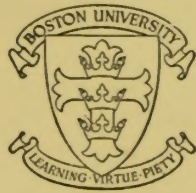


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Dissertation

ETHICAL RELATIVISM IN REINHOLD NIEBUHR

by

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(A.B., Southwestern College, 1943)

(S.T.B., Boston University, 1946)

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every historical fact and reality. This absolute principle is perfect love. It is only through a perfect religious faith that one can discern this love, and it can never be fully known. As a principle of comprehension beyond our comprehension it remains an "impossible possibility." The cross of Christ (the symbol of absolute love) becomes the axis of history and the norm of morality alike. The cross is viewed as the symbol of God's judgment upon the partial, selfish, and relative achievements of mankind. Thus the transcendent character of the ideal of divine love and all other formulations of ethical theory are relatively necessary however necessary they may be and are. In the treatment of this principle of absolute love are contained many of the basic tenets of Niebuhr's ethical theory.

This investigation will involve the following related questions: What is the general ethical theory of Niebuhr? What is Niebuhr's critique of a rational approach to ethics? How is a rational morality to be justified? What

INTRODUCTION

I. Statement of the Problem

The problem of this dissertation is to investigate the ethical relativism implicit and explicit in the formal ethical theory and practical applications of Reinhold Niebuhr's conception of the transcendent love ethic. Niebuhr holds that the ultimate principle of ethics transcends every historical fact and reality. This absolute principle is perfect love. It is only through a profound religious faith that one can discern this love, and it can never be fully known. As a principle of comprehension beyond our comprehension it remains an "impossible possibility." The cross of Christ (the symbol of absolute love) becomes the norm of history and the norm of morality alike. The cross is viewed as the symbol of God's judgment upon the partial, sinful, and relative achievements of mankind. Thus the transcendent character of the ideal of ethics makes all human formulations of ethical principles inevitably relative, however necessary they may be and are. In the treatment of this principle of absolute love are centered many of the basic issues of Niebuhr's ethical theory.

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This investigation will involve the following related questions: What is the general ethical theory of Nietzsche? What is Nietzsche's criticism of a religious approach to ethics? How is a rational morality to be validated? What

is the real nature and destiny of man? What is the true interpretation of prophetic Christianity? How is ethical responsibility to be conceived in Niebuhr's transcendent love ethic? How is God's grace related to human willing and acting? The attempt to give detailed answers to these questions will constitute the broad outline and ruling purpose of this dissertation.

II. Summary of Research of Previous Investigators

There has appeared no systematic study of ethical relativism in Reinhold Niebuhr. Numerous investigators have discussed various aspects of the moral and theological problems raised by Niebuhr.

The first investigator to be considered is H. D. Lewis. His book entitled Morals and the New Theology is largely analytical and critical in nature. The basic assumption is that

the dominant trend in Protestant theology today is altogether at variance with elementary ethical principles which we take for granted from day to day, and which the moral philosopher seeks to describe and correlate.¹

His concern for the rift between theology and moral philosophy is noteworthy. While the main ethical truths do not

1. Lewis, MNT, 8. References to sources are indicated in this dissertation by abbreviations which are explained in the Bibliography. The author's name appears with each abbreviation.

depend directly on religion, we are informed, yet the more specific or material problems of ethics require close account to be taken of religious aspirations.

Theology is vitally concerned with the meaning of value and the nature of the values attainable in human life; it has to do especially with moral worth and its opposite, moral wickedness or sin. But it cannot be that these qualities have two natures, one which they present to the moralist and another which they present to the theologian. Truth is one.¹

Lewis's main criticism of the traditional theologians (among whom he includes Reinhold Niebuhr) is that they violate a most fundamental delivery of the moral consciousness when they claim that human obligations must be thought to own their obligatory character directly to their being imposed by God. Moral responsibility is thus reduced to a matter of belief or unbelief. The view Lewis holds is that

mature persons have a proper awareness of moral distinctions quite independently of their adoption of any religious faith.²

The doctrine of universal sin and collective guilt, basic to Niebuhr's thought, is a case in point. Lewis would repudiate this doctrine on the grounds that it makes man neither moral nor immoral, for moral responsibility, in

1. Lewis, MNT, 13.

2. Ibid., 24.

the proper sense, thus becomes an illusion.¹ Further, Niebuhr obscures the ordinary meaning of the words "sinfulness" and "guilt" by the ambiguous use of the words "guilt" and "responsibility" to designate the outward injustices we perpetrate, rather than to a quality of the will of the agent.² Niebuhr's stress on the "contingencies and relativities" of history is but a half-truth, for the limitations to which we are subject

are not ones for which we can justly be held responsible provided we have done all we can to rid ourselves of such prejudices as society tends to perpetuate and harden.³

The conception of an "impossible ideal" can never be the standard by which moral guilt and merit are determined, for these depend solely "on the individual's loyalty to the ideal that presents itself to him."⁴

What is commendable in the New Theology is: (1) the unshaken conviction that man is the bearer of supreme responsibility; (2) the consistency with which its representatives have developed the implications of the traditionalist doctrine; (3) the much needed reaction against a facile optimism which took little account of considerable difficulties rooted in the complexities of man's nature and the structure of society.⁵

1. Lewis, op. cit., 60.

2. Ibid., 63.

3. Ibid., 129.

4. Ibid., 131.

Lewis was not able to demonstrate fully enough the precise factors in Niebuhr's position that lead to ethical relativism; he omits a discussion of the fine points of difference between the neo-orthodox writers, such as Barth, Brunner, and Niebuhr; he makes a too easy dismissal of coherence as a criterion of ethical truth; his discussion of compromise is inadequate; and his study was not conceived with the particular problem in mind that is our starting-point here.

Albert C. Knudson, the second investigator to be considered, criticizes Niebuhr's total viewpoint in a review of The Nature and Destiny of Man. He also criticizes certain aspects of the ethics of neo-orthodoxy in his The Principles of Christian Ethics. In the first of these, Dean Knudson insists that Niebuhr misinterprets the function of the absolute moral ideal in human life. In his words:

The absolute ideal, insofar as it is unrealizable, is not a ground of divine judgment. It is rather a challenge to men not to be content with what they are or what they have thus far done, but to be continually seeking something higher and better than what they have yet attained. Insofar as they do this they deserve the divine approval rather than the divine judgment.¹

Thus when Niebuhr places all deeds, even the most virtuous,

1. Knudson, Rev.(1943), 604.

under the divine judgment, he assumes a sub-ethical and sub-Christian conception of Deity.¹

It is one thing to recognize the permanent and universal need of the divine grace and a very different thing to ground this need in a submoral conception of human responsibility and of divine judgment.²

The doctrine of original sin is found to be at fault, for one must choose between

a rational and an ethical conception of sin on the one hand and a subethical and subvolitional conception on the other. The latter is represented by the doctrine of original sin.³

What is constructive in Niebuhr is his sincere desire to work out some sort of compromise with the more rational type of Christian theology. But he includes just enough activism and optimism "to make the effort undesirable to modern man."⁴ The historical and psychological sections are valuable. Niebuhr will "help guard the Church against a one-sided moralism and humanism."⁵

In The Principles of Christian Ethics Dean Knudson criticizes Niebuhr's conception of Christian love. He contends that it is a mistake to draw a radical distinction between agape (love in the New Testament sense) and the good will of natural ethics.

1. Knudson, Rev. (1943), 605.

2. Ibid., 606.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

In its essential nature Christian love must be regarded as rooted in the ethical structure of the human mind. Otherwise it would have no power of appeal to the human conscience...The difference is one of degree, not of kind.¹

As opposed to the contention that there are no universal moral principles which reveal any content in the absolute moral ideal of love (a conception held by Reinhold Niebuhr) Knudson finds that there are four fundamental universal moral principles. These are:

The principle of love; the principle of purity or perfection; the principle of the recognition of the sacredness of personality; and the principle of the essentially religious nature of social service.²

In the discussion of the individual and the state, Dean Knudson insists that it is misleading to speak of "moral man" and "immoral society." In his words:

An unethical use of the weapons of power is not inherent in the nature of the state, and still less does it follow that coercion by the state is a negation of love and that the power of the state is necessarily more or less "demonic." Good and evil are mixed in the state as in the individual...Society or the state is the collective will, and as such there is no reason why it as well as the individual, should not be capable of being moralized.³

Another investigator to be considered is G. G. H. Macgregor. In The Relevance of the Impossible⁴ he lists two major objections to Niebuhr's ethical position. In the

1. Knudson, PCE, 77.

2. Ibid., 301.

3. Ibid., 217.

4. This is the title of the 1941 edition.

first place, his doctrine of human depravity springs from "a quite unscriptural view of human nature."¹ And secondly, Niebuhr fails to grasp the really characteristic and essential elements in Jesus' teaching concerning the Kingdom of God.²

Judged by the New Testament the greatest weakness of Niebuhr's case, the less excusable because it lies at the very central point of the Gospel, is his failure to give any adequate place to the distinctively Christian method of overcoming evil--the redemptive power of active, self-sacrificial love, which has its symbol in the Cross.³

What is right in Niebuhr is his insistence that the fruitfulness of all ethical teaching depends on its ability to maintain a "tension between the historical and the transcendent," the contrast between "the imperfect present and the consummation which is God's perfect will."⁴ Niebuhr errs, however, in making that tension too severe and in failing to see that "the kingdom of God operates as redeeming power."⁵

Another critic of Reinhold Niebuhr's ethics is Edward Thomas Ramsdell. In an essay on "Religion and the Issue of Ethical Relativism" he finds that Barth and his followers are "theological relativists."⁶ The theological relativists

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1. Macgregor, ROI, 37.
 2. Ibid.
 3. Ibid., 75.
 4. Ibid., 50f.
 5. Ibid., 54.
 6. Ramsdell, Art.(1943).

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Another critic of Reinhold Niebuhr's ethics is Howard
Thoreau Haskell. In an essay on "Religion and the Issue of
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are "theological relativists." The theological relativists

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1. Haskell, Art. (1942).
 2. Ibid., 57.
 3. Ibid., 75.
 4. Ibid., 57.
 5. Ibid., 56.

agree with the ethical relativists in their description of man's moral experience; that is, in both positions man has no dependable moral nature; man is incapable of objectivity in his ethics; and man's moral ideas are always and necessarily relative to his cultural context.¹ In so doing they "reduce the behavior of man to a complex of mechanisms" and thus "deny the moral capacity of man."²

Ramsdell feels that the motive of theological relativism is religious and pragmatic in nature. Only by destroying man's confidence in himself can the absolute sovereignty of God be maintained. So contend the relativists. To them, it "is not a question primarily what is true, but a question of what will make faith more absolute."³

In his denial of reason as an adequate guide to ethics Niebuhr faces an impossible dilemma, for either the relativist must assume that

his own rational judgment of the matter is sound or he must hold that the truth of ethical relativism has been divinely revealed... He cannot well appeal to revelation, for the Bible certainly assumes...the moral capacity of man. Or, if he were to hold that ethical relativism is the implication of God's revelation of Himself as absolutely sovereign power, he would still be trusting his own rational capacity for valid inference.⁴

It is true, admits Ramsdell, that man acts irrationally at times; but he also has a capacity for the rational. Man

1. Ramsdell, Ibid.
 2. Ramsdell, Ibid.
 3. Ibid.
 4. Ibid.

has the ability to "generalize from particulars" to see particulars "in the light of general or universal principles."¹ The whole question of the neo-orthodox approach to morals needs careful examination by scholars and church leaders alike, for it can furnish no sound basis for either theology or morality.

However much such relativism and irrationalism may serve as an incentive to faith in time of stress, it can offer no stable basis for faith in the long run...No faith which repudiates the moral capacity which God has given to man can long sustain itself.²

Still another investigator is Henry Nelson Wieman, editor of the collection of essays entitled Religious Liberals Reply. This work is largely a defense of naturalistic religious humanists against "neo-orthodoxy, neo-supernaturalism, and neo-Thomism, and religious and philosophical authoritarianism in general."³ The essays most relevant to the present study are "Coming to Grips With the Nature and Destiny of Man" by Arthur E. Murphy; "Humanistic Elements in the Opposition to Liberalism" by Gardner Williams; "The New Orthodoxy and Human Progress" by Jay William Hudson; and "The New Supernaturalism: Peril to 20th Century Christianity" by James Bissett Pratt.

In the introductory essay Wieman, after discussing

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1. Ramsdell, Ibid.
 2. Ibid.
 3. Wieman, RLR, 3.

the function of religious myth, makes the following confession:

I am quite ready to agree that God's initiative, and the myths created in history by God's initiative, can alone lead us aright.¹

But when and if they do guide us aright, they must guide us to something that

can be known in truth to be the creative and redeeming God when the resources and methods of rational and observational inquiry have been developed in such a way as to be applicable to this problem.²

What is good in men like Niebuhr is that they have made us more keenly aware of "the depths of evil in human life and the inability of man by his own effort alone to deliver himself or to create the better world and better life."³ The greatest weakness of neo-orthodoxy is that "it cannot lead us religiously in the struggle to find a way through the present confusion in the direction of life's fulfilment."⁴

In his essay, Arthur E. Murphy reaches the conclusion that Niebuhr's views on human nature are

in essential respects unclear and misleading. They contain a considerable fund of sound moral experience and practical wisdom refracted in the distorting medium of a radically incoherent dialectical theology. Their clear acceptance in the form in which

1. Wieman, *Ibid.*, 8.

2. *Ibid.*, 9.

3. *Ibid.*, 15.

4. *Ibid.*

they are presented, is more likely to lead to obscurantism and moral confusion than to the deeper wisdom their distinguished author wishes to propound.¹

As to Niebuhr's contention that the downfall of historical civilizations is a manifestation of the righteous wrath of God, this view turns out to be

not so much super- and anti-human, for it is aimed not only at what is worst in man, but also at what is best in him.²

And Dr. Niebuhr's "tortuous reflections" to prove that all human claims to transcendence are illegitimate is not "a conclusion justified by the facts of human nature to which he appeals," or the "scriptural tradition on which he builds."³ For if the disciples of "transcendence" proceed to make a virtue of incomprehensibility and incoherence, they will "have attacked something that we can speak about and do know to be valid--the rational cogency of ordered and tested thought."⁴ What is good in Niebuhr's religion is that it has

the kind of vitality that will destroy tyranny, and on the proximate problems of social justice and of righteous political action in war and peace he is right and reasonable as few men of our time have been.⁵

In his essay, Gardner Williams discusses the two moralities in Niebuhr--the human and the divine. In Niebuhr's theory we are "offered no evidence, except revelation, that

1. Murphy, Art.(1943).

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

agape is the highest ethical principle."¹

Mr. Niebuhr simply accepts, without criticism, the tradition which sets supernatural love on a pinnacle...He depreciates natural human love, which is, of course, an expression rather than a denial of self. He calls human love eros, thus indicating that it is inherently tainted with the sensuality of sex.²

As to standards for ethical conduct, Niebuhr urges us actually to "live by the relative humanistic standard."³

He points out that we must live by this if we are to live at all. But the absolute one alone has absolute validity! This is ⁴ a contradiction, as judged by human logic.

Williams finds that Niebuhr's concept of God is not one that would be very likely to inspire sensible people with great confidence in the divine commands.

Mr. Niebuhr does not ascribe to God those qualities, usually associated with a good executive, of foresight, and rational control of the passions, and the ability to make allowances for the weaknesses of subordinates, and the habit of never demanding what is impossible. Greek reasonableness seems to be as foreign to the nature of God whom Mr. Niebuhr conjures up as it is to Mr. Niebuhr's own ultimate ideal.⁵

What is true in Niebuhr's thought is his assertion that man will always be involved in conflicts; that there is truth

1. Williams, Art.(1943).

2. Ibid. Williams's use of eros is not strictly accurate. For example, in the Symposium and Phaedrus Plato means by eros a natural human passion for the Absolute Idea, including the Virtues. It is true, however, that Niebuhr considers the "inevitable" sense of shame that accompanies the sex act to be a mark of original sin. Cf. Niebuhr, FAH, 178

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

in individualistic relativism; that there is great need for repentance; and that love and harmony are valid ideals.¹

Jay William Hudson, in his essay entitled "The New Orthodoxy and Human Progress," finds that it is psychologically and historically unsound to say that man is inevitably sinful, however sinful he is; that he is innately and incurably addicted to self-love, however selfish he is. That man seeks "the illusion of fulfilment and completeness in historic time "is often all too true; but it "is a fault not ineradicable."² And that man tries

to transcend his limits, whatever they are, is not so much to his discredit as to his praise...For man can learn what his limits³ are only by endeavoring to transcend them.³

Further, the view of God which holds that Deity is far removed from the fight for a better world is at serious fault. God, rather, is very near to man's moral struggles, his moral defeats, his moral victories. As to the idea of God's grace in neo-orthodoxy,

this "grace" is not a matter of morals in the least...What a travesty upon the psychological origin and the historical meaning of religion, which is, surely, based upon a moral need: the desperate need of salvation to righteousness.⁴

The essay by James Bissett Pratt is a selection from

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1. Williams, Ibid.
 2. Ibid.
 3. Ibid.
 4. Ibid.

in individualistic selfishness; that there is a great need
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 life of the world. In his essay entitled "The New
 Psychology and Human Progress," he finds that it is inevitable
 that the individualism which has so long reigned in the
 world, however slight it is; that it is inevitable and in-
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The essay by James Blissett Pratt is a selection from

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- 1. Williams, etc.
 - 2. Pratt
 - 3. Pratt
 - 4. Pratt

his book Can We Keep the Faith? Pratt is convinced that "the New Supernaturalism and the old Fundamentalism are among the most insidious perils of twentieth-century Christianity."¹ If religion is to live in our times, it "must make its appeal to reason and the religious experience, and it must grow with its times."²

As to the view of human freedom in the new theology, Pratt insists that

a being who can create a race of men devoid of real freedom and inevitably foredoomed to be sinners, and then punish them for being what he has made them, may be omnipotent and various other things, but he is not what the English language has always intended by the adjective holy.³

Concerning the moral ideal in men like Niebuhr, this identification of moral action

as obedience to the Divine Will, this definition of goodness as that which God wills, when clearly understood reduces the assertion that God is good to a redundancy: it amounts only to the undeniable proposition that God wills what He wills. It thus tells us nothing either about goodness or about God.⁴

This new definition has successfully united goodness with the will of God, but only at the cost of "severing it completely from what is commonly known as moral obligation"

1. Pratt, Art.(1943).

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

and from "the rationally justifiable way to live."¹

Perhaps the most recent investigators in the ethics of neo-orthodoxy are Daniel Day Williams and L. Harold DeWolf. Williams's study entitled God's Grace and Man's Hope will be considered first. Williams will not make a simple choice between liberalism and neo-orthodoxy.

Both sides have left something out which is the very basis of all Christian experience. That is the fact of redemption...Both schools have left no place for God's redemptive work in history.²

Niebuhr and his school have recognized the need for redemption, but they have

never made an adequate place for the real possibility of redemption as transformation of our human existence, hence they postpone redemption to another realm.³

Further, Niebuhr has brought only confusion in asserting that we break with sin only in "principle."

Either some break with sin in fact as well as in principle is possible or else the whole of Christian experience is a delusion.⁴

This break takes place, insists Williams, in human experience, in history, and in the processes of life.

In the discussion of Christian love, Williams feels that Niebuhr has not succeeded in bringing together his doctrine that sacrificial love is complete self-giving on

1. Pratt, Ibid.
 2. Williams, GGMH, 32.
 3. Ibid., 60.
 4. Ibid. 38.

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1. Ibid., 101b.
2. Williams, *op. cit.*, 28.
3. Ibid., 80.
4. Ibid., 28.

the one hand, and his admission that the ultimate good involves the good of the self on the other.

On Niebuhr's view it would always be impossible for the Christian to identify himself with the cause for which he links his life with others, a curious conclusion.¹

Actually, insists Williams, the good is "just the good of each in the good of all."² It is therefore not a denial of Christian love "to intend my own good in the service of the Kingdom."³ This very intention is the foundation of human struggles for freedom, justice, adequate material goods, and more universal brotherhood. The movement of redemption, according to Williams, means nothing without these.

Williams sees virtue in Niebuhr's labors. His analysis of the sin of moral and spiritual pride, for example, is a real contribution to the study of morality and religion. The chief defect in the position of men like Niebuhr, Williams argues, is their inability

to give adequate ethical guidance, for...their philosophy of history commits an opposite error from liberalism and puts the love of God outside of history. It is a judgment upon us; but it does not transform the world.⁴

A final investigator to be considered is L. Harold DeWolf. In his The Religious Revolt Against Reason he argues

1. Williams, *Ibid.*, 77.

2. *Ibid.*, 79.

3. *Ibid.*, 80.

4. *Ibid.*, 136.

the one hand, and the admission that the ultimate good involves the good of the self on the other.

On Williams's view it would always be impossible for the Gospels to identify himself with the cause for which he links his life with others, a certain conviction.

Actually, instead Williams, the good is "just the good of each in the good of all." It is therefore not a total of "Christian love" to intend my own good in the service of the Kingdom. The very intention is the foundation of human strategies for freedom, justice, adequate material goods, and more universal brotherhood. The awareness of responsibility, according to Williams, means nothing without these.

Williams reads virtue in Nietzsche's *Jenseits*.

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DeWolf. In his Christian Love: A Study in Ethics he argues

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1. Williams, *Love*, vi.
 2. *Ibid.*, 79.
 3. *Ibid.*, 80.
 4. *Ibid.*, 100.

that the belief in human reason as "idolatry" is in serious error.

Reason may properly be regarded as God-given. Hence the use of reason may be gratefully regarded as the employment of a divine instrument.¹

When it is contended that "the recognition of the true way of life is not at all rational," then "the ethical content of redemption is implicitly denied."²

DeWolf holds that some rather disastrous moral effects have resulted from the revolt against reason, so popular among modern theologians. For one thing, the revolters obscure the fact that "in practice every believer in Christian ethics does continually subsume particular actions under general ethical principles."³ For another thing, their strictures against reason blur their own arguments and lend encouragement

to the vast number of obscurantists and escapists who are delighted to find that it is quite all right to allow irrational discrepancies within the structure of their moral thought and action.⁴

Again, their teachings are affecting adversely a crucial problem of our times--how to prevent "the separation of technical power and moral responsibility."⁵ The revolters are undermining the very means of communication between the theological and scientific communities.⁶ By their irra-

1. DeWolf, RRAR, 144.

2. Ibid., 149.

3. Ibid., 157.

4. Ibid., 158.

5. Ibid., 159.

6. Ibid., 160.

tional interpretation of moral responsibility, they are speeding the tragic "estrangement between theology and the common life of men."¹ They have helped aggravate the individualism which "has nearly broken down all sense of community, and hence of social responsibility, in our age."²

Much use will be made of the analyses and criticisms of both Williams and DeWolf throughout this dissertation.

III. Materials and Method of this Dissertation

The materials which are utilized in this dissertation are the thirteen basic works of Reinhold Niebuhr, and the numerous essays and articles which have appeared in the last quarter of a century dealing with Christian ethics and the social problem in general. These articles and essays have appeared in such periodicals as Radical Religion, Christianity and Society, The Christian Century, Nation, Fortune, World Tomorrow, Time, Harpers, Scribners, American Scholar, Life Magazine, and others. Book reviews in the various journals have also been consulted. The general ethical theories of the major moral philosophers cited in the dissertation have been consulted in the original sources whenever possible.

The method of this dissertation will be as follows:

- 1) Expository. We shall develop at some length Niebuhr's position in regard to the problem and related

1. DeWolf, *Ibid.*, 6.

2. *Ibid.*, 161.

questions as stated.¹ This will involve a statement of Reinhold Niebuhr's general ethical theory.

2) Historical and comparative. We shall try to show how some of the basic tenets of Niebuhr's ethics have developed in opposition to Idealism and Liberalism. We shall then compare the resultant conception of ethics with the main stream of Christian thought.

3) Critical and analytic. We shall analyze the answers made by Niebuhr to the several questions posited above and will inquire whether his conclusions are valid in the light of logic and in comparison with the main stream of Christian ethical thinking.

IV. General Plan of the Dissertation

In the Introduction we have tried to set forth the problem of this investigation, and to indicate its importance in the sphere of Christian ethics, as well as ethics in general. We have also summarized some of the criticisms of various investigators concerning the ethical views of Reinhold Niebuhr.

Chapter I will be devoted to a discussion of the scope of ethics, including a definition of ethics, Christian ethics, and ethical relativism. At the close of the chapter we shall formulate a normative definition of ethical relativism that will be employed throughout this dissertation.

1. *Supra*, 1f.

Chapter II discusses the general ethical theory of Reinhold Niebuhr. It develops his criticism of all naturalistic and rationalistic moral philosophies. And it analyzes Niebuhr's conception of the unique nature and scope of Christian ethics. This chapter will be chiefly expository.

Chapter III is an attempt to establish a valid basis for a rational morality. We shall examine the ethical views of certain representative theists who hold to a reasonable approach to ethics (i.e., that the mind is a valid arbiter in moral matters). These views will constitute the basis for an analysis and criticism of Niebuhr's approach. Niebuhr's objections to the use of reason as a guide to ethics will be examined. Then we shall attempt to show how a rational morality can and must square with the Christian religion.

Chapter IV begins the search for ethical relativism in Niebuhr's ethical thought. It summarizes his view of man's vocation in the universe, followed by a critique of his position, and a summary of our conclusions.

Chapter V investigates the ethical relativism implicit or explicit in Niebuhr's view of God's work in history. This chapter includes a statement of the central thesis of this dissertation.

Chapter VI continues the investigation of ethical relativism in Niebuhr by discussing and criticizing his

concept of community.

Chapter VII takes up the general ethical problem of freedom. After presenting Niebuhr's view of human freedom, we shall attempt to point out the ethical relativism involved in his formulation.

Chapter VIII continues the same methodology of analysis and criticism and discusses the ethical relativism entailed in Niebuhr's philosophy of war and peace. At the conclusion of each chapter we shall include a summary statement of our major findings.

1. Wright, *Art.* (1945).
2. Roberts, *pp.* 90.
3. Brightman, *ib.* 13.

CHAPTER I

THE DEFINITION OF ETHICAL RELATIVISM

1. The Scope of Ethics

Our word "ethics" is derived from the Greek ta ethika, meaning "customs" which, in turn, came from ethos, meaning character or moral purpose.¹ Thus from a very early time ethics has been concerned with the character, actions, and conduct of individuals.

The terms "ethics" and "morals" are ordinarily distinguished in any treatment of ethics. Ethics is a normative science of the good and the nature of right. As W. H. Roberts defines it:

The attempt to understand on what grounds we shall adjudge our choices "right" or "wrong," what we should mean by "good" or "evil," "better" or "worse," is ethics.²

Dr. Brightman defines ethics as "the normative science of the principles (or laws) of the best types of human conduct."³ A more elaborate definition is given by G. R. Morrow:

Ethics is that study or discipline which concerns itself with judgments of approval and disapproval, judgments as to the rightness or wrongness, goodness or badness, virtue or vice, desirability or wisdom of

1. Wright, Art. (1945).
2. Roberts, POC, 90.
3. Brightman, ML, 13.

THE DEFINITION OF MORAL RELATIVISM

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Ethics is that study or discipline which concerns itself with judgments of approval and disapproval, judgments as to the rightness or wrongness, goodness or badness, virtue or vice, desirability or blamability of actions.

1. Wright, Art. (1925).
2. Roberts, p. 30.
3. Brightman, M., 13.

actions, dispositions, ends, objects or state of affairs.¹

Thus by ethics we understand an attempt to answer the questions: What "ought" I to do? What is "right" and "wrong" conduct? What are the principles and standards to guide men in making choices in both individual and social situations?

As distinguished from ethics, "morals" is usually employed to mean the actual conduct of individuals and social groups. The Latin mores refers to the practicing customs, folkways, conventions, and traditions of the people. Thus one might say that "ethics" is a critical investigation of "morals," with an attempt to discover if what is done in a given situation is the thing that ought to be done.

Cornelius Van Til, a conservative, notes that ethics falls into three divisions: (1) What should be the goal of man's actions? (2) According to what standards should man conduct himself in seeking for his proper goal? (3) What is the motive that should impel man in seeking to reach his destination?²

Historically, ethical treatments fall into two parts: (1) the theory of value or axiology, which is concerned with judgments of value, extrinsic or intrinsic,

1. Morrow, Art.(1941).

2. Van Til, NM, 306.

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cerned with judgments of value, extrinsic or intrinsic,

moral or nonmoral; and (2) the theory of obligation or deontology, which is concerned with judgments of obligation.¹ In this dissertation there will be no attempt to keep a rigid separation between the two spheres, for judgments of value and obligation are, more often than not, component factors in any ethical situation (though it is recognized that since the nineteenth century value-theory has become a separate discipline studied for its own sake).

The present study is concerned with Christian ethics, as well as ethics in general. It is necessary to indicate in what respects Christian ethics differs from philosophical ethics. This is not an easy task, for much debate is still going on as to whether there is such a thing as a mature Christian ethics "as yet." However, there has been a traditional distinction between Christian and philosophical ethical theories.² Dr. R. Richard Niebuhr defines Christian Ethics as that part of Christian theology which

deals with the principles of human response to divine action in creation, revelation and redemption.³

Further, the term is employed to designate:

(1) The conduct of Christians; (2) statements of principles or rules which are recommended as norms of such conduct; (3) the critical effort, carried on in the Christian community, to discover, systematize and apply

1. Morrow, Art.(1941).

2. See Knudson, PCE, 16.

3. Niebuhr, Art.(1945).

moral principles of greatest generality and certainty and to use such principles for the sake of gaining greater consistency and precision in conduct.¹

Niebuhr notes that the separate study of Christian moral principles is a relatively late development, though descriptions of Christian behavior have been a part of theology from the beginning.²

Dean Knudson insists that, while theological and philosophical ethics must supplement each other, yet there is "an independent status and province to Christian ethics."³ He observes that the Christian principles of love and perfection, the search for the good life, and the problem of adjusting the Christian ideal to the concrete conditions of life and to the necessities of civilization--these, together with the problems of sin and conversion, place theological ethics "in a unique position along side of philosophical ethics."⁴

It is pertinent to the discussion to note here that the method of validation does not differ in any ethical discipline, be it theological or philosophical in nature. Further, as Knudson rightly insists, Christian ethics and philosophical ethics need not be opposed to each other. In his words:

There are, it is true, certain types of philosophical ethics that are out of harmony

1. Niebuhr, Ibid.
2. Ibid.
3. Knudson, PCE, 32.
4. Ibid.

with Christian ethics...But there is no proper antithesis between theological and philosophical ethics.¹

For, as Ernst Troeltsch rightly observed, Christian ethics "must recognize other moral principles alongside of itself."²

II. The Various Usages of "Relativism"

Any systematic treatment of ethics will discuss such terms as "relativism," "objectivity," "absolutism," and the like. Usually one of the foregoing positions is either stated or taken for granted by any given ethical theorist.

The foregoing terms are amenable to ambiguity unless precise meanings are given them in their proper context. For example, the following fields of knowledge use the term "relativity" in slightly different senses: physical science, sociology, philosophy, and theology. We will consider each of these meanings briefly.

The theory of relativity in Physics was developed by H. A. Lorentz and Albert Einstein. This theory refers to the principle that there is no absolute motion, or motion with respect to some absolute space filled with ether, but that all motion observable is "relative." Thus relativity in the physical sciences has to do with one portion or manifestation of matter with respect to another portion of matter.³ When it was demonstrated that matter and motion

1. Knudson, *Ibid.*, 33.

2. Troeltsch, *PEC*, 34. Cited in Knudson, *PCE*, 29.

3. See Einstein, *GTR*, *passim*.

are actually relative to the observer, the "pure" objectivity of eighteenth and nineteenth century science was thus overcome.

Sociologists speak of "cultural relativism." Those who hold this view contend that moral opinions become relative solely to the cultural context in which they arise. The norms of one culture in no way hold good for another culture. The wide differences in moral judgments between different societies reveal the fact, it is claimed, that moral ideas have no universal validity: thus cultural relativism is deemed inevitable. The survival and developmental needs of the group usually determine what is "right" and "wrong" for that particular group. Conspicuous examples of this view of cultural relativism are William Graham Sumner's Folkways and (perhaps in a less noticeable sense) Ruth Benedict's Patterns of Culture.

Another term that should be defined in this connection is "historical relativism." When the material values of history are judged by no system of theoretical universal principles that lie behind those formulations, then this may be properly called historical relativism. For example, it has been demonstrated that the thought of Ernst Troeltsch leads in this direction.¹

In moral philosophy "ethical relativism" is the view that ethical truths are relative to time and place. Since

1. Muelder, ITTPH.

moral values vary among individuals and groups according to cultural conditions and other circumstances, the logical conclusion would seem to be that there is no absolute ethical standard that ought to hold universally. Moral standards, other than those imposed by persons or groups upon themselves, have no validity for all of mankind. The theory of universal moral principles does not conform to the "facts" of actual experience. Thus, for this point of view, there are no "categorical imperatives" or "universal moral obligations."

Edward Westermarck has distinguished himself by this description of ethical relativity. His Origin and Development of the Moral Ideas and his Ethical Relativity contain his most fully developed thought in this connection. Westermarck summarizes the difference between ethical relativity and objectivity in these words:

Ethical relativity implies that there is no objective standard of morality, and objectivity presupposes universality.¹

Westermarck continues by suggesting the origin of relativism.

The variability of moral judgments largely originates in different measures of knowledge, based on experience of the consequences of conduct, and in different beliefs.²

What is the basis of morality? Westermarck would

1. Westermarck, ER, 183.

2. Ibid., 187.

base it upon a psychological fact, the existence of "emotions." He defends this position by asserting that emotions depend on

cognitions and are apt to vary as the cognitions vary; hence a theory which leads to an examination of the psychological and historical origins of people's moral opinions should be more useful than a theory which postulates moral truths enunciated by self-evident intuitions that are unchangeable.¹

If it could only be brought home to people that there is no absolute standard in morality, the reader is informed, then individuals would perhaps be "on the one hand tolerant and on the other hand more critical in their judgments."²

It is informative, in passing, that W. T. Stace argues that Westermarck in his Ethical Relativity is not strictly an ethical relativist. What he really insisted upon, Stace insists, was "a universal morality when he asserted that 'altruistic sentiment' is the law of morals."³ This is because the altruistic sentiment is a universal possession. Whether one can rightly characterize a theory as "universal" which is based upon emotional rather than rational considerations would still have to be debated further than Stace carries the argument.

As another example of ethical relativism, it has

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1. Westermarck, *Ibid.*, 59.
 2. *Ibid.*
 3. Stace, *COM*, 31.

been asserted that John Dewey and his school fall into this category. That this criticism has to be qualified can be shown by the fact that Dewey seems to hold to the absolute value of democracy, and in the complete co-ordination of all elements in any given moral situation. But it remains true that the Dewey "school" does denounce all formulations of abstract and static principles that are claimed to have a separate and unchanging existence apart from human experience and rational development. The major criticisms of men like Dewey are levelled against authoritarianism in morals.

It is instructive that the first moral relativists (similar to certain modern relativists) attacked the belief in the theological origin of morals.¹ For example, Protagoras, a Greek teacher in the fifth century B.C., came out with this dictum: Man is the measure of all things. That is, there was for Protagoras no absolute and universal law, no divine standard, above and beyond the varying opinions that prevailed in Greece, Persia, and Egypt. Thomas Hobbes, in the seventeenth century, made a similar denial of morality as determined by a divine will.² In modern times, William Graham Sumner took up the argument and declared--after a vast gathering of evidence--that

1. Leys, ESP, 178.

2. In The Leviathan.

notions of right and wrong, good and bad, always come from custom, and not from God and Nature. That these classic opinions are a source of the present animosity that exists between certain types of theological and philosophical ethics is evident.

As opposed to the idea of ethical relativism, ethical objectivity is the theory that there are universal moral principles that are capable of guiding men in concrete ethical situations where choices are demanded. The adherents of ethical objectivity hold that the moral capacity of man is such that he is capable of making valid moral distinctions between "higher" and "lower" values, and "right" and "wrong" decisions and actions.

W. T. Stace rightly observes that ethical objectivity is not a view of ethics that disregards the problem and need of an intelligent application of moral truths to varying circumstances of time and place. He writes:

The law of morals will be a general law which will give different results as it is applied to different cases--just as the law of gravitation results in parabolic orbits in some cases, elliptical orbits in others. Failure to understand this is one of the breeding grounds of ethical relativity.¹

Much care must be exercised here, however. The question of compromise always arises in the matter of actual appli-

1. Stace, COM, 41.

cation of moral principles. It is not clear that Stace understands fully the difficulties involved. But he is correct in his assertion that the ethical objectivists are not blind to the problem of the implementation and application of the general ethical principles to specific situations.

IV. A Normative Definition of Ethical Relativism

What does it mean to say that an ethical idea or truth is relative? Relative to what? Is there a "right" and "wrong" way of thinking of a truth as relative? To be relative, of course, an idea or object must possess a relationship with another idea or object. Just what that relationship is and how it is to be conceived is of serious import in ethical theory, as we shall see.

In the various fields of knowledge the term "relative" serves many divergent functions. In Epistemology, for example, the theory of the relativity of knowledge states that "all knowledge is relative to the knowing mind and to the conditions of the body and sense organs."¹ Historically, this view has been known as the "subjectivist's" approach to knowledge.

W. R. Sorley has shown that in the theory of morality, as in the theory of knowledge, the term "relative" might be used in two different meanings. That is, it may mean being "relative" to the subject who pronounces the judgment whether of value or of fact. Or the relation implied may be

1. Wood, Art.(1941).

to other objective elements, recognition of which is required to give validity to the judgment. The second meaning given does not imply dependence of the object upon the subject observing it; rather, it asserts "relation between this particular object and other factors of the objective whole."¹ Sorley maintains that if we use the term in this latter sense, relativity will no longer imply any divorce from reality, and we would have to interpret differently "the assertion that morality is relative."²

Another use of the term "relative" may be noted in the field of Psychology. One school of thought holds that the character of any present conscious content is relative to and influenced by past and contemporaneous experiences of the organism. Examples are the psychology of Wundt and the Gestalt school.

Further, in theology and moral philosophy considerable attention is devoted to a search for or a defense of "truth." Here the crucial questions inevitably arise: What is truth? How is truth related to us? Philosophers by and large have been interested in the nature and tests of truth, under which they discuss theories of correspondence, coherence, pragmatism, and the like; while theologians have been mainly concerned with the practical problem of formulating divine "truth" into doctrines and rituals. In both disci-

1. Sorley, MV, 135.

2. Ibid., 138.

plines considerable debate goes on as to the precise nature of the verifying experiences required to know truth. But it has been generally agreed by philosophers and theologians alike that truth, regardless of how it is conceived, is in some measure accessible, and that any experience of truth can be analyzed for meaningful content.

To bring up the question of truth in regard to religion and ethics necessitates a discussion of the way truth is related to the human mind that reflects upon it. Religion has perhaps presented a more consistent viewpoint upon the matter than has philosophy. Orthodox Christianity, for example, has held fairly closely to the "twofold nature of truth" theory since the Middle Ages. According to this view "something may be true theologically which is not true philosophically, and vice versa." William Ockham gave this theory an acute epistemological analysis.¹ Thus the idea that truth is not one but two was of great influence in the development of many modern disciplines, such as mysticism, political theory, Lutheran theology, and secular science, to mention only a few.

The neo-orthodox theologians have been classified as "non-philosophical" in their approach to divine and moral truth. Neither reason, nor any other of the criteria employed

1. Brenn, Art.(1945).

by the philosophers, is able to cope with the "wholly other" quality of revealed truth. Real truth is divine truth, to be received only by and in a profound faith; and it is to be judged by God alone. Any human formulations of truth are conceived as proximate, relative, and contingent upon the absolute, unconditioned Truth.

Few philosophers or "liberal" theologians will quarrel with the assertion that all rational formulations of truth are necessarily limited and must always fall short of absolute truth. Particular minds can never be identified with eternal mind. But this is not the crucial issue. For morals, at least, the question of what consequences are to be drawn from the admitted relative nature of human formulations of truth, be it theological or ethical truth that is under investigation, is the decisive one. If the postulated absolute truth of neo-orthodoxy is one of such a nature that all human conceptions and approximations are doomed to inevitable frustration and defeat, then one might rightly inquire if morality is possible at all under such a theory. Whether Reinhold Niebuhr falls into this category is a major purpose of this investigation to determine.

A line of argumentation that denies man's possibility of knowing the content of the "good" and "right" to such a degree that moral distinctions are deemed invalid is usually

designated as "moral skepticism." Moral skepticism and ethical relativism are the two facets of a view of ethics that denies the rational capacity of man to know and apply valid universal moral principles.

In the light of the foregoing discussion, and in anticipation of the substantial portion of this dissertation yet to come, we postulate the following definition of ethical relativism to serve as a guiding norm for our inquiry:

Ethical relativism is the view that, due to the limitations of human reason and the evidence of conflicting moral standards and frustrated moral ideals, man as man is incapable, apart from social pressure or the intervention of supernatural aid, of making universally normative valid distinctions concerning the nature of right and the good, and of formulating a system of general ethical principles that can function concretely as a constructive guide to men in their personal and collective conduct.

CHAPTER II

THE GENERAL ETHICAL THEORY OF REINHOLD NIEBUHR

1. The Criticism of Naturalistic Ethics

In most of his discussions of ethical subjects, Reinhold Niebuhr includes detailed criticisms of naturalistic and philosophical systems of ethics. The essential error common to all naturalistic systems, we are informed, is their "superficiality and false optimism" which destroys the sense of depth and the experience of tension, known only to a profound Biblical faith, and without which ethics is bereft of meaning.

The following quotation serves to point up Niebuhr's great concern over modern Christianity's too easy friendship with naturalistic theories:

It is by faith in transcendence that a profound religion is saved from complete capitulation to the culture of the age, past or present. When modern Christianity, confused by the prestige of science, the temper of a this-worldly age and the disrepute of orthodox dogmatism, sought to come to terms with current naturalism, it lost the power to penetrate into the ethical aberrations and confusions of a naturalistic culture and to correct its superficiality and false optimism.¹

In Beyond Tragedy the reader is informed that naturalism in ethics is a self-defeating and impotent approach.

1. Niebuhr, ICE, 16.

A purely naturalistic ethics will not only be overcome by a sense of frustration and sink into despair, but it will lack the force to restrain the self-will and self-interest of man and nations. If life cannot be centered in something beyond nature, it will not be possible to lift men above the brute struggle for survival.¹

Although strongly opposed to all modern "liberal" naturalists, Niebuhr will not speak a flat "yes" or "no" to all elements in naturalism. In some respects the meaning of time and history as conceived in Christianity is approached by naturalism, though invariably false conclusions are drawn from this insight.

It [Christianity] affirms them [naturalistic systems] when they insist on the meaningfulness of historical existence. It refutes them inasfar as they believe that the temporal process explains and fulfils itself.²

The reason naturalists draw this erroneous conclusion, Niebuhr insists, is their blindness to a fundamental conception in Christian ethics. This is the concept of a "tension between the historical and the transcendent." In this view there must be an awareness of the contradiction between what we are now and what we shall be when God's eternal purpose for us is fulfilled.

This tension cannot be maintained, it is asserted, unless the ideal of ethics is seen to transcend every

1. Niebuhr, BT, viii.

2. Ibid., ix.

possible human achievement in the realm of history. Yet the transcendent and the historical must constantly be set side by side, so that the relevance of the ideal to actual life is not overlooked. Naturalistic and rationalistic ideas have so destroyed this sense of tension within Christianity that we have "lost the fruitfulness of the Christian ethic."¹ Just why this tension must be maintained will be made more clear when we discuss Niebuhr's positive ethical theory.²

A consistent error in naturalistic ethics, contends Niebuhr, is its over-optimistic reading of human nature, coupled with its under-estimation of the power of the egoistic impulse to corrupt all human enterprises, including even the best. This oversight leads naturalists to a false appraisal of the moral realities of social and political life. Speaking specifically of modern liberals³ it is asserted that

the real basis for all the errors of liberalism is its erroneous estimate of human nature. The wise men of our day cannot gauge the actions of our strong men correctly because they do not understand the tragic facts of human nature. They do not know to what degree

1. Niebuhr, ICE, 10.

2. See section 3 of this chapter.

3. In this specific instance "liberals" and "naturalists" are used interchangeably.

the impulses of life are able to defy the canons of reason and the dictates of conscience.¹

These "tragic facts of human nature" are described most completely in Niebuhr's Gifford Lectures on The Nature and Destiny of Man. Here the Christian view of human nature is presented in sharp contrast to all modern theories. True prophetic Christianity is presented as the only adequate view that understands both the "depths" and the "heights" of human life. It sees the depth of corruption in which the human will is inevitably involved. On the basis of this insight, Niebuhr finds that contemporary history

is filled with manifestations of man's furies; with evidences of his demonic capacity and inclinations to break the harmonies of nature and defy the prudent canons of rational restraint.²

Despite this fact, however, no cumulation of contradictory evidence seems "to disturb modern man's good opinion of himself."³

Niebuhr finds that the great achievement of modern culture is its understanding of nature. But this blessing turns out to be a curse in disguise: it has caused the great confusion of modern man--the misunderstanding of

1. Niebuhr, REE, 48.

2. Niebuhr, NDM, I, 94.

3. Ibid.

human nature. Modern man, in his sentimental and optimistic estimate of life, does not see that

the tragedy of human history consists precisely in the fact that human life cannot be creative without being destructive, that biological urges are enhanced and sublimated by demonic spirit and that this spirit cannot express itself without committing the sin of pride.¹

Again, the "natural man" is not aware that he has missed the essential point in the nature of human evil, which consists in the fact that evil arises from

the very freedom of reason with which man is endowed. Sin is not so much a consequence of natural impulse...as of the freedom by which man is able to throw the harmonies of nature out of joint.²

Man disturbs the harmony of nature when he centers his life about "one particular impulse (sex or the possessive impulse, for instance), or when he tries to make himself rather than God the centre of existence."³ This egoism in man becomes "sin in its quintessential form."⁴

Failing to comprehend man's inevitable self-interest, his will-to-power that often reaches demonic stages, his personality corrupted at its very center--the will--the liberal naturalist becomes involved in some rather peculiar opinions, most of which "contradict the obvious facts of

1. Niebuhr, NDM, I, 11.

2. Niebuhr, BT, 11.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

history."¹

One of these dangerous opinions held by naturalists, we are told, is that ethical ideals can actually be achieved in human history. They will never admit corruption in the human heart; for to them only excessive egoism can be called "wrong," and they erroneously believe that "just a little more education" will suffice to perfect the inner man to the point where ethical values can be realized. What is forgotten, insists Niebuhr, is that

if the good is to be established in history that must be done at least partly by evil destroying itself and not by making evil people good through a little more education.²

And there is certainly no cause for a simple optimism concerning the role of human goodness as a fighter against evil. Why?

There is not a single thread of evidence to prove that good triumphs over evil in the constant development of history.³

The reason why moral suasion cannot conquer the powerful forces of evil in human society, Niebuhr further argues, is to be found in the nature of society itself.

We have developed so complex a society that it cannot be made ethical by moral goodwill alone, if moral purpose is not astutely guided.⁴

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1. Niebuhr, *Ibid.*, 12.
 2. Niebuhr, *REE*, 126.
 3. Niebuhr, *Art.*(1941).¹
 4. Niebuhr, *DCNR*, 13.

Only true prophetic Christianity, in contradistinction to all naturalistic theories, can furnish this "astute guidance." It alone knows that

the force of egoism cannot be broken by moral suasion and that on certain levels qualified harmonies must be achieved by building conflicting egoisms into a balance of power.¹

That prophetic Christianity, unlike naturalism, is unable to adopt a complacent attitude toward the force of human egoism is the secret of its power. This insight saves it from all of the false pretensions of modernism.

By recognizing that men will remain selfish to the end we will be saved from the errors of both a liberalism which wants to achieve political ends by purely ethical means and a radicalism which hopes to achieve ethical ends by purely political means.²

Assuming that an "inner check" upon egoism is enough, naturalistic systems of ethics, we are informed, become incapable of comprehending the true dialectic of the spiritual life. They regard the love commandment, for example, as capable of fulfilment, and thus "slip into utopianism"; or else they are forced "to relegate it to the category of an either harmless or harmful irrelevance."³

Niebuhr insists that this "utopianism" is the usual course for naturalists. In his words:

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1. Niebuhr, ICE, 114.¹
 2. Niebuhr, Art.(1933).¹
 3. Niebuhr, ICE, 116.

Utopianism is the perennial disease of all naturalists. In one movement naturalism protests against God and in the next it exalts some movement in history into its God.¹

It is thus not only subject to perpetual disillusionment, but "tempted to perennial self-righteousness and to the cruelty which flows from all self-righteousness."²

When modern man adopted this optimistic view of human nature and the utopian dream in history, he found himself in a profound confusion. His liberal culture became divided against itself on the question whether it should

regard human nature and human history primarily from the standpoint of man's relation to nature or from the standpoint of his rational transcendence over nature.³

This conflict falls into two broad camps--the naturalists and the idealists. Both contain elements of strength, judged from the Christian perspective, but fatal errors are there also. The idealists, for example, have something of the Christian doctrine

of the dignity of man as made in the image of God, and the naturalists have something of the Christian doctrine of man as a creature who must not pretend to be more than he is.⁴

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1. Niebuhr, Art.(1935).¹
 2. Ibid.
 3. Niebuhr, Art.(1939).¹
 4. Ibid.

But in both naturalism and idealism the crucial issue is lost sight of, we are told, and a simple moralism and utopianism is the inevitable result. What is this crucial issue? It has to do with the seriousness with which man takes his ever-present sins. This seriousness is not known in either naturalism or idealism. Between them they lost the uneasy conscience

of the Christian and expressed themselves in terms of an easy conscience. Whatever was wrong with man, the cause was some defect in his social organizations or some imperfection in his education which further social historical and cultural development would correct.¹

If they could have understood the finiteness of all that is human, the naturalists and idealists "could have been saved from this unrealistic analysis."²

It is clear, Niebuhr insists, that naturalism is inconsistent when it holds to the possibility of perfectability in human character. Logically, its limited view of nature and its denial of meaning to human existence "should lead it to despair."³ But this is not the case. What we actually have is a naturalism

which seeks to understand man from the standpoint of his relation to nature. This might be expected logically to issue in disillusionment, since it emphasizes the natural contingencies which condition all forms of human

1. Niebuhr, Art.(1939).¹

2. Ibid.

3. Niebuhr, FAH, 156.

culture, and since it can offer no basis of meaning for those dimensions of human existence which transcend the system of nature.¹

But instead of this disillusionment, as we might expect, what we actually have, in the main stream of naturalism at least, is "complacency, rather than despair."² It does this by creating "a very non-naturalistic confidence in the perfectability of human reason and virtue."³ For only in a profound religious faith is the doctrine of perfectability seen in its proper proportions.

Finally, naturalism falls short of an adequate doctrine of freedom and responsibility. In neither classical nor modern naturalism is there "an understanding of the full depth and height of human existence."⁴

The uniqueness of human freedom makes it impossible to regard the structure and sequences of pure nature as the basis of the pattern of the meaning of life.⁵

But where is the center of meaning to be found for both individual life and for the total human enterprise? It is precisely because the answer to this question is so difficult, and because it extends the bounds of meaning from the confines of the simple intelligible to the realm of mystery, that both "classical and modern naturalism have sought to confine the meaning of human existence rigorously to the realm of

1. Niebuhr, FAH, 156.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., 56.

5. Ibid.

nature."¹ What happens when this is done?

If this procedure is carried through rigorously, as in classical naturalism, the freedom of man is annulled and all characteristically human desires and ambitions are regarded as aberrations. If it is not carried through rigorously, as it is not in modern history-minded naturalism, an endless confusion results about what is "natural" and what is "human."²

Niebuhr notes that modern culture, since the time of the Renaissance, has sought to find freedom for man in the concept of individuality. Idealism, on the one hand, began by emphasizing man's freedom and transcendence over nature, but ends "by losing the individual in the universalities of rational concepts" and ultimately in "the undifferentiated totality of the divine."³ Naturalism, on the other hand, began by "emphasizing natural variety and particularity." But real individuality, the reader is informed, is not to be found in either pure mind or pure nature.

As the idealists lose individuality in the absolute mind, so the naturalists lose it in the "streams of consciousness" when dealing with the matter psychologically, and in "laws of motion" when thinking sociologically.⁴

A genuine individuality, however, can be maintained, not by naturalism or idealism, but by certain religious presupposi-

are able to exalt the dignity of the human mind, but they

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1. Niebuhr, FAH, 56.
 2. Ibid., 65.
 3. Niebuhr, NDM, I, 22.
 4. Ibid., 23.

What happens when this is done?

If this procedure is carried through right-
ly, as in classical naturalism, the freedom
of man is denied and all characteristics
human beings and nations are regarded as
operations. It is not carried through
rigorously, as it is not in modern history-
related naturalism, in which a conflict results
about what is "natural" and what is "human."¹

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1. Nietzsche, *Was*, 58.
 2. *Ibid.*, 58.
 3. Nietzsche, *MDM*, I, 22.
 4. *Ibid.*, 58.

tions which

can do justice to the immediate involvement of human individuality in all the organic forms and social tensions of history, while yet appreciating its ultimate transcendence over every social and historical situation in the highest reaches of its self-transcendence.¹

One of these necessary "religious presuppositions" is the paradoxical conception of man as creature and yet a child of God. Without this conception, Niebuhr insists, there is no strength or realism to face the complexities of human existence. Thus naturalism, lacking this insight, succumbs to "fascist and Marxist collectivism in its cultural expressions."²

As to responsibility in the self, the naturalists have reduced the idea to an absurdity. The more consistent naturalists

are involved in the absurdity of ostensibly guarding the dignity of man while they actually deny the reality of the responsible self, by reducing human behaviour to the dimension of "facts of nature" about which no moral judgments can be made since every human act is the consequence of some "sufficient cause."³

The less consistent naturalists and idealists, it is true, are able to exalt the dignity of the human mind, but they

1. Niebuhr, NDM, I, 23.

2. Ibid.

3. Niebuhr, FAH, 100.

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1. Leibniz, *Monadology*, I, 27.
2. Ibid.
3. Leibniz, *Monadology*, I, 27.

"do not understand its involvement in finite conditions."¹

Thus, in Niebuhr's eyes, the whole system of natural ethics falls down at the point of an omission of certain basic religious presuppositions which will maintain a tension between historical fact and transcendent reality. That omission leads natural man to look upon himself as an end in himself: he thinks that his accomplishments may yet reach perfection in time, that his finiteness might somehow be overcome by manipulating the facts of nature--an impossibility which naturalists do not see, and which blindness is the essence of their sin.

2. The Criticism of Philosophical Ethics

Niebuhr's opposition to all types of philosophical ethics, which he broadly conceives as "rationalistic idealism," is based upon his distrust of philosophy in general. Philosophy, he maintains, is limited: it can never bridge the gulf between relative and absolute truth.

Philosophical adequacy cannot be a final test of a world-view because every complete philosophy is a rationalized mythology which is judged by the inner consistency of its structure but which, because of the canon of consistency, cannot do justice to all the facts of paradoxical reality.²

This is because the canons of logic and rationality are

1. Niebuhr, FAH, 100.

2. Niebuhr, REE, 198.

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This is because the essence of logic and rationality are

1. Heidegger, *Was, 192*.
2. Heidegger, *Was, 192*.

transcended "when reason attempts to comprehend the final rationality of things."¹ Only Christian theism, with its conception of a transcendent-immanent God (a conception which can never be fully rationalized) has solved this problem of finding moral truth and meaning amidst the conflicting experiences of life. Its solution was not a matter of philosophical reflection, but an experience of profound faith. In fact, neither religion nor morality "can be fully rationalized in view of the facts of paradoxical existence."²

After all, contends Niebuhr, some things are more important than consistency. He would hold to a radical interpretation of the familiar dictum that "life is more than logic."

It is better for religion to forego perfect metaphysical consistency for the sake of moral potency. In a sense religion is always forced to choose between an adequate metaphysics and an adequate ethics.³

If a religion must be consistent throughout, then that religion is held to be "absurd."⁴

Yet Niebuhr will not deny the importance of philosophy and metaphysics in particular. In his words:

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1. Niebuhr, REE, 198.
 2. Ibid.
 3. Ibid., 214.
 4. Ibid., 188.

The metaphysical problem of religion cannot be depreciated. In the long run religion must be able to impress the mind of modern man with the essential plausibility and scientific respectability of its fundamental affirmations.¹

Moreover, he realizes the necessity of rational guidance in ethical conduct. He is aware that this complicates the problem of ethics, for the religious imagination and "astute intelligence which are equally necessary for its solution are incompatible with each other."²

Religion is naturally jealous of any partner in the redemptive enterprise; and the same intelligence which is needed to guide moral purpose in a complex situation easily lames the moral will and dulls the spiritual insight.³

It is quite possible that this difficulty "may permanently destroy every vestige of morality in the group relations of modern society."⁴ The necessary partnership and the inevitable conflict "between the religio-moral and the rational forces" is obvious in both "the political and the economic problems of the present age."⁵

Thus reason alone, apart from religio-moral forces, can never be the basis for a sound ethics. Philosophical

1. Niebuhr, DCNR, 17.

2. Ibid., 140.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

ethics breaks down, we are told, for want of profounder insights into the meaning of life.

To continue the criticism of philosophical ethics, Niebuhr finds that the philosophers have not come to grips with the dynamic element in human existence.

The rationalists from the Stoics to Kant have correctly assessed the role of reason in morality, but have not been able to relate it to the dynamic aspects of life.¹

It is true that the rationalists have done much that is essential to a sound morality. For instance, they have shown how reason discloses that uncontrolled impulses create anarchy both within the self and within the social whole.² They have demonstrated "that reason discloses the moral law."³ They have set up the ideal of order against moral anarchy. But in spite of all these very real contributions of rationalism to moral theory, it has not erected an adequate basis for moral conduct. Moreover,

it can provide principles of criticism and norms; but such norms do not contain a dynamic for their realization.⁴

In both Kantian and Stoic 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

1. Niebuhr, ICE, 203.

2. Ibid., 204.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., 206.

social impulses with which men are endowed by nature are placed outside of the moral realm.¹

Thus the failure of all systems of philosophical ethics gives the major clue to the importance of the Christian doctrine of love in the realm of ethics. This doctrine is known in faith. What does this faith mean?

Faith in God means faith in the transcendent unity of essence and existence, of the ideal and the real world. The cleavage between them in the historical world is not a cleavage between impulse and reason, though it is by reason that the "law of God" is most fully apprehended.²

The cleavage can only be mythically expressed "as one between obedience and sin, between good will and evil will."³ This "will" is ultimately overcome by love.

The Christian conception of love stands in radical opposition to all philosophical ethics. The latter, dominated in the main by Kantian idealism, contains no real dynamic for moral conduct; it can find no effective contact between the real and the ideal world; it has no adequate understanding of the total dimensions of life, of the proper function of impulse in religious and ethical activity.⁴ In one of its simplest expressions, it is believed that "the law of love can be realized simply by

1. Niebuhr, ICE, 206.

2. Ibid., 209.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., 21-29.

being known."¹ This is a shallow reading of the moral life, insists Niebuhr. Not so the Christian love ethic, however.

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.²

It is able to do this by appropriating all of the resources of human nature "which tend toward the harmony of life with life, without resting in the resources of 'natural man'."³ It is able to "set moral goals transcending nature without being lost in other-worldliness."⁴ The degree of approximation to the moral ideal depends upon the extent to which the Christian faith "is not merely a moral theory, but a living and vital presupposition of life and conduct."⁵

3. The Unique Nature and Scope of the Christian Ethic

Niebuhr insists that modern Christianity, in its espousal of secularized versions of ethics, has "sold its birth-right for a mess of pottage."⁶ An independent Christian ethic cannot be achieved or maintained by this procedure.

A Christianity which leans unduly on or borrows excessively from naturalistic idealism, whether liberal or radical, is really betrayed

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1. Niebuhr, ICE, 220.
 2. Ibid., 214.
 3. Ibid.
 4. Ibid.
 5. Ibid.
 6. Niebuhr, Art.(1939).¹

into dependence upon corruptions of its own ethos and culture.¹

When this is done, the significance of Hebrew-Christian religion is lost sight of--a significance which lies in the fact that

the tension between the ideal and the real which it creates can be maintained at any point in history, no matter what the moral and social achievement, because its ultimate ideal always transcends every historical fact and reality.²

In order to maintain this tension, the Christian ethic must be disassociated from "idealistic dualisms as from naturalistic monisms."³ For neither of these disciplines can maintain the proper dynamic for ethical living, and neither is successful in maintaining the ultimate meaning of life in the totality of existence.⁴

How is the Christian ethic able to do these things? By the vitality of Biblical faith, renewing its youth in its prophetic origin. With this vital faith the Christian ethic

is capable of dealing adequately with the moral and social problems of our age; only such a faith can affirm the significance of temporal and mundane existence without capitulating unduly to the relativities of the temporal process.⁵

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1. Niebuhr, ICE, 20.
 2. Ibid.
 3. Ibid., 21.
 4. Ibid.
 5. Ibid., 33.

This faith is capable of pointing to a source of meaning which transcends "all the little universes of value and meaning which have their day and cease to be."¹ At the same time it does not seek refuge in an eternal world where all history ceases to be significant. Only such a faith can outlast "the death of old cultures and the birth of new civilizations" and yet deal in terms of moral responsibility with the world "in which cultures and civilizations engage in struggles of death and life (sic)."² The secret of this faith for ethics is to be found in the conception of the transcendent love ideal, of which the ethic of Jesus is the highest expression. It is necessary to discuss at some length this basic concept of Niebuhr's ethical theory.

Niebuhr agrees with Ernst Troeltsch that Jesus' ethic was at once absolute and uncompromising, an ethic of "love universalism and love perfectionism."³

The injunctions "rest not evil", "love your enemies", "if ye love them that love you what thanks have you?" "be not anxious for your life" and "be ye therefore perfect even as your father in heaven is perfect," are all of one piece, and they are all uncompromising and absolute.⁴

A clear recognition of this fact, it is asserted, will prevent Christian[^] from the dangerous and confusing practice

1. Niebuhr, ICE, 34.

2. Ibid.

3. Niebuhr, CPP, 8.

4. Ibid.

of giving their "tentative and relative standards final and absolute religious sanction."¹ For to know that the love ethic, which is finally and ultimately normative, is above and beyond all human possibilities of realization will help us maintain the tension between what is and what ought to be--an essential feature, Niebuhr would agree, in any vital ethics.

It is perfectly true, as Jesus taught, that love is the law of life. This agape of the New Testament is, moreover, the "chief motivating power of responsible human action, and the one secret of social cohesion."² The significance of this law of love lies in the fact that it is "not just another law, but a law which transcends all law."³

Every law and every standard which falls short of the law of love embodies contingent factors and makes concessions to the fact that sinful man must achieve tentative harmonies of life with life which are less than the best.⁴

And the compulsion to make those tentative harmonies is as all-embracing "as the love of God itself to man."⁵

What is the proper motive behind Christian love? In answer to this question, the reader is informed that

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1. Niebuhr, CPP, 9.
 2. Niebuhr, ICE, 211. Cf. CPP, 9.
 3. Niebuhr, CPP, 9.
 4. Ibid.
 5. Ibid.

the Christian love-commandment does not demand love of the fellowman because he is with us equally divine, or because we ought to have "respect for personality" but because God loves him.¹

There is no area of life which does not feel "this sense of responsibility toward the law of love."²

Though the love ideal transcends all finite possibilities, yet it is not merely a transcendental ideal. Rather, Jesus' ethic of love

is drawn from, and relevant to, every moral experience. It is immanent in life as God is immanent in the world.³

There is a relevance of the ideal of love on every conceivable level. It is not an ideal "magically superimposed upon life" by a revelation which has "no relation to the total human experience."⁴

But to understand that the law of love, at once impossible and possible, is ever relevant to the human situation is no excuse for drawing hasty conclusions regarding the social and prudential possibilities of the love ethic--which Niebuhr sees to be a major weakness of liberal Christianity.⁵ For the ethic of Jesus was not meant to deal with

the immediate problem of every human life--
the problem of arranging some kind of

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1. Niebuhr, CPP, 223.
 2. Ibid.
 3. Niebuhr, ICE, 47.
 4. Ibid., 114.
 5. Ibid., 41.

armistice between various contending factions and forces.¹

Jesus, for example, had nothing to say "about the relativities of politics and economics," nor was he concerned primarily with "the necessary balances of power which exist in even the most intimate social relationships."² Jesus' ethic was neither horizontal, dealing exclusively with political or social problems, nor was it diagonal, drawing lines between the moral ideal and the facts of a given situation; rather, it has only "a vertical dimension between the loving will of God and the will of man."³

How reconcile the paradoxical nature of the foregoing statements? This is done by the adoption of a dualistic ethics, based upon the recognition of man as a child of God and as a sinner at one and the same time. To man's righteousness as a child of God appertains one ethic; to his status as a sinner belongs the other. To the persistence of righteousness in the midst of his sin belongs the tension between the two ethics which is expressed by describing perfection as an "impossible possibility."⁴

In An Interpretation of Christian Ethics this dual ethics is given a realistic analysis. In Christianity and Power Politics some practical applications of this twofold

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1. Niebuhr, ICE, 39.
 2. Ibid.
 3. Ibid.
 4. Ibid.

view of ethics are suggested. In both works the reader is cautioned not to take the ethics of Jesus as an adequate guide for the problems of life. Jesus' ethic, as we have observed, was one of "love perfectionism" which presupposes men who are capable of suppressing their egotism altogether. For this reason it is inapplicable to man as he actually is.

The ultimate principles of the Kingdom of God are never irrelevant to any problem of justice, and they hover over every social situation as an ideal possibility; but that does not mean that they can be made into simple alternatives for the present schemes of relative justice.¹

All attempts to the contrary are based on "illusions about the stuff with which it is dealing in human nature."²

There is a legitimate sense, Niebuhr finds, in which the ethic of Jesus is relevant to the human situation. But this is no easy doctrine, we are warned again: it requires the insights of true prophetic Christianity to comprehend it completely. Once this vantage point is reached it will appear that the absolute love ethic of Jesus is relevant, within strict limits, in the following ways:

1. It provides an ideal standard for man whereby he may measure the magnitude of his failure. Christianity demands the impossible, and by that very demand it emphasizes the impotence of human nature.

1. Niebuhr, CPP, 25.

2. Ibid.

Some transcendent possibility always stands above every actuality, as a vantage point from which actual achievements are found wanting. Thus the ideal of perfect love gives a perspective upon every human action which prompts the confession: Are we not all unprofitable servants?¹

Men are saved by the very recognition of the fact that they can never achieve perfection, measured by the standard of perfect love. That recognition should lead to repentance, for by it alone will grace be experienced.²

2. It provides us with "an indiscriminate principle of criticism over all attempts at social and international justice."³ Here the absolute standard for individual and social ethics is to be found. Every attempt to create a new and better world must be judged by this ultimate criterion.

The ultimate principles of the Kingdom of God are never irrelevant to any problem of justice, and they hover over every situation as an ideal possibility.⁴

It must be continually kept in mind, however, that this transcendent ideal principle cannot in and of itself provide men with a practicable way of life in a sinful world; nevertheless, it may "offer valuable insights to and sources of criticism for a prudential social ethic which deals with present realities."⁵

1. Niebuhr, ICE, 92.

2. Ibid., 99.

3. Niebuhr, WCNP, 33.

4. Ibid., 36.

5. Niebuhr, ICE, 61

Niebuhr is convinced that this second principle of the relevance of the Christian ethic is the best safeguard available against complacency in the moral life.

Against all forms of moral complacency the Christian faith must sharpen the sense of the Kingdom of God as a relevant alternative to every scheme and structure of human justice. It sees history as a realm of infinite possibilities. No limit can be placed upon the higher possibilities of justice which may be achieved in any given historic situation.¹

If Jesus' ethic can never become the way of life for a sinful humanity, it can at least help us to set all our poor tentative experiments under the criticism of the ultimate ideal; above all "the law of love remains a principle of criticism over all forms of community in which elements of coercion and conflict destroy the highest type of fellowship."²

A word of caution is again injected against those who make the law of love a simple panacea. The following quotations are typical statements, of which similar ones can be found in a majority if not all of Niebuhr's major works.

Love may qualify the social struggle of history but it will never abolish it, and those who make the attempt to bring society under the dominion of perfect love will die on the cross.³

1. Niebuhr, Art.(1943).¹
 2. Niebuhr, WCNP, 33.
 3. Niebuhr, Art.(1932).¹

The Christian interpretation of the human situation is not exhausted in the discovery that love is the law of life, though it may be purified by the ideal of love.¹

This is because the Christian faith does not begin with the law of love, but at the point of the cry of despair: "The good that I would do, I do not do and the evil that I would not, that I do--Wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death."²

3. Finally, the ideal of love is relevant to the human situation by a recognition that it is "not merely a principle of indiscriminate criticism upon all approximations of justice: it is also a principle of discriminate criticism between forms of justice."³ For example, when there are two or more alternatives, both admittedly falling short of the ideal, the law of love provides the criterion by which we may determine which of these "second-bests" approximates most closely to the ideal. It may even lay upon us the duty of accepting what, in the light of the ideal, is obviously the lesser of two evils. For example, war is better than submission to tyranny.

In a significant article in Christianity and Crisis Niebuhr asks the question: "Can the Church Give a Moral Lead?"⁴ In other words, has the church an effective program

1. Niebuhr, Art.(1944).¹
 2. Ibid.
 3. Niebuhr, WCNP, 33.
 4. Niebuhr, Art.(1948).¹

for Christians in a sinful society? The reply is a qualified affirmative.

We must, as Christians, constantly make significant moral and political decisions amidst and upon perplexing issues and hazardous ventures. We must even make them "with might" and not half-heartedly. But the Christian faith gives us no warrant to lift ourselves above the world's perplexities and to seek or to claim absolute validity for the stand we take. It does, however, encourage us to charity, which is born of humility and contrition.¹

In this interpretation the Christian religion furnishes not a clear "moral lead" but, rather, a clear religious insight into the fragmentary character of all human morality, including the "virtue of the saints and the political pronouncements of the churches."² To claim too much for the ethic of Jesus, Niebuhr insists, is to turn it into "an inhuman fanaticism."³

From the principles outlined in the foregoing discussion it is now possible to draw certain conclusions regarding the ethical theory of Reinhold Niebuhr as applied to the field of concrete ethical action.

First, since man lives in a corrupted world (which exhibits on every page of its history the impracticability of the way of absolute love) the next best thing to do is to find the closest approximation to the absolute ideal

1. Niebuhr, Art. (1948).¹
 2. Ibid.
 3. Ibid.

and proceed on that basis. This approximation is found in the conception of "equal justice."¹

The closest approximation to a love in which life supports life in voluntary community is a justice in which life is prevented from destroying life and the interests of the one are guarded against unjust claims by the other.²

And again in another connection:

Justice is probably the highest ideal toward human groups can aspire (sic). And justice, with its goal of adjustment of right against right, inevitably involves the assertion of right against right and interest against interest until some kind of harmony is achieved.³

It should be observed at this point that Niebuhr is inconsistent with his total viewpoint in the foregoing statement that "human groups can aspire." This would imply that human groups may be normal forms of self-transcendence, and that their activities can be moralized--a position he explicitly denies in The Nature and Destiny of Man. The term "achieve" would be more in keeping with his thought than the term "aspire." Aspiration, in the usual usage in religion or morality, presupposes a sufficient degree of positive freedom and power within man to choose and in some measure realize ideal values. Since Niebuhr tends to deny this positive freedom, as we shall see, the above statement is inconsistent.

To continue, the sense of justice which Niebuhr

1. Niebuhr, CPP, 26.

2. Ibid.

3. Niebuhr, Art.(1932).²

hold to be the closest possible approximation to the ideal is based upon a concept of "balance of power." By this principle individuals and groups are kept in "check" and prevented from degenerating into irresponsible centers of power. It is admitted that a balance of power, or an equal justice concept, is different from and inferior to the harmony of the love ideal.¹ But since love is an absolute and uncompromising ideal, as we have noted, and since it is incapable of being realized on the historical plane of human existence, then the only sensible conclusion is that "equal justice remains the only possible, though hardly a precise, criterion of value."²

The law of love is not lost in this realistic handling of social and political issues, though it might logically appear to be so. Perfect love remains

involved in all approximations of justice, not only as the source of the norms of justice, but as an ultimate perspective³ by which their limitations are discovered.

A second practical conclusion to be deduced from the ways in which the Christian ethic is relevant to the moral situation is this: We must be prepared to make relative judgments; that is, to distinguish between con-

1. Niebuhr, CPP, 26.

2. Niebuhr, ICE, 196.

3. Ibid., 140.

flicting values. Here an obligation to choose "the lesser of two evils" is again considered. This approach is basic to Niebuhr's philosophy of war and peace, as we shall see.¹ A Christian must, with good conscience, act upon his best choices.

The relativity of all moral ideals cannot absolve us of the necessity and duty of choosing between relative values; and the choice is sometimes so clear as to become an imperative one.²

If Christian morality is senseless "when it seeks uncritically to identify the cause of Christ with the cause of democracy," it is equally as senseless when "it purges itself of this error by an uncritical refusal to make any distinctions between relative values in history."³ By no means will Niebuhr deny that there are "values" in life.

Is not the whole of life a constant choice between lesser and higher values? There are no means and no ends in life in an absolute sense. There are merely competing values.⁴

Social justice, as we have noted, is one of these values which demands an "imperative choice." This remains true even though it is understood that this choice may involve armed conflict, for "there is no perfectly adequate method of preventing either anarchy or tyranny."⁵

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1. See Chapter VIII.
 2. Niebuhr, ICE, 142.
 3. Niebuhr, WCNP, 39.
 4. Niebuhr, Art. (1933).²
 5. Niebuhr, CPP, 27.

A final practical conclusion regarding the relevance of the law of perfect love suggests a fundamental concept in Niebuhr's ethic, which necessitates an extended discussion. We refer to the idea of the sinful nature of man. This idea involves the conception of original sin, collective guilt, freedom and responsibility, and the tension between spirit and nature in man. We may state the final practical conclusion thus: The ultimate standard of the Christian ideal ought to persuade man that "political controversies are always conflicts between sinners and not between righteous men and sinners."¹ This admission will save practical man from self-righteousness in thought and action. But to recognize that we ourselves are sinners, who are clearly involved in the sin of those whom we call "evil," is no reason why we should not resist evil. If we imagine that

we have no right to act against an acknowledged evil because we are not ourselves pure, we are delivered into historic futility.²

It is precisely the religious gift of grace which frees the Christian to act in history, to give his devotion to the highest values he knows, even though he "is persuaded by that grace to remember the ambiguity of even his best actions."³ Moral anarchy results if men and nations do

1. Niebuhr, WCNP, 34.
 2. Niebuhr, Art.(1933).²
 3. Niebuhr, WCNP, 44.

not see this. An understanding by man of his limitations due to his finiteness will be the clue to the Christian conception of man, and will be able to prove a check against fanaticism in social ethics. He will then know that

the same man who touches the fringes of the infinite in his moral life remains imbedded in finiteness, and he increases the evil in his life if he tries to overcome it without regard to his limitations.¹

For between the perfect Father in heaven and finite man there is a fixed gulf which no striving after a perfectionist ideal can ever bridge. Man, because of his sin (though his sin is not his finiteness) is incapacitated to do more than achieve an approximation of the Kingdom of God; in fact, he cannot even do that, for it is entirely in God's hands to "bring in the Kingdom."

We are now in a position to examine the concept of original sin--a doctrine which, with certain modifications, forms a cornerstone of Niebuhr's theology and ethical theory alike.

That Niebuhr is not willing to accept the traditional doctrine of original sin per se or in toto is made quite clear in his various writings, particularly in The Nature and Destiny of Man, in Reflections on the End of an Era, and in An Interpretation of Christian Ethics. For

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example, in the latter work he criticizes the orthodox doctrine as being "self-destructive" when it interprets the myth of the Fall as "inherited corruption."

If original sin is an inherited corruption, its inheritance destroys the freedom and therefore the responsibility which is basic to the conception of sin.¹

Rather than being an inherited taint on human nature, as the Church Fathers vainly taught, original sin

is an inevitable fact of human existence, the inevitability of which is given by the nature of man's spirituality. It is true in every moment of existence, but it has no history.²

Thus the myth of the Fall is reinterpreted to serve as a tool for describing the very quality of human existence. Niebuhr's defense of this restoration of the doctrine of original sin lies at the point of its superior insight into the depth of man's real nature.

The particular virtue of the myth of the Fall is that it does justice to the paradoxical relation of spirit and nature in human evil. In the religious thought which flows from its interpretation reason and consciousness are not the unqualified instruments of good and the manifestations of the divine. Neither is the body or material existence evil as such.³

Rather, evil came into the world "through human responsibility," and it is to be attributed to "an act of rebel-

1. Niebuhr, ICE, 89.

2. Ibid., 90.

3. Ibid.

lion on the part of man."¹ The myth of the Fall, it is asserted, is adequate to explain this rebellious act common to all men.

In this conception evil becomes, not the absence of the good, but the corruption of the good. Compared to other views, a mythical reading of human evil

is more positive than in monistic philosophies, and more dependent upon the good than in religious and philosophical dualisms.²

The myth of the Fall is thus in harmony with the mixture of profound pessimism and ultimate optimism "which distinguishes prophetic religion from other forms of faith and world-views."³ In the faith of prophetic religion existence is viewed as more meaningful, and this meaning "is more definitely threatened by evil and the triumph of good over evil is ultimately more certain" than in alternative forms of religion.⁴

In addition to these general advantages, the doctrine of sin and guilt has the added specific virtue of assisting morality in maintaining its vital function.

Morality...maintains its vigor only if the conflict between good and evil is recognized as real and significant.⁵

Further, a general sense of religious guilt "is therefore a fruitful source of a sense of moral responsibility in immediate situations."⁶

1. Niebuhr, ICE, 74.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid., 75.

6. Ibid., 78.

It is instructive that in Reflections on the End of an Era Niebuhr is unusually hesitant when employing the concept of original sin as a true account of man's situation. Though admitting that his own orientation is taken from the orthodox doctrine of the Fall, he manifests a marked fear that a revival of Reformation teaching might lead to a political defeatism which would "fasten injustice upon society in the name of religion."¹ Here he embraces the concept because of its psychological merits. The myth of the Fall is alone able, in contrast to rational conceptions of human nature, to communicate the thought that "the egoism of natural impulse is actually transmuted into a wilful conflict of life with life" and so does justice "to the actual facts."²

Through it one may understand that no matter how wise the perspectives which the human mind may reach, how broad the loyalties which the human imagination may conceive, how universal the community which human statecraft may organize, or how pure the aspirations of the saintliest idealists may be, there is no level of human moral or social achievement in which there is not some corruption of inordinate self-love.³

What is the exact nature of human sin? Where does it find its locus? In the first place, sin is too profound in its essence to be comprehended in moralistic

1. Niebuhr, REE, 122.

2. Ibid., 291.

3. Niebuhr, CLCD, 17.

terms. It is to theological terminology that one must turn to discover the "total dimension" of human life, for morals deals only "with the surface of life."¹ Prophetic Christianity is best equipped to see sin in its proper setting. This is because it comprehends the height and depth of human stature, as we have seen.

In The Nature and Destiny of Man Niebuhr understands the Christian picture of man as placing the high estimate of man, implied in the concept of "made in the image of God," in paradoxical juxtaposition to the low estimate of human virtue in Christian thought. Christianity sees that

man is a sinner. His sin is defined as rebellion against God. The Christian estimate of human evil is so serious precisely because it places evil at the very centre of human personality: in the will.²

Here is the answer to the question: What is the locus of human sin? Not man's finiteness, which he cannot help, nor his inevitable involvement in the contingencies and necessities of nature are to be understood as the seat and occasion for his sin; rather, it is to be found in his rebellious nature which makes him refuse to admit his creatureliness, and leads to a wrong use of his freedom.

1. Niebuhr, Art. (1936).¹

2. Niebuhr, NDM, I, 16. Italics mine.

Prophetic religion attributes moral evil to an evil will rather than to the limitations of natural man. The justification for such an emphasis lies in the fact that human reason is actually able to envisage moral possibilities, more inclusive loyalties, and more adequate harmonies of impulse than those which are actually chosen.¹

There is, therefore, an element of "perversity, a conscious choice of the lesser good, involved in practically every moral action."² This "imp of the perverse" causes man to pretend to be more than he is. In fact, the power of man's pretension to be like God is so strong that it causes a rift within his "self" which cannot be overcome outside of God's grace: no moralistic or rationalistic discipline can remove the "contradiction."

Man is not divided against himself so that the essential man can be extricated from the nonessential. Man contradicts himself within the terms of his true essence. His essence is self-determination. His sin is the wrong use of his freedom and its consequent destruction.³

While the law of man's nature is love (a harmonious relation of life to life in obedience to the divine center and source of life) yet this law is violated when man seeks to make himself the center and source of his own life.⁴ This is the meaning of rebellion against God, and is the essence of human sin. This sin is conceived as something

1. Niebuhr, ICE, 77.

2. Ibid.

3. Niebuhr, NDM, I, 16.

4. Ibid.

spiritual, not carnal, though "the infection of rebellion spreads from the spirit to the body and disturbs its harmonies also."¹

Man, in other words, is a sinner not because he is one limited individual within a whole but because he is betrayed by his very ability to survey the whole to imagine himself the whole.²

In contrast to thinkers like Hegel and Kant, who cannot define sin as spiritual because they regard spirit as essentially good, Niebuhr would define sin as a violation of the good within freedom itself. Evil thus takes on a paradoxical nature: it arises out of freedom "not as an essential or necessary consequence but as an alogical fact."³

It is informative in this connection to note the development of Niebuhr's view of sin through the years.

Mary Thelen has done this with the following results:

Previously [to the publication of An Interpretation of Christian Ethics (1935)] Niebuhr had made sin issue from the weakness of reason as measured against the strength of egoism; later he makes it issue wholly from the pretension of spirit; but now he admits both weakness and pretension as causes of sin, although with the emphasis on sin arising from the latter as the truer kind of sin.⁴

We would add to this historical survey of Niebuhr's devel-

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1. Niebuhr, NDM, I, 17.
 2. Ibid.
 3. Ibid., 120. Italics mine.
 4. Thelen, MAS, 80.

oping thought on the problem of sin by noting the view taken in his latest work, Faith and History. Here sin is clearly conceived as the "revolt" of man against God. In his words:

Sin is, in short, the consequence of man's inclination to usurp the prerogatives of God, to think more highly of himself than he ought to think, thus making destructive use of his freedom by not observing the limits to which a creaturely freedom is bound.¹

Man's sinful pride brings him into conflict with both his Creator and his fellowman. There is no essential modification observable from the view taken in The Nature and Destiny of Man. Sin remains rebellion; it is inevitable; it is found on all levels of existence; and it is magnified on the collective plane of existence.

A further comment should be made concerning the role of will in moral action. It will be recalled that evil is rooted and grounded in will: it results from an irresponsible use of freedom, but remains man's responsibility under all circumstances. Those who base morality on the power of will to overcome all obstacles to human perfection are, according to Niebuhr, involved "in an illusion." For example, liberal Christians who would apply the ethics of love simply by "strengthening the will" are doomed to find their fondest hopes frustrated.

1. Niebuhr, FAH, 121.

The commandment of love is a challenge to my will which I cannot answer by strengthening my will. Constant appeals to the will merely increase either self-righteousness or the despair of impotence.¹

Where men really fulfil the law of Christ, we are told, they do it not by the strength of their own wills, but by "some strength which has entered their wills."² At times, these acts of grace may even be prompted by "an impulse of nature."³

The phrase "impulse of nature" suggests another essential feature of Niebuhr's general ethical theory. The social and generous impulses of man are conceived as radically opposed to the egoistic ones, which have their origin in nature.⁴ The strength and permanence of the egoistic impulse is based upon a psychological analysis of the instinctual type. The individual, in Moral Man and Immoral Society, is viewed as "a nucleus of energy."⁵ This energy received direction and pattern first on the level of natural impulse, and then on the level of reason.

The "instincts" of life include drives toward self-preservation, toward preservation of the race, and toward fulfillment.

Every type of energy in nature seeks to preserve and perpetuate itself and to gain

1. Niebuhr, Art. (1936).²

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Niebuhr, NDM, I, 108.

5. Niebuhr, MMIS, 25.

fulfillment within terms of its unique
genius.¹

In addition to these mentioned, the natural instincts include a tendency toward "some achievement of harmony with other life," so that

it is obvious that man not only shares a gregarious impulse with the lower creatures but that a specific impulse of pity bids him fly to² aid of stricken members of his community.

What, one might legitimately inquire at this point, is the function of reason in the ordering of the impulses? More will be said in Chapter III, but we may observe here that reason has the function of ordering human energy as a kind of supplement to the order already immanent within the impulses. The principle of rationality is the principle of harmony, coherence, universality. In the field of human relationships the reason of man gives approval to "those impulses which affirm life in its most inclusive terms," and likewise "disapproves their opposites."³

Reason alone, however, has no vitality to enforce its demands. Its dynamic is received in part by its union with the benevolent impulses, whose purposes to some degree coincide with its own, and in part from conscience, which is probably to be regarded psychologically as of the

1. Niebuhr, MMIS, 25.

2. Ibid., 26.

3. Ibid., 10.

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- 1. Richard, 1910, 25.
 - 2. Ibid., 28.
 - 3. Ibid., 10.

nature of "desire."¹

The problem of morality is set in part by the fact that man possesses both egoistic and altruistic impulses. For example, Kantian and Stoic rationalism are wrong, Niebuhr insists, "in finding the root of man's moral capacity in reason alone and in depreciating the moral quality of the social impulses."² In a more significant sense, the problem of morality is set by the double principle of order--a principle unique to man. According to this idea, man alone is the creature endowed with the rational capacity for "self-consciousness" or "self-transcendence." Armed with this rational capacity, man is able to see himself in relation to his environment and to other life, and is thus enabled to project goals more inclusive than those which natural impulse prompts. Thus there are two resources in human nature to which the religio-moral discipline must be related. These are:

The natural endowments of sympathy, paternal and filial affection and the sense of cohesion which all human beings possess (gregarious impulses); and the faculties of reason which tend to extend the range of these impulses beyond the limits set by nature.³

This double principle of order means that it is possible for the impulses to achieve a coherence among

1. Niebuhr would attribute his psychology of desire as related to conscience to C. D. Broad. See MMIS, 10.

2. Niebuhr, MMIS, 26f.

3. Niebuhr, ICE, 203.

themselves which gives great stability to the personality on the level which is below that of rationality (which demands harmony with all life universally). On the basis of this insight Niebuhr is equipped to criticize the social philosophies of the type of John Dewey, who would make the problem of life merely "that of the integration of natural impulses."¹ This theory, we are informed, does not do justice to

the complexities of human behavior and to the inevitable conflicts between the objectives determined by reason and those of the total body of impulse, rationally unified but bent upon more immediate goals than those which man's highest reason envisages.²

It is quite possible that men may "achieve a rational unity of impulses around the organizing centre of the possessive instinct or the will-to-power," and yet have "a faint sense of obligation to achieve social objectives, which transcend, or are in conflict with, the will-to-power."³

Niebuhr feels that all schools of excessive rationalism (as modern liberalism) are optimistic when they should be more guarded against the possibilities of human nature. There is no "gradual triumph of mind over impulse."⁴ What the rationalists do not see is that "forces which are not immediately conscious of purpose...may be used to weave meaning into the strands of history."⁵ After all, reason

1. Niebuhr, MMIS, 35.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Niebuhr, REE, 123.

5. Ibid., 124.

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It is quite possible that we may "achieve a rational unity of impulses around the organizing centre of the massive instinct or the will-to-power," and yet have "a latent sense of obligation to achieve social objectives, which transcend, or are in conflict with, the will-to-power." Niebuhr feels that all schools of excessive rationalism (as modern liberalism) are optimistic when they should be more guarded against the possibilities of human nature. There is no "gradual triumph of mind over impulse." That the rationalists do not see in that "force which are not immediately conscious of purpose... may be used to weave meaning into the strands of history." After all, reason

1. Niebuhr, *WMB*, 25.
2. *ibid.*
3. *ibid.*
4. Niebuhr, *WMB*, 122.

contains many perils to ethical living.

The rationalists have so much confidence in the power of reason to control impulse that they fail to see that the tendency to use reason to justify egoism in terms of the general good rather than to check egoism is a perennial characteristic of the moral life. I do not say that it cannot be reduced, but it cannot be eliminated... Political realism must regard it as a permanent factor.¹

The power of impulse, as opposed to spirit, is given an extended analysis in Reflections on the End of an Era. Here Niebuhr understands a radical and persistent tension between "spirit" and "nature." A brief summary of this discussion will reveal its relevance in the field of ethics.

The term "spirit" is employed by Niebuhr to mean "the impulse to subject the individual or social ego to the universal even to the point of self-annihilation or absorption."² "Nature" is defined as "the impulse to universalize the ego to the point of destroying or enslaving all competing forms of life."³ This is clearly not nature as we generally conceive the concept. In Niebuhr's view "nature" undergoes a peculiar transformation by reason and the impulses. Reason is able to transmute the will-to-live which man shares with the animals (the impulse to self-preservation) into the strictly human will-to-power (the imperialistic impulse). This transmutation

1. Niebuhr, Art.(1933).¹

2. Niebuhr, REE, 9.

3. Ibid.

is an aspect of the deeper nature of "nature."

"Spirit" is not the exact opposite of "nature."

Here it is instructive that Niebuhr will not construct an impassable gulf between God and nature, in opposition to men like Karl Barth.

An absolute dualism either between God and the universe or between man and nature, spirit and matter, or good and evil, is neither possible nor necessary.¹

What is most important is that justice be done to the fact that "creative purpose meets resistance in the world" and that "the ideal which is implicit in every reality is also in conflict with it."² And this conflict will remain as long as there is human history. There is a positive value in this realization.

The tension between spirit and nature must remain to the end of history lest the impulses of nature clothe themselves with the moral prestige of the spiritual and secure a moral immunity behind which they express themselves without moral restraint.³

One explanation for the foregoing statement that spirit and nature are not exact opposites is that some of the forces which impel men to affirm the life of the other man rather than their own lives are "derived from natural impulse, and not from reason."⁴ "Spirituality" becomes, not mere rationality, but reason, will, and emotion acting

1. Niebuhr, DCNR, 200.

2. Ibid.

3. Niebuhr, REE, 136.

4. Ibid., 9.

together to see life in its total relationships, in such a fashion as to "feel" an obligation toward the whole of life.¹

These drives, as we have observed, are forever at war within man. The demand of spirit, as embodied in all systems of high morality, is that "men shall affirm the life of others as much as they affirm their own"; but this demand of reason and conscience

is in conflict with the natural egoistic impulse with which all life is endowed and which attempts the immediate and the exclusive preservation of the ego or the specific social organization, if need be at the expense of other life.²

This view of the eternal warfare between spirit and nature leads Niebuhr to some startling conclusions. For one thing, no one is able fully to obey the dictates of conscience at any one moment; in fact, if he were successful in so doing the results would be disastrous.

Complete devotion to the ethical principle would lead to annihilation in any immediate instant.³

Logically every life deserves destruction.⁴

Once man has realized the futility of attempting to apply pure spirit in the realm of actual human experience, what is left for him to do? Since it is impossible to act

1. Niebuhr, REE, 263f.

2. Ibid., 198f.

3. Ibid., 212.

4. Ibid., 285.

in the world of nature and history in terms of pure spirit, then the only conclusion to be deduced is that "the highest moral ideal is compromised in every realization."¹ Compromise, then, is the way out. Thus the foundation for a philosophy of compromise, based upon a new interpretation of the medieval conception of jus naturale and jus gentium, is now laid and ready. We have already discussed the dualistic ethics based upon this conviction.

The inevitability of moral wrong cuts across all individual and social bonds. It is both universal and necessary. This situation results from the "paradox in which all morality moves."² This paradox affirms that we can work concretely for the affirmation of the total needs of humanity only by setting one partial interest against another. For example, this takes place when the interests of those in society who have been defrauded are asserted against the interest of those who have undue privileges.³ Our disinterestedness, no matter how sincere, is bound "to be corrupted in the end by a more egoistic interest in the particular group we are supporting."⁴ This evil is in man and becomes the source of his own chaos. And this chaotic condition is expressed most fully in his collective relationships.

1. Niebuhr, REE, 266.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

In the conception of "immoral society" we have now introduced a final word in this extended survey of the ethical theory of Reinhold Niebuhr. In a sense the concept of collective egoism is the end result of a logic based upon "the egoistic corruption of the human heart."¹ Sin in society is just an extension of sin in the individual, we are informed, except that it takes on a more complex and demonic nature in the larger aggregates.

It is instructive that Niebuhr, in a debate with George A. Coe following the publication of Moral Man and Immoral Society, admitted that he might have overstated the antithesis between the two in the wording of the title.

I do not regard the individual as moral and society as immoral, though I chose that² title for my book for pedagogical purposes.

He goes on to affirm that society, in his opinion, merely "cumulates the egoism of individuals and transmutes their individual altruism" in collective egoism so that "the egoism of the group has a double force."³

For this reason no group acts from purely unselfish or even mutual intent and politics⁴ is therefore bound to be a contest of power.

Thus neither individuals nor groups can rise above the inherent egoism that pervades every human thought and action. In The Nature and Destiny of Man this idea of the immoral

1. Niebuhr, BT, 13.

2. Niebuhr, Art.(1934).² This was an editorial debate.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

character of individual man comes to a full culmination-- a conviction that is merely adumbrated in Moral Man and Immoral Society.

In what sense is man moral and society immoral? Where is the evidence to be found? Niebuhr suggests in the Introduction to Moral Man and Immoral Society that individual men may be moral

in the sense that they are able to consider interests other than their own in determining problems of conduct, and are capable, on occasion, of preferring the advantages of others to their own.¹

Men are endowed by nature with "a measure of sympathy for their kind," the breadth of which may be extended by an "astute social pedagogy."² Further, the rational faculty of individual men prompts them to

a sense of justice which educational discipline may refine and purge of egoistic elements until they are able to view a social situation, in which their own interests are involved, with a fair measure of objectivity.³

This optimism regarding the moral capacity of individual man is repeated nowhere else to the extent that we find it here. But even so there are sobering facts of offset any latent optimism.

For one thing, the imperialistic impulse is ever-

1. Niebuhr, MMIS, xi.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.

present in the self-consciousness of individuals. Again, the will-to-live is inevitably linked with the will-to-power. And self-interest, egoism, the natural impulses, greed, and the various forms of self-assertion can never "be completely controlled or sublimated by reason."¹ It is true that these things are much more likely of being checked in individuals than in their collective behavior. This is due to the superior capacity of particular men to conceive and apply religio-moral ideals.

In every human group there is less reason to guide and to check impulse, less capacity for self-transcendence, less ability to comprehend the needs of others and therefore more unrestrained egoism than the individuals who compose the group, reveal in their personal relationships.²

Thus whatever achievements are possible for "moral man" are all but impossible, if not totally so, for human societies and social groups.³

If we inquire as to the reason for this radical difference between personal and collective ethical behavior, we are informed that the morality of groups is inferior to that of individuals precisely because of the difficulty of establishing a rational social force which

is powerful enough to cope with the natural impulses by which society achieves its cohesion.⁴

1. Niebuhr, MMIS, 42.

2. Ibid., xii.

3. Ibid., xi.

4. Ibid., xii.

The main reason, however, is the mathematical factor of "adding up" the egoism of particular men until a

collective egoism, compounded of the egoistic impulses of individuals, which achieve a more vivid expression and a more cumulative effect when they are united in a common impulse than when they express themselves separately and discretely.¹

That Niebuhr's pessimism regarding the possibility of making inter-group relations conform to ethical principles grew more emphatic as his thought developed can be illustrated by a brief comparison of Moral Man and Immoral Society with his book written five years earlier, Does Civilization Need Religion? In the latter work Niebuhr admits that modern man faces no problem that is greater than that of his aggregate existence.² Here he is disturbed that "reasonable ethicists" are so preoccupied with attempting to make life within groups moral that they fail to aspire to "the moral redemption of inter-group relations."³ By no means will Niebuhr give up the hope that such an achievement is possible, though he strictly qualifies this hope.

The task of making complex group relations ethical belongs primarily to religion and education because statecraft cannot rise above the universal limitations of human

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1. Niebuhr, xiii.
 2. Niebuhr, DCNR, 17.
 3. Ibid., 55. Italics mine.

imagination and intelligence. A robust ethical idealism, an extraordinary spiritual insight, and a high degree of intelligence are equally necessary for such a social task.¹

While moral goodwill alone cannot make modern complex society moral, yet in this earlier work Niebuhr sees the possibility of a moral society if "moral purpose is astutely guided."² But even in this connection is to be detected that note of despair which characterizes all of his later writings.

The task of persuading the group to sacrifice some of its advantages for the sake of the whole of human society is so difficult that it almost leads to despair. If it will ever be accomplished religious-moral forces, whatever their present im-³potence, must come to the aid of reason.

Turning now to Moral Man and Immoral Society it is observed that group relations can never be as ethical as those which characterize individual relations.⁴ For whatever increase in social intelligence and moral goodwill may be achieved in human history may "serve to mitigate the brutalities of social conflict," but they cannot "abolish the conflict itself."⁵

The ethical and spiritual note of love and repentance can do no more than qualify the social struggle in history. It will never abolish it.⁶

Thus, in this latter work, society remains "immoral" in a

1. Niebuhr, DCNR, 139.

2. Ibid., 13.

3. Ibid., 142.

4. Ibid., 83.

5. Niebuhr, MMIS, xxiii.¹

6. Ibid. Cf. Art.(1932).¹

very fundamental sense, in a radical contradiction to the ways of "moral man."¹

Niebuhr gathers the evidence for his thesis of collective egoism from the social and political sciences. He finds far more accurate data in the laboratories of the descriptive scientists than in the "guesses" of the sociologists and the moralists among the normative scientists. In fact, there is manifest a deep distrust in the normative disciplines.

Social analyses and prophecies made by moralists, sociologists and educators upon the basis of these assumptions [that rationality or goodwill can progressively establish social harmony] lead to a very considerable moral and political confusion in our day.²

Even the psychologists, because of their individualistic bias, are found wanting in insights needed to comprehend the complexities of collective existence.

One cannot turn to psychologists, not even social psychologists, to secure the most authoritative data on collective behavior.³

One must turn, rather, to political scientists and to historians.⁴ They alone, we are informed, recognize that there are elements in man's collective behavior "which belong to the order of nature and can never be brought completely under the dominion of reason or conscience."⁵

1. Niebuhr, Art.(1932).²

2. Niebuhr, MMIS, xii.

3. Niebuhr, Art.(1933).²

4. Ibid.

5. Niebuhr, MMIS, xii.

They understand, in contradistinction to religious or rational moralists, the "brutal character of the behavior of all human collectives," and "the power of self-interest and collective egoism in all inter-group relations."¹

One reason for the inferiority of the social sciences in this regard is their ignorance of the limitations of human nature. They do not see that "the limitations of the human imagination" and the easy subservience of reason

to prejudice and passion, and the consequent persistence of irrational egoism, particularly in group behavior, make social conflict an inevitability in human history, probably to the very end.²

However, a concession is made to the fact that not all elements in contemporary culture are unrealistic in their estimate of social realities. As a matter of fact, social situations are frequently appraised quite realistically. But the fallacy is that when "the hope is expressed that a new pedagogy or a revival of religion will make conflict unnecessary in the future," then all realism is lost. Niebuhr knows that "a considerable portion of modern culture remains unrealistic in its analyses"; that is, it is erroneously assumed that substantial social and moral achievements will result automatically from "better attitudes," a "religiously inspired goodwill," a "little more effort," or perhaps a "little more education."³

1. Niebuhr, *Ibid.*, xx.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*, xvff.

Thus Niebuhr, pragmatically, turns to the facts of politics rather than to the less "accurate" normative disciplines in order to build a realistic analysis of individual and social interaction. The social sciences have demonstrated their failure to observe that it is next to impossible to establish just relations between individuals within a group simply by moral and rational suasion and accommodation, and that it is a futile hope to attempt this in inter-group relations. The political and historical studies, however, have gained the insight that

the relations between groups must...always be predominantly political rather than ethical; that is, they will be determined by the proportion of power which each group possesses at least as much as by a rational and moral appraisal of the comparative needs and claims of the group.¹

The educators and social scientists can serve a useful function in society, however. They can help "humanize individuals within an established social system" and "purge the relations of individuals of as much egoism as possible."² But they fail--and in this failure leave only frustration and confusion--in their blindness to the limitations of human nature which "finally frustrate their every effort."³ The actual facts are, we are told, that

given the inevitable limitations of human nature and the limits of the human imagination

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1. Niebuhr, *MMIS*, xxiii.
 2. *Ibid.*, xxiv.
 3. *Ibid.*

and intelligence, this is an ideal which individuals may approximate [the ideal of eliminating social conflict] but which is beyond the capacities of human societies.¹

When George A. Coe, in the debate previously referred to, asked Reinhold Niebuhr for his proof of the assertion that the human imagination is limited to such a degree that inter-group relations cannot be made moral, Niebuhr replied with the following statement:

What about my proof for this limit of the human imagination?...If I should seek for support for it in psychology I would find it in the emphasis of psychology upon the force of subconscious impulse which conscious intelligence never completely controls.²

Freud and Jung are mentioned as particularly outstanding authorities on the psychology of the unconscious mind--whose conclusions Niebuhr would appear to accept uncritically in this specific instance.

But even more reliable than the psychologists, as we have already observed, are the studies made by the political scientists and historians. They have accumulated an abundance of data to prove that the human imagination is limited. To them, for example, it is axiomatic that human collectives act egoistically, and that peace or the perfectly good society can never be achieved.³ Thus

1. Niebuhr, MMIS, xxiv.
2. Niebuhr, Art.(1933).¹
3. Ibid.

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1. Niebuhr, *Human Nature and Conduct*, p. 214.
2. Niebuhr, *Christianity and Moral Life*, p. 104.
3. Ibid., p. 104.

Niebuhr would support his basic postulate that practical facts are more useful to a realistic morality than the theoretical ones, and are far less likely to confuse the problem of morality for practical man.¹

Having established his theory that human groups are inevitably given to self-interest and conflict, Niebuhr is ready to draw practical conclusions in regard to the social and political arena. We have already summarized this conclusion², but due to its importance of the problem of social conflict it will bear repeating in a slightly different treatment.

Since love and goodwill, as well as all rational schemes, cannot achieve the perfect society; and since the selfishness of nations is proverbial--a selfishness that cannot be checked by either religious or rational idealism--then it must be accepted that international conflict is inevitable, and that our task "is to make wars morally redemptive."³ Equality is to be viewed as a higher social goal than peace.⁴ A delicate balance of power is all that can be expected in the task of creating harmony among the nations. Since the natural impulse to assert life as over against life and interest

1. Cf. Niebuhr, Art.(1938).¹

2. Supra, 62-64.

3. Niebuhr, Art.(1932).³

4. Niebuhr, MMIS, 235.

against interest is so powerful, then coercion must be accepted as axiomatic and, within limits, a positive good. The following statements are informative in this connection:

Believing as I do that human egoism, particularly in collective behavior, is too persistent to permit the establishment of a love anarchism, I am ready to use coercion and to recognize that we are in a coercive system.¹

An adequate political morality...will recognize that human society will probably never escape social conflict, even though it extends the areas of social co-operation. It will try to save society from being involved in endless cycles of futile conflict, not by an effort to abolish coercion in the life of collective man, but by reducing it to a minimum, by counselling the use of such types of coercion as are most compatible with the moral and rational factors in human society and by discriminating between the purposes and ends for which coercion is used.²

What a rational society must do, we are informed, is to place a greater emphasis upon the "ends and purposes for which coercion is used" than upon "the elimination of coercion and conflict."³

On this basis it becomes possible to give moral justification to social conflicts which aim at a greater social equality--a justification denied to efforts which aim at "the perpetuation of privilege in society."⁴ In

1. Niebuhr, Art.(1933).¹

2. Niebuhr, MMIS, 234.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

this respect Niebuhr finds Marxian philosophy superior to Christian pacifism.¹ Though we are not to accept the principle that the end justifies the means without qualification, nevertheless it is possible to determine if a given cause deserves moral and rational approval to the point of using force if necessary. For example, the "rational use of coercion is a possible achievement which may yet save society."²

At this point Niebuhr makes a rather bold concession as regards the role of reason in judging and assessing the relative merit of conflicting social claims. While human reason is always involved in prejudice and subject to partial perspectives, yet it has the task of aspiring to "the impartiality by which such claims and pretensions could be analysed and assessed."³ Reason tends to establish a more even balance of power among social groups, for it "is probably true that there is a general tendency of increasing social intelligence to withdraw its support from the claims of social privilege and to give it to the disinherited."⁴

Conflict and coercion are admitted to be such dangerous instruments, and are so fruitful of the very evils from which society must be saved, that "an intelligent society must not countenance their indiscriminate

1. Niebuhr, MMIS, 234.

2. Ibid., 235.

3. Ibid., 236.

4. Ibid., 237.

use."¹

If reason is to make coercion a tool of the moral ideal it must not only enlist it in the service of the highest causes but it must choose those types of coercion which are most compatible with, and least dangerous to, the rational and moral forces of society.²

Moral reason must learn to make coercion its ally "without running the risk of a Pyrric victory in which the ally exploits and negates the triumph."³ Thus the reason of man may serve a useful function in the social struggle, providing it does not make claims incommensurate with the limitations of human nature.

If the mind and the spirit of man does (sic) not attempt the impossible, if it does not seek to conquer or to eliminate nature but tries only to make the forces of nature the servants of the human spirit and the instruments of the moral ideal, a progressively higher justice and more stable peace can be achieved.⁴

The conflict between ethics and politics is make inevitable, we are told, by the double focus of the moral life which creates a "dual ethics." This dual morality is not mutually exclusive, and the contradiction between the two systems is not absolute. But neither are they easily harmonized into a single system.

1. Niebuhr, MMIS, 238.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., 256.

The necessity and possibility of fusing moral and political insights does not, however, completely eliminate certain irreconcilable elements in the two types of morality, internal and external, individual and social.¹

These elements make for constant confusion, it is admitted, but they also add to the richness of human life.

In Moral Man and Immoral Society Niebuhr takes up again the discussion of dual morality under "individual" (or inner) and "social" (or external) ethics. Under the latter focus of the moral life, we are to assume self-interest to be a continuing fact and we should, therefore, seek to prevent oppression by levelling the centers of excessive power and opposing force with counter force. It is to be an ethics, in a sense, of expediency. Society must aim

to seek equality of opportunity for all life. If this equality and justice cannot be achieved without the assertion of interest against interest, and without restraint upon the self-assertion of those who infringe upon the rights of their neighbors, then society is compelled to sanction self-assertion and restraint. It may even be forced to sanction social conflict and violence.²

The individual, however, is not so immediately concerned with the delicate shades of "more or less" in the struggle for social justice. From the perspective of the individual the highest ideal is unselfishness.³ This ideal of un-

1. Niebuhr, *Ibid.*, 258.

2. *Ibid.*, 259.

3. *Ibid.*, 257.

selfishness in persons is both relevant and necessary in the life of society--relevant because perfect justice cannot be established without it: necessary because the realistic wisdom of the statesman "is reduced to foolishness if it is not under the influence of the foolishness of the moral seer."¹

Niebuhr would make a radical distinction between political morality and religious morality.

The social viewpoint stands in sharpest contrast to religious morality when it views the behavior of collective rather than individual man, and when it deals with the necessities of political life. Political morality...is in the most uncompromising antithesis to religious morality.²

When rational morality attempts an intermediary position between the two, we are told, it usually "degenerates into some kind of utilitarianism."³ It usually assumes a premature identity "between self-interest and social interest and establishes a spurious harmony between egoism and altruism."⁴ It is best, contends Niebuhr, that an uneasy harmony exist between the two types of restraint upon the egoistic impulses. All rational morality "is too complacent regarding the inner and outer curbs to self-assertion demanded in every society."⁵

1. Niebuhr, *Ibid.*, 258.

2. *Ibid.*, 259.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, 261.

5. *Ibid.*

If further proof is desired to show that political and religious morality are diametrically opposed, one needs but to recall that "the religious ideal in its purest form has nothing to do with the problem of social justice."¹ Its ideal is disinterestedness, with no reference to social consequences. For example, Jesus taught that self-realization is the inevitable consequence of self-abnegation. But this self-realization "is not attained on the level of physical life or mundane advantages."² All of his claims and commandments were clothed in spiritual terms.

He did not dwell upon the social consequences of these moral actions, because he viewed them from an inner and transcendent perspective.³

But even Jesus was not totally void of a pragmatic sense.

Niebuhr observes that the teachings of Jesus reveal a

prudential strain in which the wholesome social consequences of generous attitudes are emphasised. "With what measure you mete, it shall be measured to you again."⁴

Nevertheless, the total effect of Jesus' ethical teachings was "to support the paradoxical relationship between inner and external, religious and political ethics."⁵ A clear-eyed moral strategy will accept a frank dualism between

1. Niebuhr, MMIS, 263.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., 264.

4. Ibid., 265.

5. Ibid.

the two methods, rather than "to attempt a harmony which threatens the effectiveness of both."¹ This strategy will recognize that groups are inevitably selfish;² that there is not enough imagination in any social group to render it amenable to the influence of pure love;³ that moral factors may qualify, but they will never eliminate, social coercion and conflict;⁴ that moral goodwill may qualify the social struggle, but that it is too partial to persuade any group to subject its interests completely to an inclusive social ideal;⁵ that individual moral discipline and the most uncompromising idealism are necessary to help check egoism, to furnish a guide for communities to achieve unity and harmony, and to add the enlargement of the areas of co-operation.⁶

This astute moral strategy will further know that since the egoistic impulses are so much more powerful than the altruistic ones, especially in collective groups, then the use of force and even open warfare may serve a useful moral purpose. It will know that the illusion that mankind can achieve perfect justice is valuable and yet dangerous. In Niebuhr's words:

1. Niebuhr, *MMIS*, 271.

2. *Ibid.*, 272.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*, 273.

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1. Niebuhr, *MORALS*, 271.
 2. *Ibid.*, 272.
 3. *Ibid.*, 273.
 4. *Ibid.*, 274.
 5. *Ibid.*, 275.
 6. *Ibid.*, 276.

Justice cannot be approximated if the hope of its perfect realization does not generate a sublime madness in the soul... The illusion is dangerous because it encourages terrible fanaticisms.¹

The solution offered is that all new illusions, which men substitute for the abandoned ones in the search for social redemption, must be brought "under the control of reason."² Our only hope is that "reason will not destroy it [the illusion of perfect justice] before its work is done."³

We are now in a position to draw up an outline summary of the main features of the general ethical theory of Reinhold Niebuhr, which we have presented in both its individual and social dimensions.

1. Naturalistic ethics is permeated with aberrations and confusions. It is made impotent by its superficiality and false optimism. Being centered in the facts of nature rather than in a transcendent source and meaning, it lacks the power to restrain the self-will and self-interest of men and nations.

2. Rational moral philosophies, constructed upon the canons of logic and consistency, fail to do justice to paradoxical reality. They break down when they assume that reason alone, apart from religio-moral forces, can

1. Niebuhr, MMIS, 277.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.

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1. Niebuhr, *WMS*, 277.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*

be the basis for a sound morality. What is lacking is a dynamic for the realization of moral ideals.

3. The bankruptcy of naturalistic and rationalistic systems of ethics furnishes the clue to the unique nature and power of the Christian ethic. This new element is the transcendent love ethic of Jesus. This ethic is known only through faith by a revelation of the grace of God--a God in whom is found the unity of essence and existence, and in whose transcendent will is found the ideal of the real world and the hope of the fulfilment of history.

4. This love ethic is at once uncompromising and absolute. It is an ultimate ideal that transcends every historical fact and reality, and is thus in a position to judge them by a higher principle.

5. The significance of this concept for ethics lies in the fact that it creates a tension between the ideal and the real world--a tension which furnishes a vitality adequate enough to deal with social and moral problems, and that maintains the pull of what ought to be upon what is.

6. The love ethic becomes a principle of indiscriminate criticism over all attempts at social and international justice, and a principle of discriminate criticism between forms of justice. The love ethic points the way

to the nearest "second-best" approximation of the moral ideal.

7. This approximation is equal justice. Though admittedly less than the law of love, it is the only practical guide we have amid the conflicts of interest and brutal power in men and groups.

8. The law of love is the New Testament agape. A law that transcends all law, it is based upon God's freely given love to man. It is at once the chief motivating power of responsible human action, and the one secret of social cohesion.

9. All life feels a sense of responsibility toward the law of love, and by it men are led to achieve tentative harmonies of life with life. It must be realized, however, that pure love is impossible of being applied successfully on the mundane level of life. This is due to the sinful character of human nature.

10. The egoistic will-to-live, ever linked with the will-to-power, must be considered a permanent factor in man's makeup. Men will remain sinners to the end of history. Their sin lies in their rebellious nature, which leads them to pretend that perfection of life and of historic achievement lies within their unaided grasp, in bold defiance of their Creator and Redeemer, whose

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A law that transcends all law, it is based upon God's freely given love to man. It is as such the chief motivating power of responsible human action, and the one source of social cohesion.

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which leads them to pretend that perfection of life and of history is never attained.

In both spheres of their conduct and behavior, where

judgment is upon all human accomplishments, the best included. This sin lies at the very center of man's personality--in the will. Sin is thus inevitable and universal, though not necessary, and it always remains man's responsibility.

11. This situation makes necessary a dualistic ethics. Man as a child of God and as a child of sin at one and the same time demands an ethic for each category. Righteousness persists even though right and the good are realizable only beyond history. The tension remains and creates the "impossible possibility" of the love ethic. The dual focus of ethics is also extended into the area of political ethics. Religious ideals and political goals are viewed as radically opposed to each other, with the crucial difference being that religious ethics is "disinterested" in practical consequences, while these consequences form the heart of political ethics. This dual system of ethics makes compromise of the ideal necessary and, at times, desirable.

12. Man's chaotic condition is expressed most fully in his collective relationships. Groups are inevitably more egoistic than individuals because of the natural limitations of human imagination. Society cumulates the egoism of individuals and transmutes even their altruistic

impulses into a collective egoism that carries a double force. Thus no group can rise above selfishness, and politics will ever remain a contest of power against power and interest against interest. All that national or world leaders can hope to do is to bring these egoistic forces under control by a balance of power arrangement that can offer no guarantee that peace will prevail or that justice will ever be realized completely.

13. Therefore, coercion is to be accepted as a universal and permanent factor in human relationships, and in some cases (as in a crisis situation when there is need to check the spread of "intolerable tyrannies") warfare is to be accepted as morally preferable to complacent capitulation to demonic forces. The only check to coercion is to be "reason," conscious at once of the limitations of human nature, and yet a reason that attempts to make the forces of nature subservient to the human spirit and the instruments of the moral ideal. It is an "illusion" that this can ever be accomplished. Nevertheless, it is a necessary illusion if human collectives are to achieve even an approximation of unity and harmony, and if the egoistic impulses of particular men are not to destroy civilization.

CHAPTER III

THE PROBLEM OF THE VALIDITY OF A RATIONAL MORALITY

1. A Brief Account of the Difficulties

The problem before us in this chapter is to investigate the possibility of an ethics based upon man's reason as the highest court of appeal in approaching concrete situations of choice, and to compare this approach with Niebuhr's view. Then we shall attempt to formulate a defense of rational morality in contrast with Niebuhr's approach. This will bring into sharp focus the two fundamental methodologies which will be employed when we deal with problems of ethical theory and practice.

One must admit the difficulties which inevitably arise when a morality based upon human intelligence is postulated. Historically speaking, the morality of men and societies has not been primarily a matter of intelligence or deliberation, but usually authority, custom, intuition or blind impulse have been the guides to morals. For most peoples their moral nature has been looked upon as some "strength of spirit" which would enable them to live up to some authoritative or revealed moral truth. Even as far back as Plato and Aristotle the limitations

of man's intelligence were clearly recognized: both philosophers knew the power of habit and the inclinations of human nature that hinder the realization of the good or the perfection of human life.

Further, it is common knowledge that though reason may enlighten one regarding reasonable actions and ends, yet the choice of any specific course of action is not entirely a matter of the reason: the will is also involved, as well as emotion and impulse. This inevitably raises the questions: Does not an arbitrary element (will or inclination, for example) control moral activity? With regard to the will, is it not true that every human being experiences a will that is more or less incoherent at times? Man, as William James said, "is a fighter for ends." But are not those ends often mutually exclusive?

Niebuhr and others like him are correct in observing that there is real conflict between egoism and altruism in human nature. Man is finite and must suffer the consequences of his limited nature and capacities, though his finiteness is not of his own making. Human nature is involved in all of the ignorance, maladjustment, incompetence, and contradictions that the skeptics and cynics are so fond of delineating. The fact such an analysis is only a half-truth does not alter the fact

that there are urges within man to "do the evil that he would not."

Further, the problem of the exact relationship between mind and nature, or spirit and nature, still remains unsolved. Philosophers and theologians have advanced theoretical solutions, and some have made dogmatic assertions. But the battle still rages. Meanwhile new data continue to come in from the laboratories of the physical sciences, from the class rooms of the normative disciplines, and from other sources. If final proof could be submitted that mind (or spirit) is so unconditioned by nature that it can completely control and mold natural impulse after ideal patterns of conduct, then the task of the rational moral philosopher would be relatively simple. Unfortunately, this is not the case, though some important advances have been made in this direction, as we shall see.

The attempt to give a satisfactory account of the content of the moral ideal would appear to be making pretensions beyond our power or knowledge. Formal statements and definitions of such terms as "goodness," "right," "ultimate principles," "perfection of human nature," and the like, are found in abundance in the literature of ethical theory. But in most instances the moral phil-

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osophers are aware of the difficult and imperative task of attempting to describe the moral ideal in terms that can make a concrete rapprochement with the mind and will of practical man so that moral values can be actually realized, rather than just contemplated. Is it true, as the "new" theologians contend, that only God knows the content of the ethical ideal, and that it will be revealed in grace but never realized fully until the end of history? If so, then a rational ethics is impossible, as we shall try to demonstrate. But the problem has to be faced. It is admittedly a formidable, though necessary, task for the moral philosopher.

In order to establish a concrete basis for considering Niebuhr's attack against rationalistic ethics, we have selected five representative exponents of a rational morality. Since Niebuhr mentions very few rationalists by name,¹ this procedure will prevent our universe of discourse from proceeding in a vacuum. It is only regretted that space limitations makes this selection an arbitrary one. Any number of theists who have taken a position friendly to a rational morality could be listed. Conspicuous examples are: Immanuel Kant(1724-1804); Andrew Seth Pringle-Pattison(1856-1931); Henry Sidgwick(1838-1900);

1. Usually the Stoics, Kant, and John Dewey bear the brunt of Niebuhr's attack against rationalism in ethics.

Hastings Rashdall(1858-1924); Thomas Hill Green(1836-1882); William Ritchie Sorley(1885-1935); Rudolf Hermann Lotze(1817-1881); Frederick Robert Tennant(1886--); Otto Karl Albrecht Ritschl(1860--); Borden Parker Bowne(1847-1910); Edgar Sheffield Brightman; Walter Goodnew Everett; Wilbur Marshall Urban; and Henry Nelson Wieman. From this list we have chosen the following persons to be investigated in brief summaries of their theories: Henry Sidgwick, Thomas Hill Green, William Ritchie Sorley, Frederick Robert Tennant, Edgar Sheffield Brightman, and Walter Goodnow Everett. Our purpose here is to indicate, on the basis of the views presented by these moral philosophers, some of the basic principles of a rational approach to morality.

Henry Sidgwick is the first rationalist¹ to be investigated. He began his Methods of Ethics with this definition of ethics:

A method of ethics means any rational procedure by which we determine what individual human beings "ought"--or what is "right" for them--to do or to seek to realize by voluntary action.²

While he does not hold that it is by reason alone that men are influenced to act rightly (desires and inclinations may operate independently of moral judgment), still he insists

1. We are using the term "rationalism" in the broad sense as meaning that man has the capacity to construct a system of ethics as a science in its own right, independent of revelation and theology. It is recognized that Henry Sidgwick is classified as an "intuitionist," but he is also a rationalist in the sense that we use it here.
 2. Sidgwick, MOE, 5.

that when a person seriously asks why he should do anything, he commonly assumes in himself

a determination to pursue whatever conduct may be shown by argument to be reasonable even though it be very different from that to which his nonrational inclinations may prompt.¹

Reasonable conduct, to Sidgwick, has to be determined by principles. The fact that there are conflicting principles and methods held by reasonable men does not destroy the possibility of valid principles for ethics.

We cannot, of course, regard as valid reasonings that lead to conflicting conclusions; and I therefore assume as a fundamental postulate of Ethics, that so far as two methods conflict, one or other of them must be modified or rejected.²

What, then, is to be the highest court of appeal in ethics? Is the human mind adequate to fulfil this momentous responsibility?

Sidgwick holds that actions we judge to be right and which contain obligation or "oughtness" are "reasonable" or "rational" judgments. Similarly, ultimate ends in the moral realm are "prescribed by reason."³

The motive to ethical action is supplied by the "non-rational" desires and inclinations. As to the supposed conflict of these non-rational or irrational

1. Sidgwick, *Ibid.*, 5.

2. *Ibid.*, 6.

3. *Ibid.*, 23.

desires with reason, Sidgwick finds that these non-rational aspects of moral activity, and the volitions to which they are related, are continually modified by intellectual processes. This takes place in two distinct ways:

First, by new perceptions or representations of means conducive to the desired ends, and secondly by new presentations or representations of facts actually existing or in prospect...which rouse new impulses of desire and aversion.¹

The conflict of desire with reason does not destroy the function of reason, nor does it eliminate desire as a constituent factor in ethical activity.

The question is one on which appeal must ultimately be made to the reflection of individuals on their practical judgments and reasonings; and in making this appeal it seems most convenient to begin by showing the inadequacy of all attempts to explain the practical judgments or propositions in which this fundamental notion is introduced, without recognising its unique character.²

In discussing the concepts "ought" and "right" (terms Sidgwick holds to be too elementary to admit of formal definition) he notes that there are two different implications attached to the term "ought." In the narrowest ethical sense, what we judge to be done implies ability. It is

always thought capable of being brought about by the volition of any individual to whom

1. Sidgwick, *Ibid.*, 24.
2. *Ibid.*, 25.

the judgment applies. I cannot conceive that I "ought" to do anything which at the same time I judge that I cannot do.¹

In the wider sense, the word "ought" implies an ideal or pattern which we feel obligated to seek to imitate as far as possible, though this does not imply that "my own or any other individual's single volition can bring about the ideal change."² But this much is made clear:

In either case...what ought to be is a possible object of knowledge; i.e., that which I judge ought to be must, unless I am in error, be similarly judged by all rational beings who judge truly of the matter.³

In referring ethical judgments to "Reason," Sidgwick does not mean that valid moral judgments are normally attained by a process of reasoning from universal principles or axioms (his view is based upon direct "intuition" of these principles). By "reason" he means to denote

the faculty of moral cognition: adding... that even when a moral judgment relates primarily to some particular action we commonly regard it as applicable to any other action belonging to a certain definable class: so that the moral truth apprehended is implicitly conceived to be intrinsically universal, though particular in our first apprehension of it.⁴

1. Sidgwick, *Ibid.*, 33. Italics mine.

2. *Ibid.*, 34.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, 32.

Man's reason prompts him to systematise and free from error the "apparent cognitions" that most men have of the rightness or wrongness of conduct, whether the conduct "be considered as right in itself, or as the means to some end commonly conceived as ultimately reasonable."¹ If man is consistent in this attempt he will find that

what I "ought" to do is always "in my power," in the sense that there is no obstacle to my doing it except absence of adequate motive; and it is ordinarily impossible for me, in deliberation, to regard such absence of motive as a reason for not doing what I otherwise judge to be reasonable.²

Thomas Hill Green, the second rationalist to be investigated, holds that the moral ideal, though eternally known to God alone, can be gradually realized in human moral progress. As men advance in personal character, they experience a growing appreciation of a larger common good. To Green, excellence is the end of life: utilitarianism the means. In his Prolegomena to Ethics, Green conceives virtue to be an end in itself, and the capacity of man makes its realization possible.

The one divine mind, insists Green, gradually reproduces itself in the human mind (often used interchangeably with "soul" or "spirit"). By virtue of this principle in man, he has "definite capabilities, the

1. Sidgwick, *Ibid.*, 77.

2. *Ibid.*, 78.

realization of which, since in it alone he can satisfy himself, forms his true good."¹ This principle becomes, for man, the ground of all moral progress. Of what does it consist?

It consists in the direction of the will to objects determined for it by this idea, as operative in the person willing; which direction of the will we may...fitly call its determination by reason.²

Viewed as the "directive" principle in life, it becomes the ground of human will and reason. Its full development in the human soul would constitute the perfection of human life--a distinct possibility in Green's estimation. Here is one of the first treatments of an important conception in ethics--the view of indefinite perfectability.³

It is instructive that our ultimate standard of worth, according to Green, is to be an ideal of personal worth. In a remarkable passage we are informed that "all other values are relative to value for, of, or in a person."⁴ To speak of any progress or improvement or development of "mankind" or "history", except as related to some greater worth of persons, is to "use words without meaning."⁵

Green insists that reason is "the self-objectifying

1. Green, PTE, 206

2. Ibid., 207.

3. See Green, PTE, 431.

4. Ibid, 210.

5. Ibid.

consciousness."¹ It constitutes the capabilities in man of seeking an absolute good and of conceiving this good as common to others with himself. It is this principle alone which renders man "a possible author and a self-submitting subject of moral law."²

There is no question but what Green would ground morality in the reason of man. The following quotation will illustrate how intelligence is the only means by which man can achieve moral values or realize development in history.

If we are right in ascribing to Reason a function of union in the life that we know; if we are right in holding that through it we are conscious of ourselves, and of others as ourselves,--through it accordingly that we seek to make the best of ourselves and of others with ourselves, and that in this sense Reason is the basis of society, because the source at once of the establishment of equal practical rules in a common interest, and of self-imposed subjection to those rules; then we are entitled to hold that Reason fulfilled a function intrinsically the same in the most primitive associations of man with man, between which and the actual institutions of family and commune, of state and nations, there has been any continuity of development.³

Further, God's will for man can be realized only in and through the mind of man. Since man must act upon the principle of good within him which makes for human per-

1. Green, Ibid., 234.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., 236.

fection, then in a very real sense, for Green, man is a creator of values in the universe, and a co-worker with God in the realization of his divine will.¹ And the intellectual and moral activity of man necessarily imply "the reproduction in man of an eternal consciousness which is object to itself."² Reason has the initiative of all virtue.³

William Ritchie Sorley holds that true philosophical synopsis must give an adequate account of the irreducible "ought" in seeking the clue to existence. Objectively valid values are revealed in human moral experience. When one achieves a coherent interpretation of these in relation to natural existence, together with a realization of values common in human experience, he is led, by the laws of logic, to believe in a personal God in whom these values have their being as ends of existence.⁴

The work of thought, according to Sorley, is to produce systematic harmony in the content of moral experience.

Freedom from contradiction, coherence, and thus possible systematisation are criteria by which the validity of any moral judgment may be tested.⁵

By this rule one may rule out error and illusion in his

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1. Green, *Ibid.*, 430.
 2. *Ibid.*, 198.
 3. *Ibid.*, 212.
 4. See Bertocci, *Art.*(1945).
 5. Sorley, *MVIG*, 96.

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1. Green, *Works*, 430.

2. *Ibid.*, 192.

3. *Ibid.*, 212.

4. See Gifford, *Art*, (1925).

5. Gifford, *WV*, 90.

choices. If any moral judgment "is inconsistent with some other judgment known to be valid, then it cannot be valid also."¹ Further, if it "is consistent with other valid judgments, then it may be valid."²

Thus the possibility of more and more adequate moral judgments is made clear when the mind is freed to perform its systematizing function. When two systems of value are found to be internally consistent, the problem of deciding between them can be solved only by choosing that system which is most comprehensive and which penetrates beneath the conflict by including the greater value of both.

Frederick Robert Tennant stresses a broad empirical approach to theological, philosophical, and ethical problems. He will not appeal to independent and unique religious or moral data; rather, his theism is sustained by the facts of experience and science, including values. Using the evidence presented by the regularity and interdependence of nature, knowledge, and value, he supports his argument that a good Person created and directs the ultimate collocations of reality.³

In Philosophical Theology, Tennant contends that just as there is continuity of development from perception through ideation to abstract thought, so there is con-

1. Sorley, *Ibid.*, 96.

2. *Ibid.*

3. See Bertocci, *Art.*(1945).

tinuity traceable

by psychology from individual feeling and desire, together with their cognitive concomitants, to aesthetic and moral sentiments, and acquisition of ethical principles.¹

In the discussion of "conscience" Tennant holds that the recognition of duty or debt to the common good is the original "oughtness." This is not the same as a Kantian unconditional categorical imperative, though he does hold that "there is continuity, if logically there is disparateness, between 'I owe' and 'I ought'."² He holds that the axiological level of the categorical imperative "is itself reached by idealisation and abstraction from the empirical value-judgments of social experience."³

But to Tennant there is no unique "moral" consciousness, no cognitive value per se in conscience. As opposed to certain rationalists, he sees no reason for an a priori grounding of ethics on the ultimate deliverance of the moral consciousness. For to do this is to confuse the psychological immediacy claimed by the assertion, with the epistemological when, as a matter of fact, it is really something acquired.

Thus moral progress, in Tennant's eyes, cannot be the perfection of any "faculty" as such. What he calls moral insight is, rather, a "largely intellectual discern-

1. Tennant, Philosophical Theology, I, 139.

2. Ibid., 146.

3. Ibid., 147.

ment of existential truth, determinative of conative disposition."¹ By means of this the social prophet, for example, is able to discover a better than the old good, something more, something conducive to

the abiding happiness of a greater number; his criticism of mores does not presuppose, actually or logically, any new and unique conception such as that of absolute good or oughtness.²

By this interpretation, of course, Tennant would deny that there is knowledge of a unique moral object. He denies the sui generis quality of moral obligation.³

Thus we are to identify a cognitive verdict of conscience with moral obligation itself.

Tennant contends that moral evolution is possible, and that it is caused by the development of insight and will.

The self has a self-regarding sense that is inalienable, though capable of transformation and indefinite refinement...; and as the self rises morally the conception of a relatively more ideal self to be attained results.⁴

But this "ideal self" is not some imperfect translation of vaguely perceived metaphysical ideals; rather, the successive ideals of self are

imaginal or ideational constructions, original or suggested, reached by thinking away faults

1. Tennant, *Ibid.*, 147.

2. *Ibid.*

3. See Bertocci, *ERG*, 218.

4. Tennant, *PT*, I. 149-150.

and shortcomings of which the higher self has already convicted the lower.¹

Rejecting both self-realization and the social goal as the highest good (these being conflicting claims), Tennant looks for ideals in the world of experience. Ideals arise as "a result of our affective-volitional attitudes in concrete situations and are relevant and valid of them."² That is to say, ideals are not absolutes reached by such abstraction from the individual desires and the initial situation that they no longer acknowledge their birthplace. In his words:

From the desired to the desirable, for the concrete good for something, to the good-in-itself, from the subpersonal to the over-individual, and from the social to what may be called the over-social or the absolute, there is a way. But there is no deductive way back from high abstractions, so reached, to particular moral judgments, relevant to specific actual issues. Necessary truth, in ethics as anywhere else, is purchased at the price of possible irrelevance to Actuality.³

Thus Tennant's view of the objectivity of moral value is that, while moral judgments and valuations are independent of individual tastes and preferences, yet they are not independent of the affective-volitional experiences of a community of individuals.⁴

For Tennant, both individual whim and absolute or

1. Tennant, *Ibid.*, 150.

2. See Bertocci, *ERG*, 220.

3. Tennant, *Ibid.*, 156.

4. See Bertocci, *Ibid.*

unconditioned values are rejected as extremes. In their place he substitutes a rational postulation of ethical norms valid of some "actual or possible situation."¹ A consistent empirical ethics, this theory is based on the coherent systematization of value-claims that will make possible the postulation of a valid ideal of the Good which, in turn, grows with experience and criticism. Does this view deny practical absolutes for man? Tennant replies:

It only denies that ideals are literally and theoretically absolute, and affirms that they issue from, and are relevant to, life in the environment of Nature.²

As a final note on Tennant's concept of ethics, it is significant that he would deny that God is the direct source and home of human ethical ideals. While these ideals (of God's existence and divine laws) are essential--indeed they form the most significant part of the data to be taken into account in a synoptic view and interpretation of the world--yet it remains true that the human mind possesses a rationality that qualifies man to construct valid ethical principles.

The term "rationality" is restricted by Tennant to mean "the analytically intelligible" or "interpretableness."³ And all of the findings of the rational processes must

1. Tennant, PT, I, 156.
 2. Ibid., 159.
 3. Tennant, PT, II, 94.

apply to the "here and now." He finds, significantly enough, no reason for a strict separation between "nature" and "moral man." Nature and moral man "are not at strife, but are organically one."¹

Man, as organic to the world, is not noumenal but phenomenal. Thus, for Tennant, man and his moral ideals cannot be isolated from the world into which he was born. Man's body, his knowledge, his social expressions, and his morality are "of a piece with Nature."² Tennant conceives "nature" as contributing to a larger purpose for persons, and man's mind may proceed with an intelligent analysis and interpretation of the data of experience ready and waiting in nature.

To Tennant, the only absolute in ethics is "conscientiousness." Only the reasonableness of the individual himself can furnish a sufficient guide in concrete situations of choice. For example, no absolute standard can assist in deciding the issue between the realization of the self versus social duty. The only valid appeal that can be made is to the "conscientiousness" of the person himself. This emphasis does not necessarily negate all attempts at systematizing a formal ethics for Tennant. While no one all-embracing ideal or complete good is the

1. Tennant, PT, II, 101.

2. Ibid.

answer to the problem of ethics, yet one may build up a system of formal ethics which would have duties to the self and duties to the social whole serve as poles of orientation. The tension created between the two would become constructive if permanent. Persons, to Tennant, are always obligated to realize the best possible. This cannot be done without the most reasonable solution to any given problem demanding moral choice.

The next ethical theorist to be considered is Edgar Sheffield Brightman. He contends that all ethical knowledge is based on moral experience. What is meant by experience is "the whole field of consciousness, every process or state of awareness within it."¹

Experience is not sensation alone, nor scientifically interpreted experience alone. It is not to be taken in contrast with reason or speculation, but, rather, in contrast with the absence of experience, or unconsciousness...It contains both what have been called empirical and what have been called transcendental (rational) factors.²

By "ethics" Brightman understands "the normative science of the principles (or laws) of the best types of human conduct."³ Conduct is defined as "voluntary behavior," which includes more than actual overt movements: it takes on definite moral experience when it is related to mental

1. Brightman, ML, 56.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., 13.

processes. Thus moral behavior is a voluntary act, a rational experience of choice.

Moral experience, in the broad sense, includes not only the act of voluntary choice, but also the experiences chosen--the consciousness of value, or obligation, and of law.¹

Since moral experience can occur only in persons,² and since persons develop only in social relations, one must then turn to the sociological and psychological sciences for the data of ethics--the latter being a superior source of information because it includes both social and individual factors in its analyses, and because it is more scientific than sociology.³ For sociology deals with visible social behavior; while in psychology we move to actual causes in the inner world of mind.⁴

From here Brightman seeks for a basis in experience for the fundamental concepts of ethics; namely, value, obligation, and law. While sense and moral experience need criticism and interpretation, Brightman will not hold to an unqualified use of reason as a basis for ethics.

Many hopeful idealists have come to disillusionment through reliance on this estimate of the magical power of reason.⁵

1. Brightman, *Ibid.*, 58.

2. By "persons" Brightman means "selves potentially self-conscious, rational, and ideal." See *POR*, 350.

3. Brightman, *ML*, 59.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*, 69.

Kant's concept of "radical evil," for example, expressed an element of truth regarding essential human nature. But the matter must not rest with the recognition of an unreasonableness at times which causes man to deviate from the maxims of morality. After all, reflexes, impulses, instincts, are all powerless in themselves to control the irrational factors in life. The reason of man must be given its rightful place in this constructive work. The principle of rationality, for Brightman, is a fact at work in the moral consciousness.

It is just as erroneous to overemphasize the tendencies to irrational lawlessness in human nature as to overemphasize the tendencies to be guided by rational laws. Sometimes, if not always, rational processes control the irrational.¹

The human mind is able to inhibit the undesirable, to select the desirable, to "guide the movement of consciousness toward a chosen goal."² Where this is not so, constructive activity is impossible.

Critical thought about rational control is among the most important data of ethics. The fact that human beings sometimes guide their conduct by ideas and ideals is just³ as certain a fact as is sense experience.

Here Brightman would agree with Ralph Barton Perry that "moral life is impossible without a degree of intelligence."⁴

1. Brightman, *Ibid.*, 69.

2. *Ibid.*, 70.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Cited in Brightman, *ML*, 70.

Hence control by rational laws "belongs with value and obligation as empirical subject matter for ethics."¹

And those who would reduce ethics "to mere convention or tribal mores omit these experiences from consideration."²

Brightman then raises the question: Is free, effective, volitional, rational choice possible? At this point we are dealing with "an absolutely central and essential foundation in ethics."³ For if rational, purposive choice is not effective or possible in the control of life, then goodness likewise is impossible.

To be moral, insists Brightman, an act "must be voluntary."⁴ Without it there can be no moral experience in the proper sense of the term.

Until such an attitude is taken, that is, until some choice is made, there is nothing ethical (morally good or bad) about a situation, so far as the agent's responsibility at the time of the original act is concerned.⁵

Thus the essence of a moral situation "is will, and the essence of will is choice."⁶

The definition of "will" now becomes necessary. Rather than being merely the "mind in action" it is the act of saying "yes" or "no" to a given content.⁷

1. Brightman, *Ibid.*, 70.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*, 74.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*, 76.

The consent which one gives or refuses to give to a situation determines both the moral quality of one's act and the direction of one's further development.¹

While perhaps not possessing the divine attribute of creativity, the human will certainly has "powers of selection and therefore of direction of the processes of life."²

At the risk of anticipating the discussion yet to come in this dissertation, one might appropriately observe here that Brightman considers the concept of "collective guilt" an untenable one. To him, there can be no moral guilt assessed (in the sense of morality being a conscious act of selection and direction of causes that a person would be loyal to and active in) to any "group" activity as such. For this would involve the fallacy of the "social mind," and there is no morality involved in the proper sense of the term. Not groups, but persons who voluntarily choose a given course of action, can be morally responsible for undesirable choices. Only persons, for Brightman, possess free determination of the will.

Freedom, in Brightman's thought, is absolutely essential in ethical activity. Acts of will are unique

1. Brightman, *Ibid.*, 74.

2. *Ibid.*

combinations of necessity and possibility. The necessity is implied in the givenness of a situation, the psychological mechanisms involved, and the necessary consequences of the act.¹

Unless there were a situation with a definite structure, knowable psychological mechanisms, and causal laws guaranteeing connections with the past and effects in the future, our will neither would have anything to deal with, nor could it deal with what is had in any effective or reasonable way.²

Possibility enters the field of ethics through our actual freedom in choosing the best possible in any given situation.

When one makes a voluntary choice, there is normally first an inhibition of impulsive tendencies, followed by deliberation regarding possible courses of action, and then by a decision to select one possibility for actualization.³

This emphasis is saved from determinism by the fact that men actually do act "as if they were free."⁴

The most significant fact for ethics is that men make moral choices, regard themselves and others as reasonable, recognize distinctions between better and worse, and, in short, act as if they were free.⁵

The metaphysical dimension of freedom is considered by Brightman and found to be essential in any

1. Brightman, *Ibid.*, 76.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, 78.

5. *Ibid.*

ethical theory. Metaphysical truth about anything is defined as "the truth about its setting in reality as a whole."¹ All of our knowledge and experience is required in approaching metaphysical truth. Metaphysics is relevant in ethics because choice

is an ultimate fact not determined by circumstances external to it, but selecting from the given possibilities one which will² have necessary consequences for the future.

Thus metaphysical truth is a constituent part of every ethical (and therefore of every rational) choice, without which "every moral law would be meaningless."³

In answer to the query if this emphasis on metaphysical truth, which holds that the field of choice and the consequences of choice are in a sense determined, does not deny or impair the autonomy of moral law, or if it does not make ethics dependent upon metaphysics, Brightman replies that

it must be admitted that it impairs to some extent the absolute autonomy of the science. If reality as a whole were such that freedom were impossible, then ethical law would have no validity.⁴

Thus moral science stands in inseparable relation with the organic whole of truth. But the postulate of freedom

1. Brightman, *Ibid.*, 283.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, 284.

is immanent in every ethical situation, and therefore it

imperils the autonomy of ethics far less than would the supposition (which we deny) that the validity of ethics depends on whether our metaphysics is theistic or atheistic or whether we accept or reject immortality.¹

Ethics, then, is independent of metaphysics, except that the metaphysics of freedom is a constituent part of ethics. And the practical fact of freedom is present in every ethical choice, even if "the theoretical justification of it must carry us beyond a mere description of the fact."²

Brightman's solution to the problem of autonomy or theonomy in ethics is that "both principles can be preserved if each be given its proper place."³

As far as the moral life itself is concerned, autonomy is the last word. The moral laws are valid because they are a reasoned account of the nature and implications of moral experience, not because they are commandments made by an eternal lawgiver or communicated on a Mount Sinai. Moral law is autonomous and independent of religion and of the existence of God so far as the obligatory nature of its principles is concerned.⁴

But there is an equally valid sense in which theonomy is a part of ethics. If among the postulated moral laws the

1. Brightman, *Ibid.*, 284.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*, 268.

4. *Ibid.*, 268f.

Law of the Most Inclusive End be true, then it is a part of one's duty to worship God and to achieve "the highest type of religion of which one is capable."¹

Further, if the existence of God be a reality, then it is He who has created us as moral beings, so that in this sense autonomy depends on theonomy.² Yet the moral law is never a purely arbitrary creation of the will of God; rather, it

is an expression of the reason of God, and the divine reason must be eternal and uncreated. Otherwise, there was a time when God was not reasonable or moral, which is inconsistent with his very nature as God and hence impossible.³

The moral laws, as formulated by Brightman, embody the eternal principles of goodness "as geometrical law embodies the eternal principles of space relations." But in no sense does this mean that any human being has an adequate knowledge of the one or the other. But it does imply that "both are principles of reason which may be discovered by autonomous thought." Thus autonomy "is the guide to theonomy."⁴

For Brightman ethics, and the moral laws which give it scientific standing, must be "a rational account

1. Brightman, *Ibid.*, 269.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*

of moral experience."¹ Ethical laws cannot be based on intuition, authority, or desire alone. Reason must be the highest court of appeal.

All intuitions, authorities, and desires-- in fact, the whole field of our actual and possible experiences, as far as may be--needs to be surveyed and criticized by reason if we are to have the slightest hope of attaining moral truth.²

But reason is not to be divorced from experience. As against Kant's sharp separation of empirical and transcendental factors, the basis of moral knowledge

is total moral experience; reason has no existence except in the actual conscious experience of reasonable persons.³

Reason, insists Brightman, has the special function in experience of surveying, ordering, unifying, and systematizing.⁴ Without this function the sciences, including ethics, could not have developed. To deny the right of reason to do this constructive work is "to deny the very structure of the mind and the achievements of the highest cultures."⁵

Our last rationalist in the field of ethical theory is Walter Goodnow Everett. To him, ethics deals primarily with what is, and finds all the data of ethics

1. Brightman, *Ibid.*, 84.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*, 85.

"in the moral experience of the race."¹ It is the humble but imperative task of the ethical theorist to interpret morality, to make clear and explicit by description and explanation the moral values already existing in human experience.²

The ideal of ethics, for Everett, is to be constructed solely out of the facts presented to the mind of man: it can be realized in the common experience of mankind. Thus the moralist is not concerned with "better morals" but he undertakes to study morality as a "response to an intellectual demand."³ The following quotation throws light on what is meant here:

This intellectual demand for clear and systematic understanding of the moral life is not to be confused with the impulse of positive morality. It is one thing to understand right action, another to act rightly... It is one thing to teach men a rational system of ethics, quite another to train them in ways of moral righteousness.⁴

But there is no question but what man must concern himself with a serious examination of his ethical life if he would achieve moral values.

The question is not whether there shall be serious examination of conduct, but whether it shall be serious and systematic, and shall proceed under the guidance of the most enlightened conscience.⁵

1. Everett, MV, 17.

2. Ibid., 18.

3. Ibid., 26.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid., 29.

The rational powers of man are not to be compartmentalized as they approach the various disciplines of life. All judgments are rational judgments.

The distinction between moral and other judgments lies in the objects of relations to which they are applied, not in the mental power exercised. When an act is judged to be right or wrong, the same mental power is called into play which, on other occasions, yields an economic, aesthetic, or religious judgment.¹

Thus man's rational powers function as the principle of unity within personality.

Everett will have no traffic with authoritarian systems of ethics, or ethics based upon natural impulse. For him, to abandon one's best judgment "in favor of any external authority or internal impulse is to abandon the moral task."² And to trust blindly to external authority would be

to revert to a stage of irresponsible tutelage; to surrender the control of conduct to mere impulse or caprice would result in moral anarchy. It is better to follow even a wrong judgment than to fail in loyalty to one's convictions.³

For the individual, therefore, his enlightened conscience, though admittedly not infallible, is always to be his best guide in the moral life. Man has the imperative task of improving his moral nature. In this sense man

1. Everett, *Ibid.*, 276.

2. *Ibid.*, 277.

3. *Ibid.*

has laid upon him "an absolute obligation in a relative and changing moral order."¹

3. How Niebuhr Attacks Rational Morality

Niebuhr holds that the fundamental difficulty with all rational moral theories is that they do not come to grips with the tragic facts of human nature. They naively assume that reason is the guide to life, when as a matter of fact "men move more by impulse than by reason."² There is an inertia of natural impulse to moral ideals, we are informed, which is obscured by rationalists.³ And they will not understand the Biblical truth that "all human actions betray the fact that though 'we delight in the law of God after the inward man, there is a law in our members which wars against the law that is in our mind.'"⁴ Further, the rational moralists do not see that

the limitations of the human imagination, the easy subservience of reason to prejudice and passion, and the consequent persistence of irrational egoism, particularly in group behavior, make social conflict an inevitability in human history, probably to its very end.⁵

All romantic overestimates of human virtue, rational power, or moral capacity, insists Niebuhr, usually end in an unrealistic appraisal of present social facts. Rational

1. Everett, *Ibid.*, 277.

2. Niebuhr, *REE*, 6.

3. *Ibid.*, 87.

4. Niebuhr, *Art.*(1948).²

5. Niebuhr, *MMIS*, xx.

suasion and accommodation may possibly establish just relations "between individuals within a group," but in inter-group relations "this is practically an impossibility."¹

Before we proceed further, it will be well to inquire what Niebuhr understands by the term "reason." One will search in vain for a precise definition of reason in Niebuhr's writings. Detailed accounts of the "role of reason" are to be found in the chapter on "Rational Resources" in Moral Man and Immoral Society, and in various portions of Reflections on the End of an Era,² An Interpretation of Christian Ethics,³ and The Nature and Destiny of Man. But no precise definition of reason is given in either of these treatments.

That the term "reason" is not exactly synonymous with "intelligence" may be shown by citing examples of word usage. For instance, when Niebuhr is asked by George A. Coe to explain his sources for his view that the human imagination is too limited to ever overcome the egoistic impulse, he makes this statement:

There is no scientific proof that innate human intelligence has increased since the dawn of history. There has of course been a cumulation of social experience and intellectual discipline.⁴

It seems to be implied here that human intellectual capacity

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1. Niebuhr, *Ibid.*, xxiii.
 2. See Niebuhr, *REE*, Chapter I.
 3. See Niebuhr, *ICE*, Chapter VII.
 4. Niebuhr, *Art.* (1933).¹

is not in a process of growth or development. A comparison of this statement with certain passages in Moral Man and Immoral Society will reveal that Niebuhr does hold that it is possible for the "reason" to grow and the "mind" to develop; otherwise, what could be made of the following statements?

It is fair to assume that growing rationality is a guarantee of man's growing morality.¹

The development of reason and the growth of mind makes for increasingly just relations not only by bringing all impulses in society into reference with, and under the control of, and influenced by, an inclusive social ideal, but also by increasing the penetration with which all factors in the social situation are analyzed.²

There are possibilities of increasing social justice through the development of mind and reason.³

If, then, intellectual capacity is fixed for all time, but the reason undergoes growth and development, the two cannot be equated, either quantitatively or qualitatively.

Were it made clear that Niebuhr means that there are limits beyond which the intelligence cannot develop because of its finiteness, in the same sense that he speaks of the reason of man as growing and developing

1. Niebuhr, MMIS, 27.

2. Ibid., 32.

3. Ibid., 34.

toward its natural limitations, then there could be no serious quarrel with his presentation. But this is not made clear.

One wonders if Niebuhr would subscribe to Emil Brunner's broad definition of reason in The Theology of Crisis. In this work Brunner says: "By reason I mean all the faculties of man as such."¹ A closer glance at The Nature and Destiny of Man reveals that Niebuhr cannot be this comprehensive in his use of reason, as can be illustrated by the following passage: "It is not possible to exempt 'reason' or any other human faculty from the disease of sin."² Reason, then, is merely one of the faculties that constitute the human psyche: it is not the sum total of man's capacities.

As another approach to Niebuhr's understanding of reason, one might ask: Is reason to be equated with will? If not, how are reason and will related? Niebuhr defines the will thus:

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 (sic) between reason and impulse.³

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1. Brunner, TOC, 14f.
 2. Niebuhr, NDM, I, 277.
 3. Niebuhr, ICE, 210.

Thus by "will" Niebuhr means the total organized personality. What Brunner understands by "reason" Niebuhr calls "will."

For Niebuhr, the will includes a much wider range of responsibility than reason. It is the "will" that effects "a rational organization of impulse."¹ From this one may deduce that the rationalists are in error in making reason the ordering and unifying element in the personality. For this is the prerogative of the will. And when the will itself is made weak and ineffective by the corruption of sin, then what grounds are left for an assertion that the personality can be unified at all, or that morality is possible? Let us see further.

The usages of the terms "reason" and "impulse" in Niebuhr's writings suggest certain fundamental criticisms of the rationalism of men like Kant. In Kant's critical idealism, for example, a great gulf is fixed between the intelligible self and the sensible self, roughly synonymous with speaking of the self which is in "reason" and the self which is in "nature." Kant makes this gulf so absolute, contends Niebuhr, that "all natural vital forces in the life of man are ruled out of the field of ethics."² This is because Kant did not understand that man's involvement

1. Niebuhr, ICE, 210.

2. Niebuhr, NDM, I, 118.

in the natural process is not the cause of the evil in him. As a matter of fact, the natural impulses play a very positive and necessary role in moral action: it is the forces of nature in man "which inchoately support the ideal."¹ And our impulses furnish "the dynamic for realizing moral ends."² Thus in depreciating the positive value of natural impulse, Kant ended in an unnecessary pessimism regarding the role of the sensible self.

The Kantian self...is cut in two. The part which is immersed in natural process is essentially evil and the part which is subject to reason is essentially good. But the freedom of man is always freedom from nature and not freedom from reason.³

For Niebuhr, Kantian rationalism is wrong in setting the reason at variance with natural impulse. This procedure 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."⁴

Rationalistic naturalists, among whom John Dewey is singled out as a typical example, are allegedly wrongly informed as regards the functions and limitations

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1. Niebuhr, ICE, 208.
 2. Ibid.
 3. Niebuhr, NDM, I, 119.
 4. Niebuhr, ICE, 206.

of human reason. Dewey, like the rest, is "forced to construct a very shaky and inadequate point of reference from which to operate against the confusion of natural impulse."¹

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.²

The trouble with this theory, insists Niebuhr, is that "it presupposes a nonexistent 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."³

The idealistic rationalists have a provisional advantage over the naturalists, according to Niebuhr, in that they "see the human spirit in a deeper dimension than a pure naturalism."⁴

The proof that this is an advantage is given by the fact that naturalism is always forced to contradict itself to explain the facts of human history. The human spirit obviously transcends natural process too much to be bound to the harmony of natural necessity. This is proved both by the character of human creativity and by the emergence of a distinctively historical

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1. Niebuhr, NDM, I, 113.
 2. Niebuhr, ICE, 207.
 3. Ibid., 208.
 4. Niebuhr, NDM, I, 114.

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- 1. Mead, HDM, I, 113.
 - 2. Mead, ICE, 207.
 - 3. Ibid., 208.
 - 4. Mead, HDM, I, 114.

rather than a natural chaos and destruction.¹

Though rightly understanding that the human spirit is nous and not physis, the idealist immediately "sacrifices his provisional advantage by identifying nous with logos, spirit with rationality."² The idealist believes therefore

that the human spirit has a certain protection against the perils of its freedom within its own law-giving rationality. The possible evil of human actions is recognized but it is attributed to the body or, more exactly, to the psyche, that is, to the vitality of a particular form of existence.³

Thus, if the naturalists are in error in looking for a harmony of nature, the idealists are wrong in making a sharp distinction between reason and nature, nous and physis. The order and inner coherence of reason "is regarded as a safe retreat from the chaos of natural impulse" in both schools; and the power of reason "is considered sufficient to master and coerce natural vitality and transmute it into a higher realm of coherence."⁴

Such an interpretation of human nature, Niebuhr argues, has the advantage of recognizing "the total dimension of the human spirit." But it makes the fatal mistake

1. Niebuhr, NDM, I, 114.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., 112.

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1. Michener, HUM, I, 114.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., II.

of "dividing the human psyche too absolutely and of identifying spirit and reason too completely."¹ The idealists are involved in a dualism which prevents them from understanding "the organic relation between nature and reason and the dependence of reason upon nature."² Their identification of reason and spirit "obscures the fact that human freedom actually transcends the capacities which are usually known as 'rational.'³

Thus we arrive, by a roundabout way, at an important clue to the function of reason in distinction to other faculties in the human psyche. Reason cannot be identified with "spirit," for human self-consciousness (the fruit of reason) is a self-objectifying consciousness that is able to see life from a perspective that transcends all deliverances of rational processes. This is admittedly one of the "ultra-rational presuppositions" needed for the Christian wisdom about man.⁴ It is not possible for any "principle of reason" to plumb the depths or reach the heights of the human spirit. When the idealists identify the self with some "principle of reason" they lose both the self, and (so they pretend) their finiteness as well.

1. Niebuhr, NDM, I, 112.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., 16.

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 their finiteness as well.

1. M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 119.
 2. Ibid., p. 119.
 3. Ibid., p. 119.
 4. Ibid., p. 119.

In idealism the self is lost in the breadth of its view; and the breadth of its view is identified with ultimate reality. Idealism conceives the self primarily as reason and reason primarily as God.¹

The actual self, however, is "less as well as more than reason" because every self "is a unity of thought and life in which thought remains in organic unity with all the organic processes of finite existence."²

Niebuhr insists that more is involved in human creativity than just the workings of the mind. In The Nature and Destiny of Man he discusses the problem of vitality and form in human nature and analyzes the "four elements in human creativity." These elements are: (1) the vitality of nature (its impulses and drives); (2) the forms and unities of nature; that is, the determinations of instinct, and the forms of natural cohesion and natural differentiation; (3) the freedom of spirit to transcend natural forms within limits and direct and redirect the vitalities; (4) the forming capacity of spirit, its ability to create a new realm of coherence and order.³ Both nature and spirit, Niebuhr argues, possess resources of vitality and form. Thus it is wrong, as do the modern rationalists and romanticists, to hold "that one aspect

1. Niebuhr, NDM, I, 76.

2. Ibid., 75.

3. Ibid., 27.

of reality can be made the principle of interpretation of the whole."¹

As opposed to modern culture, a Biblical view of human creativity employs a principle of interpretation which is able to transcend both form and vitality; it has faith in the unity of God's will and wisdom; it interprets man as

a unity of will in which human vitality, natural and spiritual, is set under the ordering will of God. No pattern of human reason but only the will of God can be the principle of the form and order to which human life must be conformed.²

Thus, in this view, human vitality is not considered evil "in and of itself." The function of reason must not be to destroy natural impulse, according to Niebuhr. A better approach is to hold to a paradoxical relationship between mind and body, spirit and nature, freedom and necessity.³ Though seemingly opposed in interest and function, these vital concepts can find no proper expression without keeping a delicate tension between each dual paradox. And these, as well as all paradoxical concepts, must be viewed from a higher pinnacle than reason alone is able to achieve.

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1. Niebuhr, NDM, I, 29.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., 120.

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1. Niebuhr, *NRM*, I, 29.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*, 120.

role and limitations of human reason is to be found in Niebuhr's chapter on "Rational Resources" in Moral Man and Immoral Society. A brief summary of this discussion will serve to point up the various issues that we have thus far touched upon. This, together with certain statements in Reflections on the End of an Era, and selected statements from articles in periodicals, will complete our summary of Niebuhr's critique of reason.

In discussing rational resources Niebuhr is willing to concede that the optimism of the rationalists and educators is not without value, for there are always "unrealized potentialities in human life which remain undeveloped if hope does not encourage their development."¹ As for the work of education, it can

no doubt solve many problems of society, and can increase the capacity of men to envisage the needs of their fellows and to live in harmonious and equitable relations with them.²

Thus an optimistic appraisal of human potentialities "may create its own verification."³ But it is important to bear in mind, insists Niebuhr, that this judgment applies only to individuals, and never to collectives. This aspect of the problem will arise numerous times throughout this dissertation.

1. Niebuhr, MMIS, 24.
2. Ibid., 24f.
3. Ibid., 25.

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1. Weber, WIRTS, 24.
2. Ibid., 247.
3. Ibid., 25.

Niebuhr finds that human beings are endowed by nature with both selfish and unselfish impulses. The individual is

a nucleus of energy which is organically related from the very beginning with other energy, but which maintains...its own discrete existence.¹

The energy of human life differs from the whole world of nature only "in the degree of reason which directs the energy."² Man is the only creature capable of fully discerning his essential nature. Man alone is completely self-conscious. His reason endows him

with a capacity for self-transcendence..Reason enables him, within limits, to direct his energy so that it will flow in harmony, and not in conflict, with other life.³

Here we find a basic principle regarding the role of reason in Niebuhr's thought. It is in evidence throughout all of his writings. It is this: reason may "restrain," "redirect," "extend," stabilize," or "control" the energies of life so that increasingly worthwhile ends may be realized. Reason may even "affirm life in more inclusive terms." Nevertheless, it will never be able to destroy or completely control natural impulse (energy).⁴

The rationalistic idealists are wrong, Niebuhr argues, in maintaining that it is possible to abolish "evil" impulse.

1. Niebuhr, MMIS, 25.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., 26.

4. Ibid., 27.

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The rationalistic idealists are wrong, Nietzsche argues, in maintaining that it is possible to abolish "evil" impulses.

1. Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 28.
2. *Ibid.*, 28.
3. *Ibid.*, 28.
4. *Ibid.*, 27.

This is because reason

is not the sole basis of moral virtue in man. His social impulses are more deeply rooted than his rational life.¹

Thus reason may "extend and stabilize," but it does not "create the capacity to affirm other life than its own."²

Niebuhr appears to rely quite heavily on Freudian psychology in Moral Man and Immoral Society. The Freudian analysis of vital impulses in man seems to be qualified only by the theories of Jung and Adler.³ Here the natural impulses are given a central role in achieving moral ends, such as harmony in social relationships. This is obviously a crucial concept in Niebuhr's ethics. His positive appreciation of deeply rooted instinct and natural impulse becomes a major reason for his negative appreciation of the role of reason. What is the strength of natural impulse? It prompts man

not only to the perpetuation of life beyond himself but to some achievement of harmony with other life...It is obvious that man not only shares a gregarious impulse with the lower creatures but that a specific impulse of pity bids him fly to aid of (sic) stricken members of his community.⁴

An adequate moral theory, Niebuhr contends, must not

1. Niebuhr, *Ibid.*, 26.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*

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An adequate moral theory, Wichur contends, must not

1. Wichur, *Ibid.*, 28.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*

depreciate the social impulses. These impulses "are undeniably good but obviously rooted in instinct and nature."¹

It is the basic function of reason, then, to support those impulses which carry life beyond itself. Reason, inasfar as it is able to survey the whole field of life, analyzes

the various forces in their relation to each other and, gauging their consequences in terms of the total welfare, it inevitably places the stamp of its approval upon those impulses which affirm life in its most inclusive terms.²

A comparison of the foregoing passage with a similar one in Reflections on the End of an Era will serve to clarify what is meant by this particular duty of reason.

It is the function of reason to relate life with life in terms of harmony. To accomplish this task it must restrain the immediate impulses in the individual which war against each other; and the organized impulses of the individual which set his life against the life of his community; and the impulses of his community which bring it in conflict with the total community of mankind.³

If this is done successfully, reason is then able to "prevent and reduce social conflict by relating interest to interest and will to will in ever widening circles of social harmony."⁴ In such social harmony various forms

1. Niebuhr, *Ibid.*, 27.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Niebuhr, *REE*, 4f.

4. *Ibid.*, 5.

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- 1. Weber, *Ibid.*, 27.
 - 2. *Ibid.*
 - 3. Weber, *ibid.*, 47.
 - 4. *Ibid.*, 8.

of life "do not feed upon each other but support each other and death is postponed."¹

A related responsibility of human reason in the realm of moral theory and action is to make decisions that work for justice.² At this point a confusion seems to exist regarding the exact construction to be placed upon the concept "justice." In Moral Man and Immoral Society it is further observed that the sense of justice is "a product of the mind and not of the heart."³ It is the result of "reason's insistence upon consistency."⁴ But in an article in Christianity and Crisis it is stated that the will to do justice ultimately has

a religious root and no rational reason can be given why a man ought to be just, unless it be the prudential one that injustice will finally destroy its beneficiaries as well as its victims.⁵

Does Niebuhr mean here that the "sense" of justice and the "ought" of justice are radically separate and distinct, as the foregoing statements seem to imply? If so, it would have been helpful to explain why reason is adequate in one area and not in the other; that is, why reason can legitimately produce a sense of justice and yet cannot be a valid arbiter in judging if a given

1. Niebuhr, REE, 5.

2. It will be recalled that justice is, for Niebuhr, the closest approximation to the ideal of love that can be achieved in mundane existence.

3. Niebuhr, MMIS, 29.

4. Niebuhr, Art.(1944).² 5. Ibid.

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 3. Niebuhr, *ibid.*, p. 3.
 4. Niebuhr, *ibid.*, p. 3.
 5. Niebuhr, *ibid.*, p. 3.

moral action leads to more justice or less justice, even if the impulse to that moral activity does have religious roots. This problem is confused in Niebuhr's writings.

To return to the role of reason as presented in Moral Man and Immoral Society, it is further observed that the morality of an action is "judged by the possibility of conforming it to a universal scheme of consistent moral actions."¹

This means, in terms of conduct, that the satisfaction of an impulse can be called good only if it can be related in terms of inner consistency with a total harmony of impulses. While the unreasonable man may approve the satisfaction of an impulse in himself and disapprove the same impulse in another, the reasonable man must judge his actions, in some degree, in terms of the total necessities of a social situation.²

Thus reason tends to check selfish impulses in the person himself and "to grant the satisfaction of legitimate impulses in others."³

Lest the reader be led to think that Niebuhr is making a brief for the criterion of coherence in moral philosophy, let the foregoing statements be balanced by these:

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1. Niebuhr, MMIS, 29.
 2. Ibid.
 3. Ibid.

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Thus reason tends to check selfish impulses in the person himself and "to grant the satisfaction of legitimate impulses in others."³

Let the reader be led to think that Niebuhr is making a plea for the criterion of coherence in moral philosophy, let the foregoing statements be balanced by these:

1. Niebuhr, *MIR*, 22.
2. *Id.*
3. *Id.*

It is a question whether reason is ever sufficiently powerful to achieve, or even to approximate, a complete harmony and consistency between what is demanded for the self and what is granted to the other.¹

How shall one test the validity of social expectations?..They are finally answered through exigencies of history in which contingent factors and unpredictable forces may carry more weight than the nicest and most convincing abstract speculation.²

But it remains true that reason does work "toward the end" of justice in society. It does this, contends Niebuhr, by "placing inner restraints upon the desires of the self in the interest of social harmony," but also by "judging the claims and assertions of individuals from the perspective of the intelligence of the total community."³ A growing rationality in society works "to destroy the uncritical acceptance of injustice by destroying the morale of dominant groups."⁴ It brings all impulses in society into reference with, and under the control of, an "inclusive social ideal."⁵

While the development of social justice does depend upon the extension of rationality, in the sense in which we have here analyzed it, yet it is necessary that one be realistic regarding the possibilities of attaining perfec-

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1. Niebuhr, *Ibid.*, 30.
 2. Niebuhr, *ICE*, 197.
 3. Niebuhr, *MMIS*, 30f.
 4. *Ibid.*, 31.
 5. *Ibid.*, 32.

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1. Niebuhr, *Ibid.*, 30.
2. Niebuhr, *ibid.*, 197.
3. Niebuhr, *ibid.*, 307.
4. *Ibid.*, 31.
5. *Ibid.*, 32.

tion through reason, for the limits

of reason make it inevitable that pure moral action, particularly in the intricate, complex and collective relationships, should (sic) be an impossible goal.¹

Individual men will "never be wholly rational or reasonable" and the proportion of reason to impulse "becomes increasingly negative when we proceed from the life of the individual to that of social groups."² For among groups any common mind or purpose "is always more or less inchoate and transitory" and groups must depend "upon a common impulse to bind them together."³

The question of the dynamics of moral action is now raised. Reason, Niebuhr insists, may be able to project goals more inclusive and more socially acceptable than those which natural impulse prompts, but how is "an adequate dynamic toward the more inclusive objective to be gained?" It is not sufficient, we are informed, to look to the social character of moral judgments or to the pressure of society upon an individual, though "both are facts to be reckoned with."⁴ The peculiar phenomenon of the moral life called "conscience" is thus presented:

Men do possess, among other moral resources, a sense of obligation toward the good, as

1. Niebuhr, *Ibid.*, 35.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, 37.

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- 1. Merton, *Ibid.*, 23.
 - 2. *Ibid.*
 - 3. *Ibid.*
 - 4. *Ibid.*, 27.

their mind (sic) conceives it. This moral sense does not give content to moral judgments. It is a principle of action which requires the individual to act according to whatever judgments of good and evil he is able to form.¹

This "principle of action" is not to be equated with the total dynamic of life, nor with the "individual's fear of the disapproval or discipline of his group."²

What is the place of reason in the dynamics of the moral life? In answer to this query we are informed that reason

provides the opportunity for its [dynamic morality] expression by creating the possibility of conflict between immediate impulses and the inclusive objects of reason.³

Yet, at the same time, the sense of obligation cannot be equated with "the rational character of life any more than it can be identified with its dynamic character."⁴

Whatever the character of the "desire to do right," the important thing for Niebuhr is that

men do seem to possess a sense of obligation toward the good, however they may define it. While it may give force to moral judgments, which must be regarded as mistaken from a rational perspective, its general tendency is to support reason against impulse.⁵

This sense of obligation is historically related to "both

1. Niebuhr, *Ibid.*, 37.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*, 38.

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 - 3. *ibid.*
 - 4. *ibid.*
 - 5. *ibid.*, 38.

the rational and the impulsive elements in human nature" and, like conceptual knowledge, it may "be strengthened and enlarged by discipline, and may deteriorate by lack of use."¹

Conscience, as a moral resource in human life, is not as powerful, in Niebuhr's estimation, as most moralists assume. Nor is conscience strengthened by the reason in such a simple fashion as they imagine.

It is dubious whether the development of reason, though it increases the opportunities for the exercise of conscience, strengthens the force of conscience itself. In that task religion is more potent than reason.²

Religion is superior in this particular instance due to its "absolutising the moral principle of life until it achieves the purity of absolute disinterestedness," and by "imparting transcendent worth to the life of others."³

In analyzing the limits of reason in morality, Niebuhr begins by recognizing the force of egoistic impulse which "is more powerful than any but the most astute psychological analysts and the most rigorous devotees of introspection realise."⁴ This impulse can never be defeated, for it will always express itself "in more subtle forms."⁵ For example, one's devotion to his

1. Niebuhr, *Ibid.*, 38.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*, 40.

4. *Ibid.*, 71.

5. *Ibid.*, 40.

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1. Niebuhr, *Ibid.*, 38.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*, 40.
4. *Ibid.*, 41.
5. *Ibid.*, 40.

community always means "the expression of a transferred egoism as well as of altruism."¹ That reason may check egoism in order to fit it harmoniously into a total body of social impulse has already been granted. The trouble, insists Niebuhr, is that this same force of reason

is bound to justify the egoism of the individual as a legitimate element in the total body of vital capacities, which society seeks to harmonise...Rationalism in morals may persuade men in one moment that their selfishness is a peril to society and in the next moment it may condone their egoism as a necessary and inevitable element in the total social harmony.²

Not only this, but reason may actually give egoism a force which it does not possess in non-rational nature. This is so because man's self-consciousness, the fruit of reason, increases the urge to preserve and extend life. Further, the impulses of self-preservation "easily lead into desires for aggrandisement."³ For this reason there is no possibility in drawing a sharp line between "the will-to-live and the will-to-power."⁴

Moreover, man's self-consciousness, which lifts him above nature, gives natural impulse "a new and more awful potency in the human world."⁵ That is, man fights his battles with instruments

in which mind has sharpened nature's claws;

1. Niebuhr, *Ibid.*, 40.

2. *Ibid.*, 41.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, 42.

5. *Ibid.*, 44.

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1. Ibid., 40.
 2. Ibid., 41.
 3. Ibid., 42.
 4. Ibid., 43.
 5. Ibid., 44.

and his ferocities are more sustained than those of the natural world, where they are prompted only by the moods and the necessities of the moment.¹

Man's lusts are "fed by his imagination," and he will never cease until "the universal objectives which the imagination envisages are attained."²

At this point a judgment is levelled against man's sanity (or insanity). It is asserted that man's protest against finiteness "makes the universal character of his imperial dreams inevitable."³ In his saner moments man sees his life

fulfilled as an organic part of a harmonious whole. But he has few sane moments; for he is governed more by imagination than by reason and imagination is compounded of mind and impulse.⁴

One wonders here if imagination is to be given a superior role over both "mind" and "impulse"? This possibility does not appear in any other discussion that we have consulted. Apparently this is not the intention, for the human imagination is elsewhere represented as "tragically limited," and natural impulse (which Niebuhr considers a constituent element of the imagination) is nowhere presented as subject to such limitations.

A further limitation of a reasonable approach to

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1. Niebuhr, *Ibid.*, 44.
 2. *Ibid.*
 3. *Ibid.*, 45.
 4. *Ibid.* Italics mine.

and his theories are more practical than those of the natural world, where they are prompted only by the needs and the necessities of the moment.¹

Man's mind is "led by his imagination," and he will never cease until "the universal objectives which the imagination envisages are attained."²

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1. Mehnert, *Ibid.*, 44.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*, 43.
4. *Ibid.*, *Impulse* mine.

ethics is that "man's self-interest corrupts even the most ideal enterprises and universal objectives."¹ This fact makes hypocrisy "an inevitable by-product of all virtuous endeavor."²

Even a conscious attempt to eliminate dishonest and ambiguous motives is no perfect guarantee against hypocrisy; for there is no miracle by which men can achieve a rationality high enough to give them as vivid an understanding of general interests as of their own.³

In another connection, it is stated that not only does human selfishness make hypocrisy in morality inevitable, but it also makes man's virtues "relative" and fleeting.

The virtues of men have a short-ranged efficacy. We may be virtuous in this context; and just in that relationship; and the instruments of divine judgment in performing such and such a peculiar relationship. But this does not guarantee our virtue tomorrow.⁴

A consistent realist must continually bear in mind that the will-to-power in man will remain to corrupt every noble cause or purpose, be it in the family or in larger relationships. He will know

that every immediate loyalty is a potential danger to higher and more inclusive loyalties, and an opportunity⁵ for the expression of a sublimated egoism.

We close this summary of Niebuhr's criticism of

1. Niebuhr, MMIS, 45.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Niebuhr, Art.(1945).¹

5. Niebuhr, MMIS, 47.

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1. Niebuhr, *WMS*, 48.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*
4. Niebuhr, *Art. (1925)*, 1.
5. Niebuhr, *WMS*, 47.

reason as a valid arbiter in ethical matters by quoting the following rather remarkable passage depicting man's ultimate limitations:

The life of man is brief and fragmentary. So also are the desires, hopes, and achievements of his nations, cultures, and civilizations. No collective strength of man is great enough to overcome these creaturely limits of human existence. No wisdom can comprehend all the factors which impinge upon our decisions or the consequences which flow from them. We must act with such wisdom as we have; but since neither are adequate for either the comprehension or the mastery of the total frame of life in which we must act, we must learn to live in the confidence that "He leadeth the blind by ways they know not of."¹

4. The Validity of a Rational Morality Defended

This chapter began with a summary statement of some of the difficulties that arise when one attempts to defend a rational morality. We were willing to concede that men have, more often than not perhaps, acted irrationally in their moral choices. Blind impulse, inclination, interest, feeling--these have dominated the moral history of the race. We have also admitted that morality must include more than formal rationality. It is true that natural impulse, intelligence, and will are constituent factors in moral activity.

1. Niebuhr, Art.(1949).¹

It is also admitted that human nature has never been adequately defined, nor has there been any universally satisfactory formula devised for its remaking.¹ That a continual strife exists between the egoistic and the altruistic tendencies within the self must be granted to Niebuhr. Indeed, this conflict has been the stock-in-trade of most moralists. Much work needs to be done to clarify the precise relationships that exist between mind and impulse, spirit and nature, and the like. Niebuhr's work in this connection has been admirable, though perhaps inadequate.

There is truth in the criticism Niebuhr brings against those among the ultra-rationalists who hold that the mind is "creative." There is a proper sense in which the intellect is and is not creative. What Kant claimed for the creative or productive imagination, for example, certainly finds no support in the facts of consciousness, as Cohen has shown.² The mind cannot create the world or other minds--though it is indeed creative in producing many aspects of the world as phenomenally experienced, such as improvements in technology and social structure, for examples--for to claim too much for the mind is to

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1. See Hooker, Miller, and Murphy, *etc.*, and Dewey, *etc.*
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involve one in the contradictory and self-defeating errors of solipsism. We will agree here with Brightman that creativeness (in the sense of bringing forth completely novel objects to be experienced) is a divine attribute of God alone. A qualified--and significant--sense of human creativity is possible, however, as we shall see. The selecting, ordering, directing, perfecting activities of the mind do, in a very real sense, contain constructive elements. But this is no defense of a tendency within rationalism that would "make reason into a god," as Niebuhr sees all rationalism.

Finally, it is also true that the human mind is never free from the tendency to error and illusion. As Dean Knudson has rightly observed:

The mind as a whole is subject to error, and can escape it only through constant self-criticism.¹

There is clearly no automatic or magic formula by which men can know truth. Further, it is quite likely that the mind of man can never know truth perfectly. There will always be factors of mistaken judgment, illusion, and partial understanding as long as there is human nature. In this sense--and in this sense alone--can one speak of a "contingent" and "irrational" aspect of

1. Knudson, VRE, 179.

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experience. As Cohen, a thorough-going rationalist, has rightly observed:

To the extent that we are creatures in time and must add fact to fact, we can never logically exhaust the totality of nature. There is thus something which will always be for us beyond rational form or system, and in that sense appropriately called irrational.¹

Brightman, in many passages in Nature and Values and A Philosophy of Religion, would also agree with this judgment regarding the ultimate limitations of human reason. He agrees with Cohen, however, that it is of serious import whether man constructs a morality or a religion on the basis of what can be known rather than upon the contingent and irrational factors of nature and experience.

What Niebuhr overlooks in his attack upon reason as a valid guide to moral experience is that if man cannot trust his God-given faculties, among which reason may be appropriately considered as a gift of the highest order, then what is there left for him to trust? One cannot trust blind impulse, for given full expression it leads to barbaric strife and conflict, as Niebuhr knows full well. Feelings, instincts, or desires alone do not lift man above the animal kingdom. Imagination

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too easily becomes whim and fancy. Revelation as a guide to moral or religious truth cannot be relied upon, for who or what is to judge among the abundance of revelation-claims that exist the world over? If man cannot trust his inner capacities, where is the ground for faith in the Giver of these capacities? As Dean Knudson insists:

If man is made in the image of God, we may obviously trust his faculties, and we may trust them all the more confidently as they approach a greater and greater degree of maturity.¹

Where will one find the certainty so basic to both morality and religion if it is not through a deliverance of the moral consciousness? Again we quote Knudson.

The sole basis of certainty is the mind itself. It is a quickened and enlightened intellect, a quickened and enlightened conscience, and a quickened and enlightened religious nature that constitute the only valid ground for certainty.²

In fact, in a very real sense one might say that to deny the function of reason as a valid arbiter in the moral life is both irreligious and immoral, if by "irreligious" we mean the denial of the goodness of God's creativity and by "immoral" the reference of the critical aspects of moral experience to irrational or "amoral" factors such

1. Knudson, VRE, 183.

2. Ibid.

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as impulse or so-called "instinct." To say that it is impossible to redirect impulse because of certain inevitable limitations in human nature would appear to be surrendering man, made in the "image of God," to blind and inchoate forces. As Cohen rightly says:

Mere life apart from intelligent thought is dumb and blind. Unless intelligence illumines the meaning of our vital activity we can make no significant assertion about it nor draw any valid conclusions from it.¹

Man can never affirm life, nor religious values, nor God Himself, in other words, unless he is led to some confidence in his own capacity to reflect upon, choose, and order the factors of human consciousness. To deny this capacity would appear to be a skeptical conclusion regarding man's essential nature, and a cynical one regarding the goodness of creation--both of which are usually considered irreligious and immoral conclusions in the face of alternative possibilities.

Niebuhr does not deny that reason has a legitimate function in ordering experiences. He realizes that "reason must feed upon faith and faith upon reason." John Bennett defends Niebuhr's use of reason thus:

Niebuhr does not neglect reason but he uses reason to show the inadequacy of all rational systems, and he also uses reason constructively to show that the Christian position, elements of which may be expressed in mythical terms, actually fits the realities of life.²

1. Cohen, RAN, 53.
2. Bennett, Rev.(1947).

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Here life apart from intelligent thought is dumb and blind. Unless intelligence illumines the meaning of our vital activity we can make no intelligent assertion about it nor draw any valid conclusions from it.

Man can never affirm life, nor religious values, nor God Himself, in other words, unless he is led to some confidence in his own capacity to reflect upon, choose, and order the factors of human consciousness. To deny this capacity would appear to be a skeptical conclusion regarding man's essential nature, and a cynical one regarding the goodness of creation--both of which are usually considered religious and moral conclusions in the face of alternative possibilities.

Nichols does not deny that reason has a legitimate function in ordering experiences. He realizes that "reason must feed upon faith and faith upon reason." John Bennett defends Nichols' use of reason thus:

Nichols does not neglect reason but he uses reason to show the inadequacy of all rational systems, and he also uses reason constructively to show that the Christian position, elements of which may be expressed in mystical terms, actually fits the realities of life.

This is perfectly true, but is it not possible to use reason in such a fashion as to abuse it? That is, to reason for the sole purpose of defending a specialized conception of truth, at the expense of virtually denying every constructive system that has resulted from conscientious, albeit inadequate, attempts to explain the riddle of human existence, would appear to be not only a contradiction in terms and a special case of "having one's cake and eating too," but also a wholly unnecessary distrust of the efforts of rationalistic philosophers. One does not have to agree in toto with the Stoics and Kant, for example, in order to appreciate and incorporate their valid and abiding insights into a more comprehensive faith.

In Faith and History, as Karl Lowith has observed, Niebuhr attempts to "incorporate what is true" in liberal and rational accounts of development in history into his own view of final truth.¹ But, as Lowith notes, the perplexing problem of how the Christian story of salvation "is embodied in the history of the world is not sufficiently thought through."² Niebuhr stops using reason at the point where its services are most needed--in striving for a reasonable account of God's redemptive love so that His

1. See Lowith, Rev. (1949).

2. Ibid.

spirit may bear witness with our spirits that our ideals and actions are valid approximations of what is expected of us as finite creatures.

It has often been a criticism of Niebuhr that he uses reason to disprove the central role of reason, and that he uses philosophy to establish the superiority of religious presuppositions over philosophy in the vital matters of faith and life. Lowith sees this aspect of the problem in an informative light. He notes that Niebuhr appeals to a principle of explanation beyond all possible alternatives in order to establish the prior claim of the Christian interpretation--a position above the

alternatives of despair and complacency, evolutionary optimism and defeatism, secularism and escapism, pietistic sectarianism and Catholic institutionism, traditional orthodoxy and liberalism, worldliness and asceticism, etc. The Christian interpretation is more adequate than alternative interpretations because it is dialectically more comprehensive: it "comprehends all of life's antinomies and contradictions into a system of meaning." One wonders whether this criterion of the superiority of the Christian interpretation is not rather Hegelian than Christian.¹

Of course Hegel would never postulate a system of meaning beyond the comprehension of Reason, as is Niebuhr's intention,

Lowith, Ibid.

but the point is well taken that Niebuhr's fundamental construction depends upon the philosophical heritage of the race, and the basic concepts of philosophy have all been deliverances of the practical reason--or rather, to use Kant's terminology, of both the speculative and the practical reason.

Dean Muelder has shown, in this connection, that Niebuhr's basic views are "probably less orthodox and certainly less Biblical than he assumes them to be."¹ That is, Niebuhr incorporates into his view of the Christian faith "many insights and employs categories which have their origin in Greek and modern philosophical thought."²

He overhauls in terms of historical and liberal criticism such ideas as original sin, the fall of man, original righteousness, and guilt. He introduces into the old wine-skins of Christology novel assumptions of fact and doctrine.³

Further, in stressing the uniqueness of the Biblical view of man, Niebuhr "stresses and seemingly rejects Greek and modern idealism."⁴ But a closer look at The Nature and Destiny of Man reveals that

it is idealistic concepts and categories which carry the weight of his argument. Such ideas are: self, consciousness, trans-

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1. Muelder, Art.(1945).
 2. Ibid.
 3. Ibid.
 4. Ibid.

cendence, self-transcendence, freedom, reason, will, universality, and person-ality. Without them he could neither analyze spirit nor "soul," and with them he is dependent beyond measure on the stream of philosophical idealism.¹

Because of his failure to recognize or admit the basic idealistic pattern of his theological criteria, Niebuhr is caught in the difficult position of denying that which he unconsciously affirms and, conversely, of affirming that which cannot be rationally proved or disproved. Lowith understands this dilemma in Niebuhr's thought. In his words:

Faith and History leaves one with the general impression that the limits of man's virtues, wisdom, and power and the unresolved questions of the human enterprise only exist to be answered and completed by faith and religion. But one might question if the task of Christian apologetics is not "too simply" conceived if worked out in this manner. For why should the contradictions and ambiguities of our historical enterprise not have to be endured with mature resignation instead of overcome and resolved ultimately?²

Niebuhr is in error when he contends that all systems of philosophy claim that ultimate truth lies within the "unaided" grasp of man's mind. In Lowith's words again:

If, since Kant, philosophers make room for faith by subjecting the competence of reason to a philosophical criticism, they do not

1. Muellder, Ibid.

2. Lowith, Rev.(1949).

pretend to know the ultimate truth by revelation and faith. If theologians try to establish the truth of the Christian gospel "at the very limit of all systems of meaning" and as the completion of provisional half-truths and meanings, they will have to demonstrate the validity of their apologetic on more than dialectical grounds.¹

If Niebuhr can say that rationalists of every kind claim too much for the power and sweep of man's intellect, men like Henry Nelson Wieman can counter that Niebuhr goes too far in the opposite direction in asserting that Christian faith must direct man's commitment to something "beyond the reach of Reason, not merely beyond its grasp."²

Using the language of Wieman that Niebuhr would hold to a principle beyond the "reach and grasp" of the rational processes, one might inquire if Niebuhr's ethical ideal does not fall into this category. The transcendent love ethic, as we have observed,³ is incapable of being known or realized in mundane existence. It is "a principle of comprehension beyond our comprehension." It is only by religious presuppositions, based upon a profound faith and received as a gift of Grace through revelation, that one can ascertain the absolute ideal

1. Lowith, Ibid.
 2. Wieman, SHG, 33.
 3. Supra, 1.

and goal of existence. No proof is given, or is capable of being given, for this postulate. It is to be taken for granted as the ground of religion and morality alike. What happens when this is done?

George A. Coe expresses a valid criticism of Niebuhr at this point.

He is both intellectually and emotionally attracted toward absolutes, but often his absolutes turn out, Hegel-wise, to contain their own opposites. His treatment of the Christian law of love is an instance. As it is formulated by Jesus it requires me to love myself as I love my neighbor, to do as I would be done by, hence to calculate and plan, to take circumstances into account (my own and others), and to balance probabilities against one another, all in the interest of a common good in which I am to share.¹

But what Niebuhr actually does is to

turn this complex of acts that are relative into an absolute. He identifies Christian love with absolute disinterestedness... Hence love becomes impulsive rather than voluntary, and it tends to end in a contentless emotion--an emotional absolute.²

When this is done, according to Coe, Niebuhr involves himself in a perilous predicament for ethics.

Instead of revolting against the religious emptiness that he takes to be absoluteness, he subjects himself to the tortures of a divided loyalty. Thereupon, the construction of sharp antitheses and emotional absolutes leads him to turn our ethical finiteness with

1. Coe, Art.(1933).

2. Ibid.

and goal of existence. No proof is given, or is capable of being given, for this postulate. It is to be taken for granted as the ground of religion and morality alike. What happens when this is done? George A. Gos expresses a valid criticism of Niebuhr at this point.

He is both intellectually and emotionally attracted toward absolutism; but often his absolutism turns out, however, to contain their own opposites. His treatment of the Christian law of love is an instance. As it is formulated by Jesus it requires me to love myself as I love my neighbor, to do as I would be done by, hence to self-love and plan, to take circumstances into account (my own and others), and to balance probabilities against one another, all in the interest of a common good in which I am to share.¹

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1. Gos, Art. (1933).
2. Ibid.

its uncertainties into an anti-ethical absolute.¹

Certain of Rashdall's remarks become relevant in this connection.

It is impossible to construct a logically coherent system of ethics without the assumption that the reasonableness of an act is sufficient ground for its being done.²

An ethical system which is based upon confusion of thought surely rests upon a precarious foundation.³

Moral Reason bids us not only to seek to understand and realize the good, but to realize as much good as possible and to distribute that good justly or impartially between the various persons who may be affected by our actions.⁴

Is it not begging the question to accept as "axiomatic" the supposition that Jesus made no use of reasoned argument, or that the Christian church has always held its central beliefs to be above rational proof or disproof?⁵ DeWolf has demonstrated that this is only a half-truth. He finds the use of reasoned argumentation not only in Jesus, but in the entire literature of the Christian church. In his words:

The New Testament employs reason with utmost freedom. Jesus used arguments from

1. Coe, Art. (1933).

2. Rashdall, TGE, I, 101.

3. Ibid., 50.

4. Ibid., 101.

5. See Niebuhr, ICE, 37-61.

its unacceptance into an anti-ethical
absolute.

Certain of Nashall's remarks become relevant

in this connection.

It is impossible to construct a logically
coherent system of ethics without the
assumption that the reasonableness of an
act is sufficient ground for its being
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An ethical system which is based upon
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1. Gos. Art. (1923).
 2. Nashall, TBE, I, 101.
 3. Ibid., 80.
 4. Ibid., 101.

5. See Mishkin, ICE, 57-61.

analogy (Matt.5:43-45), pragmatic arguments (Matt.7:15-20; Luke 7:20-23; 13:6-9), and arguments a fortiori (Matt.7:11; Luke 13:15-17). He argues frequently from cause to effect and appeals again and again to experience for the correction of notions which he regards as theologically or ethically mistaken (Matt.5:46-47; Luke 13:1-5).¹

Further, DeWolf finds that St. Paul is described in the Acts as "entering into argumentative discussion in place after place which he visited for missionary purposes."² And much of the New Testament "is written in the spirit of Isaiah's words, 'Come now, and let us reason together, saith Jehovah.'³ When we are exhorted to commit ourselves wholly to God it is added "which is your reasonable service."⁴ The Fourth Gospel, DeWolf insists, is a "highly rational as well as mystical document."⁵ This is so all the way from the prologue, based upon "a revision of the prevailing Logos philosophy," to the promise of Christ that "you will know the truth and the truth will make you free."⁶

At this point DeWolf raises a valid objection to

1. DeWolf, RAR, 134. DeWolf's footnotes of the scriptural passages have here been incorporated into the quotation.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid. Here DeWolf rightly objects to the substitution of the word "spiritual" for "reasonable" in the Revised Standard Version of Romans 12:1, on the grounds that the Greek adjective here in question is the etymological equivalent of the English word "logical," meaning rational, intellectual, or sensible. See DeWolf, RAR, f.125.

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the use of paradoxical argumentation in the "revolters against reason." For example, men like Niebuhr are quite fond of citing Jesus' statement that "For whoever would save his life will lose it" as a basic contradiction that can have no logical justification and must be accepted as true in its paradoxical setting.¹ What is overlooked in this interpretation is rightly understood by DeWolf.

Even when Jesus and St. Paul used the paradox as a rhetorical device, it seems often to have been an intentional means of stimulating more earnest and penetrating thought. "For whoever would save his life will lose it" implies no logical contradiction, since the saving and losing have obviously to do with different levels of being.²

It is true, insists DeWolf, that the utterance of such a paradox "does tend to set the hearer to thinking about his experience, and by the rational contemplation of such experiences as Jesus' words call to mind, he may well come to a profounder understanding of his duty, which is to say, of God's will for him."³

Turning to the Church Fathers, DeWolf points out that we find a number of men distrustful of reason. But even such conspicuous examples as Tertullian must often appeal to reason in support of theological positions.⁴ Men like

1. See Niebuhr, ICE, 53, 57; NDM, I, 76; Art.(1946).¹
 2. DeWolf, op. cit., 134f.
 3. Ibid., 133.
 4. Ibid., 135.

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 2. DeWolff, *op. cit.*, 1947.
 3. *Ibid.*, 135.
 4. *Ibid.*, 135.

Justin Martyr, trained in Greek philosophy, certainly achieved a high degree of rationalism in their use of dialectical skills.¹ Clement of Alexandria is cited by DeWolf as a Church Father who says in so many words: "Everything that is contrary to right reason is sin."²

The apologists appealed to reason and found no difficulty in quoting from the pagan philosophers "to demonstrate the reasonableness of the gospel."³

Though admitting that there is much in the Gospel that is paradoxical and passing the bounds of our experience and understanding, DeWolf finds nothing in the New Testament "which contradicts the principles of reason nor the data of our experience."⁴

The argument that Christian teaching is essentially paradoxical, that is, self-contradictory, assumes gratuitously some irrational doctrines...For such contradictions in thought we should not hold the gospel writers responsible, but rather the speculative theologians of later centuries who proceed with greater respect for cumulative traditions and the practical needs of propaganda against despised heresies than for critical self-restraint.⁵

In a similar vein, Brightman holds that "to appeal to reason is to appeal to God."⁶ This is because "God is a God of truth" and all claims to truth "need to be

1. DeWolf, *Ibid.*, 135f.

2. Cited in DeWolf, *RAR*, 136.

3. *Ibid.*, 136.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*, 137.

6. Brightman, *NAV*, 137.

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1. DeWolf, *Ibid.*, 136.
 2. Cited in DeWolf, *ibid.*, 136.
 3. *Ibid.*, 136.
 4. *Ibid.*, 137.
 5. *Ibid.*, 137.

abjudicated before the Supreme Court of reason."¹ The God of the Test Testament, insists Brightman, "is essentially logos and agape, reason and love, or, better still, reasonable love."² To hold that God's love is beyond the power of reason, or that any religion or society is to be based on irrationalism, "can only create partisan feuds and bitter divisions."³

One wonders of the "partisan feuds" and "bitter divisions," which Niebuhr appeals to again and again to support his position that selfish interests will ever corrupt the highest deliverances of reason, are actually caused, in part at least, by an irrational view of life and human nature such as he himself holds.

Is not the postulating of inevitable corruption in all of man's highest achievements, including his most developed spiritual and moral insights, an open invitation to abandon the struggle for a morality among men and nations that would serve to mitigate these "partisan feuds" and "bitter divisions" that Niebuhr accepts as a cornerstone of his theological and ethical position? This would certainly appear to be the case with respect to the question of war and peace, as we shall try to show in Chapter VIII.

1. Brightman, NAV, 137.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

It is illogical to suppose that one would accept as an imperative demand that which he is convinced is impossible of realization. In this sense would not a lack of conviction become a causative factor in increasing the "evils we deplore?" We can find no better quotation to support this criticism than from Montague.

It has long been known that too much preoccupation with one's natural impulses tends to increase them. The fighter needs his foe and the ascetic needs the flesh which he is pledged to oppose. The continuous searching of oneself for sin creates the very thing one would destroy.¹

Niebuhr would appear to abandon a rational morality in favor of a qualified Biblical authoritarianism. We say "qualified" because he does claim to incorporate modern insights into the traditional mold of his theological criteria. But to affirm that no moral idea can be accepted as valid in its own right, and must always be judged by a higher theological presupposition, is unquestionably a type of authoritarian ethics.

What is wrong with authoritarianism in ethics? What is the peril of interpreting ideals of natural excellence as commands of supernatural power? According to Montague, this practice has borne "many hideous fruits," of which he names three especially. These are: (1) the menace to ethical ideas; (2) the menace to social progress;

1. Montague, WOT, 520.

and (3) the menace to religious faith. We will consider each of these aspects at some length, for they contain highly relevant considerations for this study.

In the first place, Montague feels that the authoritarian element in our present Christianity is a menace to our ethical ideals "because it exalts monarchical power above democratic leadership."¹ In his words:

The conception of God as a great king whose mere will is our law is...a vestige of a predemocratic age, and it therefore gives to religion a note that is subtly but unmistakably discordant with the highest social aspirations of the present day.²

But the serious objection is that when God is thus made the source and sanction of moral laws, "He becomes, like other monarchs, immune to the duties prescribed for his subjects. His ways are not our ways."³ In other words, there is no basis for assurance that God is a God of righteous character and reasonable love. God is then not only above

that justice which he makes binding upon his creatures, but He is endowed with that will to vengeance which is depicted as the cardinal sin of man. The Christ ideal of universal love and forgiveness is directly and shamelessly contradicted by the conception of God who condemns to a hell of eternal torture the vast majority of his children. Here is clearly a double standard of morals:

1. Montague, WOT, 521.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.

and (3) the message to religious faith. We will consider each of these aspects at some length, for they contain highly relevant considerations for this study.

In the first place, Kant's theory is a authoritarian element in our present Christianity is a message to our ethical ideas "because it exists now" - ethical power above democratic leadership. In his words:

The conception of God as a great king whose laws are... a vestige of a pre-democratic age, and it therefore gives to religion a note that is utterly but unacceptably discordant with the highest social aspirations of the present day.

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the higher standard for man and the lower one for God.¹

Here is the predicament, according to Montague, that this conception brings one into: the ideals of the higher standard tend to sink to the level of the lower. If God allows nature to create injustice, then "for us to go counter to nature and to interfere with her laws savors of sacrilege."² But this is not all. To teach children the morality of commands rather than the morality of valid principles "is to inoculate them with the poisonous idea that the moral sense derives its ultimate sanction from the power of an almighty God."³ The logical result is "a complete disintegration of the moral tissues." And the generations that make right

depend on heavenly might will sooner or later be followed by a generation who will gratify their morbid inherited craving for an external power on which to base their ideals by looking for that power in the mud beneath their feet.⁴

We would add to the foregoing observations that to postulate an ethical ideal known only in God's will and inaccessible to man's will is a peculiarly vicious form of this rather arbitrary and indefensible procedure that Montague describes. To say that moral goodness means simply conformity to God's will tells us nothing about the

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- 1. Montague, Ibid., 232.
 - 2. Ibid.
 - 3. Ibid.
 - 4. Ibid.

content of that will, nor does the ascription of the good and right to a transcendent realm of reality offer any obligation on the part of man to search for any excellence in life. We quote Pratt:

The man who gives the term morally good this arbitrary meaning will find it impossible to show that there is any obligation on the part of anyone to be morally good. The proposed definition has united moral goodness to the will of God only at the cost of severing it completely from obligation and from the conception of the wise and justifiable and reasonable way to live.¹

And if good has no other meaning than whatever God wills, then the assertion that God is good, according to Pratt, "can have no other meaning than God wills what he wills."²

The question then becomes pertinent: If God's ideals are utterly different from ours, then in what respect can He be called morally superior to Satan? And why should we either worship or obey Him? It is no solution of the ethical or theological problem to appeal to undefined and inaccessible "religious presuppositions," or to postulate the "impossible possibility" of ethical ideals. Sidgwick is right when he says: "I cannot conceive that I ought to do anything which at the same time I judge that I cannot do."³

1. Pratt, RAL, 25.

2. Ibid.

3. Sidgwick, MOE, 33.

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1. Pratt, *VAL*, 22.
 2. *Ibid.*
 3. Sidgwick, *MOR*, 23.

The second peril of authoritarianism in ethics noted by Montague is the menace to social efficiency. This is because of "the enormous waste of human energy which it involves."¹ This waste results when the devotees of authoritarianism become preoccupied with defending their position against all comers. They are "at war with secular science and ethics,"² when they could be using these disciplines to support God's purposes in the universe and employing their methodologies in implementing the ethical ideals discerned by the mind of man.

It is instructive that the authoritarian theologians are not only at warfare with modern culture, but they cannot help being at war among themselves. One needs but to read the published correspondence between Barth, Brunner, and Niebuhr, for example, to understand what Montague means when he says that "each faction regards itself as orthodox and the others as heterodox."³ That no modus vivendi will appear to resolve these basic differences within their particular frames of reference is quite likely.

The last peril of authoritarianism in ethics discussed by Montague is that religion itself is menaced by its acceptance. When the religious consciousness

1. Montague, WOT, 524.

2. Ibid.

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The last part of authorial bias in ethics discussed by Montague is that religion itself is renounced by its acceptance. When the religious consciousness

interprets rules of conduct as divine commands, it "fastens upon later generations a code of life that can never be amended."¹

No matter how sound the system of moral and scientific beliefs may have been, no matter even if they actually possessed the divinely revealed truth which they claim, when once they are made sacrosanct and immune from criticism or change, they defeat their own purpose.²

Not only this, but the principle of life itself is refuted by this procedure. For life is growth. New discoveries require new theories, new situations call for new practices, and new social techniques are needed for an increasingly complex society. We advance, as John Dewey has demonstrated, by inquiry and experiment. What happens when religion is exempt from this process of criticism and growth? According to Montague, when religion

refuses to submit its authoritarian dogmas to free and fearless examination, it arrays itself against the entire drive of the ascending human spirit. It declares war on all that is most honest, brave, and free. It deprives its own best teachings of the possibility of vindication in the open court of reason.³

Will not the Christian faith become a "poor and weak thing," to use Montague's words, when it is shielded from the light of right reason?

The net result of this vicious circle of denying any real and lasting value to the long, arduous struggle

1. Montague, *Ibid.*, 523.
 2. *Ibid.*
 3. *Ibid.*

for spiritual and moral progress is to support, as Montague has rightly observed, the

debauchery of a religion of liberty,
service, tolerance, and progress to the
base ends of persecution, reaction, and
gloom.¹

A better solution, it would seem, is to work toward a theology that ascribes character to Deity and dignity to man; that offers man the assurance that his moral capacity enables him to achieve at least a fair approximation of the commandment "be thou perfect"; and that will make possible the construction of a system of ethics which would have the supreme and single purpose of making life more abundant, which means the developing to a maximum the potentialities of every creature. Then all moral standards could be appraised without prejudice and in the cold light of intelligence, to be accepted or rejected only according to their efficiency in promoting the ideal of freer and more abundant living. To "exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees" and to "be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect" (in intention at least) would appear to require the employment of the whole mind.

Niebuhr contends that a realistic morality will accept the inevitability of selfish thoughts and actions among all men. He holds that an admission on the part of

1. Montague, *Ibid.*, 526.

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the rationalists of the selfish character of human nature would destroy their system of thought. With this judgment we would take sharp issue, for though Niebuhr appeals to the "facts" delivered by the political and historical studies, he is not justified in holding that individuals and groups are selfish and corrupted even in their highest developments. For what is a "fact"? What can establish the validity of a religious, social, or moral "fact" except a rational consideration of all relevant data pertaining to the postulated fact? In the words of Cohen:

It is easy for those who have not reflected on actual scientific procedure to say: Begin with the facts. But an even more fundamental difficulty faces us: What are the facts? To determine them is the very object of scientific investigation, and if that were but the beginning or first stage of science, the other stages might be dispensed with.¹

To determine the facts scientifically, insists Cohen, is "a long and baffling enterprise, not only because the facts are so often inaccessible, but because what we ordinarily take for fact is so often full of illusion."² This problem of getting rid of illusion in order to see what truly goes on in nature "requires persistent and arduous reasoning."³

To appeal to the merely "obvious" facts of experience places one in the negative and restricted position

1. Cohen, RAN, 77.

2. Ibid., 78.

3. Ibid.

of abandoning the search for other significant and relevant facts which wait for observation, clarification, and validation in the constructive enterprise of human existence. For example, a more reasonable approach to sociological and psychological "facts" will lead one to admit that there are possibilities and resources yet untapped in human nature and social interaction. As a conspicuous example of this creative work that is being done in the area of human personality we note the investigations being made by Gordon Allport of Harvard University.

Allport is seeking to demonstrate that socialization "is not simply a varnish laid over personality," but it involves in a very real sense "a genuine transmutation of interests from the egoistic to the altruistic."¹ There is no question for Allport but that all persons enter the world self-centered and uncivilized.

The biological creature that we find in early childhood possesses no instincts, habits nor sentiments that are in the remotest degree socialized or civilized. Egoism is the incontrovertible philosophy of childhood. But in the process of growth and extension of interests, newly adopted codes and manners represent genuine, not superficial, alterations in personality.²

While men like Niebuhr appeal to a psychology of

1. Allport, PER, 169.

2. Ibid.

interests and instincts, Allport questions the fixed and static role of human drives that this theory implies.

No instinct can retain its motivational force unimpaired after it has been absorbed and recast under the transforming influence of learning.¹

Thus a psychology based upon inevitable selfishness, even into adulthood, leaves no room for the construction of a mature personality. As George A. Coe rightly insists:

Niebuhr ignores experiments made repeatedly in recent years with respect to modifications, even in adult life, of social prejudice and social inertia.²

In a sense, one might say that Niebuhr appeals to a "child" psychology. He deals with the phenomena of childhood, and does not apply his energies to the more imperative task of validating a mature approach to personality, such as Allport and others like him are seeking to formulate.

Niebuhr's approach hardly does justice to man's dignity and inner capacities. When discussing the role and limitations of human reason, Niebuhr usually argues that "intelligence is always corrupted by interest."³ On many instances he flatly denounces those who hold that "the historical resources exist to solve our individual and social problems."⁴ What reason is given? In Niebuhr's words:

1. Allport, *Ibid.*, 169.
 2. Coe, *Art.*(1933).
 3. Niebuhr, *Art.*(1944).²
 4. *Ibid.*

The human imagination, particularly the imagination of collective man, is so limited and the moral inertia and complacency so great that even the greatest tragedies of history do not quite shatter it.¹

If Allport is able to demonstrate conclusively that the work of intelligence and the advancement of learning are able to bring about a genuine transformation in man's egoistic tendencies, and there is every reason to believe that he can, then Niebuhr's position will have to be abandoned, modified, or continued in an obsolete and irrational form. A more sympathetic view of the normative sciences and those among the descriptive sciences friendly to valuations would make this impasse unnecessary.

Rational moralists usually affirm the possibility of validating universally concrete moral principles that will shed light on particular problems of choice. Even Niebuhr will not deny that the reason of man "can provide principles of criticisms and norms."² In his words:

We ought to continue to strive for political and moral perspectives in our education. We will always need as much moral transcendence over interest and rational perspectives upon conflicting passions as it is possible to secure.³

But let us take a closer look at the restrictions Niebuhr places upon the possibility of securing rational

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2. Niebuhr, ICE, 200.
3. Niebuhr, Art. (1944), S.

perspectives in the moral realm. Norms are declared impotent in themselves because they "contain no dynamic for their realization."¹ The only valid norm for ethics, absolute love, is an "impossible possibility."² And even this absolute principle cannot be fully known or validated by the rational processes, but must be "taken for granted."³ The political and economic problems of society are not to be evaluated by human moral principles or ethical considerations: their only criticism is by a "transcendent judgment" upon all human actions.⁴ Since the one true standard of ethics is beyond history or rational formulation, all human standards automatically become "second-bests" and "relative," and always an inevitable compromise of the ideal.

All human moral ideals are allegedly involved in "hypocrisy." Human reason is no basis for certainty in postulating ethical ideals and principles, insists Niebuhr, for morality "is more than reason," and the moral law "cannot be obeyed simply by being known."⁵ Thus runs the argument against a rational morality and the theory of objectivity in moral values. What is left but an affirmation of ethical relativism? Let us see further.

Niebuhr claims that all human virtues and values

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1. Niebuhr, ICE, 206.
 2. Ibid.
 3. Ibid., 39.
 4. Ibid., 140.
 5. Ibid., 75.

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Niebuhr claims that all human virtues and values

1. Niebuhr, *ICC*, 266.
 2. *Ibid.*
 3. *Ibid.*, 28.
 4. *Ibid.*, 140.
 5. *Ibid.*, 78.

are fleeting and "of short-ranged efficacy."¹ There are no guarantees, we are informed, that any human achievements will last from one day to the next.² The inference is that neither Christian character nor any of the so-called principles and norms of human morality have any lasting, valid, or imperative qualities about them for life. There is also a subtle suggestion here that all human values, in contradistinction to the absolute or "wholly other" character of the postulated transcendental values, are to be regarded as subjective in nature.

As Dr. Brightman insists, in answer to assertions similar to the foregoing ones, to rely on divine revelation of unique moral and religious values in order to impart an absolute quality to the whole of experience, is to pay the high price of either "extreme subjectivism or objective irrationalism." The net result is an immunity to "all known or conceivable truth or value."³

There are logical and psychological grounds for holding that Niebuhr's lack of appreciation for objective moral values is untenable. In the first place, it is difficult to conceive how one can speak of "morality" at all without at the same time placing some reliance upon

1. Niebuhr, Art.(1945).¹

2. Ibid.

3. Brightman, POR, 110.

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 2. *Ibid.*
 3. Brighman, *FOR*, 110.

the stability and imperative nature of certain moral values and duties that exist for all persons alike. It is no refutation of this insight to say that mankind as a whole has not demonstrated either the knowledge of or the ability to comply to these postulated universal moral principles. It is true that the application of these principles has proved to be a perplexing problem. As Pratt rightly says:

The application of ethical principles, no matter how sound, will never cease at times to be a difficult matter. For our human life is ever developing, changing, advancing, and increasing in complexity, so that new situations must be repeatedly met. The individual may be in the possession of a perfectly sound and demonstrable ethical principle, yet, until he is in possession also of a major portion of the facts relevant to his particular situation, it will be impossible for him to apply his principle with any great degree of certitude.¹

But this note of caution is a far cry from saying that principles are worthless, in the last analysis, simply because they are not practiced uniformly, or because they fall short of a completely adequate formulation as judged² by the absolute principle of perfect love. This difficulty of perceiving and applying moral principles is all the more reason for a greater trust in and dependence upon philosophical investigation and rational analyses of moral and

1. Pratt, RAL, 192.

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H. D. Lewis notes, in this connection, that to affirm distinctive ethical principles that are capable of application and that can serve as a helpful guide to conduct does not necessarily imply a clear grasp of all of the aspects and probable consequences of these ethical ideals.

It is the postulation of standards independent of ourselves that makes honest doubt and the fallibility of ethical judgments intelligible...The more we appreciate the objectivity of ethical truth the greater the care with which we shall examine our own ethical convictions and those of others in the hope of attaining the closest conformity to ultimate standards that is possible to us.¹

Though some theologians may go along with Lewis in the foregoing judgment, the crucial issue arises when these same theologians draw the conclusions that (1) because ethical standards are not dependent upon the reactions or opinions of man, therefore (2) they find their obligatory character and justification directly to their being imposed by the will of God. Does not this conclusion destroy the validity of moral autonomy that can alone impart a sense of duty to achieve higher moral values, as men like Kant, Sidgwick, Knudson, and Brightman have so

1. Lewis, MNT, 21.

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effectively demonstrated. Concerning moral autonomy, Brightman has well summarized the crucial importance of this concept in ethical theory.

As far as the moral life is concerned, autonomy is the last word. The moral laws are valid because they are a reasoned account of the nature and implications of moral experience, not because they are commanded by an eternal lawgiver or communicated on Mount Sinai. Moral laws are autonomous and independent of religion and of the existence of God so far as the obligatory nature of their principles are concerned.¹

In discussing the value of objective moral principles, Rashdall makes the following relevant remarks:

Analytical thought and philosophical language may be inadequate for the accurate expression of the delicate shades and gradations of circumstances upon which, in complicated cases, our moral judgments actually depend; but some approximation to this, some rough rules or principles of ethical judgment ought, one would think, to be capable of being elicited from a wide comparative survey of one's own and other people's actual judgments. If this is denied, moral instruction must be treated as absolutely impossible.²

Further, one may make any reservations he pleases as to the inadequacy of the moral rules, their want of definiteness, their inability to meet many problems of life, the necessity for exceptions and the like: yet it must be admitted, insists Rashdall, that

1. Brightman, ML, 268f.
2. Rashdall, TGE, I, 82.

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Further, one may make any reservations he pleases as to the indispensability of the moral rules, their want of definiteness, their inability to meet every problem of life, the necessity for exceptions and the like: yet it must be admitted, insists Rawls, that

if there is any one point about Morality as to which there is a consensus alike among all plain people and nearly all philosophers it is surely this--that general rules do exist.¹

What are some of these principles of morality that might rightly be conceived as having an "obligatory nature" upon all peoples? Dean Knudson has made an acute analysis of the moral nature in The Principles of Christian Ethics. He concludes that there are three fundamental elements in our moral nature that "are not wholly formal and that give a certain general content to the moral law."² These principles are: (1) the principle of good will; (2) the conception of a more or less binding human ideal; and (3) the recognition of the sacredness of personality.² We shall consider each of these briefly.³

The principle of good will, according to Dean Knudson, supplements "the bare obligation to do the right by defining the right in terms of the good or of well-being," and by adding to the sense of obligation "the will or disposition to do what is right or good."⁴ It thus

1. Rashdall, TGE, I, 83.

2. Knudson, PCE, 76.

3. While agreeing with Dean Knudson that these moral principles are valid, we question his a priori conception of man's moral nature. Moral principles may arise in the interaction between our moral nature and our environment; that is, they are products of human experience quite as much as any "givenness" in human nature.

4. Knudson, PCE, 76.

gives direction and content to the moral nature.

It imposes upon us the duty of a right motive and a right goal. Both are involved in the good will. The will is good only in so far as it wills the good, and the good is morally good only in so far as it is willed by a good will.¹

Thus the good will, in the subjective sense of the term, is, as Kant rightly pointed out, the only thing in the world "which can be termed absolutely and altogether good."² But, insists Dean Knudson, to be good "the will must have a good object; it must seek to produce well-being."³

Since the principle of good will in the moral life usually refers to the well-being of others rather than of one's self, it is regarded as a social principle. It has to do with the interaction of moral beings. And, as Dean Knudson rightly say, it "is the deepest and only universal law."⁴

It holds for all moral beings, human and divine, in so far as they stand in a free personal relation to each other and are capable of mutual influence, and in so far as the sacredness of the moral personality is recognized.⁴

The principle of good will, Dean Knudson argues, "stands in its own right."⁶ It needs no other support

1. Knudson, *Ibid.*, 76.

2. Kant, *MOE*, 3; cited in Knudson, *PCE*, 76.

3. Knudson, *Ibid.*, 76.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*

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- 1. Knudson, *Ibid.*, 78.
 - 2. Kant, *MOR.*, §: cited in Knudson, *loc. cit.*, 78.
 - 3. Knudson, *Ibid.*, 78.
 - 4. *Ibid.*
 - 5. *Ibid.*
 - 6. *Ibid.*

than of man's own native moral insight.

Every normal human being recognizes its validity. Good will is the relation which should exist among all personal beings, and is so far as it does so it serves a function in the moral realm similar to that of the law of gravitation in the physical world. It binds all moral beings together.¹

At this point Dean Knudson considers the conception of Christian love (agape). He holds that in the native principle of good will "there is a manifest basis for the Christian law of life."² Rather than holding to a radical distinction between agape and natural ethics, as do Barth, Brunner, Nygren and Niebuhr, Dean Knudson prefers the view that in its essential nature agape must be "regarded as rooted in the ethical structure of the human mind."³ The principle of Christian love, it is true, has "an explicit religious and metaphysical background that differentiates it from ordinary good will," but the idea of agape itself

is inherent in the normal interaction of moral beings, and what we have in Christian teaching is simply a religiously intensified, purified, and expanded expression or application of it.⁴

Thus in this fundamental sense the good will of natural ethics and Christian love are mutually complementary.

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2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

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The difference, contends Dean Knudson, "is one of degree, not of kind."¹

But love and good will cannot be properly identified with mere good nature. So Dean Knudson finds that the good, toward which the good will is directed, is "a moral as well as a natural good."² That is, it includes character as an essential element. Thus we arrive at the second valid principle of a universal ethics: the conception of a more or less binding human ideal. In Dean Knudson's words:

No good is truly good that is not consistent with inner worth and dignity. In other words, there is in man a moral ideal, an ideal of humanity, which conditions the application of the principle of good will.³

It is important to note that this ideal of human character is not to be derived from a consideration of consequences alone. It is inherent, Dean Knudson argues, in the moral nature itself and "may be regarded as even more basal than the law of love."⁴ This is because the law of love may be said to be implied or included in the moral ideal.⁵

Dean Knudson further insists that love and perfection cannot be identified. There is a certain moral uniqueness in each.

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eliminated. Both stand in their own right, and both are fundamental factors in Christian morality.¹

The obligation to moral perfection is not only assumed throughout the New Testament, according to Knudson, but it is also inherent in the moral law itself. Our moral nature "requires us to do the right and to avoid the wrong."² The idea of perfection, as presented in the New Testament, is grounded in the nature of God, rather than in the nature of moral law as such.

God is perfect, and because of this fact we ought to be such. He is also love, and because of this fact we ought to be loving both in thought and deed. God is thus the norm and ground of moral excellence, and he is also its inspiring source...Kinship to God is the true goal of conduct, and he this fact is to be found the basis of perfectionism. In order to be like God and to have fellowship with him we must share in his perfection.³

The third principle that gives general content to the moral law is, Dean Knudson contends, the idea of the sacredness of personality. Here Kant's dictum becomes of utmost importance in the ethical realm: "So act as to treat humanity, whether in thine own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end withal, never as means only."⁴ Both the teaching of reason and revelation point in this direction. This principle is implied in the principle of

1. Knudson, PCE, 138.

2. Ibid., 139.

3. Ibid.

4. Kant, Werke, IV, 429; cited in Tsanoff, MIOC, 332.

eliminated. Both stand in their own right and both are fundamental factors in Christian morality.

The obligation to moral perfection is not only assumed throughout the New Testament, according to Kantian, but it is also inherent in the moral law itself. Our moral nature requires us to do the right and to avoid the wrong. The idea of perfection, as presented in the New Testament, is grounded in the nature of God, rather than in the nature of moral law as such.

God is perfect, and because of this fact we ought to be such. He is also love, and because of this fact we ought to be loving both in thought and deed. God is thus the source and ground of moral excellence, and he is also the inspiring source... Kinship to God is the true goal of conduct, and he is the basis of perfection. In order to be like God and to have fellowship with him we must share in his perfection.

The third principle that gives general content to the moral law is, then, Kantian content, the idea of the sacredness of personality. Here Kant's dictum becomes of utmost importance in the ethical realm: "So act as to treat humanity, whether in thine own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end withal, never as means only." Both the teaching of reason and revelation point in this direction. This principle is implied in the principle of

1. Kantian, FCE, 138.
2. Ibid., 138.
3. Ibid., 138.
4. Kant, Works, IV, 430; cited in Tennant, WOC, 332.

love. As Dean Knudson puts it:

We owe good will to others, and the obligation is absolute because they are beings of intrinsic and infinite worth. We have no right to use them as mere instruments of our own pleasure...This idea lies at the root of the whole moral life, and without it neither the law of love nor the ideal of human perfection would be invested with the absolute obligation that we ascribe to them.¹

These three material elements in man's moral nature, as formulated by Knudson and which elements we have summarized in the foregoing discussion, correspond in a general way to the three "personalistic laws" in Brightman's system of moral laws: "the law of altruism," "the law of the ideal of personality," and "the law of individualism."²

Both Brightman and Dean Knudson would agree with Niebuhr that man cannot create the moral laws out of his own imagination. But they would go beyond Niebuhr's restricted viewpoint by saying that even God himself must be subject to the requirements of moral law, for otherwise we could not trust him as a morally responsible personality: he would then become unworthy of our worship. Moreover, Brightman insists that a substantial basis for religion itself lies in ethics. In his words:

1. Knudson, *Ibid.*, 79.

2. See Brightman, *ML*, *passim*.

For civilized and reflective man religion has the distinctive meaning of the worship of a divine power that is believed to be good. Now, it is impossible to regard any being as good, unless one has some conception of what "good" is; and that conception is one's ethics. Moreover, it is unreasonable to believe in the existence of a good God unless experience offers evidence of goodness; and the evidence of goodness is found largely in moral conduct.¹

Thus ethics may be viewed "as logically prior to religion."²

Religion cannot be true "unless ethics is true, but ethics might be true and religion false."³ Our highest ideals would lose their validity and worth if we were not to trust the autonomy of moral law.

This principle of moral autonomy neither asserts nor denies God's existence for Brightman. In a similar vein, Lewis would affirm the basic conception we are here discussing--that ethical truths are independently valid.

Although ethical truths require no direct support from religion, except in so far as we have some specifically religious duties like acts of worship in mind, there can be no adequate presentation of religious principles that does not make a very fundamental use of ethical objectivity.⁴

Lewis does not imply that "the existence of God can be known as an immediate postulate of the moral law," although that "is in a way ruled out by our insistence

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1. Brightman, ML, 265.
 2. Ibid.
 3. Ibid.
 4. Lewis, MNT, 26.

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1. Brightman, *W.*, 238.
 2. *Ibid.*
 3. *Ibid.*
 4. Lewis, *W.*, 28.

that ethical truth is independent of religion."¹

Niebuhr's criticism of moral norms and principles thus constructed on the basis of the principle of the autonomy of moral laws and the autonomy of the human moral will is that these norms and principles "contain no basis for their realization." There is no means provided to "create moral conduct."² The emotional supports of moral action are thus "suppressed unduly."³

How these can in any way be relevant criticisms is difficult to conceive. Is not man's reason, as well as his "impulses," "emotions," and "social instincts" God-given attributes of the personality with specific functions to perform? Is it justifiable, as the logic of Niebuhr's position appears to lead, to suppress reason unduly in preference to the other attributes? Reason does not furnish its own dynamic, it is true. But the crucial issue lies in the choice and direction of moral values to which these other functions of the personality lend the "dynamic." Since moral experience is so complex, it is all the more reason for supplying a larger place for the role of reason in determining conduct. As Cohen rightly observes:

Neither authority nor experience, neither intuition nor imagination, can be ruled out

1. Lewis, *Ibid.*, 26.
2. Niebuhr, *ICE*, 206.
3. *Ibid.*

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Wideman's criticism of moral norms and principles

thus constructed on the basis of the principle of the autonomy of moral laws and the autonomy of the human mind will be that these norms and principles "contain no basis for their realization." There is no means provided to "create moral conduct." The emotional supports of moral action are thus "suppressed entirely."

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I. Lewis, 1914, 20.
S. Wideman, 1914, 208.
S. 1914.

in favor of pure reason (if the latter be identified with logical inference). All of these play significant roles in our effort to apprehend the nature of things; but their fruitfulness depends...upon the extent to which they submit to the rule of reason...Always we need a rational apprehension of the significant things in their relations or intelligible contexts.¹

In his concern to maintain the vigor of the moral life, Niebuhr would appear to hold that reason functions in contrast or even in opposition to "morality." This seems to be the implication in the following passage:

Reason insists on a coherent world because it is its nature to relate all things to each other in one system of consistency and coherence. Morality, on the other hand, maintains its vigor if the conflict between good and evil is recognized as real and significant.²

That this construction represents a misunderstanding of the function of reason and the criterion of coherence in moral philosophy can be readily demonstrated.

For one thing, what is to determine if the conflict between good and evil, on Niebuhr's terms, is "real and significant" if it is not the reason of man acting upon the factors of moral experience? What else can "recognize" the existence of a conflict of values but the intellect itself? Why oppose reason with the use of reason? Or why insist that reason and passion are forever at war

1. Cohen, RAN, 25.

2. Niebuhr, ICE, 75.

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J. Cohen, RAM, 23.
S. Niebuhr, ICE, 78.

because of conflicting interests? Dr. DeWolf understands a better solution.

Is it not better to work for such complete integration of reason and passion within that the full powers of the soul may be brought to bear on the evils of a sinful world?¹

And if it is "tension" in life that Niebuhr would preserve by this arbitrary separation of reason and morality, is it not true that one can find sufficient tension between the ideal and the present stage of its actualization without destroying the only valid means of seeking and knowing the ideals to be realized? Again we quote DeWolf:

What is needed...is neither tension per se nor freedom from tension, but an earnest desire to know and do the will of God. If a person genuinely seeks first the Kingdom of God, he will find plenty of tension between himself and the world to demand the² most valiant faith and passionate devotion.

It is true that in a certain sense the existence of tension is as basic for morality as for religion. As the Kingdom of God is "yet coming," so there will always be moral ideals to be perceived, clarified, understood, and realized. But this conception of tension will not separate ideals from reality, reason from impulse, and divine truth from moral truth as is the logic of Niebuhr's

1. De Wolf, RAR, 121.

2. Ibid., 121f.

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position.

The criterion of coherence as applied to moral life does not imply that a reasonable way to discover and test truth is the same thing as applying that truth in concrete situations. There is no claim here, for example, that "to know the moral law is to obey it,"¹ as Niebuhr understands the moral "rationalists." Rather, the criterion of coherence is to be regarded as a useful tool in finding and validating the moral norms and principles that may be deemed worthy of highest allegiance. As Dr. DeWolf rightly says:

It may be freely admitted that concepts and moral laws, in themselves, have no power to save. But they are highly useful as the schoolmaster introducing us into the very presence of Him who can save.²

Paraphrasing this terminology to apply to the criterion of coherence, we can say that it is a "useful schoolmaster introducing us to a more ordered and consistent account of moral experience."

It is pertinent to inquire what the function of a science is if it is not to seek for harmonious and consistent standards of right conduct? As Cohen has observed:

1. Niebuhr, ICE, 220.
2. De Wolf, RAR, 125.

Ethics cannot be restricted to a natural history of what men actually do or even to a psychologic study of what in fact they believe they ought to do. An adequate science of ethics must, of course, include a good deal of such material. But it must not forget that it is a normative science; i.e., that it is a logical study of the validity of judgments of right and wrong, good and evil, implied in our expressed or tacit choices.¹

Thus the primary interest of ethics, if it is to be genuinely scientific and hence reasonable, must be with "the extent to which these judgments can be harmonized into a rational system."² To this end the criterion of coherence is a valid and useful instrument.

Dr. Brightman, a major exponent of the concept of coherence as a test of moral and religious truth, defines the concept thus: A proposition is to be treated as true if (1) it is self-consistent, (2) it is consistent with all other propositions held as true by the mind that is applying this criterion, (4) it establishes explanatory and interpretative relations between various parts of experience, (5) these relations include all known aspects of experience and all known problems about experience in its details and as a whole.³

Brightman insists that this conception is not

1. Cohen, RAN, 438f.

2. Ibid.

3. Brightman, POR, 128.

"mere consistency." Consistency means absence of contradiction; coherence, on the other hand, requires "the presence of the empirical relations mentioned under points (4) and (5)."¹ Thus consistency "is necessary to coherence, but consistency is not sufficient."²

Two important considerations are added by Dr. Brightman to the foregoing definition of coherence. They are: (1) since coherence requires a reference to the whole of experience, some hypothesis about the nature of the whole is essential to the working of this criterion; and (2) since experience and science are constantly growing, the application of coherence cannot arrive at fixed and static results.³ Coherence is "a principle of constant reorganization, a law of criticism and growth, rather than a closed system."⁴

Niebuhr has been a contentious critic of coherence in religion and ethics because it allegedly leaves no grounds for commitment to the highest truths in life; in fact, he sees in this criterion the impossibility of knowing truth at all, for as Brightman explicitly states, "the criterion of coherence implies that no

1. Brightman, POR, 128.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., 129.

truth can be completely tested or proved until all truth is known."¹ And since final truth is known to God alone, then the truth necessary for a vital religion or morality is ruled out. What is overlooked by Niebuhr and others like him is the purpose of this methodology.

The principle of coherence does not indicate that no truth can be known, or that every present insight into moral and religious values is erroneous because inadequate in its present form as measured by the whole of truth. What is actually involved in the coherence theory is that all of these insights that we do possess, as well as all the other factors that enter into knowledge, such as revelations, sense experiences, intuitions, etc., must come, in Brightman's words, "before the tribunal of the whole mind and its grasp of experience as a whole."² Otherwise, there could be no justification or verification for any proposed object of knowledge, and the best grounds for certainty in moral and religious beliefs would be forfeited for less coherent and hence irrational tests of truth.

Moreover, one must read further into Brightman's system before making rash judgments. His conception of "theoretical relativism and practical absolutism,"

1. Brightman, POR, 129.

2. Ibid.

suggested to him by Karl Groos, leaves the way open for a very real commitment to the highest truths available, and yet is a view that will make no dogmatic assertions that truth is a closed system requiring no further investigation or clarification.¹

The value and significance of the criterion of coherence in the matter of making concrete choices in the moral life is that it makes possible the progressive elimination of error and illusion in those choices that guide conduct. No methodology can possibly be an automatic and infallible indicator of right choices or the good to be experienced. But if it is the best possible safeguard against contradictory and self-defeating choices, then the criterion of coherence has established its own validation. Only the critical reason acting in the most coherent manner of which it is capable can do this. As Cohen rightly insists:

We must use the critical reason and technical safeguards and instruments of science to penetrate the fogs of natural illusion and see more truly what exists; when such existents are more definitely located and examined it is always by means of abstract traits or universal connections. Nevertheless, it is not exhausted by any number of these universals, and to this extent it constitutes an unattainable limit of analysis.²

W. E. Hocking, in making a defense of reason in

1. Brightman, POR, 130f.

2. Cohen, RAN, 135.

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W. E. Hocking, in making a defense of reason in

1. Brighman, *PR*, 130f.
2. Cohen, *MA*, 135.

religious experience, would also appear to indicate that a coherent interpretation of all experience, moral as well as religious, is necessary if we are to verify our beliefs and make ideals accessible and realizable. In his words:

And what is matter of experience must also become, in time, matter of reason; for reason is but the process of finding, by some secure path of connection, a given experience from the standpoint of other experience assumed as better known...Such proof, or mental direction, is called for, not because the religious objects are inaccessible to experience, but rather because they are accessible; and being found in experience, it is necessary to establish¹ their systematic relations with the rest.

Thus without the rational application of the principle of coherence in the moral life there can be no justification or verification of any of our moral or religious values; the existence of God could not be established as veritable truth; and all moral ideals would be reduced to ethically relative concepts simply because they could not be established as universally valid and binding upon all rational persons.

We have not yet indicated a definition of reason, though the function and proper role of reason in morality and religion have been discussed at some length. Our conception of the role of reason in morality has been

1. Hocking, MGHE, 135.

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shown to differ in certain fundamental respects with the position taken by Reinhold Niebuhr. Rather than holding to a distrustful attitude toward reason in order to make possible a defense of the sovereignty of God,¹ we have attempted to accept, in all humility but with emphatic conviction, that man's rational capacity is a "gift of God" and as such contains an imperative demand to use it in whatever fashion best meets the purposes for which it was created. Not to use reason in this fashion is to abuse it--an immoral and irreligious conclusion in our view.

Our definition of reason has been that of Dr. Brightman in Nature and Values. The superiority of this definition over other definitions lies in its inclusiveness; yet, it is sufficiently specific in its details to be a practical and helpful tool in approaching and and all problems that arise in moral experience. Brightman suggests that this definition of reason is one of "an ideal of completely coherent thinking and living, never fully realized, never merely static, yet always imperative in its claims." It is "the supreme court of the mind."² It consists of the following norms:

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1. See Ramsdell, Art.(1943), for a cogent presentation of this criticism of Niebuhr.
 2. Brightman, NAV, 106.

Be consistent (eliminate all contradictions).

Be systematic (discover all relevant relations).

Be analytic (consider all the elements of which every complex consists).

Be synoptic (relate all the elements of any whole to its properties as a whole).

Be active (use experimental method).

Be open to alternatives (consider many possible hypotheses).

Be critical (test and verify or falsify hypotheses).

Be decisive (be committed to the best available hypothesis).¹

To follow these norms of reason postulated by Brightman is admittedly an arduous task. Predicament and frustration will occur at times when one appeals to this formula as a guide to reasonable living. But what is the alternative but greater disillusionment and frustration? If one appeals to reason he must at the same time appeal to systematic thought, for the two are one. If this is not the case, then we have the situation described by Cohen.

The popular distrust of reasoning is due to the fact that unless our reasoning is scientifically systematic or logically rigorous, we can introduce all sorts of contradictory propositions in the course of a long argument and can then seem to prove anything while actually proving nothing.²

1. Brightman, NAV, 107.

2. Cohen, RAN, 110.

Be consistent (eliminate all contradictions)
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 Be analytic (consider all the elements of which every complex consists)
 Be synthetic (relate all the elements of any whole to its properties as a whole)
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1. Brightman, *NAV*, 107.
 2. Cohen, *RAM*, 120.

And, as Brightman rightly insists, "if one does not appeal to reason he cannot be reasoned with."¹

Moreover, there is an imperative need for modern civilization to place a greater reliance upon reason in solving its problems. There is more than a theoretical or academic interest involved here. The situation becomes even more critical when intellectual and religious leaders succumb to the dominant trend that Cohen perceived when he wrote his Reason and Nature.

Despite the frequent assertion that ours is an age of science, we are witnessing today a remarkably widespread decline of the prestige of intellect and reason...There can be little doubt that this distrust of reason has its roots deep in the dominant temper of our age, an age whose feverish restlessness makes it impatiently out of tune with the slow rhythm of deliberate order.²

Cohen notes a "greater value to novel impression and vehement expression than to coherency and order" in our contemporary civilization.³

There can be little doubt that this total situation, if not radically redirected by a more reasonable approach to the perplexing social, political, moral, and religious problems of our day, may well serve as a major

1. Brightman, NAV, 107.

2. Cohen, RAN, 3.

3. Ibid.

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1. R. B. Braithwaite, *RAV*, 107.
 2. Cohen, *RAV*, 3.
 3. *Ibid.*

causal factor in any future catastrophe that might befall civilization. If the morality of men and nations is to be conceived as voluntary and responsible choice in matters of concrete action, as is our position in this dissertation, then the responsibility lies heavily upon those who might have known a wiser way had they said "yes" to the light of God-given reason. Those who refuse this solution can not validate their position by resorting to what Lewis has termed "a reversal to the mystery-mongering, the cults and priesthoods, of primitive religion."¹ The results of a similar type of faith are evident in modern life. As Cohen rightly observes:

Is it far-fetched to correlate the distrust of intellectual procedure (and consequent revival of all sorts of ancient superstitions) with the growing bigotry, intolerance, and remarkable resurgence of faith in violence?²

As a final word in this discussion of reason in ethics, we include a statement by Cohen which rather sums up the position we have tried to indicate. It makes no claims to the infallibility of the human mind. Its humble and yet appreciative recognition of the role of reason in science and morality and religion can in no way be interpreted as an indication of "the idolatrous pride of

1. Lewis, MNT, 73.
2. Cohen, RAN, 4.

reason." Cohen states:

Rationalism does not deny that clear thoughts may begin as vague or obscure premonitions. But the essential difference between rationalism and obscurantism depends upon whether our guesses or obscure visions do or do not submit to the processes of critical examination and logical clarification. Our reason may be a pitiful candle light in the dark and boundless sea of being. But we have nothing better and woe to those who wilfully try to put it out.¹

Cohen, *Ibid.*, 155.

¹ This does not necessarily represent Cohen's view. See Cohen, *Ibid.*, 15, where he says that a "realistic intellect baffled by forces within the world"

CHAPTER IV

EVIDENCE OF ETHICAL RELATIVISM

IN NIEBUHR'S VIEW OF MAN'S PLACE IN THE UNIVERSE

1. Niebuhr's View of Man

The psalmist expressed a valid and universal concern when he sang: "When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou has ordained; What is man, that thou art mindful of him; and the son of man, that thou visitest him?"¹ The way this question is answered is of supreme import in morality and religion alike, as we shall try to show in this chapter. Is man really but "a little lower than the angels" and crowned "with glory and honour" as the psalmist claimed? Or is he, rather, a "little animal living a precarious existence on a second-rate planet, attached to a second-rate sun," to use Niebuhr's words.²

Niebuhr opens his study The Nature and Destiny of Man with the observation that "every affirmation which man can make about his stature, virtue, or place in the cosmos becomes involved in contradictions when fully analysed."³

1. Psalm 8:4.

2. Niebuhr, NDM, I, 3. This does not necessarily represent Niebuhr's view of man. But see Niebuhr, BT, 98, where he sees man as a "frail little insect buffeted by forces vaster than he."

The analysis reveals "some presupposition or implication which seems to deny what the proposition intended to affirm."¹ For example, if man believes himself to be essentially good, or that human life has unique value, he has involved himself in contradictions, for these very assertions prove that man's essential nature enables him to transcend his own human nature and even the reason which first postulated these beliefs about life.

Especially is man subject to antinomies in his thought, we are informed, when he contemplates his place in the universe. At times, man pretends "to occupy the centre of the universe."² This is reflected in philosophies and theocentric religions with "anthropocentric tendencies" and ideas that "the Creator of the world is interested in saving man from his unique predicament."³ But at other times man is driven to moderate these optimistic pretensions by a more sober view, and to gain a vantage point where he can judge "his insignificance."⁴

Niebuhr finds two facts about man and his place in the cosmos--one obvious, the other not so obvious. These are: (1) man is a child of nature, subject to its vicissitudes, compelled by its necessities, driven by its

1. Niebuhr, NDM, I, 3.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

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1. Niebuhr, *RM*, I, 2.
 2. *Ibid.*
 3. *Ibid.*
 4. *Ibid.*

impulses, and confined within the brevity of the years which nature permits its varied organic forms, allowing them some, but not too much, latitude; and (2) man is a spirit who stands outside of nature, life, himself, his reason and the world.¹ It is precisely the less obvious fact of the second category which Niebuhr finds the rationalists and philosophers to have misunderstood. They have overlooked man's "relation to nature" and thus "identify him, prematurely and unqualifiedly, with the divine and the eternal."²

After analyzing the weaknesses in the classical³ and modern views of man, Niebuhr then presents his interpretation of "the Christian view of man." This includes a listing of the following characteristics of man as he is understood in regard to his relationship to God, to the cosmos, and to nature: (1) he is a creature of God; (2) man is a created and finite existence in both body and spirit (an ultra-rational presupposition which is immediately endangered when rationally explicated); (3) man is understood primarily from the standpoint of God, rather than the uniqueness of his rational faculties or his relation to nature; that is, man is made in the "image of God,"

1. Niebuhr, NDM, I, 4.

2. Ibid.

3. See Calhoun, Rev.(1942), for a criticism of Niebuhr's indiscriminate use of the word "classical."

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1. Niebuhr, *WDM*, I, 4.
 2. *Ibid.*
 3. See Calhoun, *Rev. (1922)*, for a criticism of Niebuhr's
 indeterminate use of the word "classical."

which means that "the self knows the world insofar as it is able to know the world, because it stands outside both itself and the world," and it cannot understand itself "except as it is understood from beyond itself and the world."¹

Thus if man would understand himself and find his true place in the universe, he must first begin "with the faith that he is understood from beyond himself," that he is "known and loved of God," and must find himself "in terms of obedience to the divine will."²

This relation of the divine to the human will makes it possible for man to relate himself to God without pretending to be God; and to accept his distance from God as a created thing, without believing that the evil of his nature is caused by his finiteness.³

As a last characteristic of the Christian view of man, Niebuhr states the crucial fact of sin which causes man "to survey the whole to imagine himself the whole."⁴ This sin in man is the great "contradiction," both from the standpoint of man's essential nature and his earthly vocation. Man's sin is made particularly serious by the fact that "it lies at the very centre of

1. Niebuhr, NDM, I, 14.

2. Ibid., 15.

3. Ibid. Italics mine.

4. Ibid., 17.

human personality: in the will."¹ Sin is occasioned, we are told, by the fact that "man refuses to admit his creatureliness and to acknowledge himself as merely a member of a total unity of life."² He thus "pretends to be more than he is."³ Man contradicts himself in every instance. What is this contradiction?

Man is not divided against himself so that the essential man can be extricated from the nonessential. Man contradicts himself within the terms of his true essence. His essence is self-determination. His sin is the wrong use of his freedom and its consequent destruction.⁴

True Christianity, insists Niebuhr, views man as caught in insecurity, frustration, and with "an uneasy conscience."⁵ Man has freedom to use the forces and processes of nature creatively; but his failure to observe the limits of his finite existence "causes him to defy the forms and restraints of both nature and reason."⁶ And man's self-consciousness "is a tower looking upon a large and inclusive world."⁷ The trouble is that man vainly imagines that "it is the large world which he beholds" and not "a narrow tower insecurely erected amidst the shifting sands of the world."⁸

1. Niebuhr, NDM, I, 16.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid., 18.

6. Ibid., 17.

7. Ibid., 17.

8. Ibid.

As a consequence of these insights into God, man, and the cosmos, Niebuhr is then led to assert that "the Christian view of human nature is involved in the paradox of claiming a higher stature for man and of taking a more serious view of his evil than other anthropology."¹

An examination of the factors involved in this "serious view of man's evil" reveals the following judgments regarding man's vocation in the universe.

In the first place, Niebuhr feels that the self will ever remain a dependent, finite entity, inevitably involved in "the relativities and contingencies of nature and history."² There is and will ever be corruption of human life on every level of goodness.³ The self cannot do the good it intends, and is "always betrayed into self-love."⁴

As to God, he stands "over against man and nation and must be experienced as an 'enemy' before he can be known as a friend."⁵

Human purposes, insofar as they usurp the divine prerogatives, must be broken and redirected before there can be a concurrence between the divine and the human will.⁶

As to man, he cannot be trusted, for "there is no human

1. Niebuhr, NDM, I, 18.

2. Ibid., 170.

3. Niebuhr, NDM, II, 104.

4. Ibid., 108.

5. Niebuhr, FAH, 103.

6. Ibid.

vitality which is not subject to decay and no human virtue which is not subject to corruption."¹

Further, this "serious" view of evil finds sin arising when man seeks to establish security, either in the brutal facts of human existence or in human formulations of an ultimate faith.² Before God's holiness all of man's attempts at righteousness become as "filthy rags."³ God's thoughts will ever remain veiled, and his ways are not our ways.⁴ Man can never be perfect enough to save his collective enterprises from periodic catastrophes.⁵ The power of human pride is so great, and man so blinded by illusions, that only historical tragedies can destroy the force or source of meaning which man has trusted.⁶

Moreover, while creation must be regarded as "good" and God as both "redeemer and creator," yet man cannot find the grace of God nor know the meaning of life until he is first "crucified," that is, until his self-love is destroyed or "shattered." Why is this so?

The best antidote for the bitterness of a disillusioned trust in man is disillusionment in the self. This is the disillusionment of true repentance.⁷

1. Niebuhr, BT, 130f.

2. Ibid., 98.

3. Ibid., 56.

4. Ibid., 10.

5. Ibid., 45.

6. Ibid., 116.

7. Ibid., 132.

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1.	Wieder, W., 1907.
2.	Idid., 99.
3.	Idid., 28.
4.	Idid., 10.
5.	Idid., 42.
6.	Idid., 112.
7.	Idid., 122.

Repentance does not accuse life or God but accuses self. In self-accusation lies the beginning of hope and salvation. If the defect lies in us and not in the character of life, life is not hopeless. If we can only weep for ourselves as men we need not weep for ourselves as man.¹

All this is because man has "a capacity to be like God," but at the same time the corruption in his nature "renders him unworthy of God."²

For Niebuhr, the final problem of history becomes the fact that "before God no man living is justified."³ There is no solution of this final problem this side of the divine mercy. This divine mercy operates, not in history, but at the edge of history.⁴ Every individual "is a Moses who perishes outside the promised land."⁵ Because of this community life becomes "the frustration as well as the realization of individual life."⁶ The result is that there can be no real moral progress in man's social, political, and religious life: for good can never triumph over evil in mundane existence, due to the limitations of human nature--though there may be a parallel development of good and evil throughout history.⁷

As a matter of fact, insists Niebuhr, when man

1. Niebuhr, BT, 169.

2. Ibid., 211.

3. Niebuhr, NDM, II, 292.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid., 308.

6. Ibid., 310.

7. Niebuhr, REE, 87.

seriously contemplates his existence he is met by two sobering facts. These are, in his words:

Human history must remain a perpetual conflict between conscience and nature; and the forces of nature are so powerful that complete devotion to the ethical principle would lead to annihilation in any immediate instant.¹

And since it is impossible to act in the world of nature and history in terms of pure spirit, then the problems of grace, judgment, and redemption become crucial ones, for "logically every life deserves destruction."² That is, since life is predatory either individually or collectively, it "ought to die at the hands of those it has exploited."³ Thus man must look for ultimate hope and security, not in his own achievements or in anything in his historical existence, but in a resource of mercy beyond God's judgment-- a mercy that operates outside, beyond, and at the "edge" of history.

In our view, this total interpretation of man's place in the universe makes God a great deceiver. Logically, all forms of ethical relativism lead to this conclusion. When it is postulated that man's earthly vocation and his ethical ideals possess no eternal significance, as Niebuhr

1. Niebuhr, REE, 87.
2. Ibid., 285.
3. Ibid.

seems to hold in the discussions cited in the foregoing summary, then there is no basis for belief in God's goodness or in a purposeful order of nature and values. Not only this, but Niebuhr's thought represents a profound misunderstanding of what is meant by man's being made "in the image of God" in Christian doctrine. We will examine each of these criticisms at some length, for they contain important considerations in any search for a rational morality or a high religion.

In the first place, it is difficult to conceive how there can be either logos or agape (or reasonable love in Brightman's usage) in a view that finds the final proof of God's majesty and divinity in the fact that he confronts the nation and the individual at the limit of their own power and purpose, and that man must first become the enemy and judge of every human pretension.¹ Where is the ground for any religious assurance in God if we must understand that all life is involved in a contradiction of the will of God?² Or where is the incentive for moral action if man is to understand that he will be finally judged to be incapable of being a co-worker with God simply because of evidence of corruption in his nature?

1. See Niebuhr, FAH, 104.
2. See Niebuhr, Art.(1940).¹

This interpretation of God's will and man's nature is, according to Widgery, a way of making mockery of the total human enterprise. In his words:

The argument that we have no power to fulfil the divine commands implies that God orders us what is impossible for us to do and then condemns us for not doing it.¹

To argue, as Niebuhr does, that all human deeds are finally judged unworthy and hence worthless is to bring inconsistency into the concept of God's character, and can only serve to confuse practical man as he strives for meaning and creative expression in the universe. As Dean Knudson rightly insists:

To place all deeds, even the most virtuous, under the divine judgment is to assume a sub-ethical and sub-Christian conception of Deity. If God is a moral Being and not an irresponsible despot, He cannot condemn as sinful the genuine virtues and unavoidable imperfections of men. As Creator of the world and Father of mankind, He is the most deeply obligated Being in the universe, and cannot but look with love and approval upon all sincere efforts to do His will, as Jesus did upon the rich young ruler.²

To take a contrary view and say that God looks upon the highest and noblest endeavors of His children as sinful and deserving of condemnation instead of approval is, according to Dean Knudson, "artificial, a relic of an imperfectly moralized religiosity and a fertile source of pious

1. Widgery, CEML, 149.

2. Knudson, Rev.(1943).

hypocrisy."¹

It is one thing to recognize the permanent and universal need or the divine grace and a very different thing to ground this need in a submoral conception of human responsibility and of divine judgment.²

It is perfectly possible to construct a view of the world and man's vocation in time in such a fashion that meets the requirements of Christian realism and yet does not do violence to man's dignity or negate his positive function in the universe by making mere token concessions to the goodness of creation-- a view that points up the crucial distinctions between ethical relativity and ethical objectivity when approaching the problem of man's vocation in time. We will begin with the early Christian view of man's dignity and the attitude toward the "world."

2. The Attitude of Jesus and the Early Church Toward Man and the World

It is clear that Jesus entered into the conditions of human existence with positive appreciation. As Cadoux has observed:

Whatever view may be taken of the relative predominance of spiritual, as compared with

1. Knudson, Ibid.

2. Ibid.

material, interests in Jesus' idea of the Kingdom of God, or of the mode by which he expected the Kingdom to be established, there can be little doubt that he concerned himself very deeply with the conditions and methods of human life on earth.¹

It is true that Jesus did not center his attention upon mere externals, or agitate for specific social reforms, but at the same time inasmuch as his Gospel affected the convert's life in all its relationships, and as the scope of his appeal was universal, then his view of the Kingdom, in Cadoux's words, "necessarily involved the social regeneration of mankind."²

Cadoux makes an impressive presentation of data to indicate that Jesus was not otherworldly in the sense of depreciating the human aspects of the work of redemption in history. For examples, Jesus taught his disciples to pray that God's will might be done "on earth."³ The great bulk of his teaching was concerned with the duties of this life.⁴ The Kingdom of God, the reign of the Divine Will in and through men on earth, is a conception fundamentally social, and is a concept that casts light upon the principles underlying every social institution.⁵

1. Cadoux, ECW, 4.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

In Cadoux's words:

We can therefore be sure that in studying Jesus' teaching in its reference to, and bearing upon human society at large, that is to say, upon "the world"--the mass of mankind that lay beyond the limits of his own group of disciples--we shall not be straying away from what was for him a central line of interest, or busying ourselves with topics that he would have regarded as in any way irrelevant to his life-mission.¹

Ernst Troeltsch would appear to confirm this general position regarding the work of Jesus and man's place in the total redemptive enterprise. While the center of Jesus' message was the glory of God's final victory and the conquest of demons, yet we can foresee, Troeltsch contends, that as soon as

a message of this kind creates a permanent community a social order will inevitably arise out of this programme...The spirit of love, indeed, will be exercised in all kinds of conceivable circumstances, but as long as the command to love one another is not checked by the pressure of adverse conditions it feels impelled to obey the inward impulse to organize the life of its own community in obedience to the economic principles which this commandment contains.²

Thus there was clearly implicit in Jesus an imperative demand to make the will of God effective on every possible level of life.

1. Cadoux, *Ibid.*, 4.

2. Troeltsch, *STCC*, I, 62.

But Troeltsch says more than this. And here he would take sharp issue with Niebuhr in the assertion that meaning and fulfilment lie only at the edge and not in history in any meaningful sense. Troeltsch states:

The Kingdom of God means the rule of God upon earth, to be followed, later on, by the end of the world and judgment. These events, however, are so closely connected, and preparation for the coming Kingdom is also so vital for the final judgment, that nothing definite is taught about either the difference or the relationship between these two conceptions.¹

Jesus places his emphasis upon "preparation" for the coming of the Kingdom of God. This preparation, according to Troeltsch, is

so thorough that the community which is "looking out for the Kingdom of God" can already in anticipation be described as the "Kingdom of God."²

Further, Troeltsch finds that Jesus' fundamental moral demand is "the sanctification of the individual in all his moral activity for the sake of God."³ This purity of heart will alone enable man to "see God."

The moral commandments are conceived from the point of view of ordinary practice and general human interest, but they are illuminated by the fact that as they are obeyed with devotion and inner simplicity, all that is done takes place under the Eye of God... Thus the will is given to God in absolute

1. Troeltsch, STCC, I, 52.
 2. Ibid.
 3. Ibid.

obedience, in order that it may attain the real and true life, its real spiritual eternal value in the sight of God.¹

Upon this basis, would not one search in vain for evidence to prove that Jesus had any serious thought this his revelation of the life that God willed was impossible of realization even on the human level?

When Troeltsch discusses his view of the concrete and characteristic tendency of the Gospel ethic, he states that the unique factor in this ethic is that "the idea of God is set in the very centre of moral purpose."² This God is "a living and active Will" who allows co-operation in His work."³ The Gospel, insists Troeltsch, becomes extremely radical on the following point:

No doubt about the possibility of its practical realization is permitted; yet his austerity in no way destroys the innocent joy of life. The same applies to the question of relationship with other people; all moral achievements of this kind are regarded from the point of view of participation in the work of God, of the revelation within us of the true spirit of God Himself, which we have received from Him, and awakening of the sense of the true knowledge of God through the revelation of His Being in our own behaviour.⁴

Since God is active, creative Love, so men who are "consecrated to God ought to manifest their love to friend

1. Troeltsch, *Ibid.*, 52.

2. *Ibid.*, 53.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, 54.

and foe, to the good and to the bad, overcoming hostility and defiance by a generous love which will break down all barriers and waken love in return."¹

Whatever may be said about the distrust of the "world" and man's virtues, and the theological constructions of eschatology in the followers of Jesus--from St. Paul through Luther, Calvin, and Niebuhr--there can be little doubt that Jesus accepted the world and human nature as potential, if not actual, goods in the work of God's redemptive love. Max Otto, a naturalist, has truly perceived a truth in the Gospel accounts. In his words:

If one reads the Markian (sic) or earliest account of the movement which made its appeal to men under the slogan "The Good News," and reads it as one does the report of other social phenomena, one gets the unmistakable sense of the importance of the here and now. The whole story has the healthy smell of earth upon it.²

One wonders if there might not be a positive value in a posited imperfect world and a limited human capacity. Is it necessary for God to be an "enemy" of man and his natural environment in order to redeem them? Dr. Sorley rightly argues that

an imperfect world was required for the making of moral beings; they had to be tried in, and habituated to, all kinds of circumstances in

1. Troeltsch, *Ibid.*, 54.
2. Otto, *TAI*, 277.

order that they might grow into goodness.
The variety of natural and social conditions
offers a training ground for the good will.¹

Thus, insists Sorley, from an ethical point of view the very imperfection of man and the world is "an evidence of God's moral purpose for mankind."² This view does not, of course, exclude the possibility of an indefinite improvement of individuals and communities in the direction of perfection--a view Dr. Sorley includes in his moral theory. But it affirms that man's failures and inabilities deserve Divine approval and support rather than disapprobation, particularly when man attempts to implement valid moral ideals in social and political matters. As John Dewey rightly says in this connection:

God only knows how many of the sufferings of life are due to the belief that the natural scene and operations of our life are lacking in ideal import, and to the consequent tendency to flee for the lacking ideal factors to some other world inhabited exclusively by ideals.³

Certainly mundane existence must include ideal values if life is to have any intelligent meaning. For, as Dean Muelder has noted, "if His Will be never done on earth, we would not know or have faith that it is done in Heaven."⁴

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1. Sorley, MVIG, 110.
 2. Ibid.
 3. Cited in Otto, TAI, 288.
 4. Muelder, Art.(1945).

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Thus, instead of being an ethical point of view the
very intention of man and the world is "an evidence of
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- 1. Sorley, *W.M.*, 110.
 - 2. *Ibid.*
 - 3. *Ibid.*, 110, 111, 112.
 - 4. Wheeler, *Art.* (1942).

3. A Further Critique of Niebuhr's View

In our view, Niebuhr contributes to the widespread neglect and rejection of the fundamental principle of God's active and concrete relationship in the human enterprise. This is evidence of the moral relativism in Niebuhr. Failure to recognize the finality of moral values, as Widgery has truly argued, is the serious error in all views of the final relativity of all that is related to human beings, including ideal values.¹ This is precisely where the logic of Niebuhr's position leads, as we shall try to show.

Perhaps the difficulty is that Niebuhr begins with, or at least tends to overemphasize, one aspect of the "dialectic" to the point of obscuring and virtually negating the other side. That is, instead of beginning with the contradiction between God and man, Niebuhr should have begun with the divine overruling of that contradiction.

Niebuhr interprets the cross of Christ as the symbol of God's judgment and redemptive power. In his view, the cross is not only a symbol of the human rejection of divine love, but also is the sign of God's way of ruling out the apparent finality of human sin. But the total

1. Widgery, CEML, 149.

effect of this emphasis in Niebuhr's written and spoken word is to obscure and negate the meaning of the Holy Spirit in the work of redemption. In the words of Andrew Banning:

If the cross signifies primarily the human contradiction of God's love, the meaning of the incarnation, and even of creation, is obscured. For both imply that God can overcome the limitations of the finite and can express himself through them.¹

If the way of God's redemptive love were emphasized in equal proportion to his wrathful judgment, then the creative work of the Holy Spirit would be more effective and complete than ever. It is difficult to conceive how the doctrine of God and His Grace could have meaning otherwise. As Williams rightly says:

The work of redemption includes a work of creation in which human creative effort shares...This radical separation between the divine love and man's works of love [as in Niebuhr and Nygren] must be shown to be a distortion of the fact...When the Christian faith points to the Kingdom of God's love as the ultimate good, it is pointing to a reality which cannot be absolutely separated from the imperfect good for which men strive.²

And if Nygren and Niebuhr are correct in their belief that the love of God is of different order from all

1. Banning, Art.(1949).
2. Williams, GGMH, 66.

human love and human values, and thus cannot be brought into a single structure, then

the good accomplished in redemption lies in a different dimension from the good realized by human effort, and we cannot sustain the thesis that the work of redemption involves as an integral aspect a process in this world, and the actualization of love in this life.¹

It is true, of course, that a radical doctrine of divine Agape cannot be refuted: for nothing postulated upon an irrational premise (as Niebuhr readily admits that his view of divine love is so postulated²) can be "proved" or "disproved." But the crucial issue, as Williams rightly insists, is that

it cannot be brought into any significant relation to human experience. All of these consequences lead to the conclusion that this doctrine of agape is an unacceptable interpretation of the New Testament message. It sets forth the evangelical truth, but in such an extreme form as to constitute a reductio ad absurdum of this truth.³

In this connection, Williams notes that liberal philosophy has made a lasting contribution to the age-old problem of "the divine-human encounter."

The tendency in modern philosophical theology to interpret God's power and man's derived power as dynamically related in the ongoing of life is fundamentally sound, however it may have been oversimplified in the

1. Williams, GGMH, 67.
 2. See Niebuhr, Art.(1948).¹
 3. Williams, GGMH, 70.

liberal period.¹

To postulate any other conception of God's relationship to man places one in a defensive position, for he must then give a rational answer to the following questions: What has become of the Christian doctrine that man is created "in the image of God?" Where is the recognition that the necessities of human life serve love and do not always destroy it?

When Niebuhr discusses man's side of the "dialectic," he becomes immediately preoccupied with demonstrating the radical evil and corrupted aspects in the human factor. There is both a value and a serious peril in this procedure. The value is in the realism of facing up to human weakness and radical evil; the peril is in the ethical relativism involved in saying that man, in view of his corrupt nature, can do nothing apart from the intervention of supernatural aid. As Meland rightly observes:

The terms "radical evil" and "corrupted nature" are useful, dramatic imageries for bringing into sharp relief the evil that actually does persist in human beings; and for holding up to view the subtle perversions that enter into all forms of self-righteousness.²

Despite this positive value, however, such terms as

1. Williams, GGMH, 70.

2. Meland, Art.(1948).

"corrupt nature" and "radical evil", according to Meland, remain at best

generalizations which do violence to the concrete actualities, blurring distinctions of sensibility and of qualitative attainment in the human character and making creation, itself, at the human level, a farcical episode. Theology has yet to come to terms with the contradiction in human nature, evidencing evil which is radical, indeed; yet giving evidence, too, however slight, however tenuous and frail, of a margin of sensitivity and tenderness which give intimation and stature implicit in this human level of the creatural response.¹

Meland rightly perceives the fatal flaw in a fragmentary portrayal of man's dignity and worth. It is a mark of ethical relativism to concentrate upon limited aspects of human willing and acting, as is represented by Niebuhr's conception of human sin, and to neglect the whole man and the redemptive aspects of life.

One might appropriately inquire: How else can we find God except through an obedient response in faith to His Grace? If we can have no faith and hope in God's redemptive love, then it does not seem logical to suppose that a human response is possible, or that either moral striving or religious aspiration could have any valid and eternal significance. Everett sees the danger in a fragmentary view of the moral struggle of the human

1. Meland, Ibid.

race. In his words:

So every moment of delight in nature and a joy of fellowship with our kind, every triumph of the higher over the lower impulse, every insight of intelligence, and every forward struggle of the race, is a part of the meaning of religion. They are expressions of the all-pervading Power. He who does not find God here is in danger of finding Him nowhere.¹

In opposition to Niebuhr's view, we have affirmed in this chapter that there is a positive relation between God and his human creatures--a relation of universal moral significance, on which the blessedness of man and his attainment of supreme good are dependent.

Human morality, we have argued, is not just a convenient invention by man to stave off destruction on the mundane level, but it has reference to the cosmic purposes of God. As such, God is morally obligated to accept man, his creature, as a co-worker in the redemptive enterprise on earth as in heaven. Since Niebuhr will not allow this reading of divine love, his view makes God a great deceiver, and empties all human activity of ideal import. This does violence to man's dignity and takes away all positive significance in the divine agape, as well as the moral laws. This is the ethical relativism in Niebuhr's view of man and his vocation in the universe.

¹ Niebuhr, *ibid.* (1945),
p. 124.

CHAPTER V

EVIDENCE OF ETHICAL RELATIVISM

IN NIEBUHR'S VIEW OF GOD IN HISTORY

1. The Need for Further Research in the Philosophy of History

It is to Niebuhr's credit that he has courageously entered into a field that has received but scant attention among Christian theologians. We refer to the problem of relating the nature of man to the destiny of history. As Dean Muelder has noted:

History is an area almost completely ignored by systematic theologians. On the whole, it is amazing to note the scarcity of great names among Christian philosophers and theologians who have dealt with the interpretation of history in the period just prior to World War I. Writers of the stature of Ernst Troeltsch are lonely landmarks.¹

But Dean Muelder is able to see a growing concern over the crisis of civilization in the past quarter of a century.

A significant list of writers, including Tillich, Dodd, Bevan, Horton, Lyman, Dawson, Flewelling, Case, Macmurray, Piper, Berdyaev, are wrestling with the tragedy of historical existence.²

We would add to this list Arnold Toynbee, Morris Cohen, Karl Lowith, and Amos Wilder.

The problem of finding meaning in history has

1. Muelder, Art.(1945).

2. Ibid.

become an imperative one for philosophers and theologians alike, and it cannot be dispensed with except at the risk of abandoning the historical processes to blind, incoherent, and meaningless forces---a surrender that denies the existence of a righteous God and at the same time negates the proper function of man.

It is our purpose in this chapter to show that Niebuhr's thought leads to the ethically relativistic conclusion that God is not functional (operative) in the historical processes, except through divine intervention and judgment (and hence negatively and passively); and to indicate that the corollary of this skeptical conclusion---namely, that man is incapable of achieving any significant moral progress in history--is also a relativistic concept.

1. A Summary of Niebuhr's Interpretation of God's Relation to History

Niebuhr's most systematic treatments of the problem of a Christian interpretation¹ of history are to be found in Beyond History, The Nature and Destiny of Man

1. We say "interpretation" because Niebuhr explicitly denies that he is constructing a "philosophy" of history. See Niebuhr, FAH, 112. In this connection, both Hughley (in TPSI) and Thelen (in MAS) are in error in speaking of Niebuhr's system as a "philosophical theology" or a "philosophy of history."

(Volume II), and Faith and History. In our summary of these works we shall attempt to lift up the main issues regarding God in history as related to the problem of ethical relativism.

One thing is made clear at the outset in Beyond History. This is that the temporal, natural historical world is neither self-derived nor self-explanatory.¹ The ground of fulfilment for all existence lies outside and not inside the historical processes--in the eternal and divine will. This is not a simple rational dualistic conception, insists Niebuhr, that would postulate an eternal world separate and distinct from the temporal world; rather, the relation between the temporal and the eternal is "dialectical."²

The eternal is revealed and expressed in the temporal but not exhausted in it. God is not the sum total of finite occasions and relationships. He is their ground and they are the creation of His will.³

But this does not mean, we are informed, that the finite world "is merely a corrupt emanation from the ideal and eternal."⁴

The relationship between the finite and the ideal

1. Niebuhr, BT, 4.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

world is to be expressed in symbolic terms. Any rational or logical explanation of the mystery of historical meaning, Niebuhr argues, will inevitably lead to

a pantheism in which God and the world are identified, and the temporal in its totality is equated with the eternal; or in which they are separated so that a false supernaturalism emerges, a dualism between an eternal and spiritual world without content and a temporal world without meaning or significance.¹

Niebuhr does not say specifically, but one wonders if he would imply by the foregoing construction that one cannot say literally that the world is either "good" or "bad" as a created thing, since meaning can be attributed only "mythologically" or "symbolically."² This is clearly not the finding of Troeltsch and Cadoux regarding Jesus and the early Christians, as we have noted,³ and is a wholly unnecessary reversion to sub-ethical and sub-Christian modes of argumentation. But let us see further.

Human existence, insists Niebuhr, will not end tragically. Though every expression of human life is in contradiction to the will of God, man can yet have hope that need not yield to despair if he will first "cease

1. Niebuhr, BT, 4.

2. See Niebuhr, FAH, 33, for his defense of the use of "symbols" in Christian thought.

3. Supra, 226-231.

making the standards of a sinful existence the norms of life," and will accept the wisdom of God as his true norm so that he may know "the Godly sorrow that worketh repentance."¹

Out of this despair hope is born. The hope is simply this: that the contradictions of human existence, which man cannot surmount, are swallowed up in the life of God Himself. The God of Christian faith is not only creator but redeemer. He does not allow human existence to end tragically. He snatches victory from defeat. He is himself defeated in history but He is also victorious in that defeat.²

Further, God's fulfilment and his establishing of the Kingdom of God at the edge of history "does not imply that fulfilment means the negation of what is established and developed in history."³

Each moment of history stands under the possibility of an ultimate fulfilment. The fulfilment is neither a negation of its essential character nor yet a further development of its own inherent capacities. It is rather a completion of its essence by an annihilation of the contradictions which sin has introduced into human life.⁴

Another thing is made clear in Beyond Tragedy. The final proof of God's majesty and power, we are told, is exhibited by the inevitable periodical downfall of all humanely contrived political or sociological structures.

1. Niebuhr, BT, 19.

2. Ibid., 24. Italics mine.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid. Italics mine.

In Niebuhr's words:

Christianity at its best is not involved in chaos and confusion when the imposing structures of human contrivance fall, as they inevitably do and must. The chaos of the destruction does not tempt it to a sense of ultimate confusion. It knows that "the world passeth away and the lusts thereof," and that the self-destruction in which the world's empires become periodically involved is but a proof of the immutability of God's laws and the power of his sovereignty, which man defies at his own peril.¹

Thus periods of catastrophe and adversity are viewed as valuable in effecting "a genuine renewal of the Christian religion."²

In Beyond Tragedy Niebuhr makes some significant statements regarding the Kingdom of God concept. We are informed that God's Kingdom "is not the kingdom of some other world"; rather, it is the picture "of what this world ought to be."³

This kingdom is thus not of this world, insofar as the world is constantly denying the fundamental laws of human existence. Yet it is of this world. It is not some realm of perfection which has nothing to do with historical existence. It constantly impinges upon man's every decision and is involved in every action.⁴

Thus the concept of the Kingdom of God is "never a purely

1. Niebuhr, *Ibid.*, 114.

2. *Ibid.*, 277.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*

other-worldly perfection."¹ It operates in history as a judgment and as a pressure "upon the conscience of man in every action."² In other words, it is a regulative and not a constitutive principle. It acts through man and in man and in history as judgment but not as concrete realization of ideal values.

At this point we detect an inconsistency in Niebuhr's discussion of the way the Kingdom of God is operative in history. On page 283 of Beyond Tragedy it is asserted that the Kingdom of God may be in the conscience of man "but not in his action."³ On the following page it is stated that

the kingdom of truth constantly enters the world. And its entrance descends beyond conscience into action.⁴

If Niebuhr means here that the Kingdom of God enters into action that is other than personal (which might be implied in the words "beyond conscience"), and that God's activity must stop there, then this is in effect saying that God is finally operative in impersonal forces--a strange doctrine indeed from the Christian standpoint. T. H. Green was able to demonstrate that neither morality nor religion

1. Niebuhr, BT, 278.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., 282.

4. Ibid., 283. Italics mine.

can have vital meaning outside of persons: for all values "are relative for, of, or in persons."¹ If the Kingdom of God is not concretely functional in persons in some recognizable way, then one who holds such a view is involved in an ultimate cynicism that does inestimable violence to the Christian ethic.

It is no solution of the problem to resort to what Lewis and Dean Knudson have termed the "mystery-mongering" and the "cult of the paradoxical" in explaining the way God operates in history. Either God does or does not reveal Himself in and through personal experience. If He does operate in and through His creatures, which is our view here, then man's earthly vocation and the historical processes do have eternal significance insofar as they approximate God's purposes. If God's redemptive love and power do not work in and through persons, except in an abstract and provisional sense, then the nerve of all virtuous endeavor is cut. For why would man aspire to share in "the preparation for His coming" which Troeltsch understands to be the essence of Jesus' program for his followers? In Troeltsch's words:

This demand for "preparation" includes both the ethic of Jesus and the idea of God which determined His ethic.²

1. Green PTE, 210.
2. Troeltsch, STCC, I, 52.

It is a mark of ethical relativism to say that man, because of corruption in his nature and evil in his historical achievements, can have no share in the process of redemption or in the "preparation" for the coming of God's Kingdom in personal and social relationships. When Niebuhr argues that the Kingdom is expressed finally and most meaningfully by a divine intervention of God's judgment then he virtually and actually negates man's function in the redemptive processes. Not only this, but such an argument goes against every principle of human psychology and destroys the motive for ethical activity. For if man can have no assurance of an actual share in the work of redemption, where will there be any desire for repentance on the part of man? Or where will there be any joy in the actual coming of the Kingdom? Neither man's thoughts nor his actions would carry any ideal import on Niebuhr's terms. This type of logic is the error in all theological and ethical relativistic theories.¹

In the second volume of The Nature and Destiny of Man Niebuhr rises to an appreciation of the constructive and redemptive work of individuals and groups that is repeated nowhere else in his writings. Here he makes assertions that, if carried to their logical conclusions,

1. See Ramsdell, Art.(1943), for a convincing statement of this aspect of Niebuhr's relativism.

would destroy his fundamental premises regarding the work of God and man in history.¹

To illustrate the foregoing statement that Human Destiny represents an unprecedented optimism, we note that Niebuhr finds that man's freedom to transcend the natural flux of nature "enables him to change, re-order and transmute the causal sequences of nature and thereby to make history."² There is no point at which "the mind cannot transcend the given circumstances to imagine a more ultimate possibility."³ Man looks toward a reality where the conflicts of history "are overcome in a reign of universal order and peace."⁴ Man's loyalty to the principles of moral law "prompts him to seek the elimination of contingent, irrelevant and contradictory elements in the flux, for the sake of realizing the real essence of his life, as defined by the unchanging and eternal power which governs it."⁵

Further, it is admitted that man's reason, in a qualified sense of course, "is quite obviously a principle of order in history."⁶ Man's reason prompts him to struggle for justice. Each achievement of justice "is an approxima-

1. For the remainder of this chapter we shall refer to the second volume of The Nature and Destiny of Man as Human Destiny.

2. Niebuhr, NDM, II, 1.

3. Ibid., 2.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid., 247.

tion to the Kingdom of God."¹ Rules and laws of justice do approximate, though they contradict true community.² Every vital religion must hope for "mediate goals in history."³ A disclosure of the eternal will and purpose is both possible and necessary.⁴ Kierkegaard goes too far in attributing absolute absurdity to life here and now.⁵ There is a real distinction between good and evil in history.⁶

As to the idea of God, he is "not some undifferentiated eternity which effaces both the good and evil in history by destroying history itself."⁷ Rather, God's mercy must make itself known in history "so that man in history may become fully conscious of his guilt and his redemption."⁷ God's revelation, it is further argued, "does not remain in contradiction to human culture and human knowledge."⁸ Even the purest form of agape cannot stand in complete contradiction to historical possibilities, for justice "can achieve more and more imaginative forms."⁹ The highest unity in earthly life is "a harmony of love in which the self relates itself in its freedom to other selves in their freedom under the will of God."¹⁰

1. Niebuhr, NDM, II, 247.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., n. 32.

4. Ibid., 38.

5. Ibid., n. 38.

6. Ibid., 44.

7. Ibid., 45.

8. Ibid., 67.

9. Ibid., 85.

10. Ibid., 95.

To continue our survey of the positive and constructive work of man as presented by Niebuhr in Human Destiny, we find that there "are indeterminate possibilities of relating the family to the community on higher and higher levels of harmony."¹ As to the individual struggle for perfection in life, there is a perfection of intention possible, though there is no human perfection in any real sense.²

There is no limit to either sanctification in individual life, or social perfection in collective life, or to the discovery of truth in cultural life; except of course the one limit, that there will be some corruption, as well as deficiency, of virtue and truth on the new level of achievement.³

Every human moral situation, whether individual or social, actually discloses, when fully analyzed, "unending possibilities of higher fulfillment."⁴ This was the abiding contribution of the Renaissance, insists Niebuhr--to show that human history "is indeed filled with endless possibilities."⁵

Further, Niebuhr finds that it is a good thing "to seek for the Kingdom of God on earth."⁶

The insistence of sectarian Christianity that the Kingdom of God is relevant to all

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1. Niebuhr, NDM, II, 124.
 2. Ibid., 125.
 3. Ibid., 156.
 4. Ibid.
 5. Ibid., 155.
 6. Ibid., 178.

historical social problems, and that brotherhood is a possibility of history is certainly a part of the Christian gospel.¹

Against Brunner's rigid distrust of legalism in moral obligation, Niebuhr asserts that "there would be little goodness in history by that standard."² Positive law, in other words, has a necessary and rightful role to play in human society.

Not only has positive law an important function in history, but also the rational disciplines of culture have their place and proper roles to play.

The real situation is that the human mind can, in the various disciplines of culture, discover and elaborate an indeterminate variety of systems of meaning and coherence by analysing the relation of things to each other on every level of existence, whether geological or biological, social or psychological, historical or philosophical. If these subordinate realms of meaning claim to be no more than they are they will add to the wealth of our apprehensions about the character of existence and the richness of our insights into reality.³

Moreover, these rational disciplines can become "valuable guides to conduct and action," whether it be in "the exploitation of nature, or the manipulation of social forces, or the disciplines of individual life."⁴

1. Niebuhr, *Ibid.*, 179.

2. *Ibid.*, 190.

3. *Ibid.*, 208.

4. *Ibid.*

Further, the Christian doctrine of the Atonement entails, we are told, that "the distinctions between good and evil are important and have ultimate significance," and the realization of the good "must be taken seriously."¹ And even though the taint of evil is upon all historical achievements, this "does not destroy the possibility of such achievements nor the obligation to realize truth and goodness in history."²

Finally, the pinnacle of the moral ideal stands inside history "in so far as love may elicit a reciprocal response and change the character of human relations."³ And history itself "moves toward the realization of the Kingdom" even though "the judgment of God is upon every new realization."⁴

Lest we be found guilty of the fallacy of simple enumeration in attempting to illustrate our argument, it must be stated that in each of the instances that we have cited in the foregoing discussion to show how Niebuhr rises to a unique appreciation of positive factors in human nature and historical achievement, there is a qualifying dialectical statement that will allow no

1. Niebuhr, *Ibid.*, 211.

2. *Ibid.*, 213.

3. *Ibid.*, 247.

4. *Ibid.*, 286.

simple optimism to emerge free and unscathed. There is always a "nevertheless" to offset the first half of the dialectical statement, of which the following instances are typical, and would apply in nearly every case:

Every human potency may be an instrument of chaos as well as of order; and history... has no solution of its own problem.¹

There will be corruption, as well as deficiency, of virtue and truth on every level of achievement.²

On the other hand, every effort and pre-tension to complete life, whether in collective or individual terms; every desire to stand beyond the contradictions of history, or to eliminate the final corruptions of history, must be disavowed.³

Our purpose in the foregoing methodology of cumulative data is to indicate a profound dilemma in Niebuhr's total theological orientation. This dilemma contains a peril that leads to ethical relativism in Niebuhr's moral theory. The statement of this confusion in Niebuhr's thought will constitute the central thesis of this dissertation.

1. The Thesis of this Dissertation Stated

If Niebuhr is consistent in his repeated affirmation that he will not commit the error of Kierkegaard and Barth in a too rigorous interpretation of dialectical

1. Niebuhr, NDM, II, 155.

2. Ibid., 156.

3. Ibid., 207.

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always a "nevertheless" to offset the first half of the
dialectical statement, of which the following instances
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Every human potency may be an instrument
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delicacy, of virtue and truth on every
level of achievement.²

On the other hand, every effort and pro-
tention to complete life, whether in
collective or individual terms; every
desire to stand beyond the contradictions
of history, or to eliminate the final
contradictions of history, must be discovered.³

Our purpose in the foregoing methodology of
evaluative data is to indicate a profound dilemma in
Nietzsche's total dialectical orientation. This dilemma
contains a peril that leads to critical relativism in
Nietzsche's moral theory. The statement of this conclusion
in Nietzsche's thought will constitute the central thesis
of this dissertation.

1. The Thesis of this Dissertation States
If Nietzsche is committed in his repeated affir-
mation that he will not commit the error of Kierkegaard
and Barth in a too rigorous interpretation of dialectical

1. Nietzsche, *WOM*, II, 158.
2. *Ibid.*, 158.
3. *Ibid.*, 207.

theology that would deny meaning to either mankind or history, then he must accept as valid the claims of the liberal theologians that God's purposes, His power, and His grace are dynamically related to human achievements and historical processes.

By "dynamically related" we mean that God's spirit is operative within human experience and historical processes. As opposed to Niebuhr's claim that the only sense in which we can say that God has a dynamic relationship to finite existence is in His judgment upon all human structures and achievements, we affirm that God, if He is to be conceived as a righteous, morally responsible, and worthy Deity, must function as redeeming power within persons and in history, and not at the "edge" or at the "end" of the historical struggle.

Since Niebuhr denies this dynamic and concrete relationship of God in history and continues to resort to paradoxical explanations that make an abstraction of all ultimate ideals and meanings, then he has virtually and actually negated the first half of every one of the dialectical statements that we have cited in the foregoing section of this chapter.¹

When this is done, of course, we are confronted with the very radical contradiction of divine and human

1. Supra, 248-254.

love that Niebuhr desires to evade by means of paradoxical argumentation. For if moral principles, human structures of community, and historical approximations to the absolute ideal of love are in every instance finally defeated in history¹ simply because God in his wrathful judgment pronounces them so in order to make way for final completion and fulfillment beyond history in a different order from anything in the natural order, then the positive affirmations Niebuhr makes in Human Destiny concerning the accomplishments of individuals and groups are devoid of concrete meaning. If human aspiration and achievement can have no vital relationship to eternal values, then even to postulate such possibilities of human achievement as Niebuhr makes in Human Destiny without a proper metaphysical frame of reference that would give real meaning to the aspirations and choices that make possible these personal and collective achievements, is to be dealing in abstractions.

Since Niebuhr presents no such metaphysical basis for his interpretation of God's work and man's work in history, then there is no ground in his argument for a human morality possessing eternal significance. There can be no more radical contradiction of divine and human love

1. See Niebuhr, BT, 24. Cf. Niebuhr, Art. (1942).¹

than this denial of concrete and eternal meaning to human willing and acting--a denial that is both implicit and explicit in Niebuhr's thought.

This construction, we insist, leads to the skeptical conclusion that God's purposes cannot be realized in and through persons in either time or eternity, but only in and through God Himself. Thus the human side of the moral struggle is lacking in any real value, and we are driven to operate solely in the absolute, hidden, and divine order of value.

In no written statement that has yet appeared is there to be found any hint in Niebuhr's thought of any rational content in the divine ideal which stands in contradiction to human formulations of value. This, of course, is part of the "mystery" of a profound faith. But it is logically and psychologically unsound to base a morality (or a religion) upon an unknown and undefined principle. Man is not constituted with a moral nature that will strive for an ideal that cannot be brought into any meaningful relationship with what he can know, any more than he would long be loyal to an ideal that he deems impossible of realization. This insight was one of Sidgwick's lasting contributions to moral philosophy.

Finally, since Niebuhr will allow no concept of God that sees Him as operating concretely within

man and his historical activity; and since the logic of his position makes an abstraction of both his transcendent love ethic and his attempts to relate this ethic to human willing and acting, then we must conclude that on this basis all human aspirations and endeavors operate in a vacuum devoid of concrete meaning, and human historical existence will ever remain driven and buffeted by "contingent" and "relative" factors.

We have defined ethical relativism¹ as the view that man as man is incapable, apart from social pressure or the intervention of supernatural aid, of formulating universally valid moral principles that can function concretely as a guide to human beings in the historical task of achieving the good life both individually and collectively.

Upon these terms it is possible to assert that Niebuhr's total theological and ethical orientation is undermined by a pervasive ethical relativism. We have found this relativism in his views of man's vocation and God's activity in history. After we have discussed the concept of moral progress, we shall seek to further support our thesis in other areas of importance in moral theory and practice.

1. *Supra*, 36.

1. God's Relation to Human Moral Progress

There are two considerations that cannot be dispensed with in a discussion of this nature. These are: (1) What is God's relation to human moral progress? and (2) What does the work of the Holy Spirit entail in Christian doctrine? We have touched upon these issues in numerous instances thus far in this investigation, but their importance is such that an extended treatment is warranted in this specific connection.

In the first place, Niebuhr does not hold to the so-called "modern" view of evolution and progress in a straight, natural, and unbroken line toward historical fulfilment and perfection in time. He will not deny, however, that there is progress of a certain type, as we shall see.

In a significant article in Fortune Magazine entitled "The Perspective of Faith Upon History" Niebuhr rather sums up his conception of God's relation to human progress. In his words:

There is always progress in history in the sense that it cumulates wisdom, perfects techniques, increases the areas of human cooperation, and extends the human control over nature. But this cannot be regarded as moral progress. There are morally

ambiguous elements in human history on every new level of achievement.¹

All modern, rational, romantic or Marxist theories of inevitable progress, Niebuhr further argues, do not understand what the Hebraic-Christian tradition so clearly perceives--that while historical existence has a provisional meaning, yet it sees

no fulfillment of life's meaning in history, because it recognizes that history, on every level of achievement, contains ambiguities, problems, and insecurities that demand an answer. The answer to these problems given by the Christian faith is that history is borne by a divine reality that completes what remains incomplete in history and purges what is evil in history.²

This means that all political and economic achievements must be informed by "a religion and culture which knows that history is a realm of infinite possibilities," and that "each new level of maturity places new responsibilities upon us."³

But it must also be understood that all historic achievements are limited and precarious; that human existence, individual and collective, can be transmuted and sublimated on many new levels, but that it cannot be eliminated in history.⁴

Further, Niebuhr contends that when the liberals

1. Niebuhr, Art.(1942).² Italics mine.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

cling to a faith that man, as a particular force in history contending against other particular forces, is able to subdue these forces to ideal purposes, they are burdened with a profound illusion, for "there is no historical evidence to justify such a claim."¹ The actual situation is, we are informed, that human existence

is precarious and will remain so to the end of history. Human achievement contains a tragic element of frustration and corruption and will contain it to the end of history.²

We may well admit, with Niebuhr, that there will probably be some moral failure in all men in generations yet to come. As free moral agents we cannot guarantee future willing and acting. But there is grave danger in the strong emphasis that Niebuhr places upon human corruption and frustration on all levels of moral activity. If man can have no assurance that there is any progress in the certainty or probability that his moral choices contribute to a realm of goodness, then he would lack the motivation that comes from such faith and such assurance, and the nerve of moral striving would be severed.

The following statements illustrate a fundamental emphasis within Niebuhr's thought that might well lead to the cutting of the nerve of moral endeavor, for he gives

1. Niebuhr, Art.(1942).²

2. Ibid.

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1. Niebuhr, *Ans.* (1943), 2.
 2. *Ibid.*

no proper qualifying statements to mitigate the severity of the alleged judgment upon man's achievements--the most virtuous along with the evil ones. These examples are typical of the entire literature:

Just as the desires of men are infinite, so also are the possibilities for good and evil in history. But the possibilities for evil keep abreast of the possibilities for good...Thus there can be no moral progress in history.¹

Human existence is precarious and will remain so to the end of history. And all human achievements contain a tragic element of frustration and corruption...that place them in contradiction to the divine will.²

While Niebuhr does not deny the possibility of a measure of goodness and virtue in man's endeavors, yet he does not adequately ground this insight in the divine goodness. As a consequence, man cannot know or have faith that any of his choices or his efforts toward achieving righteousness in his personal and social relationships will merit divine approval. Thus man's function in the redemptive process is negated, and his morality is reduced to the level of expediency and pragmatic problem-solving.

Instead of placing the central emphasis on the contradiction between the divine and human realms of love and goodness, Niebuhr should begin with the divine love

1. Niebuhr, Art.(1942).²

2. Ibid.

and goodness which is able to overcome this contradiction and to make for a fruitful co-operation of the divine and human aspects of existence. One can find evidence of this divine overruling of the "contradiction" between divine and human love, not only in the story of the Crucifixion and throughout Christian history, but in certain aspects of contemporary life, as we shall try to illustrate in Chapter VI and Chapter VII. Only this latter emphasis can save one from an ethical relativism that sees no ultimate worth in man's aspirations and achievements.

Niebuhr usually refers to the divine end and ground of existence as having a "double relation" to history. What is this double relation?

God judges the world because there are visitations of the law of life (divine love) on every level of human achievement. God "saves" the world because there are resources of mercy beyond his judgment.¹

At this point the crucial issue arises.

But mercy cannot express itself without taking justice seriously. Thus God is pictured, in Christian thought, as being able to be merciful only by taking the consequences of his judgment upon and into himself.²

What is meant by God's "taking the consequences of his judgment upon and into himself" and "taking justice

1. Niebuhr, Art.(1942).²

2. Ibid.

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Niebuhr usually refers to the divine end and ground of existence as having a "double relation" to history. What is this double relation?

God judges the world because there are violations of the law of love (divine love) on every level of human achievement. God "saves" the world because there are resources of mercy beyond his judgment.¹

At this point the crucial issue arises.

But mercy cannot express itself without taking justice seriously. Thus God is pleased, in Christian thought, as being able to be merciful only by taking the consequences of his judgment upon and into himself.²

What is meant by God's "taking the consequences of his judgment upon and into himself" and "taking justice

1. Niebuhr, *Art. (1942)*, p. 2.
2. *Ibid.*

seriously," if we examine the evidence in other written statements, seems to be that "all human attitudes and customs must be tortuously annihilated by history before new forms and attitudes can emerge."¹ Only God's judgment and grace, in contradistinction to any human moral accomplishments, can mitigate "the horrible prejudices and conflicts which are boiling up in society."²

Further, in order to mitigate these evils caused by man which stand in the way of perfection, "God must first become our enemy before He is our friend."³ As to redemption, there is nothing in man's power, no resources of positive freedom within his nature, which will permit him to share in the redemptive enterprise.⁴ And God has so arranged it--or at least man's fallen nature has made it necessary--that there can be no literal or actual meanings disclosed in the historical scene, but only "potential" and "provisional" meanings.⁵ This is because of "the contingent and false element" in man's makeup.⁶

T. W. Bevan of England has shown as clearly as any of Niebuhr's critics where this type of logic leads one. Bevan shows that if one takes as his basic premise the fact that a defect in the human will makes man in-

1. Niebuhr, Art.(1944).³

2. Ibid.

3. Niebuhr, FAH, 103.

4. Ibid., 99.

5. Ibid., 146.

6. Ibid.

seriously," if we examine the evidence in other written statements, seems to be that "all human attitudes and customs must be temporarily annihilated by history before new forms and attitudes can emerge."¹ Only God's judgment and grace, in contradiction to any human moral accomplishments, can mitigate "the horrible prejudices and conflicts which are boiling up in society."²

Further, in order to mitigate these evils caused by man which stand in the way of perfection, "God must first become our enemy before He is our friend."³ As to redemption, there is nothing in man's power, no resources of positive freedom within his nature, which will permit him to share in the redemptive enterprise.⁴ And God has so arranged it--or at least man's fallen nature has made it necessary--that there can be no literal or actual meaning disclosed in the historical scene, but only "potential" and "provisional" meanings.⁵ This is because of "the contingent and false element" in man's nature.⁶

T. W. Bowen of England has shown as clearly as any of Niebuhr's critics where this type of logic leads one. Bowen shows that if one takes as his basic premise the fact that a defect in the human will makes man in-

1. Niebuhr, *Art.* (1944), 3.
 2. *Ibid.*
 3. Niebuhr, *FAH*, 103.
 4. *Ibid.*, 98.
 5. *Ibid.*, 103.
 6. *Ibid.*

capable of any morally significant actions, then he must make conclusions something like these:

Since all moral and religious decisions and actions necessarily involve the will, and since a postulated defect of the will makes autonomous moral striving condemned as invalid, then the only way out is to assert that God forces men to go His way. Thus history is judged tragic, not because man fails to develop and make effective use of his moral capacities, but because God moves toward His ends against the human will.¹

This is, of course, an essentially pragmatic and relativistic conclusion regarding the entire human enterprise, for on this premise almost anything can be justified. For what does it matter what men do if God will always countermand their achievements?

Bevan lists a number of dangers in this type of tortuous thinking. For one thing, men are offered a "manageable faith" that tends to sink to a sub-ethical and sub-Christian standard. Once Niebuhr's premise of the "fatal flaw" is accepted, then no man can logically be expected

to reach for the ideal, to turn the other cheek, to forgive one's enemies, to expect or work for a heaven on earth--for it meets their practical way of life.²

1. Bevan, Art. (1945). Italics mine.
2. Ibid.

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Since all moral and religious decisions and actions necessarily involve the will, and since a postulated defect of the will makes autonomous moral striving condemned as invalid, then the only way out is to assert that God forces man to do His will. This theory is judged tragic, not because man fails to develop and make effective use of his moral capacities, but because God moves toward His ends against the human will.

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J. Bever, Art. (1943), *Realism and*
S. Ibid.

There is nothing in Niebuhr's view, Bevan further argues, that would understand "the redemptive power of the Gospel, the energizing power of the Holy Spirit, the gaining of the Kingdom of God on every level of life."¹ Consequently, we are led to "a judgment of proximities," and man is doomed to live in a society where "wars and class struggles are deemed a part of God's plan for the world," and where "the eternal tug of war" in the social order makes it impossible to ever decide "who is the winner, good or evil, God or the Devil."² Our only comfort is to be "the tension and mystery of a confused faith," where man is offered no assurance in his religious faith or hope for any final victory in the heroic struggles for a just and decent society.³

Bevan sees all this as an accommodation to "the sub-Christian mind," where the imperatives, the need for urgency, for courageous effort in spreading the Good News in both its personal and social dimensions, are actually negated. For "if in the end there is no victory that we can know," Bevan rightly insists, "then there will be no overcoming of evil in this order or in any order."⁴ Thus God is defeated in His proper field of

1. Bevan, *Ibid.*

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*

activity--in persons and their collective endeavors.

And what is left of the Christian ethic but a naturalistic pragmatism or an abstract ideal?

Vida Scudder, in a somewhat lighter but none the less serious vein, notes a similar direction in the logic of Niebuhr's view of history. In her words:

History as we read stretches out drearily toward an invisible goal, and, however scrupulously the importance of the absolutist to the Church and the world is stated, the last word to the man who would "cut through the relativities of life" would seem to echo Hamlet's cry to Ophelia: "Get thee to a nunnery, go."¹

Of course this is only a half-truth, for Niebuhr himself has demonstrated an activist and not an escapist attitude in social and political matters. But neither, we insist with Vida Scudder, has he made any serious attempts to "cut through the relativities of life." The reality of an objective moral order that could make possible this "cut through" has been negated in Niebuhr's thought by what Bevan terms a "faux pas of Christian truth."²

It is to be regretted that Niebuhr does not define his terms more in detail, and that he does not pursue to their final outcome many concepts that are clearly stated in his works. For example, it is difficult to conceive

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2. Bevan, Art.(1945).

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1. Gundar, Rev. (1938).
2. Bevan, Art. (1942).

what Niebuhr means in his assertion that there is "no moral progress in history." If we were more informed as to his understanding of "moral" we might then be in a position to see more clearly why the following statements do not include moral progress:

There is no limit to sanctification...History moves on toward the Kingdom of God.¹

There is always progress...in increasing the areas of human cooperation, and extending the human control over nature.²

Love may elicit a reciprocal response and change the character of human relations.³

There are possibilities of realizing truth and goodness in history.⁴

If morality is defined, as it usually is in ethical theory, as voluntary choice among alternative courses of action in the light of norms and standards, then in every instance the foregoing statements do include the possibility--if not the reality--of human moral progress. If man is assured that his choices can add to an increasing goodness within his own personality, and a growing justice and righteousness in his collective responsibilities--all of which Niebuhr would seem to allow in the foregoing assertions--then there are no serious objections to saying, however we may qualify the

1. Niebuhr, NDM, II, 156.

2. Niebuhr, Art. (1942).²

3. Niebuhr, NDM, II, 247.

4. Ibid., 213.

terminology, that there is a very real sense in which moral progress can and does take place in history.

There are redemptive factors in human nature, as men like Flewelling, Brightman, Everett, Green, Dean Muelder and DeWolf and have pointed out, which would allow for a belief in "inexhaustible perfectibility"; that is, there is always the possibility that man may choose to cooperate with God in ever new tasks in the search for truth and meaning in history.

Calhoun insists that Niebuhr is talking about both growth and moral progress in Human Destiny. In his words:

To say that there are no limits to sanctification or that "history moves on toward the Kingdom of God" entails both growth and moral progress...And if some "perfectionism" can include a provisional understanding of the relativity of human knowledge" in every human self, then clearly the status of deity is not being claimed and neither exceptional ignorance nor arrogance is involved.¹

Niebuhr is both appreciative and critical of the "liberal" idea of historical development. He feels that the Biblical idea of creation "is actually much

1. Calhoun, Rev.(1944).

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more compatible with the view of evolutionary process than the Greek concept of temporal recurrence."¹ While there is a limit to progress, there is real significance in "historical development as the bearer of the meaning of life."² This does not imply the negation but, rather, "the transfiguration of historical reality."³ Both nature and historic institutions "are subject to development in time."⁴

Despite these qualified concessions to the liberal idea of historical development, however, the too close identification of the Christian Ethos with modern ideas of progress contains, Niebuhr insists, a number of perils.

The main fallacy of this procedure of identifying Christianity with the evolutionary process, we are told, is that "it obscures the relation between the divine mystery and human life."⁵ The Biblical idea that the vanity of

the imagination of man rather than the paucity of his intellectual faculties, is the primary veil between God and man is also rejected when this is done.⁶

The facts of evil and the fallen aspect of human nature are also obscured by this erroneous doctrine "of God in

1. Niebuhr, FAH, 47.

2. Ibid., 33.

3. Ibid., 69.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid., 31.

6. Ibid.

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1. Niebuhr, *YAH*, 47.
 2. *Ibid.*, 55.
 3. *Ibid.*, 69.
 4. *Ibid.*
 5. *Ibid.*, 51.
 6. *Ibid.*

the natural processes of history."¹ And all the symbolical events, such as the "Fall" and the "consummation," lose their vital meanings when taken as literal history.

The error in Niebuhr's view of God's relation to human moral progress--an error which illustrates the social pessimism inherent in a doctrine of ethical relativism--is that it misunderstands the shades of difference between various types of "progress" theories. The issues involved are too important to justify a too easy dismissal of all theories of progress as inadequate because of mistaken emphases at times.

It is not true, for instance, that all liberal theologians "simply equate God with the evolutionary process."² This would overlook the emphasis on freedom of choice in many modern theists--an emphasis which would see man as free to cooperate or refuse to cooperate with the redemptive aspects of the historical processes. This concept is central to many liberal theologians.³ When this emphasis is thought through, it is not possible to say that these men would equate "process" and "progress" in such a fashion as Niebuhr supposes.

But even if it were true that a majority of

1. Niebuhr, FAH, 47.

2. Ibid.

3. See Flewelling, RIF, for a comprehensive statement of this aspect of the problem.

liberal theologians should assert without adequate qualification that God is at work reconciling even the natural processes of history unto Himself, would there be any valid evidence to prove that coming to pass by development and by the Divine Will are incompatible?

A greater appreciation for a concept of moral and historical development known as "meliorism" would make possible the preservation of the valid elements in Niebuhr's conception of the priority of God over nature and human destiny, and yet would include the equally significant emphasis of Christian liberalism on the inexhaustible perfectibility of man and his works in time.

Meliorism, as defined by Brightman, is the view that

existence is partially controlled by value; in some sense both good and evil are real, but good is dominant in that the state of affairs in the universe is always susceptible of improvement.¹

This is no simply optimism, insists Brightman. There is no automatic or miraculous advance toward the perfection of man or his collective enterprises. To say that God's creation has made conditions so that they may be improved by human effort in cooperation with His Will and by the

1. Brightman, POR, 276f.

power of His Holy Spirit is not to say that these improvements will inevitably occur. In Brightman's words:

Not optimism but meliorism; not completeness, but ever new tasks in accordance with the eternal principles of the Good; not timeless perfection, but inexhaustible perfectibility in everlasting time--these are the perspectives which open for the cosmos and for every enduring person in it.¹

Thus, in this view, a moral quality is assessed to human striving if men make choices that lead in the direction of moral, social, religious, and economic betterment.

In meliorism, God's purposes are realized in a fashion that enhances His Being in the eyes of man, and yet imputes real and rational meaning to the freedom and dignity of man. Man, made in the image of God, would neither be understood as "fallen" by an inevitable defect in his will to the point where his will necessarily contradicts God's Will, nor would his moral nature be judged as impotent because of the power of personal or impersonal evils--evident as they may be and are.

According to this conception, any "fallenness" in man's personality is due to his indecision or lack of discipline in working in a melioristic universe.

1. Brightman, POR, 340.

The responsibility of personal decision thus gains new and extended meaning, not just in the limited area of a "Biblical faith," but in the totality of life and its varied possibilities of achieving new virtue and new goodness.

Dean Muelder has noted that Niebuhr overlooks this important concept of meliorism in his discussion of progress in Human Destiny. Dean Muelder argues that the weakness in Niebuhr's position resides in its inability

to deal adequately with the relative perfection which is the fact of the Christian life. How there can be development in the spiritual life of the self; by what powers Christian values are conserved in personality; what redemptive forces can be released into history by committed human beings; and how the immanence of Agape in human nature and history is to be concretely conceived--all these issues are left unresolved.¹

Further, the practical assurance of "the ultimacy and availability of the divine Agape is not naive," and it is not to be dismissed "as an extreme perfectionism which misjudges the historical situation."² Rather, there is a type of Christian perfectionism

which may be called prophetic meliorism, which, while it does not presume to guar-

1. Muelder, Art.(1945).
2. Ibid.

antee future willing, does not bog down in pessimistic imperfectionism. Niebuhr's treatment of much historical perfectionism is well-founded criticism from an abstract viewpoint, but it hardly does justice to the constructive historical contributions of the perfectionist sects within the Christian fellowship and even within the secular order.¹

Moreover, there is in evidence "a kind of Christian assurance which releases creative energy into the world," and which in actual fellowship "rises above the conflicts of individual or collective egoism."²

Since Niebuhr denies, or at least refuses to discuss, the validity of this redemptive aspect in the human situation, then he is vulnerable to the charge of ethical relativism in his view of God in history. The logic of his view is to deny that man is capable of such constructive activity in historical time.

If Niebuhr were not so insistent upon emphasizing God's judgment and His grace as pardon rather than as enabling power, then he would not make himself susceptible to the valid criticism of men like Macgregor, Williams, and Hocking. We shall review these criticisms briefly.

Macgregor observes that Niebuhr "apparently has no doctrine of the Holy Spirit--at any rate not in the

1. Muelder, Ibid.

2. Ibid.

New Testament sense."¹ He wonders where the "fruits of the Spirit" are if there "is no power that worketh in us mightily?"² Niebuhr's distortion of this basic New Testament doctrine "would seem to suggest a permanent disability which would render all moral effort irrelevant."³

In the same vein, Williams finds that it is a mistaken idea to interpret "the grace of God" as the "sheer mercy of God descending upon man apart from any moral demand or human effort."⁴

A doctrine of grace which destroys the freedom and moral responsibility of man is not grace as known in mature Christian experience. The New Testament emphasis is upon grace as forgiveness, but never as a substitute for repentance in its ethical dimensions.⁵

God's grace, insists Williams, is the Christian term "for the whole of God's love in action." As such the grace of God offers new life, power, and faith so that man, while always a creature of God, might be thereby enabled to work out solutions to his perplexing personal and social problems in history. In William's words again:

If belief in the creative and the redemptive God makes sense at all, it must enable

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1. Macgregor, ROI, 44.
 2. Ibid., 43.
 3. Ibid., 45.
 4. Williams, GGMH, 60.
 5. Ibid. Italics mine.

us to see more deeply and clearly into the whole of experience, and to be able to find our proper place in the redemption of men and society.¹

W. E. Hocking would seem to agree with this total emphasis on the power of the Holy Spirit in ordering and shaping human affairs after the ideal pattern. In his words:

Our confidence with regard to history must be built in history as well as in universal thought,--in both of these, welded together. Unless we can discern at its silent work in human affairs this Power, self-consciously eternal, actively communicating its own scope to the feeble deeds, the painful acquirements, the values, the loves and hopes of man, we have no right to such faith as we habitually assume. And without such faith there is for us no valid morality or religion.²

5. Summary of the Chapter

In this chapter we have tried to show that Niebuhr's denial of God's spirit as functional (operative) in man and the historical processes is an indication of ethical relativism in his thought.

According to Niebuhr, God does have a "dynamic" relationship to the natural order and to man. Through divine intervention and judgment the imperfection of man's works is referred to a realm of completion and consum-

1. Williams, *Ibid.*, 60.

2. Hocking, *MGHE*, 524.

mation where resources outside of man and outside of history are able to accomplish that which sinful man is unable to comprehend or realize. Insofar as God is "operative" in history, he acts in judgment on all human pretensions at "progress" or "perfection" in time.

We have argued that this construction involves the relativistic emphasis that God functions as a purely negative and passive force in the universe, and that man is thus condemned to construct a morality devoid of ideal significance--a morality based upon pragmatic considerations unrelated to the work of redemption and hence unguided and uninspired by divine love (agape).

Logically, if God's spirit does not bear witness with our spirit that we may achieve sonship and collective realization of His purposeful love and righteousness in any concrete sense, then our moral strivings become not only relative and contingent in the negative meaning of these terms, but moral ideals also become irrelevant to man. Since Niebuhr's thought, both implicitly and explicitly, leads to this conclusion, as we have tried to indicate, then we have further evidence of the ethical relativism that pervades his moral theory.

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CHAPTER VI

EVIDENCE OF ETHICAL RELATIVISM IN NIEBUHR'S CONCEPT OF COMMUNITY

1. Niebuhr's Sociological Theory of Community

It is not easy to ascertain what Niebuhr understands by the term "community." Nowhere does he attempt a descriptive or normative definition of community, such as MacIver and Morgan have achieved, for example.¹ Nor does he appeal to any of the authoritative studies of community that have appeared in the last quarter of a century.

In this connection, it is instructive to note that in nearly every specific instance when Niebuhr does enter into an extended treatment of community, he begins with a description of the primordial communities and then goes from there into an immediate critique of the limitations and dangers of every human aggregate. This procedure is usually followed by a restatement of the religious presuppositions necessary to a proper transcendence of the moral ambiguities of all individual and group expressions of the ideal values of love, truth, and goodness.

1. See MacIver, CSI; and Morgan, SC.

For example, in Human Destiny, The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness, and Faith and History, one is informed that the basic factor in any social organization must be its natural and instinctive cohesive forces. This is true even when there are elements of tyranny in the social organization of every primitive community.¹ What is implied here is that the basic patterns of community life are not appreciably altered by either rational schemes or the creative power of religious and moral ideals.

It is upon the "natural vitality" at the base of group life that Niebuhr builds his theory of community. This total impression is not negated even by Niebuhr's emphatic disavowal of such intentions in The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness. In his words:

It is no more possible for a mature and highly elaborated community to return to the unity of its tribal simplicity than for a mature man to escape the perils of maturity by a return to childhood. The fact that primitivism results in perversity and that coerced unity produces sadistic cruelties (in place of the uncoerced unities of genuinely primitive life) is a tremendously valuable lesson for our civilization.²

1. Niebuhr, NDM, II, 79.

2. Niebuhr, CLCD, 123f.

In this work (CLCD) Niebuhr is concerned lest all rationalistic and idealistic attempts to establish harmony between groups and nations will be in danger of destroying "the richness and variety of life."¹

One of the greatest problems of democratic civilization is how to integrate the life of its various subordinate, ethnic, religious and economic groups in the community in such a way that the richness and harmony of the whole community will be enhanced and not destroyed by them.²

In another place he is fearful that a growing rationality "might destroy the virtue of nature" and "disrupt natural harmony."³

It is further argued that "the children of light" (the optimists regarding human nature and universal moral values) are not equipped for the task of integrating community life because they "expect modern society to achieve an essential uniformity through the common convictions of 'men of good-will' who have been enlightened by modern liberal education," and they do not understand "the perennial power of particularity in human culture."⁴

In Human Destiny the sociologists are scored for trying to make ultimate moral or religious ideals immanent and concrete in history in their attempts to perfect society, and for trying to "bid the individual fulfil his life in community."⁵

1. Niebuhr, CLCD, 124.

2. Ibid.

3. Niebuhr, ICE, 93.

4. Niebuhr, CLCD, 131.

5. Niebuhr, NDM, II, 309.

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1. Niebuhr, GID, 184.
2. Ibid.
3. Niebuhr, ICR, 93.
4. Niebuhr, GID, 131.
5. Niebuhr, NDM, II, 203.

What is the danger when the sociologists attempt this impossible feat? What they do not understand is, we are informed, that only

nature, history, and traditions create communities...and [they] establish loyalties and sentiments which are bound to be in conflict with the more rational and inclusive communities and loyalties which human reason can project. Since these narrower loyalties result in conflict and anarchy, they must be constantly subjected to criticism. Without this criticism the harmless divisions and disharmonies of nature are heightened into unsufferable proportions by human sin. But they cannot be eliminated; and the effort to do so merely results in desperate and demonic affirmations of the imperiled values inherent in them.¹

If further proof is desired to support our assertion that Niebuhr tends to lend more support to primitive and undisciplined forms of community than to modern normative and progressive types, we may consider the following propositions: (1) his distrust of the role of reason in integrating group life on higher and higher levels; (2) his theory that, since we have lost the natural cohesion of the primitive communities, coercion must be the central integrating factor in modern communal relationships; (3) his fatalism and pragmatism in regard to planning and ideal programs aimed at community development; and (4) his refusal to even discuss recent normative studies of community.

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to even discuss recent normative studies of community.

We shall return to a detailed analysis of these propositions¹ after we have further investigated Niebuhr's concept of community.

Perhaps the nearest approach to a scientific treatment of community in Niebuhr's works is The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness. Here we are told that the indeterminate character of human vitalities makes necessary a consideration of three dimensions of the problem of community. These are:

(1) The individual is related to the community (in its various levels and extensions) in such a way that the highest reaches of his individuality are dependent upon the social substance out of which they arise and they must find their end and fulfillment in the community.² Thus no simple limit can be placed upon "the degree of intimacy to the community, and the breadth and extend of community which the individual requires for his life."³

(2) Both individual and collective centers of human vitality may be endlessly elaborated. Any premature definition of what the limits of these elaborations ought to be "inevitably destroys and suppresses legitimate forms of life and culture."⁴ But this capacity for human

1. *Infra*, 299ff.

2. Niebuhr, *CLCD*, 48.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*

creativity "also involves the destructive capacity of human vitality," and the tension "between the various forms may threaten or destroy the harmony and peace of the community."¹

(3) Individual vitality arises in indeterminate degree over all social and communal concretions of life. This freedom of the human spirit over the natural process "makes history possible."² The transcendent perspective of the individual over the historical process makes history perpetually creative and capable of producing new forms; but it also "means that the individual finally has some vantage point over history itself."³ Thus there are questions that man can raise which neither his community nor the course of history can answer. This element of self-transcendence is, of course, the "essential human nature" elaborated upon in The Nature and Destiny of Man.

Niebuhr finds that the individual and the community are related to each other on many different levels.

The highest reaches of individual consciousness and awareness are rooted in social experience and find their ultimate meaning in relation to community. The individual is the product of the whole socio-historical process, though he may reach a height of uniqueness

1. Niebuhr, CLCD, 49.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

which seems to transcend his social history completely.¹

Further, an individual's decisions and achievements "grow into, as well as out of, the community and find their final meaning in community."²

Niebuhr does not seem to be aware of the implications of the foregoing assertion in this specific connection. That is, to say that individuals, in their decisions and actions, find their "final meaning" in community would, logically, destroy any and all theories of "transcendence." One could make a strong case for the self-transcendence of group solidarity on these terms--something Niebuhr will not allow in his total theory of community, as we shall see.

To continue, Niebuhr insists that the individual's dependence upon the community

for the foundation upon which the pinnacle of his uniqueness stands, and the stuff out of which particular and special forms of his vitality are created, is matched by his need of the community as the partial end, justification and fulfillment of his existence.³

It will be noted that here the community is viewed as the "partial end" of man's existence. In the quotation cited above an individual's "decisions" and "achievements" find their "final meaning" in community. Here again we are

1. Niebuhr, CLCD, 50.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., 55.

left with no metaphysical grounds for saying that man's personal and social aspirations and strivings may possess ideal import or eternal significance.

On the basis of Niebuhr's view of community that we have outlined in the foregoing discussion, he is able to judge all modern liberal theories of community as holding to the belief in communal "self-sufficiency," and are thus "one form of the primal sin."¹ This is because, we are informed, there is only isolationism and not "true self-transcendancy" involved in this conception. For the true self involves responsibility.

By the responsibilities which men have to their family and community and to many common enterprises, they are drawn out of themselves to become their true selves.²

How Niebuhr can conceive this sublime "losing of self" implied in the above statement as including only "mutual love" (the only possible actualized form of love allowed in Human Destiny) and not a very real element of "sacrificial love" is difficult to understand.

Niebuhr finds that no limits can be set to the intensity or extent of the social responsibilities of particular men. Here he gives his reason for not attempt-

1. Niebuhr, *Ibid.*, 55.

2. *Ibid.*, 56. Italics mine.

ting a precise definition of the nature and limits of community.

We have spoken of the community thus far without defining its boundaries. Family and nation have become the inner and outer confines of the community for most men; but we have advisedly left the limits undefined because we must presently consider the fact that no bounds can be finally placed upon man's responsibility to his fellows or upon his need of their help.¹

Thus we are left guessing as to whether Niebuhr's community is a spirit of fellowship, a formal association (both might be gathered from the foregoing remarks), or just what it is.

One thing is made clear by Niebuhr: there are definite limits to which growing rationality can contribute to the extension of human communities. It is conceded, however, that reason "is provisionally an organ of the universal," and that practical reason "has furnished the technical and political instruments which bind larger communities together in one unit of mutual dependence."² Despite these positive values in human reason, however, there is

no evidence that reason is becoming progressively disembodied. It always remains organically related to a particular center of vitality, individual and collective; and it is therefore always a weapon of

1. Niebuhr, CLCD, 56.

2. Ibid., 66.

defense and attack for this vitality against competing vitalities, as well as a transcendent force which arbitrates between conflicting vitalities.¹

After all, a high perspective of reason "may as easily enlarge the realm of dominion of an imperial self as mitigate expansive desires in the interest of the harmony of the whole."² Because of this fact, we are told, there can be "no community, whether national or international, that can maintain its order if it cannot finally limit expansive impulses by coercion."³

The concept of coercive power is so basic to Niebuhr's idea of community that we must reserve this part of the discussion to a later and more precise delineation.⁴

Returning to Niebuhr's view of reason as related to community development, we find that "because reason is something more than a weapon of self-interest it can be an instrument of justice."⁵ But since reason "is never dissociated from the vitalities of life, individual and collective" then it "cannot be a pure instrument of justice."⁶ Here Niebuhr attacks all natural-law theories that attempt to derive absolutely valid principles of

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1. Niebuhr, *Ibid.*, 67.
 2. *Ibid.*
 3. *Ibid.*
 4. *Infra*, 299ff.
 5. Niebuhr, *CLCD*, 72.
 6. *Ibid.*

morals and politics from "reason alone," for when they (the natural-law theorists) make such a claim they must "inevitably introduce contingent practical applications into the definition of these principles."¹

Moreover, the power of reason is so impotent, particularly in the political arena, that one is counseled to accept as axiomatic that moral theory and political practice are set in radical distinction--the social and political field being always involved in "relative and contingent factors."² In Niebuhr's words:

In terms of pure moral principle one may contend that the ideal possibility of community is that every vital capacity should find its limit and its fulfillment in the harmony of the whole.³

But in terms of political morality

one must state the specific limits beyond which the individual cannot go if the minimal harmony of the community is to be preserved, and beyond which the community must not go if a decent minimal individual freedom is to be protected.⁴

On the strength of this distinction between moral theory and political practice, Niebuhr is then in a position to define what he calls a "descending scale

1. Niebuhr, *Ibid.*, 72.

2. *Ibid.*, 73. See Ernst Troeltsch's article on "Contingency" in *Hastings, ERE*, IV, for a careful statement of a proper emphasis to be placed upon this concept. Here Troeltsch sees contingency as a factor in opposition to a super-rationalism that claims all comprehension and all-perfection, and allows no vitality, multiplicity, and freedom in God or man. But this is not irrationalism, and we are not here upholding super-rationalism.

3. Niebuhr, *GLCD*, 73.

4. *Ibid.*

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3. Niebuhr, *ibid.*, 75.

of relativity" in the treatment of moral and political principles.

The moral principles may be more valid than the political principles which are derived from it. The political principles may have greater validity than the specific applications by which they are made relevant to a particular situation. And the specific applications may have a greater validity than the impulses and ambitions of the social hegemony of a given period which applies or pretends to apply them.¹

No matter how benevolent (or brutal) the bearers of power in a given community are, they will always claim "the sanctity of the pure principle for their power."² For this reason, we are informed, there are "perennial corruptions of interest and passion which are introduced into any historical definitions of even the most ideal and abstract moral principles."³

It will be noted that Niebuhr is not here defending a "hierarchy of values," for there is no philosophical defense of any ideal values or principles. What he has constructed is, rather, a type of syllogism to establish the relativity and lack of finality of all moral values when applied to concrete social and political matters. Unfortunately for such logical (or illogical) means of argumentation, there is always the factor of the validity

1. Niebuhr, CLCD, 75.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., 70.

of the premise, and also the factor of the "undistributed middle" that awaits rational and empirical demonstration and validation that Niebuhr overlooks--an omission that would in itself place his scale of the relativity of values under suspicion. There is considerable evidence to show that personal moral ideals and social and political principles are not so artificially categorized and arbitrarily separated as Niebuhr assumes, as we shall see.

To continue the discussion of Niebuhr's theory of community, we find that "freedom" is made necessary in any society by the fact that "human vitalities have no simply definable limits."¹ But restraints are necessary within communities because "all man's vitalities (impulses and ambitions) tend to defy any defined limits."²

Since the community may as easily become inordinate in its passion for order, as may the various forces in the community in their passion for freedom, it is necessary to preserve a proper balance between both principles, and to be as ready to champion the individual against the community as the community against the individual.³

Thus freedom and order must be kept in a delicate balance, and the moral and social principles that attempt to set

1. Niebuhr, *Ibid.*, 77.

2. *Ibid.*, 78.

3. *Ibid.*

limits upon either freedom or order "must, in a free society, be subject to constant re-examination."¹

The foregoing arguments constitute Niebuhr's defense of the qualified sense in which the individual, in his view, is organically related to the community.

It is not accurate to say that Niebuhr has no appreciation of the role of community in human experience. He knows, for example, that there is an impulse toward community in all human beings²; that man is created for community³; that God wills community--even to the point of desiring America to join the allies in the Second World War⁴; that it is an individual as well as a social necessity to seek community, for the individual "can realize himself only in intimate and organic relation with his fellowman"⁵ and that brotherhood is the fundamental requirement of man's social existence.⁶ In brotherhood alone can one find ground for the ethical realization of the individual.⁷

But the matter does not rest here. There is no "communitarian" approach to personality. According to Niebuhr, man's essential freedom enables him to rise above his organic relation to his community and to the

1. Niebuhr, CLCD, 78.

2. Niebuhr, NDM, II, 96.

3. Niebuhr, Art.(1946).2

4. Ibid.

5. Niebuhr, NDM, II, 244.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., 310.

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2. Niebuhr, *ibid.*, 78.

3. Niebuhr, *ibid.*, 78.

4. *ibid.*

5. Niebuhr, *ibid.*, 78.

6. *ibid.*

total historical process in such a fashion that he is not ultimately bound or conditioned by communal life or social responsibilities. But this principle of transcendence and self-transcendence, we are told, can be understood only in a profound Biblical faith which knows "of a universe of meaning in which this individual freedom has support and significance."¹ Niebuhr argues that this insight is basic to the establishment of any community, and particularly a world community.² For from this lofty pinnacle of transcendence and self-transcendence man is able "to aspire to a purity of life which makes the actual community a constant source of frustration as well as fulfillment."³

The sensitive individual, Niebuhr further argues, has purer and broader ideals of brotherhood than any actual community can realize. For this reason there is "a constant tension between individual conscience and the moral ambiguities of community."⁴ Thus social cohesion must always be "partly maintained by the denial of brotherhood."⁵ And it is impossible "to eliminate moral ambiguities from historic existence."⁶

1. Niebuhr, CLCD, 79.

2. Ibid., 82.

3. Ibid., 83.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

There is positive value, Niebuhr maintains, in the tension between the individual and the realities of actual community life. Only thus is history itself possible. The meaning of the historical process is called into question so that man can then recognize that "his own life is not completely fulfilled by his organic relation to a social process."¹ But this can only be comprehended by the Christian faith which knows of "a universe of meaning in which this principle of self-transcendence becomes relevant to community as a means of bringing new richness and a higher possibility of justice into its various expressions."²

But Niebuhr knows that there is grave danger that this vital principle of self-transcendence might be sacrificed to radical expressions of community life. In his words:

The height [of self-transcendence] is destroyed by any community which seeks prematurely to cut off this pinnacle of individuality in the interest of the community's peace and order.³

Thus the problem of the individual and the community cannot be solved "if the height is not achieved where the sovereign source and end of both individual and communal existence are discerned," and where the "limits

1. Niebuhr, *Ibid.*, 84.

2. *Ibid.*, 85.

3. *Ibid.*

are set against the idolatrous self-worship of both individuals and communities."¹

In Faith and History Niebuhr enters into a discussion of the differences and similarities that exist between individuals and collective organisms. He insists that there is a profound similarity between them, for civilizations

do die; and it may be that, like the individual, they destroy themselves when they try too desperately to live or when they seek their own life too consistently.²

As if aware of the perils of the "fallacy of organic analogies" Niebuhr enters into a detailed analysis of the specific relationships between individuals and collective organisms. His purpose here is to indicate how "neither the classical nor the modern interpretations of historic reality conform to the observable facts."³ Here he takes for granted that the Christian interpretation of life and history is primarily applied to the life of the individual rather than to the social order--though he admits in Faith and History that the Christian ideal may "illuminate" the facts of man's collective existence.

The following discussion is a summary of the differences and similarities between individuals and

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1. Niebuhr, *Ibid.*, 85.
 2. Niebuhr, *FAH*, 216.
 3. *Ibid.*

social organisms in Faith and History:

(1) There are no discrete or integral collective organisms, corresponding to the life of the individual. One may speak of cultures and civilizations as "organisms" only inexactly, for the purpose of describing whatever unity, cohesion and common purpose informs the variegated vitalities of a nation, empire, or civilization.¹ It is possible to view the political forms of collective life as having a higher degree of inner integrity than the cultural forms.²

(2) There are no simple distinctions between life and death in collective organisms.³ Nations may persist in a coma, or a kind of living death, which has no counterpart in the destiny of individuals.⁴

These differences between the individual and the collective life of mankind "make it impossible to reach a precise conclusion about the fate of nations and empires," as it is possible to do so concerning "the destiny of individuals."⁵ This state of affairs makes generalizations about cultures and civilizations a very hazardous procedure.⁶

But there are obvious similarities between individ-

1. Niebuhr, FAH, 216.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., 217.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

uals and social groups--a fact made significant for Niebuhr by the prophetic interpretation of human destiny; that is, the prophets were concerned primarily with "nations" rather than individuals.¹

Incidentally, if this is to be conceived as the true "essence" of prophetism, what then becomes of the pronounced individualism and "remnant" emphasis in Niebuhr's view of prophetic Christianity? To deal with "nations" of men in such a fashion is to be dealing with a social entity that possesses an element of self-transcendence as surely as individuals can claim.

These are the similarities between individuals and groups listed by Niebuhr:

(1) Collective organisms have the same sense of the contingent and insecure character of human existence; and they seek by the same pride and lust for power to hide or to overcome that insecurity.²

(2) Nations and empires have a longer life-span than individuals, but they are, as the prophet Ezekiel observed, likewise "delivered unto death."³ Nations seek, just as individuals, to overcome their mortality by their own power. This effort "invariably involves them

1. Niebuhr, FAH, 218.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

in pretensions of divinity, which hastens the fate which they seek to avoid."¹

(3) Collective man seeks, like the individual (but even more so), to claim an absolute significance for his virtues and achievements, a final validity for his social structures and institutions, and a degree of power which is incompatible with human finiteness.² Thus the death of nations and empires "is more obviously self-inflicted than of individuals."³ For the collective enterprises of men "are not physical organisms and are therefore not subject to natural fate."⁴

(4) Collective enterprises are created by the ingenuity of human freedom and, as are individuals, destroyed by corruptions of that freedom.⁵

(5) Nations may become the victims of historical caprice, even as individuals may have their physical fate sealed by a caprice of nature.⁶

(6) Nations, like individuals, may defeat superior power by special measures of spiritual grace. They may also, within limits, "achieve a spiritual victory in the agony of physical defeat."⁷

1. Niebuhr, FAH, 218.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid., 219.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

On the basis of these definitions Niebuhr is able to conclude that "the whole history of man is comparable to his individual life."¹ And all the evils in both categories (personal and collective) arise because of the pretensions and confusions involved in the abuse of human freedom.²

That the foregoing qualifications of the use of the organic analogy do not constitute convincing proof that the fallacy of such a heuristic device has been entirely avoided must be asserted. If we knew more about what is meant by "human freedom" and "collective freedom" the argument might be more credible. But as it stands the discussion involves the fatal error of all organic and "social mind" theories--that they do not take into account the fundamental principle that all vital moral decisions arise only in free, responsible minds.

Thus Niebuhr loses sight of moral values altogether. Only thus could he assert that moral guilt is "common" or "collective." Here is further indication of ethical relativism in Niebuhr, for he will not allow that all purposeful moral activity must have reference to free minds. We will return to this point in Chapter VII.

1. Niebuhr, FAH, 233.

2. Ibid.

Niebuhr merely adds to the confusion of thought in such discussions by his all too frequent personification of abstractions--such as saying that nations and groups "claim" so and so, or that collectives actually "think." Only persons, as Allport has demonstrated, can think, will, or act, though they may lift their experiences into collective expressions and meaningful types of interaction.

We have observed¹ that Niebuhr believes that no community, whether local, national or international, can exist unless it first maintains order and unless it can limit expansive impulses by coercion. This concept is so fundamental in Niebuhr's idea of community that we must pursue it at some length. This discussion will involve his critique of world community.

The crux of the argument for the coercive power of community leaders is succinctly stated in The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness. In Niebuhr's words:

The actual situation is that the first task of a community is to subdue chaos and create order; but the second task is equally important and must be implicated in the first. That task is to prevent the power, by which initial unity is achieved, from becoming tyrannical.²

1. Supra, 287.

2. Niebuhr, CLCD, 178.

This argument, it will be noted, is practically identical with the first two stages of Emil Brunner's "four stages of political justice" in Justice and the Social Order.¹ Niebuhr, of course, does not hold to such a rigid doctrine of the "orders of creation" as does Brunner in attempting to establish the validity of his concept of the just community.

We have earlier noted² that Niebuhr appears to hold a bias toward the primitive community with its natural cohesive forces. The following statement is instructive in this connection:

It may be regarded as axiomatic that the less a community is held together by cohesive forces in the texture of its life the more must it be held together by power.³

From this insight Niebuhr is led to the admittedly "dismal" conclusion that modern communities, lacking in these inner cohesive forces, must find their first unity through coercion "to a larger degree than is compatible with the necessities of justice."⁴

If we add to this construction of community organization another basic principle in Niebuhr's social theory-- that "rational interests have no integrating, community-

1. See Brunner, JSO, 196-202.

2. Supra, 281.

3. Niebuhr, CLCD, 168.

4. Ibid.

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1. See Brunner, *ibid.*, 192-202.
 2. *Ibid.*, 281.
 3. Niebuhr, *ibid.*, 188.
 4. *Ibid.*

building power"¹--then we are in a position to formulate the following rough analogy to a syllogism:

- (1) All communities, ideally, are held together by their natural cohesive forces.
- (2) All rational schemes to hold together and extend community have and must finally fail because of the corruption of human sin brought on by the inevitable abuse of human freedom.
- (3) Therefore, communities are finally irrational entities, and coercive power has become a practical and imperative necessity if either individuals or aggregates are to survive and extend their meanings.

The fallacy in this method of argumentation may be demonstrated by the laws of logic and by the facts of human experience.

According to the laws of logic, the conclusion in any type of syllogism is negative and invalid when the major and minor premises are negative (as they are in the foregoing example in the face of positive alternatives to the contrary). Further, the evidence to support the middle term is so tenuous that a universal distribution is rendered impossible by the facts of the case, and the conclusion that "communities are finally irrational entities" may thus be shown to be untenable. We shall

1. Niebuhr, Art.(1946).²

present positive evidence to illustrate this fallacy in Niebuhr's thought¹--a fallacy pointing to ethical relativism in his concept of community--after we have further investigated his idea of coercive power.

In Human Destiny Niebuhr contends that the perennial importance of power in social organization is based upon two characteristics of human nature.

The one is the unity of vitality and reason, of body and soul. The other is the force of human sin, the persistent tendency to regard ourselves as more important than any one else and to view a common problem from the standpoint of our own interest.²

The second characteristic is so stubborn that "mere moral or rational suasion does not suffice to restrain one person from taking advantage of another."³

Because of the stubbornness of human sin in every conflict of interest "the possibility of marshalling every possible resource on either side is implied."⁴

Most human conflicts are composed, or subdued, by a superior authority and power, without an overt appeal to force or without the actual use of force, either violent or non-violent. But the calculation of available resource on each side is as determinative in settling the outcome of the struggle as more purely rational or moral considerations.⁵

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1. *Infra*, 329ff.
 2. Niebuhr, *NDM*, II, 259.
 3. *Ibid.*
 4. *Ibid.*
 5. *Ibid.*

Conflict between groups is, of course, axiomatic in Niebuhr's social theory.

The antagonisms of group conflicts cannot be abolished in this mundane existence, so long as it is necessary to resist the strong in order to achieve justice.¹

Niebuhr admits that it is perilous to place too much reliance upon unbridled power in community organization. In his words:

Each principle of communal organization--the organization of power and the balance of power--contain (sic) possibilities of contradicting the law of brotherhood. The organizing principle and power may easily degenerate into tyranny. It may create a coerced unity of society in which the freedom and vitality of all individual members are impaired. Such a tyrannical unification of life is a travesty of brotherhood.²

Moreover, the principle of the balance of power "is always pregnant with the possibility of anarchy."³ Thus the twin evils of tyranny and anarchy "present the Scylla and Charybdis between which the frail bark of social justice must sail."⁴

Niebuhr understands two aspects of social power which determine the quality of order and harmony on any level of community. These are: (1) the coercive and

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1. Niebuhr, Art. (1934).¹
 2. Niebuhr, NDM, II, 258.
 3. Ibid.
 4. Ibid.

organizing power of the leading minority; and (2) the balance of vitalities and forces in any given social situation.¹ There is no possible moral or social advance, we are informed, that "can redeem society from its dependence upon these two principles."² However, there can be an indeterminate refinement of these two principles so that a closer approximation to the law of brotherhood is possible.

Insofar as increasing freedom leads to harmonies of life with life within communities and between communities, in which the restraints and cohesions of nature are less determinative for the harmony than the initiative of men, a positive meaning must be assigned to growth in history. There is, certainly, positive significance in the fact that modern man must establish community in global terms or run the risk of having his community destroyed even on the level of the local village...The expansion of the perennial task of achieving a tolerable harmony of life with life...represents the residual truth in modern progressive interpretations of history.³

Here again, the total argument rests upon the meaning to be placed upon the crucial word "freedom." In Chapter VII we shall explore the possibility that Niebuhr's view of human freedom constitutes an impasse wherein any constructive activity in either personal or social life is rendered extremely difficult if not

1. Niebuhr, NDM, II, 257.

2. Ibid., 258.

3. Niebuhr, FAH, 232.

impossible.

Niebuhr insists that the realistic balance-of-power principle is essential to community organization. This is especially so on the international level. He holds this view even when he admits that it is morally inferior to the community of love that was axiomatic in Jesus' thought. In his words:

It is important to remember that every structure of justice, as embodied in political and social institutions, (a) contains elements of injustice which stand in contradiction to the law of love; (b) that it contains higher possibilities of justice which must be realized in terms of institutions and structures; and (c) that it must be supplemented by the grace of individual and personal generosity and mercy.¹

In this same connection, it is asserted that "love must be regarded as the final flower and fruit of justice."² And whenever it is substituted for practical justice "it degenerates into sentimentality and may become the accomplice of tyranny."³ For this reason, Niebuhr contends, we must establish a balance-of-power principle to control both anarchy and tyranny "even at the risk of war."⁴

In other words, as Bevan summarizes this concept, social justice can only be gained "when men are held in

1. Niebuhr, Art.(1941).¹

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

a continual state of fear and trembling."¹ Righteous justice, or the justitia of St. Augustine, is lost sight of when this done. Here is further evidence of ethical relativism in Niebuhr's concept of community.

For justice, as is true of all meaningful ideal concepts, must be a constructive, community-building principle--not just a regulative one. Enforced justice, as Bevan rightly knows, is not true justice.² Instead of postulating love as the "final flower and fruit" of justice³, it would seem more in keeping with the Christian revelation of love as the law of life--and more reasonable in the light of normative studies of social justice--to say that justice is the final flower and fruit of love. How Niebuhr can conceive love as the law of life and then conclude that there is no other way to establish justice except by coercive force is admittedly a paradox beyond rational understanding. If love is not constructive and operative in life as we know it, it is not likely that it will be effective or operative in any life--at least we have no logical ground to so suppose on Niebuhr's terms. In our view, it is a mark of ethical relativism to ignore this possibility of the work of redemptive love in human experience.

1. Bevan, Art.(1945).
2. Ibid.
3. See Niebuhr, Art.(1941).¹

Niebuhr rightly knows that the problem of community growth and world brotherhood is far more involved than is commonly supposed. In Radical Religion he notes the different levels of complication one faces when he approaches this perennial, and imperative, problem. In his words:

Some problems of human life can be solved only by the creation of an adequate mechanism of brotherhood. Other problems can be solved only by the generation of a spirit of love which transcends the possibilities and limits of every social program. And there are also problems which can not be solved by either social mechanisms or the spirit of love. They are the evils in human life which can not be overcome at all except as it is recognized that they cannot be conquered and must be borne.¹

If we are to accept as authoritative a statement made in Christianity and Crisis in 1949, then one of the evils that "cannot be overcome" is world anarchy. Here he could say that

the spiritual problem of UNESCO is in short the spiritual problem of modern man, who must find a way of engaging in impossible tasks and not be discouraged when he fails to complete any of them...Here is an organization which seeks the impossible: a world community.²

Further, regarding world community Niebuhr finds fault with the Christian Churches for their simple moralistic

1. Niebuhr, Art.(1946).³

2. Niebuhr, Art.(1949).² Italics mine.

and sentimental sermons and programs designed to bring "world community." In an article entitled "When Will the Christians Stop Fooling Themselves?" he argues:

The church will do more for the cause of reconciliation if, instead of producing moral idealists who think that they can establish world justice, it would create religious and Christian realists who know that justice will require that some men shall contend against them.¹

Here the dilemma in Niebuhr's social theory arises. On the one hand he asserts that isolationism is a sin, because God wills community.² On the other hand, it is alleged to be a sin to strive too hopefully or energetically for world community, for man is finite and any ultimate solution agreed upon smacks of illusion and idolatry.³

With both isolationism and world brotherhood condemned as contrary to God's will, the only solution left for man, it would seem, is to accept his "impossible possibility" in deep humility, and to try to make the best of his uneasy plight by controlling individual and collective egoism, in so far as this is possible, by a wise use of force.

This state of affairs does not seem to be a

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1. Niebuhr, Art.(1934).¹
 2. Niebuhr, Art.(1948).³
 3. See Niebuhr, CLCD, 145.

sufficiently clear directive for any definite or imperative action on the part of man, either in the extension of brotherhood or the creation of world government. For if man can never be quite sure if his prayers, plans, and actions designed to move in the direction of international order and universal brotherhood will or will not approximate the purposes of God or merit His approval, then it is clear that an impasse has been reached--for the Christian at least, if not for all men of goodwill. On these terms man could not logically be expected to act with the strength of will or the decisiveness that are essential ingredients in any revolutionary situation (of which the need for world community is a conspicuous example).

This weakening of the moral springs of choice and action in community-building is another illustration of the ethical relativism inherent in Niebuhr's social thought. On Niebuhr's premise man could never plan for constructive activity in the area of world order with any confidence or assurance, but only in fear and trembling before the bar of divine judgment. This is, of course, a denial that a system of universally valid moral principles can be constructed as a concrete guide to man in his attempts at extending the imperative command, both implicit and explicit in the Gospels, to further human brotherhood on

ever higher and higher levels. Measured by our normative definition of ethical relativism,¹ this is further evidence to support the thesis of this dissertation.²

One wonders if the sense of fear and anxiety, so central in the thought of Biblical theologians since the time of Kierkegaard, is not so much something native to man as something cultivated in him by this and similar types of tortuous thinking. Surely the Gospel has something to offer mankind besides constant tension and dread between God and man, man and man, class and class, and nation and nation. Carried to its logical conclusion, of course, this state of affairs would lift this dread, fear, and anxiety all the way up the hierarchy of values and meanings into the character of God Himself. This, it must be asserted, would be the final counsel of despair. As yet, we have found no safeguards in Niebuhr's thought against this skeptical and pessimistic conclusion regarding the divine-human encounter.

Let us see further into Niebuhr's concept of community. In an article entitled "One World or None" Niebuhr has this to say on the complexities of international organization:

1. Supra, 36.

2. See supra, 253, for a full statement of our thesis.

The problem of world community is more complex than those believe who would solve it by constitutional logic. Coming in terms with friend or foe is not primarily a problem of mind. It is an encounter of life with life and personality with personality. It may require that we resist the foe, in so far as we find his fanaticisms dangerous.¹

Just who or by what moral standard we are to judge the "foe to be dangerous" is not revealed.

If the mind can be decisive enough to "resist the foe" (for such calculated action, in modern times, is a work of the mind) in defense of an alleged system of cultural values, one wonders why it is not sufficiently equipped to defend a system of values that might well have made such a costly resistance unnecessary.

Hughley has shown, in this connection, that during the Second World War Niebuhr was able to judge Nazism as "fanatically dangerous" because it threatened the existence of Western democratic "Christian" civilization.² But since the World War Niebuhr has been talking more of a "true" Christianity that he himself expands, and is busy denying that "even the most democratic structure of justice can be 'Christian'."³

The confusion of thought here is obvious, but it can be partially explained by the fact that Niebuhr holds

1. Niebuhr, Art.(1948).³
 2. Hughley, TPSI, 110.
 3. Ibid.

that man should not place the sanctions of God upon his formulations of justice or community. All such formulations, it is alleged, constitute "false absolutes." It cannot be denied that Niebuhr has here voiced an essential truth that all social engineers must take into account. But again our quarrel is not with the valid points in Niebuhr's argument with over-optimistic world "dreamers"; it is, rather, with his emphasis. It is too strong to say that all plans at world community will be "false absolutes." Such an affirmation will not stand up under critical investigation, as we shall see.¹

In The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness Niebuhr insists that we are under special urgency in dealing with the problem of world community because of the convergence of two forces of universality, one very old and one very new. Both of these forces, it is asserted, challenge nationalistic particularism. They are: (1) the sense of moral obligation, transcending the geographic and other limits of historic communities; and (2) the global interdependence of nations, achieved by a technical civilization.²

The first, or older form, is the fruit of "high

1. *Infra*, 3 18ff.

2. Niebuhr, *CLCD*, 154.

religions and philosophies which supplanted tribal and imperial religions some two to three thousand years ago."¹ For this older form "there seemed no final limit to the size which communities might achieve, except the one limit that they could not embody the entire community of mankind."² The prophets and the Stoics figure largely in this connection. There may have been sufficient freedom to envisage a universal community for this older form, we are informed, though "not sufficient freedom to create community."³

The second, or newer force (the global interdependence of nations), is the technical civilization developed during the past century.

This new technical interdependence created a potential world community because it established complex interrelations which could be ordered only by a wider community than now exists.³

The new situation is that "the political institutions of national particularity were no longer challenged merely from above but also from below."⁴

Further, the convergence of these two forces of universality, one moral and the other technical, has

1. Niebuhr, *Ibid.*, 154.
2. *Ibid.*, 158.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*, 159.

created such a powerful impetus, Niebuhr finds, toward the establishment of world community, that "the children of light regard it as a practically inevitable achievement."¹ The trouble is, we are told, that "they have underestimated the power of particular forces in history."²

It is significant that a potential world community announces itself to history by the extension of conflict between nations to global proportions. Two World Wars in one generation prove that the logic of history has less power over the recalcitrance of human wills than the children of light assume.³

And since all schemes of world unity are finally corrupted by egoistic ends, then

long before a genuine community can be established mankind must go through a period in which corrupt forms of universalism must be defeated.⁴

Any attempt to form a world constitutional convention that could call upon the nations to subordinate their interests to this new sovereignty, we are further informed, is to become involved in the error of a voluntarism "which attributes too much power to the human will, particularly to the collective will of men."⁵ All voluntaristic theories "fail to understand the pertinence of the Pauline confession:

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1. Niebuhr, CLCD, 159.
 2. Ibid.
 3. Ibid., 160.
 4. Ibid.
 5. Ibid., 170.

'For to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not'."¹

Significantly enough in this connection, Hughley has noted that Niebuhr does not try as hard as he might to "perform that which is good." For on every practical social problem he becomes "rather vague, attenuated, and non-committal."²

The fact is, this intellectual rebel centers his scholarship almost entirely upon ultimate theological, ethical, and philosophical principles. In his major writings since 1934 there is virtually no speculation on questions like the practical functions of governments, the relation of government to economic life, the role of parties, various types of planning, the problem of political leadership, the status and function of organized labor, prospects for economic change, and strategy in achieving a socialist system...It would appear that he is somewhat like the Roman historian who could no longer bear the ills of the present nor any remedies for them.³

With Hughley, we question the practical value of a scholarship that posits religious and moral values with little or no attempt at formulating valid methodologies for implementing those values in the context of human experience.

In the closing pages of The Children of Light and and the Children of Darkness Niebuhr offers what he calls

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1. Niebuhr, CLCD, 170.
 2. Hughley, TFSI, 128.
 3. Ibid.

"a realistic approach to the problem of world community." A more accurate term, it would seem, is "a pragmatic approach to world community," for his argument is based entirely upon the weighing of practical consequences in different courses of action. In his words:

The realistic school of international thought believes that world politics cannot rise higher than the balance-of-power principle. The balance-of-power theory of world politics, seeing no possibility of a genuine unity of nations, seeks to construct the most adequate possible mechanism for equilibrating power on a world scale.¹

This balance of power principle is to be "a kind of managed anarchy."² It has its defects, Niebuhr admits, but without it, he insists, "strong disproportions of power develop" and "wherever power is inordinate, injustice results."³ And some type of government (though he will not say which kind) is necessary to keep "potential anarchy from becoming actual anarchy in the long run."⁴

While Niebuhr knows that there must be a stable accord between the great powers--America, Russia, and Britain--yet he knows that this will by no means insure the peace. Why is this so?

There is sufficient mistrust between the great nations, even while they are still

1. Niebuhr, CLCD, 174.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

locked in the intimate embrace of a great common effort, to make it quite certain that a mere equilibrium between them will not suffice to preserve the peace.¹

Niebuhr closes his discussion of community by observing that "the field of politics is not helpfully tilled by pure moralists."² A more sober approach, we are told, is to understand that

community must be built by men and nations sufficiently mature and robust to understand that political justice is achieved, not merely by destroying, but also by deflecting, beguiling, and harnessing residual self-interest and by finding the greatest possible concurrence between self-interest and the general welfare.³

This task, Niebuhr argues, is both man's "final necessity and possibility" and his "final impossibility."⁴

From the standpoint of such a faith that there is meaning beyond man's failure to create community it is possible to deal with the ultimate social problem of human history: the creation of community in world dimensions. The insistence of the Christian faith that the love of Christ is the final norm of human existence must express itself socially in unwillingness to stop short of the whole human community in expressing our sense of moral responsibility for the life and welfare of others.⁵

This understating of the Christian faith, which sees the highest achievements of human life as infected with

1. Niebuhr, GLCD, 175.

2. Ibid., 186.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., 187.

5. Ibid., 189.

sinful corruption, "will help men to be prepared for new corruptions on the level of world community which drive simpler idealists to despair."¹

We are now in a position to enter into a more extended discussion of the specific aspects of Niebuhr's concept of community which illustrate or lead to ethical relativism in his social thought.

2. The Individualism in Niebuhr's Theory of Community

Niebuhr understands man's essential nature as including both his natural endowments and the freedom of spirit which affords him transcendence and self-transcendence over natural processes. In his words:

To the essential nature of man belong, on the one hand, all his natural endowments, and determinations, his physical differentiations, his physical and social impulses, his sexual and racial differentiations, in short his character as a creature embedded in the natural order. On the other hand, his essential nature includes the freedom of spirit, his transcendence over natural processes, and finally his self-transcendence.²

Commenting on the foregoing passage, Dean Muelder makes some instructive observations. He notes that

in trying to understand what these words imply one must note Niebuhr's insistence on the unity of body and mind and his

1. Niebuhr, CLCD, 189.

2. Niebuhr, NDM, I, 270.

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I. Niebuhr, *GRAD*, 198.
S. Niebuhr, *NIM*, I, 270.

rejection of all Greek, idealistic, and naturalistic dualisms.¹

Noting that Niebuhr assumes the "Biblical" view to be a triadic unity of body, soul, and spirit, Dean Muelder remarks: "How he unifies the triad by the manipulations of self-transcendence and self-consciousness is admittedly paradoxical."²

What Niebuhr does with the concept of self-transcendence is to abstract it--as he appears to do with all of his major theological criteria. Again we quote Dean Muelder:

The primary difficulty in Niebuhr's conception of man resides in the fallacy of abstracting one type of self-transcendence and making it serve as essential human nature...This makes Niebuhr an individualist.³

Let us see if this observation is accurate.

Niebuhr states that man is an individuality. The basis of selfhood, we are informed, lies in the particularity of the body; but the freedom of man's spirit is the cause of his real individuality. Man, we are told, is the only animal which can make itself its own object. This capacity for self-transcendence distinguishes spirit in man from his "soul." Thus self-knowledge is the basis of discrete individuality. According to Dean Muelder, this is what

1. Muelder, Art.(1945).

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid. Italics mine.

happens when this is done:

The author seems to assume that self-knowledge is necessarily or inevitably egoistic, while love is regarded as problematic, a law which man cannot fulfill, and a relationship which is "frustrated by inscrutable mysteries in the heart of each person and by opaque 'walls of partition' between man and man." Here is scant recognition, in fact none at all, that mutuality and communitarian solidarity may be normal forms of self-transcendence. Egoistic self-consciousness is often-times but an interruption of self-fulfilling and natural fellowship.¹

Further, if we assume that man's will is essentially self-contradictory and ego-centric, as Niebuhr argues in The Nature and Destiny of Man,² then it is impossible, Dean Muelder rightly insists, "to unite such inevitably sinful willing in love."³

Even God cannot get out of man what is not there. He must work with man's power to love in self-conscious freedom. If we begin with the isolated will we shall end with the war of all against all.⁴

Fortunately, there is a better alternative.

But if we begin, where empirically we do begin, in the reciprocity of group life, we shall be able to recognize that all self-transcendence takes place in a larger whole of nature and society, and that normal mature living is a process of moving from one level of communitarian solidarity to a higher one.⁵

It cannot be denied that a careful study of the

1. Muelder, Art.(1945). Italics mine.

2. Niebuhr, NDM, I, 16.

3. Muelder, Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

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But if we begin, where realistically we do begin, in the reciprocity of group life, we shall be able to recognize that all self-transcendence takes place in a larger whole of nature and society, and that normal nature living is a process of moving from one level of communication solidarity to a higher one.⁵

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1. Niebuhr, *Art* (1942), Italian mine.
 2. Niebuhr, *NHM*, I, 18.
 3. Niebuhr, *ibid.*
 4. *ibid.*
 5. *ibid.*

psychology of human nature will reveal a sense of isolation in self-consciousness. But we must assert that Niebuhr carries this problem beyond its legitimate scope in his theory of essential human nature. For this sense of isolation, as Dean Muelder rightly knows, is

not the essential clue to the whole communitarian reality of personal existence. The communitarian character of personality is not simply an idea; on one level or another it is the empirical fact.¹

Niebuhr overlooks the values in the solidaristic approach to personal and social problems. He does not seem to be aware of either the need or the imperative for an increasing realization of the essential interdependence of man and nations. George A. Coe rightly sees in Niebuhr's view of human nature an emphasis that would make the growth of communitarian solidarity a virtual impossibility. In his words:

The validity of Niebuhr's social theory hangs upon a single thread. As he constantly reiterates, all depends upon a question as to human nature--a narrow range of fact, as it turns out...The whole trend of psychology and anthropology is against such an antithesis between men and society. That we attain to individual, personal life through social processes, and not otherwise, is definitely established.²

1. Muelder, Ibid.

2. Coe, Art.(1933).

Coe's observation, written in 1933, would have to be amended somewhat by some statements made by Niebuhr in Human Destiny (1941). For here he admits that the individual "can realize himself only in intimate and organic relation with his fellowman."¹ But the central core of Coe's criticism still stands, for Niebuhr continues to hold that "essential human nature" is not subject to substantial growth or improvement in the reciprocity of group life.

In 1942 Niebuhr could say emphatically that all modern liberals and social scientists are wrong when they think that

men can be beguiled from following their own interests and can be persuaded to espouse the general interest by some simple process of social reorganization or educational device.²

And again in 1949 he affirms that all schemes at extending community on the basis of man's freedom are bound to end in disillusionment when they assume that "such an extension of freedom insures and increases emancipation from the bondage of self."³ In fact, man only "increases the bondage by that illusion."⁴ For the increase in human power in our age, we are told, has involved man "in the profound pathos of disappointed hopes, caused by false

1. Niebuhr, NDM, II, 244.

2. Niebuhr, Art. (1942).²

3. Niebuhr, FAH, 234.

4. Ibid.

estimates of the glory and the misery of man."¹

In other words, mutuality has no power over essential man, and self-transcendence is not a possible achievement of normal forms of social interaction. The individual, basically, stands above and beyond social processes by virtue of an alleged "freedom of spirit." We must raise the question: Is this type of individualism a valid one for the social needs of contemporary life?

It is true, of course, that there is an unmistakable individualism in the Gospel Ethic. For example, Ernst Troeltsch notes the following sociological characteristic of the Gospel Ethic: "Its outstanding characteristic is an unlimited, unqualified individualism."² This individualism, Troeltsch insists, is purely religious, and seeks only fellowship with God and obedience to His Holy Will. But this is only one side of the story. For Troeltsch sees implicit in the Gospel Ethic an imperative urge to universalism and a call to devise structures within society that would make for right relationships between God-and-man and man-and-man.

Troeltsch summarizes the main directions of the Gospel Ethic in the closing section of his monumental

1. Niebuhr, FAH, 234.

2. Troeltsch, STCC, I, 55.

study of The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches

in these words:

First: The Christian Ethos alone possesses, in virtue of its personalistic Theism, a conviction of personality and individuality, based on metaphysics, which no Naturalism and no Pessimism can disturb...

Second: The Christian Ethos alone, through its conception of a Divine Love which embraces all souls and unites them all, possesses a Socialism which cannot be shaken...

Thirdly: Only the Christian Ethos solves the problem of equality and inequality, since it neither glorifies force and accident in the sense of a Nietzschean cult of breed, nor outrages the patent facts of life by a doctrinaire equalitarianism...The ethical values of voluntary incorporation and subordination on the one hand, and of care and responsibility for others on the other hand, places each human being in circumstances where natural differences can and should be transmuted into the ethical values of mutual recognition, confidence, and care of others.

Fourthly: Through its emphasis upon the Christian value of personality, and on love, the Christian Ethos creates something which no social order--however just and rational--can dispense with entirely:...it produces charity. Charity, or active helpfulness, is the fruit of the Christian Spirit, which alone keeps it alive.

In Conclusion: The Christian Ethos gives to all social life and aspiration a goal which lies far beyond all the relativities of this earthly life, compared with which, indeed, everything else represents merely approximate values...It raises the soul above the world without denying the world...The life beyond this world is, in very deed, the inspiration

of the life that now is."¹

There are elements in Troeltsch's summary of the Gospel Ethic which, indeed, would appear to substantiate Niebuhr's crucial arguments. But the over-all emphasis, we must affirm, refutes the social pessimism that pervades Niebuhr's thought.

For instance, it will be noted that Troeltsch makes a concrete union of individuality and sociality, and insists that they are ineradicably joined in the Gospel Ethic. If this emphasis is taken seriously it destroys Niebuhr's dialectical, symbolical, and abstract union of the individual-social and divine-human categories.

Niebuhr is right, of course, in his insistence that man has a transcendent destiny. Troeltsch is equally emphatic at this point. But Troeltsch goes on to assert that man, according to the Christian Ethos, has a social destiny of an equally valid significance. In his words:

Christianity raises the soul above the world without denying the world...The life beyond this world is, in very deed, the inspiration of the life that now is.²

There is a profound distinction between a realm of meaning that "inspires" human life on earth and a realm of meaning that, as Niebuhr contends, "criticizes" and "judges" the life that now is.

1. Troeltsch, STCC, II, 1004-1006. This summary of Troeltsch's conclusions is cited in Muelder, Mat. Add.(1945).
2. Troeltsch, Ibid., 1005.

To illustrate one aspect of this distinction between Troeltsch's comprehensive emphasis and Niebuhr's one-sided emphasis, we quote from Dean Muelder's commentary on Troeltsch's findings. In his words:

Troeltsch...recognized that man not only has an ultimate community in God, he has real community in social groups. The group is a reality; it is not a myth. The group is the reality with which our century must come to terms creatively if we are to make both domestic and international living tolerable. One of the great assignments which the Christian Church has to accept in this generation is the improvement and organization of group life.¹

In this connection, Daniel Day Williams has an instructive suggestion to make regarding the various factors that go into the formation of human personality--factors other than self-transcendence.

Certainly the Christian ethic is a personal ethic. Its aim is a society of free and responsible individuals, with the life of each made more full and more free through sharing in the life of all. But we must not overlook that fact that in human life the growth of wholesome personal relations depends in part on the existence of certain impersonal elements. The impersonal factors in laws and institutions and rational ethical principles are not merely concessions to sin. They enter into and support the growth of the personal factors.²

Williams rightly insists, in opposition to the individualism of men like Niebuhr, that we miss the wonder of human

1. Muelder, Mat. Add.(1945).

2. Williams, GGMH, 97.

personality "if we look for it solely in the factors of consciousness and spiritual freedom."¹

Niebuhr is profoundly in error when he states in An Interpretation of Christian Ethics that Jesus "has nothing to say about the relativities of politics and economics."² While these matters may not have been his primary interest, it is true, yet it is too strong an assertion to deny that he had a vital and urgent interest in the secondary social values. In Williams's words:

On Niebuhr's view it would always be impossible for the Christian to identify himself with the cause for which he links his life with others, a curious conclusion...What of Jesus' defiance of the institution of the Sabbath? What of the attack on the Pharisees? What of the blessing pronounced upon the poor?²

Further, Williams finds that there were assertions in history of what Agape intends which had enormous practical consequences for historical institutions and powers.³

Even the saying, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's," which had indeed meant all things to all men, does assert that there are claims which God makes in history. Since that statement was uttered the political order has always found itself confronted by religious groups which point to these claims and their consequences.⁴

Perhaps the major difficulty in Niebuhr's view

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1. Williams, *Ibid.*, 97.
 2. See Niebuhr, *ICE*, 39.
 3. Williams, *Ibid.*, 77.
 4. *Ibid.*

which prompts him to be unduly hesitant in accepting a communitarian approach to personal and social problems is his erroneous formulation of the doctrine of Agape. We shall try to show that Niebuhr's view confuses the relationship between mutual love and sacrificial love.

The concept of Agape is so crucial in Christian Ethics that we have been forced to return to it in numerous instances throughout this dissertation. We shall take up the discussion again in Chapter VIII.

The present writer agrees with Williams, Dean Muelder, Dean Knudson, and Dr. DeWolf that in intention universal mutual love and sacrificial love are one; and that true love intends the mutual good of all in a community of love in which the good of the self and the good of others are included. This emphasis prevents the eventual annihilation of the self, toward which the logic of Niebuhr's position leads. It sees the growth of community as an essential part of the "preparation for His coming" which Troeltsch rightly holds to be the imperative demand of the Gospel Ethic. In this view the work of individual redemption and social redemption are essentially one. Those who hold this view agree with Walter Rauschenbusch in his classic words:

Most Christians say: Wait until all men are converted, then a perfect social order will be possible. Most social reformers say: Wait till we have a perfect social order, then all men will be good. We say: Go at both simultaneously; neither is possible without the other.¹

Since Niebuhr views Agape as essentially transcendental, he fails to take into account the empirical fact that sacrificial love and mutual love often do become dynamically related (functional or operative) in many areas of human life, as in the family relationship. There are grounds for holding that sacrificial love may be operative in creating conditions of peace in modern society, as we shall see in Chapter VIII. This oversight on Niebuhr's part in his discussion of community--together with the one-sided individualism in his view--constitutes a clear-cut example of ethical relativism in his social theory.

We turn now to a second major criticism of Niebuhr's concept of community.

3. The Fallacy in Niebuhr's Appeal to Historical Data

Niebuhr's methodology of simple enumeration in appealing to historical data to substantiate his theory of community growth and decay is inconclusive. For instance, he is fond of saying that all historic communities have

1. Rauschenbusch, "For the Right," Society and the Individual. Cited in Sharpe, Walter Rauschenbusch, 82f.

been held together, primarily, by coercive power added to the natural organic forces of inner cohesion.¹ And because of an alleged "defect of the will" communities, as well as individuals, are brought to inevitable self-destruction.

Niebuhr, of course, concentrates upon the political community, the structure of formal justice, and the strategic problems of modern power politics. What he does not see is--and in this oversight is to be detected further evidence of ethical relativism in his thinking--that any and all forms of community, be it local or global in scope, must have a content of meaningful values and goals to be achieved as well as a grass-roots participation. It is this basic content that is not accounted for in Niebuhr's formal discussions of the political community.

There have been and are communities which do not conform to Niebuhr's formula of a coerced unity. Joachim Wach, for example, was able to write a convincing Sociology of Religion based on the thesis that numerous historical societies have had as a major cohesive force in their community organization the ideas, ideals, and various outward expressions of a vital religious orientation. There were

1. See supra, 279ff, for a full discussion of this concept.

neither instinctive cohesive nor coercive forces necessarily involved as the basic principles of social organization in these societies. One could also make a strong case for the assertion that certain Christian sects and utopian societies, many of which are still in existence,¹ do not conform to the arbitrary rules set down by Niebuhr.

As to Niebuhr's theory of the inevitable clash of interest between persons and groups, would it not have been more helpful to have examined the findings of anthropology that reveal radically opposite but just as convincing, if not more so, evidence regarding the laws of group interaction? Outstanding in this regard is Margaret Mead's Cooperation and Competition Among Primitive Peoples. This is a descriptive, not a normative, study of society; but the data presented here could rightly furnish valid insights in the making of valuations in social problems. Here we find that cooperation and mutual interest are just as basic in human nature as are conflict and the inevitable clash of egoistic interest.²

One might ask the pertinent question: Whence came group animosities, conflicts, the warfare of interest-against-interest? Are they native to man, or are they something conditioned in him by anti-social forms of

1. See King, THI, 185, for a listing and discussion of these communities.

2. See Mead, CCAP, passim.

culture? This possibility cannot be evaded by question begging devices such as re-formulations of the Fall of man argument. A fragmentary solution to the problem of the anti-social personality, as modern psychological studies have demonstrated,¹ is hardly a solution at all. Personality-in-community is a problem of the whole man.

Niebuhr sees class conflict and collective self-destruction as inevitable due to the corruption at the center of personality brought on by the abuse of human freedom. In a sense, there is an important truth in this assertion, if we view the "abuse of freedom" as a descriptive device and not as a basic criterion upon which to base our morality and religion.

For example, Karen Horney has made a study entitled The Neurotic Personality of Our Time, in which the undisciplined drive for power, privilege, and possessions is traced and found to be a dominant characteristic of our culture. These "neurotic" drives represent both a use and an abuse of human freedom.

In a similar vein, Gunnar Myrdal describes these and other cumulative tendencies in our culture as representing a vortex in a disintegrating downward spiral. But Myrdal insists that once an agreed upon system of ethical

1. See Allport, PER; Murphy, HNEP; Horney, NPOT.

norms and standards and a valid methodology for making those norms concrete and effective in social relationships are set in operation by a sufficient number of persons, then this circle of "cumulative causation" may just as easily start upward in a constructively integrating spiral.

It is regretted that Niebuhr does not explore, in any of his written statements, the possibility of such a constructive approach to social problems. This refusal on his part to admit that it is possible for human nature to be guided into constructive "expressions" (to use Huxley's term) is in itself an indication of an ethical relativism that will not explore new possibilities for redirecting human impulses into personality-building and community-building channels.

What Myrdal has suggested in An American Dilemma is no simple optimism or utopianism. He rightly admits that both tendencies--the destructive and constructive factors in social life--may be at work at one and the same time. But here is hope, as well as a program, both of which we have found lacking in Niebuhr's approach to community.

We concur with Dean Muelder in his significant essay entitled "Cumulative Power Tendencies in Western Culture" when he says:

The writer assumes that if contemporary culture were structured according to these ideal values [the Judaeo-Christian hierarchy of values, the humanism of the Greeks, and the democratic movements of recent centuries] and provided with international institutions appropriate to these ends, the dilemmas and crises of the age would be basically resolved.¹

There is a growing number of idealistic-realistic analyses of the problem of human interaction which could well serve as the core of a theory of community designed to resolve the perplexing social problems of our age.² The value of these descriptive and normative studies of the social problem lies in their combination of concern for human life and the scientific "know-how" of achieving desired plans and goals. They reveal an increasing understanding of the true genius of community.

That a profound trust in human reason and in the redemptive possibilities of human nature is first necessary before these approaches to human community can be in any sense effective must, of course, be assumed as axiomatic. If we distrust man's God-given capacity to reason constructively; if we disparage his ability to aspire and accomplish in himself (that is, in self-conscious freedom apart from the intervention of supernatural aid), as we have tried to

1. Muellder, Art.(1947).

2. See our Bibliography for a list of these studies. Outstanding examples are: Myrdal, AMD; Murphy, HNEP; Linton, SMWC; Sorokin, COA; Morgan, TSC; Boodin, TSM; Mumford, COM; Mounier, APM; and the Symposiums of the Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion.

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1. Mather, Art. (1947).
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Mather, ISU; and the Symposium of the Conference on Science,
Philosophy and Religion.

demonstrate that Niebuhr and other "religious revolters against reason" (to use Dr. DeWolf's terms) are guilty of so doing,¹ then of course the labors of these social scientists and psychologists have been in vain.

In Niebuhr's concern for making faith absolute he appears to overlook the fact that man's moral capacity is a task as well as a gift. Here is the ethical relativism in his view. As a result he is led to misunderstand the real genius of a Christian-communitarian solution to social conflict. If life-in-community is a task as well as a gift, which we assume that it is on the basis of the arguments presented in this chapter, then religious leaders are obligated to consider the work of the sociologists and psychologists as legitimate aids in the work of personal and social redemption.

It is both theological and ethical relativism, in our view, to refuse to accept the belief, based upon an abundance of empirical evidence, that man actually does receive in his created being, and through his voluntary aspirations toward a larger life of the spirit, enough power to envisage moral ideals, at once universally valid and concrete, and to implement these ideals in his cooperative enterprises. Niebuhr's fear that all such claims

1. See supra, 161 ff.

are involved in "sinful idolatry" is in itself an equally perilous "sin" when viewed in its wider moral and religious implications. For the end result of such non-committal fear is to cut the nerve of moral willing and striving in the face of imperative social responsibilities, and to negate the true spiritual function of man. In Chapter VII we shall take up this aspect of the problem in more detail in the discussion of human freedom.

4. Summary of the Chapter

Niebuhr's concept of community may be said to consist of the following main points: (1) natural vitality and instinctive cohesive forces form the basic principles upon which all human communities are constructed; (2) all rationalistic and idealistic attempts to found community upon other social principles endanger the richness and variety of group life; (3) since we have lost the natural cohesion of the primitive communities, and since human rational or religious schemes aimed at community-building are finally ineffective, then either the threat of or the actual use of coercive force must be the central integrating factor in modern communal relationships; (4) on the international level, the balance-of-power principle must be the only realistic approach to the problem of controlling collective conflict, though it can never guarantee world

peace; and (5) communities, like individuals, can never escape from periodic catastrophes, for the sinful abuse of human freedom is universal and ineradicable, especially in larger human aggregates.

We have argued that the following propositions point to ethical relativism in Niebuhr's total sociological orientation: (1) his illogical deduction that, since we have allegedly lost the instinctive cohesion of the primitive communities, social justice must be, or ever can be, a coerced justice; (2) his failure to see that human solidarity may be a normal form of self-transcendence; (3) his introduction of the social mind fallacy into his social theory; (4) his basic individualism that does not recognize that the Gospel Ethic includes a social destiny as well as a transcendent fulfillment of personal moral and religious values; (5) his erroneous methodology of simple enumeration in approaching historical data that does not take into account significant forms of community which do not conform to his arbitrary formula of social cohesion; (6) his refusal to accept or consider as valid certain normative and descriptive studies of social interaction which might well furnish valuable methodologies in the task of personal and social redemption; and (7) his denial that Agape is and may be increasingly operative

peace; and (2) communities, like individuals, can never escape from periodic catastrophes, for the sake of which of human freedom is universal and inevitable, especially in larger human aggregates.

We have argued that the following propositions point to ethical relativism in Niebuhr's social-ethical orientation: (1) his logical deduction that, since we have allegedly lost the instinctive cohesion of the primitive communities, social justice must be, or ever can be, a coerced justice; (2) his failure to see that human solidarity may be a normal form of self-transcendence; (3) his introduction of the social into his social theory; (4) his basic individualism that does not recognize that the Gospel itself includes a social destiny as well as a transcendent fulfillment of personal moral and religious values; (5) his erroneous methodology of ethical summation in synchronic historical data that does not take into account significant forms of community which do not conform to his arbitrary formula of social cohesion; (6) his refusal to accept or consider as valid certain normative and descriptive studies of social interaction which might well furnish valuable methodologies in the task of personal and social redemption; and (7) his denial that Grace is and may be increasingly operative

in and through persons in their self-conscious freedom in resolving concrete social and political problems.

We have tried to show that these considerations are not just of theoretical or academic interest; that they are central issues in the Christian Ethos; and that the way these problems are answered is directly relevant to the predicament of modern man.

Nichols' most systematic and fully developed treatment of the problem of freedom is to be found in a collection of three of his earlier works. These were his Interpretation of Christian Ethics, The Nature and Origin of Man, and Faith and History. In our survey of the positions of these works we proceed in order with the problem of human freedom in which Nichols' essential contribution is to be found. The other two articles are included for purposes of further illustration and clarification.

1. Brightman, 181, 178.

CHAPTER VII

EVIDENCE OF ETHICAL RELATIVISM IN NIEBUHR'S CONCEPT OF FREEDOM

1. Niebuhr's View of Freedom Stated

Freedom is a basic concept in Niebuhr's total theological and ethical viewpoint. Yet it remains perhaps the most ambiguous term in his entire vocabulary. This is an honest weakness for, as Brightman has observed, "freedom is the most ambiguous word in any language."¹ It is thus an ambitious undertaking even to attempt an analysis of the many-sided meanings to which Niebuhr applies the term. But attempt it we must, for freedom is central in any discussion of religion or morality.

Niebuhr's most systematic and fully developed treatment of the problem of freedom is to be found in a combination of three of his major works. These are: An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, The Nature and Destiny of Man, and Faith and History. In our summary of the sections of these works dealing specifically with the problem of human freedom we shall include occasional quotations from other works and articles for purposes of further illustration and clarification.

1. Brightman, TSL, 179.

In the first work cited above (ICE) Niebuhr introduces his discussion of freedom by noting that "the human spirit is set in the dimension of depth in such a way that it is able to apprehend, but not to comprehend, the total dimension."¹

The human mind is forced to relate all finite events to causes and consummations beyond themselves. It thus constantly conceives all particular things in their relation to the totality of reality, and can adequately apprehend totality only in terms of a principle of unity "beyond, behind, and above the passing flux of things" (Whitehead).²

But this same human reason, we are told, "is itself imbedded in the passing flux, a tool of a finite organism, the instrument of its physical necessities," and the prisoner "of the partial perspectives of a limited time and place."³ As a consequence, human reason

is always capable of envisaging possibilities of order, unity, and harmony above and beyond the contingent and arbitrary realities of its physical existence; but it is not capable (because of its finiteness) of incarnating, all the higher values which it discerns; nor even of adequately defining, the unconditioned good which it dimly apprehends as the ground and goal of all its contingent values.⁴

Thus the paradoxical relation of finitude and infinity, and consequently of freedom and necessity, is "the mark of

1. Niebuhr, ICE, 66.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

the uniqueness of the human spirit in this creaturely world."¹

It is instructive in this connection to note Mary Thelen's survey of Niebuhr's developing thought regarding man's finitude and infinity of spirit.

In Moral Man (sic), man's possible responses to the infinite grasped in reason (universality) and in feeling (the sense of the absolute) determined whether reason and religion would be resources or liabilities for morality. In the Reflections (sic) the bad, imperialistic infinite became "nature," which warred against the good, disinterested infinite of "spirit." In the Interpretation (sic) man's capacity for the infinite despite his finitude emerges clearly as the clue to the problem of human nature.²

In 1935 Niebuhr could say that

the ultimate problem of the human spirit is revealed in every specific situation, and obscured by particular situations for a time, is really the problem of finitude and infinity.³

What is to be the relation of finitude to infinity, or freedom and necessity in man? According to Niebuhr, man is the only mortal animal

who knows that he is mortal, a fact which proves that in some sense he is not mortal. Man is the only creature imbedded in the flux of finitude who knows that this is his fate; which proves that in some sense this is not his fate.⁴

Thus, when human life is seen in its total dimensions, the

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1. Niebuhr, ICE, 67.
 2. Thelen, MAS, 78.
 3. Niebuhr, Art.(1935).¹
 4. Niebuhr, ICE, 67.

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In Man's Nature (sic) man's possible responses to the infinite grasped in reason (universal) and in feeling (the sense of the absolute) determined whether reason and religion would be resources or liabilities for morality. In the Reflections (sic) the bad, impermissible infinite became "nature," which warned against the good, disinterested infinite of "spirit." In the Interpretation (sic) man's capacity for the infinite despite his finite senses clearly as the clue to the problem of human nature.

In 1933 Niebuhr could say that

the ultimate problem of the human spirit is revealed in every specific situation, and appeared in particular situations for a time, is really the problem of attitude and ability.

What is to be the relation of attitude to ability, or vice versa and necessity in man? According to Niebuhr, man is the

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Thus, when human life is seen in its social dimensions, the

1. Niebuhr, ICR, 67.
2. Traces, 78.
3. Niebuhr, ICR (1933), 1.
4. Niebuhr, ICR, 67.

"sense of God and the sense of sin are involved in the same act of self-consciousness."¹

For to be self-conscious is to see the self as a finite object separated from essential reality; but also related to it, or there could be no knowledge of separation.²

Niebuhr further notes that if this religious feeling is translated into moral terms "it becomes the tension between the principle of love and the impulse of egoism."³ It also becomes the tension between the obligation "to affirm the ultimate unity of life" and the urge "to establish the ego against all competing forms of life."⁴

However, insists Niebuhr, the Christian approach to the problem of sin is not exhausted "in the recognition of mere finiteness."⁵ The claim that it is, Niebuhr insists, is the error "in all moral and philosophical theory."⁶ At this point Niebuhr scores all modern moral theorists for their "complacent finiteness."⁷ That is, they all follow, essentially, the spirit of the Renaissance--which spirit Niebuhr finds to be well stated by Cosimo de' Medici in these words:

You follow infinite objects, I finite ones.
You place your ladders in the heavens and I

1. Niebuhr, ICE, 67.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

on earth that I may not seek so high or fall so low.¹

Niebuhr would be hard pressed to validate his sweeping claim that "all modern moral theory" has no interest in any transcendent references for its religious and moral criteria. This judgment might apply to certain types of logical positivism and naturalism--but even here more qualifications are called for than Niebuhr will allow. Where would one find "complacent finiteness," or any proof that reality is conceived of as "mere flux" in Personalistic Idealism, for example?² And yet Personalism, as a school of thought, has a "modern moral theory" in opposition to Niebuhr's Biblical criteria in theology and ethics. Such unguarded statements, we must assert, do not serve either the cause of understanding or the search for truth.

To proceed with the analysis of freedom in Niebuhr, we note that "prophetic religion" views the problem of freedom and sin more seriously than alternative ways of thinking precisely because it knows that

the flux of the world is full of evil and every higher principle of order to which the soul might attach itself, in the effort to rescue meaning from chaos, is discovered, upon analysis, to have new possibilities of

1. Cited in Niebuhr, ICE, 67.

2. See Brightman's discussion of teleology in POR, Chapter XII.

evil in it.¹

For example, the "community of mankind is corrupted as soon as it is incarnated," since the instruments of its realization "are always specific men, groups, and nations."² These specific men are bound "to introduce their partial perspectives and imperial lusts into the dream of the ideal."³

In the discussion of religious guilt and moral responsibility we come to the heart of Niebuhr's break with all liberal religious thinkers in their insistence that sin and guilt are moral as well as religious in nature, and that responsibility is a matter of freedom of the will to choose or reject a given course of action involving attitudes and conduct. As his opponent in debate, Niebuhr selects Tennant, and takes immediate issue with his putting of the problem in The Concept of Sin.

According to Tennant's interpretation of sin, the amount of moral guilt to be assessed to a person in any given ethical situation is to be determined by "the degree of conscious rejection of the good."⁴ Thus, in Tennant's view, there can be no moral guilt involved where there is no conscious freedom and responsibility in the agent him-

1. Niebuhr, ICE, 68.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Tennant, COS, 245ff.

self. Sin, to Tennant, is moral wrong, not just spiritual rebellion. Without self-conscious freedom man could never be responsible for any kind of evil relating to human life.

Niebuhr criticizes this concept of sin as being naive regarding the true character of human nature. Both Augustinian Christianity and modern moral theories like Tennant's, we are told, are guilty of the error of misunderstanding the true nature of the paradoxical relation of spirit and nature, of reason and impulse. In his words:

The former [Augustinian Christianity] fails to make a significant distinction between reason and impulse and the latter [Tennant's moral theory of sin] erroneously sees in reason the unqualified basis of virtue and in impulse the root of evil. The former theory obscures the fact that a significant portion of human wrong-doing is due to human finiteness.¹

This human finiteness, we are informed, includes both "the imperfect vision of human reason and the blindness of human impulse."²

At this point the essential distinction between evil due to finiteness and evil due to spiritual freedom is explained.

1. Niebuhr, ICE, 191.

2. Ibid.

It [finite evil resulting from imperfect reason and blind impulse] is a different order and level of evil from the spiritual evil which is the consequence of trying to make the self the center of existence. It is this latter type of evil which is sin in the strictest sense of the word. It is here that rebellion against God is committed which high religion has always regarded as the essence of sin. The distinction between sin and weakness is in the degree of this pretension and, not incidentally, as some modern theologians would have it, in the degree of conscious rejection of the good.¹

Thus two characteristics of sin, as Niebuhr understands the term, emerge in clear and unmistakable terms: (1) sin is due to the human capacity for self-transcendence; and (2) it is essentially a spiritual act.

Niebuhr's doctrine of freedom and responsibility is then subjected to a severe spiritual interpretation. He rejects the orthodox doctrine of original sin as "inherited corruption" because its strong emphasis on inheritance "destroys the freedom and therefore the responsibility which is basic to the conception of sin."² His own view, we are told, is nearer to that of John Calvin, who "refused to admit the total corruption of reason."³

The human capacity for self-transcendence, the ability to see beyond an immediate world to more and more inclusive loyalties and values, is the basis of all that is good and

1. Niebuhr, ICE, 92.

2. Niebuhr, Ibid., 90.

3. Ibid., 91.

all that is evil in human life. If it were altogether evil and corrupt, it could not become the basis of the kind of evil for which men feel themselves responsible. It is human freedom, in other words, created by the transcendence of reason over impulse, which makes sin possible.¹

Therefore, insists Niebuhr, if we say that man "is totally corrupt," then he "is not sinful at all."² At any rate, we are told, sin has been stripped "of the connotation of guilt, or guilt has been divested of the implication of moral responsibility."³

The problem of the orthodox doctrine of the Fall thus being raised, it becomes pertinent to inquire: Just what fell and how far in Niebuhr's new formulation of this ancient concept?

In the first place, argues Niebuhr, the Fall is not to be interpreted literally, but only "mythically," for then, and only then, "can the permanently valid insights be isolated from the primitive."⁴ The peculiar virtue of the doctrine of the Fall is, we are told, that "it does justice to the paradoxical relation of spirit and nature in human evil."⁵

In the religious thought which flows from its interpretation reason and consciousness

1. Niebuhr, ICE, 91.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., 72.

5. Ibid.

are not the unqualified instruments of good and the manifestations of the divine. Neither is the body or material existence evil as such...According to the myth of the Fall, evil came into the world through human responsibility. It was neither ordained in the counsels of God nor the inevitable consequence of temporal existence.¹

Here we have a part of the answer to our query of "what fell and how far?" It was not finite, temporal existence that "fell," but, rather, something in the human spirit itself--something which prompted man to an inevitable act of rebellion against God. Man's very capacity thus becomes the occasion for his "sin."² While Niebuhr thus objectifies guilt, though realizing that complete responsibility for the evil which threatens the unity of existence is to be placed squarely upon man and his sinful capacities, he is aware that one qualification must be made. In his words:

This responsibility is slightly qualified by the suggestion that man is tempted. The serpent, symbol of the principle of evil, (sic) in the story of the Fall (sic) does justice to the idea that human rebellion is not the first cause and source of evil in the world. The world was not a perfect harmony even before human sin created confusion.³

Thus we are to interpret evil, not as the absence of the good (as in certain monistic and dualistic philoso-

1. Niebuhr, ICE, 72f.
 2. See Niebuhr, Art.(1939).²
 3. Niebuhr, ICE, 73. Italics mine.

phies), but as the corruption of the good. As such it is, in Niebuhr's terms, "parasitic on the good."¹

The myth of the Fall, Niebuhr further argues, is not so valuable as a metaphysical tool as it is a psychological one.

It is in its interpretation of the facts of human nature, rather than in its oblique insights into the relation of order and chaos as such, that the myth of the Fall makes its profoundest contribution to moral and religious theory. The most basic and fruitful conception flowing from this ancient myth is the idea that evil lies at the juncture of nature and spirit.²

That is, evil is not the consequence of temporality or finiteness; it is not the result of the freedom of human reason alone; and it is not to be understood in terms of "the circumscribed harmonies in which the human body is found."³ Rather, it is a spiritual condition wherein men "stand under the perspective of the eternal and unconditioned."⁴

Since men are not able to accept their limitations in humility, we are told, then they inevitably transgress "the bounds set for their lives."⁵ How we are to determine "the bounds set for life" is not disclosed. All we are told is that the sense of guilt and anxiety will ever arise

1. Niebuhr, ICE, 73.

2. Ibid., 76.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Niebuhr, Art.(1941).¹

in human experience, and that the "moral" evil which drives man to commit the ultimate sin of transgression and rebellion is "an evil will rather than the limitations of natural man."¹

Niebuhr finds that the Christian interpretation of moral evil attaches guilt not only "to actions in which the individual is free to choose a higher possibility and fails to do so," but also to objective conditions in which "higher possibilities, which the individual is not free to choose, reveal the imperfection of the action which he is forced to take."² Thus the simple moral guilt of conscious evil "is transmuted into a sense of religious guilt which feels a general responsibility for that for which the individual agent cannot be immediately responsible."³ Niebuhr is aware of one danger in this formulation of the problem of human sin.

While the ascription of guilt to actions which are derived from the necessities of nature may lead to moral and religious morbidity, it is true, nevertheless, that moral complacency toward them is even more false to the human situation. Forces over which we have no control may drive our nation into war. Shall we accept all the moral alternatives which war makes inevitable as forced upon us by an ineluctable fate?⁴

1. Niebuhr, ICE, 77.

2. Ibid., 78.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

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1. Wiesner, *ibid.*, p. 77.
 2. *ibid.*, p. 78.
 3. *ibid.*
 4. *ibid.*

There is real value, Niebuhr argues, in the recognition that man's freedom will always be imperfect, and that it is impossible to ever realize the moral ideal. The businessman, for example, rightly knows that he cannot be perfectly honest, we are told, for this "would probably lead to self-destruction."¹

A general sense of religious guilt is therefore a fruitful source of a sense of moral responsibility in immediate situations.²

How a businessman would be in any sense guilty if he did the "best possible thing," even on Niebuhr's terms; or, further, how Niebuhr can deduce religious guilt, on the basis of the foregoing description of it, from an act of dishonesty on the part of a practical man of affairs--these questions are pertinent, but are left unresolved in the specific instances cited.

Though man cannot accept his limitations complacently, Niebuhr insists, neither must he assume that his reason "can completely overcome the partial insights and natural limits of finite men."³ For this reason man, as the creature of both necessity and freedom, "must, like Moses, always perish outside the promised land."⁴

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2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., 79.

4. Ibid.

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1. Niebuhr, *LOC*, 78.
 2. *Ibid.*
 3. *Ibid.*, 79.
 4. *Ibid.*

That is, "man can see what he cannot reach."¹ Are we not reminded here of Spinoza's dictum that we have freedom to know but not to do?"

As a closing note on Niebuhr's concept of freedom in An Interpretation of Christian Ethics we include Mary Thelen's impression of "sin as a spiritual act." In her words:

The commentator can interpret such a view in two ways. If he takes it to mean that wrong-doing springing from finiteness is a form of sin, although not exhibiting its quintessential character, then sin may be universal and possibly also inevitable. If he takes it that finiteness cannot really produce sin, then sin is not universal but characterizes only some acts. Since in his correction of Augustine, Niebuhr writes, "Original sin is not an inherited corruption, but it is an inevitable fact of human existence, the inevitability of which is given by the nature of man's spirituality. It is true in every moment of existence, but it has no history," and since the inevitability of sin is Niebuhr's position throughout the Interpretation (sic), it seems better to adopt the first alternative and to say that Niebuhr is here recognizing two levels or degrees of sin. And the degree of sin will be determined by the amount of pretension involved and not, as with Tennant, by the amount of conscious responsibility.²

In Beyond Tragedy, written three years after An Interpretation of Christian Ethics (1935), Niebuhr makes the following statement, which throws light on

1. Niebuhr, ICE, 79.
2. Thelen, MAS, 81.

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words:

The commentator can interpret such a view in two ways. If he takes it to mean that wrong-doing springs from finiteness is a form of sin, although not exhibiting its quintessential character, then sin may be universal and possibly also inevitable. If he takes it that finiteness cannot really produce sin, then sin is not universal but characterizes only some acts. Since in his correction of Augustine, Niebuhr writes, "Original sin is not an inherited corruption, but it is an inevitable fact of human existence, the inevitability of which is given by the nature of man's spiritual life. It is true in every moment of existence, but it has no history," and since the inevitability of sin is Niebuhr's position throughout the Interpretation (also), it seems better to adopt the first alternative and to say that Niebuhr is here recognizing two levels or degrees of sin. And the degree of sin will be determined by the amount of pretension involved and not, as with Tennant, by the amount of conscious responsibility.

In Beyond Tragedy, written three years after An Interpretation of Christian Ethics (1935), Niebuhr makes the following statement, which throws light on

J. Niebuhr, ICW, 79.
S. Thelen, MAS, 61.

the relationship of freedom to human rational capacity in his view.

The essential point in the nature of human evil is...that it arises from the very freedom of reason with which man is endowed. Sin is not so much a consequence of natural impulses, which in animal life do not lead to sin, as of the freedom by which man is able to throw the harmonies of nature out of joint. He disturbs the harmony of nature when he centres his life about one particular impulse (sex or the possessive impulse, for instance) or when he tries to make himself, rather than God, the centre of existence. This egoism is sin in its quintessential form.¹

Moreover, man's sin is not a defect of creation, but a defect "which becomes possible because man has been endowed with a freedom not known in the rest of creation."²

Thus sin becomes, not a defect of the mind as such, but an "egoistic corruption of the human heart." In this connection, one wonders if Niebuhr intends to equate "will" "spirit" and "heart"? At one time or another all claim the distinction of owning the "fatal defect" in Niebuhr's works. If this is so, then Niebuhr does not seem to be aware of the difficulties that arise when his readers infer that "freedom of the will" and "freedom of the spirit" may include the same things, since "will" and "spirit" are to be equated. This is an illustration of the confusion

1. Niebuhr, BT, 11.

2. Ibid.

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1. Niebuhr, W., II.
2. Ibid.

that arises because Niebuhr does not define his important terms more in detail.

Because of the alleged defect at the center of the human personality, we are counseled not to hope for a completion of any of life's deeper meanings on the mundane level but, rather, to look "for a completion of life's essence by an annihilation of the contradictions which sin has introduced into human life."¹

In other words, man's freedom as negative (destructive) cancels out his freedom as positive (growth in righteousness, for example), and the grounds for any hope that human life may have ultimate meaning must be established outside anything in human experience in a supernatural realm of meaning which is able "to complete the good that man cannot."²

In 1939 Niebuhr could see man in the vicious circle of "rationalizing" his freedom to further his selfish interests.

Man actually uses the universal perspectives of his freedom partly as a false front and rationalization of his partial interest in action. This is the element of original sin in all historic activity.³

Further, man can find final meaning in life only in the Christian doctrine of grace which knows that

1. Niebuhr, BT, 24.

2. Ibid.

3. Niebuhr, Art.(1939).¹

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Because of the alleged defect at the center of the human personality, we are counseled not to hope for a completion of any of life's deeper meanings or the mundane level but, rather, to look "for a completion of life's essence by an annihilation of the contradictions which also has introduced into human life."¹

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1. Niebuhr, *ibid.*, p. 24.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Niebuhr, *Art.* (1939), p. 1.

the soul which has become contritely conscious of the fact that the deed always falls short of the intent, that the justice which we achieve in action always corrupts the scheme of justice which we conceive in contemplation, that the soul which knows itself capable of transcending the contradictions within itself between the divine will and self will, is given a measure of power not its own.¹

It will be noted that Niebuhr's "power not its own" in the foregoing citation is not to be understood as the enabling power of the Holy Spirit at work within created beings, as in certain forms of liberal Christianity. It is, rather, a power of transcendent judgment and ultimate righteousness "not our own," which would lose a portion of its power and majesty, on Niebuhr's terms, if it entered into a concrete immanent relationship with creatures in history. One might gather the former intention from the above passage, but this is not the leit motiv of Niebuhr's total emphasis, as we have seen. To view human freedom as related to the gift of Grace in such a way that there is a progressive elimination of human imperfections is neither a major nor a minor emphasis in Niebuhr's transcendental criteria. Only God is, or can ever be, good in any real sense--this is Niebuhr's repeated emphasis throughout all his works. Creaturehood, for him, would have no meaning otherwise.

1. Niebuhr, Ibid. Italics mine.

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1. Niebuhr, *Ibid.*, *Justice and Mercy*.

However, it should be observed, by way of qualifying the foregoing statements, that Niebuhr does make an occasional inconsistent emphasis, of which the following is typical:

Wherever men really fulfil the law of Christ they do it, not by the strength of their own will, but by some strength which has entered their will--an act of grace.¹

Then it is possible, perhaps, for men to "fulfil the law of Christ?" It would be helpful if Niebuhr would clarify why such a possibility does not involve an immanent God and the power of redemptive love at work in man and in his collective enterprises. Either God enters the will by force or by human choice. If He enters by the former, He is a tyrant; if he enters by the latter method, then there is a concrete witness of His Spirit with the human spirit, and Agape is dynamically operative within history. Niebuhr cannot have it both ways.

In The Nature and Destiny of Man Niebuhr's doctrine of freedom-and-responsibility comes to full flower. The discussion of individuality, transcendence, self-transcendence, and anxiety in freedom, constitutes a number of leading issues in this distinguished work. These issues strike at the roots of the ethical problem.

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As a basic aim in the Gifford Lectures, Niebuhr sets out to demonstrate that "essential human nature" is radically different from the views taken by all "rivals" to the Christian faith. These alleged rivals are rationalism, naturalism, idealism, and pragmatism.

The two volumes are quite different in scope and intention. In Dean Muelder's words:

The nature of man invites an analysis of man's personal structure as a self-transcending being, and the destiny of man invites a study of his end or telos. In the analysis of man's nature we are involved in an anthropology of freedom and anxiety. In the study of man's actual and proper end we are involved in the problems of the philosophy of history. One dimension of man is thus the hierarchy of self-transcendence, the other is the relation of freedom to the meaning of the social process.¹

So different did Niebuhr develop these two approaches in Human Nature and Human Destiny that Dean Muelder is able to make the following significant observations:

In the first volume the attitude toward reason is quite derogatory and essentially negative; in the second volume the attitude toward reason is more conciliatory and its constructive uses are positively appraised. In the first volume the view of human nature is primarily individualistic; in the second volume more stress is laid upon social solidarity and community in man's make-up. In the first volume social groups are treated essentially as heightened forms of man's

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pride and egotism; in the second volume the constructive and redemptive roles of social groups are recognized. In the first volume the discussion of transcendence seems to imply a dualistic metaphysical opposition between time and eternity; in the second volume eternity is explicitly defined as not a separate order of metaphysical existence as over against time.¹

It would seem wise to keep these important distinctions in mind in the analysis of Niebuhr's doctrine of freedom as it relates to the ethical problem.

At the outset, we raise, with Dean Muelder, the following questions: Does not Niebuhr's attempt to establish the uniqueness of the Christian view of man distort the view which the discussion of freedom and historical destiny requires? Is not Niebuhr's dilemma at this point caused in part by his opposition to all supposed "rivals" to the Christian interpretation of human nature? The way these questions are answered will determine the degree of implicit or explicit ethical relativism in Niebuhr's concept of freedom.

In Chapter I of Human Nature the reader is immediately informed that "redemption is not in the power of the eternal man who gradually sloughs off finite man."²

Man is not divided against himself so that the essential man can be extricated

1. Muelder, *Ibid.*

2. Niebuhr, *NDM*, I, 16.

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1. Niebuhr, *Ibid.*, I, 18.
2. Niebuhr, *Human Nature*, I, 18.

from the nonessential. Man contradicts himself within the terms of his true essence. His essence is self-determination. His sin is the wrong use of his freedom and its consequent destruction.¹

Further, man, as an individual, is not self-sufficing.

The law of his nature "is love, a harmonious relation of life to life in obedience to the divine centre and source of his life."² This law is violated when man seeks "to make himself the centre and source of his own life."³

His sin is therefore spiritual and not carnal, though the infection of rebellion spreads from the spirit to the body and disturbs its harmonies also. Man, in other words, is a sinner not because he is one limited individual within a whole but rather because he is betrayed by his very ability to survey the whole to imagine himself the whole.⁴

The essence of essential man, Niebuhr argues, is his "freedom." Sin is committed in and because of this very freedom. Sin is not to be attributed "to a defect in man's essence."⁵ It can only be understood, we are told, as "a self-contradiction, made possible by that fact of man's freedom but not following necessarily from it."⁶ Thus sin is inevitable, but not necessary. If it were necessary, as Niebuhr rightly knows, then it would no

1. Niebuhr, NDM, I, 16.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., 17.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

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- 1. Niebuhr, *NDM*, IX, 10.
 - 2. *Ibid.*
 - 3. *Ibid.*
 - 4. *Ibid.*, IV.
 - 5. *Ibid.*
 - 6. *Ibid.*

longer be possible to maintain a doctrine of responsibility.

Niebuhr is concerned with the fact that modern culture tends to lose the genuine sense of individuality, known only to a profound Biblical faith such as he describes. Neither the rationalists nor the romanticists, we are told, have maintained a genuine individualism. The Idealists are particularly guilty in this regard.

Idealism begins by emphasizing man's freedom and transcendence over nature but ends by losing the individual in the universalities of rational concepts and ultimately in the undifferentiated totality of the divine...The idealists lose individuality in the absolute mind.¹

A true individuality, Niebuhr contends, can be maintained only in terms

of religious presuppositions which can do justice to the immediate involvement of human individuality in all the organic forms and social tensions of history, while yet appreciating its ultimate transcendence over every social and historical situation in the highest reaches of its self-transcendence. The paradox of man as creature and man as a child of God is a necessary presupposition of a concept of individuality, strong enough to maintain itself against the pressures of history, and realistic enough to do justice to the organic cohesions of social life.²

All the errors of modern estimates of man, we are further informed, point to a single and common source of

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1. Nietzsche, *ibid.*, 18.
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confusion. In Niebuhr's words:

Man is not measured in a dimension sufficiently high or deep to do full justice to either his stature or his capacity for both good and evil or to understand the total environment in which such a stature can understand, express and find itself...A spirit who can set time, nature, the world and being per se into juxtaposition to himself, and inquire after the meaning of these things, proves that in some sense he stands outside and beyond them.¹

But the only principle for comprehension of the whole--the whole which includes both man and his world--is always beyond man's finite comprehension, for "the rational faculty by which he orders and interprets experience is itself a part of the finite world."² Man is thus in the position

of being unable to comprehend himself in his full stature of freedom without a principle of comprehension which is beyond his comprehension.³

If this were not so, Niebuhr argues, man would be caught in a dilemma something like this:

If some vitality of existence, or even some subordinate principle of coherence is used as the principle of meaning, man is involved in idolatry. He lifts some finite and contingent element of existence into the eminence of the divine. He uses something which itself requires explanation as the ultimate principle of coherence and meaning.⁴

1. Niebuhr, *Ibid.*, 124.

2. *Ibid.*, 125.

3. *Ibid.* Italics mine.

4. *Ibid.*, 165.

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- 1. Heidegger, *Ibid.*, 124.
- 2. *Ibid.*, 125.
- 3. *Ibid.*, *Letter* nine.
- 4. *Ibid.*, 123.

Niebuhr does not intend a thorough-going irrationalism in morality or religion. In his words:

Though the religious faith through which God is apprehended cannot be in contradiction to reason in the sense that the ultimate principle of meaning cannot be in contradiction to the subordinate principle of meaning which is found in rational coherence yet, on the other hand, religious faith cannot be simply subordinated to reason or made to stand under its judgment. When this is done the reason which asks the question whether the God of religious faith is plausible has already implied a negative answer in the question because it has made itself God and naturally cannot tolerate another.¹

Regarding this significant passage, in which an important concession is made to rational coherence, Dr. DeWolf has posed an instructive question.

Which are we to accept, the admission that a true religious faith must be rationally coherent, or the assertion that religious faith must not be subject to rational evaluation?²

It is clear that Niebuhr cannot have it both ways without making an abstraction of either "faith" or "rational coherence."

Niebuhr finds that three basic insights constitute the essence of Biblical teaching. These insights, we are told, answer the problems related to man's stature, place

1. Niebuhr, NDM, I, 165.

2. DeWolf, RRAR, 30.

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in the cosmos, and his virtue. These insights are: (1) man possesses a capacity for infinite self-transcendence which is not identical with "reason" if reason is interpreted to mean the capacity to deal with universals; (2) man is neither essentially rational nor essentially a part of nature: he belongs to both realms; and (3) the evil in man arises in the will itself, out of the anxiety of man's ambiguous situation at the juncture of nature and spirit, so that sin is inevitable though not necessary.¹

In the term "anxiety" Niebuhr introduces a relatively new concept into his theological criteria. In the Gifford Lectures (NDM) it becomes a crucial factor in the analysis of human freedom. It is designated, by Niebuhr, as "a basic concomitant of human freedom."² There are over seventy-five separate references to the term anxiety in the two volumes. A brief survey of Niebuhr's use of the concept will reveal its relevance in the discussion of freedom in moral theory.

In the first place, man is both free and bound, both limited and limitless (because of his self-transcendence). As a consequence man is an "anxious" creature.

Anxiety is the inevitable concomitant of the paradox of freedom and finiteness in which

1. From Thelen, MAS, 88f.

2. Niebuhr, NDM, I, n.43.

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1. From *Theology*, NAS, 387.
 2. Niebuhr, *WDM*, I, p. 43.

man is involved. Anxiety is the internal pre-condition of sin. It is the inevitable spiritual state of man, standing in the paradoxical situation of freedom and finiteness. Anxiety is the internal description of the state of temptation.¹

But, warns Niebuhr, anxiety is not to be identified with sin. This is because there is "always the ideal possibility that faith would purge anxiety of the tendency toward sinful self-assertion."² Just how this event is to take place concretely is not discussed.

Niebuhr notes that when Jesus said: "Be not anxious," he enjoins it as a possibility "only if perfect trust in divine security has been achieved."³ But since man always stands this side of perfection, due to his sinful nature, then he must understand that "no life, even the most saintly, perfectly conforms to the injunction not to be anxious."⁴

Elaborating on the assertion that anxiety is not to be equated with sin, Niebuhr says:

It must be distinguished from sin partly because it is its pre-condition and not its actuality, and partly because it is the basis of all human creativity as well as the pre-condition of sin. Man is anxious not only because his life is limited and dependent and yet not so limited that he does not know of his limitations. He is also anxious

1. Niebuhr, NDM, I, 182. Italics mine.

2. Ibid., 183.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

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 4. *Ibid.*

because he does not know the limits of his possibilities.¹

Since it is not possible to make a simple separation between the creative and destructive elements in anxiety, we are informed, then man may, in the same moment, "be anxious because he has not become what he ought to be; and also anxious lest he cease to be at all."²

Soren Kierkegaard, it should be noted, is the inspiration for Niebuhr's use of anxiety in his psychological analysis of human freedom. He insists that Kierkegaard's treatment of the relation of anxiety to sin in his Der Begriff der Angst "is the profoundest in Christian thought."³

On the basis of the insight that anxiety is a concomitant of freedom, and that it lies at the root of all creativity and activity, Niebuhr is then in a position to reintroduce the discussion of the myth of the Fall and original sin. In this instance he attempts to weave the concepts of anxiety, original righteousness, and original sin into a simple pattern of interpretation.

Anxiety, as we have noted in numerous instances thus far, makes sin inevitable but not necessary. This

1. Niebuhr, NDM, I, 183.

2. Ibid., 184.

3. Ibid., n.182.

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Anxiety, as we have noted in numerous instances thus far, makes sin inevitable but not necessary. This

1. Mead, *WJW*, I, 183.
2. *Ibid.*, 184.
3. *Ibid.*, n.183.

emphasis, it will be recalled, is precisely the view taken of the Fall in An Interpretation of Christian, though in the latter work the concept of anxiety receives but scant attention. Man falls into sin, we are told in Human Nature, because he does not fulfil the ideal possibilities of his faith. As a result, man sins in every act. This "fall" is considered to be inevitable, though Niebuhr admits that there are no premises upon which one might demonstrate its logical necessity. Sin is committed in and as a consequence of man's freedom. Thus man is responsible for evil; and he cannot prevent its existence. This is precisely why man becomes anxious in his limited, finite, and sinful state of existence.

In Human Nature Niebuhr describes the myth of the Fall as "a vertical rather than a horizontal relation."¹ It is not to be made an event in history (as in radical Protestantism), but it is to be a symbol, we are told, "of an aspect of every historical moment in the life of man."²

As opposed to the Pelagianism of liberalism (which holds that nothing is morally "right" or "wrong" not committed in self-conscious freedom), Niebuhr pleads for a return to a central emphasis in the Augustinian doctrine,

1. Niebuhr, NDM, I, 269.

2. Ibid.

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1. Niebuhr, HMN, I, 289.
 2. Ibid.

which affirms that "the will is free in the sense that man is responsible for his sin, and is not free in the sense that he can of his own will, do nothing but evil."¹ Thus, we are told, the Augustinian interpretation of sin is truer to the actual facts of the human situation than all rival theories.

In doing this, of course, Niebuhr embraces an essentially negative view of freedom. And he explicitly abandons the moral conception of sin entirely, and locates the Fall in "the confusion of conscious and unconscious distortion of the facts of experience."² For this reason, either the consciousness of, or the actual condition of, sin is a universal phenomenon.

When we again raise the crucial question: What fell and how far in the Fall? we are confronted with an important contrast in Human Nature. This contrast is between man's "original righteousness" (the state of innocence before the Fall) and his empirical sinfulness (the situation of man after the Fall). This distinction, Niebuhr insists, is less pessimistic than in Lutheranism and more so than in Catholicism. That is, the original image of God in man "is corrupted by the Fall but not destroyed."³ The

1. Niebuhr, NDM, I, 245.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., 269. Italics mine.

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1. Niebuhr, NDK, I, 248.
 2. Ibid.
 3. Ibid., 289. Italics mine.

ethical norm for man is to be "complete righteousness." This norm is still present in man, even after the Fall, in "the activity of conscience."¹ In man's uneasy consciousness, we are told, he still has some knowledge of true righteousness, even though human sin has destroyed the possibility of achieving it. Thus righteousness, not sin, is the norm for man.

Sin neither destroys the structure by virtue of which man is man nor yet eliminates the sense of obligation toward the essential nature of man, which is the remnant of his perfection. This sense of obligation is, in fact, the claim which the essential nature of man makes upon him in his present sinful state.²

Where is the locus of original righteousness to be found? Niebuhr insists that it is to be placed outside of man, and man is able, because of his self-transcendence, to have the consciousness and memory of original perfection in the moment before intended acts are set in motion.³ But in the action itself the self "is betrayed by original sin," and "cannot do the good it intends."

In other words, man may in any given ethical situation possess, in his memory, the perfection allegedly existing in man before the "fall." The self, in contemplation, may rise above anxiety and frame a right general

1. Niebuhr, NDM, I, 272.

2. Ibid., 292.

3. Ibid., 277.

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J. Niebuhr, *RM*, I, 275.
 S. 276, 277.
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"intention." But because of an alleged defect of the will man is rendered incapable of carrying out this right general intention in any specific instance. Again we are reminded of Spinoza's dictum that "we have freedom to know but not to do."

To illustrate this interpretation of Niebuhr's thought in this connection, we note his reformulation of St. Paul's statement regretting that he "could not do the good that he would."

The will stands in contradiction to itself because it cannot do the good which it wills. The will is deficient in the specific instance to carry out the transcendent purpose because the motive power of the will in the specific instance is furnished by the fears and anxieties of the anxious self; and these fears drive in a different direction from the transcendent general intention.¹

As the consequence of all of these interrelated considerations of the problem of human freedom, Niebuhr is able to make the following significant conclusions:

The ultimate proof of the freedom of the human spirit is its own recognition that its will is not free to choose between good and evil.²

Man is most free in the discovery that he is not free.³

The final paradox is that the discovery of the inevitability of sin is man's highest

1. Niebuhr, NDM, I, 292f.

2. Ibid., 258.

3. Ibid., 260. Italics mine.

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1. Nietzsche, *MMN*, I, 292f.
2. Ibid., 288.
3. Ibid., 280. Italics mine.

assertion of freedom. It is in and by his freedom that man sins.¹

Man's self-love and self-centeredness is inevitable, though not in such a way as to fit into the category of natural necessity.²

Turning now to Human Destiny, we are informed on the first page that "man's ability to transcend the flux of nature gives him the capacity to make history."³ Human history "is compounded of natural necessity and human freedom."⁴

Man's freedom to transcend the natural flux gives him the possibility of grasping a span of time in his consciousness and thereby of knowing history. It also enables him to change, reorder and transmute the causal sequences of nature and thereby to make history.⁵

Is this the same "freedom" we observed in Human Nature? Or is it, perhaps, a new dimension of freedom not hitherto explored by Niebuhr? Let us see further.

While man cannot escape from natural necessity in history because of his finiteness, Niebuhr argues, yet there is no point "at which the mind cannot transcend the given circumstances to imagine a more ultimate possibility."⁶ Man's reason becomes both "a symbol of

1. Niebuhr, NDM, I, 263.

2. Ibid.

3. Niebuhr, NDM, II, 1.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid., 2.

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1. Niebuhr, NDM, I, 283.

2. Ibid.

3. Niebuhr, NDM, II, 1.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid., 8.

freedom over nature" and of "his involvement in it."¹

To declare, as Christian faith does, that a disclosure of the eternal will and purpose is both possible and necessary is to accept the paradox of man and history fundamentally. It is to understand that man is, even in the highest reaches of his transcendent freedom, too finite to comprehend the eternal by his own resources. But it is also understood that man is, in the deepest involvement of process and nature, too free of nature to be blind to the possibilities of a disclosure of the Eternal which transcends him.²

Regarding moral laws and legal codes, Niebuhr finds that man, in his transcendent freedom, may rise to the insight that "no proximate law, but only an ultimate law, represented by a disclosure of God's own nature, can be normative for man."³ We are further informed that there is "no pure ethical norm in history" nor any hope of "history gradually purifying itself so that it will achieve this norm."⁴ However, the essential man has freedom to seek for final justification in the divine and eternal Agape, the ultimate and final harmony of life with life.⁵

Where there is history at all, contends Niebuhr, there is freedom; and where there is freedom there is sin.⁶ As freedom develops "both good and evil develop with it."⁷

1. Niebuhr, NDM, II, 38.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., 40.

4. Ibid., 81.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid., 80.

7. Ibid., 95.

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1. Niebuhr, *NDM*, II, 38.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*, 40.
4. *Ibid.*, 81.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*, 80.
7. *Ibid.*, 88.

The innocent state of trust develops into anxieties and fears of freedom; and these prompt the individual and the community to seek an unjust security at the expense of others.¹

On the other hand, we are told, it is possible that "the same freedom may prompt larger and larger structures of brotherhood in human society."²

This brotherly relation of life with life is most basically the "law of life." It alone does justice to the freedom of the human spirit and the mutual dependence of men upon each other, their necessity of fulfilling themselves in each other.³

This emphasis is clearly a new appreciation of the constructive and redemptive possibilities in human freedom. But the reader must not be too hopeful that a defense of positive human freedom is here intended. For every development toward human brotherhood has "a corresponding development of the imperial corruption of brotherhood."⁴ Thus there are no grounds for the possibility that a positive human freedom may be victorious over the anxieties and corruptions brought upon man by the abuse of his freedom.

In Human Destiny is to be found a significant discussion of grace and spiritual power as related to

1. Niebuhr, *Ibid.*, 95.

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1. Wieder, Ibid., 95.
 2. Ibid.
 3. Ibid.
 4. Ibid., 95f.

freedom in man. Here Niebuhr feels that all modern theories of human nature have confused the problem of grace by concentrating upon the one strategy of increasing "the power and the range of mind and reason against the narrower impulses of the body."¹ What they do not understand, we are informed, is that man is a unity of body, soul, and spirit. To say otherwise is "to misunderstand the facts of experience."

One of the important facts of experience, Niebuhr insists, is one that we have encountered on several occasions thus far: that the self is not able to do the good it intends.² In this instance the problem is restated in an informative manner.

The self is so created in freedom that it cannot realize itself within itself. It can only realize itself in loving relation to its fellows. Love is the law of its being. But in practice it is always betrayed into self-love.³

Does Niebuhr here mean ordinary self-love or inordinate self-love? Some rather crucial issues are involved in this distinction, as we shall see in the next section of this chapter.⁴

Because of the alleged weakness within man's will, described above, man, as a unified self, is inev-

1. Niebuhr, NDM, II, 107.

2. Ibid., 108.

3. Ibid. Italics mine.

4. Infra, 379ff.

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1. Niebuhr, *NDM*, II, 107.
 2. *Ibid.*, 108.
 3. *Ibid.*, *Ibid.* also.
 4. *Ibid.*, 272ff.

itably involved in a state of preoccupation with his "self." There is no solution to this self-love, insists Niebuhr, outside of the intervention of God's grace--an act that must "break," "shatter," or "crucify" the self. Why must the self be crucified? Because, insists Niebuhr, it "cannot save itself merely by being enlightened."¹

Incidentally, and perhaps significantly, one wonders if Niebuhr has not here introduced a distortion of the true meaning of "crucifixion." We had rather thought that crucifixion, particularly as experienced by Jesus, was a voluntary choice executed in self-conscious freedom. Apparently the term has taken on a new connotation in Niebuhr's thought. Since only the transcendent God can crucify the self through an act of grace, on Niebuhr's terms, then man's part in the event becomes essentially passive and receptive, and in no sense voluntary (except as man turns in despair for supernatural aid, of course).

To continue, Niebuhr finds that the following statement, first voiced by St. Paul, strikes at the heart of the relationship of grace to free will in man: "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do His good pleasure."²

1. Niebuhr, NDM, II, 109.

2. Ibid., 116f.

This putting of the problem of grace, Niebuhr contends, saves one from the errors of both deterministic and moralistic interpretations of conversion.¹ The first part of St. Paul's paradoxical statement--that man is to work out his own salvation with fear and trembling--expresses man's freedom, in his anxiety, to know but not to do in himself; the second part represents the power above and beyond man which can fulfill what he, in his own weakness, cannot. In other words, it is not God working in man with enabling power, but God entering man that finally "shatters" the self and makes redemption possible.

To conclude the survey of Niebuhr's thought on freedom in The Nature and Destiny of Man, it is observed that

no sinful self-centeredness can ever destroy the structure of freedom and self-transcendence in man...It must follow that there is some inner testimony from the very character and structure of the human psyche against the strategy of sinful egotism.²

This knowledge of finiteness, and the uneasy conscience that results from the effort to complete life here and now, becomes the "point of contact" between grace and the natural endowments of the soul."³ As long as

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There is no substantial alteration in the overall view of freedom that we have here outlined in Niebuhr's latest work at this writing--Faith and History. Here man is still viewed as a unity of body and mind--or, more accurately, body, soul, and spirit. Man's freedom is still explained by the transcendence and self-transcendence of his spirit.

Not so much attention is given to the concept of anxiety as in The Nature and Destiny of Man. In fact, the term is discussed but three times, and only briefly, in the entire work. Perhaps the following is the most forceful statement in this connection regarding anxiety:

It must be obvious that the triumph of faith over anxiety, which is the prerequisite of love, is no more a simple possibility than Agape itself. Such faith and such love are ultimate possibilities which can not be claimed as actual achievements. Yet there are partial realizations of them in history, so long as they are not proudly

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claimed as achievements. These impossible possibilities describe the true norms of the self in its freedom over nature and history.¹

As in Human Destiny, man's freedom is unique because it enables him, though in the temporal process, also to

transcend it by conceptual knowledge, memory and a self-determining will. Thus he creates a new level of coherence and meaning, which conforms neither to the world of natural change nor yet to the realm of pure Being in which Greek idealism sought refuge from the world of change. This is the realm of history.²

Niebuhr argues that the ultimate question raised by the facts of freedom and necessity in history is: How is human freedom related to the patterns and structures of historical existence?"³

If human freedom were absolute, human actions would create a realm of confusion. If the patterns and structures, whether natural or historical, were absolute, human freedom would be annulled. The uniqueness of human freedom makes it impossible to regard the structures and sequences of pure nature as the basis of the pattern of meaning for life.⁴

Further, while men are able to develop rational structures of meaning for their individual and collective life, yet they should not be too confident in the power of

1. Niebuhr, FAH, 176.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., 56.

4. Ibid.

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1. Heidegger, WAR, 176.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., 88.
4. Ibid.

human reason. For men, in the unity of their freedom and finiteness, are something more and something less than Nous and Logos, we are told. And the something more and less which they are

is intimately and organically related to the processes of their mind. Insofar as human selfhood is something more than mind, man can use his freedom to defy the canons of logic. Insofar as he is something less, man is involved in the processes of nature which he seeks to comprehend rationally.¹

Therefore, man must have confident faith in a center of meaning beyond himself. This faith is, for Niebuhr, "a necessary corollary of the preservation of the sense of unity of man in his finiteness and freedom."²

This Biblical faith, we are told, becomes the center, source, and end of the historical process, and represents a power that is able to complete all the partial and relative approximations to substantial achievements in the realm of history.

Thus man still has the freedom (as in Human Destiny) to apprehend the good, in intention, but not to realize it concretely. Realization lies at the edge of history, beyond man, beyond the temporal process.

1. Niebuhr, FAH, 57.

2. Ibid.

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partial and relative approximations to substantial achieve-
ments in the realm of history.

Thus man still has the freedom (as in Human
Destiny) to apprehend the good, in intention, but not
to realize it concretely. Realization lies at the edge
of history, beyond man, beyond the temporal process.

J. Niebuhr, YAR, 57.
S. Ibid.

Modern culture has failed to understand this ultimate solution of the human problem, Niebuhr insists. In this oversight it "has exaggerated the degree of growth in human freedom and power."¹ The moderns have also erred, we are told, in "identifying freedom with virtue."² To attempt virtuous achievements too energetically is, for Niebuhr, a mark of the Hybris; and it is "the root of sin."³ For in the last analysis, Niebuhr concludes, human freedom is just as destructive as it is constructive.⁴

1. A Critique of Niebuhr's View of Freedom

It is our major contention in this critique that Niebuhr's total emphasis is such that his view of freedom becomes essentially negative and one-sided--so much so that he overlooks the empirical fact of positive spiritual freedom in persons with its possibilities for constructive thought and action. This oversight, we shall try to show, tends to degrade man unnecessarily. This, together with other factors relating to this central thesis, is the ethical relativism in Niebuhr's concept of freedom.

1. Niebuhr, FAH, 69.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., 85.

4. Ibid., 100.

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In the first place, it would seem that Niebuhr has made his position particularly vulnerable by his ambiguous and often confused use of the term "freedom." Freedom is, of course, as a concept, a product of the long stream of philosophical idealism, as are "will," "self," "transcendence," "self-transcendence," "reason," "universality," and "personality."¹ If Niebuhr had directed his attention to the presuppositions and wider implications of these concepts, his observations--many of which express unquestionably shrewd psychological insights into human nature--might have been more helpful. As it stands, he tends to make an abstraction of freedom.

Perhaps none of Niebuhr's critics has understood this ambiguity in his discussion of freedom more clearly than Dean Knudson. In his important review of the Gifford Lectures he says:

Freedom as applied to the human will is an ambiguous term. It is used in three different senses. There is "psychological" freedom which means freedom from external coercion. There is "moral" freedom which means freedom from bondage to sin. And there is "real" or "metaphysical" freedom, which means the power of contrary choice. In order to avoid confusion, it is important that these three meanings be clearly dis-

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Further, Dean Knudson contends that "those who limit human freedom to 'psychological' freedom are naturalistic determinists."² Those who limit human freedom to "moral freedom" are rationalistic or theological determinists."³ But only those who hold the third view (of metaphysical or real freedom) are true freedomists.³

They alone provide a rational basis for moral responsibility. If man does not have the power of contrary choice over against either sin or virtue, with or without the aid of divine grace, he is not morally accountable.⁴

This fundamental ethical insight, Dean Knudson rightly insists, rules out both the idea of divine judgment on human history as a whole and the traditional idea of original sin.⁵

It is understandable why Niebuhr does not choose to pursue the idealistic implications of human freedom, for to have adopted some form of metaphysical freedom would have negated his fundamental theological criteria of divine judgment, collective sin, anxiety in sin, and original sin. For in metaphysical freedom sin can be neither universal nor necessary.

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 2. Ibid.
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 4. Ibid.
 5. Ibid.

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2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.

We have observed that Niebuhr applies the term "moral guilt" to actions in which the individual is not free to choose.¹ On these terms it is impossible to demonstrate, logically, how men can be morally accountable for many major crises in individual and collective life, such as global wars. Large-scale human evils would be forces "beyond our powers." This objectifying of human evil, in direct contradiction to the basic moral principle of the power of contrary choice in self-conscious persons, is a serious hindrance to the solution of major social and political problems, as we shall see in the discussion of war and peace in Chapter VIII, for example. It is clearly sub-ethical and sub-volitional to externalize moral guilt. It is no accident, in view of this distortion of the moral life, that Niebuhr's thought has been called a "gospel of moral despair."²

Another major fallacy in Niebuhr's concept of freedom which illustrates the ethical relativism in his thought is his preoccupation with the power of sin to the virtual exclusion of the power of love in man. As Dean Muelder notes:

1. Supra, 350.

2. See Muste, Art.(1948).

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2. See *Justice, Art.* (1948).

One misses in this analysis of love and sin The Nature and Destiny of Man the recognition of the self-transcending power of the former. Love as a law of human nature is power as well as norm, and Niebuhr does not provide for the natural power of love in the self.¹

This situation is brought about, of course, because Niebuhr abstracts one type of self-transcendence in human nature (freedom of the spirit) and makes it serve as "essential" man to the exclusion, or at least the inadequate treatment, of equally important factors in the human self. What happens to personality when this is done?

We must assert that the total personality cannot be assessed accurately on such a narrow range of interpretation as an unconditioned "transcendence," as important as it may be and is in the discussion of human nature. This distortion leads Niebuhr to overlook certain other dynamic forces at work on and in the personality.

For instance, human social interaction, a factor which strongly conditions man--just as man conditions society in part--is an important form of self-transcendence. Only thus are meaningful forms of community made possible. We are not here speaking of a "social mind," an entity dis-

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connected from concrete minds or historical processes, but of the empirical fact of human interaction and group participation which, more often than Niebuhr will allow, has a therapeutic influence upon the inner conflicts or anti-social tendencies in particular personalities. The healing value of group therapy, for example, has been shown to be such that it can be scientifically demonstrated.¹ Yet this power of love in action or mutual aid is as surely a form of "self-transcendence" as is freedom in individuality. As Williams has truly remarked:

It is a distortion of the Christian experience to neglect the factors of social process and human interaction, in which the cumulative historical consequence of the work of freedom is given its place.²

To include these factors is to come closer to a true interpretation of the personality--if we define personality, with Allport, as the dynamic integration of all the complex factors in the self.³ Not to include these factors, as we have seen that Niebuhr does not, is to fail to notice powers within the human situation that make for the enhancement of life in mundane existence. Thus, according to our normative definition⁴, Niebuhr is an ethical rela-

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2. Williams, GGMH, 137.

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A further note should be added concerning Niebuhr's sub-ethical use of the terms "guilt" and "responsibility." To Niebuhr, guilt and responsibility may refer to the outward injustices and other evils that persist in history. Thus these concepts are given an essentially objective role, and guilt and responsibility take on an entirely different meaning from their usual connotation. What happens when this is done? Lewis rightly perceives the dangers involved.

The result of this attitude is to divorce the consciousness of sin and the "uneasy conscience" altogether from the business of living--a divorce that cannot fail to have a serious effect upon practice as well as on religious and ethical thinking.¹

For, insists Lewis, it is an empirical fact that

the effects of sin, even within our own nature, are not themselves sins; nor is the heinousness of sin to be estimated in terms of these, or any other effects. Nothing can be put into the reckoning that we did not intend.²

Sin, in other words, must include morally imputable action. If it is conceived entirely as rebellion against God--even though there may be an "inequality of guilt" in this interpretation³--then there are no rational grounds for assessing moral guilt to the anti-social rebellion of man against man, brought on by choices and actions committed in self-conscious

1. Lewis, MNT, 64.

2. Ibid., 48. Italics mine.

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2. *Ibid.*, 48. *Further* 114.
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freedom. When sin is viewed as spiritual rather than ethical then we are in danger of annulling the positive function of personal freedom. Concerning sin as spiritual Dean Muelder has noted:

Responsibility must relate to choices; historical consequences may be, and largely are, impersonal. What is impersonal must relate to choice as foreseeable consequence, if moral qualities are to be assigned to it.¹

When Niebuhr insists, along with Emil Brunner, that man is the bearer of supreme responsibility for human evils, he is on firm ground. This truth must be strongly asserted against the irresponsible determinism of naturalism. But to present a doctrine that is altogether incompatible with the fundamental belief in free, conscious moral life is, in the words of H. D. Lewis, to "blunt the moral consciousness."²

We began this critique by stating the thesis that Niebuhr's concept of freedom is negative and fragmentary, and hence a distortion of available powers within man. It was our assumption that this oversight is an indication of the ethical relativism inherent in Niebuhr's position, for it tends to degrade human nature unduly. Let us see if there is positive evidence to support this hypothesis, in

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1. Meyer, *Art* (1946).
 2. Lewis, *WWT*, 140.

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Perhaps the most brilliant treatment of moral and spiritual freedom in contemporary idealist theology is Brightman's The Spiritual Life. The view presented here parallels our own in opposition to Niebuhr's concept of freedom. It will be possible to lift up the main issues regarding positive-spiritual versus negative-spiritual freedom by an analysis of this work.

In another connection, Brightman defines freedom as "the experience of choosing from among possible courses of action."¹ As such it requires a reference to value--a standard of estimation. For the possibility "must be regarded as worth choosing."² Freedom is not mere introspection, but it involves "an actual move toward the effective realization of that concept of value."³ There is no true freedom, in other words, unless the reason is allowed to protect and guide man in his concrete choices. Otherwise, freedom remains "a barren and unreal ideal."⁴

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1. Brightman, *op. cit.* (1940), p. 114.
 2. *ibid.*, p. 114.
 3. *ibid.*, p. 114.

Negative freedom is the freedom of personal consciousness from whatever might impair its freedom, and positive freedom is the freedom of a person to achieve whatever is a suitable end for freedom.¹

Negative freedom, like physical freedom, relates to the absence of obstacles. As such it may mean, according to Brightman, "freedom of consciousness from external control or freedom from internal control."²

For negative personal freedom to be complete, the direction of life must also be free from control by involuntary inner forces...Inner negative personal freedom operates when we make our choices without being deterred by fears, complexes, inhibitions, or tabus.³

Thus negative freedom is "a minimum essential to the spiritual life."⁴ But while it may be necessary, it is not sufficient. For the crucial issue in spiritual or moral matters is the view to be taken of positive personal freedom.

At this point we come to an important distinction between Niebuhr's "power to apprehend but not to do," which, we have argued, is a mark of ethical relativism in his moral theory, and Brightman's "power to know, choose, and achieve."

By positive personal freedom Brightman means the power to achieve chosen objectives. As such it involves

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2. Ibid., 181.

3. Ibid., 184.

4. Ibid.

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- 1. Brighman, *ibid.*, 180.
 - 2. *ibid.*, 181.
 - 3. *ibid.*, 184.
 - 4. *ibid.*

a fusion of two powers: to choose and to accomplish.

As Brightman puts it:

In a world of persons, socially related, interdependent, and aiming at shared values, freedom of choice is a ghostly shadow unless accompanied by some degree of achievement. The spiritual value of freedom hinges on the extent to which the free man can, in some sense, not only choose a better world, but actually remake this one.¹

Brightman is able to find positive personal freedom at work in the following concrete areas: the personal consciousness, the organism, the natural environment, society, and the divine environment. Let us see how this takes place.

1. Personal consciousness. Here is involved the remaking of the person's own conscious life--by suppression of the irrelevant, the choice of the worthy and rational, and the planned organization of experience. This is the root of all spiritual life: it is true freedom.²

2. The organism. If the mind is to be usefully and adequately free, it must know its body; it must understand the powers and limitations of the physical organism; and it must direct the body toward health and efficiency. For without control of the body, the range and power of

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2. *Ibid.*

spiritual freedom are painfully hampered.¹

3. The natural environment. Our working knowledge of the physical world and its laws is itself an achievement of freedom and must be used by freedom if the organism is to survive and the spiritual life is to come to vital expression.²

4. The society of persons. A very large proportion of the ends which freedom seeks for the fulfillment of its spiritual needs is attainable only by co-operation with others. Without knowledge of others, we are not free to love; without response from others, we can never build free institutions.³

5. The divine environment. Religion and morality are no mere social or natural or biological or individual products. They are, rather, products of the free co-operation of the Divine Spirit with human spirit. For without free action on both sides of the encounter (human and divine) genuine spiritual religion does not occur.⁴

If God is mere mechanism, or man is mere passive recipient, religion is not a personal experience but an illusory mechanical trick.⁵

Thus freedom includes more than choice, though it is a central factor. There must be action, at once wise

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2. *Ibid.*

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4. *Ibid.*, 188. 5. *Ibid.*

and fruitful. This involves, of course, a profound trust in man's reason. In Brightman's words again:

Freedom's eyes are blind without rationality. Freedom that is irrational may destroy both itself and others; too often it destroys the others long before it destroys itself...If choice is the first factor, rationality is the second factor in spiritual freedom. Without rationality freedom is irresponsible, ruthless, egoistic, and ruinous.¹

Moreover, freedom involves a rational devotion to truth, moral and divine. It means a search for wholeness in life. Thus man may actually increase his positive personal freedom.

In addition to action and rationality, freedom must also include opportunity. It requires, insists Brightman, the "availability of values to choose."²

Spiritual freedom is not only freedom to aspire, but also freedom to climb. Spiritual freedom, in the absence of heights that may be scaled, is an empty gift. It cheapens freedom. A God who gave nothing for freedom to gain would be an unworthy God.³

This availability of values, Brightman finds, is what high religion calls "the grace of God."

Here again we come to a sharp break with Niebuhr's tendency to emphasize God's initiative and man's passivity. For, contends Brightman, God "cannot achieve His gracious

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2. *Ibid.*, 194.
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purposes without human co-operation, both individual and social."¹

Lack of human co-operation rather than any lack of divine grace is what reduces freedom of choice to an empty boon.²

In other words, there could be no spiritual universe nor any real freedom unless "the truly desirable is eventually available."³ Brightman would concur with Sidgwick in his classic dictum that man cannot conceive that he ought to do something which at the same time he judged that he could not do. To argue otherwise, we must assert, is to make a fiction of human freedom, and to negate man's true moral and spiritual function.

Brightman rightly insists that the difference between the free man and the unfree man is that the free man "seeks and takes the highest opportunities."⁴ He becomes, in a very real sense, a "slave of God." That is, he is a disciplined, purposeful spirit, who has mastered himself, and, to a significant extent, his circumstances. As such, man has a ground for finding meaning in historical existence and for realizing victory over his sins in fact as well as in principle.⁵ In Brightman's words again:

1. Brightman, *Ibid.*, 194f.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*, 195.

4. *Ibid.*, 197.

5. Niebuhr denies this possibility in *NDM*, II.

Hope is grounded in freedom, and freedom is grounded in all the high purposes and powers of spirit, human and divine. The last word of spirit is Victory!¹

We are not here arguing that Niebuhr would disagree with Brightman in the assertion that man must become "the slave of God." We are aware that Niebuhr holds that the sovereignty of God is essential to freedom in man. And with that contention there can be no serious quarrel. But Niebuhr tends to direct his scholarship so exclusively within the realm of God's sovereign power, and to so neglect the natural God-given powers within man, that he actually annuls man's positive personal freedom in the end.

The dignity of man, we insist, is just as essential in any meaningful interpretation of freedom as is God's sovereignty. For no rational meaning could be assessed to freedom otherwise. Without this sense of dignity which results from the assurance that human life may possess eternal significance man could not be sure of either moral or spiritual victory in this life, or any life. Man would not then be a slave of God, in the sense that St. Paul used the term (devoted and disciplined) but, rather, he would be a slave of tyrannical, irrational, and inhuman evils that he could not hope to control or

1. Brightman, *Ibid.*, 213.

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redirect; and he could not have faith that God is a morally responsible being who permits His love and grace to be dynamically related and operative within the life that men can know and experience. To be a slave, in the ordinary usage of the term, is to work for someone or some high purpose--either by force or by voluntary choice. Few people would find a rich and meaningful experience in working for Niebuhr's "absentee landlord" conception of God. For freedom-purpose-value, in God and in man, as Brightman has demonstrated, is a social as well as a metaphysical category.¹ That is, freedom and value must relate to and be functional in all of the complex areas of human life--social, political, economic, moral--if they are to have concrete meaning. Otherwise, we argue in a vacuum.

What Niebuhr overlooks in his interpretation of freedom is the imperative responsibility of using human freedom in a constructive fashion. It will be granted that human freedom may be, as too often it is, destructive. But to view freedom in its highest expressions as the consciousness that we are not free, as Niebuhr explicitly asserts, is to take an essentially negative and truncated view of man's powers. On these terms, our major respon-

1. Brightman, Art.(1940).

sibility becomes a sense of guilt incurred in an alleged inevitable abuse of freedom through sinful disobedience of the divine ground and end of existence, rather than where the emphasis should be placed: in the task of redeeming and redirecting the inner life and the external institutions of man in a larger field of progressive attainment nurtured by the Holy Spirit and empowered with enabling grace.

For the highest expression of freedom in prophetic Christianity is the practice of self-sacrificial and redeeming love--the Agape of the New Testament. Actually, Agape is a task as well as a gift--an Aufgabe as well as a Gabe. Is it not true that the verb "to love" has an imperative mood? Love's rise and progress, as James Strahan has truly said, are "dependent on a continuous effort," and the more perfect love becomes "the more does it embody the inmost desires and strongest impulses of the soul."¹ It is only by this insistence upon the union of divine love and human love--divine Agape and human agape--that man can hope to fulfill the law of his life, the law of love. If love is fulfilled only by a supernatural power or in a deferred realm of meaning (as in Niebuhr's "beyond tragedy" concept) then Agape has not been granted

1. Strahan, ERE, VIII, 164f.

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its proper field of activity, nor has it been brought into any meaningful relationship with human experience.

This concrete operation of the divine love in and through human love is not possible if we postulate, with Niebuhr, that man's freedom is such that he must make corrupt choices and be led to self-deception in every instance. To say that the center of the human personality--or the will in Niebuhr's terms--is inevitably defective due to wrong choices beyond man's control is to deny that there can be any real growth in personality, or in the increased certainty of our moral willing and striving as related to the moral laws.

Is not human personality the end of the good will in this life? If this be true, we hamper personality unnecessarily if we assert that the will can never be good as judged by the divine goodness. There could never be even a perfection of good intentions--something Niebuhr will allow is possible--on these terms. For will and intention cannot be arbitrarily separated in moral activity. Nor can will and action long be so separated without cutting the nerve of the moral nature.

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of the human will renders it impossible for the reason and personality of man to sustain universal norms and principles. For no judgment of what man ought to be or ought to do could have validity until God acted to remove the defect that corrupted, allegedly, all the moral laws that man had constructed to guide him in his many personal and collective choices. Until God speaks, on these terms, man can do nothing except as he wills or acts in self-deception or self-righteousness. His words and deeds would be guided only by "sinful" and "relative" standards--all of which would vanish, we are told, when God chooses to act.

This construction, of course, condemns man to ethical relativity, to pragmatic politics, and to a negative, negated freedom. God's revelation of grace and moral law then have little or no concrete meaning, nor could a trustful response from man be expected, for man, as Ramsdell rightly says, must first "unmistakably recognize their truth and relevance."¹

Because of his refusal to emphasize this essential truth, Niebuhr has neglected the high prophetic quality of

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Mackenzie has observed, in this connection, that the tendency of an essentially Augustinian or Calvinistic approach to the problem of human freedom is

to start from knowledge of God's absoluteness above experience, deduce logically from this eternal decrees, and so explain individual experience. We must start from experience, however; and, doing so, the problem is to reconcile God's absoluteness in grace with man's freedom.¹

This is the proper emphasis of prophetic Christianity. To become preoccupied with demonstrating God's "wholly otherness" is to postulate a world of moral chaos. Not to begin with human experience is to deface man. Man's highest hopes, including fellowship with God, could never be satisfied if they were not made of the stuff of human experience as well as divine experience.

Niebuhr's view of man places him squarely in the camp of pragmatism in ethics. On his terms, since there are no accessible moral laws that have eternal significance and validity in history, then man is driven to make his

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own rules of conduct and to "get by" with them as best he can until God acts to make them finally valid and truly universal. These purely regulative rules could in no sense be dynamically related to the alleged eternal ideal Rule. For no objective frame of reference for the practical affairs of mundane life are provided for in Niebuhr's moral theory. His postulated transcendental ideal of ethics, as it now stands, is allowed no concrete demonstration in human experience, and is thus cut off from the world of moral willing and acting.

Thus Niebuhr's view of human freedom leads to pragmatic conclusions regarding concrete social and political matters, as we shall try to show more in detail in Chapter VIII, and to relativistic conclusions in moral philosophy. As a result, one-half of a valid opposition to positivistic naturalism is sacrificed on the altar of irrationalism in morality and religion.

3. Summary of the Chapter

Niebuhr's concept of freedom may be said to consist of the following propositions: (1) man's freedom is set in the dimension of depth in such a way that he is able to apprehend, but not to comprehend or to achieve, the law of life; (2) the relation of finite spirit to infinite spirit

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is paradoxical, and any interpretation of contact between the two areas will reveal only provisional meanings (that is, true meaning is deferred to the end of history); (3) man's essential nature (his true freedom) is his transcendence and self-transcendence over natural processes, including the reason itself; (4) man sins (rebels against God) in and by his freedom, through its inevitable abuse; (5) man's sin is universal and ineradicable because of a defect of the will at the center of the personality--a defect which makes it impossible for man to do the good that he intends; (6) moral guilt may be objectified and thus not necessarily directly related to self-conscious personal choice, though human evils remain man's responsibility; (7) the destructive aspects of human freedom cancel out the constructive aspects, so that growth in grace is rendered impossible apart from an act of divine grace which removes the contradiction and makes fulfillment possible; and (8) the highest expression of freedom in man is his recognition and admission of the fact that he is not free, in view of the foregoing considerations.

We have argued (1) that Niebuhr's view of freedom is essentially negative and fragmentary, for he does not provide for the proper function of positive personal freedom which, on one level or another, is an empirical fact;

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We have argued (1) that Niebuhr's view of freedom is essentially negative and fragmentary, for he does not provide for the proper function of positive personal freedom which, on one level or another, is an empirical fact;

(2) that he does not properly distinguish between psychological freedom, moral freedom, and metaphysical or real freedom; (3) that his view of objective moral guilt is not valid, for moral guilt must relate to self-conscious choice; (4) that his preoccupation with the problem of spiritual sin leads him to overlook the power of love in man, thus degrading man unduly; (5) that he overlooks the fact that it is the lack of human co-operation with the divine grace rather than any deficiency of Agape or divine grace which constitutes the true abuse of freedom; (6) that to preserve the dignity of man is just as necessary to a meaningful interpretation of freedom as is the defense of God's sovereignty, for it is only through his natural human experience that man can aspire to or realize God's will or the moral laws, and thus to gain the assurance that such possibilities may be valid for him; and (7) that Niebuhr has not validated his claim that man has no enabling power to achieve victory over sin in fact as well as in principle.

In our view, the total effect of these emphases in Niebuhr's view of freedom is to condemn man to ethical relativity, to pragmatic politics, and to a negative, impotent freedom. This defaces man unnecessarily, and makes God appear as a careless, irresponsible Deity--

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careless because He does not provide man, on Niebuhr's terms, with power to actualize love and the moral laws in concrete personal and social matters, and irresponsible because He places before man a goal and a task that he cannot hope to realize to any meaningful degree.

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If Niebuhr is consistent in his repeated assertion that he will not commit the error of Kierkegaard and Barth in a too rigorous interpretation of dialectical theology that denies meaning to either reality or history, then he must accept as valid the claim of the liberal theologians that God's grace and grace are dynamically related (functional or operative) to human willing and striving.

Since Niebuhr denies this dynamic and concrete relationship of God to human experience and historical processes, and asserts that God makes contact with man only in judgment upon his moral, social, and political achievements (with the qualification that grace is certain rather than possible) and since he continues to resort to paradoxical explanations that take as abstraction of all ultimate ideals and meanings, then he has already negated his own end and all other constructive and redemptive factors at work within human experience, making unavailing his own moral principles and religiously significant.

CHAPTER VIII

EVIDENCE OF ETHICAL RELATIVISM IN NIEBUHR'S VIEW OF WAR AND PEACE

1. A Restatement of the Central Thesis of this Dissertation

If Niebuhr is consistent in his repeated assertion that he will not commit the error of Kierkegaard and Barth in a too rigorous interpretation of dialectical theology that denies meaning to either mankind or history, then he must accept as valid the claim of the liberal theologians that God's Agape and grace are dynamically related (functional or operative) to human willing and striving.

Since Niebuhr denies this dynamic and concrete relationship of God to human experience and historical processes, and asserts that God makes contact with man only in judgment upon his moral, social, and political achievements (with the qualification that grace is pardon rather than power); and since he continues to resort to paradoxical explanations that make an abstraction of all ultimate ideals and meanings, then he has virtually negated his own and all other constructive and redemptive factors at work within human experience, among which universally valid moral principles are especially significant.

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perpetual explanations that make an abstraction of all

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valid moral principles are especially significant.

When this is done, of course, we are confronted with the radical contradiction that Niebuhr desires to evade by means of paradoxical argumentation. For if moral principles, human structures of community, and historical approximations to the alleged absolute ideal of love are in every instance defeated in history simply because God, in His judgment, pronounces them imperfect and hence to be "crucified" in order to make way for final completion and fulfillment in a different order from anything in the natural order--when this is done, then all human willing and acting is devoid of concrete meaning or eternal significance. If human aspiration and achievement can have no vital relationship to eternally valid values, then there are no rational grounds--for there is no proper metaphysical frame of reference--for asserting that man has any real freedom, or that he is created "in the image" of God.

There can be no more radical contradiction of divine and human love than this denial of concrete and eternal meaning to human willing and acting. This denial is both implicit and explicit in Niebuhr's thought. Thus Niebuhr's readers are led to the sub-ethical and sub-Christian conclusion that God's purposes cannot be realized in and through persons in either time or eternity, but only in and through God Himself. Thus the

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human side of the work of personal and social redemption is lacking in any ideal value, and we are driven to aspire after the absolute, hidden, and divine order of value.

But no rational content in the alleged divine ideal which stands in judgment on and in contradiction to human formulations of value is provided in Niebuhr's writings. It is, of course, logically and psychologically unsound to base a morality or a religion upon an unknown and undefined principle. Of what possible value is an ultimate ideal that is exempt from human considerations? Man is not constituted with such a moral nature that he will long be loyal to an ideal or a realm of meaning that cannot be brought into any meaningful relationship with anything he can know and experience.

Consequently, we must assert that Niebuhr's moral and social theory is undermined by a pervasive ethical relativism. This ethical relativism, which we have defined as the view that man as man is incapable, apart from social pressure or the intervention of supernatural aid, of formulating universally valid moral principles that can function concretely as a guide to persons in the historical task of achieving the good life both individually and collectively, is inherent in Niebuhr's

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view of man's vocation in the universe, his interpretation of God in history, his concept of community, and his view of freedom.

One further question awaits investigation: Is there evidence of ethical relativism in Niebuhr's views on war and peace, and in the related area of love versus coercion in human relationships? In this discussion we shall try to show that with respect to these concrete problems man, on Niebuhr's terms, is incapable of resolving them on the basis of any moral or religious principles available in mundane existence.

2. Niebuhr's View of Coercive Force

The core of Niebuhr's thinking in regard to love and coercion in individual and group life may be found in four of his major works. These are: Moral Man and Immoral Society, An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, Christianity and Power Politics, and The Nature and Destiny of Man. It will be possible to set forth the author's leading ideas in this connection by our methodology of quotation, explanation, and criticism without doing injustice either to his thought or to the vital subject under investigation.

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Marxian interpretation of human nature and class conflict, came to full flower in Moral Man. It is true that this significant development was heralded for several months prior to the publication of this work (1932) in various articles and editorials in Radical Religion, a publication of the Fellowship of Socialist Christians, and in a small treatise published in the same year as Moral Man entitled The Contribution of Religion to Social Work.

In the latter work cited, Niebuhr informs his readers that the basic problem of social justice is the control of power and coercion, and that all social scientists and religious idealists (such as pacifists) merely "abhor" the realities of practical politics, and invariably underestimate the evil in man's make-up. He says, Marx-wise, that

the sentimentalities and errors of the social and religious idealists are the natural limitations of the class to which they belong. Their errors belong to the social outlook of the middle classes, who do not understand that there are inexorable movements of economic power, because they neither wield it nor suffer from it...They fail to understand the brutalities of inter-group life...They are just as naive in dealing with international relations.¹

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Further, since equal justice cannot be achieved without political struggle and coercion, we are told, then idealists

are "peculiarly awkward in their approach to the ethico-political problem."¹ However, it is true, Niebuhr admits, that coercion, ideally, is a "non-violent coercion."²

In Moral Man the reader is immediately informed that man is basically an irrational creature, and that there will inevitably be a conflict of interests between persons and groups. In this perpetual conflict "power must be challenged by power."³ As the discussion proceeds, we shall understand more what Niebuhr means by the terms "conflict" and "power."

Niebuhr bases his social and political "realism" on the alleged tragic limitation of the human imagination, the too easy subservience of reason to prejudice and passion, and the consequent persistence of irrational egoism, particularly in group behavior, which "make social conflict an inevitability in human history, probably to its very end."³

Having postulated as axiomatic the irrationality of inter-group relations that makes the establishment of peace and equal justice a virtual impossibility, Niebuhr is then in a position to make the following significant

1. Niebuhr, CRSW, 88.

2. Ibid.

3. Niebuhr, MMIS, xx.

are "peculiarly awkward in their approach to the ethical-political problem."¹ However, it is true, Niebuhr admits that coercion, ideally, is a "non-violent coercion."²

In Moral Man the reader is immediately informed

that man is basically an irrational creature, and that there will inevitably be a conflict of interests between persons and groups. In this perpetual conflict "power" must be challenged by power."³ As the discussion proceeds, we shall understand more what Niebuhr means by the terms "conflict" and "power."

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1. Niebuhr, *GRW*, 68.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Niebuhr, *NWB*, xx.

conclusion:

The relations between groups must therefore always be predominantly political rather than ethical, that is, they will be determined by the proportion of power which each group possesses at least as much as by rational and moral appraisal of the comparative needs and claims of each group.¹

In another connection in this same year (1932) Niebuhr stated succinctly his distrust of ethical inter-group relations. He asserts that "man can never resolve in purely ethical terms the conflict between what is and what ought to be."² Moreover, we are informed, coercion is just as effective in the work of social redemption, if not more so, than is any rational ethical suasion.

The hope of attaining an ethical goal for society by ethical means, that is, without coercion, and without the assertion of the interests of the under-privileged, is an illusion which was spread chiefly among the comfortable classes of the past century.³

As one answer to the query: Why is coercion a necessity in society? Niebuhr states:

If there is a law in our members which wars against the law that is in our minds as individuals, this is even more true when we think of society. Individuals set the goal for society but society itself must achieve the goal, and society is and will always be sub-human.⁴

1. Niebuhr, MMIS, xxiii. Italics mine.

2. Niebuhr, Art.(1932).²

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid. Italics mine.

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The relations between groups must therefore
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1. Richard, W.M., XIII, Ethics mine.
2. Richard, Art. (1933), S.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., Ethics mine.

Thus, we are told, a true political realism must know that the appeal to reason, the formulation of ethical goals for society, and the ethics of love "may qualify the social struggle of history" but they "will never abolish it."¹ And those who make the attempt "will die on the cross."²

The casual or superficial observer, Niebuhr finds, will tend to overestimate the moral and rational factors at work in the political arena, and at the same time will overlook the "covert" types of coercive force used in every social situation. For example, the threat of violence entails a form of coercion just as clearly as does actual violence.³ For this reason, it is argued, the "hidden" expressions of power are more vicious than occasional violent outbreaks, such as proletarian revolutions aimed at mitigating the growing disproportion of power in an industrial society, since they fester relatively unnoticed in the social body.

Niebuhr contends that society is perennially harassed by two facts. These are: (1) the overt and covert factors in social life which create injustice in the process of establishing peace; and (2) the tendency

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2. Ibid.

3. Niebuhr, MMIS, xxiii.

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1. Niebuhr, *Art. (1932)*, p. 2.
 2. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
 3. Niebuhr, *WMS, XIII*, xliii.

of these same coercive factors to aggravate inter-group conflict.¹ In his discussion of these factors Niebuhr presents his view of the predominant causes of war. In his words:

Power sacrifices justice to peace within the community and destroys peace between communities. It is not true that only kings make war. The common members of any national community, while sentimentally desiring peace, nevertheless indulge impulses of envy, jealousy, pride, bigotry, and greed which make for conflict between communities. Neither is it true that modern wars are caused solely by the modern capitalistic system with its disproportion of economic power and privilege. Without an almost miraculous increase in human intelligence it will not be easy to resolve the conflicts of interest between various national communities even after the special privilege and the unequal power, which now aggravate international conflicts, have been destroyed.²

Moreover, Niebuhr insists, the whole history of mankind bears testimony to the fact that "the power which prevents anarchy in intra-group relations encourages anarchy in inter-group relations."³ Thus the same motives and attitudes that prompt bloodshed between particular persons are merely lifted to a higher dimension of fury in global conflict.

Pride, jealousy, disappointed love, hurt vanity, greed for greater treasures, lust for power over larger dominions, petty animosities between royal brothers or between father and

1. Niebuhr, *Ibid.*, 16.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*

son, momentary passions and childish whims, these all have been, not the occasional but the perennially recurring, causes and occasions of international conflict.¹

The will-to-power which results from a combination of these selfish motives is characteristic of competing national groups, we are told, and is "the cause of the international anarchy which the moral sense of mankind has thus far vainly striven to overcome."²

Thus society is in a perpetual state of war. Lacking moral and rational resources to organize its life, without resort to coercion, except in the most immediate and intimate groups social groups, men remain the victims of the individuals, classes and nations by whose force a momentary coerced unity is created. The fact that the coercive factor in society is both necessary and dangerous seriously complicates the whole task of securing both peace and justice.³

It is instructive that in the same year that Niebuhr could go to such pains in presenting the foregoing rational analysis of the causes of war (though we have reservations regarding the rational validity of certain of his theses, as we shall see), he could pronounce the rank and file of persons and groups as irrational and sub-human. The reader naturally wonders why one who goes to such an effort to present a rational analysis of wars--an analysis clearly based

1. Niebuhr, MMIS, 17.

2. Ibid., 18.

3. Ibid., 20.

upon some standards of moral estimation, as all evaluations must be--does not at the same time go to equal pains in presenting a rational ethical program of the causes of peace. This one-sidedness is in itself a mark of ethical relativism, for it represents a fragmentary employment of available powers within men and groups. Analysis is valuable and necessary; the ways and means of applying constructive, problem-solving measures is even more valuable and desirable.

In Moral Man Niebuhr states his major criticisms of pacifists and all advocates of non-resistance. The trouble with idealistic pacifists is, we are told, that "they note the evils which force introduces into society and then give themselves to the vain illusion that force can be eliminated, and society organized upon the basis of anarchistic principles."¹ The actual fact is, Niebuhr argues, that moral goodwill is so impossible among the wielders of power in society that such idealistic theories as pacifism and non-resistance constitute "blind leaders of the blind."

Practical politics, Niebuhr insists, is concerned with a more serious problem than non-resistance: the avoidance of both tyranny and anarchy. In his words:

1. Niebuhr, MMIS, 20.

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So difficult is it to avoid the Scylla of despotism and the Charybdis of anarchy that it is safe to hazard the prophecy that the dream of perpetual peace and brotherhood for human society is one which will never be fully realized.¹

Apparently, Niebuhr knows something of what the ultimate good is--in this case human brotherhood and perpetual peace--and what he wishes to avoid (tyranny and anarchy) but he does not know what can be done concretely either to realize the "dream" or to find any safe and relatively sure means of avoiding the evils apart from the use or threatened use of coercive power by delegated institutions in society.

While society cannot hope to avoid the use of coercion in one way or another, Niebuhr further argues, yet it must seek to make coercion "ethically responsible."

The problem society faces is clearly one of reducing force by increasing the factors which make for a moral and rational adjustment of life to life; of bringing such force as is still necessary under the responsibility of the whole of society; of destroying the kind of power which cannot be made socially responsible (the power which resides in economic ownership for instance); and of bringing forces of moral self-restraint to bear upon types of power which can never be brought completely under social control.²

The "stupidity of the average man" and the tragic

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limitation of intelligence in society, it is asserted, makes the use of coercive methods against irresponsible power an inevitability--though it is admitted that this procedure "will always run the peril of introducing new forms of injustice in place of those abolished."¹ Since the utopian dream of peace is an impossibility, collective man "must content himself with a more modest goal."² What is this modest goal?

Man's concern for some centuries to come is not the creation of an ideal society in which there will be uncoerced and perfect peace and justice, but a society in which there will be enough justice, and in which coercion will be sufficiently non-violent to prevent his common enterprise from issuing into complete disaster.³

This more practical goal is deemed superior to the ethical goals of the "romanticists," who have so little understanding of human nature and group dynamics, we are told, that "any goal regarded as worthy of achievement by them must necessarily be beyond attainment."⁴

Niebuhr contends that those, like the pacifists, who assume that coercion and warfare are intrinsically immoral are in error on two specific counts. These are: (1) in the belief that violence is a natural and inevitable

1. Niebuhr, MMIS, 21.
2. Ibid., 22.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.

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1. Wilson, W. L., 21.
 2. Ibid., 22.
 3. Ibid., 23.
 4. Ibid., 24.

expression of ill-will, and that violence is therefore intrinsically evil and non-violence intrinsically good; and (2) in the uncritical identification of traditionalised instrumental values with intrinsic moral values.¹

In the first place, Niebuhr admits that proposition (1) above does contain a measure of validity-- or at least of plausibility. But it is certainly not universally valid.²

It is less valid in inter-group relations than in individual relations, if our assumption is correct that the achievement of harmony and justice between groups requires a measure of coercion, which is not necessary in the most intimate and the most imaginative individual relations.³

For once we admit the factor of coercion "as ethically justified, though we concede that it is always morally dangerous, we cannot draw any absolute line of demarcation between violent and non-violent coercion."⁴

Moreover, Niebuhr admits, "we may argue that the immediate consequences of violence are such that they frustrate the ultimate purpose by which it is justified."⁵ But if this is true, we are told, it is "certainly not self-evident," and violence "can therefore not be ruled out on a priori grounds."⁶

1. Niebuhr, *Ibid.*, 172.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*

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4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*

The difference between violence and non-violence is not an absolute one, even though there may be important distinctions, which must be weighed carefully. Gandhi's boycott of British cotton results in the undernourishment of children in Manchester, and the blockade of the Allies in wartime caused the death of German children. It is impossible to coerce a group without damaging both life and property and without imperilling the interests of the innocent with those of the guilty. These are factors which are involved in the intricacies of group relations; and they make it impossible to transfer an ethic of personal relations uncritically to the field of inter-group relations.¹

In the second place, Niebuhr finds that proposition (2) above represents a further error in pacifism--its uncritical identification of traditionalised instrumental values with intrinsic moral values.² He says further:

Only goodwill is intrinsically good. But as soon as goodwill expresses itself in specific actions, it must be determined whether the right motive has chosen the right instruments for the attainment of its goal and whether the objective is a defensible one. For reason may err in guiding the righteous will in the choice of either means or ends. But there are certain specific actions and attitudes which are generally not judged in terms of their adequacy in achieving an approved social end. Experience has established them; and their traditionalised instrumental value is regarded as an intrinsic one.³

Examples of these specific actions and attitudes are:

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1. Niebuhr, MMIS, 173; Cf. NDM, I, 22.
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Examples of these specific actions and attitudes are:

1. Niebuhr, *MORALS*, 178; cf. *NDM*, I, 22.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*

respect for the life, the opinions, and the interests of other persons. Thus, in purely "personal relations" non-violence is a justified procedure.

It is good to trust the neighbor, for it will prompt him to trustworthy action; it is good to respect his life because this respect helps to establish and preserve that general reverence for life upon which all morality rests; it is good not to coerce the opinions of the other because coercion does not change opinion or because it may give an undue advantage to the wrong opinion; it is good to tell the truth because truth-telling facilitates the sharing of experience which is basic to all social life. Such justifiable judgments as these may not be universally accepted, but they are the working capital of personal morality.¹

But even on the more intimate personal level, Niebuhr insists, these so-called moral values cannot be regarded as absolute. For every value, in any given instance, "may have to be sacrificed to some other value."²

Every action resolves a certain competition between values, in which one value must be subordinated to another. This is necessary in a specific instance even though there may be an ultimate harmony of all high and legitimate moral values...A reflective morality is constantly under the necessity of re-analysing moral values which are regarded as intrinsically good and of judging them in instrumental terms.³

Here we detect a strong element of ethical relativism. Who is to determine what value is to be sacri-

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2. *Ibid.*, 174.

3. *Ibid.*

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2. *Ibid.*, 174.
3. *Ibid.*

ficed to what other value? What criterion is to be used? How can there be a "reflective morality" without some valid system of objective moral values to reflect upon? Moral values do not exist in an intellectual or metaphysical vacuum. If they are to be valid guides to man, they must be rationally demonstrable and capable of concrete application--neither of which Niebuhr has adequately provided for.

As if aware that this construction brings one perilously close to the doctrine of expediency in the moral life, Niebuhr has this to say:

The more inclusive the ends¹ which are held in view, the more the immediate consequences of an action cease to be the authoritative criteria of moral judgment. Since society must constantly deal with these inclusive ends, it always seems to capitulate to the dangerous principle that the end justifies the means. All morality really accepts that principle, but the fact is obscured by the assumption, frequently though not universally justified, that the character of immediate consequences guarantees the character of the ultimate end.²

For example, a community may believe, as it usually does, we are told, that "reverence for life is a basic moral

1. We are reminded here of Brightman's "law of the most inclusive end" in Moral Laws, 183, with the crucial distinction that Brightman appeals to the criterion of a coherent life including a rational system of values, while Niebuhr makes no such appeal.

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attitude and yet rob a criminal of his life in order to deter others from taking life."¹

The community may be wrong in doing this; but if it is, the error is not in taking the life but in following a policy which does not really deter others from murder. The question cannot be resolved on a priori grounds but only by observing the social consequences of various types of punishment.²

Niebuhr seems to imply, in the above and other instances, that all liberal or rational systems of ethics appeal to a priori grounds to validate their major criteria. That this is a distortion of fact can be shown by a glance at the writings of a growing number of Personalistic Idealists, for example, who construct their moral and religious criteria quite as much out of rational considerations of concrete human experience as by any priori principles (thus Brightman, Flewelling, Harkness, Muelder, Bertocci, DeWolf).

Niebuhr admits that his solution to the problem of punishment for criminals is a pragmatic and relative one. This judgment, it would seem, is also carried into the area of freedom and security in society. In his words:

On the question of the relative value of freedom and solidarity no final and authoritative answer can be given. Every answer

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2. Ibid.

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I. Nietzsche, *MMIS*, IV, 5.
S. *Ibid.*

will be relative to the social experience of particular individuals and groups, who have suffered from either anarchy or autocracy and tend to embrace the evils of the one in the effort to escape the perils of the other.¹

Niebuhr can apparently see no middle ground between anarchy and tyranny that could rightly afford a dependable stability or an enduring peace in society. He has made no substantial alteration in this fear since the publication of Moral Man. A better understanding of the genius of community might well give him a hope for such a middle ground. Kert Lewin, for instance, has demonstrated that an efficient organization of society is both practical and possible--one that would hold, not to a precarious balance of power between autocracy and anarchy, but to a dynamic, creative, triangular relationship between (1) autocracy, (2) democracy, and (3) laissez-faire.² In other words, all the redemptive possibilities within society cannot be adequately represented by any such arbitrary continuum as that between "autocracy" (or tyranny) and "anarchy." Niebuhr does not provide his readers with the assurance that such a stable society is possible without recourse to either fear or violent coercion. Such truncated social theory is ethically relativistic, in view of alternative possibilities.

1. Niebuhr, MMIS, 175.

2. Lewin, Art.(1945).

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Having established his thesis that neither violence nor non-violence are intrinsically good or evil in large human aggregates, Niebuhr then concludes, Marx-wise again, that a violent revolution, inspired by the working classes, may avail to destroy, to a significant extent, the root of social injustice--the disproportion of power in society.¹

If a season of violence can establish a just social system and can create the possibilities of its preservation, there is no purely ethical ground upon which violence and revolution may be ruled out. This could be done only upon the basis of purely anarchistic ethical and political presuppositions. Once we have made the fateful concession of ethics to politics, and accepted coercion as a necessary instrument of social cohesion, we can make no absolute distinctions between non-violent and violent types of coercion or between coercion used by governments and that which is used by revolutionaries.²

On Niebuhr's terms, to be sure, it would be impossible to find ethical grounds for ruling out violent coercion and violent revolutions. For he allows no ideal significance in any thorough-going manner to any universal values, such as respect for personality. Not only does he do violence to this fundamental principle of social health, but he does not consider the possibility that all forms of violent coercion, in personal or social relationships,

1. Niebuhr, *MMIS*, 163.

2. *Ibid.*, 179. Italics mine.

Having established the thesis that violence is not non-violence are intrinsically good or evil in large human aggregates, Niebuhr then concludes, Marx-ists again, that a violent revolution, inspired by the working classes, may avail to destroy, to a significant extent, the root of social injustice--the disproportion of power in society.¹

If a season of violence can establish a just social system and can create the possibilities of its preservation, there is no purely ethical ground upon which violence and revolution may be tried out. This could be done only upon the basis of purely empirical, political and political considerations. Once we have made the factual connection of ethics to politics, and accepted coercion as a necessary instrument of social cohesion, we can make no absolute distinctions between non-violent and violent types of coercion or between coercion used by governments and that which is used by revolutionaries.²

On Niebuhr's terms, to be sure, it would be impossible to find ethical grounds for ruling out violent coercion and violent revolutions. For he allows no ideal significance in any through-going manner to any universal values, such as respect for personality. Not only does he do violence to this fundamental principle of social health, but he does not consider the possibility that all forms of violent coercion, in personal or social relationships,

1. Niebuhr, *ETHICS*, 183.
2. *Ibid.*, 179. *Ibid.* also.

might neither conserve nor extend the so-called values their wielders set out to defend. Even on his own pragmatic grounds, he does not adequately take into account the total consequences of violent coercion. We shall consider some of these possible consequences in our critique later in this chapter.¹

Niebuhr is aware that a too consistent political realism would consign society to complete pragmatism in morals and a perpetual war of all against all in society. He insists that men can accept coercion, self-assertion, and violent conflict as permissible and necessary instruments of social life without accepting as axiomatic "perpetual conflict and perennial tyranny."²

How can this be done? In the first place, we are told, it is necessary to do justice to the insights of both the moralists and the political realists. The moralists rightly insist, Niebuhr admits, that we are obligated to extend the areas of social cooperation. But the political realists, on the other hand, are aware that we can never hope to escape social conflict--neither the covert nor overt types. We must thus try to save society

from being involved in endless cycles of futile conflict, not by an effort to abolish

1. *Infra*, 441ff.

2. Niebuhr, *MMIS*, 231.

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1. *Ibid.*, 411ff.
 2. *Ibid.*, 413, 431.

coercion in the life of collective man, but by reducing it to a minimum, by counseling the use of such types of coercion as are most compatible with the moral and rational factors in human society and by discriminating between the purposes and ends for which coercion is used.¹

This logic leads Niebuhr to the insight that "equality is a higher social goal than peace."² Thus a social conflict which aims at the elimination of "frozen" inequalities within the social body is in a morally superior category, for Niebuhr, than is a war "to perpetuate imperial rule or class dominance."³ For these reasons Niebuhr finds that Marxian philosophy is truer to the human situation than is idealistic pacifism.⁴

More should be said of Niebuhr's restrictions on coercive force. He insists that as an instrument of social peace it is a potentially perilous one, and that the moral reason must guard against its possible abuse.

Conflict and coercion are manifestly... dangerous instruments. They are so fruitful of the very evils from which society must be saved that an intelligent society will not countenance their indiscriminate use.⁵

It is regretted that Niebuhr does not pursue this insight to its logical conclusion in regard to coercive violence. For what he offers is an inconsistent and inadequate check on coercion--the reason is not allowed

1. Niebuhr, *Ibid.*, 234.

2. *Ibid.*, 235.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*, 238.

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1. Niebuhr, *Ibid.*, 234.

2. *Ibid.*, 235.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*, 235.

its proper scope and function. Let us see how this takes place.

The best rational check of violent coercion, Niebuhr argues, is an impartial tribunal which will not be tempted to use coercion for selfish ends. Thus society may claim, as it usually does, the right "to use coercion, but denies the same right to individuals."¹ The police power of a community or nation is listed as an example of a type of "impartial tribunal." But no evidence is given that such a police power can be, or ever has been, as "impartial" as Niebuhr desires. At this point the Marxist interpretation of police power would rightly make a fiction of such an alleged impartial tribunal.

On page 239 of Moral Man Niebuhr rather admits the foregoing dilemma by noting that "the distinction between the impartial and the partial use of social and political coercion is a legitimate one," but the concept is limited, we are told, by the fact of "the impossibility of achieving the kind of impartiality which the theory assumes."² Again, the prejudices and sinful passions of men are so strong that violent coercion will never be

1. Niebuhr, MMIS, 239.

2. Ibid.

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I. Nietzsche, MORAL MEN, 236.
S. 1914.

rationally or ethically "safe and sound" in every instance.

Perhaps an important part of the confusion at this point is Niebuhr's refusal to make a proper distinction between coercion as effort exerted by man against impersonal or irrational forces in society and coercion of a violent nature against strictly personal and intrinsically valuable entities (personalities). We are aware that he defends the thesis in Moral Man that no hard and fast separation is possible between the two types of coercion. But he bases his arguments on purely pragmatic grounds (social consequences) in the end, and does not consider the larger moral and metaphysical implications of his arguments. The result is to lose sight of personal values and to abandon society, logically, to a war of all against all. What Niebuhr does not see is that human reason, guided by universally valid moral principles, based upon the foregoing and other considerations, should be the valid arbiter (or "impartial tribunal" in Niebuhr's terms) in such concrete matters as the wise and unwise use of coercion.

To continue, we are informed that pacifism has a contribution to make in society. Indeed, it may rightly become an imperative calling for some. In

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Moral Man it is asserted that

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Despite these contributions of pacifists and well-meaning social scientists, we are informed, the final social fact is that human life "will always be the projection of the world of nature" and "to the end of history the peace of the world, as St. Augustine observed, must be gained by strife."²

In another connection in this same year (1932) Niebuhr is convinced that pacifists have put the issue incorrectly. The major social problem is "not voluntary versus coerced justice," but, rather, "coerced justice versus chaos."³ This is because the ideal of self-sacrificial love (the essence of perfect justice) is "too rarely achieved in individual life and not in group life at all."⁴ Thus, contends Niebuhr, we must use coercion, and recognize "that we are in a coercive system."⁵

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1. Niebuhr, MMIS, 273.
 2. Ibid., 256.
 3. Niebuhr, Art.(1932).³
 4. Ibid.
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1. Niebuhr, *WMB*, 275.
 2. *Ibid.*, 280.
 3. Niebuhr, *Art.* (1932), 2.
 4. *Ibid.*
 5. *Ibid.*

Niebuhr is convinced that there is little or no inherent moral advantage in the expression of spiritual power and physical power.

The propagandist uses a cheaper and more lasting method than the general; but it is not morally better...The idea that purely spiritual weapons are good while physical weapons are evil is derived from the assumption that to be spiritual means to transcend the interest of the ego and to achieve some universal interest. But human spirituality is never as simply universal as rationalists assume. It is, therefore, however subtle, a weapon of one ego, individual or collective, against another. It is a tool of conflict.¹

For this reason, Niebuhr concludes, the war system is an integral part of the character of man and of historic reality.

It [violent conflict] is not overcome by lifting life from the physical to the spiritual level. Human conflicts are more deadly than animal conflict precisely because man is spiritual.²

One reads these words and is left wondering what is meant by the term "spiritual." The logic of Niebuhr's position here would appear to be that if men were not "spiritual" on Niebuhr's terms, then conflict would be reduced to a minimum and wars might cease. Would not the jungle, rather than a reasonable society, then become the ideal? We are aware that Niebuhr's ideal for society is

1. Niebuhr, Art.(1932).²

2. Niebuhr, Art.(1933).¹ Italics mine.

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1. Heidegger, Art. (1932), p. 2.
2. Heidegger, Art. (1932), p. 2. Italian trans.

not a mere simple reduction of the deadliness of human conflict. But confusion arises at the point of presenting human spirituality as if it were a negative, limited expression of the ego. The emphasis, we must assert, is sub-Christian and sub-ethical when the constructive factors in the spiritual life are not presented with equal stress. This confusion illustrates one peril in moral and theological relativism.

In a significant article entitled "Why I Leave the FOR" Niebuhr states his case regarding the relationship of hatred to non-violence. Here the reader is informed that Christianity "means more than any moral attitude which can express itself in social politics."¹

But it must at least mean that the social struggle is fought without hatred. Non-hatred is a much more important sign and symbol of Christian faith than non-violence.²

Presently we shall attempt to discover if non-hatred is a concrete possibility in the light of Niebuhr's total view of human nature.³

In an article in Christianity and Society Niebuhr takes up the discussion of hatred and denounces the idealistic pacifists for teaching that people who participate in war become corrupted by hatred and are thus "incapable of

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3. Infra, 431f.

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contributing to a decent peace."¹ The actual fact is, we are informed, that

the old ladies back home may do a good deal of hating. But the soldiers upon the battlefield usually do not hate. They have an impersonal attitude toward the conflict.²

The army leaders rightly know, Niebuhr further argues, that morale "is not strengthened by hatred but only by a moral purpose, which transcends personal and individual consideration."³

At this point it seems well to restate a question in the central thesis of this dissertation: How much moral value is there in a purpose which transcends individual consideration? If Niebuhr is willing to agree with the army leaders, which he explicitly states that he does in the foregoing cited article, then he, along with them, is making an abstraction of "moral purpose." Again we repeat the classic dictum of T. H. Green that all values must be relative to value for, of, or in persons.

The argument Niebuhr's uses to support his theory that one may take an impersonal attitude toward violent conflict is based upon an instructive interpretation of Eros and Agape. It is through Agape, or a love that transcends all human conflicts and other mundane matters, that

1. Niebuhr, Art.(1942).³
 2. Ibid.
 3. Ibid.

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1. Meadner, Art. (1922).
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.

one is able to oppose the enemy, we are told, and even to destroy him, if need be, without hatred. This is because Agape allows "an emotional attachment to someone with whom we are in conflict."¹ Thus we can desire the good of the "enemy" while we contend against him.

Niebuhr admits that this Agape, while psychologically possible, is spiritually impossible, and that there will "ever be an element of egotism in the defense of our cause and an element of hatred in our opposition to the enemy."²

That this argument cannot be validated by the data of psychological theory and the empirical evidence must be asserted. While we know of no actual scientific studies that would (or could) indicate how many soldiers in the last two world wars fought with or without hatred, yet it is an empirical fact that only the most idealistic army leaders ever projected such a theory of non-hatred as Niebuhr assumes. It may have been the ideal of some top army officers, but it was not the ideal or the practice of the combat officers who had to carry out the actual commands. The use of bayonets and flame-throwing instruments (two basic skills in modern warfare) would appear absurd, and even impossible, from a purely psychological standpoint,

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1. Niebuhr, *et al.* (1943), p. 2.
 2. *Ibid.*

if their use were not inspired by the complicated impulses of hatred--if hatred is viewed as any detestation, aversion, animosity, or intense dislike of another human being.

We have repeatedly indicated the error in a doctrine of Agape which makes an arbitrary separation of the divine love and the concrete willing and acting of persons. Such a distortion is only possible in a view that sees morality as meaningless apart from the intervention of supernatural aid.

It was in 1936 that Niebuhr began to use the expression, later to receive a classic formulation in an article in Life Magazine, that "for peace we must risk war." In Radical Religion we are informed that

unwillingness to run some risk of war in the present moment, means certain war in the future. It also means the probable victory of all the most fanatic and reactionary political influences in the world today.¹

Since the momentary threats against the world's peace offer no hope of a lasting justice or peace, it is thus necessary, we are told, to take the pragmatic approach and "do everything possible to destroy the immediate

1. Niebuhr, Art.(1936).⁴

danger."¹

What is entailed in the "everything possible" is not made clear in the above connection. The "immediate danger" in 1936, of course, was Nazism. In an article in Life Magazine in 1948 the present peril is Communism. Here it is conceded--with a slightly different emphasis from the former article cited--that we must avoid war "but not at all costs." For to pay too high a price for its avoidance "is finally to court the peril of war in the very effort to avoid it."² The formula for peace, we are told, is that

we can save mankind from another holocaust only if our nerves are steady and if our moral purpose is matched by strategic shrewdness.³

This strategic shrewdness will involve the best possible balance of power arrangement between the great nations.

3. A Further Critique of Niebuhr's View

All of the statements in the foregoing analysis are related and can be treated as a unity. The underlying premise is that coercion and warfare cannot be considered as intrinsic evils. This is because, we are told, it often becomes imperative to fight a "greater evil" with

1. Niebuhr, Art.(1936).⁴

2. Niebuhr, Art.(1948).⁴

3. Ibid.

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1. Niebuhr, *op. cit.* (1938), p. 4.
 2. Niebuhr, *op. cit.* (1948), p. 4.
 3. *Ibid.*

a "lesser evil." In other words, perfect peace, goodness, and equal justice may be legitimate, but finally impossible goals for society. The "lesser evil" is to be coercive violence or defensive warfare--if and when they are needed to deter the larger evils. To fight evil with evil is, we are informed, a basic necessity in any social group.

The theory that we constantly fight "sin with sin" is based upon the following logic:

We use evil in every moment of our existence to hold evil in check. Every day of my life I eat food and use utensils, produced under unjust conditions.¹

Just how any "moral guilt" can be assessed to such obvious injustices is not made clear. A clearer understanding of the role of moral values would have prevented this confusion of evil conditions with evil choices.

Niebuhr thus constructs an objective role for "moral guilt," but will allow no real objectivity to the moral laws. The result is to lose sight of the basic issues making for moral praise or blame. In a similar way, the problem of love versus coercion is confused by the denial that ideal values may have concrete meaning within human social relationships where these issues are

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presently relevant.

Historically, it is doubtful if one can demonstrate that the "evils" of force and violence (to use Niebuhr's terms) have ever been finally adequate, when all factors are considered, in holding the alleged "larger evils" in check. It is true that World War II held the Nazi Party in check. But recent reports coming from Germany do not confirm any premature hopes that the Nazi spirit or tactics have been destroyed or redirected in the least by military methods.

Further, Toynbee was able to conclude in A Study of History that military force, used either defensively or offensively, begets more evils than it destroys, and that those "who have taken up the sword have perished by the sword."¹ It would not seem irrelevant to remark that the atomic age has rather magnified than diminished the truth in Toynbee's dictum. Perhaps the greatest illusion of our age is the theory that war or preparation for war is "the way out."

It is regretted that Niebuhr does not consider adequately these larger implications in his "philosophy" of war and peace. The end result of this oversight is to allow vital personal and moral values to bog down in

1. See Toynbee, SOH, VI, passim.

the imperfectionism of pragmatic politics. It is ethically relativistic, in our view, to deal almost exclusively with survival values and not to place the emphasis, where it should be placed in all social and political matters, in the human and ideal values at stake in high matters of state--such as international relations.

The ethical relativism in Niebuhr's view of war and peace is further reflected in his aversion to any and all "moral notions" of the solution of the age-old problem of war and peace. In a significant criticism of Quaker strategy Niebuhr says:

It is not easy to set "just" bounds to the ambitions of men and of nations. The bounds are not set by moral notions of justice but by the exigencies and vicissitudes of history. As long as we live in a state of international anarchy we do not gain peace by yielding to those who threaten it most.¹

It is true, Niebuhr admits, that it is not easy to set just bounds to the will-to-power of men and nations. But Niebuhr does not see that this task is made even more difficult when the only effective means to such an end is discredited unduly--namely, the concrete and dynamic role of universal moral values that can have

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 dynamic role of universal moral values that can have

¹ I. Niebuhr, *American Realism*, p. 117.

functional as well as formal significance.

In Radical Religion during the period under discussion (1934-1938) Niebuhr was concerned that we view the problem of collective violence from the heights of a "profound Christianity," rather than from the lesser "moralisms" of an idealistic pacifism. A true Christian, we are told, will not pray to God

to preserve a civilization which proves itself self-destructive. Rather, he will pray for grace that men may understand that this self-destruction is a judgment of God upon history.¹

This prayer, it cannot be denied, is in many ways a sound one. But in nearly every specific instance when Niebuhr attempts to make a concrete application of the basic insight in the prayer he becomes preoccupied with the formal political and national aspects of the problem. Scarcely any of the specific political policies or concrete decisions of any responsible people in the United States, for example, that might rightly deserve God's praise or blame, is given the full consideration it deserves. Here is a further illustration of the peril of objectifying moral guilt and responsibility. What we should be concerned with is the content of human attitudes and actions that bring on the self-destruction upon which God's

1. Niebuhr, Art.(1938)²

judgment is deservedly directed.

Niebuhr finds that the real problem for the Christian in a coercive society "is not how anyone as good as he can participate in unethical political activity" but how anyone "as sinful as he can dare to set himself as a judge of his fellowmen."¹ With this knowledge the Christian will be prompted to make a certain "reservation in judgment in his political attitudes."²

But it must not dissuade him from acting according to his best and highest moral judgment. We are men and not God and we have to act even though we are and will be proved by subsequent history to be sinful men in action.³

Thus we may contend against the foe, we are told, "if our best judgments point our actions against his prejudices."⁴

Our "best judgments," if the reader judges correctly from the context of the foregoing cited article, are based upon actual conditions rather than upon any ideal concepts, for it is explicitly stated that "future history" and "moral guesses" cannot sustain an argument or make possible any urgent practical decisions in history.⁵

Here again we are left in confusion. For if we cannot judge the good and worthy motives of men, by

1. Niebuhr, Art.(1938).²

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

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1. Michael, Art. (1938),²
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.

what token can we judge their "sinful" actions which prompt us, in Niebuhr's terms, to "contend against them."¹ There is clearly no basis for any kind of valid moral judgments apart from some universal standard or principles believed to possess ideal import. Otherwise our judgments become capricious and fragmentary rather than coherent and constructive. The pragmatism and ethical relativism in Niebuhr's argument at this point are too obvious to deserve further demonstration.

To continue, Niebuhr insists that a recognition of the fact that, while we must accept the absolute, final validity of the law of life (perfect love), yet there must be no question but that "every life, even the best of us, is involved in a contradiction of this commandment."² The simple "moralists" are thus unable to understand that "all life is thus involved in a contradiction of the will of God."³ This admission, it is argued, will add continuity to our faith which no human catastrophe can shake.

If our faith and our ethics shift continually between what is believed in peace and what is believed in war, that is fairly good proof that we are not profound enough to have disclosed the unity of the

1. Niebuhr, Ibid.
2. Niebuhr, Art.(1940).¹
3. Ibid.

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1. Niebuhr, *ibid.*
 2. Niebuhr, *ibid.* (1940).
 3. *ibid.*

total human situation.¹

This unity is most clearly seen during a total war, we are told. For it is here that "we see the collective sin of mankind most vividly--a sin that can only be understood and redeemed by a profound faith in God's judgment and mercy beyond our common tragedies."²

There is an essential truth in Niebuhr's argument at this point which cannot be refuted. Certainly a confident faith in a transcendent realm of meaning is necessary if we are to have assurance that the moral order will be sustained and that there is to be a rational ground for the universe and all ultimate values. This faith, it is true, must not be distorted to meet the exigencies of human catastrophes.

In our view, however, it is incorrect to base the proof of this basic principle upon an alleged universal corruption of human nature or upon God's wrathful judgment alone. He should have based his case upon God's goodness and His righteous will. There is thus no rational or worthy frame of reference in which to establish the validity of his thesis.

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J. Niebuhr, 1940.
p. 104.

appeared, Niebuhr made the following suggestion to all idealistic pacifists:

Might we not therefore suggest to all "idealists" that before they retreat to the despairing conviction that nothing good can come out of this war, that they try to survey once more how some good might come out of it and by what means the evil of the present might be transmuted into an ultimate good.¹

Expanding upon this point in another connection, Niebuhr poses this question:

Might, it is true, does not make right. But can right prevail if it does not have the will to marshal all the power of which it can avail itself to execute its purpose? Both propositions: the absolute distinction between war and peace, and the absolute impossibility of discriminating between the comparative justice of embattled causes, are untenable...For we cannot predict what good or evil might come out of the conflict.²

Niebuhr seems to imply, in the above quotation, that it is possible to apply the law of consequences to the problem of war and peace. One wonders if he has carried through as rigorously as he might the implications of this methodology. While it may be true, as Sorokin has argued,³ that certain indirect "goods" may result from modern wars (such as social changes, technological improvements, medical advance) yet it is doubtful if these factors

1. Niebuhr, Art.(1940).²

2. Ibid. Italics mine.

3. Sorokin, CST, Chapter VI.

seriously affect the deeper moral and cultural issues involved in the causal chain of modern wars.

For example, Dean Muelder argues that the major issues facing modern civilization remain unresolved after two world wars. These issues are:

1. National sovereignty versus world federation...
2. The race question...
3. Cultural conflict...
4. The problem of imperialism...
5. Free enterprise versus collectivism of some type...¹

It is possible, in view of these considerations, to quarrel with Niebuhr in his appeal to St. Augustine's dictum that "the peace of the world must be gained by strife." That violence breeds violence would appear to be the truer lesson of history. At least, violence has not resolved the central issues making for the peace of the world.

We are not arguing here that Niebuhr glorify war as such. What Niebuhr is defending is his belief that we cannot make an absolute distinction between war and peace. While wars may be necessary, Niebuhr argues, they are not the final goal of society.

1. Muelder, Lecture Notes, Boston University School of Theology, March 18, 1948.

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It is wrong to worship force and to make power self-justifying...It is monstrous to glorify war as the final good. But that error could not have brought us so close to disaster if a comfortable civilization had not meanwhile regarded peace as a final good; and had not expected perfect peace to be an attainable goal for history.¹

If our civilization does not survive, it is further argued, it would "be quite appropriate though a terrible fate, if its final destruction would have been hastened by the fantasies of religious idealists," who hold that peace is desirable at all costs and "who had, in the words of Karl Barth, 'mistaken humility before the foe for humility before God'."²

It is instructive in this connection that at times Niebuhr seems to indicate a strong positive value in warfare, something the foregoing statements appear to deny. In an article in Fortune Magazine it is asserted:

Christian faith becomes vapid and sentimental in periods of stability and peace. It recovers its own profoundest insights in those periods of social chaos when all simple interpretations of life break down and force men to seek for a profounder interpretation of existence.³

One might gather from this emphasis that God uses wars, at times, as a schoolmaster to teach mankind

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1. Niebuhr, *Art.* (1942), 2.
 2. Niebuhr, *Art.* (1941), 1.
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the lesson of a profound faith--though of course such a view is not explicitly stated. Such a conclusion is an honest one, however, given Niebuhr's premise. This would seem a rather dubious value in warfare, for if men and their social institutions must be destroyed before the Christian faith is finally validated, then the impotency and error in such a faith has already been demonstrated. If faith is not in effective operation during peace, how can we know or believe that it will be validated in or because of a social tragedy?

Perhaps Niebuhr's most comprehensive critique of the related questions of coercion and pacifism is his Christianity and Power Politics. We have already discussed many of the issues raised in this study of power politics. Our procedure will be to include only new or different emphases for purposes of illustration and criticism.

In the first place, Niebuhr sets out to show that "the failure of the church to espouse pacifism is not apostasy," but is derived from "an understanding of the Christian Gospel which refuses simply to equate the Gospel with the 'law of love'."¹

The good news of the Gospel is not the law that we ought to love one another. The

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good news of the Gospel is that there is a resource of divine mercy which is able to overcome a contradiction within our souls, which we cannot ourselves overcome.¹

Instead of being primarily a "challenge" to men to obey the law of Christ, it is further argued, Christianity, as opposed to pacifism, is a "religion which deals realistically with a problem presented by the violation of the law of love."²

Further, Niebuhr finds that one kind of Christian pacifism is not heretical.

In one of its aspects modern Christian pacifism is simply a version of Christian perfectionism. It expresses a genuine impulse to take the law of Christ seriously and not to allow the political strategies which the sinful character of man makes necessary, to become final norms.³

Whenever pacifism is not presented as a "political alternative" to a coercive society, Niebuhr further insists, then it has a valuable role to play. This type of pacifism does not "give itself to the illusion that it has discovered a method for eliminating the element of conflict from political strategies."⁴ Examples cited are (1) medieval ascetic perfectionism and (2) Protestant sectarian perfectionism. These rightly regard "the mystery of evil as beyond their

1. Niebuhr, CPP, 2.

2. Ibid., 3.

3. Ibid., 5.

4. Ibid.

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2. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
4. *Ibid.*

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the most perfect and unselfish individual life as a symbol of the Kingdom of God. It knew that this could only be done by disavowing the political task and by freeing the individual of all responsibility for social justice.²

It is precisely this kind of pacifism, we are told, which "is not heresy." It becomes a valuable symbol and reminder to the Christian community that

the relative norms of social justice, which justify both coercion and resistance to coercion, are not final norms, and that Christians are in constant peril of forgetting their relative and tentative character and of making them too completely normative.³

Thus the proper role of pacifism, if we interpret the argument correctly, is not to attempt the resolution of the relativism of a coercive social order, but to act as a "symbol" that we are operating in a relativistic order. The role of pacifism thus becomes essentially a negative one. One wonders if the positive aspects of the pacifist movement are given their due consideration.

Niebuhr finds no evidence in Scripture to support the doctrine of "non-violence," as typified in Richard

1. Niebuhr, *Ibid.*, 5.

2. *Ibid.* Italics mine.

3. *Ibid.*, 6.

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2. *ibid.*, *ibid.* p. 8.
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Gregg's The Power of Non-Violence. For nothing could be plainer, Niebuhr insists, than that the Gospel ethic "uncompromisingly enjoins non-resistance and not non-violent resistance."¹ Thus there is "no absolute distinction between violent and non-violent resistance."² In both Power Politics and An Interpretation Niebuhr criticizes Gregg's type of pacifism as confusing "pragmatic" with purely "religious" motives. In the latter work it is asserted:

If Christians are to live by "the way of the Cross" they ought to practice non-resistance. They will find nothing in the Gospels which justifies non-violent resistance as an instrument of love-perfectionism. The principal defect of the liberal Christian thought on the question of violence is that it confuses two perspectives upon the problem, one pragmatic and the other perfectionist. Both have their legitimacy. But moral confusion results from efforts to compound them.³

Such moral confusion, we are told, is indicated when pacifists "praise the peace of tyranny as if it were nearer to the peace of the Kingdom of God."⁴ For the introduction of perfectionist ideas into politics "for the purpose of reinforcing counsels of submission to injustice smells of dishonesty."⁵

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1. Niebuhr, *Ibid.*, 10.
 2. *Ibid.*
 3. Niebuhr, *ICE*, 196f.
 4. *Ibid.*, 172.
 5. *Ibid.*

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1. Niebuhr, *Ibid.*, 10.
 2. *Ibid.*
 3. Niebuhr, *ICE*, 198f.
 4. *Ibid.*, 175.
 5. *Ibid.*

In Power Politics Niebuhr makes some significant statements regarding the relationship of the Christian ethic to peace. Here he argues that the ethic of Jesus was so uncompromising and absolute that we cannot look to it for a justification of social conflict; that love is indeed the law of life; that Christians are wrong in supporting any "holy war"; and that violent conflict, though a pragmatic necessity, can never be finally normative for man.

It is a terrible thing to take human life. The conflict between man and man and nation and nation is tragic. If there are men who declare that, no matter what the consequences, they cannot bring themselves to participate in this slaughter, the Church ought to be able to say to the general community: We quite understand this scruple and we respect it. It proceeds from the conviction that the true and final end of man is brotherhood, and that love is the law of life. We who allow ourselves to become engaged in war need this testimony of the absolutist against us, lest we forget the ambiguity of our own actions and motives and the risk we run of achieving no permanent good from this momentary anarchy in which we are involved.¹

Despite these concessions to the arguments of the "idealists" Niebuhr still insists that they offer no effective guarantee of peace, "for we make the catastrophe of war more inevitable by our effort to escape it."²

1. Niebuhr, CPP, 31.

2. Ibid., 105.

Further, the testimony of the idealists is made vulnerable by "the corruption of self-righteousness" and "the implicit or explicit apostasy involved in their thoughts and actions."¹ For not to resist the foe when necessity arises, we are told, "will inevitably result in moral anarchy both for the individual life and also in social and international relationships."²

Turning now to related issues, it is instructive to note Niebuhr's attitude toward the atomic bomb. In an important editorial in Christianity and Society on "The Atomic Bomb" it is stated:

Critics have rightly pointed out that we reached the level of Nazi morality in justifying the use of the atomic bomb, on the ground that it shortened the war. That is exactly what the Nazi said about the destruction of Rotterdam and Warsaw.³

But the matter does not rest here. No simple condemnation of the use of the bomb is intended for, contends Niebuhr, "the use of the bomb is merely the culmination of our own strategy of total war, involving the use of ever more power obliteration bombing and incendiarism."⁴

It is a simple matter to condemn the statesmen who made the decision to use the bomb. The question is whether they were not driven by forces more powerful

1. Niebuhr, CPP, 105.

2. Ibid.

3. Niebuhr, Art. (1945).²

4. Ibid.

than any human decisions.¹

It is an open invitation to moral chaos, we must assert, to dismiss moral guilt so easily by assigning the final cause of the atomic bomb, for example, to "historic forces" beyond human control. Niebuhr overlooks an important part of the record in this connection. It is possible to show that personal moral decisions were involved in the development and use of the atomic bomb.

For instance, there is considerable evidence to indicate that many leading scientists would neither agree with nor cooperate in the development and use of the hydrogen bomb. The New York Times reports that nearly all, if not all, of the first-rank scientists who helped produce the A-bomb have now left the project and refuse to return.² On February 6, 1950, Dr. Clarence E. Larson, executive director of the Oak Ridge, Tennessee, National Laboratory, announced that "it would be exceedingly difficult to recruit and organize scientists and technical experts for the task of making an H-bomb" because of the moral opposition to such a project.³ Apparently "human decisions" have a great deal more to do with the making and use of these

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Here is evidence of ethical relativism in Niebuhr's thought. In his efforts to arrive at a consistent "realistic" interpretation of social and political forces which figure so largely in man's life on earth, he has all but dismissed the realistic (in many ways more realistic) personal decisions that originate the social forces that set in motion the "cumulative causation" (to use Myrdal's term) that leads to wars and other social catastrophes. A consistent and rational moral theory places equal emphasis upon personal decisions as upon historical consequences. Niebuhr addresses his scholarship to the consequences of human sin and draws conclusions in keeping with his preconceived moral and theological criteria. The result, as Bevan has rightly said, is "to moralize upon the ruins of human life rather than upon the attitudes and decisions that brought on the ruins."¹

The total result of Niebuhr's position at this point is to admit that material, impersonal forces, rather than the constructive force of moral and spiritual ideals,

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1. Bevan, *op. cit.* (1943).

are finally effective and decisive in human history. Such is to deny the power of love revealed on the Cross of Christ, and to posit the relativity of all moral values.

This reintroduction of the doctrine of Christian love brings us to a final, and perhaps the most important, criticism of Niebuhr's view of war and peace. This is not the place to discuss or defend pacifism, but the discussion of mutual love versus sacrificial love illustrates a basic element of ethical relativism in Niebuhr.

In Human Destiny we are informed that Christ, as the norm of human nature, "defines the final perfection of man in history."¹ This perfection, it is argued, is not so much a sum total of various virtues or an absence of transgression of various laws; it is, rather, the "perfection of sacrificial love."²

The same Cross which symbolizes the love of God and reveals the divine perfection to be not incompatible with a suffering involvement in historical tragedy, also indicates that the perfection of man is not attainable in history. It does not transcend history as a thought transcends an act. It is an act in history; but it cannot justify itself in history.³

From the standpoint of history, we are told, the only love

1. Niebuhr, NDM, II, 68.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

and finally effective and decisive in human history. Such is to deny the power of love revealed on the Cross of Christ, and to posit the relativity of all moral values.

This reintroduction of the doctrine of Christian love brings us to a final, and perhaps the most important, criticism of Niebuhr's view of war and peace. This is not the place to discuss or defend pacifism, but the discussion of mutual love versus sacrificial love illustrates a basic element of ethical relativism in Niebuhr.

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From the standpoint of history, we are told, the only love

1. Niebuhr, *NDM*, II, 88.
2. *Ibid.*
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that can "justify itself" is mutual love. For Niebuhr, mutual love is the highest good available on earth.

Only in mutual love, in which the concern of one person for the interests of another prompts and elicits a reciprocal affection, are the social demands of historical existence satisfied. The highest good of history must conform to standards of coherence and consistency in the whole realm of historical vitality. All claims within the general field of interests must be proportionately satisfied and related to each other harmoniously. The sacrifice of the self for others is therefore a violation of natural standards of morals, as limited by historic existence.¹

This sacrifice of the interests of the self for others is, we are informed, a "psychological impossibility when life is conceived only in terms of nature-history."²

If the self identifies its life with physical existence the basic ethical paradox of the gospel ethic: "Whosoever loseth his life shall find it" can have no meaning. This paradox can have meaning only if the dimension of life is known to transcend historical existence.³

Sacrificial love, it is asserted, represents a "tangent toward eternity" in the field of historical ethics. It is also "the support of all historical ethics," for the self "cannot achieve relations of mutual and reciprocal affection with others if its actions are dominated by the fear that they may not be reciprocated."⁴

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2. Ibid., 69.

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1. Niebuhr, *WDM*, II, 88.
2. *Ibid.*, 89.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*

Niebuhr admits that there must be some kind of relationship between sacrificial love and mutual love. In his words:

Mutuality is not a possible achievement if it is made the intention and goal of any action. Sacrificial love is thus paradoxically related to mutual love; and this relation is an ethical counterpart of the general relation of super-history to history.¹

Further, the relation of sacrificial love to mutual love "cannot be defined as a truth of revealed religion of which nothing is known apart from the revelation of God in Christ."²

Any rigorous analysis of the ethical problem of history discloses that history transcends itself in such a way that the highest good transcends historical canons and possibilities. For this reason the popular imagination fastens upon the Cross as the symbol of the highest ethical norm, even when and if the full profundity of the religious meaning of the Cross is not understood.³

Thus, for Niebuhr, human experience constantly yields some knowledge of the fact that "concern for the other rather than the self leads inevitably to consequences which cannot be justified in purely historical and this-worldly terms."⁴

Nevertheless, the ethical truth embodied in the Cross is clarified by the religious

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2. Ibid., 70.

3. Ibid.

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- 1. Wieder, *idem*, II, 89.
 - 2. *idem*, *ibid.*, 90.
 - 3. *idem*, *ibid.*, 91.

revelation contained in the Cross. For without the latter's disclosure of the relation of God to history ethical life tends to degenerate either into an egoistic utilitarianism which makes self-regarding motives ethically normative; or into a mystical ethics which flees from the tensions and incomplete harmonies of history to an undifferentiated unity of life and eternity.¹

This paradoxical relation of sacrificial love to mutual love, we are told, makes possible a statement of the divine-human encounter which does justice to the logos and agape aspects of reality.

The love of Christ, His disinterested and sacrificial agape, as the highest possibility of human existence, stands in paradoxical rather than contradictory relation to the majesty of God, so conceived. The assertion that Christ is both human and divine is contradictory when defined in terms which Christian orthodoxy used to refute the heresies which denied, from one side or the other, that there could be a relation between the historical and the eternal.²

These contradictions were asserted, Niebuhr argues, because they expressed, though inadequately, what Christian faith has always

apprehended beyond all metaphysical speculations, about the paradoxical relation of divine agape, which stoops to conquer, and the human agape, which rises above history in a sacrificial act.³

1. Niebuhr, *Ibid.*, 70.

2. *Ibid.*, 71.

3. *Ibid.*

The divine agape, Niebuhr contends, is not operative within history in any "concrete immanence" as the liberals vainly suppose. For agape "refuses to participate in the claims and counterclaims of historical existence."¹ Why is disinterested, sacrificial love impossible in mundane existence? Again we are informed that the self, having betrayed itself into self-love, cannot rise above its own interests. This being so, complete "powerlessness" becomes the symbol of perfect love.

The significant contrast between the divine and the human...is a contrast between the perfect coincidence of power and goodness in the divine. It is impossible to symbolize the divine goodness in history in any other way than by complete powerlessness, or rather by the consistent refusal to use power in the rivalries of history. For there is no self in history or society, no matter how impartial its perspective upon the competitions of life, which can rise to the position of a disinterested participation in those rivalries and competitions. It can symbolize disinterested love only by a refusal to participate in the rivalries. Any participation in them means the assertion of one ego interest against another.²

For these reasons Niebuhr then concludes that "the ethics of non-resistance as taught in the Sermon on the Mount

1. Niebuhr, NDM, II, 71.

2. Ibid.

is in perfectly consistent relation with love symbolized on the Cross."¹ But this is not to say, insists Niebuhr, that the ethic of sacrificial love can ever be successful in history.

Sacrificial love (agape) stands at the edge of history, we are told, to complete mutual love (eros). The latter conception of love is deemed the effective course for a sinful world "which seeks to relate life to life from the standpoint of the self and for the self's own happiness."² As to the human self, it "can never love itself in the life of the other."³ Those who think otherwise are "imprudent fanatics."⁴

Perhaps the greatest weakness in Niebuhr's view of war and peace is his failure to account for the natural power of love in the self and in social relationships. As G. H. C. Macgregor has persuasively argued, Niebuhr has not given an adequate place in his philosophy of war and peace to the distinctively Christian method of overcoming evil--namely, the redemptive power of active, self-sacrificial love, which indeed has its symbol in the Cross.

In the first place, Niebuhr has not proved his case

1. Niebuhr, NDM, II, n.72.

2. Ibid., 82.

3. Ibid., 83.

4. Ibid.

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1. Nietzsche, *Human, All-Too-Human*, II, p. 12.
2. Ibid., 82.
3. Ibid., 83.
4. Ibid., 84.

that the Crucifixion was so unique an experience of self-sacrificial love (agape) that this love can never be repeated again in human experience. Such was certainly not the intention of Jesus. In Macgregor's words:

In the Cross, it is true, this redemptive way of sacrificial love finds its perfect expression. It is Jesus' seal upon His assurance that man cannot cast out devils by the prince of devils, His witness to the weakness and folly of the sword, and to the triumphant power of the new way of overcoming evil with good. We err if we isolate the Cross as a unique divine transaction which has no bearing upon the ethic which Jesus taught or the way of life to which He called His disciples, having first trodden it Himself.¹

For Jesus, it was not suffering as such that redeems, but the "willingness to accept suffering rather than deny the truth, obedience to a particular way of life which self-sacrifice, if such should be God's will, as a possible crown."²

Dr. Macgregor is not here arguing that this interpretation plumbs the depths of the mystery of the Cross. But he rightly insists that the Crucifixion was the inevitable climax of a consistent life-practice of meeting evil, not by violent coercion³ but by the way of redeeming love.

1. Macgregor, ROI, 82.

2. Ibid.

3. We are not arguing that Jesus used no coercion of any type. Our contention is that there is an important qualitative difference between a coercion of abstractions (ideas, arguments) and coercion of concrete personalities (as in physical violence).

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In Macgregor's words again:

The faith that sacrificial love is the only Christian method of overcoming evil is not a mere appendage to the Gospel, but its very core and condition. If Jesus was wrong here, then He was wrong in the very crux of His message, and it is a mockery to call Him Lord.¹

It is difficult, on this basis, to draw any other conclusion than that Jesus went to the Cross rather than betray the love-method. It does not seem logical to suppose, with Niebuhr, that Jesus would have considered it an "impossible possibility" for human beings to ever practice that same sacrificial love, or that He would denounce any attempted imitation of this act of love as an "idolatrous presumption."

Moreover, it can be shown that Niebuhr is both sub-ethical and sub-Christian in his interpretation of Jesus' love ethic. On Niebuhr's terms, one is led to the pragmatic doctrine of self-defense with its "protect physical life at all costs" philosophy. This is not all of Niebuhr's argument, to be sure. He contends that we are obligated to protect the "moral and spiritual values" of Christian democracy. The difficulty here is that "moral values" have no meaning apart from rational considerations of their validity and from concrete personal

1. Macgregor, *Ibid.*, 82.

choices in which alone these "values" become applicable or meaningful. Thus, on Niebuhr's terms, we are dealing in abstractions that have no concrete meaning when we protect "moral and spiritual values" in a defensive war. And what is there left for us but the pragmatic doctrine of the protection of physical life?

Not only does Niebuhr misunderstand the real genius of Christian love but, as we have tried to show, he tends to lose sight of personality--through which alone love can find expression, or any ideal value can be actualized. This tendency to deal with the impersonal aspects of social and political problems to the virtual exclusion of the true end of all such social activity--namely, the human personality--is a serious peril in any and all ethically relativistic solutions to the human situation.

More should be said of Niebuhr's view of the way justice is achieved in society. According to him, violent coercion, if necessary, is a morally justifiable method of "creating social justice." While perfect love is the norm and end of human life, yet it is impractical when dealing with complex social problems. Thus it becomes a necessity, at times, to attempt a coerced justice. The query of the pacifists becomes relevant at this point: Does love finally create justice, or is it the other way around?

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 query of the pacifists becomes relevant at this point: Does
 love finally create justice, or is it the other way around?

Is a "coerced justice" even a practical possibility? The testimony of a growing number of social scientists (Lewin, Bogardas, Allport, MacIver, Morgan, Boodin, Muellder) would seem to indicate that there is a valid objection to such an interpretation of human nature as men like Niebuhr present. Careful studies have shown that democracy (as a way of social justice), for example, is a grass-roots achievement that must first function from the bottom in a healthy-minded participation before any over~~r~~all formal structures of justice can be tolerable and in any sense constructive. If there is not justice on all levels of human interaction, in other words, then a true community of brotherhood is impossible.

What Niebuhr overlooks is that Christian love, operating in the various levels of social interaction, can be increasingly effective in the task of the redemption of men and nations. In Niebuhr's view, Christian love becomes bogged down in the strategic aspects of pragmatic politics. Love, as a means of overcoming evil, is not given its rightful place. Thus available human powers are limited unjustifiably. This leads Niebuhr's readers to the erroneous conclusion that men are not good enough for community apart from the use of coercive violence.

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of evidence to show that there are certain aptitudes and potencies in human nature which can bring into the realm of practical politics the ethical values so necessary to a full and harmonized social life, and so essential to a revolutionary readjustment of present economic conditions.

The foregoing arguments can have no meaning unless we make a radical break with Niebuhr's total theological orientation and assert that God (and all ideal values) is operational (functional) in persons and in group dynamics. It is possible, of course, to dismiss the creative power of the Holy Spirit entirely by positing God's complete and final transcendence. Since the logic of Niebuhr's view leads to this pessimistic conclusion, as we have tried to indicate throughout this dissertation, then we must assert that he takes a sub-Christian view of Agape.

Similarly, Niebuhr's ethical theory has not escaped the fallacy of dismissing ideal standards and values from concrete areas of human willing and striving. For if ideal values are not functional as well as structural or formal, then human morality is emptied of concrete meaning. All attempts to create a just community, for example, would be self-defeating, for the ideal of community (to hold pride and selfishness at a minimum) could not possibly be effective in the end if moral values are deemed "relative" and

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"contradicted by" an alleged supernatural order of moral value. An "ideal" that is viewed as finally negating all human attempts to understand or apply it concretely can neither be rationally validated nor morally helpful.

Niebuhr further betrays the ethical relativism in his view of war and peace when he argues, as he did in 1949 regarding the North Atlantic Pact, that all questions of defense are "strategic" questions which "have nothing to do with moral or religious 'stands'."¹ What Niebuhr does not take into account is that morals are involved either way one looks at the question. Even problems of strategy involve decisions of "more or less" on the part of statesmen, and the results of those choices finally agreed upon often have tremendous repercussions all along the line of values within the social order. The crucial question arises: What principle is to guide these political decisions--Machiavellian expediency or rationally validated universal moral criteria?

Errol E. Harris has shown that moral standards of some kind are implicitly or explicitly involved in all social and political transactions. In opposition to men like Niebuhr, he insists that any just solution to the problem of war and peace is vitally dependent upon a universal system of moral principles. Any other solution,

1. Niebuhr, Art.(1949).³

Harris rightly insists, has and will ever prove self-defeating. In his words:

The courses of action adopted in pursuit of national security and self-preservation prove in the end self-defeating. To adopt them is suicidal whether for Communists or capitalists, and the question which is most perplexing and most urgent today to both statesmen and citizens is quite literally: "What shall we do to be saved?" This question is answered only by the moralists. Any answer which we attempt must presuppose moral principles and imply the possibility--nay the necessity--of ethics as a philosophical study. For the problem of war and peace is one of human relations, which is the peculiar character of a moral problem.¹

We concur with this view of ethics as a practical and concrete study of human relations, and would only add that Christianity can bring into moral philosophy a needed spiritual dynamic and final meaning that views moral activity--in its personal, social, and political dimensions--as a matter of ideal import and hence of eternal significance.

Niebuhr would seem to imply that Christianity and human morality must finally be conditioned by events, insofar as their work on earth is concerned. If our assumption is correct at this point, then we have grounds for asserting that on Niebuhr's terms man has no other alternative but the moral defeatism of a pragmatic and compromising approach to the human problem. This is the peril in

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I. Harris, *ibid.* (1948), italics mine.

his moral theory which leads directly to ethical relativism.

For he places the emphasis in the wrong place. He should be addressing his scholarship to implementing the moral imperatives explicit and implicit in the Christian love ethic, so that Christianity might then find ways and means of conditioning events, rather than the morally defeating method of being conditioned by the events of human history.

Since Niebuhr does not allow for this possibility in any satisfactory manner, then one must conclude that, in his view, a constructive program for peace on earth is but a futile waste of time and energy. At times, Niebuhr has gone so far as to say that it is "sinful" effort, for it represents "idolatrous pretense" to strive too hopefully for world order or an effective world peace organization.

It is regretted that Niebuhr does not make a careful consideration of the possibility that man has, at present, adequate psychological and sociological knowledge and tools that might well help implement Christ's law of love and human brotherhood in the complex social and political problems of our age. In none of Niebuhr's major written statements has he even discussed the possibility that man may now, through wise social engineering, make explicit and

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For example, Niebuhr pays but scant attention--in fact, none at all--to a growing number of constructive analyses of the problem of war and peace in our time. Quincy Wright's A Study of War; Ruth Anshen's Beyond Victory; Kirby Page's Now Is the Time to Prevent a Third World War; Gardner Murphy's Human Nature and Enduring Peace; Bryson, Finkelstein, and MacIver's Approaches to World Peace; Mark A. May's A Social Psychology of War and Peace--these suggestive studies, to mention only a few, are usually dismissed (though not by name or title) as "moralistic guesses", "unrealistic liberalism," or "utopian dreams." Such uncritical generalizations are neither accurate nor helpful; for the overall tendency is to disparage legitimate and constructive efforts and forces at work in men and nations seeking for a resolution of the social and political crisis of the present hour.

We assume as axiomatic the important dictum of Quincy Wright that the absence of conditions of peace is a major cause of war, as well as of all types of coercive violence. Therefore, we must assert that if the Christian takes his vocation seriously, he will search for ways and means of meeting the conditions of peace. He has the

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principles--love, respect for personality, brotherhood, social solidarity, the moral laws--but what he lacks is the technical "know how" for making these principles effective in social structures. To do this, it is essential that responsible Christians turn to the social scientists for insights into human nature and for valid methodologies to aid them in this task.

For the Christian love ethic, as Ernst Troeltsch rightly insists, cannot be effective in improving the social order single-handed. Certain basic skills are needed. A moral philosophy, a sociology, a philosophy of culture, an adequate theory of education, the techniques of social engineering--all of these are called for in the task of making the Christian love ethic effective in human society. The argument that no such concrete application of ideal principles has yet been demonstrated on a large scale is no logical ground for supposing that it can never be done, once the total human situation is correctly assessed. It is just as illogical to appeal to the past to validate an argument (as Niebuhr does on numerous occasions) as it is to appeal to the future (as Niebuhr claims the liberals do consistently). Our major concern should be with the present possibilities.

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scientists and a willingness to cooperate with them in their attempts to put their valid findings to a good use--these, we insist, are legitimate and proper expressions of Christianity. Such a willingness to examine new possibilities of resolving personal and social problems constitutes an important characteristic of modern prophetic Christianity.

Since Niebuhr both implicitly and explicitly denies this concrete function of the Christian love ethic and other moral ideals in modern society, we must assert that he makes himself vulnerable to Quincy Wright's charge that those who hold wars to be inevitable simply because the historical resources to solve the problem of social conflict are alleged to be non-existent are themselves involved in the causal chain of modern wars. We are aware that this is a serious accusation. But a careful study of the entire literature under investigation will reveal no rational grounds for arguing otherwise.

Thus we must conclude that Niebuhr has not demonstrated any positive value in his concept of morals. His major energies are directed, not to the solution of problems which arise because we attempt to practice the imperative commands of a rational faith and morality, but to the purely pragmatic problems that arise because we do

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not attempt concrete applications of these principles. The truly moral life is thus negated in Niebuhr's moral theory, and the nerve of constructive endeavor is severed. This is the final outcome of relativism in morals.

4. Summary of the Chapter

We have argued that Niebuhr is involved in ethical relativism when he asserts that wars cannot be considered intrinsic evils because of the fact that some "values" in society have to be sacrificed to preserve other "values." For who or by what standard is one to judge which values are to be sacrificed? "Moral values," we have asserted, do not exist in an intellectual or metaphysical vacuum. They must be rationally validated and related to the concrete willing and acting of self-conscious persons.

Further, Niebuhr distorts the actual social situation when he denies that a tolerable middle ground between anarchy and tyranny is either possible or practical apart from an unstable equilibrium based upon the balance of power principle. Positive evidence was presented in this connection.

Again, we found that Niebuhr seems to base his arguments almost entirely upon pragmatic grounds (social and material consequences). As a result, he tends to

lose sight of personal values and larger metaphysical considerations. The logical result is to abandon society to a war of all against all.

In addition, we have tried to show that Niebuhr does not adequately consider the possibility that wars might neither preserve nor extend the values of peace; of that the major issues facing modern civilization are rather less resolved than before two world wars. His tendency to emphasize survival values above human and ideal values in this connection illustrates the ethical relativism in his thought. Man's true and highest nature is thus lost sight of in pragmatic considerations.

Further, we have argued that Niebuhr becomes so preoccupied with the formal and strategic questions of social justice that he overlooks the fundamental social law of grass-roots participation of persons in worthy and shared values--through which social process alone justice can be achieved. Hence he leaves out of account constructive community-building forces and principles that might well be significant in resolving larger problems relating to world peace.

Niebuhr's attitude toward the atomic bomb, we have asserted, is an open invitation to moral chaos and self-destruction. This is because he erroneously supposes that the bomb was the result of historical forces stronger

than human decisions. We presented positive evidence to show that this is a distortion of the actual records. This objectifying of moral guilt and responsibility, we argued, is ethically relativistic, for it presents a false view of moral values, which must always be related to self-conscious personal choices.

Moreover, Niebuhr appears to assume that material and impersonal forces are finally effective in human history, and are hence to be the central considerations in any social or political discussion. Such, we argued, is to deny the distinctively Christian way of overcoming evil (the power of redemptive love), and to overlook available powers in man. On Niebuhr's terms, we are led to pronounce man as finally incapable of any type of constructive activity in the matter of war and peace.

Similarly, Niebuhr has failed to see that universal moral principles, rationally validated, are essential to a just solution of the problem of war and peace. War, we argued, is a matter of human relations, and as such is a moral problem. To view war as essentially a strategic problem is both pragmatism and relativism in morals.

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Finally, we have tried to indicate that Niebuhr does not allow for the constructive possibilities in the human situation revealed by the insights and methodologies

of the psychologists and social scientists. With their help, we argued, Christianity might be brought to an increasingly effective conditioning of events, rather than to be conditioned by events, as in Niebuhr's socially pessimistic and ethically relativistic point of view.

under several points.

1. Niebuhr's general ethical theory may be said to consist of the following basic ideas: (1) The Christian distinction to all naturalistic and relativistic theories of ethics, the Christian ethic possesses a unique source and power. This new element is the transcendent love which of Jesus. (2) This love ethic is at once unconditional and absolute. As the ultimate ethical ideal, it transcends every historical fact and reality, and by its power it judges all human historical achievements as relative to the contradiction to the will of God. (3) Though the ethical ideal is an impossible possibility, it creates a moral dynamic by the tension it maintains between the ideal and the real world. (4) The ethical ideal functions as a guide to practical man and as a source of conflict of interests between individuals and nations in larger human aggregates. (5) The ethical ideal is a dynamic force. His sin is not only a personal sin but a social

CHAPTER IX

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

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in larger human aggregates. (5) Man is an inviolable

sinner. His sin is spiritual, not merely. It is brought

on by a defect in the will. Though inevitable and universal, man's sin (rebellion against God) remains his own responsibility. It represents an abuse of his freedom.

(6) A dualistic ethics is called for--one for man as a child of God (the ethic of perfect love) and one for man as a child of sin (the ethics of pragmatic politics). And (7) coercive force is justified as a means of establishing social order and keeping the peace. Coercive violence (war) is morally preferable to complacent capitulation to either anarchy or tyranny. Man's egoism makes a conflict of interests a perpetual feature of historical existence.

2. Defining ethical relativism as the view that man as man is incapable, apart from social pressure or the intervention of supernatural aid, of making universally normative valid distinctions concerning the nature of right and the good, and of formulating general ethical principles that can function concretely as a constructive guide to men in their personal and collective conduct, we have examined the following areas in Niebuhr's thought for evidence of ethical relativism: (1) his view of rational morality; (2) his interpretation of God in history; (3) his view of man's vocation in the universe; (4) his concept of community; (5) his idea of freedom; and (6) his philosophy of war and peace.

3. Regarding reason in morals, Niebuhr holds that man is a unity of mind, body, and soul. Man moves more by impulse than by reason. The rationalists and simple moralists do not understand the tragic character of human nature--that men cannot do the good they intend because of a defect of the will which corrupts all human formulations of moral ideals and places all moral achievements under the judgment of God. While religious pre-suppositions and revelations cannot be in complete contradiction to the laws of rational coherence, and though intelligence is needed in the moral life, yet one must not trust the reason too confidently. For such is to identify nous and logos, spirit and rationality. Since the rationalists do this, it is argued, they sin in attempting to usurp God's prerogatives.

We have tried to show that the main stream of rationalism in theism is not involved in the errors that Niebuhr supposes. We found the central argument of the rationalists to be that in order to retain the ethical content in human life, and more especially in the religious life, it is necessary to maintain that the right and good way of life must be rationally justified. This involves a trust in the rational capacity of man. For it is the reason which is able to order and guide the natural impulses

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into an increasing enhancement and socialization of the individual personality and its collective expressions. This employment of the reason does not constitute idolatry, but, rather, it makes possible a more coherent reading of morality and religion alike. To make theological ethics exempt from the laws of a rational morality is to involve such an ethics in irrationalism and relativity in the moral life.

4. In the discussion of man's vocation in the universe, we noted that Niebuhr holds that man is a child of nature limited by its necessities and driven by its impulses, but at the same time is a spirit who stands outside of nature, himself, and the world. Thus it is alleged that the rationalists are in error in overlooking man's relation to nature and in identifying him, prematurely and unqualifiedly, with the divine and the eternal. The Christian view of man, Niebuhr holds, is that man and the world are good, not because of anything in themselves, but because of their relation to God as Creator and Redeemer. The self can find no meaning in the world as such, but only in relation to God's grace and final revelation of meaning at the edge of history. Thus a profound believer will accept his distance from God as a created being, will know that God is the enemy of every sinful human pretension, and will know that the human will is evil even though this evil is not

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caused by his finiteness.

Our criticism of this view was that it makes God a great deceiver in placing before man an ethical ideal and a historical task that he cannot hope to comprehend or realize concretely in any meaningful degree, and that it does not give an adequate interpretation of the Christian doctrine of man as created "in the image" of God. To understand God as a being capable of reasonable love would allow a place in faith for a conception of man as a co-worker with God, ever perfecting and actualizing His Will on earth as in heaven. This task involves a very real "preparation" for the coming of the Kingdom of God in social and political structures as well as in individual consciences. To overemphasize God's sovereignty and wrathful judgment is to degrade man unduly, and to cut the nerve of constructive moral activity in mundane existence. We found this tendency very marked in Niebuhr.

5. Regarding the work of God and man in history, we found that Niebuhr holds the relation between the temporal and the eternal to be a dialectical one. The eternal is revealed and expressed in the historical processes as a principle of judgment, a source of dynamics in the moral life through the sense of tension it creates between the "is" and the "ought to be," and as a symbol of final perfection and completion beyond the inevitable tragedies of

history. But the eternal is not realized or exhausted in the temporal. Finite occasions and relationships have their ground in God, but God's will and purposes are always defeated in history, even though there may be progressive approximations to His will and purposes. Since human sin has introduced a contradiction to God's will, then there can be no meaningful moral progress through any further developments of the inherent capacities of human existence. New corruptions of evil arise and remain equal with all further developments of good in history. Thus the judgment of God is upon every pretense or claim to moral progress in human life.

That this construction makes an abstraction of the ethical ideal by denying that God's will and purposes are dynamically (functionally) related to man's willing and acting, and that it negates the truly moral life by ending, logically, in a radical contradiction of divine and human love by the mechanics of paradoxical argumentation, was stated as the central thesis of this dissertation. Thus Niebuhr's view makes all human moral and religious endeavors operate in a vacuum devoid of concrete meaning, and history is reduced to the level of a negative contingency and relativity that can only end in tragedy. We tried to show that a philosophy of meliorism as applied to history would make possible a reasonable optimism and

a very real moral progress, while admitting with Niebuhr that progress is never automatic. But we go further to say that a progressive control of human evils and an increasing success of the good are possible and practical when humanly willed, planned, and executed. We have conceded that there will ever be moral setbacks, but have insisted that they are not to be accepted as axiomatic.

6. Niebuhr's concept of community is based upon the theory of the natural vitality and cohesive forces that lie at the base of all group life. Since human corruption destroys this natural cohesion, and since rational schemes prove ineffective in the task of ordering and extending community, then coercive force is necessary to prevent either anarchy or tyranny from gaining ascendancy in the social organization of communities. With the magnified destructive forces at work between nations, this reliance upon coercive power is even more a necessity in the world community. While God wills community, and though man cannot fulfil his life without it, yet the sociologists and moralists are involved in sinful pretension in attempting to appeal to man's rational nature or to suppose that love can create the just society. For to claim that an increasing perfection of human community is possible on a large scale is to become involved in the false absolute of sanctioning a particular social structure

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as the Kingdom of God. Perfect love or rational moral schemes cannot be the guiding principles of community. Rather, a more pragmatic theory of justice that accepts the balance of power principle as the nearest possible approximation to the ideal is Niebuhr's solution to the problem of community. Man is not good enough, and the historical resources do not exist, to create a community of reasonable love and justice in either intra-group or inter-group relations.

In our critique of this concept of community, we have tried to indicate (1) that Niebuhr is too individualistic in his basic social criteria, for he abstracts one type of self-transcendence (spiritual freedom) as essential human nature, and does not allow for mutuality and human solidarity as normal forms of self-transcendence; (2) that his appeal to historical data is inconclusive, for there is considerable evidence to show that men and communities do not conform to the arbitrary pattern set down by Niebuhr; (3) that the true Christian approach to the human problem involves an imperative command to search for and achieve a communitarian social organization based on the universal principles of love and respect for personality, with the aid of God's enabling power and the methodologies of the social sciences.

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analyzed and found to consist of these leading ideas: (1) there is a paradoxical relation of finitude and infinity, of freedom and necessity in man, the recognition of which will prevent the error of complacent finiteness found in all modern moral theories of man's freedom; (2) the Fall of man concept is an instructive symbol to show that man sins because of the inevitable abuse of his freedom; (3) sin is man's responsibility, and guilt may assume an objective role not necessarily related to foreseeable consequences or concrete human choices; (4) sin, as the rebellion against God in a refusal to accept the limitations of human freedom, is a spiritual, not a moral act; (5) man has freedom to apprehend the good but not to achieve it; (6) man is most free in the humble recognition that he has no real freedom to choose between good and evil; and (7) man has no power in himself to do the good he intends apart from the intervention of God's grace in the human will.

We argued that there is a serious ambiguity in Niebuhr's understanding of freedom that illustrates his ethical relativism, for he fails to distinguish adequately between (1) psychological freedom; (2) moral freedom; and (3) metaphysical or real freedom. The latter concept, we insisted, is the only valid approach to freedom in ethical theory, for it alone can provide a rational basis for moral

accountability, and it alone can preserve meaning in universally normative moral principles. We tried to show that this view of real freedom rules out both Niebuhr's idea of divine judgment on human moral endeavors and his reformulation of the Fall of man doctrine. The presentation of Brightman's view of positive personal freedom revealed that Niebuhr's concept of freedom is negative and morally nihilistic in the face of empirical evidence to the contrary.

8. Finally, we investigated Niebuhr's philosophy of war and peace in the attempt to find further evidence of ethical relativism in his thought. Noting his view that wars cannot be considered as intrinsic evils due to the fact that some values in society have to be sacrificed to preserve other values, we argued that he has no valid basis for judging which "values" are to be sacrificed and which are to be defended; for he will allow no rationally validated system of moral principles, and he overlooks the fact that all moral values must be related to the concrete willing and acting of self-conscious persons.

Further noting that Niebuhr appears to base his arguments upon pragmatic grounds (social and material consequences) we insisted that he tends to lose sight of personal values and larger metaphysical considerations.

The logical result is to abandon society to a war of all against all. His tendency to emphasize survival values above human and ideal values was stated as a mark of ethical relativism in his view of war and peace.

We then tried to show that Niebuhr's preoccupation with the formal and strategic questions of social justice and world community leads him to overlook the fundamental social law of grass-roots participation. Hence he leaves out of account constructive community-building forces and principles that are relevant in matters of world peace.

Niebuhr's assumption that material and impersonal forces are to receive central consideration in matters social and political is a denial of the uniquely Christian way of overcoming evil--the power of redemptive love. This construction rules out available powers for good in man, and finally rules man incapable of constructive activity in the area of war and peace.

Finally, we tried to indicate that Niebuhr's refusal to admit the constructive possibilities revealed by the insights and methodologies of the psychologists and social scientists is a mark of ethical relativism. For with their assistance, we argued, Christianity might well be brought to an increasingly effective conditioning of events, rather than to be content to be conditioned by

events, as in Niebuhr's socially pessimistic and ethically relativistic point of view.

2. Conclusions

Several conclusions are drawn from this investigation of ethical relativism in Reinhold Niebuhr.

1. When Niebuhr denies that man has the moral capacity to make universally normative valid distinctions concerning the nature of right and the good apart from the intervention of the divine will, he destroys the concept of moral autonomy necessary to a rationally justifiable objectivity in ethics. This negates man's ethical function until God chooses to act. Since we do not know the content of the absolute ideal upon which God is alleged to base His judgment on man's relative and sinful achievements, then we must conclude that ethical relativism exists in both Niebuhr's formal ethical theory and his practical applications of this theory. For neither possess concrete ideal import, and they are incapable of being functionally demonstrated in the ethical life.

2. Niebuhr's total view leads to a sub-ethical and sub-Christian interpretation of human life, for he leaves out of account the concrete moral laws and the actual instances when human choices and rational participation

in ideal moral values have functioned in a fashion that rightly deserve God's support rather than His condemnation. And Niebuhr does not allow for the implicit imperative in the Gospel Ethic to implement Jesus' command to love and respect all persons. Thus his conception of prophetic Christianity is essentially negative and fragmentary.

3. Niebuhr has not validated his claim that all rationalists are involved in sinful idolatry when they search for a coherent account of human existence. While the rationalists among the theists hold that all data to support religious faith or moral theory must come before the court of reason for validation and justification, yet they agree with Niebuhr that ultimate truth, in its complete form, lies beyond the scope of human reason. They realize that man's mind can never become God's mind. But they insist that any system of faith or morality that claims exemption from rational validation cannot be reasoned with. The error in Niebuhr's thought at this point is that he does not see that one is not required to deny the proper function of reason in order to prove faith absolute. To overemphasize a theological criterion of coherence beyond man's comprehension is to degrade man unnecessarily, and to deny that human reason is a divine

instrument capable of ordering experience and achieving meaningful insights into truth. Niebuhr's defense of irrationalism cannot be validated since it does not account for the actual fact that men can and do discover new moral and spiritual insights.

4. Niebuhr has not escaped the errors of Barth and Nygren in making an arbitrary separation of divine love and natural human love. His discussion of the dialectical interpretation of the divine-human encounter does not indicate a functional relationship between God's will and human aspirations. Thus God's agape, in Niebuhr's thought, is not concretely operational in history. On these terms, man has no rational basis for believing that love will be effective at the end of history. When God reveals His will in history only in judgment, then man can have no assurance that either individual justification or social redemption is possible.

5. Niebuhr makes God a great deceiver in placing before man an ideal and a task that he cannot hope to achieve. Logically, this means that all human striving and all formulations of moral principles are divested of any ideal import or eternal significance, and man is condemned to an ethically relativistic universe.

6. In his interpretation of history, Niebuhr is involved in the fallacy of claiming that God is inevitably

defeated in history. He is also in error in asserting that human corruption is such that moral progress is to be considered a utopian dream. His views in this connection are invalidated by a consideration of the empirical fact that a concept of meliorism (a progressive achievement of good over evil in history) is both possible and practical when willed by man and implemented by rational methodologies. Meliorism is further validated by a philosophical defense of God's reasonable love as qualifying His will. Niebuhr's view of God's capricious will would lead one to think of God as so jealous of His prerogatives that He would annul all human historical achievements in order to prove His majesty and sovereignty. Thus Niebuhr's thought at this point indicates a reversion to irrational patterns of argumentation, rather than forward to the spiritual and moral insights of high religion.

7. Niebuhr's theory of community reveals a lack of positive appreciation of the normative studies of community that could rightly furnish scientific aids to the task of achieving the Christian community of love and righteous justice on ever increasing levels of human interaction. He fails to prove that communities are not appreciably affected by religious ideals or rational programs. He is individualistic in his basic orientation in approaching social problems. He is involved in the error

of simple enumeration in appealing to historical data. And he overlooks the imperative command implicit in the Gospel Ethic and revealed in human historical experience to plan for and to extend the communitarian ideal of mutuality and human solidarity on every level of existence. This task involves a rational morality and a functional theory of Agape, as well as a reliance upon the sociological tools of the social sciences. This oversight illustrates the ethical relativism in Niebuhr.

8. In his presentation of human freedom, Niebuhr is negative and morally nihilistic. There is scant recognition in his writings of the empirical fact of positive personal freedom in persons. In this connection, Niebuhr has not validated his theory of sin as spiritual, for a rational analysis of human freedom reveals that no moral accountability can be assessed to actions not willed in self-conscious personal freedom. To say that moral guilt may be objectively real is to make a fiction of freedom. This view does not make possible a rational account of large-scale human catastrophes, such as wars; and it eventually severs the nerve of constructive activity in the moral life. Moreover, he has not entirely avoided the errors of determinism in his account of freedom and responsibility, for reasons stated above. Brightman's theory of positive personal freedom is more adequate,

and shows that man has freedom to achieve as well as to aspire. Moreover, sin as moral can function to enhance the spiritual life by making conscious choice a matter of eternal significance rather than a mere pragmatic guidance in human conduct, as in Niebuhr's relativistic moral theory.

9. Niebuhr's view of war and peace is ethically relativistic at the point of his insistence that wars cannot be intrinsic evils (and thus may be morally justified) because of the alleged fact that there are times when some values in society must be sacrificed to preserve other values. For he allows no valid basis for judging which "values" are to be sacrificed and which are to be defended. Only a rationally validated system of moral principles, plus a view of moral values as necessarily related to the concrete willing of self-conscious persons, can function as a trustworthy guide in assessing the worth of conflicting values. When he bases his arguments upon pragmatic grounds, he tends to emphasize survival values over and above personal values and other ideal values, and thus logically abandons human society to moral chaos and the war of all against all. By leaving out of account the power of love in man, and the constructive possibilities revealed by the psychological and social sciences, he rules out available forces

for good in the human situation, and finally renders man incapable of any significant constructive activity in mundane existence. Thus the truly moral life is negated. This is the end result of relativism in theology and morals.

10. Niebuhr comes out in his moral theory very near the pragmatic ethics of John Dewey and the naturalists. His social and political theory, as opposed to the idealism-realism of the main stream of Christianity, would appear to condemn men to apply their major energies to the purely pragmatic problems that arise because they do not attempt to apply universal moral principles, rather than supporting them in their attempts to solve the problems of strategy that arise when they do attempt concrete applications of the moral principles (as love, respect for personality, social solidarity, and the like).

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This bibliography serves as a key to the abbreviations in the text, where books and articles are referred to by the author's last name, followed by the standard abbreviation.

The abbreviation "tr." means "translated by." The abbreviation "rev." means "review." Undesignated Roman numerals refer to volumes, Arabic numerals to pages. Where two dates appear, the one in parentheses is that of the first edition, and the other is the edition referred to.

When several articles have appeared by the same author in a given year and are cited in this dissertation, the order of their appearance in the text is referred to by small Arabic numerals.

The special bibliography refers to works or articles of crucial import in this dissertation.

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Abstract of a Dissertation

ETHICAL RELATIVISM IN REINHOLD NIEBUHR

by

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Reinhold Niebuhr holds that the ultimate principle of ethics transcends every historical fact and reality. This absolute principle is perfect love. It is only through a profound Biblical faith that one can discern this love, and it can never be fully known or concretely realized in history. As a principle of comprehension beyond our comprehension it remains an "impossible possibility."

In the treatment of this transcendent love ethic are centered many of the basic issues in Niebuhr's moral theory. It is the purpose of this dissertation to investigate the ethical relativism implicit and explicit in both the formal ethical theory and the practical applications of Niebuhr's conception of absolute love.

In Chapter I we define ethical relativism as the view that, due to the limitations of human reason and the evidence of conflicting moral standards and frustrated ideals, man as man is incapable, apart from the intervention of supernatural aid or social pressure, of making universally normative valid distinctions concerning the nature of right and the good, and of formulating general ethical principles that can function concretely as a constructive guide to men in their personal and collective conduct.

Chapter II sets forth the general ethical theory of Reinhold Niebuhr. Chapter III surveys the ethical theories

of representative theists who hold to a rational approach to morality. These are: Henry Sidgwick, Thomas Hill Green, William Ritchie Sorley, Frederick Robert Tennant, Edgar Sheffield Brightman, and Walter Goodnow Everett. Our purpose here is to indicate that Niebuhr is in error in asserting that all rationalists claim to be able to know absolute truth or that they are involved in idolatry in holding that the reason of man is a divine instrument capable of ordering and redirecting the natural impulses toward an increasing perfection of personal and social life. We then analyze Niebuhr's criticism of rational morality, followed by our own defense of reason in ethics.

Chapter IV carries the issues of rationalism in ethics (objectivity of moral principles) versus irrationalism (relativity of moral ideals) into the discussion of man's vocation in the universe. Chapter V surveys Niebuhr's view of God in history, followed by a critique of his position indicating his ethical relativism. Chapter VI is a search for evidence of ethical relativism in Niebuhr's concept of community. Chapter VII employs the same methodology of interpretation and criticism in the discussion of freedom. This chapter includes a statement of Brightman's concept of positive personal freedom.

Chapter VIII summarizes Niebuhr's view of war and

peace, followed by our criticism of his thought. At the end of each chapter we have included a summary of the specific aspects of Niebuhr's thinking illustrating ethical relativism.

The following conclusions are drawn from this investigation of ethical relativism in Reinhold Niebuhr.

1. When Niebuhr denies that man has the moral capacity to make universally normative valid distinctions concerning the nature of right and the good apart from the intervention of the divine will, he destroys the concept of moral autonomy necessary to a rationally justifiable objectivity in ethics. This negates man's ethical function until God chooses to act. Since we are not told of any content in the absolute ideal upon which God allegedly bases His judgment on man's relative and sinful achievements, then we must conclude that ethical relativism exists in both the formal theory and the practical applications of Niebuhr's conception of the transcendent love ethic.

2. This construction leads to a sub-ethical and sub-Christian interpretation of human life, for it leaves out of account the actual instances when human choices, guided by rational moral laws, have made possible a concrete participation in ideal moral values in such a fashion that men rightly deserve God's support rather than His condemnation. Moreover, Niebuhr does not allow for the imperative command implicit in

the Gospel Ethic to implement the universal ideal values of love and respect for personality.

3. The fallacy of Niebuhr's criticism of a rational morality is that he does not see that it is not required that one deny the proper function of reason (ordering and perfecting human life) in order to prove faith absolute. His defense of irrationalism cannot be validated, since he does not account for the empirical fact that disciplined minds can control impulse, and that new insights into truth are possible.

4. Niebuhr has not escaped the errors of Barth and Nygren in making an arbitrary separation of divine and human love. His discussion of the dialectical interpretation of the divine-human encounter does not indicate a functional relationship between God's righteous will and human aspirations. Thus God's Agape, on these terms, is not concretely operational in history, and man has no basis for believing that love will be effective even at the edge of history. Niebuhr allows no rational grounds for either individual or social redemption.

5. Niebuhr makes God a great deceiver in placing before man an ideal and a task that he cannot hope to understand or achieve. Logically, this divests all human moral activity of any ideal import or eternal significance.

6. In his interpretation of history, Niebuhr is in error in holding that God is inevitably defeated in history, and also in his assertion that human corruption makes moral progress a utopian dream. This view is invalidated by a consideration of the fact that a concept of historical meliorism (a progressive achievement of good over evil) is possible and practical when willed by man and aided by rational methodologies. Since he tends to deny that God's will is qualified by reasonable love, Niebuhr's thought indicates a reversion to irrational patterns of argumentation, rather than forward to the moral and spiritual insights of high religion.

7. His theory of community reveals a lack of positive appreciation of the normative studies of community that can furnish needed scientific aids in the achievement of the Christian community of love on ever increasing levels of human interaction. Niebuhr fails to prove his case that communities are not appreciably affected by religious ideals or rational moral programs. He is individualistic in his basic orientation approaching social problems, for he fails to see that mutuality and human solidarity are normal forms of self-transcendence. He is involved in the error of simple enumeration in appealing to historical data, for certain communitarian movements in medieval and modern history do not conform to the arbitrary rules of community

he sets down.

8. Niebuhr's idea of freedom is negative and morally nihilistic. He gives inadequate recognition to the empirical fact of positive personal freedom with its power to achieve as well as aspire. In this connection, he has not validated his concept of sin as spiritual. A rational analysis of human freedom will reveal that no moral accountability can be assessed to actions not willed in self-conscious freedom. Thus to objectify moral guilt is to make a fiction of freedom. His view does not make possible a rational account of large-scale human catastrophes, such as global wars; and it eventually severs the nerve of constructive activity in the moral life.

9. Niebuhr's view of war and peace is ethically relativistic at the point of his insistence that wars cannot be considered to be intrinsic evils. He bases his claim that wars may be morally justifiable on the fact that there are times when some values in society must be sacrificed to preserve other values. But he presents no valid basis for judging which values are to be sacrificed and which are to be defended. In his pragmatic defense of coercive violence he tends to emphasize survival values over and above personal values and other ideal values, and thus logically abandons human society to moral chaos and the war of all against all.

Moreover, he overlooks the constructive possibilities for peace revealed by the psychological and social sciences.

10. Niebuhr comes out in his moral theory very near the pragmatic ethics of John Dewey and the naturalists. His social and political theory, as opposed to the idealism-realism of the main stream of Christianity, would appear to condemn men to apply their major energies to the purely pragmatic problems that arise because they do not attempt to apply universal moral principles, rather than supporting them in their attempts to solve the problems of strategy that arise when they do attempt concrete applications of the moral principles.

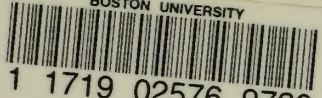
AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Marvin Wilmoth Cook, the son of Orville Ray Cook and Ruth Jensen Cook, was born in Beaver, Oklahoma, September 23, 1922. He attended the public schools of Beaver, Oklahoma, and Garden City, Kansas. He received the A. B. degree (cum laude) from Southwestern College in 1943, and the S. T. B. degree from Boston University School of Theology in 1946. A member of the Central Kansas Conference of the Methodist Church, he was the pastor of the Methodist Church in Cataumet, Massachusetts, from 1946 to 1950. He was an assistant professor of Philosophy and Social Ethics in Simmons College, Boston, Massachusetts, from September, 1948, to June, 1949. For two semesters (1947-48) he was one of the graduate assistants in the department of Social Ethics in the Boston University School of Theology. He was married in 1948 to Helen Louise Greenleaf.

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