

## THE MEANING OF LIFE AND DIVINE TRANSCENDENCE

If my presentation this afternoon is as cryptic as its assumptions are broad and sweeping, it is *not* due merely to the limitations of time. Beneath the surface of the subject matter there lurks a treacherous philosophical undertow—treacherous at least for an unsuspecting moral theologian of the “conventional swim” such as I. Be advised then, however obliquely, that at least one participant will be somewhat at sea in the formal presentation, not however without the hope, *bene fundata*, that subsequent discussion will provide either company or rescue.

I cannot expect all to be sympathetic. Some perhaps will want nothing to do with such foolishness as metaphysics and would be inclined to judge that I'm getting pretty much what I deserve. I'll not debate this point, though it is at least debatable, for it is not a principle but a fact that is of immediate concern. The fact is that within the Catholic experience philosophy has been a well traveled pathway to theology. If, indeed, we were ill advised to trod this path, we will not regain our bearings simply by abandoning it; the more sensible approach, it seems to me, lies in retracing our steps.

Our goal then is a modest one, less pretentious at least than the topic suggests. For we intend neither to define the meaning of life nor to demonstrate the reality of divine transcendence. Rather, we are in search of a question, a “misplaced” question whose recovery is essential if theological investigation is to move in a forward direction.

### THE PROBLEM OF GOD

What prompts man to reject divine transcendence? Is it because God is an unverifiable assumption, a disproved theory, a non-fact? Does the problem of God fall under the rubric of fact or fiction? Or is *the* problem first and foremost one of meaning? Whether meaning can survive in the face of God?

We are searching out the question behind the question; one whose matter of factness will not betray it as less than human. If my reading of modern philosophical anthropology is correct, *the* question, whether posed in terms of God or man, is "to be or not to be;" and not merely a matter of *esse*, moreover, but of *inter-esse*—of interest and concern. For human be-ing *is* indeed (Seindes), a matter of fact, but never simply this. Essentially and from the beginning human be-ing is Dasein; being toward and with and for. This relative and diaphanous structure of human be-ing constitutes man a meaning of, a pointing toward, a pledge of; and it is the what of this question—that-is-man that divides theist and atheist.

The question of fact, whether God is or is not, can be allowed, perhaps, but only as the anticlimactic corollary of atheism. For one who has decided that man does not mean God is still free, it seems to me, to raise the matter-of-fact question that invites the matter-of-fact response which characterizes deism or adeism. But, to borrow a phrase of Pascal, this is "to discuss to pass an hour." It is freedom bereft of meaning.

#### THE WORLD OF MEANING

In the realm of the manuals, the theologian has inherited from the philosopher a "substantialist" perspective from which to view all of reality. Everything, man included, is first gathered up within the category of the "in itself;" the *what-is-that-is* prior to any *relationship* it might have to another; the *fact* prior to the *meaning* it might bear. To see man in the light of this facticity is to accord him at least one purely neutral moment of existence; a moment whose proper affirmation is simply "I am." Following closely upon the heels of this neutral moment, but nonetheless secondary, is meaning; the toward, the with, the for of the "I am."

Existentialism serves to remind us of what has been the deepest insight—though unfortunately more often than not the deepest buried insight—of our philosophical tradition, namely, that meaning is the irreducible datum of human existence. It would be impossible to do justice in a few lines to the plenitude of this insight. Permit me therefore simply to point up some of its more salient features in statements that are by now commonplace.

Insofar as the term existence serves as the central reference point of existential philosophy it no longer signifies—as it did for Kant—the simple fact of be-ing; it means rather the mode of be-ing that is proper to man. In this restricted sense man alone exists (ek-sists) in that from the very beginning, he stands-beyond-what-is in the paradoxical experience of consciousness. A self beyond self in a way that transcends the normal subject-object relationship, he is present to himself, discovers himself, realizes himself only by going outside of himself.

This radical openness of human be-ing, this other than-ness, constitutes man not-a-thing but what is beyond everything. In this sense to say that man is no-thing is not to deny the fact that man is but to affirm the transcendent nature of the fact, namely, man-is-not-yet. Terms such as intentionality, subjectivity, meaning, anticipation, etc., all convey this is-to-be structure of human be-ing.

#### THE PRE-CONCEPTUAL EXPERIENCE OF BE-ING

All the above terms used to describe the dynamic relational structure of human be-ing imply some sort of knowing in man from the very beginning. Here one must precede cautiously for failure to differentiate this primary knowing from the more familiar and secondary levels of knowing opens one squarely to the charge of innatism. Primary knowing designates a pre-conceptual experience which cannot correctly be described in terms borrowed from the secondary and conceptual level of knowing, the level of understanding. Lonergan is most helpful here in his differentiation of the terms "idea," "concept," and "notion," all fairly synonymous terms in common usage. "Idea" is the act of understanding, the insight man has on the second level of intellectual operation. The "idea" is already known and controlled. "Concept" is the thematization of that insight; the known in terms of definition. "Notion," on the other hand, is meant to suggest the heuristic character of pre-conceptual knowing, the tending toward the unknown-to-be-known. Here we are dealing neither with an idea nor a concept nor, I might add, an intuition, if this latter is meant to suggest something already known and controlled. When radical intentionality, meaning, anticipation,

etc. are understood in the light of heuristic knowing the charge of innatism can be successfully averted.

From this perspective also mystery is once again located squarely within man as his *proprium esse*. Human being is ever and always unbelievable; within reach of understanding yet never within grasp. Man is structured as a radical amazement, a primordial wonder, pointed to by Aristotle as the beginning of all philosophy, and by the critical realist as the unconditioned condition for the possibility of any and all questions.

Constitutive meaning strikes also at the heart of psychological relativism which similarly affirms that man is a meaning-of-being; that nothing is of meaning (good, true, valuable) except that man means it to be so. To the extent that psychological relativism locates meaning within man thereby refusing any alien dignity that meaning outside of man offers him at the expense of his *esse proprium*, it is of genuinely human inspiration. But it fails to finger primary or latent meaning; the pre-conceptual meaning that underpins, penetrates, and goes beyond particular meanings. Such myopia reduces reality to a world of make-believe and condemns man to play the role of God.

#### MAN—AN UNRESTRICTED MEANING

The vision of man we have been sketching out need not be dogmatically asserted. It can be mediated through a transcendental method with which names such as Marochal, Coreth, and Lonergan are commonly associated, and which aims for a truly presuppositionless metaphysics.

This is not the place to detail the method. Briefly, it has for its point of insertion the "clearly known, universally accessible, indubitable occurrence of question," and for its proper tool the rejection of the counterposition, that is, where one's performance counters his stated position. Beginning with the fact of questioning it claims as the condition for the possibility of the fact, an awareness that goes beyond the already known to an unknown to be known. This heuristic pre-conceptual experience is what we have been pointing to in our analysis of man as *Dasein*. In this mediation moreover, the expe-

rience reveals itself in all its unrestrictedness as an intention or a meaning of being.

I am well aware of course that "being-talk" can be just as treacherous and misleading as "God-talk." The specter of pseudo-transcendence haunts the regions of philosophy as well as theology. When being is viewed in isolation, apart from the heuristic experience that is human being, insulated from "the wonder of it all," it is reduced to a pseudo-idea, an empty thought. Such a villification of being leaves man nothing more than an expectation of not being at all; a useless passion indeed. Only when being is understood in the light of anticipation and expectation, not of this or that or the sum total of this and that, but of the not yet known, the "what first comes to understanding" and thus to be understood, to be affirmed, to be decided for, only when being is viewed in the context of the concrete existential experience that is human being, does man emerge, not as mock meaning, but as genuine transcendence.

We have now hastily retraced the route that meaning must never again travel if it is to survive. Hopefully we have left behind that absolute facticity, that eternal explanation before which expectation withers and dies. There remains still the question of divine transcendence; in particular there is the question of whether this restoration of finite transcendence points also to a restoration of God. We'll not pursue this further, however, since our seminar is placed more immediately within the context of the abortion question. In the brief time remaining I should like to offer a few observations on this most crucial question from the vantage point thus far established.

#### THE QUESTION OF MEANING

"Is pre-natal life a person or a thing?" has been for the theologian *the* question—the precise point at which he has inserted himself into the abortion debate. Far from raising this question anew, I propose to question it; specifically to question whether it is a question at all. If, in fact, it has led the moral theologian to the affirmation of no fact at all, simply a presumption in favor of person, and if, in principle, it is regarded as unanswerable, then in what sense is it really a question?

Does not the performance of a question, insofar as it is performed within the world of meaning, and not immediacy, intend or mean answerability?

Perhaps an answer is indeed intended. Perhaps one is prepared to confirm pre-natal life either as a person or a thing. If so we suggest it can only be dogmatically asserted either through an appeal to a higher wisdom—what I am now inclined to regard as a god of the gaps—or by pressing science beyond its own limits thereby forcing it to say what it does not mean to say. In neither case is the response mediated by human wisdom.

We are searching out meaning's own question; one that carries us beyond the known to the unknown to be known. In the problem at hand pre-natal life is the known, the datum, the fact. Insofar as one approaches this datum as a scientist, he may legitimately question it in order to know it in a more accurate and comprehensive way. But insofar as the scientist is a man, he must question beyond the known to the unknown to be known. As constitutive meaning man can neither evade nor ignore this quest. He means the unknown to be understood, and to be affirmed, and to be stood for. In man, question and answer are joined.

As constitutive meaning, man does not enjoy the neutral moment implied in the question "Is it a person or a thing?". Here meaning finds itself at issue only after the answer has been given. When, however, one asks the primary question, "What is the unknown that I mean to know, and affirm, and stand for?", meaning is already at stake; one takes his stand not after the question but in and through it.

The question of abortion then has as its starting point the datum of pre-natal life. It is indeed a fact, given to us to know and, given through the eyes of science, to know well. At present we know it to be a highly sophisticated form of animal life, classifiable as human in its differentiation from all other species of animal, and remarkably individuated within this species since no two appearances are ever exactly the same. Not all the evidence is in, but it is only a matter of time before science will see and touch and measure what now is invisible and intangible and non-measurable. When all the evidence is in, however, nothing will be known beyond what is given to the

senses to know. *Beyond* what is given there is only the unknown: the unknown that man means to be known and affirmed and stood for as affirmed. By the grace of this constitutive meaning that is man, all that is not yet known, insofar as it is meant to be known, comes to light.

Let us not be misled by the language. If the vocabulary is that of potency and act, it is more an obediencial potency and a creative act that is signified. We are one world removed from the acorn-oak paradigm. When the acorn first gave itself to constitutive meaning, it was not the oak that was meant. The oak was already given and known, though virtually, in the acorn; it was simply a matter of time and ingenuity before man would locate the data. What man meant, if he meant anything, was beyond the datum, beyond what the acorn was known to be, either actually or virtually; what man meant was the unknown to be known, which now can be described but only in terms of the *Lebenswelt*—what man historically and reflexly meant the acorn to be beyond the datum. The acorn, this oak to be, reveals itself in the creative light of meaning to be the refreshment of a shady tree, the warmth of burning fire, the shelter of a home, the poem of a poet, the retribution of a gallows. And as long as it continues to dwell in the world of meaning, as a pointer to what is unknown but meant to be known, it is not yet given to know all that it shall become for man.

As the tiny acorn so also the tiny embryo; as the mighty oak to be so also the mighty animal to be—mighty in its complex formation and operation. It has only taken time and ingenuity for science to locate the marvel of the human animal in the embryo. But what is beyond the datum? To what unknown does the fact bear meaning and in the meeting unveil itself? What is fetal life not yet known to be, but when meant to be known and affirmed and stood for, reveals itself in its meeting with meaning? The question can be asked, for fetal life is not a fact that man faces for the first time. Others before us have faced it, known it, and gone beyond it to mean the not yet known to be known. In the light of this intention, be-ing (what comes first to man's understanding) has revealed itself as human be-ing; a new self; a person.

Perhaps our anticipation is running too far ahead of the facts.

Such would undoubtedly be the case if what we have said thus far is meant to answer the question of abortion. Quite to the contrary, it is not an answer but a question—a misplaced question—that we have located; not a response but responsibility.

Abortion is also a fact given for us to go beyond. I have reference here to the phenomenon of spontaneous abortion—the abrupt end of a fact of life and with it the end of a path of meaning. The living fetus can bear meaning to a beyond, not yet known, but when met in the spirit of fidelity and openness, leads self to the disclosure of self. It can bear meaning to a beyond no other fact has been given to meaning to disclose. What then do we mean beyond the lifelessness of a spontaneously aborted fetus? To what unknown does it lead us and which we mean to disclose?

In the human condition, moreover, where meaning encounters fact always in situation, facts not only bear meaning beyond but also resist meaning's thrust to meet what is beyond; not only invite and encourage, but threaten and discourage. Human life, whether before or after birth, is no exception. It also can taunt human desire, inviting us to invoke the unknown only to leave the expectation without revelation, e.g., the totally defective life that appears as a "living death," a "human vegetable." Consider also the classic instance of unjust aggression where the desire to company with human life, to be present to it in the unique way we mean to be (*disponibilité*), can cost us our life or our livelihood. Those are the limit situations wherein meaning falters, expectation fades, and man is revealed in all his helplessness. We seem not to be able to take our stand in what we are.

Permit me one final observation that is in a sense a summation. It has been said that God does not love us because we are good or lovable, but that we are good and lovable because God has first loved us. This truth finds full and dramatic expression in The Word become flesh, Jesus Christ. What we have proposed today, I feel, is the human variation of this theme of agapaic love, so characterized by its motivelessness or disinterestedness. Like the Love that graciously desired it to be, human love desires not the good that is, but creates the good that is to be. Shall we then demand the credentials of pre-natal life seemingly implied in the "person or thing"



question? Must it be a person before we will love it, or shall it become for us a person because we freely desire to be so? The answer, I feel, finds eloquent statement in one of the many Abraham Heschel aphorisms: "Within our awe we only know that all we own we owe."

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