

## SEMINAR ON NORTH AMERICAN THEOLOGY

### A. THE ETHICS OF THE FITTING:

#### H. RICHARD NIEBUHR AND THE AMERICAN TRADITION (William C. Spohn, S.J.—Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley)

The central category of Niebuhr's ethics of responsibility is "the fitting." The responsible agent seeks the significance of actions by interpretation that fits them into contexts of meaning, within frameworks that extend to the ultimate context disclosed to faith. The more ordinary categories of ethics, the right and the good, have a more limited range of application than the fitting; hence, they are not false but inadequate.

Niebuhr's proposal has not been embraced by moral philosophers in the past generation. In part this occurred because they were not conversant with the main figures of the American speculative tradition from whom Niebuhr drew heavily for his moral psychology. Jonathan Edwards, William James and John Dewey sought to discern the appropriate action by uniting intellectual and affective evaluation. For these authors, the good is a relational category: nothing is good by itself but always in reference to an experiencing being with felt dispositions and purposes. The relation of values is perceived primarily as a relation of fittingness. I refer to this initial grasp of value as an "appreciative judgment."

For William James, moral judgments are grounded in directly experienced relations between things or ideas. He provides a phenomenology of the appreciative judgments in his *The Principles of Psychology*. In the stream of consciousness some items are relatively stable, others transitional. All relations, including the fitting, are flights of consciousness that occur between the resting points of definite ideas. They register through feelings rather than definite notions. Relations are directly perceived but mute until they are named conceptually.

Jonathan Edwards' account of moral discernment highlights the role of "religious affections" in moral insight. Religious conversion provides a new source of dispositions which mediate between perception and action. They prompt insights and actions which are consonant with their character and reflect the divine beauty. In the mature Christian, these dispositions on occasion discern directly what behavior is suitable or fitting, not by elaborate reasoning but by a holy relish or taste. Edwards is no more an intuitionist than James or Dewey since the initial appreciative judgment is always subject to rational scrutiny and public standards. Ultimately, no action is moral for Edwards which does not fittingly reflect God's dispositions and intentions which seek the good of each creature in relation to the good of the whole universe.

John Dewey offers a corrective to the seeming subjectivism of James who stressed the relation between actions and the subject's deepest interests. Dewey

seeks the action which fits the conditions of action in a pragmatically fruitful manner. Affective judgments guide moral deliberation when we rehearse in imagination the possible careers of various options available to us. We directly grasp their "quality," that is, their significance in the whole situation of action which embraces our needs and the enviroing conditions of action. In *Art as Experience* Dewey describes the particular aesthetic experience which grasps the part in relation to the whole in a consummatory experience where appreciation is complete. This aesthetic dimension of appreciative judgments is central to moral and intellectual reflection as well, a point customarily ignored by critics who accuse the pragmatists of crass instrumentalism. In fact, for all four authors, the morally definitive relation is part-to-whole rather than means-to-end. Niebuhr is firmly rooted in this American tradition of the fitting.

B. NOT FATE BUT CONVERSATION:  
NORTH AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES  
ON DIVINE INVITATION AND HUMAN RESPONSE  
(John R. Stacer, S.J.—Loyola University, New Orleans)

The belief in free will is not in the least incompatible with the belief in Providence, provided you do not restrict the Providence to fulminating nothing but fatal decrees. If you allow him to provide possibilities as well as actualities to the universe, and to carry on his own thinking in those two categories . . . , chances may be there, . . . and the course of the universe be really ambiguous. . . .<sup>1</sup>

Thus William James summarizes Classical North American thought about this year's topic. James, Peirce, Royce, Whitehead, Hocking, Hartshorne, and others underline two truths about providence. First, God provides us mainly *possibilities*—valuable alternatives open for us to act on them. Second, God deals with us largely through *inviting* final causation; God's efficient causation empowers us and leaves us free to channel the energy as we choose.

From my neo-Whiteheadian perspective God's permanent nature (core self) includes: *Creativity*, universal energy, in process thought analogous to Aquinas's "Esse"; *Aim*, roughly equivalent to Aristotle's "Entelechy"; and *Ideals* ("eternal objectives"), similar to Augustine's version of Plato's forms eternally present in the mind of God. Both aim and ideals involve possibilities and function through inviting final causation.

To highlight God's inviting, we may recount the divine-human conversation in ten stages, using Roman numerals for six operations of God's intentional consciousness and Arabic numbers for four human operations.

I. God knows all possibilities for creatures. God aims creatively to share with us, thus brings together into focus a group of harmonious ideal patterns—"sensitive, intelligent, free, loving, developing"—to form an initial aim apt basically to constitute each member of the human family.

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<sup>1</sup>William James, "The Dilemma of Determinism," in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1897) 180-81. Emphasis is James's.

II. God actually establishes each of us as fundamentally such an initial purpose—empowering us with sensitivity, intelligence, freedom, capacity to love and grow. God's efficient causation gives us aim, but within us aim functions largely by final causation. Fatalists seem blinded by the "Modern Period's" reductionistic neglect of final causation. Conversationalists notice the invitation of God's purposes, ideals, hopes and perhaps plans—a call that does not force a mechanical reaction but elicits a free response.

1. For James conversion involves shifting the "hot spot" of consciousness from self toward others. For a neo-Whiteheadian an ordinary human occasion begins by knowing actualities of other persons and the environment. We feel them as given us and calling for respect and response. Through them we feel at least indirectly invited by God who shares with us creativity, aim, and ideals. For Classical North Americans, divine providence is normally mediated by human community and by nature. We should diligently use our intelligence to discover the invitations God provides, and we should also open ourselves in personal prayer to receive more immediate invitations.

2. A fully human response includes valuing—appreciating the presence of good or regretting its absence. At this stage we feel God's ideals—whether indirectly in an Aristotelian way through our own entelechies and others' invitations, or directly in a Platonic-Augustinian way through prayerful openness to more immediate divine communication. Even when God communicates directly, God's grace invites our free response by persuasion, not coercion.

3. If we appreciate a present good, we naturally hope that it continues and may propose to ourselves a plan for its preservation. If we regret a good's absence, we hope for healing and may propose a plan for the good's recovery. At this stage we feel God's hopes and plans—at least indirectly.

4. Hopes and plans propose alternatives that may or may not become actual. Thus they invite our free choice and responsible action—our human response that affects other persons, nature, our own character, and God.

III. God hears our response, knows the actuality of our choices and their results, knows not coldly but feels joy at our good and sorrow at the absence of good. God may communicate such feeling, so that God's joy "is the mirror that discloses to every creature its own greatness"<sup>2</sup> for us to preserve. If we or others have caused injury, then "God is the great companion—the fellow sufferer who understands"<sup>3</sup> how we may heal.

IV. How are we to preserve or to heal? Always we are urged to use our human capacity to understand what we can. Sometimes—faced with very complex questions about the future of individual persons, of various communities, or of our planet's environment—we may need special help from the divine wisdom that situates each act within the broad context of all relevant history.

V. Knowing the whole history, God integrates such knowledge of actuality with knowledge of all possibilities to center on relevant possibilities and form relevant aims for us. Whitehead explicitly calls this God's "particular providence

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<sup>2</sup>Whitehead, *Religion in the Making* (New York: Macmillan, 1926) 155.

<sup>3</sup>Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Macmillan, 1929) 532.

for particular occasions,"<sup>4</sup>—the special purposes, hopes, perhaps plans that God provides as invitations at particular moments of our lives.

VI. At least in a low-key way, God energizes us with these relevant aims. They renew our personal purpose—invite us to know our new actual world realistically, value it appropriately, form wise proposals for preserving the good or for healing, decide unselfishly and act courageously.

North American ideas of providence help us resist oversimplifications of fatalism and quietism. Fundamentalistic fatalists overlook the distinction between actuality and possibility. We respond that God does know all reality, but the future's reality is that of possibility; its actuality is yet to be determined, in many cases through our responsible choices.

Fundamentalistic quietists overlook the distinction between efficient causation and final causation. We respond that God does influence all reality but has freely chosen to make us free children and heirs rather than perfectly performing robots. Thus God influences some reality not by determining it directly but by inviting us to determine it responsibly.

A recognition of God's providential inviting helps us resist compulsion and conditioning. Freud recounts how inner compulsion may coerce us, as fear or rage drives us to violence and greed or lust splinters our families. Skinner tells how outer conditioning may manipulate us, as advertising makes us tools of injustice and environmental breakdown. To resist compulsion or conditioning we need to unmask it, recognize that it is not the sole influence on an action but suggests only one possibility among alternatives. Unmasked, it becomes no longer a determining efficient cause but an inviting final cause—offering an invitation to which we may say either Yes or No.

Thus our North Americans help us recognize that God's providence offers us mainly possibilities—chances, opportunities, alternatives that enable us to be free. And God's providence operates partly through an efficient causation that empowers but does not coerce, mainly through an inviting final causation that calls for our free human response.

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<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*