From the online library at www.worldwisdom.com

1

Setting aside the purely formal factors of the contemplative life, which do not directly engage the intellectual and moral worth of man, we can say that spirituality stands in a sense between metaphysical truth and human virtue, or rather that it has an absolute need of these two, though it can be reduced to neither. The presence in our mind of metaphysical truth is by itself inoperative as far as our final ends are concerned. Similarly, virtues sundered from truth do not have the power to raise us above ourselves—if indeed they can still subsist—for only the truth can surpass the level of our nature.

Truths make us understand virtues, giving them all their cosmic amplitude and their efficacy. Virtues for their part lead us to truths and transform them for us into realities that are concrete, seen, and lived.

*
* *

Everything revolves around truth and the will; the one must penetrate the other. Truth illumines the will, which, when illuminated, vivifies the truth. From the point of view of fallen man truth is dead, and the will is blind. Truth is life, but in human consciousness it appears *a priori* as a dead letter.

Intelligence is nothing without truth, and without virtue it is unable to contain truth in a really adequate and absolutely stable way. As for the will it is nothing without virtue, and without truth it cannot realize virtue in a profound and total manner.

Truth is what we must know: the Absolute and the relative and, at their points of contact—if one may speak in this way—the divine will in all its complexity. As for virtue, it is humility[1] and charity. Truth includes something of both humility and charity in its manifestation;

[1] This word is taken in its etymological sense, which is independent of the sentimental flavor it has in fact acquired. In itself the word "humility" expresses a fundamental attitude independent of any particular sentimentality, and this amounts to saying that the emotive concomitants of this attitude may differ according to the point of view.

humility is false if it has neither truth nor charity, and charity is false if it has neither truth nor humility. The virtues condition one another.

Truth becomes virtue when it appears on the level of our will, and it is then veracity and sincerity.

*
* *

The three fundamental virtues—veracity, charity, humility—must penetrate even into our thinking since this thinking is an act. There is no plane of activity where the virtues should not intervene. When pure truth manifests itself, it cannot do so without the virtues, for manifestation is an act.

Humility means looking at oneself in the limiting state of individuation; it means turning one's gaze on the ego, limitation, nothingness. Charity means looking around oneself: it means seeing God in one's neighbor and also seeing oneself there, though this time not as pure limitation but as a creature of God made in His image. Veracity means looking toward Truth, submitting and attaching oneself to it, and becoming penetrated by its implacable light. Each of the three virtues must be found again in the others; they are the criteria of one another.

*
* *

Charitable humility will avoid causing scandal and thus injuring one's neighbor; it must not be contrary to self-effacement, which is its sufficient reason.

Truthful humility will avoid overestimation: virtue must not run counter to truth. But it can be more "true" than some outward and sterile truth; in this case it is virtue that is truth, and the contradiction is only apparent.

Humble charity will avoid exhibiting itself without any useful purpose; man must not pride himself on his generosity: "Let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth." The gift of self should be above all inward; without this gift outward charity is devoid of spiritual value and blessing.

Truthful charity is conscious of the nature of things: I am not less than my neighbor since I too exist and have an immortal soul. On the other hand it may be that some higher interest takes precedence over some particular interest of the neighbor; in a general way spiritual interest takes precedence over temporal interest whether it is a question of the "neighbor" or "oneself".

Humble veracity will not hide our ignorance; to pretend to a knowledge we do not possess is harmful to the knowledge we do possess.

Charitable veracity will neglect nothing in order to make the truth understood; if truth is a good, it should also be a gift.

Effacement of ego, gift of self, realization of truth. It could be said that these attitudes correspond respectively to the stages—or states—of purification, expansion, union. They are the three "dimensions" of perfect *gnosis*.

*
* *

A spiritual virtue is nothing other than consciousness of a reality; it is natural—but immaterial—if it is accompanied by feeling. When virtue is purely sentimental, in the sense of being ignorant of the reality to which it relates, it may have a relative utility, but it is nonetheless a spiritual obstacle and a source of errors.

*
* *

If metaphysics is sacred, this means it cannot be presented as though it were only a profane philosophy sufficient unto itself, that is, not surpassing the sphere of mental operations. It is illogical and dangerous to talk of metaphysics without concerning oneself with its moral concomitants, whose criteria for man are his behavior in relation to God and his neighbor.

*
* *

The key to understanding the spiritual necessity of the virtues lies in the fact that metaphysical truths are reflected in the will and not just in the Intellect and reason. To a given principial truth there corresponds a specific volitional attitude; this is a necessary aspect—or a consequence—of the principle that "to know is to be".

*
* *

To meditate on the divine qualities is at the same time to meditate on the virtues—and consequently the vices—of human beings. Spirituality includes concentric circles and radii, modes of analogy and modes of identity: virtues and intellections. When intellections are replaced by rational operations, it is the virtues in their turn that appear as modes of identity, as "relatively direct" participations in the divine Being.

*
* *

We must clearly distinguish between natural qualities and spiritual virtues, although the appearances may be the same and although, in principle, the first constitute qualifications for the second; we say "in principle" because in fact natural qualities may give rise to a moral idolatry that prevents the passage to a higher plane and can even provoke spiritual falls. In other words natural qualities do not necessarily retain their efficacy on the spiritual level; this is also true of a purely mental—or "worldly"—intelligence, though not of metaphysical intuition when it is predominant, for metaphysical intuition by definition belongs to the domain of the spirit and therefore to the domain of the immutable.

There are vices that appear in certain men only on the spiritual, or so-called spiritual, level; and from this results the paradox of men who are naturally intelligent and spiritually stupid or modest on the surface and fundamentally proud. As soon as a man tries to go beyond himself the qualities that are linked strictly to his earthly nature and not anchored in his spiritual essence become more or less inoperative.

In some cases mental intelligence is the normal expression of the Intellect, but in others it is the opposition between the natural and the supernatural intelligence that manifests itself.

*
* *

If qualities may be only apparent and not real, the same must be true of certain defects.

False qualities are always superficial and fragmentary, hence inoperative beyond certain limits; they are not false on their own level of manifestation but in relation to the sum of the characteristics that make up the individual. The same thing is true *mutatis mutandis* of superficial defects: they are situated on the surface of the soul and cannot indefinitely resist the contrary—and fundamental—tendencies of the soul itself; and this implies that such defects—like the qualities of which we have just spoken—always remain within certain limits.

It is the overall nature of man that decides his intrinsic worth: if there is incompatibility between a quality and a defect, this means that they are not situated on the same level and that one of the two characteristics is only superficial; thus the criterion lies in their respective scope, so that some essential aspect of the soul—one that is decisive by its nature—will be the key for evaluating all the other aspects. It goes without saying that there are qualities and defects that are too important to be merely accidental; it is also evident that a great good excludes a great evil of the same order, and conversely; hence they cannot both be found in the same individual.

*
* *

Strictly social morality does not permit psychological or spiritual complications, and in this it is right in view of its practical bearing; on the other hand it is improper to attach an absolute value to this point of view and to apply it to the intrinsic nature of man. Narrow-minded moralists do not like complications, and they think this is because of their own "straightforwardness", thus absolving themselves of the need for reflection. Nonetheless complexity is to be met with everywhere in the world: there are mammals that live like fish and others

that live like birds, just as there are winged creatures adapted to the water and others adapted to the land. There are men whose qualities are genuine only at the level of profane life and others whose defects result only from ephemeral conditions on this same level.

Normally a man's evident qualities should manifest his fundamental worth, but it may happen that such qualities merely compensate for latent defects that are themselves fundamental; where there is analogy there may also be opposition. Every human quality may either express or contradict a divine perfection: it expresses it thanks to its analogy with this perfection and contradicts it because of its own relativity, which then—despite its positive content—sets it in opposition to its celestial prototype. To speak of expression is to speak at the same time of analogy, relativity, opposition.

A quality has a definitive value only through its inward humility—its position before God. False virtues are those that man alone enjoys without God being able to delight in them.

*
* *

The world is woven of analogies and oppositions in relation to God; either of these can be real or merely apparent. This is why the world is full of paradoxes, for both good and ill.

*
* *

The disproportion between the natural virtues and those having a supernatural essence or between those tainted by a secret vanity and those that are pure and deep implies that virtues of the second category may be at times less apparent than those of the first and that a certain spiritual modesty may even conceal them. It may also be that some inner reality, misunderstood from without, may seem to contradict them.

In a similar manner *gnosis* sometimes gives rise to paradoxical expressions, which in reality indicate the qualitative separation between the profane and spiritual planes; but this discontinuity is only one aspect alongside another that is more important, that of analogy and essential continuity.

*
* *

A virtue is a token of immortality only on condition that it is founded on God; this gives it a character at once impersonal and generous. A quality that is purely natural—and not validated by a spiritual attitude infusing it with divine life—has no more importance for God than "sounding brass".

*
* *

There are men who are virtuous in a conventional way, on the surface of their being and for the sole reason that their habitual environment imposes certain styles of action on them; this does not at all mean that such virtues are without merit at a particular level, however small the merit might be. There are other men who are incapable of being virtuous in a purely conventional way and without a deep understanding of the nature of things, but whose virtue would on the contrary be unshakeable given such an understanding.

A virtue that is purely natural, that is, independent of any acceptance of truth and any movement toward God, is like a crystal with which a man might try to light a darkened room; the crystal is naturally luminous, but its properties of purity and transparency and its power to focus luminous rays are inoperative without the presence of light, which in our example is nothing other than humility or perfect objectivity toward the ego and its infirmities. Or likewise: the color white is certainly luminous when set beside black, but it cannot light up a dark place; similarly a quality is certainly good when set beside a vice, but if it is not accompanied by a true, inner effacement before God and before the merit of our neighbor, it will be drowned in the blackness of hidden vanity just as the color white is drowned in darkness. One other example: without any question a horse in itself represents a force, but when two elephants pulling in the opposite direction are harnessed to the other end of a vehicle, the strength of the horse becomes inoperative even though it does not for a moment cease to exist. It is the same with the force or merit possessed by a strictly human virtue, one not illumined or transfigured by a spiritual

development, by a real victory over our nature, by a gift of our being to God.

Virtue in itself is necessary, for light does not pass through an opaque stone and barely illuminates a black wall; man must therefore become like crystal or snow but without maintaining that snow is light.

On the other hand even fire loses its brilliance before the sun; it is thus that in knowledge—or perfect love—the virtues lose their separate existence and human conditioning.

*
* *

God at times permits weaknesses in order to be able—by means of the contrast between these accidental infirmities and the essential being—to awaken virtues that are all the more profound. Qualities that have grown up from the compost of some affliction are as it were endowed with consciousness; in a concrete way they know the vanity of error.

At times God reinforces the appearance of the natural in order to be able to make the supernatural all the more evident, or He permits weakness in order to bring out the radiance and transcendence—or the gratuitous nature—of grace all the more fully, and this is without prejudice to the fact that in a general way God brings the receptacle into conformity with the supernatural gift, for these two possibilities are combined in different ways.

Too great an indulgence toward others is often caused not by an innate weakness of character but by an actual inability to conceive the frailty of men and the malice of the devil. Human beings have a tendency to believe only what they see; now there are men who *a priori* see God rather than the secret evil of creatures.

*
* *

Scandal mongering is an evil because one who is absent cannot defend himself and the divulging of an unfavorable fact may injure him and also because man naturally tends to overestimate his own power of judgment. From the point of view of simple logic it is normal for a

man to report facts that surprise him or make him suffer since in principle he always has the right to ask for advice and assure himself of the correctness of his own feeling; but this depends on the accuracy of the facts and the impartiality of the witness as well as the moral dignity of the interlocutor, quite apart from safeguarding those who are absent. Now in practice there is no means of guaranteeing that these conditions are always completely fulfilled, and indeed in nine cases out of ten they will not be; insofar as it concerns the collectivity the moral law is therefore obliged to sacrifice the exception to the rule and the particular truth to the general expediency.

As for calumny, it consists in peddling inaccurate and unfavorable facts and in interpreting unfavorably things that are susceptible to a favorable interpretation, making no distinction between what is certain, probable, possible, doubtful, improbable, and impossible. Calumny is not a matter of accidental mistakes but of systematic passion.

*
* *

In psychology as elsewhere we must differentiate between accidental essences and essences as such; thus the fact that a human being is young or is a woman constitutes a kind of essence for the person—the will cannot change it in any way—but its character is accidental, for age is fleeting and a person's sex neither adds nor takes away any fundamental human value. On the other hand there are also essential accidents, that is, accidents that manifest an essence: for example, a very unusual destiny that would be incompatible with a different essence, the mortal sin of a man who is damned, the sudden conversion of a dying man, or a crucial fact determining the life of a saint.

Experience can teach us that a man who is apparently quite imperfect may in time reveal very solid virtues, or conversely. The supernatural alone guarantees the stability of human values.

*
* *

A thought that is in itself passionate and self-interested, and "juridical" instead of "just" in its external functioning—its logic lacking a sense

of proportion and thus what one might call "the aesthetic dimension" of intelligence—cannot encompass all aspects of truth; it is a thought that "argues" and does not "listen".

Pure intellectuality depends upon thought, which in itself is contemplative, hence as completely disinterested as the act of seeing, and which in its outward functioning employs a logic that is not artificial or somehow mechanical but consonant with the real nature of things.

We could almost speak of a "moral dimension" of intelligence: moral elevation, which has nothing to do with external laws but depends upon beauty of soul, excludes an arbitrary functioning of the mind; if "beauty is the splendor of the true", it is also in a sense its criterion and guarantee, though in a subtle manner that cannot be comprehended by means of a purely theoretical knowledge; otherwise the idea of beauty would automatically confer beauty on the soul. It is true that every man has a tendency to attribute to himself what he is merely able to conceive: there is no proud man who does not deem himself humble, assuming he admits that humility is a virtue.

If truth is a constituent element of beauty, beauty is in turn a necessary factor of intellectual manifestation. There is no error without some ugliness: like every form thought is made up of conformities and proportions.

*
* *

There are men who believe themselves to be without passions because they have transferred their whole passional life to the mental plane, which becomes "egoistic".

"Wisdom after the flesh" is among other things mental passion with its compensating complement, petrifaction; it is the thought of a "hardened heart".

Since he transcends the mind, the sage loses his concepts in contemplation; he is always being born anew. Charity is to lose oneself.

*
* *

To take fallen man as the human norm is to end up idealizing not man but the human animal, the thinking beast.

Men who spiritually speaking are "fools" are often more cunning than wise men; hence their conviction, which is sustained by a certain practical experience, that they are more intelligent than such men. But this experience is limited by their very ignorance and therefore furnishes only a quite specious argument.

There are modes of intelligence that are more or less mutually exclusive in their development; this becomes very apparent when a comparison is made between the Middle Ages and the modern era or between the traditional East and the "progressive" West.

*
* *

In the normal state of the world the intelligent man possesses intelligence, and the fool is without it, but in our period of the "realization of impossibilities"—if one may venture such an elliptical definition—we see everywhere fools who are accidentally intelligent and intelligent men who are accidentally fools.

Among our ancestors intelligence had a sort of artlessness; being at once contemplative and practical, it was not projected in its entirety onto the plane of discursive thought and hardly needed external complications. In our day the opposite occurs: what characterizes our period is not so much stupidity in itself as intelligent stupidity.

In former times the devil would have had every reason for showing himself in his characteristic guise, for in this form he fascinated and intimidated the weak and perverse; indeed he was obliged to reveal himself in this manner because faith in God was everywhere. But today it is the devil who is everywhere, and he therefore no longer has any reason for showing himself as he is, nor does anything any longer oblige him to do so; on the contrary he has every reason to make people deny him since, in order to be able to make them forget God, the devil must himself be forgotten.

*
* *

"Be ye therefore wise as serpents", says the Gospel, not "be ye therefore cunning as foxes". Wisdom or prudence is defensive and is

based on generosity; but cunning is aggressive, and its basis is a glacial egoism.

True intelligence has no need of cunning, for it has a sense of proportion. With cunning man falls "intelligently" into error, but with a sense of proportion he remains "naively" in truth.

Every man must resign himself to the thought that he is of necessity a little foolish; humility is not a luxury.

Most of our contemporaries would rather appear bad than naive; and yet God is indulgent toward a sincere naiveté and even has a tenderness for it, but He always hates pretentious cleverness and spitefulness or arrogance.

*
* *

A tendency toward suspicion is no more a normal mode of intelligence[2] than is guile. If suspicion is legitimate when it arises incidentally—and exceptionally—from an accurate impression, it is illegitimate as soon as it becomes a tendency and a kind of principle, for it then engenders a sickness of the soul that is incompatible with virtue and hence with sanctity.

But suspicion not only feeds on subjective illusions: it also lives on objective appearances, which are just as illusory but nonetheless rooted in facts. Indeed suspicion, which essentially ignores the laws of coincidence and paradox, often finds itself corroborated by appearances that the environment seems to create quite wantonly, and this is by no means the least of the aspects of cosmic illusion; these possibilities—accumulations of coincidences, of appearances contrary to the reality they hide—are necessary applications of the principle of contradiction, which is included in universal Possibility. Sometimes the paradox is intentional on man's part, as is shown by the classic example of Omar Khayyam, whose wisdom clothed in frivolity is

[2] A *hadīth* says: "Keep yourselves from suspicion, for suspicion is the most deceitful thing the soul can hold out as an enticement to man." Another says: "Do not make investigations and do not spy." The police mentality is in fact closely linked with a suspicious and corrosive moralism and even with a certain mania of persecution.

opposed to a Phariseeism clothed in piety; if religious hypocrisy is possible, the contrary paradox must be equally so.

It is sometimes necessary for the good to show itself under the accidental appearance of evil, and conversely—a superficial illusion, which would always be discernible if self-interest did not prevent man from perceiving the truth.

*
* *

In certain respects every human manifestation, every thought, is an "evil" before God since every manifestation of oneself is an affirmation "alongside" God and in "opposition" to Him; in other respects every thought is inevitably a form of egoism because it does not confer a blessing on one's neighbor; finally every thought indicates a sort of illusion insofar as it does not act as a vehicle of Reality. Our nature lives on forgetfulness.

To efface oneself, to bless one's neighbor, to contemplate Truth: three ways of remembering.

There are evils that are inevitable, that are inherent in existence and individuation, and that are therefore capable of being the vehicles of a good; in this case they lose, if not their limitative character, at least their poison; but as soon as they become the vehicles of an evil, their own wretchedness reappears before God; they again become evils.

2

The spiritual necessity of the virtues is founded not only on the analogy between the human and the Divine but also on the complementary relationship—in the microcosm—between the center and the totality; this is because it is not possible for man to realize in his heart-intellect what he conceives in his mind without making the whole of his being participate in this realization. The intellective center of a being is not reached without involving his volitional circumference: he who wants the center must realize the whole; in other words he who wants to know with the heart-intellect must "know" with the whole soul, and this entails the purification of the soul and therefore the virtues. When the mind is purified by doctrinal truth and the whole being is purified by virtue, Truth can reveal itself in the heart with the help of God.

Virtue is "moral"—and therefore volitive—"truth"; it concerns not only action but all of life. The center of man cannot see as long as his periphery is blind.

Virtue is the abolition of egoism. Why? Because the ego is error: it is a principle of illusion, which falsifies the proportions of things in relation to both God and one's neighbor.

*
* *

The spiritual importance of the virtues is apparent in the fact that there are inner obstacles that come only from the falsity—or from the ugliness, which amounts to the same thing—of certain human attitudes. At the moment man wants to draw near to God the ugliness of his attitude toward others turns against him.

To know God with all that we are: the very infinity of the object of knowledge requires the totality of the act of knowing, and this totality requires the essential virtues.

It is always these essential virtues we have in view and not the qualities required by secondary human functions, such as courage and diligence. In appropriate circumstances qualities such as these obviously combine with the fundamental virtues, which in principle they depend upon. But this in no way concerns a moralism that sees in the most contingent quality an end in itself.

*
* *

It is abundantly clear that virtue, in the general and ordinary sense of the term, is by no means a guarantee of spiritual knowledge, for the thinking of a man who is "normally" virtuous may—barring pure and simple ignorance—be steeped in mental passion and unconscious presumption. In order to awaken intellection virtue must penetrate even into thought, just as knowledge should penetrate into inward and outward actions to be complete.

When virtue reaches the innermost regions of the soul, it gives rise to illumination; when the wall of a darkened room is broken, light cannot fail to enter. Complete virtue is the elimination of everything that constitutes an obstacle to *gnosis* and love.

Actions are not only superficial manifestations of the individual but also criteria of his heart, hence of his essence and of his knowledge or ignorance. To watch over one's actions is therefore not only an individual preoccupation; in some cases it is also a pursuit of purity of heart for the sake of the knowledge of God.

This confers on the theory of sin, on the examination of conscience, and on penitence a significance that goes further than any religious individualism, making them compatible with pure spirituality: in Muslim esoterism as in Christian mysticism, this strictly alchemical way of regarding actions, whether good or bad, goes hand in hand with selfless contemplation of God.

*
* *

On the plane of activity everything is a matter of proportion and equilibrium: individualistic or sentimental deviations are always possible but cannot discredit action as such. If action directly or indirectly exteriorizes what the heart contains and what the individual "knows"—or does not know—of God, it may also and conversely act upon the heart: it purifies the heart for the sake of knowledge or else hardens and darkens it; it may be either virtuous or sinful.

It is in this sense that there exists a necessary connection between action and virtue.

*
* *

If "beauty is the splendor of the true", then it can be said that moralism consists in sundering beauty from truth. Without truth beauty cannot exist, and this explains the ugliness associated with moralism. It replaces knowledge of the true by idolatry of a "good" that is often arbitrary and cramped.

In the very nature of things moralism is ignorant of both truth and beauty: it cannot avoid being hypocritical in relation to the former and a mockery in relation to the latter.

One of the most salient criteria of moralism is calumny of the object on account of the corruptibility of the subject.

The opposite error, intellectualism, consists in sundering truth from beauty—not truth as such, which is sufficient unto itself, but truth as it is reflected in us and transmitted by us. The question of beauty does not arise for pure truth, but it does arise for the human receptacle—for the substance it gives to the lightning flashes of the spirit.

*
* *

Spirituality has for its object not man but God; this is something a certain moral absolutism seems to forget.

Spirituality has a negative condition: the absence of error and vice; and it has a positive object: contemplation of the Divine. Vice—passion—clouds the organ that should contemplate God, and this organ is the whole man.

*
* *

In esoteric doctrines it always comes about that things "worshipped" on one plane are "consigned to the flames" on another; hence the apparent rejection of the virtues—by the Sufi Ibn al-Arif or by Buddhists, for example.

"God alone is good." All that is not God can in principle be rejected on one ground or another. The setting of the sun is only an

appearance but an appearance imposing itself on all men and thus having nothing fortuitous about it: the sun must set because it is not God, or again as the Prophet said, "It must prostrate itself every evening before the Throne of *Allāh*."

*
* *

If it is true that virtue is the absence of vice, it is even truer that vice is the absence of virtue. Virtue exists before vice because God is before the world; vice is the privation of virtue since the world is in a certain sense the privation of God. If one begins with the fallen nature of man, it is legitimate to say that virtue is in practice the absence of a vice even though in reality the relationship is just the opposite; but the realization of God is the negation of the world only insofar as the world is the negation of God. Considered independently of human imperfection virtue obviously reflects a divine perfection by its intrinsic quality.

*
* *

The vulgarization of spirituality—inevitable within certain limits—carries with it a predominance of moral injunctions over considerations of spiritual alchemy: the dynamism of the will is preached, and the good residing in the very nature of things is neglected; the "duty of doing" is insisted on, and "being" is forgotten.

Intellective contemplation goes straight to the existential roots of the virtues; it finds the virtues again, beyond moral effort, in the nature of things.[1]

[1] The *Philokalia* says, "When the wise soul is in the state that is natural to it, virtue is necessarily found in it. The soul finds itself in its natural state when it remains as it has been created. . . . The soul is just when its knowledge remains in the state that is natural to it. . . . This is why virtue is not a difficult thing; when we remain as we have been created, we are in a state of virtue. . . . If we had to seek for virtue outside ourselves, this would certainly be difficult; but since it is within us, it is enough to avoid evil thoughts and to keep our soul [as it is *a priori*] turned toward the Lord."

But since man is not pure contemplation, effort is also required of him.

*
* *

Intellection and virtue: everything is there.

Intellection refers to the divine "I", to the pure and absolute Subject, to "Consciousness" that is absolutely non-objectified, to God-Intellect: divine Knowledge.

Virtue refers to divine "Being", to pure and infinite Objectivity, to Reality free of all individuation, to God-Being: divine Qualities.

The way of intellection, the way of virtue: one does not go without the other, but one or the other predominates in keeping with human temperaments.

If "the soul is all that it knows", one may also say in another respect: "the soul knows all that it is".

3

In Hindu morals—*yama* and *niyama*—humility appears as "modesty" (*hrī*); spiritual, or one might say esoteric, humility is "childlikeness" (*bālya*) or, in its highest sense, "extinction" (*nirvāna*). An attitude that is in a sense intermediate—between *hrī* and *bālya*—is that of devotion to the master (*guru*).

Among Asians sentimentality is certainly not absent, but it lies less deep in them than in most Europeans.

Divine revelation always conforms to the human receptacle. Thus it is said that angels speak to each man in the appropriate tongue.

*
* *

The acceptance of injustice may have a spiritual meaning: humility then consists in having recourse to divine justice alone at the price of earthly rights; human justice may in fact become a pretext for egocentrism or, in Vedantic terms, for the superimposition of an "I" on the "Self".

*
* *

Man is "made in the image of God"; to humiliate this image may be a profanation. Likewise the intelligence cannot humble itself in its impersonal essence or transcendent principle; one must not seek to humiliate the Holy Spirit along with man.

One thing remains intact in our fall, and this is the Intellect. Moral requirements therefore do not account for the whole of man; if the difference between primordial man and fallen man were absolute, they would not be the same being; only one would be human. But there is something unalterable in man, and this can be a spiritual starting point, like the abyss of the fall.

The element in man that becomes aware that he is despicable cannot itself be what is to be despised; what judges cannot be what is judged.

*
* *

Ramakrishna, when speaking of a certain show of humility—an unbalanced humility one might say—rightly remarks that people who are forever comparing themselves to the lowest animals end by becoming as feebleminded as they. A purely moralistic humility blindly imitates a virtue that is in itself lucid, and it paralyses not only the knowledge but even the love of God; false humility never has its roots in truth. Virtue can be a form of idolatry like anything else.

Man needs humility to the extent that he does not think of God—to the extent that he does not forget himself in thinking of God.

*
* *

It is possible for a man not to know he is nothing and yet cultivate a feeling of humility. He may believe he is far more than he is in reality and cultivate a sentimental humility.[1]

It is possible not to know that the "neighbor" is "myself" and yet cultivate a feeling of charity. One may be an egoist and at the same time cultivate a sentimental charity.

To know "I am nothing" is perfect humility; to know the "neighbor is myself" is perfect charity. What is rooted in existence is perfect, not what depends upon action.

*
* *

When humility assumes a quasi-unique form in the sense that it obliges a man to believe he is literally and individually the worst of sinners, it has something in common with what the same individualistic perspective refers to as "pride"; the opposite of such "pride" does

[1] Certain suspicions on the part of theologians regarding a Saint Bernadette or a Saint Teresa of the Child Jesus show to what confusions the purely moralistic conception of humility can give rise.

not in fact consist in believing oneself to be for one reason or another a unique being but rather in knowing oneself to be an insignificant accident amid an indefinite number of such accidents. The Word humbled itself not by becoming Jesus but by becoming man.

Nirvāna, extinction: extinction of the "sin" of existence. He who literally believes himself to be the worst of sinners is not even close to being extinguished.

*
* *

If it is illogical to believe oneself "the worst of men", it is not only because the worst of men would not take himself to be the worst—for if he did he would not be—but because so unique an individual does not exist any more than does "the most beautiful of women"; if beauty has by definition an infinity of equivalent modes, which are reciprocally incomparable, the same is true of every other quality and also every vice.

The most perfect—or least imperfect—of ascetics can realize humility only in certain respects; otherwise he would end by sinning from humility.[2] This proves that humility, in the exclusively ascetic meaning of the term, is of value only in a very conditional way—that it is relative like all penitence. It is not on the ascetic level that humility can be total.

Instead of seeking the Absolute beyond himself, the exclusive moralist projects a kind of absolute into his own relativity by concerning himself indefinitely with the perfection—metaphysically impossible moreover—of what is only an instrument or support: the individual, the human. It is as if, instead of accomplishing a work with a usable instrument, a man devoted his whole life to making this instrument better.

It will be said that all our apparent qualities come from God and not from ourselves. This is perfectly true, but by the same token it removes from our neighbor all merit and from ourselves the possibility

[2] The concept of a "sin from humility" or of achieving humility through sin did indeed exist among certain Russian heretics; detached from its sufficient reason, the notion of humility is then reduced to absurdity.

of being worse than he; in other words it takes away from us the possibility of believing ourselves to be the vilest of men or at least of suffering from such a conviction.

*
* *

The conviction of being the basest of men may determine a movement toward God; it may open a fissure in our darkness and thus allow grace to flow in.

But from a more profound point of view the question of knowing whether a man is "high" or "low" is a matter of complete indifference. What it is important to know is that every being, every relativity, is a limitation, hence a "nothingness".

Even on the earthly plane the nothingness of the "creature" is tangible in an altogether immediate way: in space as in time we are nothing; the two "infinities" crush us on every side. If the earth is a speck of dust in the measureless gulf of space and if life is an instant between two incalculable abysses of time, what remains of man? Man cannot add one inch to his stature nor one instant to his life; he cannot be in more than one place at a time; he can live only in the moment destiny has prescribed for him, unable to turn back or fly forward; and with all his vain glories man is physically just an animal, who hides his wretchedness with great difficulty.

*
* *

We should never lose sight of the fact that a quality may be either the opposite of a defect on the same plane where this defect manifests itself or the absence of a defect by way of the elimination of this plane; pride is not the deepest root of evil, but egocentrism—whether "proud" or "humble"—which is itself the cause of all pride. It is true that this egocentrism is called "pride" in Christian terms, and the spiritual elimination of this illusion is called "humility".

An affected and as it were expansive humility is not the same thing as an absence of pride. In the case of such humility, which disregards intelligence, one never knows whether one is required to be

stupid or virtuous; in other words one never knows whether stupidity is a virtue or whether virtue is a form of stupidity.

*
* *

Individualistic, sentimental, and penitential humility is opposed to pride in the same way the color green is opposed to the color red; it is always an affectation, either useful or harmful as the case may be, and it is incompatible with a path that does not permit subjective positions contrary to objective truth.

Insofar as it is a spontaneous expression of virtue, humility is distinguished from pride in the same way white is distinguished from red; it is not an affectation, but a natural, or more exactly a primordial, state. It is in no way opposed to a sane affirmation of oneself or to an objective knowledge a man may have of his own worth;[3] on the other hand it does not constitute a path but is found in every good man.

Insofar as it is knowledge, humility is distinguished from pride in the same way pure light is distinguished from every color; it belongs to paths that exclude individualistic sentimentalities or to states that have passed beyond such a level.

*
* *

Men are very often prone to deem themselves exempt from the obligation of humility because they know their own qualities; they form an opinion of themselves according to their consciousness of some particular personal merit and not according to the balance of their nature as a whole. What they forget is that this merit may be diminished or even reduced to nothing by a flaw of which they are unaware or to which they attach no importance.

Knowledge is never illegitimate in itself; what is illegitimate are the improper conclusions drawn from it by human egocentrism, and

[3] Dante knew he was the greatest poet after Virgil and even the last great poet of that line; no moral reasoning forced him to be mistaken about himself, and history has confirmed his judgment.

it is for this reason that the qualities a man is conscious of do not in themselves constitute for him a guarantee of overall worth. The good resides in the qualities themselves, and the evil comes from the consciousness we have of them; this consciousness is an evil, however, only when the good is drowned in it.

*
* *

The possibility of our becoming aware of our personal merits with impunity is connected to our effective capacity for knowing our limitations and destitution, for a man must be immunized against himself: he cannot really know himself without being penetrated by lights that wound him, the price of which is therefore high. Nonetheless, although our nature always obliges us to take account of the danger of illusion, it is not possible to legislate about knowledge, the rights of which remain by definition inalienable.

*
* *

Man sees in himself alternatives and efforts, abysses and conflicting possibilities, which another does not see and which he himself does not see in another; the will, which to an outside witness is something already set and intelligible, is itself in a state of constant fermentation even if the agent is able in large measure to assume the point of view of a spectator.

This is why, subjectively, no one can be good. Or again: while knowing we are not evil in one respect, relatively speaking, we are ignorant of what we are in another respect—at least to the extent "we are", that is, to the extent the individuality finds itself in act.

Spiritually speaking, to know oneself is to be conscious of one's limitations and to attribute every quality to God.

*
* *

Habitual readiness to criticize other people presupposes a kind of blindness in a man regarding his own state, but at the same time it provokes this blindness through an inevitable concordant reaction.

Whoever is obliged to criticize through force of circumstances, that is, for the sake of truth, should show himself all the more humble and charitable and capable of penetrating the secret good in creatures.

*
* *

Humility toward men may be an aspect of humility toward God, but it may also be the opposite insofar as there is an antinomy between the human order and the divine Order; it will then be said that a man must humble himself before God and not before men, while being free from all pride. One must distinguish moreover between humility and humiliation.[4]

If "he that humbleth himself shall be exalted" and conversely, this cannot be taken to imply a purely sentimental attitude that excludes more serene and profound applications. If humility is an essential attitude, it cannot be limited to sentimentality, ascetic or otherwise. Humility is profound to the extent it is lucid; the more intelligent it is the greater will be its detachment from forms.

Humbling oneself with zeal but without intelligence in order to be exalted: is this truly being "humble"?

*
* *

From the psychological point of view, humility is essential because it is logically impossible to be in potency and in act at the same time and in the same respect or to be simultaneously subject and object, and therefore to be judge in one's own cause. Man cannot "be" good and "define himself" as good at one and the same time: he cannot bring his mind to bear at one and the same time on a particular content of his

[4] Ibn Arabi says that the loftiest of the virtues, humility, is too noble to have to manifest itself as humiliation before men.

knowledge and on the act of knowing; the eye cannot see itself. "Let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth."

Virtue implies a kind of incessant movement since it involves our will; there is no life—and consequently no virtue—without continual renewal. Now to attribute a particular quality to oneself amounts to a fixation—or crystallization—of the inner flux that makes the quality live; the result is to make it sterile. In a similar fashion praise is unhealthy for the one who receives it and is not above it, for then it kills the good—which is never perfected since it must continue to live and renew itself—by a sort of anticipation calculated to exhaust its possibility, exactly as too much talk before an action compromises its realization in an almost magical way.

Nonetheless, if we say that knowledge always remains inalienable, this means that God can make known to us what we are, whether by the Intellect or grace. God knows the qualities—the "talents" of the parable—He has entrusted to us, and insofar as we know that "God alone is good" we can participate in this knowledge, the real subject of which can only be God Himself. This is an instance of the reciprocity between God and man: what man cannot know about himself as logical "subject", he can know through God, for whom man is "object"—on condition that he gives up making himself into God on the human plane.

*
* *

We can understand without difficulty the meaning of humility before God; but what is the objective value of humility with regard to our neighbor? It resides in the fact that our neighbor can always teach us something even if only in a quite indirect way; in this respect he assumes a function that is quasi-divine.

Since every man has limitations, either fundamental or accidental, and since men are by definition different, there is every chance that our neighbor will not be limited in exactly the same fashion as ourselves and that he will therefore be free of limitations at the point where we are limited; in this respect he is our master.

In a certain sense the neighbor is the criterion of our sincerity toward God.

*
* *

Pride consists in taking ourselves for what we are not and disparaging others; self-respect is knowing what one is and not allowing oneself to be humiliated. Self-respect does not prevent a man from humbling himself before what surpasses him; it is far from being the opposite of true humility, whatever the more superficial moralists may say.[5]

Modesty may be a quality or a defect according to whether it springs from veracity or weakness; but even in the latter case it is nearer virtue than vice, for weakness is preferable to presumption.

*
* *

According to Saint Augustine, "The other vices attach themselves to evil in order that it may be done; pride alone attaches itself to the good in order that it may perish."

According to Boethius, "All the other vices flee from God; pride alone rises up against Him."[6]

*
* *

Spiritually speaking, pride consists in attributing to oneself what is due to God. It poisons and kills every value, for as soon as man claims a good in its cause and essence, it is transmuted into evil: it embraces the limitations of the creature and engenders limitations in turn; pride appropriates the divine gift and then strangles it. A good vivifies

[5] To the question "Do you believe in God?" Joan of Arc replied: "Better than you!" Another instance of humble self-respect is this reply of a Hindu *guru* to a worldly traveler: "I am not worthy to be your master, and you are not worthy to be my disciple."

[6] The Hasidim Cabalists relate the following saying of their master, Baal Shem: "Pride is more serious than any sin. For it is in relation to sinners that God designates Himself [in the *Torah*] as 'He who dwelleth amid their impurities'. But as the wise men [of the *Talmud*] teach, God says of the proud man: 'I and he cannot dwell together in the world.'"

insofar as it comes from God, not insofar as it is handed on by man nor above all insofar as it is usurped by him.

Man deems himself good even before God, who is Perfection, and when he endeavors to recognize his wretchedness he again deems himself good on account of this effort.

*
* *

The existential drama has as it were three movements: adoration of God, adoration of the world, and adoration of self; the last is "pride" whereas all other vices belong to the second category.

Adoration of the world inevitably brings with it in some degree adoration of self, so that it is legitimate to attribute "pride" to every man, if only potentially so. In its universal sense "humility" is thus a *conditio sine qua non* of all spirituality: as soon as a man tears himself away from adoration of the world, he must pass through the temptations of "pride" in order to approach God; for the "I" wants to appropriate this approach and to glory in it to the detriment of what is its sufficient reason.

When the proud man learns that humility is a virtue, he wants to claim it for himself because he cannot bear to be inferior to others. If humility is the concealing of the virtues one has, hypocrisy is the counterfeiting of the virtues one does not have.

In general men readily believe they possess virtues simply because they are able to conceive of them.

*
* *

In every manifestation there is an element capable of leading one away from the Principle, and it is upon this element that "pride", which is the error that subjectively brings about this distancing, is grafted.

This "demiurgic"—and virtually "luciferian"—element enters into the very definition of the created.

Pride: the "something" that prevents a man from "losing his life" for God.

*
* *

The spiritual man does not rejoice at his progress but at the disappearance of the old self; human perfection is the norm, not a peak.

After purifying oneself from one's defects one must purify oneself from one's virtues, say the Buddhists. Everything must be brought back to the divine Cause; this is the perfection of humility.

To think "I have" a given virtue is almost as false as to think "I am" God.

*
* *

In a sense knowledge does not and cannot have any direct relationship with strictly human attitudes, but in another sense—that of manifestation—it is inseparable from them: in the first case it shows its absolute transcendence by the fact that it appears as a "free" gift or "grace"; in the second case it appears on the contrary as a function of the receptivity—thus the "simplicity" or "humility"—of the individual. These two aspects are always linked to some degree.

*
* *

The loftiest *gnosis* and the most perfect humility go together: the one is knowledge of the Divine and the other knowledge of the human.[7] Pride is to treat the human as the Divine, and conversely; it is therefore to be ignorant of both the one and the other.

What the proud man readily forgets is that human virtue could never overtake either Unicity or creative Power.

[7] Diadochos of Photike distinguishes two humilities: the first comes from earthly troubles and "most often includes grief and despondency"; the second comes from an illumination of the Intellect in which "the soul possesses humility as by nature" and "judges itself beneath everything because it participates in the divine equity"; this humility includes "joy with a wise reserve".

*
* *

Humility is a state of emptiness in which our thoughts and actions appear foreign to us, so that we judge them as we judge the thoughts and actions of others.

Pride is a blind plenitude that monopolizes everything.

*
* *

Basilian spirituality includes four principal elements: separation from the world, purification, meditation on the sacred Scriptures, and continual prayer. The first element cuts man off from the current of profane life; the second empties the soul of illusory contents; the third infuses the discursive intelligence with divine Light; the fourth essentially brings about deification. This could be formulated as follows: in renunciation the soul leaves the world; in purification the world leaves the soul; in meditation God enters the soul; in continual prayer the soul enters God.

Here humility is not conceived as a "ladder"; it does not constitute the path as such but is in a sense at one and the same time its condition and its effect. Humility is *vacare Deo* in all its aspects, and for this reason it is perfect simplicity and primordial purity of the soul before the divine influx. On the one hand it conditions incessant prayer, and on the other it is conditioned by it. He who is not humble, that is, simple and pure—we would willingly say "impersonal" and "objective"—cannot persevere in this prayer, and he who does persevere in it cannot remain in the imperfections that are contrary to simplicity, purity, humility.

*
* *

Saint Bernard defines humility as "a virtue through which a man who has true knowledge of himself becomes contemptible in his own

eyes".[8] And he adds that "the Lord, who is gentle and just, gives men the law of humility in order that they might thus return to knowledge of the truth". This means that knowledge of oneself is indispensable for knowledge of God. This is also the meaning of the Prophet's teaching: "He who knows his soul knows his Lord."

Saint Bernard connects humility with truth; he understands it in a sense that has nothing exclusively moral about it, and this appears even more clearly when he speaks of the third degree of truth, which is "to purify the eye of the heart to contemplate things celestial and divine".

*
* *

Meister Eckhart says that humility[9] consists in "being below", for otherwise it is impossible for God to give; hence a lack of humility—egotism for example—does violence to the nature of God, which consists in giving.

*
* *

Christ said to Saint Catherine of Siena in a vision: "I am He who is; thou art she who is not." This is the metaphysical foundation of all humility expressed in direct terms.[10]

For Thomism humility is the measure of our nothingness before God.

[8] For Ibn Arabi likewise, humility is the sincere conviction of being a vile object in the eyes of God; perfect humility belongs only to the Sufi. The Prophet said: "Whoever has pride in his heart, if only a rice grain, cannot enter Paradise." At the beginning of one of his treatises Sri Shankaracharya designates himself as "I, who am without worth"; likewise Sri Chaitanya desires the *bhakta* "always to look upon himself as inferior to a wisp of straw" and to be "humble like grass". It would be easy to multiply examples to show that humility is far from being unique to Christianity.

[9] Etymologically, the virtue of being like the soil (*humus*).

[10] It will be noted that these terms are Vedantic, which means they are esoteric.

*
* *

"Humility," says Saint Teresa of Avila, "is to walk according to the Truth." For Saint Ignatius Loyola as well, humility is first of all the simplicity of soul that makes a man submit himself quite naturally to the divine Law,[11] then indifference with regard to worldly things,[12] and finally the ascetic will to live in privations—material and moral—for the sake of God.[13]

[11] Al-Qushayri: "It is to submit oneself to the direction of God." The same writer also gives this definition: "It is melting and contracting of the heart when subjugated by the Truth."

[12] According to al-Tirmidhi, "Man is humble when the blazing of the fire of desires has ceased" (*fanā'*, "extinction").

[13] Al-Ghazzali has been criticized for bringing the Aristotelian "measure" into his doctrine of humility instead of understanding the quasi-infinite character of virtue; this "measure" does not show that the Muslim conception stops halfway, but that al-Ghazzali's exposition gives only its purely social application (*adab*).

4

There is an inner dignity and an outer dignity just as there is an inner humility and an outer humility.

Dignity is the ontological awareness an individual has of his supra-individual reality.

The criterion of true humility is its truth and dignity.[1]

The criterion of true dignity is its truth and humility.

*
* *

There is no legitimate connection between humility and a mere leveling down, for such a leveling is a form of pride since it denies the natural hierarchy of values and men; by this negation it is also opposed to dignity. Humility—or simplicity—is never a synonym for egalitarian mediocrity or weakness.

*
* *

The spiritual content of dignity, unlike that of humility, is not accessible to all men even though in principle every man possesses the same dignity of being made in the image of God, of being the vicar of God on earth and having access to the Divine.

Dignity is opposed to vulgarity, frivolity, or curiosity as contemplation is opposed to agitation or as "being" transcends "doing". It is the "motionless mover" incarnate in movement, the "being" that shows through "acting", the contemplation affirmed in action; it is the integration of the periphery in the center as well as the revelation of the center in the periphery.[2]

[1] Or its force, according to Saint Francis of Sales. It was said of the Curé d'Ars that humility had "a certain element of unction and dignity" in him. The same saint said of humility that "it is to the virtues what the thread is to the rosary: take away the thread, and all the beads escape; take away humility, and all the virtues disappear".

[2] The "non-action" (*wu-wei*) of the Far Eastern tradition will be recalled here; these

Dignity is a universal possibility because it refers to Being, the Cause, the Principle. It appears in every realm of nature: an animal or plant such as the swan or water lily expresses a folding back of the created upon its immutable Principle.

Sacerdotal functions imply in a certain sense a way of dignity. To act in the place of God, as does the officiating priest, is to act with dignity, to act divinely; it is to be central in the periphery or immoveable in movement.

*
* *

Dignity is a way of remembering the divine presence by means of the body; it requires effacement just as self-respect requires humility. More precisely, effacement is already included in dignity and humility in self-respect. If there could be a humble pride, it would be self-respect.

Dignity is consciousness of a universal quality. Effacement is consciousness of our nothingness.

Sentimental humility individualizes this nothingness, and in this lies its contradiction. The same applies to affected dignity: it individualizes the theomorphism of Adam, which is just as contradictory, for it is not the individual who resembles God but man as such, the human form, which includes all individuals.

Dignity is a repose, not an activity like affectation; it is not an individual affirmation but on the contrary a retreat toward the impersonal center.

Dignity reflects the sacred aspect of man.

two syllables were written above the throne of the Emperor, "Son of Heaven" and personification of this "non-action".

5

The idea of sin presupposes the fact of the "fall", in other words—as Maimonides says—the passage from "necessary knowledge" to "probable opinions": before the fall Adam distinguished the true from the false; after the fall he distinguished good from evil. In the beginning will was inseparable from intelligence; the fall is a scission between the two. The distinction between what is "good" and what is "evil" is made by a will that has fallen into the void, and not by the Intellect, which is fixed in the immutable.

The good is a possibility of action; the true is not a possibility of knowing but knowledge itself. Evil is a "willing", but error is not a "knowing": it is a form of "ignorance". In other words evil is an act of the will, but error is not an act of the intelligence. Unlike the will, intelligence is not free through its possible action; it is free through its very substance and thus through the necessity of its perfection.

*
* *

Sin concerns every man to the extent that individual liberty maintains itself outside divine liberty, but this in no way means that every spiritual perspective must begin with the act of sin; to identify man with sinful action is to create a danger of individualism.

Hindus believe in hell; it cannot be denied that they therefore possess the notion of sin, but since their disciplines have ignorance—and not sin—as their negative starting point, they do not suffer from a guilt complex. Sin appears to them as a form of imprudence or stupidity and in any case as a form of ignorance; it is characterized less by its form than by its inner process.

*
* *

There is a saying of Saint James that indicates how the contemplative ought to look upon sin and in what sense he is obliged to look on himself as a great sinner: "Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin." This definition of sin goes far beyond the

social level; it concerns the essential morality that is inseparable from spirituality, and its scope therefore embraces humanity in general and not the specifically Judeo-Christian part of it.

Far from being a mere sentimentality the voice of conscience is the inner criterion of our vocation—on condition, however, that we dwell in the truth as it relates to God, the world, and ourselves.

*
* *

In the thought of a Saint Benedict or a Saint Bernard, the idea of "the greatest sinner" is equivalent to a definition of sin itself: the slightest inadvertence of our will is "sin" as such and without epithet, for in sin there is always something incommensurable because of what it denies, which is the primordial conformity of our will to God. If intellective knowledge has total Truth for its object, free will has supreme Good for its goal; knowledge liberates whereas the will binds for the sake of liberty. Like knowledge the will is "perfectly itself" through its primordial object since absolute liberty exists only in God.

If as Saint James says every omission of a good—hence of a movement of our will toward God—is a sin or "sin as such", this is because even the slightest inclination of the will that is not in accord with the meaning or goal of our existence is either directly or indirectly—and in any case logically if not effectively—contrary to the highest Good. This way of looking at things in light of an individual alternative reveals a perspective that places the human problem on the plane of the will and therefore identifies man with will; the idea of redemption requires in fact the idea of the fall; if redemption is everything, the fall must also be everything.

*
* *

"The worst of sinners": this is a subjective reality expressed in objective terms. I am necessarily "the worst", "the most vile", since I alone am "I".

Metaphysically the obstacle separating man from the Infinite is the ego, that is, the principle of individuation or the "passion" engendered by "ignorance", as Hindus would say. For individualistic mysti-

cism the obstacle is not the ego as such but a mode of it, namely, the extreme—and subversive—point of individuation: pride, which rears itself up against God and men, against Truth and destiny.

A doctrine like that of Christianity, which must take account of every level of understanding and all the human possibilities of spiritual realization, will designate the higher term by the lower, with the lower symbolizing the higher and not conversely; it is thus, practically and methodically, that the ego becomes "pride".

*
* *

The ordinary notion of "sin" is founded on action; other conceptions, in particular the idea of sin as "ignorance", place the accent on the root of evil and let action as such keep its inner indetermination. Action in fact can have divergent meanings; only the intention behind it can place it decisively in the hierarchy of values. Although action is everything from a social point of view, where the criterion lies in collective expediency, it may in itself be equivocal and enigmatic, whereas the root of evil, ignorance—and the passion resulting from it—does not give rise to any doubt or error of interpretation.

*
* *

According to some Muslim theologians there are in practice no small sins, for the transgression that is considered small by man will be considered great by God whereas the small fault that man considers great will be counted as small; just as the Christian deems himself "the greatest of sinners", the Muslim sees "the least sin rise up before him like a mountain", according to an expression of the Prophet. In Muslim esoterism sin is essentially to forget God, and this forgetting has about it something symbolically absolute because of the infinity of Him who is forgotten; from this point of view there can be no little sins. In the same way "the greatest of sinners" means, spiritually speaking, that there cannot be a greater sinner than he who commits "the greatest sin", which is none other than pride, the sin of Lucifer, who wished to be like God.

*
* *

Like "idolatry" or polytheistic "association", or again like "ignorance" (*avidyā*), pride is a cosmic tendency—in one sense "demiurgic" and in another "satanic"—which insinuates itself into all manifestation; this explains why he who knows himself knows he is "the greatest of sinners"—that is, "completely a sinner", for the negation of God contains something "relatively absolute"—and it also explains in what sense there is "no greater fault than existence", according to a saying of the Prophet.

This perspective makes it possible to understand why in Islam humility is founded less on consciousness of sin than on consciousness of powerlessness before God. In this connection the following sentence from the Koran is very revealing: "Walk not on the earth in a proud manner, for in truth thou canst neither cleave the earth nor attain the mountains in height" (*Sūrah* "The Night Journey" [17]: 37). Here the source of humility is the daily experience of our physical limitations, a meaning that also appears in the rite of ablution—the occasional cause of which is impurity of the body—and that is contained as well in the word *bashar*, "man": this term designates the human being not in his more or less theomorphic aspect—for in this case he is called *insān*—but in his aspect of mortality, powerlessness, and impurity.

Setting aside the fact that humility has the same fundamental reasons everywhere, we can say in a relative sense that the Christian is humble because he knows himself to be a sinner and the Muslim because he can neither displace the moon nor abolish death.

*
* *

If a spiritual man of an affective temperament can look upon himself as the greatest of sinners, an intellective can look upon himself—with the same logic and the same illogicality—as the most ignorant of the ignorant. With the same logic: if our fall is a state of revolt, it is also and with greater reason a state of ignorance. With the same illogicality: if it is inconsistent to hold that the greatest of sinners is the man who takes himself to be such—sin *par excellence* being pride, which excludes the recognition of its own baseness, precisely—it is just as

inconsistent to regard oneself as the least wise of men since the man who knows he is ignorant cannot be more ignorant than one who does not know this.

*
* *

From the Judeo-Christian point of view death proves the wrath of God; Edenic immortality proves that man was not yet under this wrath. For the Hindu there is a difference here only of degree; the fall was contained in the possibility of man, and this God "knew".

Man could not not fall since God "could not not create".

God "created" by reason of His infinity: the Infinite requires its own affirmation, which is Being; Being requires creation; creation requires limitation and diversity; these in turn require negation and contradiction, and therefore evil. He who wants a world perfect in virtue and happiness therefore also wants an imperfect world full of sin and misfortune. The only choice is between the world and God; there is no choice between an imperfect world and a perfect world. In a similar way there is no choice between a fallen Adam and an incorruptible Adam; there is only a choice between man and God, hence the attitude of the saint who regards himself as "the greatest sinner" and, at the spiritual antipodes of this perspective, the idea of nonduality, identity in the absolute Subject.

*
* *

Modern man always begins with the idea of his axiomatic innocence: he is not the cause of existence, he did not want the world, he did not create himself, and he is responsible neither for his predispositions nor for the circumstances that actualize them; he cannot be culpable, which amounts to saying that he has unlimited rights. The consequences of such an attitude are evident: it opens the door to all the vices of human nature and unleashes the downward force of its fall; this is enough to prove it false.

Every man who is injured in his elementary rights assumes the existence of responsibility and culpability in others; he should therefore admit the possibility of culpability in himself; he should also rec-

ognize the existence of culpability as such, hence in relation to God. And such culpability incontestably exists, for every man freely does things the responsibility for which he casts upon Heaven; every man, within the limits of his freedom, does what he reproaches God for having done in the universe. The opposite attitude is to ask pardon of God; the response, if one may put it this way, is that God asks pardon of man: this is salvation.

Spiritual contrition—the moral form of emptiness—has its full justification not in the moral and relatively superficial idea of remorse but in the essential nature of things, in our metaphysical knowledge of the universe and the empirical consciousness of our destitution. God alone possesses Being; He alone is Plenitude; if man asks pardon of God it is finally in order to conform to a normative reality or simply to truth; it is because man exists without being able to move the sun or create one grain of dust, because he usurps the existence that belongs to Him who creates and who orders the stars, because he desires and accomplishes this usurpation within the limits of his freedom and on the plane of his life.

*
* *

The fear of God is not in any way a matter of feeling any more than is the love of God; like love, which is the tendency of our whole being toward transcendent Reality, fear is an attitude of the intelligence and the will: it consists in taking account at every moment of a Reality which infinitely surpasses us, against which we can do nothing, in opposition to which we could not live, and from the teeth of which we cannot escape.

6

No "egoism" is possible in the attitude of the pure contemplative, for his "I" is the world, the "neighbor". What is realized in the microcosm radiates in the macrocosm because of the analogy between all cosmic orders; spiritual realization is a kind of "magic", which necessarily communicates itself to the surroundings. The equilibrium of the world requires contemplatives.[1]

To lose oneself for God is always to give oneself to men. To reduce all spirituality to social charity not only means putting the human above the Divine but also deeming oneself indispensable and attributing an absolute value to what one is capable of giving.

Why is social benevolence not a virtue in itself, and why does it not bring knowledge of God with it? It is because it can perfectly well go hand in hand with complacency, which annuls its spiritual quality. Without the inner virtues, such as humility and generosity, good works have no connection with sanctity; they may even indirectly take man further away from God.

According to circumstances virtue is possible without good works, but from the point of view of the love of God good works are nothing without intrinsic virtue, just as—in another order of ideas—detachment is possible without renunciation whereas renunciation is meaningless except for the sake of detachment.

*

* *

Certain Hindus of old blessed our epoch not because it is good but because, being bad, it includes by way of compensation spiritual graces that make easy what is in itself difficult, provided man is sincere, pure, humble, and persevering. In former ages the spirit was more or less ubiquitous but was more difficult to reach and realize just because it

[1] It is a question of a relative equilibrium consonant with particular cyclic conditions. Saint John of the Cross said, "A spark of pure love is more precious to God, more useful for the soul, and more rich in blessings for the Church than all other works taken together, even if to all appearances one does nothing".

was present everywhere: its very boundlessness precluded easiness. It was there but had a tendency to disappear; today it is hidden but has a tendency to give itself.

There is an economy of mercy even though mercy in its essence goes beyond any economy, for principially it comes before justice. Mercy is not measured except in its outward aspect; justice, which is neither the first nor the last word of God, limits it only accidentally and with respect to a particular plane of existence.

Apart from compensatory graces, which are in themselves independent of the evil of our times, there are advantages in this evil itself: the world has become so emptied of substance that it is hard for a spiritual man to be too attached to it; for this reason the man of today, if he is contemplative, is already half broken. In former times worldliness was all the more seductive for having aspects of intelligence, nobility, and plenitude; it was far from being wholly contemptible as it is in our day; no doubt it made possible in the souls of the elite—who alone concern us here—a sort of guileless and total attachment, which required a corresponding renunciation; the evil of the world did not yet make itself felt in the actual appearance of the world.

*
* *

Why is man unable to enter into contemplation as long as his heart is full of anger against his neighbor? It is because he is unable to go beyond his "I"—his individuality—unless he sees it as individuality as such without any distinction of person.

Before sacrificing, says the Gospel, man must be reconciled with his brother; a saint—we do not remember who—said that it is just as absurd to want to contemplate God with one's heart full of bitterness against one's neighbor as it is to pluck out one's eye in order to see better.

In this case moral imperfection is simply the human expression of an incompatibility of perspectives. Hatred of a particular person—or a collectivity, which amounts qualitatively to the same thing—is inconsistent with love of the totality; and it is the totality that one must love in order to be able to love God. Perfection requires one to love man, not a particular man.

*
* *

Spiritual realization is theoretically the easiest thing and in practice the most difficult thing there is. It is the easiest because it is enough to think of God; it is the most difficult because human nature is forgetfulness of God.

Sanctity is a tree that grows between impossibility and a miracle.

*
* *

Love is in the depths of man even as water in the depths of the earth, and man suffers from not being able to enjoy the infinity that he bears in himself and that he is made for.

It is necessary to dig deep into the soil of the soul through layers of aridity and bitterness in order to find love and to live on it.

The depths of love are inaccessible to man in his state of hardness but reveal themselves externally through the language of art and also through that of nature. In sacred art and in virgin nature the soul can taste, by analogical anticipation, something of the love which lies dormant in it and for which it has only nostalgia without experience.

*
* *

In this low world in which we live there is the immense problem of separation; how can one make men understand that in God they are separated from nothing?

Our formal—or separative—world appears to the angels as a pile of debris: what is united in reality is separated in form and by form. The formal world is made up of congealed essences.

Man escapes from form—and separateness—in his own supernatural center, on the shore of eternal and blissful essences.

*
* *

The soul is a tree whose roots are deeply embedded in the "world"—in things, whether in ourselves or around us, that are capable of being felt, tasted, lived; the "world" is diversity as well as the passional movements that respond to it, whether in the flesh, in sentiment, or in thought.

The "one thing needful" is to transfer our roots into what appears to be nothingness, emptiness, unity. Since the soul cannot plant its roots in the void, the void is "incarnated" in the symbol; it is in everything that brings us nearer God.

*
* *

There is one great certainty in life, and this is death; whoever really understands this certainty is already dead in this life. Man is hardly at all preoccupied with his past sufferings if his present state is happy; what is past in life, whatever its importance, no longer exists. Now everything will one day be past; this is what a man understands at the moment of death; thus the future is already part of the past. To know this is to be dead; it is to rest in peace.

But there is yet another certainty in life—whether we can have this certainty depends only on ourselves—and it is the certainty of living in the divine will; this certainty compensates for that of death and conquers it. To put it another way: when we have the certainty of being in conformity with the divine will, the certainty of death is full of sweetness. Thus the meaning of our life on earth can be reduced to two certainties: the ineluctability of our destiny and the meaning or value of our will. We cannot avoid the meaning of life any more than we can avoid death; this great departure, which cannot have a shadow of doubt for us, proves to us that we are not free to act no matter how, that from this present moment we ought to conform to a will stronger than our own.

*
* *

In his empirical existence man finds himself in contact with God, the world, the soul, and the neighbor. On each of these levels it might be said that God speaks a different language: in the world He touches

us through destiny, which is in time, and through the symbols that surround us, which are in space; in the soul He is truth, which is objective, and the voice of conscience, which is subjective; in our neighbor He appears as the need we must satisfy and the teaching we must accept: the divine function of the neighbor is at once passive and active.

One cannot serve God without also seeing Him in destiny, truth, the neighbor.

*
* *

What are the great misfortunes of the soul? A false life, a false death, a false activity, a false rest.

A false life: passion, which engenders suffering; a false death: egoism, which hardens the heart and separates it from God and His mercy; a false activity: dissipation, which casts the soul into an insatiable vortex and makes it forget God, who is Peace; a false rest or false passivity: weakness and laziness, which deliver up the unresisting soul to the countless solicitations of the world.

*
* *

To this false life is opposed a true death: the death of passion; this is spiritual death, the cold and crystalline purity of the soul conscious of its immortality. To false death is opposed a true life: the life of the heart turned toward God and open to the warmth of His love. To false activity is opposed a true rest, a true peace: the repose of the soul that is simple and generous and content with God, the soul that turns aside from agitations and curiosity and ambition in order to repose in divine beauty. To false rest is opposed a true activity: the battle of the spirit against the multiple weaknesses that squander the soul—and this precious life—as in a game or dream.

To false knowledge, vain thought, is opposed a manner of being: that of the spirit united to its divine Source, beyond discursive thought, which is scission, indefinite dispersion, movement without issue. To false existence, crude and blind fact, is opposed true knowledge, true discernment: to know that God alone is absolute Reality,

that the world is only through Him and in Him, and that outside Him I am not.

*
* *

To think of God: in the mind the divine presence is like snow; in the heart—as existential essence—it is like fire. Freshness, purity, peace; warmth, love, bliss. The lily and the rose.

The divine presence penetrates the soul—the existential ego, not thought in itself—like a gentle heat; or it pierces the heart—as intellective center—like an arrow of light.

*
* *

Prayer—in the widest sense—triumphs over the four accidents of our existence: the world, life, the body, the soul; we might also say: space, time, matter, desire. It is situated in existence like a shelter, like an islet. In it alone we are perfectly ourselves because it puts us into the presence of God. It is like a diamond, which nothing can tarnish and nothing can resist.

*
* *

Man prays, and prayer fashions man. The saint has himself become prayer, the meeting place of earth and Heaven; he thereby contains the universe, and the universe prays with him. He is everywhere where nature prays, and he prays with her and in her: in the peaks, which touch the void and eternity; in a flower, which scatters its scent; in the carefree song of a bird.

He who lives in prayer has not lived in vain.

The Spiritual Virtues

Features in

Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts
A New Translation with Selected by Letters
© 2007 World Wisdom, Inc
by Frithjof Schuon, edited by James S. Cutsinger
All Rights Reserved. For Personal Usage Only
www.worldwisdom.com