

## Chapter 2

# The Phases of the Immanent Moral Understanding of the Self

1. In the following pages we shall be examining some especially important “principles,” which give to human life a definite “tendency” or permanent order; if in so doing we range these one above the other and describe them as “stages,” this is not intended, in any way, as a description, however condensed, of a *development*, but the “stages” are merely introduced as phenomena, purely for purposes of comparison <sup>(1)</sup>. Further, it will be obvious that in this description we are dealing with *abstractions* which never actually occur in this kind of isolation from one another, since these different principles, in some way or another, are always present in the same person both alongside of and yet after one another, so that it is impossible to speak of a present, actual unity, but only of a tendency towards such a unity, of a preponderating principle of order. It is however only possible to know reality by means of such abstractions, human reality no less than that of Nature.

2. *Immediacy*. – When we enquire into the reason for permanence in the sphere of human practical life, what first presents itself is Nature as it exists in its immediate, instinctive, but organically uniform and “unbroken” course of the lifefunctions. In human life this only occurs in extreme instances, as, for example, in the case of the small child, or – to a lesser extent – in the case of the so-called “primitive” human being. For the distinctive element in human

nature is the fact that man is not directly united with his nature, as it is, but that through his capacity for reflection, for asking questions, and for making decisions, he can view it, as it were, from a distance. All we can say, therefore, about the extreme instance to which we have just referred, is this: it has no relation to the problem of Ethics. For here the moral “agent,” the human being who makes decisions, is absent. In such cases we can only surmise that the human element in humanity has either not yet come to birth, or that it has already been extinguished. But when we find this non-reflective, instinctive union with his nature – as for instance in the vitalistic philosophy of life of a thinker like Klages – either explicitly proclaimed by reflecting human beings as an ideal, or implicitly willed in a vague, half-conscious manner, apart from any articulate theory, we are then confronted by a quite different phenomenon (²).

3. *Custom.* – The breach with immediacy takes place through reflection; in it the current of the natural life is arrested; reflection, and on the basis of this, decision, takes place. Self-determination has begun. But this breach with immediacy may vary in intensity. There is a middle stage between immediacy and self-determination, namely, where “others” are present, who drag “me” out of immediacy, without obliging “me” to complete this breach by full self-determination. Where this happens, the individual human being remains in contact with society in a certain dim obscure way. But this does not help us to know why he allows himself to be bound – and in this instance the fact that, he allows it to take place is the signmanual of humanity. It may be due merely to imitation or habit, but it may be due to religious awe, or fear, or to considerations of utility or to aesthetic feeling, or to various other causes. This stage therefore has no characteristic content; its distinguishing characteristic is formal, namely, the fact that the individual does not take the whole responsibility for his conduct on his own shoulders, but that at least in part he transfers some of it to “others,” to “people” in general, to the community, the clan, etc. (³).

4. *Intelligent Purpose.* – The first way in which man uses his capacity of being independent of the actual through the faculty of reflection is by using his intelligence to control the purely natural function of life: self-preservation, and the preservation of the species. Man here demonstrates his intellectual independence not so much by the formulation of “ends” – which indeed remain purely natural – as in the artificial construction of means, through which the natural “ends” can be more surely and fully attained. These “means,” viewed as a

whole, we call *civilization*.<sup>1</sup> The intellect is here only the means to an end. The end is the mastery of nature for practical uses through the intelligence which makes tools and organizes. Here too, the relation between one man and another is on the natural plane, although it is realized through the intelligence; it is this: mutual security and mutual utility through co-operation and exchange. Since here the intellect is only a means to an end, there is no experience of any mental expansion which is not directed towards a definite end, the characteristic mark of this kind of life is the rigid ordering of this means to an end, or a peddling kind of economy. A man who lives in this limited way, as a “self-contained, finite being” (Tillich), is the kind of person we call a “Philistine.”

This existence, however, necessarily suffers from an internal contradiction which must somehow make itself evident; the conflict between the natural “end” and the means which itself becomes an indirect end, that is the mind, between selfpreservation – for instance, in the selfish use of other men – and the community, which is becoming a purpose to itself. On the one hand intellect and community are not desired as ends in themselves, but only as means, therefore only “what is absolutely necessary”; but once the intellect has been awakened it does not allow itself to be treated thus. It disturbs the Philistine’s complacency by shaking his confidence in his security; he becomes apprehensive, anxious, and this drives him to seek for new ways of preserving his sense of security: Philistine existence is full of this tension caused by the conflict between fear and the effort to create security. On the other hand, the intelligence may finally get the upper hand, and may triumphantly assert its own independent right to exist – in which case this stage is then abandoned.

It is worth while paying some attention to this stage, because it is the predominating principle in the life of the average man. To look at life from the point of view of the rational end is regarded as a reasonable way of living. It is that view of life which was erected into a system in the Utilitarian and Positivist ethic of the nineteenth century; it is that which mainly predominates among the masses of our contemporaries – and indeed in the social upper stratum no less than in the lower – although no man has ever lived nor ever will live

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1. We are not here concerned with civilization as a task to be achieved but as the highest meaning of life. On the former point see below, Chapter 33.

who was merely a “Philistine.” Such a person would resemble the “ultimate man” in Nietzsche’s horribly amusing eschatology.

5. *Sensible Infinity, the “daemonic element.”* – While it is characteristic of the bourgeois that he desires everything in safe and sufficient measure, but no more, the same desire, without being materially altered, may assume a very different form. The object of desire remains the same, but it is desired to an infinite extent. While in the former case the natural sense element is connected with the limiting, controlling element of the mind, with the intelligence, in the latter it is connected with the element which longs for vastness, for the infinite, that is: with the element of boundless phantasy. Phantasy weaves a romantic halo of infinity around the goods of sense, and the will grasps this boundless wealth of the finite with both hands. The real object of desire is not so much the finite object itself, as the self which asserts itself in this desire. Man desires to become conscious of his limitless existence, and to enjoy his liberation from all restrictions, his freedom. He desires to play, it matters not with what, to enjoy himself, it matters not in what medium. Therefore he does not seek security but danger, adventure, daring experiments. He intoxicates himself with the infinite possibility which his imagination brings before his mind’s eye in glamorous colours and of which he is conscious in the unrestricted independence of his own will. This kind of person is the dominating man, the masterful man, the adventurer, who as a robber-baron or as a general, as a captain of industry or a politician, as a speculator on the Stock Exchange, or a Don Juan, exults in his empty freedom, which, just because it is empty, must be filled with sense-content if it is to be real at all. Such a man may exploit his fellow-men, or he may be philanthropic in a condescending way, in order to enjoy his solitary greatness in this condescension, and to find in the dependence of others the necessary foil to his own freedom.

But even his Self is greater than he knows, and it revenges itself on him in the unrest with which it drives him from one adventure to another; he can never really enjoy his power and his greatness because actually it is not infinite but only comparatively greater than that of others. This is the man who “rushes from desire to satiety and in satiety pines for desire.”

6. *The Aesthetic Element as a Form of Life* (4). – The intellect, at first only used as a means to an end, now becomes conscious of itself as a self-end.

Man no longer investigates merely because it is useful to do so, but for the sake of truth; he works, not in order to gain his own security

but for the sheer delight of “working.” Culture is superimposed upon mere civilization. Culture as a principle of life is the aesthetic aspect of life. Here the intellect wishes to gaze at itself in the forms it assumes, in its inner accordance with law, which cannot be explained as a purely “natural end.” The means by which this is accomplished is by the construction of mental images, in science – to the extent in which it is purely theoretical, and not practical and technical – and above all, in art. For here the question of mechanical utility does not arise. But if science and art are really to be more than pleasant recreations, if they are to be the controlling force in life, they must unite in one supreme comprehensive act of contemplation, of world-vision, by which the world, precisely through this act, becomes a cosmos, a work of art, a theorem, or a drama <sup>(5)</sup>.

The intellect here regards itself as the force which creates culture, and in it man believes he has found the meaning of himself. Human existence gains its human quality from participation in this culture-process, and the genius represents the maximum of humanity. Human greatness and human worth are measured by this standard.

There are two varieties of this existence connected with culture: the more objective kind which is mainly concerned with the creative process, and the subjective kind which is more interested in the man who creates beautiful forms, that is, in the creative force, the genius. The genius, rather than culture, is then regarded as the place where the meaning of the cosmos becomes real and manifest. The former, more objective variety, appeals most to the man who cares about civilization, leading indeed to a merging of the two; the latter kind of culture appeals more strongly to the dominating, forceful type of man. “Energy or force is the quality of mind which distinguishes those who excel other men” (Beethoven) <sup>(6)</sup>. Hence this second type is the purely aesthetic type. It represents the intellect in the enjoyment of itself, and also the expansion of the self to a world-self, regarded from a cosmic point of view. I assume that it is unnecessary to produce evidence in support of this statement; this view of human life could be illustrated a hundred times over from literature and philosophy, from the Renaissance down to the time of Nietzsche. Today this view of man’s nature dominates the intelligentsia as much as the “Philistine’s” view dominates the mass of mankind.

But this aesthetic intoxication is speedily followed by disillusionment; even this “enthusiasm” has its dark background. “Your resemblance to the Divine causes deep misgiving.” It is no accident that behind German speculative Idealism, in which this

aesthetic view of life has found its most magnificent expression, lies the pessimism of Schopenhauer. This feverish attempt to make the creative faculties in man absolute is necessarily accompanied by despair of finding any absolute meaning in life at all. This intensification of the problem leads either to one still higher (?), to mysticism, or it ends in a scepticism which only plays with the problems raised by the mind.

7. *The Moral Idea.* – Hitherto we have been dealing with ethical decisions and indeed with those which define life as a whole, with “totality-views of life.” This is the element common to them all. The distinctive element, however, that which makes it possible to range them as stages in an ascending series, consists in an increasing inwardness, that is, in making the spirit independent and distinct from the actuality of nature. The path which we have been describing is the spiral of immanent self-consciousness.

And yet we might also say: hitherto we have not been dealing with spiritual existence at all. For even genius is natural immediacy, the mind as nature, actuality, not as self-determination. Genius is a quantitative, not a qualitative conception; for every one has a little genius and no one is an absolute genius. Genius, as the word implies, is the spirit as a natural endowment. What genius produces therefore is culture – a thing of the spirit (*Geist-Sache*). Thus here also there exists, as in the earlier “stages,” the opposition between the *form* and the *content* of decision. Man decides in favour of this life determined by the aesthetic element; only as such is life human and only as such is life real; but the “What” of this decision does not correspond with the “That”; the material personality (*persona-quid*), that is, self-knowledge and self-determination to freedom and responsibility for one’s determination, does not correspond with the formal personality (*persona-quod*). Here too, in a spiritless way the necessity for decision in human existence has been ignored. Here therefore one has not yet become a person.

The emergence of the moral element in human life means that man has realized himself as a person; it means that the whole of life is now regarded from the point of view of decision, self-determination, freedom, responsibility.

The *quod* – the inevitably personal character of human existence – becomes *quid*, in the act of recognizing that the Ego, in the act of decision, is aware of itself, and determines itself in the light of this fact. The content of life is now sought no longer outside but inside the self; further, it is no longer sought in the self as it

exists by nature but in its quality of *self-determination*.<sup>2</sup> The idea of freedom and autonomy has been born. No longer are we concerned with that empty freedom of infinite possibility which dissolves life into phantasy and endows Nature with a daemonic character, but with definite freedom. The αὐτός which has thus been recognized implies the νόμος. Such freedom is an inner necessity. Even in the building up of civilization and in the creation of culture, a spiritual principle of law is at work. Civilization is controlled by the logic of the understanding; in culture reason imposes law on sense. But this law affects the object, not the subject; it is accordingly a merely hypothetical law – if you wish to count correctly or to create something concrete, then do so and so – it is not categorical. “It shall be” – but not “Thou shalt.” Until the imperative – “Thou shalt” – has been perceived and accepted the contradiction is not removed which arises out of the fact that although I am always involved in decision I do not know that this fact of decision constitutes the basis of my existence. The “Thou shalt” of the Categorical Imperative means the emergence of the idea of personality.

This emergence is prepared by *custom* (<sup>8</sup>). Before man is aware of his own moral responsibility, he knows the moral demand of the community upon him, which he obeys not merely from the fear of social consequences, but in a dim, obscure but reverent awe of the *Øefas*, of that “which one may not do.” There are νόμοι ἄγραφοι, which must be obeyed.

The moment at which the νόμοι which, here and there, in a casual and disconnected way, have fenced off a section of life, coalesce and become the one law, and the instant at which the dim “one ought” becomes the clear “I ought” is one and the same. The process by which the many commandments have become one law corresponds to the process by which the law becomes more and more interior, until at last it becomes “mine,” that is, a law which I do not receive externally, because it speaks “within me.”

Only now is the Ego no longer bound up with culture, but is an end in itself; only now is life faced with the stern demand for decision, whereas formerly it was a game. No longer can man regard time as something at his own disposal, for at every turn time comes to him

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2. No one has grasped what is here intended, and presented it so clearly and fully, as Fichte, in his *Ethik* of 1798; cf. especially the beginning of the first and the close of the second main section.

burdened with this serious quality of decision, and it is called: the present moment. Here alone does the Ego count unconditionally as an entity which cannot be reckoned up in arithmetical terms, which cannot be measured by any quantitative standard, that is, as a person. The "other man," accordingly, the "fellow-man," is no longer merely the subject of culture or of civilization, which has value only in so far as and because it co-operates in the work and is the bearer of those object-values, but he also now comes under consideration as a person, since he also stands under the same law of freedom. The one moral idea demands from me recognition of his freedom as much as of my own, it limits my caprice in relation to him through the demand for unconditional respect and justice.

Then has the spiral movement of increasing inwardness here found its inmost point? Scarcely; for behind this moral idea there stand problems which no process of introspection can solve.

As the individual human being reflects upon himself, upon the 'right life,' he stumbles upon the mysterious fact of a law which speaks within himself, saying to him, "Thou shalt." The natural tendency of man to say positively: "I will," which even in spiritual creation, even in the work of genius, would like to pursue its course unhindered, is confronted by a higher authority; but the source of this authority, and its relation to me as an existent and volitional being, and also to the world in which I live, is obscure and indeed incomprehensible. Can this be "my better self"? And if so, what does this mean? What is the origin of this sense of disharmony which becomes most acute when I refuse to do what the law "within me" commands? How is it that I do not act in accordance with this law "within me"? Can it be that this challenging authority, which has the right to judge my actions, should more properly be called "Thou" than "I"? But if this authority is a "Thou," then is this issuing of commands the only way in which it manifests itself to me? If it possesses its own mode of being, should not its relation – as being – to my being and the being of the world also be that of a higher, controlling personal authority? Thus, instead of making its presence felt in this ambiguous manner, ought it not rather to give an unambiguous proof of its own existence? Does such a clear evidence of itself exist? Is there such a revelation of Divine Being? Here introspection ceases and leads to the question of religion, of Divine revelation.

Without leaving the sphere of phenomenological reflection, we will now examine the relation between ethics and the religions of the world, reserving the Christian religion for treatment at a later stage.