

Religion and Culture by Paul Tillich

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[524]

Lecture XL, March 27, 1956

We are discussing the problem of ethics and religion, and we should do it in three main steps, the first of which has been done last time. The first problem in ethics is the problem of the moral imperative and its unconditional character. The point I made last time was that the moral imperative is not unconditional because of any special content, but that it is unconditional because it expresses the essential nature of man as a person. We have defined the nature of this unconditional character by denying that any special form as such can be vested with the quality of unconditional, but that the *experience* of the self-affirmation of the person as a person, necessarily includes unconditional character.

Now this element of the unconditional was the first point, in which the ethical was transcended by the religious, or more exactly, in which the ethical included a dimension which must be called religious because it is the dimension of the ultimate, of the unconditional. I reminded you, I think, of Kant's argument for the existence of God, his moral argument, which was supposed to replace the theoretical arguments, which he had criticized; and I emphasized that this moral argument is not good either, as argument for the existence of God, but that it is a *description* of just that point which I am making, namely the unconditional character of the moral imperative.

Now after this has been discussed, we come to the second point, the question of the moral contents. This is a point of very large interest and importance. Here again I want to show only one thing. I don't want to build a system of ethics, a table of Commandments, or anything like that, but I want to ask the fundamental question: Where do the contents of the moral imperative – [and this means the ethical contents – come? How can we know, [525] in a special moment, what to do?

If this is understood and accepted, then we are driven to a very difficult alternative. This alternative is the unconditional character of the form of ethics, and the conditional character of the content of ethics. Ethics are dependent on culture; they change with every special situation; they have a certain kind of continuity in periods which have continuity themselves; they tend to get into complete dissolution in periods in which the fundamental principles disintegrate. This is the argument for the relativity of ethics. And of course, if you look at the history of religion and the history of culture, you find much evidence for ethical relativism, evidence which cannot be denied, not only with respect to primitive cultures, or with respect to different high cultural groups, such as the Asiatic and the European, but also with respect to national and sociological differences within one group,

as for instance American culture. The ethical contents, although they are comparatively homogeneous, if you compare them with the contents in Asia, or Africa (the primitives), are nevertheless very much differentiated with respect to social groups, local conditions, and historical traditions. All this has a tremendous influence on ethical contents, and this relativism goes even deeper into the individual who, if he is autonomous, makes decisions about his ethical decisions about his moral attitude – you remember I defined morals as the matter itself and ethics as the science of this matter. And they are different, and nevertheless they can be justified.

Now the anxious question, which is very often asked about this point, is the question of a relativism which makes not only community impossible – how can you live together if the ethical contents are completely relative and different? – but also with respect to the individual himself: what is the situation if you don't know what to do if you are in the cross-section of different cultural influences – and everybody is, to a great extent.

We all are in the cross-section of at least humanistic secularism, Christian traditions – and here again, Protestant, or older Catholic traditions; and here again, Puritan or Lutheran traditions; and here again, European Protestantism [sic.] and American Protestantism – everybody is within the situation that he has to make decisions, because he is *not* one monolithic tradition in which he knows what to do because of the authority of the tradition. [526]

This brings us to the question: What is the relationship of the *absolute validity* of the categorical imperative, which we discussed last time, and the *relative validity* of every content which *happens* in the ethical act? How can you act with the feeling of unconditional duty if you are torn in your consciousness about the *contents* of this duty? Now this is a very serious practical problem, I believe, and I hope for all of, you who have an ethically sensitive conscience and at the same time the pathos of autonomy in your judgment and not the acceptance of traditionalism and conformism. Of course, this is not self-understood. There are different ways of deriving, from the ultimate principle of ethics, contents which then must be accepted as unconditional themselves. I will refer to two of these: the Catholic doctrine of natural law, and the totalitarian ideas.

In the Roman Catholic doctrine of natural law – when by chance I say “Catholic” with the adjective “Roman,” please, [I mean also] the Anglo-Catholics and the Greek Catholics – don't feel hit, necessarily; it's a European tradition, where, in the practical life, especially in Germany, Catholicism is identified with Roman Catholicism – and it took me years in this country before I realized that this is misleading because here the word “Catholic” is also used for some Protestant groups.

Now the Roman Catholic position is the following – and it is a very realistic one, in our present situation here in America, where we have a powerful representation of a natural-law theory which is maintained and confirmed by the authority of the Church. Let me develop this idea a little bit. | [527]

When you speak of “natural law,” then the modern man, Western man, immediately thinks of chemical laws, or of laws of subatomic physics. Then if we read books of the past and hear church history, or history of Greek philosophy or of Medieval philosophy, then he finds that the word “natural law” has a quite different meaning. Natural law is the rational law of the human mind, which is not identical with but made working by the human conscience. The rational principle of the good and the righteous are the principles of the natural law. So please, in order to avoid confusion, avoid the confusion between *physical* law and *rational* law. The word “natural law” covers both of them. Ask yourself always: does this man speak about the rational law of ethics, or does he

speak about the physical law of physics. The reason why both of these realms have the same name is the Stoic doctrine of the *logos*, meaning the universal creative principle which has the character of the “word,” and the “word” grasps, *reasonably*, the structure of reality, according to Greek thinking. So the *logos* is the power of universal rationality in the world as a whole. We are formed by the *logos* and therefore we have natural law in the sense of *rational* law, of the law of ethics – and also the law of logic belongs to this realm. Then on the other hand, *nature* is formed by the *same* *logos* which makes knowledge possible; and this same *logos* is responsible for the physical laws, for the laws of nature, according to which the structure of reality is kept together.

We speak here in this connection about the rational law of ethics. And the theory of natural law, to which I refer and which plays such an important practical role in our present ethical discussions in this country, is the law of reason with respect to the ethical realm.

Now if this definition is understood, then we can ask: how do we become aware of this natural law? Classical Roman Catholic theology has distinguished between an immediate awareness of the principles of natural law, which they called *synthesis*, in the Middle Ages, a word which is hard to explain – it might be a distorted Greek word. [We can call it the immediate awareness of the ethical principles in ourselves. From this immediate awareness they distinguished the human conscience, which may be erroneous, but which acts on the basis of this awareness.] [528]

Now this includes a lot of important consequences. The one is that it is possible for the philosopher or theologian to develop, in terms of pure reason, the laws and principles of natural law, the law of morals – freedom, equality, justice to everybody, and many others. On the other hand, human knowledge is limited and can also produce concepts [such] as concepts of natural law, which are really natural law, and forget others which really are. [?] Therefore one needs an authority above the analysis of the human mind, and this authority of course is the Roman Church. This is the famous doctrine of the natural law, in Roman Catholicism. The modern and very interesting elaboration of it, you can find in Maritain’s book on natural law.

This natural law goes very deeply into the concreteness of life. And if there are discussions which cannot be solved by reason alone – which they can in principle – then the authority of the Church gives the ultimate judgment. Now for instance, one of the most discussed consequences which Roman theology finds in terms of natural law is the anti-conceptuals [i.e. contraceptives]. Roman Catholic theology declares that this is against the natural law, and therefore, however great the misery which follows from the non-use of anti-conceptuals in a family or in a whole nation, they are forbidden by natural law. Now this is an example which I use because it is of such an importance for innumerable practical cases in the Western world and for the whole support America gives, for instance, to India, which, if the anti-conceptual ideology is *not* accepted by the Indian people – if Rome had its way – would lead to a corresponding increase of the population and other permanency of the misery. Therefore the whole problem is not a theoretical problem alone; it’s a problem of practical decisions of greatest importance for world history as well as for the misery and happiness of [individual human beings. The arguing of Rome is that the decisive thing is that nature should not be restricted if it wants to create a new immortal soul because the decisive thing is *not* the happiness or misery in time and space, but the existence of any individual immortal soul in terms of eternity. For this reason, the increase in population and the misery of individual human beings must be taken and accepted. This is enough of an example. The Church says: this is not] [529]

a special ecclesiastical law, but this is by *natural* law, and it can be proven by the desire of nature to procreate new beings.

In large groups of the present world, this doctrine of the natural law as we have it in Rome doesn't work any more, and especially with the addition of the peculiar Christian virtues which come not from natural law but alone from the Church. So this solution of the question of *content* (with which we deal today) is not valid for those who do not accept the Catholic doctrine.

There is an alternative – if you accept it as an alternative – and this was the totalitarian, especially the Fascist, alternative which answered the question of the contents by pointing to a *concrete* reality, namely a nation, or a race, and the contents of the ethical command are identical with what is needed by the growth of a national group. This of course is not a rational but a very *irrational* principle of a founding of contents of ethics, but certainly it is a possibility. And instead of nation and race, you also can say “Party,” and then you are in the Communistic realm. Everywhere in these realms, a special finite reality is made the creator of contents, not because they are rational – here the Catholic doctrine is far superior; it is much more rational than the totalitarian doctrines – but they are identical in one point, namely that a special group, and the authorities *within this* group, are ultimately decisive for the contents of the ethical behavior for individuals and groups. The result of course is that these groups, in their ethical contents, clash with other groups in *their* contents, and that the ethical principle becomes, instead of being a matter of personality and community, [a matter of disruption of both, and this has [530] happened on a worldwide scale and is happening in individuals all the time. Therefore this solution cannot be accepted either.

Is there another solution to which we can look? There is the pragmatic solution, which is practically the solution in this country. What is the character of this solution? It has similarity to the totalitarian solution, insofar as it denies a universal, embracing, rational principle for ethics, in contrast to the natural law of the Roman Church. On the other hand, it does not bind the ethical contents to a special situation, the situation of a special group, but it binds it to the *experience*, as pragmatism calls it. When pragmatists – I have experienced myself – are attacked *because* of the relativism implied in the pragmatic principle, and the *danger* of creating an empty space into which, once upon a time, the demonic forces of the totalitarian movements may enter, then they answer: this is not true, because *experience shows* us what is good and what is not good, or should be or should not be, or correspondence to the moral ultimate and what not. –

Now then, of course, one has to make a sociological statement, which is a statement about the state of mind in *this* country, [and] only in this country – perhaps partially in England, and the British Commonwealth generally – namely that pragmatism works because traditions work which come from somewhere else and are *not* derived from the pragmatic experience itself. This is my analysis of the possibility of pragmatism in this country. One can permit oneself to be pragmatic and to derive ethical principles from the so-called experience – whatever this may be – in ethical respect, *if one knows* that this experience will remain within the boundary of pure reason, or, in this case, within the boundary of good, denominational, Protestant traditions [little laughter], which are not yet undermined to such a degree as they were in Europe, where they didn't help any more, where the pragmatic principle in terms of the philosophy of life was introduced into European and especially German thinking.

Now this shows that it is *not* the pragmatic principle as such, which gives the contents, [but a tradition which comes from somewhere else and which is still comparatively intact. [531]

How could pragmatism otherwise give contents at all? Which *is* the experience, the ethical experience? You *do* something – what do you experience? You experience that it was wrong or right. *How do* you experience it? *Conscience alone* wouldn't help, because conscience is erroneous, very often – and was certainly erroneous in all the hundreds of thousands of younger Nazis who committed the greatest atrocities imaginable because their conscience forced them to be obedient to the leader.

Then what *is* the criterion? Is it success? Alright – but what does success mean? Is the success of a politician who uses every means to come to power a criterion for his goodness? And how can pragmatism *prove* that this is not what it means – as every pragmatist of course would say? What evidence does he give that *this* politician [sic.], who becomes powerful by all kinds of frauds and cunning, is *not* justified by the success which he has, if the pragmatic principle is in power?

Now here we can only say: this is so *inconsistent* that, as always in a situation in which inconsistency is obvious, one must apply a sociological or psychological analysis – not one moment before, because then discussion becomes impossible. But if discussion leads to an absolute inconsistency in the one or both points of views, then the question is: now why is this so? Why are we not *able* to show what experience in ethical respect means? Why is pragmatism not able? Then we must make a sociological analysis, and it is very obvious if you compare Europe and this country, namely the analysis that the principles of secularized puritanism and revivalism are not yet broken. Now let us imagine that they *are* broken, as they were in Europe, certainly. What then [is] the criterion for the content? Is natural law a possibility? But who decides about the contents of natural law? And if not, where do you *get* the contents? Is there a principle, not only the principle of [sic.] oughtness and its unconditional character, but also a principle of content? Let me construe my answer, which I want to suggest to you, in three levels. I will anticipate these levels: |

[532]

1) The first and highest level: *agapē* – in English, love, but love in the sense of the New Testament concept of love.

2) The second level: mediating principles, or the middle principles, as they are often called – “middle axioms,” as John Bennett in Union Seminary calls them – which are results of wisdom and in which both natural law and pragmatism are united, come to their right.

3) And then the third level: the level of the *kairos*, of the concrete, unique situation into which one acts. *Kairos* is the Greek word for “the right time,” the qualitative time, the right moment in which something can be done which cannot be done in any other moment.

So we have these three levels: love; wisdom (including the principles which wisdom has tentatively formulated, or preliminarily formulated); and the realm of the unique moment. Let's discuss first the principle of love. The principle of love means that here is something *immovable*, unchangeable, which, however, in its application, is dynamically changing in every moment. What is love? Love is the reunion of the separated, or, better, the urge towards the reunion toward the separated. This separation can be a separation from oneself, and then the true self-love – which should be called differently – is the reunion with oneself, ultimately in terms of self-acceptance. Or it is the reunion with the others, and with the ground of oneself *and* the world.

Now if this is love, this principle of reunion, then it is obvious that here the formal and the material principle coincide. The formal principle, as we have seen, was the self-affirmation of the person as person. This is possible only because of his complete

centeredness and because of his encounter with *other* persons. The principle of love expresses the union with the others, in the fundamental ethical principle. You cannot be really a person without self-acceptance; otherwise you are continuously disrupted into pieces, some of which you accept (wrongly), others which you reject (wrongly), because you are a unity. And only if you are able to accept yourself fully – and that means [sic.] means what is wrongly called the right self-love, the *necessary* and *good* self-love – only then are you a real person. But don't speak of self-love – I used that word only for a moment, and I don't know whether in the course of these lectures I already made this suggestion; if not, I do it now: The natural self-affirmation which Jesus (and the Old Testament) refers to when He says, "Love thy neighbor as thyself." This is the natural self-affirmation which everybody has and which should not be called self-love. The second is that against which the preachers preach, namely self-love in the negative sense, which shouldn't be called so because it confuses the issues; it should be called selfishness. It shouldn't also be called self-centeredness, because self-centeredness is the greatness of man: he is a complete center. But this probably cannot be avoided any more. [533]

Then there is a third: we look at ourselves in the mirror of what we ought to be and because we are it essentially: then we discover that we have to reject ourselves. And if we are able, because of the power of love in us, to accept ourselves in *spite* of our self-disgust and self-rejection, then we have what I would call the highest form of self-love, but I would not call it so; in order to avoid confusion, let's call it self-acceptance. So instead of that in-itself-impossible and logically wrong and confusing word, "self-love," which must always be distinguished in the right and the wrong self-love, [we] have three words: self-affirmation, selfishness, and self-acceptance – self-affirmation, which is the necessary natural life process which we have in every moment, which we try to escape a [i.e. which we try to protect from] [sic.] danger, or in which we enjoy our being as living; secondly, selfishness, which neither affirms oneself nor the other one, but which is greedy and is always connected with self-disgust; and then the third, namely the self-acceptance *in spite* of this self-disgust which is connected with selfishness – this form of love, of which I am [sic.] speaking now.

And now I say: this self-acceptance also enables us to accept the others, because it overcomes the greedy selfishness which makes the others into objects and means.

If we have the principle of love, then we have a principle which has all richness of the world in itself, because *everything* is completely individualized and seeks and longs for reunion with that from which it is separated by its self-relatedness and by the estrangement in our actual existence. [534]

But now I jump to the third level immediately from here, and come later back to the second, namely to the level of the concrete situation, of the uniqueness of the moment, or – as I called it – of the *kairos*. Love is the ultimate principle of all ethical action. To understand this we must first of all remove a wrong concept of love, namely love as emotion. If love is defined as emotion, then all I have said is nonsense – and not only relative nonsense, but absolute nonsense ! [some laughter] If love is what it *really* is, namely the drive towards the reunion of the separated, then everything I have said and *will* say has at least a possible truth. The relationship of love to emotion is – like the relationship of everything which is constitutive for human existence – every function and act of man's mind and body, namely the emotional accompanies it, and accompanies it to the degree to which the whole of our being is involved. It is *with* it; it is *connected* with it; but it is not *identical* with it. The companion is not the matter itself. The *more* the *total* personality is involved, the more emotional awareness is given. And since there is

nothing in which so much of our total being is involved as in faith – as ultimate concern – and love as the drive towards reunion; in these two the emotional element is extremely strong. But this doesn't mean that the emotional element is *in itself* love or faith. This is one of the comfortable things in which people who want to *remove* the fundamental religious concepts are *easily* able to push religion into a corner in which it has not very much consequences.

So I must unfortunately close in the middle of this consideration. But keep in mind the three levels: the level of love, the level of wisdom, and the level of the concrete situation. And understand love as I think it *must* be understood: as the drive toward the reunion of the separated.

And then next time we will continue with respect to the two other levels.