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Explorations in Theology

III: Creator Spirit

Ignatius
MOVEMENT TOWARD GOD

From the human "Thou" to the divine "Thou"

The little child awakens to self-consciousness through being addressed by the love of his mother. This ascent of the intellect to conscious self-possession is an act of simple fullness that can only in abstracto be analyzed into various aspects and phasest. It is not in the least possible to make it comprehensible on the basis of the formal "structure" of the intellect: sensuous "impressions" that bring into play a categorical ordering constitution that in its turn would be a function of a dynamic capacity to affirm "Being in absolute terms" and to objectify the determinate and finite existing object that is present here. The interpretation of the mother's smiling and of her whole gift of self is the answer, awakened by her, of love to love, when the "I" is addressed by the "Thou"; and precisely because it is understood in the very origin that the "Thou" of the mother is not the "I" of the child, but both centers move in the same ellipse of love, and because it is understood likewise in the very origin that this love is the highest good and is absolutely sufficient and that, a priori, nothing higher can be awaited beyond this, so that the fullness of reality is in principle enclosed in this "I"-"Thou" (as in paradise) and that everything that may be experienced later as disappointment, deficiency and yearning longing is only descended from this: for this reason, everything - "I" and "Thou" and the world - is lit up from this lightning flash of the origin with a ray so brilliant and whole that it also includes a disclosure of God. In the beginning was the word, with which a loving "Thou" summons forth the "I": in the act of hearing lies directly, antecedent to all reflection, the fact that one has been given the gift of the reply; the little child does not consider whether it will reply with love or not to its mother's inviting smile, for just as the sun entices forth green
growth, so does love awaken love; it is in the movement toward the "Thou" that the "I" becomes aware of itself. By giving itself, it experiences: I give myself. By crossing over from itself into what is other than itself, into the open world that offers it space, it experiences its freedom, its knowledge, its being as spirit.

Since, however, the child in this process replies and responds to a directive that cannot in any way have come from within its own self—it would never occur to the child that it itself had produced the mother's smile—the entire parade of reality that unfolds around the "I" stands there as an incomprehensible miracle: it is not thanks to the gracious favor of the "I" that space and world exist, but thanks to the gracious favor of the "Thou". And if the "I" is permitted to walk upon this ground of reality and to cross the distances to reach the other, this is due to an original favor bestowed on him, something for which he has no cause to think. The "I" will never find the sufficient reason in himself for the "I" could discover this reason, then the "Thou" would have addressed any summons at all, and all would be a dwelling of the "I" in itself, the ellipse would be a circle, the world and love and knowledge would collapse in an instant; being would be illusion, the contents giving fulfillment would be empty law, love would be at best an instinct, knowledge a mere function.

But where love summons the "I" into the state where it is permitted to answer, the "I" is affected in the core of its being and can reply only with its totality, its center, its fulness: it must collect together what is best in itself in order to respond to that summons. It comes into play at once as a totality. This state in which claim is made to the totality belongs to the highest joy bestowed on love: since the summons by the mother is not addressed to something in the child but to the child itself beyond the sum of its qualities (which can share with other children), precisely in reality the "I" of the child, it experiences at the same time that my "I" is loved, is lovable for my mother, and that my reply can lie only in the gift of this "I"—together with all that may belong to it, although it is not necessary at all to know the individual details of this. Small children throw themselves upon one's lap like a round ball.

A subsequent process is necessary—and it is the parents' task to begin this—in order to differentiate the initially indivisible love of the child into love for fellow human beings and love for the absolute, in order to introduce the direction of the child's love to God. This happens most painfully when the parents declare that they are themselves "children of God" and behave accordingly, turning to God together with their children, for then the unconditional love that flows between parents and children does not need to be tied down and "demythologized" to the limited worldly measure; rather, this can be the love that is the foundation and bears the love of parents and children and is now related explicitly to the absolute "Thou". If this succeeds, then it remains possible even in relationships between human beings—for example, in marriage—for the unreserved commitment of the one to the other to be borne by common orientation to the mystery of absolute love. This highest realization is, however, an extreme achievement that is made wholly possible only within Christianity. But even here, at the outset, it remains important that we see that Christianity will be the only fully satisfactory unfolding of what has been implied in the first experience of being on the part of the awakening human spirit. Being and love are coextensive.

This implicit experience can be had only by a being that is spirit in the kernel of its subjectivity, a being that carries out what Thomas Aquinas calls reflexio completa: the total taking possession of itself in the total transcending of itself to a "Thou" that is recognized as the other who loves. In the animal realm, approxi-

1 The approach taken here gives the possibility, not only of getting beyond that of Kant and Merechal, but also of leaving behind the theological approach that begins with the kerygymatic "speech event". When Paul speaks of this (1 Cor 15:4; 1 Th 3:5), he does so always and only as it relates to God's gift of himself in Christ, which is brought close through the apostle's gift of himself (1 Th 2:8). The Word is still wordless in the beginning, because it is the pure fullness of love.
motions to both elements can exist, regulated by the natural instincts of self-preservation and of reproduction, but the pure performance of the intellectual-volitional act of the spirit is nowhere achieved; everything remains on the basis of the limited forces of pairing and procreation and does not take place in the open space of Being as such and thus in the free realm of mutual summoning to oneself, of choosing and of making the gift of oneself. Where the horizon of Being as a whole lies open for intellectual knowledge, the horizon of value of the good or of love as a whole must also necessarily lie open; no matter how many disappointments and deficiencies may set the horizon of value, realizing the horizon of Being (which cannot be removed) of its character as love and consequently making it appear as where Being (esse nudum). But that which mostly does not stand revealed in actuality during the “hard life” is nevertheless continuously envisaged as the future horizon of healed and whole Being, which as a whole is to be affirmed and loved; thanks to his origin, man has a half-buried knowledge of this Being. Plato's whole understanding of the historical spirit is based on this concept, which he expresses partly in intellectual terms and partly in terms of eros; his “idea of the good” is the sun of Being, which can be recognized by the dazzled eye of the spirit only in sudden “moments” (eptaphes).

If one keeps in view the original unity of Being and the good, of reality and love, then it is not sufficient to say that all knowledge in the world is determined by the constitutive and irremovable distinction between Being and the existent (esse and essentia, in the sense of Thomas and of Thomism); rather, the distinction now takes on a further fundamental meaning, viz., that of the distinction between the rational and ethical “mastering” of the strata of Being in the world, on the one hand, and the awareness, on the other hand, of a permission to exist that can never be mastered, never taken into one's own possession, an awareness of the gracious favor that grants access and entry to the realm of 2 Thomas, De ver. 22, 2 c ad 1, ad 2.

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Being as a whole. This awareness is joined to the primal experience that one has arrived at participation in the world of beings by means of a summons coming from outside one's own self. It is not through the perfection of one's own power that one has entered this fellowship. It is not relevant here to note that the mother, from whom the summons came forth, was herself one who had been summoned (as the child later learns), and not she alone, but all the beings who are invited to take their place at the table of existence; this means only that each one of these beings, once entered the room with the same breathing breath, even if it soon felt itself to be at home among the other beings. How is it that I come in here? An irremovable contingency attaches to the individual and initially distinguishes him from the generality; he cannot add this contingency to the contingency of all other beings in order to arrive at a general necessity that would balance them all with one another. He discovers in the depth of the heart of the others, too, the same fundamental orientation that exists in himself. Although this is, for each individual, necessarily his own question and astonishment, this is at the same time the common question and astonishment: Why does a world exist at all, rather than no world?

For the individual, the thought of the appalling contingency of the sexual process to which he owes his origin remains a wholesome admonition; this thought can scarcely be borne, and if it were to indicate the total cause of his existence in the world, it could lead the being that is begotten and born to cynicism and the loss of all hope. But even the one who has a living idea of God and can understand the kernel of his personality only as something coming from God, something that is directly created by God, will nevertheless reflect with scarcely concealed dread on the incomprehensible linking of God's creative act to nature's chance act of generation. God did not will his existence unconditionally, so to speak, but bound his own act of creation in the light to such dark and blind cooperative causes. Seen from the perspective of the latter, it seems not inappropriate to speak of "being
thrown [geworfen] into existence", since what is begotten and born of an animal is called its litter [Warf]. Between generation and spirit there yawns in Being something like a geological fault of dizzying height; Soloviev (following other Platonists such as Gregory of Nyssa) constructed his system of ethics on this geological fault. It must not be interpreted demonically or tragically, but it must not be made harmless; it comes to light definitively in the face of death. The being that has been generated sexually is doomed from the outset to die; among purely natural beings, death must be accepted as the necessary counterpart of birth, but what does dying mean for a spiritual person who has his being directly from God and is directly orientated to God—and yet who does not know himself in any other way than as a fellow citizen of the world of nature?

And yet, out of this same puzzling point of departure, light is cast on a fundamental law of human existence. No matter how great may be the space in man occupied by matter, by what is vital and biological, no matter how intensely it may be controlled by static and evolutionary laws also, which give man his place in nature as a whole; nevertheless, with his spirit he has an immediate orientation to God, irrespective of the stage of personal development and of the development of the world at which the individual stands. And if, in the age of technology, the natural element in man is subordinated ever more strongly to his arbitrary manipulations—going as far as extreme forms that have already come threateningly close to us today?—this consolation remains to man here: for all its subspiritual dimension, the fundamental substructure of the spirit is penetrated by spirit in such a way that it is its own regularity and in the mysterious (but undeniable) dynamic resoluteness of its evolution that man, as the free being endowed with

1 It is certainly not impossible that in the future, too, political "decisions," those concerned with a world view, religious or anti-religious "decisions" (if it is still possible to speak of such) or (let us rather say) reflexes will be imposed on men by technological means, attires that they "honestly" uphold and (as attempts show) can also be passed on through inheritance.

reason that he is, does not have to feel that he is handed over to demonic forces: it is certain that he, this weak individual, did not present himself with this substructure whose final outcome he himself is, nor can humanity as a whole, which stands on the peak of evolution, have been its own efficient cause. Thus, behind what is apparently the alien element in nature—the element on which he himself is built and which governs him as far as his highest capacities—stands ultimately an eternal Spirit that is related to his own spirit; as spirit, he can only have an immediate relationship to this Spirit, from which the process and the mediation of the world's nature do not distance him in any serious way. He would not be able to see God as a natural being in the infinite cosmos unless he had already found him beforehand as a spiritual being; as his own origin in the love whose remembrance can never be wholly buried and which remains the secret or open horizon against which he must measure everything that is in the world. In this process, two things will happen: he will be able to arrange what is in the world into a certain ascending scale of approximation to the absolute measurement (in an evolutionary view of the world, there might exist a chance for this ascending scale to be ordered temporally also toward the point on the horizon of absolute salvation—Omega day), but he will also know at the same time that nothing in the world can, as such, bring him to the point of absolute love: rather, absolute love can only turn to him on its own initiative, in freedom. But although it is true that this cannot be compelled on the part of the world nature ("grace" cannot be postulated by "nature"), it is equally true that subspiritual nature can have its foundation only in the absolute Spirit (and thus in love), and this means that there is a promise inscribed on nature itself that this free fulfillment of all the world's searching and all searching ("eros") of existence for the definitive encounter with love—in short, salvation—will one day become a real event.

The event in which the spirit awoke to its being as "I" was the interpersonal experience of the "Thou" in the sphere of common human nature, indeed, more intimately still, in the sphere
of the common flesh of mother and child. It seems to be the unity of nature that allows the play of love between the sheer otherness of the persons: for even where the mother pours forth her own living substance into the child, the child never becomes the mother, and the mother never becomes the child. The play of love of the persons—so it could appear—is a very high expression of nature's fullness of life, which can set itself over against itself in its unity in order to seek itself, to find itself and to give new fertility to itself in its own womb. If this were so, then the ultimate act would consist in the free self-sacrifice made by the individual persons (in death) in order to be submerged in the all-embracing dimension of the Being (the Being which rises up to become itself): persons, together with their personal love, would be transitory blossoms of a foundation that, in order to be love, takes on finite form in persons but then always takes these persons back into itself, since the blossom must fall in order to produce fruit. If this were to count seriously as an interpretation of Being, then one would have to accept the consequences: (1) interpersonal love would itself be the absolute and (quasi-)divine; but a love for God would not be possible, since God and man are not borne and sheltered by any common physis, so that a sheer setting in opposition of the "I"s would result and, thus, utter alienness; in terms of his essence, God would be acosmic, while man would be completely cosmic, and thus no love would come into being. (2) If love is a blossoming of nature, then it is only one mode of Being among others and not in the least the embodiment of Being itself. So there does exist in nature de facto also that which is opposed to love: the struggle of the species and of the individuals in each genus against each other, a struggle that is bitter, merciless and cruel; and one must either (with Nietzsche) praise precisely this cruelty in the will to attain power as the glory of absolute Being ("The Great Song of Yes and Amen") or else acknowledge that the whole realm of nature cannot be absorbed into love (it is polemos emphulos, imminent civil war) and transcended it (Buddha, Plato) to seek the place where peace rules. But it will then be questionable whether personal love, which appears as one element in interworldly Being, can find a place for itself in this act of transcendence. At the origin of human life lay a promise of love that seemed absolute. Has it the capacity to hold out until the promise is fulfilled?

**Diatic of the absolute "Thou"**

The dialectic of the idea of God, as this unfolds in the religions and philosophies of humanity, is generated precisely from the point of departure that has been set forth here.

a. The first image of God, that of myth, could be described as the religious projection of the primal experience of loving common humanity, though undeniably interwoven (and not too little obscured) by the existential feelings that man has in face of the strangeness and the superior power of nature and of Being as a whole. If we strip this image of the characteristics that belong explicitly to the realm of nature—power, as this is encountered in a beast, in a storm, in the elements, in light, fire, darkness and in natural catastrophes, the attack of panic anxiety, reverence before what is all-embracing in every regard, reverence before procreation, birth and death, before one's ancestors, who embody one's own origin—there emerges in the kernel a mysterious, indefinable "for me", behind which there must stand a "Thou" who can grant me favor, shelter and help, the grace that was promised in the first experience of childhood and could not be granted fully by one's parents or indeed by fellow men at all. This God is understood (as was one's mother) as a somebody, as one in a manner that is not the object of conscious reflection (one among possible others), just as the mother, the father, the friend and the member of one's tribe are each one, among others who are not "for me". My enemy will have his own god, and this god will, logically, be the enemy of my god. This fact that the god is "for me"—or, in the case of a tribe, a