

## CHAPTER XVI

### GOODNESS AND THE "VIRTUES"

PROPOSITION: *The Command of God, so far as the subject is concerned, requires one thing only: existence in love, but this implies the existence of every "virtue."*

1. Good, in the radical sense, does not mean "doing good" but "being good." God wants to have me—myself—for His own, and not merely my actions. In the strict sense of the word no action can be "good"; only the agent of the action can be "good." The aristocratic ethic of the "noble," "well-born" man (Scheler), in contradistinction to the democratic ethic of the "good will," is not wholly wrong; it indicates the weak point in the ethic which deals with man's "disposition"; the ethic of the "good will" does not sound the depths of man's being; it remains in the air, concentrated on moral effort, on the isolated act of the will. It does not perceive that the true Good can never flow from this feverish intensity of effort, from all this labour and pain, from all this painstaking endeavour to attain the Good, but simply and solely from the central source of goodness as a state of existence. The "Good" which issues from effort is, for that very reason, not really good; the Good must descend from above, not be striven for from below, otherwise it lacks genuineness and depth.

On the other hand, the ethic of the good will, when compared with the naturalistic ethic of the "well-born" man, is so far right in that it insists that the Good can never be a natural fact. To have a good disposition does not mean being good. To be good is a personal determination, not a natural tendency. The secret of being good therefore lies neither in the act of the will, nor in the fact of natural birth, but in the new birth, which takes place on the further side of this contradiction—the paradox of the new-born—personal will, or rather: of the person who has become good. The subject of a Christian ethic is neither birth nor race, nor a habit which has become a custom ("inherited nobility") nor is it even "the Christian character," but it is the new person, which, as such, is always something given and demanded, a divine and human "central act," an event which affects life as a whole, the whole being of the self in question.

2. But in so far as this new being is, paradoxically, one

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which is demanded, what kind of life then is it that is demanded? As a state of obedience? But that is simply tautology. Then, as a life of faith? But that is not the question. For (on the basis of that which was laid down in the last chapter) we are asking a further question about the moral nature of the life lived in faith. What sort of man is the man who in faith is obedient? This very natural question, however, is the point at which so many Christian moralists, and, indeed, whole centuries of ethical thinking, have been led astray into the false path of a doctrine of the virtues which is contrary to Christian thought. The true being of a man can never be indicated by a human quality, but only—as is implied in the expression “to be in faith”—by the actual state of his relation with God. We ought rather to ask: *Where* is man when he is in his right place? and answer: “True being” means being “in Christ”; for “Christ is my righteousness.” God’s Being in Christ, however—once again not as a quality but as act—is His being in love. The true being of man therefore can mean nothing else than standing in the love of God, being drawn into His love of man. Or, to put it differently: it means living a life which from its source in God is directed towards man, towards the interests of others.

3. Love in the sense in which the New Testament uses the word, is not a human possibility at all, but it is exclusively possible to God. Love is an “ultimate” eschatological possibility; for it will be the last thing when everything else, even faith, has vanished. Hence the state of “living in love” is not something which man can achieve by his own efforts and in his own strength, but it is something which happens to man in faith, from God. The decisive element in this life in love is therefore always to allow ourselves to be loved by God.<sup>1</sup> Once more it becomes clear how it is that the Good can only be understood from the point of view of justification. As we see from the expression that “man is created in the image of God,” we are not in any sense fixed stars: God alone shines in His own light, He alone possesses aseity. We are planets which can only shine in a borrowed light, that is, in His light. “Let your light so shine before men that . . . they may glorify your Father in heaven.”<sup>2</sup> To be good in the right way is only possible when we desire to be nothing.

4. Love is not merely an isolated act. Even in ourselves natural love, erotic love, for instance, is not genuine if it

<sup>1</sup> See particularly the First Epistle of John.

<sup>2</sup> Matt. v. 16.

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does not develop from "being in love" into real love. Only when a person is truly "in love" is it possible to love. Love is a personal form of existence. Love is not an abstract form of loving, but it is the flowing forth of love. The Divine love is the possibility of human loving; it is the river whence the tiny rivulets of human love can pour themselves into life.

Therefore God only demands one thing: that we should live in His love. In His prophetic message Jesus summons men to "Love!" The apostolic exhortation, which points back to the gift of God in Christ, summons us to "Live in love."<sup>1</sup> Or, still more plainly: to "*Remain* in love." For the apostolic exhortation is addressed to believers, that is, to those who are already in the love of God. This commandment transcends the contrast between mysticism and morality. It is the summons to remain within the giving of God, to return to Him again and again as the origin of all power to be good, or to do good. There are no "other virtues" alongside of the life of love.

Even love is not a "virtue," because it is not a quality which can be assigned to man as such—it is not the light of a fixed star—but it is the state in which man stands in the light of God. The ancient conception of virtue can only spoil the Christian statements about being good. To-day we are rightly very suspicious of all talk of "virtues," indeed we are tired of all such language. For the ancient conception of virtue, which also dominates the whole medieval system of morality(1), turns a quality which depends for its very existence upon the reality of the Divine action into a human acquisition. Behind this present-day revulsion from the "virtuous man"—often decorated with all kinds of "orders" for his virtuous conduct—lies the feeling that there is something wrong in this virtue which man has so to speak "created," that all this talk of "possessing virtues" and of "being virtuous," indeed even the striving after such virtues, and even the mere ideal of virtue, is presumptuous. The idea of virtue leads man to justify himself—and this is the very opposite of all genuine goodness.

There is, however, a second point which is connected with this ancient idea of virtue as a quality which belongs to man as he is in himself, namely, that of the plurality of virtues(2). Once the perversion has taken place which conceives "being good" as a human quality, then inevitably the

<sup>1</sup> The *phrases* are distinctly "Johannine," but the subject is equally "Pauline." Cf. Rom. xii. 1; 2 Cor. v. 15; Phil. ii. 5.

second point follows, that there are a number of such virtues. The result is the atomization of the Good. For then man does not possess one quality, but many(3). Thus he has not merely one virtue but—if he is “perfect”—many virtues. The Good, which is one, is divided into little pieces, goodness is severed from the person as a whole, and qualities are turned into independent entities as “virtues.” There then exists a whole system of virtues. The conception of the Good has become wholly externalized.

5. Thus if, in spite of this, the New Testament has adopted the conception of virtue, this can only be understood in one sense, namely, that it wishes to exhibit in the individual virtues the various forms of the one life in love. It is an ancient saying that love is “the mother of all the virtues.” This saying suggests that there is no other Good at all save that which consists in living in love, but that this one life appears in a great variety of ways in connexion with the life of others. For as goodness is not something which belongs to man inherently, but only to his existence in relation to God, so the practical manifestation of this life with God is a life in relation with others, determined according to each particular relationship. Thus even in respect of others “virtue” is not *my* quality, something which can be thought of as belonging to the individual, but it is always a “*co*-existence,” a way of being related to others.

Even where we speak of a plurality of virtues, the ancient conception of virtue has been fundamentally altered, in so far as virtue is never an individual mode of existence, but is always characterized as *co*-existence. There are no “individual” virtues, like those orders and decorations adorned with which the individual struts about among his fellows; but virtues only exist in life lived in relation with others.<sup>1</sup> Thus as the Self only achieves “goodness” in personal relation to God, so also “virtue” can only be attained in our relations with our fellow-men. And further: as life in love is a life which flows from the love of God, so also the individual virtue, as a particular manifestation of the one goodness, is always something which flows from another dimension, namely, from the fact of life as determined by the existence of our neighbour. For to live in love means concretely to allow one’s life to be

<sup>1</sup> Or, more literally: “As the ‘I’ can only ‘be good’ in relation to the Divine ‘Thou,’ so the ‘I’ can only ‘be virtuous’ in relation to the ‘Thou’ of another human being.”—Tr.

determined by the existence of others, by being "subject" to their needs and demands. Each virtue is a way of "entering into contact" with another person, of knowing that one "belongs" to him. Thus the variety of the virtues comes not from the self but from the other as the definite way in which through his particular situation or peculiarity my existence is determined by his. If it is impossible to conceive of any individual virtue as a quality of the Self, then also there are no virtues which can be individually conceived. Each virtue, one might say, is a particular way in which the person who lives in love takes the other into account, and "realizes" him as "Thou."

6. Only thus is the variety of the virtues to be understood aright. Truthfulness, for instance, is the special way of living in love, or of living in relation with others, which perceives or realizes the claim of the other man on my knowledge of the truth. Peaceableness is a particular way of living in relation with others in which I perceive the claim of the "Thou" for undisturbed fellowship with me. All these virtues are only really conceived in a personally actual, non-substantial manner, when they are conceived in terms of awareness of the claims of others, as a readiness to re-act, to respond to a definite call. Thus they are all *negative*, not positive, in character. They consist in having one's mind and heart open in a certain direction, but this does not imply that they possess positive content. All the virtues consist in "being ready." In this respect, too, the virtues cannot be defined in reply to the question *How?* but in reply to the question *Where?* The very fact that I—because I am living in love—am not self-centred and isolated, but am in touch with others, constitutes virtue in its varying forms.

There is no need here to deduce and describe the individual virtues. Traditional ethics has gone into this subject already in quite sufficient detail. What we need is to regain the right fundamental understanding of the principle which governs the conception of virtue, which has been so badly distorted both by the ancient tradition, and by the medieval scholastic tradition; we need to break away from the individualistic and anthropocentric conception of virtue. It is, indeed, no wonder that Luther hated Aristotle with such a passionate hatred! For the Aristotelian conception of virtue, which governed his own ethic and through this the ethic of Scholasticism, is the purely individualistic conception, which is dominated by the

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idea of the individual's self-improvement, till he achieves perfection. One of the most important tasks of a Christian ethic is to break away from this idea as completely as possible.

7. But, once this has been said, a second observation must be made as a secondary consideration. Man does not only consist of distinct acts; his life is also characterized by what one may describe as "settled conditions" or a "state of being." Just as we must not forget the fact of the physical existence of man in considering his power to act in a personal way, so also we must not forget the fact that his life falls into a certain "state" of being in a broader sense of the word. We do not live merely in acts of decision, but in our life there is also a region of the habitual, of that which has come to be in the empirical sense of the word. A detailed doctrine of the New Birth would have to take note of the fact that the act of faith has a reflex influence upon the condition of the person in question, with great caution it is true, but still quite clearly. There does exist what we call *character*, which can be described in empirical terms, the permanent element, the element which goes on working yesterday, to-day, and to-morrow. There is a relative constancy, an attitude, a certain stamp, whose external sign is the fact that we are in the body. And faith extends its influence into this region of the factual, habitual state just as much as sin does. There does exist something which can be described as a "Christian character"—different as this character is from faith, and in spite of the fact that faith is not to be understood from this standpoint. Faith may be "materialized" in a certain state of believing, a habitual state of faith. Hence faith exists as something which has grown thus, and therefore also as something which is growing, increasing or decreasing. The *person* can never be conceived in terms of qualities, but the *character* may be.

And just as this element of habit is one aspect of faith, so it is with love. There is therefore an "exercise in love," a process of growth in love, a more or a less, a "treasure," a power at the disposal of the moment of action, which distinguishes the mature soul from the beginner, there is a really present "excellence" and even a virtuosity of loving. In brief: there does exist what Aristotle and the Catholic moralists mean when they speak of virtue.

In this region virtues do exist as qualities in the person. Here, indeed, there really are individual virtues of which one may have more of one and less of another, just as also in

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technical excellence one may be "stronger" at one point and "weaker" at another. This point of view should and must also have its place in a Christian ethic, even though this place may be a secondary one; this subject will be treated in connexion with the discussion of the *justitia civilis*. The error of the usual doctrine of virtue does not consist in the fact that it points to these virtues—which really are present in individual persons as such—but in the fact that it makes them the fundamental and the main thing, that it interprets man as a being who strives upwards from "below," rather than as a being who depends on something which is granted to him from "above," that it regards continuity as an ascending rather than a descending scale, that it does not perceive that this order of progression is completely reversed by repentance and faith, that *gratia* is not *superponit naturam*, but that it consists in a "dying" and "becoming new"; that even the "virtue" which proceeds from faith only comes into being when the gaze of the soul is directed, not towards the "I," and that which is present, but towards Christ and His word of justification. We can only speak of this virtue as a "state" without doing harm if we are quite clear that it is nothing natural, nothing constructed by man, if we realize that its growth proceeds from the actuality of faith; otherwise we shall fall into a hopeless morass of Naturalism or Substantialism, which knows grace only as Supernature, and in so doing falsifies its nature from the very root.

But to deal with these virtues is not so much the task of ethics as of pedagogy. The place of pedagogy is the habitual, as its essential categories are practice and custom, although certainly a right pedagogy can only be produced when it looks at that which lies beyond its own sphere. Here, therefore, all that concerns us is to give an indication of this connexion between ethics and the empirical considerations and practice of pedagogy.