Elementary Monotheism II

Action and Language in Historical Religion

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Contents

Abbreviations

Works by John Courtney Murray:
PG: *The Problem of God*
Works by H. Richard Niebuhr:
RMWC: *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*
MR: *The Meaning of Revelation*

Other Abbreviations:
OT, TNK: the Old Testament; Torah, Neviim, Ketuvim: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. Usually these documents will be called simply the Common Documents instead of the Hebrew Bible. They are, after all, the common documents of the Jewish and Christian Bibles, and it seems better to call them that in order to avoid potentially Marcionite implications of the common term "Hebrew Bible."
GGD: *God, Guilt, and Death*, by Merold Westphal.
ELN: *Exposure, Limitation, and Need*, the first volume of this work.

Introduction

Some people seek to affirm all of human life in this world, including its hard and painful parts, in full view of both the pains and of the essentially historical character of life. History goes beyond nature, and the rudiments of that going-beyond appeared in the first part of this work, *Exposure, Limitation, and Need*, the preparation for this volume. There is more to living in history than that volume was able to explore. This volume continues the inquiry by taking up in somewhat changed form two questions borrowed from John Courtney Murray. How do we know God, and how do we name God?

Since the method avowed at the outset was to postpone God himself and concentrate on human lives and human commitments, Murray's questions cannot be taken as they stand. The method in the first volume was to look at providence rather than the provider, to look at the shape of human lives rather than begin with the God as an assumed concept. The problem of knowledge of God will then turn out to be more a problem of action than of epistemology. For in the spirit of the Common Documents, to know the Lord is to walk in his ways, certainly a matter of action. And human action is open to inspection and criticism in ways that God is not.

Only with the *language* of radical monotheism (variously also called historical-covenantal religion or world-affirming historical religion), do we come to the concept of God in its own right, and thereby make God himself thematic. This will come about as a consequence of noticing the openness of the commitments underlying a world-affirming basic life orientation. Life in this world, whether conceived as history or as nature, cannot be affirmed *simply*, taken as it is, because of its pains. Therefore any affirmation of life in this world implicitly presupposes many unanswered questions. Indeed, they are unanswerable.

Part III moves the question from the structure of history to the believer's task of fitting his or her life into history. This starts as an issue of knowledge of the God, but becomes a matter of how to live with history.

In chapter 10, we dispose of inevitable misconceptions, and chapter 11 sketches the narrative resources by which covenantal living makes sense of life. In chapter 12, like chapter 8 of *Exposure, Limitation, and Need*, we work through an example; in this case, the most conspicuous failed engagement of Liberal theological culture today.

Part IV deals with language and how covenantal language works. In chapter 13, we dispose of misconceptions and outline the essential irony of radically monotheistic language. In chapter 14, we work from that irony to narrative and a sense of the need for some transcendent basis for the covenanter's commitments. In chapter 15, we explore analogy as the way to articulate that transcendence. God will appear as the central analogy of covenantal language.

Part III

Knowing Providence

Chapter 10

Religious Knowledge

10.1 The Shape of the Problem

In the third question in *The Problem of God*, John Courtney Murray asks how we can know God. In a succinct dilemma, if we don't really know God, then he is not really with us, and if we think we know God as he is in himself, then what we know is not transcendent to human knowledge, and so is not God. In other words, if what is known is not a mystery, it is just part of the world, and cannot be the God of monotheism, and so God is not really with us. Murray's question, whether God is "with us" or not, "in our midst," in the corporate form of the question, is an existential question about providence more than about metaphysics or the ontological status of God. As always in this inquiry, the focus has been shifted from God in himself to divine acts as providential, from the ontological status of God to the existential import for human beings. In Murray's account, the problem is one of knowing. Recent philosophy takes this as a problem in epistemology. Somebody once said that an interest in epistemology is a symptom of an intellectual tradition that is in a confused state, unable to proceed, not in firm touch with its own problems. The remedy is often not in epistemology but in addressing the underlying confusions.

Murray finds more than epistemology in the third of his four questions. In his estimate, to know God is more a matter of lifestyle than of possessing reliable information. That is to say that human action and human knowledge of divine action are originally related, intimately parts of one another. By contrast, getting and testing information is the commonest sense of "knowledge" for epistemology. This way of posing

the question is congenial for philosophers, because it allows a clean separation of the concept of knowledge from other aspects of human life. Knowledge has, however, a grounding in being familiar with the things known, and familiarity is always in part a matter of practical involvements, not just speculative or theoretical knowledge. Such familiarity comes before one could express it in propositions that could be criticized. We say that we know others whom we live with confidently, and to live with providence is to live with God. This is the presupposition of knowing both providence and God. Part III is about the structure of living with providence, the task of bringing coherence to a human life in its comportment toward divine providence. When that task is successfully characterized, the problem of knowledge has been transformed. *Whether* there is knowledge is no longer in question; the problem has been reduced to how to articulate it in a way that is philosophically illuminating. *How* one knows may be a puzzle, something quite hidden, surprising when discovered, with an unsuspected structure. Getting that structure wrong can create a description that will by errors unnoticed subvert the practice out of which it arises.

The issue of knowledge of God is different in different ages. Murray's instinct follows the biblical and modern problem of knowledge, and his overview is quite helpful. The Patristic problem is more like the problem that grows out of it in the Scholastic, Baroque, and Enlightenment periods, a matter of language, logic, ontology, and speculative knowledge. The modern existential problem is more like the problem in the Common Documents, a matter of lifestyle, freedom, practical action, and stance toward evil. It will be instructive to see how the modern problem has been transformed into something like its biblical form once again.

As it shows itself from chapter 2, the life of faith appears as confidence, loyalty, acknowledgment. Loyalty leads to action, but what action? Acknowledgment implies some sort of knowledge, but what sort is not at all clear. Confidence presupposes some knowledge of or at least contact with what one has confidence in. To say that radical monotheism entails embracing exposure, limitation, and need as bearing blessing rather than being barren is true enough, as far as it goes. But one would like to know more. In ELN, Part II, the problem of faith was historicized, and history was seen as a guide for covenantal human living. But how does a historical individual hang together as a coherent whole? How would one know? The problem of the historical individual, Troeltsch's problem, here returns in a new guise, practical rather than speculative, and shaped by its focus on the future.

To put it a little differently, it is intuitively easy to advocate embracing limitation, for example, but how one might do that is learned only

from history. Only from history do we learn to recognize limitations or their structure and opportunities. Only from history do we learn how limitations might be reconstrued in ways that are entirely new in history. The history that one could learn from was the focus of ELN, Part II. In the past, there have been a few major ways to guide faithful living and a handful of minor ones. Life is to be regulated by statute, or by emulation of the great exemplars of faith, or by cultivation of the virtues. Ascesis and mysticism are of lesser import, and ritual occupies a special place which we shall encounter only by implication under its linguistic aspect. Ritual language is performative, and it counts as defining the orientation of a body's life. These concerns are ethical, but they go beyond ethics, and their further reach indicates an interest that has a different focus, something more like the structure of a human life. What would it mean for a life to have a coherent structure, and how could one tell whether a life fits one or another religious stance? How would you tell what a human life is oriented toward? From Merold Westphal, we see that the narrative of the cosmos makes sense of human lives: if the world is nature, the task is to fit into nature; if exile, to return from exile; if a henotheistic communal history, to live as part of the history of that community; if covenantal history, to live as part of universal covenantal history. But what would that mean, on a narrative scale larger than the embracing of particular disappointments in the rubrics of ELN, Part I? In a sense, religious observance is what someone uses to define the orientation of his life; it has performative senses – commissive and declarative, for example. For its success there must be also some implementation of the declared orientation in action. We are more interested in the structure of action that results, but actions and declaratives cannot entirely be separated; they are parts of one another.

No effort that I am capable of will yield a rigorous philosophical exploration in a systematic style. Such an endeavor has a proper place, but the task here is different, more preliminary. It will be an inquiry into faithful living on which speculative reason might later reflect. It is descriptive, relational, inter-personal, historical-existential, and not definitive, explanatory, absolute, or ontological.[1] It is more in the style of descriptive biology than of Newton's laws. The forms of life that matter have not shown themselves in philosophy today, and when they do, emerging from the fog of inarticulation, their features will remain ill-defined for quite some time longer than any discussion this effort may provoke. In the spirit of Wittgenstein and Heidegger and above all of Polanyi, we remember that human concerns and reality come before they are made explicit in language. It is impossible to make explicit *all* the

[1] Cf. PG, p. 46.

features of someone's life that constitute its orientation. The practical comes before the theoretical, skills come before representations, and meaning is corporate, not created by individuals.[2]

This is the biblical and contemporary problem, not an inquiry in the patristic or scholastic or baroque style. It lives at the presuppositions of ethics.

So posed, the problem can be sketched; there is no comprehensive solution that I am aware of. The inquiry of the present volume will thus have a different tone from that of *Exposure, Limitation, and Need*. It is quite tentative and exploratory in character. The rest of this chapter will set the stage. In chapter 11, we will see faith, action, and the coherence of a human life. In chapter 12 we will see clearings in life in which it is possible to see what its center and direction really are.

10.2 In the Light of Falsification

Philosophy in the twentieth century has spent considerable effort on religious knowledge. Early, and still in some quarters, this is conceived on analogy with knowledge of an invisible person, one who is omnipotent, omniscient, and omni-benevolent. God is then a being that might or might not exist, and the stage is set for what is called the "problem of evil." One might think that in the problem of evil the door was opened to a practical and existential sort of questioning, but instead it was usually treated in speculative terms. A few threads in the modern discussion of knowledge of God will lead us to the intimacy between knowledge and action that is the focus of Part III. They each, in their own quite various ways, come to the juncture between knowledge and action as to an old familiar place that now is surprising in its capacity to fund investigations onto new ground.

Whatever the case with the Enlightenment, the past century has approached these questions through a consciousness of language. John Searle's work can fairly stand as an example of the general interest in language. One can know what one can assert, and what one can assert can be parsed into terms that refer, and such terms refer to things that exist.[3] The project that is concentrated in *Speech Acts* illuminated some aspects of speech and action very well at the cost of hiding others. The silent

[2]Cf. Terry Winograd and Fernando Flores, *Understanding Computers and Cognition; a New Foundation for Design* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1987), p. 32-33.

[3]Cf. John R. Searle, *Speech Acts* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969), especially chapter 4, "Reference As A Speech Act."

guides are mathematical set theory and logic, spectacularly effective in their original home. Here, they call into the light the formal structure of speech acts, but cover up the original seat in life of the language that they are brought to explain. Indeed, they invert the order of language, making the second-order theoretical and speculative language of philosophical theology to be primary instead of the original languages of the Bible—narrative, law, prayer, and prophetic accusation. The major fruit of Searle's work is cultivation of an ear for the uses to which language is put, and this attentiveness does not really suffer from the risks of formalization that accompany the mathematical aspect of his explanations. In focusing on usage of language, a window was opened on the connections between knowledge (as speech) and action.

Much older than the approach from language is the crisis in plausibility of the invisible world that was supposed to hold God, the angels, and for some, the Platonic Forms. Varieties of this metaphysical dualism have traveled with Christianity through most of its history, but they acquired a certain pronounced character in the Baroque period. The task became one of demonstrating knowledge of God and other realities of the invisible dual world, but the means of communicating with the dual world evaporated in the light of science. The existential and practical side of the problem was obscured. The direct and speculative encounter between scientific and religious theory has produced modest advances in theology, though it certainly touches the existential predicament of many who live with both science and religion. Progress has been made along other lines: history, philosophical reflection on science, language, and action, and even the sociology of intellectual communities.

Talk of God is usually the means of creating a unified picture of the world. Whatever may have been the case before the Baroque period, in the modern world that grew out of it the unity of the cosmos was bought in a way that gives man some measure of control over it, at least conceptually, and insulates him from chaos and meaninglessness. It was then an instrument of power. One being (God) grounds other beings (creatures) in such a way that the mystery of Being is covered up and man is protected from terror before it. The alternative has been a philosophy of atheism that is positivist, empiricist, and naturalist, but which again functions to give man conceptual control over the cosmos and shield him from chaos and meaninglessness. Heidegger called this "onto-theo-logy," or, one might say for the atheist variant, "onto-a-theo-logy." His polemic against it is fairly well known, but it is frustrating in its ability to diagnose the pathology of modern theology without offering any remedy for it other than silence before the mystery of Being. Still, his warning bears notice as an indication of the seriousness of the malady, even if it offers no cure.

The quest to understand human religious knowledge in order to criticize it is easily misled, as when it turns to propositional formulations while losing sight of the practical. It can even become mischievous, when it claims a kind of simple certainty that is neither possible or necessary.

Where Heidegger is less help than one would expect, philosophy of science mid-century inadvertently broke beyond the confines of the then-received philosophy of religion. It was proposed that a scientific theory, in order to have any meaning at all, should be *falsifiable*, that is, framed in terms such that it could be tested empirically and at least potentially be falsified. I believe the term and the idea were invented by Karl Popper, in order to repair flaws in the philosophical claim that scientific theories must be verifiable to be meaningful and verified to be true. The roots of the discussion go back at least to Hume. This was a way of articulating the scientific commitment to making theories open to criticism by other investigators, what I would call just the scientific commitment to responsibility. But in falsificationism some philosophers of science committed themselves to one particular model of responsibility. In the event it was itself falsified as an explanation of responsibility, i. e., as a theory in philosophy of science. At the same time, of course, one could not falsify the scientific commitment to responsibility that was poorly explained by the theory of falsifiability. For all its problems, falsifiability is still a thread that can unravel some of the more significant mistakes in modern philosophy of religion.

Because dualism in theology was very much alive (it still is), and was under attack in light of the sciences, it was natural for philosophers hostile to Christianity to fashion weapons from ideas current in philosophy of science. It was claimed that Christian belief and cognitive claims were framed in terms that were unfalsifiable, and so meaningless, and therefore not in any usable sense "true." (Jewish scholars must have watched in bewilderment at how people could even think this way about a supposedly historical religion.) In the aftermath of falsifiability, further inquiries in philosophy of science and philosophy of religion tended to reinforce each other's conclusions, as we shall see.

Karl Popper published the original version of *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* in 1934, and it was translated in 1959. In 1962, Thomas Kuhn started a conversation in history and philosophy of science that has dominated it ever since.[4] In what Kuhn called "normal" science, the resolution

[4]Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962). Actually, many of Kuhn's observations were anticipated a bare few years earlier by Michael Polanyi in *Personal Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), but the thread we are interested in passes through Kuhn. Polanyi parallels the Kuhn debate, Wittgenstein, and

of scientific questions could, I suppose, be approximated in the language of one or another theory of falsification. Major theoretical commitments, those that shape a generation or centuries of scientific research, Kuhn termed scientific *paradigms*, and a change of paradigm in science is aptly characterized as *revolutionary*. Choice between paradigms is not well described by any version of falsificationism. Paradigms do not initially have to explain all the facts with which they can be confronted, and they are adopted even though refractory facts persist through most of their lifetimes. Paradigms go so far as to determine what counts as a significant fact, what could answer questions of central importance to the paradigm. The term "paradigm" so captured the public imagination that it long ago escaped the bounds of technical debate into colloquial usage.

The focus of the discussion was in paradigm shifts, in the question how one could *know* that one paradigm was superior to another. The problem of knowledge had no solution of the form "look at both theories and see which one corresponds to the facts," for that would imply that such questions were resolved straightforwardly. In the sciences, they are not; the decision to change one's mind is more like a conversion between worldviews than an inspection of facts. Competing paradigms may have quite incompatible conceptions of a scientific problem, so that they don't really "speak the same language," and may even have different definitions of what is a significant empirical fact. When a scientist is sufficiently familiar with both of them, it sometimes happens that one can explain the successes and failures of the other better than the other itself can. At this point, he converts. (This is the same process of decision that we have seen in the later work of Alasdair MacIntyre. MacIntyre was influenced by Polanyi and Kuhn.) Such a thought process is a thoroughly historical one. In Imre Lakatos's formulation, a research tradition, itself a historical phenomenon, will hopefully make progress. It can degenerate. Its self-criticism is necessarily a historical mode of thinking, for its scientific questions are resolved in answer to the meta-question whether one or another theoretical move would advance the research tradition. We have the paradox, if it is that, that scientific theories can speak only of nature, but the conduct of thought among scientists is thoroughly historical. In the view of the history and philosophy of science since 1960, scientific reasoning is much more like that in the humanities, and both have basically similar ways of enforcing responsibility, implemented in different ways only because of their differing subject matter.

In philosophy of religion, the notion of falsification was introduced by the mid-1950s at the latest. It continues a discussion that is older,

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the performative language theorists and perhaps others in a quite dazzling tour through science and its cultural matrix.

and has roots in the 1920s and 1930s.[5] The question is framed as a claim for the existence of God. The atheist challenge to the believer is to name circumstances or events under which the believer would give up belief in the existence of God. The entire discussion sounds as if the existence of God were a question of the same logical kind as the existence of a tenth planet, and the incongruousness of using providence as a test to settle the matter was never noticed. The hidden assumption in the challenge by the atheists (Antony Flew chief among them) was that there must be some disappointments in life that would qualify as disproof of God. Notice first that this is not the sort of evidence one would even consider as relevant in answering a question about existence in the natural sciences. Human disappointments have no bearing on the existence or not of beings, invisible or otherwise. The unquestioned silent assumption is that God is a hidden being who would simply manipulate events. There is a further tacit assumption that he operates by efficient causes that must in the end be physical, but there was not the slightest need to spell out how that sort of causation might work. A chain of reasoning has begun in disappointments and human comportment toward them and terminated in an ontology conceived on the model of physics, and no one noticed the change of venue.

Those who knew that God is not an explanation in the sciences and understood the implications of claiming that God acts by manipulating events in a hidden way could see a collision between science and "religion." (I put religion in scare-quotes, because what passes for religion has changed some over the last few centuries.) Those who saw a collision and sided with science became atheists, sometimes for good reasons, sometimes bad. Those who sided with "religion" had to restrict or repudiate science. That weary tale is fairly well known in outline, though the details still bear lessons. In any case, the philosophers of religion in the middle of the twentieth century did not notice the strange things they were doing in using providence as "evidence" about the existence of a God.

This was just an error in logic. Far more serious is the hidden thesis about disappointments, for the atheist challenger has asserted by presupposition that not all disappointments are redeemable, not all disappointments can bear blessing. In effect, the atheist challenge to the believer is not to specify under what circumstances he would abandon radical monotheism; it is something subtly but crucially different. By attempting to meet the challenge on its own terms, the believer *already*

[5] Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre, *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (New York: Macmillan, 1955). One could trace some of the ideas to A. J. Ayer and David Hume.

abandons radical monotheism, because he then admits that there are disappointments that are barren. The faithful monotheist believes, quite to the contrary, that *all* disappointments bear blessing, whether the blessing can be seen or not. Flew twisted the sense of John Wisdom's parable of the invisible gardener[6] to support the thesis carried in his presupposition. Wisdom's original parable was designed in its somewhat obscure way precisely to respect the agony in which the blessings in the hardest disappointments remain quite hidden.

The comedy would be compounded if it were noticed that the atheist challengers had also demanded that believers produce a God visible within nature, and were quite prepared to condemn any believer who complied with the demand. To produce a god visible within nature is to cite a god other than that of monotheism. The atheists could counter with a disguised attack from a functionally monotheistic stance and still promote an anti-monotheistic stance of their own. The confusion of the defenders of religion knew no bounds. They did not understand their own position well enough to recognize their own position being used against them, or to recognize that mere clarification of the atheists' argument would convert it from an attack on religion to an attack on the atheists. The atheists would of course have scoffed—"Israel, where now is your God?"—and against that taunt there is no defense except silence and the example of lives lived in affirmation of human life in history.

During the course of the discussion in philosophy of religion, it was suggested by both attackers and defenders of religion that religious language makes no cognitive claims. Some saw this as a defect, others as a virtue. The defenders did see (or at least bumped into) the involvement of religious language with human action, though they did not explore it very well. They abandoned the truth-claims of religious language instead of looking for a mode of truth other than that afforded by the empiricist philosophy and the correspondence theory of truth. It is indeed true that religious language expresses confidence and avows loyalty, with implicit commitments to action entailed in that loyalty. But the trouble with the non-cognitivist defense of religion is that the faithful one experiences his life as oriented toward the world as it really *is*; this is not an arbitrary choice at all. If there truly were no cognitive content in religious language, one's comportment in life would be arbitrary.

Those who accused religion of having no cognitive content did so because, they said, its claims are unfalsifiable. The respondents in the 1950s knew that something was wrong with the challenge of falsificationism in theology, but never quite unraveled it. Alastair McKinnon in

[6]John Wisdom, "Gods," in *Logic and Language*, First Series, ed. A. G. N. Flew (Oxford: Blackwell, 1951).

1970 reviewed the debate and found some if not all of its errors. His approach was to look at language of commitment in its settings in life, to see why falsifiability is ruled out. "The world has an order" can be used in three somewhat different contexts. A scientist speaks this way when he has found order in a particular phenomenon, when he expresses a commitment to finding it where it is still unknown, and when, reflecting philosophically, he seeks to articulate the commitments underlying his discipline.[7] The first is eminently falsifiable. The religious analog arises when one or another theology or personal stance develops problems and is corrected. The second use illustrates the intimacy of cognitive and practical involvements with each other, a salutary reminder for a culture that tends to be empiricist and speculative rather than phenomenological.

Problems arise for me with McKinnon's treatment of the third sense of belief-confessional statements. McKinnon follows in the steps of Anselm and concludes that the world must *of necessity* have some order, and because of this, the confession of faith in its order is unfalsifiable.[8] His argument is very much a product of British empiricism, and even as it rebels against that tradition, one must wonder whether it ever really escapes from it. In particular, McKinnon poses the alternatives as belief (only Christianity is taken seriously) or atheism. None of the options in Merold Westphal's horizon are even imagined as serious alternatives.

Nevertheless, to live in *any* of them is to live from a starting point that is both unfalsifiable and experienced as true. McKinnon correctly sees that belief, whether in science or religion, is not originally a matter of assent to propositions but of participation in an ongoing interpretative activity. Bearing in mind the lesson of the hermeneutical circle learned from the interpretation of texts, we should expect the believer in effect to live a hermeneutical circle in the working out of one of the life orientations seen in chapter 6. In particular, for historical-covenantal monotheism, the commitment to finding good in the disappointments of life is the basis upon which reflective questions could be asked, rather than something such questions could answer. At the level of logic, one is always free to choose another basic life orientation, and the criticism of life orientation occurs originally on a level where human living speaks by example, not at a level of propositions. Basic life orientation works itself out over time as larger and larger horizons of meaning are encountered and integrated

[7] Alastair McKinnon, *Falsification and Belief* (The Hague: Mouton, 1970), pp. 28, 55, and passim.

[8] In a parallel argument, Wayne Booth has found analogs of Anselm's proof in secular faiths, most notably again in science. Cf. "Systematic wonder: the rhetoric of secular religions," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 53 no. 4 (1985) 677–702.

into a life. One cannot adjudicate the fundamental choice between life orientations from a neutral ground, because there is no neutral ground from which to make such a choice. (Every questioner has a life, and so a basic life orientation, and suspending one's basic life orientation absolutely and completely is not really possible.) Asking the question of truth presupposes a prior commitment in which one is open or closed to exposure; *that* commitment is attested in examples of human lives. Whether the example of another human life exposes truth or not is a question better rephrased as whether exposure presents itself as gracious or not. If it is gracious, it will be embraced in one way or another; if not, it will eventually be stonewalled. This choice is a matter of faith, the original confessional commitment that is unavoidable and which should not be covered up in accounts of human living.

My complaint against Anselm and those of like instincts is precisely that they cover up the act of faith in making the confidence in the God of covenantal monotheism for the believer seem logically inevitable. The God of monotheism is necessary, given the prior act of faith; but other conclusions are just as necessary given other life orientations. Anselm's claim is rendered problematic when it is read to mean necessity without reference to any act of faith, empirically by sociology of religion, and theoretically by Westphal's observations. That falsification ought to call for a different account of the logic of faith than Anselmian arguments give. In fact, there is more to the logic of belief than the real minimum that an Anselmian argument can sustain, and McKinnon somewhat belatedly implies as much. If I might paraphrase and shorten his argument for clarity, the problems would not have arisen if the believer's confession were framed as, "I trust ultimate reality, whatever it turns out to be." On this phrasing, the critic's demand for proof makes no sense and cannot really even be articulated. Such a confession would display the vulnerability of the believer, as well as the intimacy of his willing and his knowing. It wears its confessional stance on its sleeve, and opens the way for further confessional commitment to a construal of the world and God in mimetic, exilic, henotheistic, or historical-covenantal terms. That choice, as I have said, exhibits an irreducible hermeneutical logic with its inevitable circularity.

After unfalsifiability, I suppose the companion charge would be one of fideism. The trouble with fideism is not that the believer must start someplace, and any starting place makes him a fideist, but that what is called fideism is irresponsible, unwilling to spell out clearly what it is doing. The present inquiry is, of course, designed in aid of that spelling out, and charges of fideism are accordingly not to be taken seriously.

It is interesting that so frequently in debates of the last decades,

even philosophers of religion turned to the sciences for an example of a life orientation that was confident and intuitively sure as a model for religion. The philosophers were correct in their instinct that science is an example of working monotheism, but this instinct was never stated (with rare exceptions such as H. Richard Niebuhr), and so never really explored. By this time it was clear that the model of falsification was not very useful in understanding science. Entirely responsible scientists protect some assumptions as immune to falsification and believe them on grounds quite other than direct empirical test. Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* and Polanyi's *Personal Knowledge* abound with examples. McKinnon remarks, correctly, I think, that science in the modern world has made clear the logic of its claims, whereas Christianity on the whole has not.[9] McKinnon's inquiry is directed to language and logic where ours will be toward the structure of human action, because the problems in logic are smaller in comparison.

Talk of confidence, loyalty, and acknowledgment repeatedly affords the means to ask about reality, Loyalty *to* what? Comportment *toward* what? Confidence *in* what? We would like to see the process out of which the believer's language emerges, the form of life from which we speak of knowing God. McKinnon is inadvertently helpful when he says, "We are, however, content to appeal to the very different tradition that the believer walks by faith and not by sight."[10] It would be better to say that he faiths by walking, as much as walks by faithing.

10.3 Knowing and Living

The harvest of the problem of falsificationism has been twofold. Human knowledge, even in the sciences, is intimately involved with human action, with communities of judgement and their history. Secondly, it entails a confessional commitment from which one may not step back to a neutral ground of judgement, simply because there is no such neutral ground. In other words, the confessional basis of knowledge is a practical interpretation, and as interpretation, it should show the same hermeneutic-circular structure as can be seen in interpretation of texts. John Courtney Murray anticipated the connection between knowledge and living, in his comments on the biblical and postmodern problem in

[9] *Falsification and Belief*, p. 92. Cf. also pp. 105–106, that the charges against religion arose because of misunderstanding how religious language works (as well as because of allied doctrines from empiricism).

[10] *Falsification and Belief*, p. 104.

its religious form.[11] The patristic, medieval, and modern problem is philosophical in the sense of being an inquiry into epistemology, logic, and language. Speaking of the biblical and modern problem, by contrast, he says,

> God is not a proposition but an Existence . . . godlessness is not a proposition but a state of existence. The knowledge of God is not an affair of affirmation alone, it is a free engagement in a whole style of life. Similarly, ignorance of God is not just want of knowledge or even denial; it, too, is the free choice of a mode of being.[12]

Murray's further examples from the Bible are concrete if tantalizing. They follow a handful of conspicuous texts. Those bearing on individuals are selected with an interest in the act of acknowledgment or denial. The collective material focuses on other nations that have chosen idols rather than the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The communal choice appears as a strong feature in the Deuteronomic sermons, of which Joshua 24 is one of the clearest: "choose this day whom you will serve . . . as for me and mine. . . ." The biblical examples serve to highlight two important features of knowledge of God: it is an acknowledgment, and it is a willful choice. In one form, the question of knowledge of God then becomes a matter of how the acknowledgment and choice are to be lived. The question as I would frame it Murray does not ask: What is the shape of a coherent faithful human life? The question as Westphal implies it is not in Murray: how does a faithful life fit into covenantal history? In its first form, the shape of a coherent life, we shall momentarily find preliminary answers in some extended reflections on halakhah.

Murray's examples from modern culture illustrate well enough the lifestyle of those who reject the biblical tradition but don't tell us much about those who continue in it. We see the godless man of the marketplace who wills to prosper without God, and the godless man of the academy who wills to explain the world without God. In both cases, God is unnecessary, a drag on human life lived to the fullest. In the "postmodern" world, the godless men of Marxism and the theater care nothing for philosophy and aspire to ethics instead. They improve somewhat on the stance that God is an embarrassment and a nuisance, since they admit the problem of evil, even if their solutions are not particularly successful (at least in the view of 1960). Without a theoretical interest in a historical-

[11] Murray speaks of the biblical and modern problem, writing in the 1950s, before the term "postmodern" was used.

[12] PG, p. 77.

covenantal living, the reader might not notice that Murray gives scant description of the life of the faithful.

Look at the problem from a slightly different angle. In its original form, the question is, how would one recognize the good that providence provides? How would one define and then seek it? How would one know the good? What gives life, life more abundantly? (This last was Edward Hobbs's definition, and it works fairly well as a heuristic device.) That, of course, depends on answers to the prior question, What is life?, a question answered in quite various ways, as Merold Westphal has shown us. There are quite different possible definitions of what is life, depending, e. g., on mimetic, exilic, historical-covenantal, henotheistic, or polymorphous and polytheistic life-orientations. In practice, the answers to these questions are implied in human actions. Those implications are difficult and subtle, and in Part III we can begin to illuminate them. To do a thorough job is beyond my resources. Focusing on divine acts (the "traditional" question) instead of the character of the good in life, one may say that divine and human acts are interrelated. Human acts implicitly presuppose or embody an appropriation of providence. People act for goals (i. e., expect and work for some good that is believed to be possible) and this structure of human actions includes a projection of a future that is good, according to one or another schedule of the goods to be provided.

There is at least one question more. How would one recognize the good *responsibly*? That is, answering others' demands for explanation and justification? This is to continue a conversation that fits into a history, whether or not that history is regarded positively. Why, indeed, is responsibility an issue at all? It would be conceived different in mimetic, exilic, and historical-covenantal life-orientations. To put it another way, to what extent are people members one of another? Is it by reason of being generic individuals with common interests? Or are there only minimal common interests? People are in competition with one another, with accordingly minimal responsibility to and for each other? Or does responsibility arise in a corporate view of human life, where the individual is irreducibly involved in other people?[13] (Here, common interests are maximized.) Are there other possibilities? Is an individual's responsibility instead to be conceived primarily to himself, and not to the community? Is responsibility an illusory issue, because embodied life in general is contaminated by illusion?

I make answer somewhat economically here, but the other possibilities are mentioned so that the confessional nature of this inquiry can remain

[13]The distinction between generic and corporate anthropologies is taken from Alexander Blair, "Christian Ambivalence Toward the Old Testament" (Ph.D. diss., Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, CA, 1984).

patent, and so that those who choose other than I do can locate the implied disagreements easily. For a covenantal approach to life construed as history, human life is a corporate affair, and people are very much part of one another. What one person does profoundly affects life for others. Because human acts presuppose and imply a view of the good (or its lack), to act is in a sense to make a statement about the good. An act endorses other people's actions directed to the same view of the good, and, if it denies some common view of the good, it can undermine other people's commitment to that good. In this respect, actions are like performative speech acts in that they have a commissive aspect, they commit their actors to one or another common view of reality. Inasmuch as it implies a view of the good for everybody, every human act functions as an assertive and a directive. Insofar as actions settle questions in a community, they also have a declarative character. All five varieties of speech acts have parallels in other actions also. The assertive implications of every kind of act bring us full circle from action for the good back to knowledge of providence.

A number of root metaphors can shape how we understand human action. One could say that a life has a *style*, a term taken from art, but intuitively workable nonetheless. The self is a creation, life is art on this view. Rich as such an inquiry would be, I shall pass it by for reasons of space, marking it as a road not taken and leaving it for others. A person follows one or another *path* or *way*; this is the traditional metaphor from the nomadic life of the second millennium BCE. It is within a path or way of life that human actions make sense. Recent philosophy of action offers some help with this reciprocal connection.

We shall begin with *halakhah*, a term that means Jewish law. Its root, *halakh*, means way or path, as in "way of life," and halakhah is life treated as a particular way or path. When the Common Documents are read on the way to the Mishnah, the result usually appears to non-Jews to be a matter of law, statute. This is misleading if in some limited senses true. Halakhah as statute reflects a prior understanding of life that it is meant to implement.

A few words will show the way.[14] *Emunah*, *yada*, *halakh*, and their derivatives all confirm John Courtney Murray's reading of the biblical tradition as one that takes faith and knowledge always to involve action. *Emunah* and its cognates cover a range of meaning that centers on faithfulness in the sense of being reliable, but extend to stability, durability, permanence, faithfulness, even truth. The root would seem to encom-

[14]The comments here are made in light of the relevant articles in the *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974).

pass confidence and loyalty, and also something like responsibility. The central meaning of *yada* is to know, but it extends to a host of intimate personal variations. To not know God is to sin against him, to engage in various offenses. Among the other meanings are to acknowledge, advise, be able, discern, consider, feel, regard, will, and words related to skill. Interestingly, Proverbs uses fear of the Lord and knowledge of God synonymously. Knowledge of God is a practical religious and ethical relationship; God will protect those who know him, who are upright of heart, refrain from idolatry, who know the Lord in their ways. To not know God is to sin against him, to engage in various offenses; to know God is to have a relationship with him. *Halakh*, to walk, could seem unrelated, but to walk in the way of the Lord is to know the Lord. That is the focus of our inquiry: what is it to walk in the way of the Lord? Nomads live on the move, and journey or pilgrimage becomes the metaphor for life. Halakh encompasses wandering, with a purpose, conforming to a norm, following someone's leadership or guidance. To walk before the Lord is to follow God's law; to follow other gods is visible in the cultic worship of other gods, but it is a way of life as much as of cult. To walk in the way of the Lord is to keep his commandments; this is the central meaning in the Deuteronomic and prophetic literature. In the Common Documents, the word most often translated as knowledge, *yada*, lives side by side with *emunah* and *halakh* and their cognates. Halakh has come to stand at the human and active pole in this complex of meanings.

The word is the root of *halakhah*, the rabbinic code that regulates life. We are fortunate to have an exposition of halakhah, though brief, that addresses our inquiry fairly directly. I turn to a work by Joseph Soloveitchik. He was born in Lithuania in 1903, worked in Boston and New York from 1933, trained countless rabbis, and speaks as a modern man reflecting on the observant Jewish life. His book, *Halakhic Man*, has only scattered remarks about particular statutes and talmudic arguments, case law, distinctions that instruct and mark the line between observance and offense.[15] It has a great deal to say about the shape of a life lived on the way of halakhah.

To a non-Jew, the book is in some ways very surprising; where one expects to hear about the particulars of kashrut or commercial transactions, Soloveitchik starts off with a distinction about three very different attitudes toward life. He anticipates, with some differences, Merold Westphal's distinctions regarding basic life orientation. *Homo religiosus* will exhibit many of the features of an exilic outlook on life, *cognitive man* approximates a mimetic outlook, but with important modifications,

[15]Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*. Translated by Lawrence Kaplan (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1983). Originally published in 1944.

and *halakhic man* is the representative of historical-covenantal religion. Soloveitchik's distinctions are preparatory to an exposition of how halakhic man, for us representative of covenantal living, lives in a way qualitatively different from cognitive man or homo religiosus. Our interest is in the exposition of halakhic man's creativity in the end of the book, but some understanding of the contrasts with cognitive man and homo religiosus will help to make sense of Soloveitchik's end point.

Cognitive man is empirical, scientific, exoteric, concerned with the practical in life, but without reference to God. Insofar as he has no sense of history and just fits into the world as it comes, he represents mimetic religion. He has, however, no interest in idols or cult, the recognizably "religious" features of mimetic religion. He takes nature on the terms that science gives it to him, and modern science is itself heavily influenced by covenantal religion, even when those historical influences are covered up. So Soloveitchik's cognitive man would have to be accounted a hybrid mimetic-covenantal type on Westphal's terms. Yet there is a real if partial overlap between cognitive man and mimetic religion.

> Cognitive man, on the other hand, is not concerned at all with a reality that extends outside the realm of lawfulness, and he has no relationship with any mode of being that is beyond empirical reality and scientific understanding—for the law is his goal, and lawfulness is always and only to be found within a context of concreteness.[16]

This is, as far as it goes, wholly in agreement with a mimetic life-orientation: human life is part of nature, and no further questions are asked. It is not surprising that Soloveitchik places halakhic man closer to cognitive man than to homo religiosus, for both halakhic and cognitive man are exoteric, this-worldly and affirming of human life. Indeed, the deep and radical contrasts all appear between halakhic man and homo religiosus, one who is esoteric and appears quite moody by contrast to halakhic man. Halakhic man and homo religiosus have in common an interest in transcendence that separates them both from cognitive man, yet they approach transcendence in quite different ways.

A word of caution is appropriate at this point. As I understand it from brief inquiries, Soloveitchik's distinctions in their original home are intended with an intra-Jewish application, in a controversy between the Hasidic movement of Galicia and the Ukraine and the opposing mitnaggedim of Lithuania. It would be too simple for serious study of the controversy, but it is nevertheless adequate for present purposes, to

[16] *Halakhic Man*, p. 13.

say that the Hasidim are mystical and charismatic, devoted to prayer, where the mitnaggedim, in their devotion instead to talmudic study, are somewhat dry and rationalist by comparison.[17] For my own part, I am in no position to take sides in the Jewish controversy and would be extremely reluctant to call Hasidism exilic in its orientation. On one hand, my limited reading knowledge of the Hasidic movement does not really support Soloveitchik's charges, but on the other hand, when people look for connections between Judaism and South Asian religions with prominent exilic features, it is among the Hasidim that they search for parallels. In the case of Christianity, one must also make careful distinctions. In the last chapter of *God, Guilt, and Death*, one can see how Christianity has been compromised by exilic tendencies for most of its history. Yet homo religiosus seems closer to the hybrid exilic-covenantal man of Christianity than to a consistently exilic attitude toward life. Even homo religiosus, discontented in this world though he is, does not reject his own discomfiting place in the world and turn to a full-blown Gnostic stance on the ancient model, nor to one of the modern exilic projects that Eric Voegelin describes. One cannot really accuse homo religiosus of an exilic life-orientation in any simple, unambiguous, or explicitly candid sense. Perhaps we can call homo religiosus a stage on the way, but on the way to what is ambiguous; covenantal and exilic outcomes are both possible. He can become truly covenantal in outlook, affirming historical life in this world as God's good creation. That path is one of transformation, whereby a stance of complaint but not outright rejection by turns becomes a covenantal affirmation of life despite its pains.

Halakhic man is such because he approaches the world from an apriori supplied by halakhah. Nature and the day-to-day world make sense because they have a place defined by halakhah. In an inquiry such as this one, it is important to be clear on the relations between history and covenant. Soloveitchik and I do not entirely agree on the order in that relationship. The living of covenant is halakhah, and for Soloveitchik, halakhah is absolute and prior to history, though history is not just an incidental or dispensible corollary. It would be too simple to say that my disagreement is merely that I would put history before halakhah, in the reverse of Soloveitchik's order. Rather, halakhah and its Christian counterparts are themselves inherently historical concepts, with a life and development that do not require an a-historical absoluteness in order to be authoritative and binding. For Soloveitchik, halakhah comes before history, an order of precedence that I do not think can be sustained after exposure to contemporary history of religions. I am siding with

[17] Cf. the articles in the *Encyclopedia Judaica* on Hasidism and mitnaggedim. Soloveitchik himself came from a Lithuanian rabbinic family.

Alasdair MacIntyre at this point, in his claim that every ethic has a history and pretensions of a-historical absoluteness are an illusion of the Enlightenment. On the other hand, I don't think that critical history is a threat to halakhah any more than it is to an ethic of virtue.[18] Although Soloveitchik does not mention that halakhah is itself a creation of history and covenant, he labors at some length later on to show how halakhah works to integrate the historical past into the present, in a process which is governed by the future. If there were any doubt whether Soloveitchik cares about history, it is dispelled at this point. He puts the halakhic man in the company with the great congregation of the faithful, from Moses to Maimonides and Rabbi Akiba.[19] They are all present to him, as part of the past and future that are always present in the here and now.

Westphal observes that exilic and covenantal religion share an interest in transcendence, if with radically different attitudes toward it. So also in Soloveitchik's account, homo religiosus and halakhic man both focus on transcendence, but homo religiosus wants to escape from this world to transcendence, where halakhic man wants to welcome transcendence into this world. Mimetic religion does not really entertain a notion of transcendence, for the humanly significant is inherent within the natural world, and cognitive man, despite the lack of superficial features of mimetic religion (idols, cult), agrees with mimetic religion at this point. Soloveitchik is in a notable contrast with the weight of tradition. In the Deuteronomic instincts of biblical tradition, contact with mimetic religion provokes something like an acute histamine reaction, but exilic religion is not really recognized as a threat in a systematic way. For Soloveitchik, the modern scientific form of mimetic religion is relatively harmless, but the threat from exilic religion is quite serious. Given the heavy admixture of covenantal attitudes with the scientific form of a mimetic life-outlook, this is not surprising.[20] It is also noteworthy, and announced on the first page of the text, that cognitive man and homo religiosus represent universal tendencies, present even in halakhic man; there is no attempt to deny or eradicate features of human nature (that would still be an exilic

[18] Jacob Neusner can stand as an example. His critical research into the historical origins of the Talmud would undermine a few of the apologetic claims of Rabbinic Judaism against Christianity, yet the Talmud emerges as more authoritative, more binding, more life-giving, more relevant to the present than it was on the older readings.

[19] Cf. *Halakhic Man*, pp. 114–123, esp. p. 120.

[20] In a culture where mimetic religion is candidly revived (during and after the 1980s), often with overtly cultic features, perhaps more careful distinctions would have to be made. But given the long history of Christian entanglements with exilic attitudes, Soloveitchik's position seems entirely understandable for the 1940s.

response), only to re-direct and order their expression in ways that fit into the world of halakhah.

The central contrast between homo religiosus and halahkic man lies in the direction of traffic with the transcendent. "When the Holy One, blessed be He, descended on Mount Sinai, He set an eternally binding precedent that it is God who descends to man, not man who ascends to God."[21] (When Christianity is not covertly functioning in an exilic mode, this is surely the meaning of the Incarnation.) Companion to this difference between covenantal and exilic outlooks on life, and extending the covenantal affirmation of this created world, is the principle that in disputed questions, the final jurisdiction lies with human judges; God defers to man. The Talmud is more explicit, more candid, and more radical even than the New Testament in this. What you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven (Matthew 16.19); but in Baba Meẓi'a 59b, when Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, the lone dissenter in a rabbinic court, is in a technical sense correct, the majority nevertheless rules, and God, asked to comment, chortles and says, "My children have defeated me! My children have defeated me!" The story begins as an account of a dispute about how to clean an oven, but along the way, it wanders through several examples designed to emphasize the importance of forbearance, consideration, and sensitivity to the feelings and positions of others. That is the point of the Mishnah that it begins with:

> Just as there is overreaching in buying and selling, so there is wrong done by words. [Thus:] one must not ask another, "What is the price of this article?" if he has no intention of buying. If a man was a repentant [sinner], one must not say to him, "Remember your former deeds." If he was a son of proselytes one must not taunt him, "remember the deeds of your ancestors," because it is written, thou shalt neither wrong a stranger, nor oppress him.[22]

The accompanying Gemara is almost, but not quite, an explicit charter for a responsible liberty of interpretation in questions of how to conduct a covenant in history, and it is worth a short digression to mark the point. It is striking and counter-intuitive to put final judicatory authority in human hands, but that is the plain meaning of the Gemara. The Talmud at this

[21] *Halakhic Man*, p. 48.

[22] Baba Meẓi'a, Soncino translation, p. 347. The story, in Baba Meẓi'a 58b-59b, culminates on p. 353 of the Soncino translation, but continues yet a few pages. Soloveitchik gives other examples as well (*Halakhic Man*, pp. 79–81); this one, though perhaps the best known outside of Jewish circles, is not isolated or exceptional. The Mishnah is Baba Meẓi'a 4.10.

point stops short of explicitly articulating the pluralism that runs through all of Judaism and Christianity. People instinctively fear such a liberty, because it could license dispensing with God and making man supreme, simply and absolutely. To do that would allow some to abuse others unchecked, but there is another reason for alarm as well. Making man supreme would imply much more than just the normal anxieties of liberty, it would leave man in a world that is essentially meaningless. Covenant does something quite different. It intends both to make human choices responsible and also to give such choices a liberty within limits, included in which are limits on the claims that human beings can make for human institutions. To make human choices responsible requires that human beings be given a permitted liberty of choice, some latitude within which to choose legitimately, or else human choice would be reduced to the mere attempt to guess the one and only correct move in every situation in life. There would be choice only in a trivial sense, with no room for any real human creativity. This would make "freedom" an indeterminacy of human choice, but it would abolish any real human liberty and invoke in its place a divine mandate in every human choice. Of course, religious communities do make very human choices in the conduct of their affairs in history. It is a temptation to project those human choices onto God and then cover up their historical and human origins.

If a human permitted liberty is admitted, there are quite natural but dangerous ways to misinterpret it. Emphasizing human choice to the point of abolishing God (the contemporary temptation) means there is no way to criticize or enforce human responsibility. But identifying human institutions of responsibility with God (the temptation through most of history) abolishes the responsibility of human institutions in the very act of pretending to define it. The remedy for both dangers is not complicated. First, human institutions can claim no immunity from criticism. As a corollary, no single party's interpretation of a covenant may use ultimate force to exclude alternative interpretations. There is a limit to the measures that parties can take against each other in the conduct of disagreements, and this is an instance of the general limits placed by covenant on human conduct. In effect, schism is permissible where it proves impossible to resolve disagreements, but the rancor and anathemas that usually come with schism are not. Each party is obliged to remember that, while its own position appears to be entirely in the right, the others' position may also prove in its own baffling way to be faithful to the heart of covenantal monotheism. The translators witness to this in a profoundly ironic comment at the end of the dispute about how to clean an oven: speaking of the rabbinic council and R. Eliezer, the Gemara says, "they took a vote and excommunicated him," which the

translators gloss in a footnote as, "Lit., 'blessed him', a euphemism for excommunication." A parting of the ways should be conducted so as to make clear to all with ears to hear that it really is also a blessing. It almost never is. It is as Rabbi Soloveitchik says: for covenantal man—whether of the Jewish or Christian variety—the anxieties of freedom in history engender a deep longing within the soul for escape to simplicity. There is always a temptation to flee human limitation and instead rise up to God, above the anxieties of human freedom and responsibility. But if God comes to mankind, then human limitation and freedom and anxiety are to be affirmed, not escaped.

After these somewhat long preparatory distinctions on three different basic outlooks on life, Soloveitchik moves into the creative capacity of halakhic man, the real center of the book. The world is flawed, defective, and the defect is to be replenished by human creative activity in partnership with the Holy One. The monthly defect and replenishment of the face of the moon is for halakhah a symbol of this central dynamic in human life and covenant. Soloveitchik's words are a little different from mine, for I have repeatedly said that for radical monotheism, all of life is good, not just parts of it. To call a thing or event flawed or defective is to pronounce it barren, broken and unfixable, at least as I hear the colloquial American meanings of "flawed" today. One must be mindful of distinctions here. The good in the pains of life is not consummated, and can even remain quite hidden, as when suffering mounts to affliction. To say that some event is good *simply*, taken as it is, would deny the gravity of the pains of life, or hide the seriousness of the endeavor to bring the good out of them, or perhaps just be a quest for cheap grace. To say that the pains are unredeemable, barren, is to say they are not good at all, even potentially. But if the painful events are remediable, then they really are, in some incompleted sense, good. Here is the difference between exile and covenant: exile takes the pains as barren, covenant takes them as fertile. As the matter is unpacked, we shall see that how the unconsummated good in the pains of life is to be made patent is a matter of how the future redeems the past. The meaning of past events can be changed.

That, in effect, is the center of Soloveitchik's next move, for he equates creativity and repentance. It is in repentance that the past is transformed on the way to the future. This is surprising to Christian ears with an Indo-European tripartite conceptual inheritance, for to such minds, creativity operates in the realm of limitation and contingency, a second-function issue, and repentance is a matter of legitimacy, a first-function issue. But Soloveitchik means what he says. Repentance and amendment of life are a kind of creativity, and what is created is a human life. This is quite

at variance with Indo-European conceptual categories. Even operating within the tripartite system, one should remember that it distinguishes but does not separate. Appropriation of a phenomenon to one or other of the functions is a matter not just of how the phenomenon discloses itself in particular circumstances, but more importantly, also a matter of the questions the interpreter brings to the phenomenon. Soloveitchik's creativity is a synthesis of first- and second-function ideas. His move is an affirmation of the human self-creative capacity that is at the center of the problem of Part III. What is created is the coherent shape of a life lived "on the path," walking in the way of the Lord, halakhically.

Creative repentance can change a person, and Soloveitchik speaks of canceling the law of identity. Strong and startling language, perhaps, but it does show uncommon recognition of the radical changes necessary if one is to repent from long-standing vices and habits. Change of character is painful. People change with such difficulty, and dramatic change (the only kind that is really visible) is so rare that one can easily think that such change is not really possible. Indeed, Aquinas speaks of such change, mediated by grace, as a gift of God to those who will receive it.[23] Thomas is in some measure of disagreement with Soloveitchik at this point, for Soloveitchik puts all his emphasis on the human actions, denying or shadowing any divine help. On the other hand, one could read (or misread) Soloveitchik to say that the repentant sinner can walk away from a past of sin, in the act of becoming a different person. It would be as if the new person is not responsible for the acts of the old. On the contrary, a person is always what his past has made him. Nevertheless, in repentance and confession, the meaning of that past can be changed even though of course the brute facts of the past cannot be.

This offends a common but not very admirable moral impulse that not only insists on responsibility but would go further and deny permission to those who would repent, holding the evil of their misdeeds against them irrevocably. People tend to think that change of character is first impossible and then not to be permitted. (This is an implicit contradiction, but instinct is not logical at this point.) In other words, common moral intuition feels that it is both impossible and forbidden to embrace exposure and amend one's life. Or, if exposure be faced as true, it is nevertheless not allowed to be gracious. Evil character is required to confess, but not allowed to repent. The message of monotheism is quite other. In repentance, the sinner is divested of his status as *rasha*, wicked, his past identity is terminated, and he assumes a new identity for the future.[24] "The desire to be another person, to be different than I am now, is

[23] *Summa Theologica*, I-II, Q. 112, Aa. 1-2.
[24] *Halakhic Man*, p. 112.

the central motif of repentance."[25] This should be stated a little more carefully, for it is open to an exilic interpretation as a rejection of what one is as human being is given to us. The remedy for rejection of the givens of life is escape (whether to Gnosis or utopia), but the remedy for a self constituted by deplorable past actions is repentance. Halakhic man desires to change what he is as constituted by his own acts, not what he is in the unchangeable givens of his circumstances. Soloveitchik sees in homo religiosus a view of repentance that entails no serious change in the person, but for halakhic man, creative repentance cancels the law of identity, and so breaks the continuity of a person. This marks one point on the boundary between covenantal and alternative views of human freedom and human action. (Repentance is possible for covenant, it makes no sense for mimesis, and it is foolish for Gnosis.) The radical character of change in repentance is also a sign that Soloveitchik and Aquinas do not disagree as much as one might think. The phenomenon described as an amendment to the law of identity is the same phenomenon that is also described as willing reception of divine grace. In Soloveitchik's view, where homo religiosus treats repentance as a matter of doleful penance, halakhic man rejoices to repent, and it is perhaps this above all else that offends popular feeling, a moral intuition that is not notably covenantal.

Soloveitchik turns next to human actions. His reflections will open the way for much of our own inquiry in the next chapter. He looks at the character of human action in time, and in particular at the contrast between time as it is understood in physics and in reflection on human action. His concern with physics is to expand the concept of time beyond the limits of deterministic causality, in order to make sense of the halakhic experience of time. This is one point where cognitive man is functionally mimetic, and Soloveitchik's disagreement with the ethos of physics[26] expresses a necessary historical-covenantal demurrer from the mimetic understanding of action in time. It does not matter whether the causation is efficient or final, from the physics of Newton or Aristotle; neither can make sense of covenantal experience.[27] If causality rules, then the past rules the future. (On such a view, final causality evidently operates from the past to the future just as much as efficient causality does.) For halakhic man, things are different. One cannot repent a past that cannot be changed, as would be the case were we confined within the views

[25] *Halakhic Man*, p. 113.

[26] In no sense, let it be noted, does Soloveitchik advocate suspending any laws of physics; nor do I. If his argument is correct at this point, the ontological constitution of the things we are interested in is quite beyond the power of natural laws to describe, without in any way requiring exceptions to any natural laws.

[27] *Halakhic Man*, p. 116. Kant is a target as well as Newton; cf. p. 115.

of physics. And indeed, the future, "drawing on its own hidden roots, infuses the past with strength and might, vigor and vitality. Both—past and future—are alive; both act and create in the heart of the present and shape the very image of reality."[28] The process of repentance takes from the past what is viable in light of the future and moves with it toward that future.

The ontological constitution of human acts is not reducible to concepts taken from physics, what one could accomplish by tabulation of human motions as a function of time, not even a tabulation of arbitrarily fine precision. We shall see more of this in the next chapter, when we come to Paul Ricoeur's reflections on human action. As a forecast, let me only suggest that the ontological constitution of human actions includes their meaning, and that meaning is not something that can be located in time, as a function of time the independent variable of physics. Soloveitchik makes this quite concrete, if he does not explicitly correlate it with current philosophy. "The idea of the reign of the future over the past is, no doubt, highly paradoxical, but it is no less true for all that. A great man can utilize his past sins and transgressions for the sake of achieving great and exalted goals."[29] This is the heart of the matter: sins of the past can be integrated into a life of faith in the present and future. Indeed, this possibility is so important that its ontological roots are older than the creation of the world, as Genesis Rabbah has it: Teshuvah, repentance, was one of six things created before the beginning of the world.[30]

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[28] *Halakhic Man*, p. 114. Soloveitchik is here not too far from phenomenological philosophy. He cites Bergson and Scheler, but somewhat similar ideas are also in Heidegger.

[29] *Halakhic Man*, p. 117.

[30] Genesis Rabbah 1.4, Soncino translation, p. 6. The midrash cites Ps. 90.2 in support.

Chapter 11

The Shape of Human Action

11.1 The Constitution of Acts

Soloveitchik's lyrical exposition of repentant halakhic man is the signal that there is more to human action than one would think. At least there is more than the common assumptions would tell. On those assumptions, a human act consists of physical motions plus intent, and the mental intent is the efficient cause of the physical motions, with details to be provided by advances in brain physiology that are expected any day now. Indeed, the mental intent is here treated as a motion of another kind, and the task then is to understand human acts entirely in terms of natural motions. Such would be the way of cognitive man in Soloveitchik's schema; ancient mimetic religion was a very distant cousin of this modern naturalistic approach. The technical and folk versions of these assumptions are not much different. But for Soloveitchik, what is at stake is the shape of a human life, and the relation of its past to its present and future. We see only evocative language, about parts of the past that are dead or alive and which can be creatively reshaped in the present and future, in the process that Judaism calls *shuv*, repentance, bringing one's life back into line with the covenant. This at least makes no sense on the common understanding of human actions: for an act, being only physical plus mental motions, is fixed in the record of the past, something no more changeable after the fact than the history of the moon's motion around the earth. The common contemporary assumptions about human action can't make much of the central experiences of historical-covenantal religion.

This chapter is divided into several stages: first, we look at the constitution of human actions taken as they initially appear, and then at how the

meanings of actions get constituted in their larger human involvements. The second section will explore one implication of repentance, change in the meaning of acts. In the present section, we start by returning to Niebuhr's brief sketch of responsibility. In the next section, we shall see how the meaning of an act becomes something that could change and grow. It does so with the narrative of a human life that it is part of, and when that life is over and finished, even it fits into a larger narrative of history. The third section will look again at how an act is to be fitted into the larger narrative of a human life, and how the life orientation of that narrative can give human action its ultimate meaning. In the fourth section, I look at conversion of life, in which an act conceived in ambiguity or in some non-covenantal way is integrated in the end into a covenantal life.

It is possible—we may hope, pending more exposition—to correct and change the implications of human acts after the fact, so that they fit into a historical-covenantal life-orientation, rather than one of the other possibilities. As should be easily inferred from ELN, Part I, that means that the blessings spurned in disappointments are to be embraced after the fact. Confession, repentance, and remorse lead to a freedom that comes from these transformations of the self. We have, of course, assumed here that exposure is gracious: that past wrongful acts can in fact be forgiven. This assumption is theological and not about the structure of acts, and it, too, is often denied in contemporary culture. We are speaking of redemption from sin. God is gracious, but in the catch-word of sermons of recent decades, grace is not "cheap": God's forgiveness does not annul the reality of past sinful acts though it does change their meaning and integrates them into a life that is saved as a whole, despite its sins. In slightly different words, grace and forgiveness and freedom from the past come at the cost of full openness to the truth of the past; it is not to be denied, nor can the sins of the past be made to unhappen. The life they fit into can be changed, and with it their overall import.

The task of living is to live faithfully enough so that redemption is possible, rather than leaving a life that is clearly set against a historical-covenantal outlook. This chapter will look at the structure of acts to see how that might be possible. The meaning of an act derives from the narrative it fits into, and the narrative an act fits into changes as it unfolds.

Having a foretaste of the goal of inquiry in this chapter, we begin with a few features of the constitution of human acts. We have already seen Niebuhr's brief account in *The Responsible Self*.[1] Human acts are distinguished from other motions of the human body inasmuch as they have what can be called an intentional structure that places them in a

[1]Cf. RS, pp. 61–65, and ELN, section 7.4.

narrative of acts, responses, and further responses. Intentional structure here means a network of involvements, not thoughts that one could obtain a transcript of; the guide is Heidegger, not the folk-baroque notion of intentionality. Human acts presuppose and express interpretation, both of prior acts and of the world. They are interpreted and disambiguated in language; that is, one can ask, "What were you doing?, What did you intend?" Inasmuch as human acts take place in a sequence of responses, they presuppose a community of interpreters; action for an individual apart from community makes no sense.[2] Acts interpret the world and are in turn interpreted by respondents, especially in the conversational process that disambiguates human actions.

It is this feature of acts that makes them be what they are; without the capacity for being interpreted and the aspect of interpreting the world, they would be just vegetative motions, not human acts. Too many recent discussions simply ignore the interpretative character of human actions. They focus instead on questions such as whether a human agent was determined or could have done differently, not noticing that they have silently taken as answered all the questions of interpretation that are necessary in order to characterize an act in the first place.

One can sympathize with the modern instinct that hypothesizes a mental speech act constituting human intention and the action it issues in. Such a move would solve the problem of ambiguity in the characterization of acts. It would be so much easier, in order to settle disputes and keep order in philosophy, if the motions of the act and their interpretation were separated cleanly; the act, identified with the motions at the start, could then be interpreted at leisure. But the initial identification of an act already contains within itself implicitly the evaluations and characterization that seem to come later. Human action is almost inherently ambiguous, often open to multiple and competing interpretations, even when responsible resolution of interpretative questions would too much involve interpreters who would rather remain detached. The modern analytic instinct seeks to posit those interpretative questions as already answered, and turn its gaze away, out of anxiety over the cases where resolution is not straightforward. But the interpretative character of acts is essential, part of their ontological constitution, not something

[2]Individuals can be temporarily separated from community, but that does not make them wolf-children, who really have grown up without socialization or community. The acts of separated individuals presuppose in their intentional structure a relationship to community that the physical motions of wolf-children simply don't have. This is not least because wolf-children do not have language, the means of interpretation, and because language is itself an essentially communal and corporate thing.

that could be added on afterward. If I sometimes speak of "changing the meaning of an act after the fact," this should not license separating the meaning from the act of which it is a part. To be fussy, it is the meaning of the *motions* of an act that is changed, and in that change, the act itself is transformed, for the act is the motions plus their meaning. Without the meaning, there is no act at all.

The essentially interpretative character of acts shows itself in a few places that well display the features that we are interested in. The experience of seeing a story with the sound turned off shows how important language is in the structure of human actions. Here one can see just how constitutive language is in the essence of acts. The dialogue makes no sense as something added on afterwards. For one sees the motions of the acts in the narrative, without any of the dialogue that would give them meaning, and without that dialogue, they are not really acts at all. Even more revealing than TV without the sound (one can escape from the TV) is the experience of a movie on an airplane without the sound, because on an airplane one is captive, virtually confined to a seat in front of the picture, so that one sees the events play out from beginning to end. But if one has not rented ear-phones, they make no sense. The importance of language is radically deepened as the scenes follow one another in motions that are meaningless without the sound-track. These are not meaningless acts: without the sound-track, they are not acts at all.

It is language that gives acts their interpretation, that anchors the involvements that we sometimes make explicit as the "intention" of the acts. This is doubtless the root of the idea that intentionality can be exhaustively captured in language, even that the expression of an intent in language must occur in the mind for the intent to happen. Act and intent are essentially linguistic, but it would be a mistake to infer that mental words must precede action. What language anchors in human actions is often articulated only after the fact, and it may not be spelled out satisfactorily, deceiving more than revealing.[3] People are quite capable of sizing up a situation and taking action without ever spelling out in words what they are doing. Intentions can be tacit more than explicit, and this is because a human action is open-ended, it can lead to many things. That is precisely why disambiguation is necessary, why interpretation of acts is always a problem. Even when there is deliberation in thought before taking action, that does not mean that all of the involvements have been spelled out, or even all the relevant involvements. One can deliberate yet think only cover-stories that tacitly do *not* spell out the real

[3]The importance of spelling out cannot be emphasized enough; we shall return to it in connection with Herbert Fingarette, who first noticed it, in the beginning of chapter 12.

involvements in an act. And prospective deliberation can err innocently and be corrected only in retrospective insight. We shall return to these features of action in later sections when we consider self-deception. For the present, I focus on the connections between speech and acts, and how they both embody the stance of an actor in the world.

The thesis of mental language in order to have something physical (in the neurophysiology of the mental words) in which to locate the intent of an act not only hypothesizes something that often does not happen (sometimes there are no motions, as in an act of omission), it also covers up much that is of interest, in the structure of the human involvements that are implicated in an action. Those involvements embody an interpretation of life and the world, and more immediately, an interpretation of the events to which the present action is a response. A human involvement with objects, with other people, with the circumstances of living, with institutions, or just with events embodies within itself an interpretation of all these things, inasmuch as something is at stake for the one acting, something of his own future. Construing involvements in terms of intention covers up human interests. This is probably its largest concealment. Intention, of course, gets construed in terms of silent words (or some other neurophysiological substitute) and then human interests are effectively invisible. People have interests in what happens to and around them, interests in the sense of "vested interests." We benefit or suffer, tools are useful to us, we have a stake in the course of events, and our being is at issue, both for ourselves and for the people around us. The clue that intent fails to capture interests comes from the case of the fool, who is oblivious to his own interests. His interests are not less real for his ignoring them. Interests are not something that could be discretely listed, even though in the course of narrated events, we list the pertinent interests of the players rather easily.[4] Human interests are as varied as the possibilities for further action in the events of life, and the reach of those possibilities seems vast indeed.

The one acting by his acts construes what is at stake in events and the world, because his actions are directed to maintaining or changing his human world. At a minimum, they call attention to his interpretation of circumstances, bringing it out into the open. The human involvements and interpretations embodied in actions can be spelled out in words if necessary, but they need not be. Thus it is at the juncture between words and motions that the interpretive moment of acts shows itself. For the

[4]The network of interests would in general be more like a field of forces, except that even the size of a mathematical continuum fails to capture their open-ended vastness at the same time that it falsely suggests the determinate and comprehensible workings of a partial differential equation.

actor's words are allowed to define the meaning of his acts, at least provisionally, and subject to believability. That is, his construal of his own acts can be rebutted if it is not plausible or if there are grounds for questioning it. The actor's words are allowed to define the purpose of the act, to spell out what he assumed of the world on the way to the goals of the act. Sometimes these things are obvious and go without saying, or they were said at other times and places, but they can be spelled out if need be.

The need to spell out arises when the events are ambiguous, if only tacitly and to continue the conduct of the actions. Consider an imaginative example. I am driving down the main street of my town at eight o'clock of an August Friday evening, at seven miles an hour. What am I doing? The possibilities: I am recharging the car's battery; going to the store to get bread and milk; showing off the car (a highly polished and restored 1956 Chevy); avoiding a family quarrel at home; avoiding homework; seeking relief from the heat; operating a motor vehicle. To answer with the last is to miss the point: it takes the description of the motions for an complete account of the act. The others are all possible, and may all simultaneously be true. If I add the circumstances, that I am seventeen years old, and that both vehicular and pedestrian traffic is composed entirely of other people my own age, the answer becomes obvious. In the words of *American Graffiti*, I am "cruising," and that word sums up a whole complex of attitudes toward the world at a certain stage of life and in a certain culture. It is also the simplest characterization of the acts in question. What is more, the correct characterization of the acts becomes apparent only when details from the circumstances are supplied, details that really are not a part of the description of what the principal is doing. *Which* of the several possible "true" characterizations is the correct one will depend on *who is asking*: the correct answer is the one appropriate to the engagement with life that is shared by myself and the questioner. This is essential, and it quite transcends any possible naturalistic explanation of the acts under review. A mere description[5] extends only to operating a motor vehicle and simply fails to capture what is going on.

In another example, "What it was was football,"[6] a man drawn into a crowd in one of two banks of seats facing each other across a small cow-pasture describes what he sees. Five convicts come onto the field and are followed by two groups of men brawling over a pointy punkin for two hours. He describes the motions—and you and I are in stitches because we recognize that he does not realize that what he sees as a brawl is football. Even his account is not a pure description of the mere motions; it is a

[5] As opposed to *a*scription; cf. H. L. A. Hart to whom I shall come momentarily.
[6] Andy Griffith, *American Originals*, Capitol Records CD Cap 98476 (1992).

different characterization of the action (as a brawl), but not a description without any characterization at all. The actions that constitute the game as football are such only by reason of a network of human involvements that quite transcend any description of the motions of the game. It would impoverish those involvements to say that the motions "count" as actions only "by convention." Convention may organize the larger involvements, but those involvements are more than just convention.

In the same genre, P. D. Q. Bach sportscasts a concert.[7] The skit opens with two sportscasters in the concert hall of the New York Mills (Minnesota) Philharmonic, which will play against the Danish conductor Heile Gedankgesan. The players are ready to begin the first inning of Beethoven's Symphony Number 5 in C Minor. The actual content of the commentary would not be a bad introduction to the structure of the symphony, but its expression, in the idiom and cadence of a sportscaster, is hilarious. That idiom (and not anything substantive said about the music) mischaracterizes the acts of the performers on analogy with a baseball game. The idiom of a sportscaster serves to get out into the open how things stand with us, to do so "incorrectly"—and thereby in its irony show how things really are with us. Language shows the more interesting (and less direct) human involvements that go into appreciating a symphony.

Where all the examples show the central role of human involvements in the definition of what is going on, the example of driving down Main Street at 8 o'clock on a hot summer evening shows something else in addition. It leaves room for enormous ambiguity in its characterization, and all the possibilities may play out in subsequent events. This is why narratives are so much richer than analytic accounts of human life. Narrative is open-ended precisely in ways that analysis seeks to close off. Indeed, this is the pivot of Troeltsch's concept of the unconscious in history, the *Unbewußten*.[8] An actor in history does not see all the ramifications of his acts, he literally does not entirely know what he is doing, because what he is doing will show itself only in the perspective of time and the later events that arise from his current actions. Something that seems small at the time, a marginal departure from the ways of the past, can become the start of something considerably more significant

[7]Professor Peter Schickele and Robert Dennis, "New Horizons in Music Appreciation; Beethoven's Fifth Symphony," included in "The Wurst of P. D. Q. Bach," Vanguard Records VCD-72015, 1987.

[8]*Der Historismus und seine Probleme*, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Scientia Aalen, 1961), vol. 3, p. 46. ff. Cf. also Robert J. Rubanowice, *Crisis in Consciousness; the thought of Ernst Troeltsch*, (Tallahassee, University Presses of Florida, 1982), pp. 83–84.

than it appears to be. Or it can be forgotten, swallowed up in the flux of events (as it usually is).

We have stumbled into something in Troeltsch's notion of the unconscious, and it is the doorway to a fuller appreciation of what is happening in human acts. For the unknowing that he speaks of arises from the open-endedness of events and actions. In terms of the goals of an act, if the act seeks *A*, it is because *A* can lead to *B*, and *B* to *D*. But *B* can also lead to *C*, *E*, *F*, and *F* to *G* or *H*. We characterize the act in terms of the ultimate goal—*C*, *D*, *G*, or *H*—but which one is effectively sought may not be chosen (or even seen) until after the immediate moves. The discrete chain of goals is itself an abstraction from and characterization of the events, rather than something spelled out in advance. And the chain of goals terminates in something that is not a means to yet further goals—a way of being human, worthwhile in and of itself. How these goals are themselves characterized is a matter of some skill and reflection, occasionally of contention. We shall take up the temporal dimension of human acts in the next section.

What is important at this point is the claim that what the acts *are* is constituted in the characterizing involvements of the actors. (And not only of the individuals, for human involvements are shared, a corporate phenomenon.) Those involvements can be spelled out in terms of "intent," and at this point, there is almost agreement with analytic and folk action-theory, but only at a superficial level. Disagreement comes in understanding how to characterize intent, for characterization is a complex discursive process composed of speech that is potential as much as actual, and usually not spelled out. The constitutive intent is not mental motions of neurons causing physical motions of muscles, but a network of relationships and involvements that both transcend time and yet unfold in time. In the example of cruising, described above, the seventeen-year old may even be thinking about his trigonometry homework as he drives down the street at seven miles per hour (stranger things have happened). There is really no plausible basis for assuming that there is always a mental thought-event in the brain that could serve as the original physical cause of the act itself. There are neurophysiological causes in the brain for the motions of the muscles; nothing is being rejected in the assumptions at the basis of scientific biology. But neither neurology nor physical motions are to be identified with human actions. Merely pointing to the brain nerve impulses that control the operation of the motor vehicle simply fails to capture what the act is about. The involvements that could constitute the act as one (or even all) of the candidate descriptions I have suggested are quite beyond the physical locus of the event, the driver's body and the car itself. They are also beyond it in time. What the act

is is related to and constituted by goals that may yet be chosen, and it is that process which is the pivot of repentance, the creative reshaping and reconstituting of a human life.

I have so far reproduced the sort of evidence that led H. L. A. Hart to question the notion that acts are things that could be "described" at all.[9] Instead, he claims that acts are *a*scribed to people, in a process that is quite other than application of rules, rules whereby a particular instance of an act could be subsumed under a description. There are no descriptive rules that could pick out all of one kind of act and only that kind of act. The way we speak of an act can be somewhat misleading in the process of deciding what it is, and whether and how to credit or hold responsible the actor. It can seem like a description, but what is going on is a process of judgement in which the act is assessed by the people concerned. That judgement is much more like a declarative than an assertive speech act, in the sense of Searle's typology of the basic speech acts. When Hart calls it ascription rather than description, the essential difference is in the way that the claims in an ascription can be defeated or sustained if the ascription is contested. Adjudication of those claims entrains human involvements in the constitution of the acts to be characterized in ways that are amenable of judgement, but not description. In this sense, natural phenomena can be described; human acts cannot, because ascription is not a matter of matching a description with a reality that can be seen by inspection. When we say we "describe" an act, the "description" merely provides a convenient summary of the argument and its conclusion in an ascription, but it is nevertheless not simply a description.

Perhaps the prime lesson that I would draw from Hart's essay, and this is a lesson not in Hart's text, is that the characterization of an act is something that happens dynamically in its aftermath, in the responses to it and further acts of the original actor. We take up that problem in the next sections. We are ultimately interested in repentance as the bringing of a life back into orientation toward the covenant. Acts become what they are by reason of the larger narratives that they fit into. We seek some sense of how a life might be covenantally oriented, and we seek an understanding of how the conflicts within a life may be resolved.

11.2 Acts in Time

In the last section, we have seen how the meaning of an act is to be located in human involvements that stretch well beyond the act itself. In

[9] H. L. A. Hart, "The Ascription of Rights and Responsibilities," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 49 (1948) 171.

this section we look at the temporal dimension of those involvements. What an act is can grow in time, becoming more and different from what it was in its original context. For help in this idea, I turn to an essay by Paul Ricoeur that has been many times reprinted, yet is highly exploratory and conjectural in its thesis: "The Model of Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text."[10] Both text and action are understood in an interpretive mode that we have come to know in the hermeneutical circle. The feature of the circle which stands out here is the move to larger and larger contexts of interpretation, in which a text may gain meanings proportionate to those larger contexts, meanings going well beyond those it had in its original, narrower context. But the pivot of the essay is something that comes earlier in the interpretive process. A text already displays a fixity that gives it a stability necessary for it to be able to grow in its import with time and larger contexts. Discourse, conversation, displays the particularity of text without that fixity. Instead of stability, it vanishes unless it is recorded. In the parallel for actions, an act needs to become "fixed" in its constitution and import, or else it will be lost to forgetfulness. The process of fixing is less obvious for acts than for text, for one can point to writing on paper or some analog thereof; with acts, there is little to point to, but some acts nevertheless become fixed as others do not. To become fixed is not to be made unchangeable. If anything, what is fixed is not prevented from growing but rather enabled to grow and change, because there is in text something stable that could change. Conversation, unless recorded in memory in a way analogous to text, evaporates with forgetfulness.

Both discourse and text have a concrete particularity that language lacks. Language is abstract, being a system of signs that is timeless, lacking reference to speakers or hearers, and without reference to a world. Language does not communicate; discourse and text do. All these things are added to language when it appears as discourse and text, but they are added in different ways. Discourse is given a life and a reach in text that it could not have in its original, spoken form. The move from discourse to text preserves its particularity, but it transforms the concrete to something that is at least partly abstracted from its original circumstances, and so it is given a stability that fixes it. It is not unchanging, but instead of merely evaporating with forgetfulness, it can now change in ways that enable it to last, giving it voice and access to a larger world and readership.

The transformation that fixes discourse in text has several features. Discourse is situated in time, but it vanishes with time. Text saves the

[10]Citations are to the pagination in *From Text to Action; Essays in Hermeneutics, II* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991). The original French of the book appeared in 1986; the essay itself was published earlier than that.

meaning, not the stutters and incomplete sentences. Reference to the persons involved in discourse has to be spelled out in text. It went without saying in conversation. Reference to the world and features of it has to be given some handle in the text; in conversation, it was obvious or could be indicated by a gesture. Lastly, text is addressed to anyone and everybody, to the whole world, where the original discourse was addressed only to its immediate hearers.

The parallels in action give us a handle on how acts are preserved in time. Actions can be preserved for subsequent time in ways that bear a distant but instructive analogy to the preservation of discourse in text. They acquire a stability that enables them to have an enduring place in the narrative they inhabit, rather than being ill-defined, forgettable, and then lost.

First, an act is to be fixed in its constitution and import. An act has the analog of a propositional content, and that content is something that crystallizes out from the confusion of events as they happen. At this point, we can isolate what it was that happened, what was done.

Secondly, the act acquires a stability in the impact it has on the course of events. Here it becomes detached from its agent and it develops consequences of its own. The course of events rescues the act from vanishing like discourse; it is preserved in its consequences, and these transcend the life of the agent.

It has, thirdly, an importance for subsequent affairs that goes well beyond its relevance for its original context. Its importance lies in its meanings for situations other than the original, meanings that can be actualized in later situations.

Fourth and lastly, an act becomes an open work, for anyone, opening up new references and receiving fresh relevance from them, open to fresh interpretations. Interpretation by contemporaries has no particular privilege in this process.

Consider some examples. We have Gregory Dix's account of how the Last Supper was changed from an original seven-action event to the four-action shape that the Church repeats in the Great Thanksgiving.[11] Seven actions (blessing, taking and breaking bread, distribution, a full meal, blessing wine, and distribution, seven parts of the action) become four: blessing, taking the elements and breaking the bread, and distribution. The original event, even as it is preserved for us in the text of 1 Corinthians 11, continues in the subsequent liturgical texts of the Church the transformation that Ricoeur outlines, a fixation that is begun but not completed in Paul's account. Gregory Dix provides the details

[11] *The Shape of the Liturgy* (London: Dacre Press, 1943). The book is about much more than that, but that transformation informs its entire argument.

of exactly the sort of process that Paul Ricoeur posits in the fixation of action and its opening and growth in meaning subsequently. If this book had ambitions to include a christology, one could make the same sort of observations in showing how the fiasco at the end of Jesus's life became the Passion. That would take us too far afield; but it may be noted here as a task for another time.

Consider the origins of the Mourner's Kaddish, the blessing recited at a funeral and after by the closest relative of the departed. The Siddur of Joseph Hertz gives no origin in an event.[12] It is not in the Mishnah, but allusions to it occur in the Maccabean literature, and it is generally thought to be older than the Destruction of the Temple. It seems to have become fixed by about the eighth century. The Kaddish is a blessing of the goodness of God, with parallels in the first two petitions of the Lord's prayer, but with an emphasis on thanksgiving and adoration that quite goes beyond the Lord's prayer. "Precisely at the moment when it is hardest to do so, we lift up our voice to assert the essential holiness and goodness of the Infinite."[13] This much is to be expected from radical monotheists. The Kaddish was a practice begun in mists of history, one that has since grown into an act that can be re-identified over and over again, and which has become an emblem of the covenant. The original circumstances have been lost, and from them has been distilled the expression of a human stance toward life, the meaning of the original blessing. It has been detached from its author (who is, I think, not known) and has spread to color and influence the life of Rabbinic Judaism everywhere. Its meaning and influence for that corporate life goes well beyond what it had in its origins. It has obviously become an open work, accessible to all. We see in this example just the sort of growth in the meaning of an act that Paul Ricoeur imagines. And in these respects, the meaning of the act has not just been fixed, it has been enabled to change and grow as it never could have were it not fixed.

Even more intriguing for the present inquiry is a legend of Rabbi Akiba that Joseph Hertz goes on to recount. Akiba chanced upon a departed soul condemned to gather the kindling for his own hell. The man told Akiba that he would be released on one condition, that his surviving son be taught to say the Kaddish and the congregation respond in course with "Amen, may God's great name be praised for ever and ever." Akiba found the son, and the matter was taken care of. The departed sinner's life was redeemed in the Great Congregation, and its import and meaning and very constitution thereby transformed.

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[12]R. Joseph H. Hertz, ed., *The Authorized Daily Prayer Book* (New York: Bloch, 1948), pp. 269–271.

[13]Hertz, p. 270.

Such an idea seems incomprehensible to the instincts of the modern world, formed as they are in the philosophical aftermath of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. That age and its heirs assume that the only things that can be real are those that have an unchanging permanence that is independent of what any person may think, intend, or experience of them. Human involvements are not just ruled out at the start, they are rendered quite invisible. But in the legend of Rabbi Akiba and the departed sinner, the sinner's life does not assume its final complexion until it is placed within the life of the covenant people.

One may take the legend of the departed sinner as the kind of miraculous narrative that we find variously in the Talmuds, the New Testament and other religious literature, a genre between fiction, history, and parable. It is ambiguous, bearing several messages. Taken more or less literally, it points to the larger context of every human life: the community in history, and the interaction between the individual's commitments and the community of meaning in which that life makes sense. Here, God's mercy is large enough even to save one who has not formally repented in life, a theme that appears recently in a different context, the pastoral care of those who have committed suicide because of organic depression. It may also be read not quite so literally, taking the sinner's words to Akiba as part of his life instead of truly something after his death. Then his final act is one of repentance, and a few words suffice to wipe out before God an entire life of sin. If there is time, they need to have some reality beyond being just the private thoughts of the repentant one; but it is not absolutely necessary. In the idiom of speech-act theory, they don't count as a successful act of repentance unless they acquire some degree of inter-subjective responsibility. Or at least they forfeit the presumption of successful repentance if an opportunity for responsibility comes and is rejected. More amazing than the requirement of community acknowledgment of the sinner's repentance is the idea that repentance could work at all at so late a stage in someone's life. The import of his actions is indeed changed after the fact.

There are two grounds for problems here. One is confessional, one is philosophical. The confessional doubt arises as a challenge to the monotheist's trust in the graciousness of exposure. In a grubby sense, it's not fair that a sinner should even be allowed to repent so late. Exposure should not be allowed to be gracious. The confessional doubt cannot be answered; it is a choice for some alternative to a covenantal life-orientation. The philosophical doubt can be answered: it is a question about the constitution of a life. To be a sinner is to be a sinner to the end; to repent is to cease to be a sinner. For the acts of his life to *finally* count as stonewalling the truth and the needs of others, as ungrateful in

the face of the real if painful opportunities of his circumstances, he has to persevere in untruthfulness, hard-heartedness, and ingratitude *to the end*. But his acts may even be transformed after the fact in the acts of others, in just the way that Paul Ricoeur thinks. If he repents late, there is an inevitable sense of tragedy to his life—for he turned to enjoy the truth, the opportunities of life and the fellowship of others late in life, when he could have enjoyed them earlier. It is a crushing remorse; but it is no longer perdition. The earlier acts grounded in a life that was (until then) one of untruth cannot undo the truth at the end. Those earlier acts are no longer acts situated within a life of untruth to the end, but have become, if belatedly, the repented acts of a repentant sinner.

Perhaps this might make more sense if one turns to the way in which the sense of acts, and thus indeed what they are, derives from the place they hold within larger narratives. There is a certain instinct that travels with the empiricist tradition in philosophy, one that takes human acts as atomic motions, motions that cannot usefully be subdivided any further. We have spent some considerable energy laboring to deflate this instinct already and have shown how an act is constituted by human involvements that may be known by an act of judgement, but which quite transcend any description of the mere motions of the act. Those involvements have a temporal dimension that is best exhibited in narrative. The unity of a human life is the unity of a narrative. Events conspire to throw the hero into a situation in which he has to do something, and the narrative tells the resolution of the problem created by that initial happening. In that sense, a narrative is a quest. Quests may fail, be frustrated, be abandoned, or just get dissipated in distractions.[14] Both the narrator and the one whose life is told have a say in defining the quest that is to be recounted. The narrator wants to know whether the hero found or even sought the truth about himself, the fellowship of his neighbors, and the real opportunities in the limitations of his life.[15] The one living may seek many things on the way to these ends, and he may seek and find a life oriented in some other direction. But the particular acts along the way ultimately make sense as part of this narrative quest, and the individual's life then fits into the larger narrative of the community in history. As the repented acts of one living in a covenant community, the sinner's previous acts of betrayal of the covenant are reintegrated into its life and its larger history. Forgotten and hidden in time, perhaps, but once repented, they advance

[14] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), pp. 218–219.

[15] The presence of the narrator shows that it is not, by the way, as if people could just make up the meaning of their lives. Truth is an inter-subjective thing, a matter of responsibility.

its life of faith nonetheless. To emphasize the points at issue yet one last time, human acts *are* the parts of larger narratives, and the verb here is not just an auxiliary of predication but an indication of something more: Acts derive not only their meaning but their very ontological constitution from being the parts of larger narratives. It is within the terms of this ontology that repentance makes sense.

11.3 Action and Life Orientation

One may declare a commitment to one or another way of life, acknowledge one or another horizon of ultimate meaning, but sooner or later, particular acts must be attended to. One has to decide what to do today, tomorrow, next week, how to fit one hour into this week and the plans for next year: how to realize a declared commitment and life orientation. Particular acts are usually ambiguous; they could be fitted into more than one larger narrative of a life. People have awesome tacit skills in making choices without deliberating on long-term goals.[16] It is possible to conduct a life orientation without ever really spelling out what it is. This section inquires into the larger horizons of meaning which determine the character of a life that particular acts fit into, with a little speculation on how acts are made to fit into that larger meaning. Those horizons are chosen confessionally and constitute a basic life orientation.

What we seek is the mode of connection of human events across time. For every life orientation, it is a narrative logic, though the narrative genres differ in different life orientations. What allows one act or event to be connected to those it responds to and to those that respond to it in turn is what Paul Ricoeur calls its "desirability character."[17] It is this feature in the constitution of a human act that allows it to be related to others in a larger whole. Actors who respond presuppose this desirability character in the act they respond to, and frame their responses in terms of a shared, disputed, or opposed desirability in their own acts.

The means and especially the goods sought in an act all presuppose a vision of the world, a sense of what is possible, what is achievable, what the world is like, as well as a sense of how proximate goods and goals fit into larger and ultimate goods. An act is situated within a network of relations with other people, in which it functions and makes sense. The constitution of an act is then not something that a naturalistic description could capture. What is less open to question and testing, because it is

[16] I shall say more about this in chapter 12, where not spelling out what is going on will become the key to self-deception.

[17] "The Model of Text," p. 161.

so hard to draw out, is the vision of the world, the larger context that ultimately determines how particular acts are interpreted. The goods and goals that make sense of an act are shared in common in at least the minimal sense that they make sense in common, in a community of discourse. This is so even in conflict and dysfunctional relationships, for the conflicts could not be conducted without some shared sense of what they were about. At some level, then, goods are corporate, and I think this is so even for individualists, though where the sense of mutual and shared humanness is diminished, the corporate structure of human goods is obscured and impoverished.

To understand one's own or another's act is to construe its motivational basis. Alasdair MacIntyre imagined an example along the lines of the cruising teenager that we saw in section 11.1. If a man is digging in his garden, is he gardening? Digging a hole? Weeding? Getting exercise? Pleasing his wife? To answer, we need to know the answers to some contrary-to-fact questions: What if he didn't think exercise did him any good? Or if he thought his wife didn't care? And so on.[18] Analytic philosophy and its twentieth-century kin like to assume that one can speak of "a" human act, presupposing it as isolated from other events. On the testimony of the examples we have seen, this is absurd. It is many acts, and they are distinguished from the other parts of the man's life only by an act of judgement, and that often only for convenience. The distinctions could have been drawn in other ways. What if the man is doing more than one thing at once, not just in the sense that particular motions can be characterized as more than one act, but in the sense that he is interleaving motions that belong to several action sequences, which, moreover, may have interconnections between these sequences? Much contemporary philosophy would like to hide the fact that the characterization of human acts presupposes a narrative context. It is that wider context that we are interested in. Acts are constituted in narrative not because narratives are actually spelled out but because they could be, and that is much more elusive. People have skills of narrative, they know how to spell out when it is necessary, and they have habits of how to spell out what is going on. If you repeatedly ask "then what happens?," they can answer. The answers may in fact be left tacit, but they could be spelled out. The ability to say what is going on is enough. People don't actually say what is going on when it is not necessary. It is almost a commonplace that an act makes sense only in terms of intentions, motives, passions, purposes. But the truth is more radical than that. It is the intentions and purposes

[18] *After Virtue*, 2nd edn. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p. 207. The example is in chapter 15, "The Virtues, the Unity of a Human Life and the Concept of a Tradition."

that enable us even to decide which motions are the parts of the act. There may not even be any physical motions; acts of omission are acts just as much as those that have overt physical motions.

In a larger horizon, purposes and intentions must be fitted into conceptions of a possible shared future. The general shape of the future may never be spelled out, but it is there, tacitly, at a minimum. Some possibilities attract us, others repel us. Some are impossible, some inevitable. But in getting to them, narratives are somewhat unpredictable, and always teleological. What is at stake is identity and selfhood; "the concept of a person is that of a character abstracted from a history."[19] Although common intuition takes characters as prior to histories, personal identity emerges out of the unity of a character that the unity of a narrative requires. The concepts of narrative, intelligibility, accountability, and personal identity each presuppose the others: they are intimately and ontologically correlated. The unity of a human life is the unity of a narrative; to ask "what is good for me?" is to ask how to live out that unity and bring it to completion. And the narrative is a quest: quests may fail, be frustrated, abandoned, or dissipated into distractions. Human lives may fail in the same ways.

All human acts relate the human to the world, and it is that relation that we are interested in. The larger horizons of acts are implicit in the shared projections of the world created by human communities. The world is different in mimetic and historical worldviews, and human acts make different sense accordingly. As Eliade has observed, for mimesis, an act has meaning only insofar as it can be subsumed under some sort of generic concept, whether that is a covering-law of modern science or an ancient mythical archetype. The meaning of "I did *X*, for reasons *A, B, C*" is then quite different in natures and histories. Indeed, the meanings of the parts are different as well: the I, the *X*, the *A, B,* and *C* are not the same in mimetic and historical worlds. And where the sense of human action differs, human freedom is construed differently also. If nature is all there is, and there is no real history, then one can act only within or against the regularity and predictability of nature; the kind of freedom one has in history does not make sense in nature. In history, the future is open, and the openness of the larger historical narrative that an act fits into colors everything that it touches. The meanings of freedom and of responsibility are reciprocals, the sense of one depends on that of the other. If we may say that responsibility is an activity and not a property, the giving and criticizing of reasons, then that activity and the assumptions immanent within it determine the sense of human freedom and human action.

Narrative is essential to responsibility, and there is a chasm between

[19] *After Virtue*, p. 216.

narratives in mimetic and historical worldviews. We explore the differences in a preliminary way here, and return to them for more work in section 14.1. Mimesis sees only archetypes and success or failure at their repetition. What it calls absurd, nonsense, chaotic, without meaning, historical religions take to be the positive character of historical individuals. Exilic religion does not put much store on narrative or history at all, inasmuch as they are part of an exile that is to be returned from. Narrative is incidental, rather than constitutive of one's being. Its historical relativity is a flaw and a defect, the locus of the unknowable. Some sort of a-historical truth is to be sought instead. In some forms of exilic religion, even human identity is illusory or unreal, and without this, the narratives of history don't make any sense. History can be evaded in many ways, as we have seen in section 7.3. It may be invisible, half-seen, denied, or ignored; one may defend against it, substitute ethics or metaphysics for it, escape it in messianism or eschatology, or even subvert it in the way that historical thinking is carried out. Where history is taken as of positive significance, the shape of the larger story determines the interpretation of all that happens within. If the larger story is restricted to the community of faith, leaving outsiders bereft of hope, then the community of insiders is essentially opposed to the outsiders, and everything fits into that conflict. If the larger story is in principle open to all, as the Exodus covenant is supposed to be, then conflict between the household of faith and others is secondary; those outside the household of faith are in a more important sense in conflict with themselves, with their true home, which should be the affirmation of human life in history.

Consider an example of the relation of narrative and responsibility. Robert Wistrich reviewed a biography of Albert Speer whose conclusion was that Speer ultimately won his battle for truth in making sense of his own life.[20] Wistrich doubts that conclusion. The questions along the way make sense only in a context that takes history seriously. They would make no sense in nature, which can only ask what archetype to file the life under, and having chosen one, shave the facts like a guest of Procrustes to fit into the terms of that archetypal narrative genre. Exile would dismiss the particulars of Speer's life as ephemera on the way to repatriation, whether that return was successful or not. A henotheism from the Nazi perspective would take up the lost cause (as some have); a henotheism from an anti-Nazi perspective would simply condemn Speer as unredeemable. But implicit in the quest for truth about oneself as Wistrich seems to understand it is the possibility that in truth redemption is possible. That Speer in the end came clean about his involvements

[20]Review of Gitta Sereny, *Albert Speer: His Battle with Truth* (Knopf, ca. 1996); in *Commentary* 101 no. 4 (1996 April) 60.

with the Shoah is not necessary for the present argument. (In fact, he did not, at least not completely.) What is important is that he could have. Wistrich doubts Sereny's claim that Speer transformed his life while in Spandau prison, and Wistrich's doubts are entirely plausible. The form of the claim is what we are interested in: the possibility of transforming a life and a self, regardless of the fact that in this instance the attempt was apparently not really successful. Grace after heinous crime is possible, as we have seen in the case of David Mason in ELN, section 5.5 above.

The example of Albert Speer's life illustrates the problem: how to fit particular acts into a larger narrative. This is both a matter of truthfulness and also a matter of intentional choices about what larger narrative to fit a life into at all. Thus the problem is how to identify a *real* relationship between small acts and a larger narrative, a relationship that is not just attributed in speech after the fact. I think we look in vain for this relationship within the internal particulars of an act. Its meaning is instead constituted by the narrative practices surrounding it. We have seen in more than one example that it is impossible even to identify an act correctly without turning to circumstances well outside its physical motions. It derives its ontological constitution from surrounding acts and cultural practices. We have seen in another way in the last section (in the example of watching a movie without the sound) that physical motions by themselves are insufficient to constitute acts: language is required. Language practices may or may not extend to integrating narratives, and the narratives themselves, if any, may be of various kinds. It is the narrative practices of the individual and the culture that determine at the widest level what particular acts mean.

These observations may be clearer if they are restated negatively as questions, in the terms of the basic life orientations that were introduced in chapter 6, at the reading of *God, Guilt, and Death*. What would it mean, from the point of view of mimesis, *not* to fit into nature? What would it mean not to acknowledge the sacred in nature? And for the contrast between henotheism and monotheism, what would it mean to discard the disappointments of life as barren? Instead of making them the focus of the work of faith, the place where one has to labor to call all of life good? And in the contrast between exilic and covenantal life, what is the use and purpose of life if it is a state of exile? What would it mean to live for return from exile? One would think this is different from living for the sacred enjoyment of this life given as good creation. I think that responsibility is exercised differently in the different basic life orientations, and responsibility is the activity in which acts are construed. What it means to say "I did *X*" determines how people relate to each other, and how they dwell within their larger assumptions about the world. One

would ask, what is the criterion of success in each case? Did a life fit into nature, succeed in mimesis? Did a life succeed in repatriating from exile? Was it loyal to the (henotheistic) community against the world? Did a life accept the covenant from history and succeed in passing it on? Did a life even try? What would count as trying, as an attempt? What if a life has one or another orientation unintentionally? How important are recognition and intention?

One acts with reference to the world, and reference to history, if the world is historical. Attention to history is then the point at which the larger intentional context of human actions enters into their constitution. It is only with a sense of history that the moral obligations of the covenant can be discharged with recognition and intention. One may achieve some degree of humility, forbearance, honesty, or generosity unintentionally. But it remains a fragile achievement, one that is hard to sustain and impossible to complete. It is as if one has caught a touchdown pass without knowing that one is playing football. The idea does not make sense, but one could imagine a fictional scenario in which it counts as a score nonetheless. To write such fiction, one would have to bend the rules or make at least some parts of the game or the roster of teams informal. That informality mirrors life in history, and its freedom makes one essential difference between mimesis and historical life-orientations. As a consequence, the covenanter is obliged to attend carefully to integrating the parts of life into the covenant. To that task we turn in the next section.

11.4 Conversion of Life

How does one know what is going on in one's life and the world? It is a task of recognizing and spelling out the pertinent features of the events and actions, a task of telling a narrative well. The problem is sharpened in the question at the end of the last section: Could one live a covenantal life without knowing it? Not really, as attention to the covenant in history is an essential part of living a covenant. Can one live in love for one's neighbors without knowing about covenant? Yes, to a degree this is possible. But eventually, one's intentions toward neighbors and self must turn to larger horizons and explicitly take on a historical character, if they are to exercise the freedom that is possible only in history, let alone exercise it well.

We have come to the conversion of life, wherein the commitment to covenant is deepened and extended to all parts of a life. It is a process of spelling out what is going on, to which we shall come again in the details of concrete examples in the next chapter. For mimesis, I suppose one is

not forever spelling out anew, because the forms of life and human action are simply given with nature, and once given may be re-used. For exilic religion, spelling out what is happening in a state of exile is not really relevant; one merely wants to return from exile as quickly as possible. But with the freedom that is inherent in history, the beginning of a story never really determines its end, and so one is of necessity compelled to ask what is going on. And in the history of cultures, the very terms of life change from one century and millennium to the next, and the task of spelling out how a covenant is to be lived has to be undertaken to some extent anew in every age. The labor of spelling out, illuminating as it does what is really going on in life, then entails in response the conversion of life that I would focus on in this section.

H. Richard Niebuhr devotes fully half of *Radical Monotheism* to the labor of conversion, as it is worked out in three areas of life: religion, politics, and science. He claims that monotheism meets the same phenomena in life as the other life orientations but handles them differently. It converts every part of life. Beyond one concrete example, I will not repeat his treatment. Instead, I would like to look at the dynamic by which covenantal religion emerges from mimesis, henotheism, and exile, and occasionally degenerates back into them.

A most striking example of the conversion of cultural categories appears in Jacob Neusner's inquiry into the Persian origins of the mishnaic law of purities. There are three parts to the concept of uncleanness: its sources and modes of transfer; its loci, the things that can become unclean and be made clean; and the modes of purification from uncleanness.[21] All ancient religion defines cleanness and uncleanness in these terms. For example, apparently the Greeks considered pea-soup, cheese, salt-fish, and garlic to be unclean.[22] Neusner is uncharacteristically hesitant about his conclusions and labels them provisional and exploratory. He asks whether the Jewish concern with cleanness and uncleanness was simply acquired from Persian religion in Babylon. If so, it would be a striking example of Niebuhr's claim that monotheism takes the concerns of life as it finds them and transforms them to fit into a covenantal life-orientation.

The system of cleanness certainly was changed. For Zoroastrianism, live snakes and insects are unclean, dead ones are not. For the Mishnah, it is just the reverse. For Zoroastrianism, the good is clean, evil is unclean, and the world displays an ethical dualism of good and evil. Cleanness and uncleanness reflect the opposition and struggle between good and

[21]Jacob Neusner, *A History of the Mishnaic Law of Purities*, vol. 22, Part Twenty-Two, *The Mishnaic System of Uncleanness; Its Context and History* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1977), p. 2.

[22]Neusner, p. 10.

evil. For Persian religion, they are linked to cosmological and ethical concerns; for the Mishnah, almost never. By contrast, for the Mishnah cleanness is an issue in the recreation and sustenance of life: cult, eating, and sex. For the Mishnah, uncleanness is natural but not evil. Neusner summarizes his thesis in his introduction. The Zoroastrian system of the clean and unclean mirrors the division of beings into good and evil. The Mishnaic law of purities, by contrast, assumes that all created beings are good, and the distinction of clean and unclean serves another purpose entirely. It works to shape human life toward the blessing of created being as good. Quite a transformation: what was in Zoroastrian religion a means of separating life into good and evil, and rejecting the evil as barren, has become in the Mishnah a means of affirming all of life as good, and at the same time a means of sanctifying human life in the good world.

Westphal remarks that actual religions have usually been a mixture of types rather than being purely mimetic, exilic, or covenantal. Particular human acts can be fitted into more than one larger vision of life, and the ambiguity is replicated at the scale of a single human life as well as that of the history of religions. How is this ambiguity to be resolved? Is it that a body pulls its life together into a coherent whole as it progresses?

Consider the case of mimesis, what it has in common with covenant, and what is yet to be supplied. The affirmation of this world as good is retained and indeed deepened in covenant. It is radicalized in two directions, transcendence and history.

For some sort of transcendence is implicit in Margot Adler's confused claim that monotheism could fit into polytheism, but not the reverse. The largest confusion is that the uniformity and exclusiveness which she attributes to monotheism has its true home in henotheism. In Niebuhr's account, monotheism accommodates all the lesser goods, including those of nature, rightly ordered in relation to the transcendent principle of Being. But more importantly, Adler's claim does not really make sense as it stands. For it to make sense, ultimate reality cannot be irreducibly plural. There has to be some unity that holds the plurality together coherently, some principle, something not merely another part of the plurality, on the basis of which the parts of a plurality could become a pluralism: diversity based on some underlying unity.

What is still missing from nature religion is any recognition of the being and importance of history, of how in practical human history, human concerns quite go beyond what nature can make sense of. Human freedom transcends nature. Nature makes freedom possible but does not determine it. The quest to fit into nature will not solve human problems, because human affairs arise new and unique every day and in every age.

Troeltsch was at his best when he tumbled to the importance of historical individuality.

There is nothing in nature like the community of moral obligation as it is found in covenantal religion. For in nature, individuals get along in an ecosystem, sometimes predatory, sometimes symbiotic. But they never function as a community of moral obligation in ways that go beyond common genetic interest. Responsibility to and for others in a community of moral obligation runs far beyond what it ever is in nature. One index of this is that intra-species killing is handled differently in nature and history. Infanticide is practiced in nature but forbidden in historical-covenantal religion. And war, it should be noted, is wrong in covenant, even when it is the least of evils.

One can follow a conversion something like what I have in mind in the Bible. Richard Elliott Friedman traces it in *The Disappearance of God*.[23] In the beginning, humans see God face to face and are comfortable doing so. God disappears progressively as one follows the timeline of the story in the Common Documents, and human responsibility increases as man is left increasingly without direct contact with God. Indeed, face to face contact would be not just terrifying, but lethal, as the events at Sinai indicate. Yet the people yearn to have God "with them," "in their midst," but this works out in ways that are quite different from face to face contact. The visible presence starts in terms that are close to nature if not naturalistic, for God can be seen directly with the senses. He becomes hidden; the Common Documents speak of the "hiding of the face." A sacred that has been lifted from nature is already transformed some when we first see it, for God and humans speak to each other as participants in a narrative that is historical rather than having the character of myth, the narrative genre of polytheism. But the sacred becomes more and more a thing of history, and we "see" only what anyone can see in history. The presence of God becomes instead something that humans can experience in human relations. Friedman goes on well beyond the Common Documents and gives a great deal of attention to the hiding of the face in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is a striking account of a religious transformation, and within the scope of the Bible, one never before to my knowledge seen.

Turn to henotheism. The good here is the good of a restricted community of faith, leaving outsiders to their own devices, or simply excluding them from the promises of blessing entirely. In a world where life orientation was always conducted with respect to a delimited community, because there were no larger horizons, the world of the second and first

[23]Richard Elliott Friedman, *The Disappearance of God; A Divine Mystery* (Boston: Little Brown, 1995).

millennia BCE, a covenantal project necessarily starts out with henotheistic overtones. These are shed as it takes upon itself the calling to be a blessing to all peoples. There are traces of henotheism in the Common Documents, and the dismissal of foreign spouses in Ezra 9-10 is an example. Yet Ruth is a protest against this; one can see the conversion to inclusive covenant deepened here. Henotheism appears as the Exclusive Or between the Church and the Synagogue after the Fall of Jerusalem. Worse, it appears as the "extra ecclesiam nulla salus" of later centuries, and in religious wars and anti-semitism.

A community-centered henotheism already has some consciousness of history built into it, even when the covenant is limited and restricted, simply because such a life orientation is transmitted to succeeding generations when the community tells its story. And a community-centered henotheism has a propensity for transcendence insofar as it centers its faith in a principle of the community, and not in nature. It lacks universality, the openness and critical inclusiveness of historical-covenantal life-orientation. The addition of this universality is the principal transforming step on the way to monotheism. The loss of it is the way back into henotheism, as history has all too often demonstrated.

In many ways, exilic religion works out as the most interesting and subtle contrast with historical-covenantal religion—it is more a foil in the story of Western religion than an antagonist. As Luther Martin observed, Gnosticism seemed to be the direction of development of religion in the Hellenistic world, and this tendency has remained to some extent in Western religion since then, in the form of tacit and residual unconverted habits in Christianity. Mapping this dynamic would go a long way toward understanding the process of conversion of life as it is worked out today in covenantal living in the West.

Exilic religion already has a sense of transcendence, and it can see beyond nature and the horizons of particular communities. But it rejects as barren parts of life that the other options affirm. It is the working out of those disappointments, transformed and reappropriated as blessings, that turns exilic into covenantal living in history. Disappointments in life are a natural part of being human, even when life is fairly comfortable. When the currents of history move against you, life can become acutely uncomfortable. Peoples and nations can be marginalized or subjected to suffering and affliction.

There is a dialectical relationship between exilic and historical-covenantal living that feeds on a natural difficulty in spelling out just what it is about acts and affairs in the world that the human actor is concerned with. This results in a significant ambiguity in the appraisal of human actions. The ambiguity works out more often as an incompletely

converted life than as a candid Gnosticism, but the structure of candid Gnosticism provides the light necessary to see what is happening in the ambiguous cases.

I would take that structure from Eric Voegelin's account in the beginning of *The Ecumenic Age*.[24] In Gnosticism transcendence is torn from the context in life in which it originates and made to stand on its own as the basis of a speculative system. In the process, mystery is banished from human life. The Gnostic myth of divine spirit falling into imprisonment in a material world created by an evil demiurge accomplishes several things. Beyond abolishing an essential dimension of mystery and shielding the believer from the anxiety that goes with it, it imposes order on the cosmos and relieves man of responsibility even for confronting the uncomfortable particulars of his situation. Instead, he can blame the demiurge or the defective world. Dissatisfaction is escalated into taking offense. The Gnostic is not just in pain in the world, he is alienated and in intense revolt against his alienation. Such Gnosticism appears more clearly among affluent discontents than among the afflicted, for whom apocalyptic is a more effective solace. Alienation without revolt might actually do something constructive about the sources of pain; a semi-gnostic stance can then develop in quite different directions. Full Gnosticism mounts a speculative system of the cosmos that quite goes beyond apocalyptic and blinds the Gnostic to the grubby particulars of the historical individuals he is forced to live with. Things are always more complicated than simple generalizations can capture, but generalizations mean power, and power means one does not have to show respect to others who have legitimate claims. Real life is messy, and covenant requires respect for the people one encounters, and equally, respect for the phenomena of the world that one affirms.

The pivot in Voegelin's diagnosis is the point at which the Gnostic inverts the relationship between transcendence and its origins in life. Transcendence is put first, made to stand on its own, and the human spirit that emerges from nature is instead credited to a self-originating transcendence. Not only are the mysteries of transcendence abolished and the particulars of life tamed, the Gnostic does not see his own *libido dominandi*, lust for power, in this central move. For the speculative system gives control in principle if not in practice, and puts the Gnostic believer ideally in a place of invulnerability. Control at the level of theory can, in the world of modern science, be translated into control in practice, and then we see the lust for power that people like Margot Adler and Jerry Mander complain so bitterly about.

[24]Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, vol. 4, *The Ecumenic Age* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), pp. 19–20.

What is crucial for our present purposes is Voegelin's observation that Christianity has provided the richest source of conceptual materials for Gnostic speculative systems. Most exilic religion in the West has had connections in one way or another with Christianity.[25] When monotheism moved from a Hebrew and halakhic setting into the Hellenistic world, it abandoned such halakhic safeguards of this-worldliness as were available in the first century, and it acquired the conceptual machinery of Greek philosophy. Once so equipped, there was no limit to speculative systems. But a second essential ingredient comes from covenantal religion, and that is the promise that the pains of life will be relieved in some way. The how of relief is quietly changed on the way from covenant to exile: in covenant, the pains are transformed, whereas in exilic religion, they are abandoned. In particular local contexts of action, what to do in a here and now, how this works out can be highly ambiguous, for two reasons. In the context of a day or a season, it is not intrinsically clear how the choices of that day will fit into the larger biographies of the actors or the history they live in. And what a situation offers in its limitations and opportunity for fellowship, what it illuminates in the lives it touches, are things that show themselves partially, at least at the start, and in showing parts of themselves, hide other parts. Essential to an exilic interpretation of human actions is, of course, the forgetting of history, because history always forces one to confront individuals and particularity, instead of comprehensive theoretical laws; it is historical relativity, limited knowledge, fallibility, helplessness before currents that one does not understand.

In later developments, things can be pushed in several directions. Science in the modern world is today the most important example. The methodological naturalism inherent in the scientific method can be turned into a comprehensive naturalism, and then the resulting life orientation is closer to mimesis than to exile or covenant. Or the powers acquired in technology can be used to abolish mystery and turn Gnostic speculation into practical control over the world. In the same vein, the quest for a "theory of everything" can be put to essentially gnostic uses. If science is treated as a historical phenomenon, and the knowledge it affords is received within a larger framework of trust in providence (here, epistemological providence, I suppose), then one is neither confined to a naturalistic worldview nor left with only lust for power as the way of relating to the world and other people.

Some have remarked that covenanters excel at complaining to God.

[25] But perhaps that is just because the majority tradition has been Christian. There have been Jewish Gnosticisms and half-gnosticisms also, if much smaller affairs and much less known.

This is true, as a casual inspection of merely the Psalms will quickly show. It is this dissatisfaction that can be pushed variously in covenantal or exilic directions. Accepting the situation from which complaint arises, the covenanter can then do something about it. Rejecting it, the Gnostic takes offense but does little or nothing about it. In between, one works to relieve the pain, but still takes offense, and the life orientation that results is never really converted, and the taking of offense in the end colors everything.

One can easily understand the process whereby covenantal monotheism degenerates and then gets criticized, usually by mimetics. The irony is that the criticism uses arguments that are functionally covenantal against a degenerate covenant that does not recognize its own commitments used against it. As a result, the mimetics can deploy such arguments without being exposed as implicating their own project as well. Monotheism easily degenerates into partial gnosticism and henotheism, and polytheism and naturalism come back in critique of the degenerate monotheism. The covenanters have indulged in semi-gnostic nihilism in bad faith; the critics can then either move to candid nihilism or protest on behalf of the goods of life rejected by functionally gnostic covenanters. Why does polytheism excel so at critique? Mimetics tend to reject the painful parts of life as bad, at the same time as they affirm this world as basically good, and so are motivated to tell the good from the bad clearly. Indeed, when the monotheist is in dalliance with one sort of Gnosticism, any other sufficiently different Gnosticism can also raise criticisms like those natural to mimesis. It merely requires that one Gnosticism affirm parts of life that the other rejects. The monotheist, committed to accept the pains as bearing blessing, often shrinks from looking squarely at them. The skeptic can see the hazards of faith often better than the believer, especially if the believer is not really forthcoming about those hazards. Still, the best critique since the eighteenth century has come from thinkers close to the churches, even if they have been all too often ostracized for their criticisms. I think of the enterprise of biblical criticism. Textual problems attracted skeptical criticism from outside, but the outsiders hostile to Christianity abandoned the critique or lost interest as soon as it became clear that inquiry might find something robust or challenging in the way of historical-covenantal living. The issues raised by new readings of the texts in the eighteenth century were in the nineteenth addressed seriously and constructively only by scholars close to the churches even if their work was offensive to those same churches.

In the end, I am reminded of the contrast in Matthew 21.28 between the son who said he would obey but did not, and the son who refused to obey, but did. The roads between mimesis, henotheism, exile, and

covenant in history carry traffic both ways.

Chapter 12

Clearings

12.1 Self-Deception

How does one know what is going on in one's life and the world? How does one get a hold on the happenings and actions that are to be incorporated into a covenantal life? It is a task of recognizing and spelling out the pertinent features, a task of telling a narrative well. The problem is sharpened in the imagined question at the end of section 11.3: Could one catch a touchdown pass, and have it count as a score, without knowing that one is playing football? Only if the activity in question is not well defined, which is why it is so incongruous to imagine it as football. What counts as football is extremely carefully regulated. But what counts as a career, a romance, a vacation trip, a marriage, raising children—or a life—is quite another matter. The notion of an *engagement with life* seems to work as a term to grab a cluster of interests, involvements, human relationships, and activities that have some internal relationship to one another.

I contend that today a few characteristic engagements can show how somebody's life is oriented. They are all associated in one way or another with life itself, its beginning or ending or the giving of new life to others. These events are places that everybody passes through, places in life that shape and color everything that happens around them. I have in mind the choices people make in regard to birth, death, and sex. They work as clearings, places where you can see what someone is about. These clearings have a common structure in everybody's life because of the way contemporary culture handles these things. Just as we may say that marriage is an institution, and one that is shaped differently in different cultures, the same may be said of the practices surrounding sex, birth,

and death. The variation across cultures shows the differences that define the life orientation not just of individuals but of the entire society.

The problem of recognition and intention in identifying the terms of an engagement with life might already seem formidably complex. But the real complexity appears when someone is self-deceived about what he is doing. People are quite capable of conducting parts of their lives not only without spelling out what is going on, but while giving an account—even to themselves—that is seriously at variance with what is really happening. This not spelling out is the essence of self-deception. We shall avail ourselves of Herbert Fingarette's anatomy of the phenomenon in order to consolidate the notion of life orientation and its maintenance in the act of repentance. One can in speech define the meaning of one's acts and life in one way, yet live them in some other. The problem then is hypocrisy, deception, and self-deception. The remedy lies in clearings, places where you can see what people are really doing. This chapter will look at a concrete series of clearings, places where an entire culture has not spelled out what it is doing in engagements that are quite inconsistent with what it supposedly believes. In this section, I look at self-deception and a rough account of what clearings are. In the following sections, I apply these concepts to the clearings associated with birth, death, and sex. In a clearing, you can see what is not yet converted to radical monotheism and still needs to be. The initial definitions will of necessity be somewhat abstract, but the applications will be quite concrete.

A clearing is a place where the hidden becomes visible, the ambiguous is disambiguated. In thought and discourse, this occurs deliberately in spelling out what is going on. But events can by themselves work to expose what is happening, even when spelling out is resisted. Events call for a spelling out when they disclose an anomaly between what is happening and what people say is happening. In William Gibson's meditations on Shakespeare, a perturbation breaks in on life's unstable equilibrium, we see "the loosing and binding of an evening's disorder," the narrative has a beginning and an end, and then people go on to other things.[1] In watching how people respond to pressure and challenge, you can see what holds them together as coherent persons.

What we are interested in first is the activity of spelling out itself, since that is the necessary response in face of events that work as a clearing. There has been discussion of self-deception both before and after Herbert Fingarette's book of that title, but his exposition of the relation between knowing and the activity of spelling out is still the most directly helpful for the present inquiry.[2] The literature after Fingarette

[1] William Gibson, *Shakespeare's Game* (New York: Athenaeum, 1978), p. 6.

[2] Herbert Fingarette, *Self-Deception* (London: RKP, 1969). Cf. chapter 3, "To

tends not to cite his work, and much of it is prone to speaking of self-deception in the language of having the form of "belief that-*p*," where *p* is wrong, and the self-deceived at bottom should know as much.[3] This is the style of analytic philosophy. It takes knowledge as something without involvements in action, and never sees the responsible appraisal involved in judging that *p*, or in characterizing an engagement in life in terms of some proposition *p*. Seeing *p* does not just happen. Self-knowledge is an active thing, and paradoxes arise when it is characterized primarily in terms of belief, knowledge, perception, seeing: the cognitive-perceptive family of terms. What is overlooked are concepts of volition and action, and the role they might play in knowledge and self-knowledge. Almost every idiom of knowledge stresses the passive and receptive character of these concepts. But we see what we look at, and the common idioms hide that looking. Fingarette proposes instead that explicit consciousness is a skill, something that can be done well or poorly, even not done at all, a skill that may be acquired or not, for good reasons or bad, something that can be learned, something in which even training is possible. The particular features of an engagement with life are usually not spelled out, and need not be, unless there is a problem with the engagement. The term is meant to grasp what a person does or undergoes as a human being, how an individual finds or takes himself and the world, the activities he engages in, projects he undertakes, the way the world presents itself to him. It is a matter of aims, reasons, motives, attitudes, feelings, what is seen, felt, heard, enjoyed, feared, a matter of understanding and perception of the world, and above all, of one's own actions in that world. The skill of spelling out is to be able to let all these things be seen from themselves, to bring them to language.

One first sizes up a situation to see whether there is adequate reason to spell out its features. This is tacit; it is before any actual spelling out. More interestingly, we can size up the situation to see whether there is reason *not* to spell out. And spelling out is an activity which is usually not itself spelled out; we do it only when there is good reason. Self-deception occurs when there is reason not to spell out: so we avoid becoming conscious of an engagement, and avoid explicit consciousness that we avoid it. Success at spelling out comes with some measure of experience and learning. It is as if one can spell out only with concepts that one already has (or can extend a little way), narrative-elements that one has acquired and can re-deploy in new narrative contexts. One learns

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say or not to say."

[3]One somewhat long example can be found in W. J. Talbott, "Intentional Self-Deception in a Single Coherent Self," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 55 no. 1 (1995 March) 27. It has an extensive bibliography.

from other narratives by reason of analogy, as they show what is possible in one's own life. I would guess that a strong skill of analogy comes as something more: one must learn to move from the light of another's narrative and attend to the individual character of one's own, rather than just assimilating one's own story to the other's. This would be a crucial difference between a mimetic and a historical way of thinking.

Not spelling out can be not lack of skill but a consistent policy, and one that is itself also not spelled out. The self-deceiver does not spell out, but gives the impression he could, and at the same time the impression he is incapable of doing so. The original reasons for not spelling out, reasons in the tacit sizing-up, are themselves not spelled out: to do so would require spelling out the engagement itself. An engagement has problems when it does not achieve its implicit goals, when it gives rise to pains of conscience (and when it should but does not; also possible), when it hurts or abandons other people, or leaves relations with them less than they could be. One could imagine other ways to go wrong. What is probably most important about self-deception is that when the problematic engagement begins to be noticed, there is usually a cover-story, an alternate explanation of the engagement, one that shields from inspection the features whose spelling out would be unacceptable.

When the engagement unravels, there is a clearing. More generally, when there is trouble of any kind, or hardship, then you can see what a person is about. One might say that any disappointment is a clearing, and then, of course, we return to exposure, limitation, and need. How someone handles them tells what he is made of. You can see what he is really doing, what his life is oriented to. One can bring to language what is going on, one can see through cover-stories. It is possible to disambiguate the more distant goals. Where *A* could lead to *B* or *C*, you can see which one the actor really wanted, because some practical choice has been made, implicit in which is also the choice between *B* and *C*. It is even possible to see which categories matter: whether history, or only nature; whether responsibility is being practiced; whether there is a community of moral obligation or just an ecosystem of cooperative mutual exploitation. A good clearing connects many areas of life, it is a strategic crossing or a hilltop, a place where you can see more than what is immediately at stake. Or it is like a roadcut: Most of us live most of the time in the flat valleys of life, where building and farming are easy, and life is routine and predictable. When pain and trouble throw up hills in our way, and a roadcut goes through the hills, one can see the rocks exposed in the roadcut that underly the valley floor far away.

Abortion, euthanasia, and contraceptives today show how certain strategic disappointments are being handled at the beginning and ending

of life, and thereby they disclose what is happening in the middle. The task of this chapter is to spell out what is going on, and in doing that to expose a major cover-up of commitments that are essentially incompatible with covenantal living.

12.2 Abortion and Euthanasia

One clearing today that shows well what people are about is the unwelcome pregnancy, and with it the decision to abort or not. What is at stake immediately is a human life that is already begun, in the choice whether it shall continue and be born alive. This choice carries implicit within itself further commitments as to how human life is to be regarded morally. The logical extension of abortion appears in euthanasia. Behind abortion stands contraception, inasmuch as abortion is usually practiced as a means of birth control after the fact. Behind contraceptives stand a network of changes in sex-roles and in relations between the sexes that are silently redefined by the permission for contraceptives. These role definitions touch everything else that people do. In this section, we look only at the choices that can lead to killing. Permission for abortion and euthanasia is the criterion of admission to a large and in many ways dominant sub-culture today, because they are necessary for its lifestyle and emblematic of its values. What is at stake beyond the immediate choice for or against a particular human life already in being and on the way to being born are several choices that are made by implication in this choice, or by generalization from it. Most directly, the choice entails some general notion of who is to be included in the community of moral obligation. Proceeding a little further in the logic, one chooses implicitly whether life is to be affirmed unconditionally in spite of its pains or accepted only conditionally, if the pains are not too great. Beyond that, the choice to abort can raise the question whether there even is a community of moral obligation, or instead only some other system of limited social obligations.

In the simplest sense, covenantal religion takes all of life as good, despite its pains. Such killing as is intended to spare the killed one too much pain (and many abortions and all euthanasia fall under this rubric), is then in the simplest and most direct contradiction to covenantal religion: To terminate or prevent a life because its pain level will be too high is incompatible with accepting all life as good, despite its pains. To repeat: to reject a life because it will have too much pain means that one really does not affirm all of life, pains included, as good. When an abortion is chosen to spare the parents pain, rather than the child, the logic is basically

the same. This commitment, that all of life is good, and therefore may not be refused or terminated because of too much pain, has come to be known as the "sanctity of life," but this term is somewhat misleading. For it can extended to cover other issues that are really different, and deserve to be decided on their own merits. (Pacifism, the Just War theory, and the arguments about capital punishment are the obvious issues.) Such an extension does not follow logically, without additional premises, from the commitment I have taken as the hallmark of covenantal religion, that the pains of life do not reduce its worth, however much one would prefer to be excused from them. Since in this chapter I am interested only in using abortion and euthanasia as diagnostic criteria to see how people draw conclusions from the pains of life to a comprehensive orientation to life, I shall say nothing about war or criminal law. The case where the mother's survival is at risk is a little different. But it may be handled consistently with covenant by a permission to put one life ahead of the other, but without gratuitously killing either one. Abortion and euthanasia are clearings in which one can see whether people really do intend to embrace all of life as good, in spite of the pains that come with it.

There are many excuses for permission of abortion, most prominent of which is the thesis that the unborn is not really human in any relevant sense. The subterfuges are transparent. The unborn is clearly alive, and clearly human, in ways that gametes are not, that tumors are not, that human tissue cultures are not. Abortion kills an unborn baby before it can assert its membership in the community of moral obligation (usually in the most basic of ways, with lung exercises). It is said that the unborn is *potential* but not *actual* human life. But the potential for further human life is precisely what distinguishes an unborn child from a tumor or a tissue culture. In the sort of ontology that is capable of making sense of human life (we have seen it in Heidegger, for example), potential for human life *is* human life. Look at the structure of the act in its social setting. Abortion is then a species of homicide, and one unique unto itself, for in no other are so many people involved in such peculiar characteristic ways: the man who got a woman pregnant when she did not want to be, and is not willing to support her; the woman who, by choice or under pressure, is willing to have her child killed; the doctor and staff who do the killing, and family members and peers who can exert pressure to abort. The question in civil law is whether this homicide is wrongful or justifiable. The question in theology is what this killing says about the persons involved, their commitments, and their general orientation toward life.

What is decided immediately is that *this* life is not worth living; whether unworthy of living from the point of view of the parents and

others into whose company the child will emerge, or by a vicarious judgement, from the point of view of the child itself. This is worth some emphasis. There is really no evading the inference about this particular life. If this child's life were deemed worthy of living, it would be allowed to live. That is what is decided in the decision to abort or not.

When someone chooses abortion, there is always some pain or disappointment that is avoided by aborting this child. The increasingly common name for the ethic that abortion is emblematic of is "quality of life," and it means absence of major disappointments and presence of sufficient gratifications. It is in effect a general thesis that the pains of life are barren of good and should thus simply be avoided. The pains may come to the parents, or to the child herself.

Sometimes the pain is exposure: the parents, unmarried (or worse, in an adulterous relationship), could no longer be "respectable," pretend to be virtuous, if the presence of a child makes it clear to everybody what is happening. Here, the child is a clearing in which it is possible to see what the parents are doing. When the child is aborted, the exposure of such a clearing is evaded. Sometimes people pretend to shield the child from exposure instead of the parents. If the child is conceived in rape or incest, then people say that such a child should not be born with the burden of embarrassment that such parentage imposes. I think the real pain is still exposure of other adults, and the claim to be "helping" the child by killing it is just another cover-story. It is one that is remarkably effective in American culture today: terrible oppression can be committed under cover of a claim to be helping the victims.

Sometimes the pain to be evaded by an abortion is a form of limitation. If this child is born alive, the parent(s) will find some activities inconvenient or impossible. Education or career plans will have to be deferred or abandoned. A job may be lost. Travel becomes impossible. The child was not in the budget and makes other planned expenditures impossible. But the limitation can come in another way also, when the child will be born disabled. Genetic anomalies are the most conspicuous example, though other inborn errors of anatomy can also be detected in the womb. Here, in the most direct way, the decision to abort implies that for the parents, certain pains make life unworthy of living.

The child may present needs to the parents, needs they would rather not respond to. It is a drain on their time, resources, attention. I suppose one could also find a scenario in which the aborting parents claim to want to save the child from having to respond to others' needs; but such is less common. I think need refused is the most common reason for abortion, but that is just speculation. To the extent that the aborting adults really intend to act on behalf of the child, with its interests in mind, and are not

just getting rid of an inconvenient other, they imply that one may reject one's own life in view of unacceptable pains. This stance generalizes to euthanasia, as we shall see.

If the mother has been raped, or is a victim of incest, the considerations are basically the same. To be sure, she has suffered a great injustice, an outrage. But the form of the choice is the same: is such a disappointment—pardon the understatement—grounds for aborting the child? Indeed, this example is paradigmatic of the arguments in favor of abortion: for here is the place where the complaint about the pains of life becomes most shrill. Here, it is rhetorically easy not just to take offense at the perpetrator but also to take offense at the child who results from the crime.

The arguments on behalf of abortion in hard cases (and everybody who would abort pretends that hers is a hard case) take the form of "having this child now is simply impossible." But this obscures an essential presupposition of such a judgement. It is of course possible to carry the child to term – but to do so would entail unacceptable costs. The person who aborts, or worse, who pressures another to abort, has made life commitments that are incompatible with a child at this point. Without those commitments it is possible to welcome the child. It is those commitments that we are interested in. Their conditional or unconditional character shows how the person involved handles the disappointments that come with an unexpected and unplanned pregnancy or a disabled child.

The decision to abort works as a clearing. In it you can see an example of the mother's general approach to life, and possibly that of the other adults involved. If the father has abandoned the mother, he is certainly implicated in the decision to abort. For him, the child's needs are simply to be stiffed. His role is largely hidden, though it will occupy us in the next section. The woman who decides to abort (or not) is what we see first: she displays the life orientation that appears in this choice. This is not just a choice to reject one day's disappointment. Because an entire life is at stake, the one who chooses makes in the choice a statement about this particular life taken as a whole. If abortion is considered permissible, then any human life can be rejected because it entails certain unacceptable disappointments. If abortion is not considered permissible, then human life may not be rejected simply in order to avoid one or another pain. Life is (or is not) worth living in spite of its pains. Just as you don't know whether someone likes chocolate or vanilla until you see the person in an ice-cream parlor, you often don't know whether a body affirms life unconditionally until you see it make choices about abortion. There aren't many clearings in life where you can see people deciding not about one or another limited disappointment, but about an entire life

as a whole. The decision to abort shows a basic attitude that underlies every other choice, though it is much harder to draw out of other choices.

Abortion discloses an ethic that goes by the name of "quality of life." The alternative is somewhat loosely labeled a "sanctity of life" ethic. "Sanctity of life" is a loose description because in the end only God is sacred. But in loyalty to the God of radical monotheism, innocent human life, though not to be worshiped, is nevertheless to be respected unconditionally. "Quality of life" is the guiding moral principle of a very different ethic: those with an unacceptable quality of life are aborted or "granted a merciful death." In the implications of its most direct meaning, the term "quality of life" says that some disappointments are to be rejected as barren. If you see people rejecting an entire life in view of some of its pains, you can draw the conclusion that such people have a life orientation that allows such decisions. Indeed, the three little words "quality of life" carry within themselves the doorway to an entire moral universe. The inattentive listener is transported unawares into the ethic of that universe. They are so brief, and contain so much. Such a stance toward life is, so far as I can see, utterly incompatible with the radical monotheist's embracing of all being as good, and all of life as good, in spite of its disappointments.

Parenthetically, when the mother's life is endangered by a pregnancy, the issues are almost as simple. If the unborn is a member of the community of moral obligation, it is impermissible to kill it. People may of course save one of the mother or child at cost of losing the other as beyond reach of saving. In no other situation that I am aware of was it permissible in the inherited ethic in this culture to kill an innocent in order to save others, and there is no reason that I can see why this case is any different. Indeed, in American medicine today, it is almost invariably possible to save the mother's life without killing the child. If, on the other hand, the unborn is *not* considered a member of the community of moral obligation, then the only concern is the mother's quality of life, and the unborn may be disposed of in whatever way best addresses that concern.

Pro-aborts would like us to know how tragic a woman's decision to abort is, though of course abortion should remain morally permissible (and legal). I fail to see how this can be coherent. Leaving the incoherence aside, this sort of rhetoric shows how frail is the claim that the unborn is not human, and it also shows the way to an understanding of the pro-abort position. The abortionist position can be made consistent, though not covenantal. The ancient world accepted slavery, abortion and infanticide. It took for granted gradations of humanness that quite break the notion of differing rights and responsibilities for different ages and roles in a covenantal society that accords a right to life to all. J. Bottum

argues that contemporary abortion and its moral offspring are a modern analog of ancient Stoic ethics, and he names the work of Peter Singer as a competent philosophical exponent of it.[4] Singer characterizes human life as admitting gradations in its worthiness and usefulness, and he sees that an entire ethics is entailed in the permission for abortion. Such an ethics is adopted in fact and in practice before it is spelled out or admitted candidly. In effect, some in the pro-abort movement are seeing what I am claiming, that their position can be made coherent, if coherently partisan of some life orientation quite different from a covenantal one. The pro-abort movement could not afford to spell out its intentions early on, because to do so would alert the remaining covenantal constituency to what was really intended. Now that it is established things are different. It seeks some coherent explanation of its life orientation. It can certainly find one, but it will be a mixture of mimetic, exilic, and henotheistic commitments. My central claim here is that one must choose: one cannot have it both ways, covenantal in name, but tolerating practices that are incompatible with covenantal living.

Abortion generalizes easily to euthanasia. Euthanasia has attracted somewhat more debate inasmuch as people alarmed about abortion were prepared for it, though that has not prevented its slow and gradual acceptance. It discloses what was really begun in abortion. The importance of euthanasia precisely as a clearing has been seen by other people:

> How we deal with illness, age, and decline says a great deal about who and what we are both as individuals and as a society. The growing number of people living to old age and the increasing incidence of depression in people of all ages presents us with a medical challenge. Our efforts should concentrate on providing treatment, relieving pain for the intractably ill, and in cases of terminal illness, helping the individual come to terms with death.[5]

A clear statement of what the response to suffering could be. The growing practice of euthanasia shows what it is, both in action and in presupposed life-orientation commitments.

The move from abortion to euthanasia is based on the simple ground of motives. If it is permissible to kill an unborn because she would have unacceptable quality of life, that motive can be used after birth as before;

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[4]J. Bottum, "Facing Up to Infanticide," *First Things* 60 (1996 February) 41. Singer's argument is concentrated in his *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 1979). It is sometimes utilitarian, sometimes Stoic; cf. p. 125.

[5]Herbert Hendin, "Seduced by Death: Doctors, Patients, and the Dutch Cure," *Issues in Law and Medicine* 10 no. 2 (1994 Fall) 123-168; p. 167.

for neonates with serious medical problems, for the very old with terminal medical problems, and for any with cognitive deficits. All of these can be declared to have unacceptably low quality of life, and can then be dispatched. The key to consistency in the pro-abort and pro-euthanasia campaign is quality of life. Those who don't have it aren't members of the community of moral obligation. This is a radical departure from covenantal religion: for covenant is open to all, simply by being human, and the test of humanity is as broad and inclusive as possible. The only way not to be included in the covenant is to opt out, but such a move neither relieves covenanters of obligations toward people who reject the covenant, nor does it undermine or negate the humanity of those not members of the covenant. And it is of course impossible to exclude people from the covenant except for great wrongdoing (if it is defensible even then, which is dubious).

Those to be "granted a merciful death" (in the Nazi phrase) present in some way disappointments that are rejected as barren, and which are in any case inseparable from themselves as persons. The only way to reject these disappointments is to stiff or just kill the persons presenting them. Need is more prominent than exposure or limitation: these people are needy. Usually they need lots of medical care, but sometimes what they really need is assistance that would enable them to live independently when institutionalization seems cheaper or would transfer the burden of their care from family and "friends" and put it on paid professionals. But this assistance is only the surface, and the aspect that can be quantified. Suffering presents need at a more fundamental level; for the suffering need solidarity, and responding to them is a form of co-suffering. Co-suffering happens already when the suffering other is merely acknowledged as a fellow human, one of whom I am a part, and who is part of me. It is this co-suffering that is rejected and refused by those who would abort the disabled unborn and kill the disabled born in the name of "death with dignity." But it is willingness for this co-suffering that is precisely the mark of consistency in radical monotheism. We saw this in the end of ELN, Part I; the one who believes that all of life is good, pains included, believes this of another's pains, and is accordingly willing to share in those pains. Even if the other has Down's syndrome, spina bifida, Alzheimer's, terminal unconsciousness, or some other cognitive deficit that makes it difficult or impossible to "appreciate" life as the able-bodied (or able-minded) do. And willingness to dispatch these people is a clearing in which you can tell whether someone is doing radical monotheism and historical-covenantal religion or something else with his life.

Euthanasia became debatable in America in the 1980s as it never was before. Richard John Neuhaus wrote about it in 1988, with extensive

comment on the rationales offered.[6] In effect, the motive, to take control over human life rather than treating it as a gift, is the key to the movement, and it is no surprise that the efforts to legalize contraceptives, abortion, euthanasia and "mere" eugenics have all been allied. The desire to impose total human control has its home in exilic instincts. Treating life as a gift, on the other hand, imposes some restrictions on what can be done to the living.

The project of control has been extended in America by gradual stages, pushing the limits of the acceptable, waiting for opposition to the formerly unacceptable to dissipate, and then pushing the limits again. This was not how it began. Euthanasia became an issue only after life-extending techniques became available in the 1950s and gave some measure of control over dying that was welcome in some cases, morally ambiguous or burdensome in others. At first, doctors gained some measure of control over the process of dying, and then patients (or more accurately, prospective patients) sought to gain for themselves some of that control. Carlos Gomez gives an account of the changing practices to 1991.[7] Lost in the technological changes was the ability to differentiate between allowing death and causing death. With that loss of discrimination there seems to have been a sure instinct for actions that tacitly reorient human life without spelling out the implications of those actions.

Parenthetically, this should remind people of the philosophical complexity of the notion of causation. In particular, it is not something delimitable simply by giving an account of the physical motions or an appeal to effective causation in the sense understood in physics. Human involvements are ontologically pivotal, and they are subject both to human judgement and to a marvelous subtlety of discrimination. The empiricist and rationalist philosophies inherited from the Baroque period are virtually helpless to illuminate the issues in human action, euthanasia in particular. The utilitarian philosophy inherited from the nineteenth century has in an opportunistic way moved into the void left by latter-day baroque philosophy and promoted a moral syllabus quite different from the ethics inherited from the covenantal traditions before the Enlightenment. The metaphysics of human action has serious consequences for how life is lived.

The beginnings of the recent movement to legalize euthanasia were

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[6]Richard John Neuhaus, "The Return of Eugenics," *Commentary* 85 no. 4 (1988 April) 15. The term "eugenics" seems too narrow, but the larger movement of which it is emblematic has ambitions that are all-inclusive.

[7]Carlos F. Gomez, *Regulating Death; Euthanasia and the case of the Netherlands* (New York: Free Press, 1991). See the first chapter for a history and a guide to other sources with more details than he gives.

somewhat later, and at first not widely approved. Derek Humphry, an early and persistent advocate, founded the Hemlock Society in 1980 to promote euthanasia.[8] The real changes, however, have not been made by people candid, systematic, or organized about what they sought, but rather by individuals facing painful choices and going to law to get what they wanted, without a long-range vision of the implications of their requests. A few hard cases have received extended national media coverage, but there has been slow and steady progress toward more and more killing through court cases that go unnoticed.[9] It is by these that the defenses of life have been worn down and permission to kill extended by incremental rationalizations. One step often contains hidden implications that will be declared only after it has been consolidated, as grounds for the next step.

Since 1990, there have been several ballot initiatives in the Western states, thought to be the most liberal and most likely to approve them.[10] These have been styled in variations of a "Death With Dignity" Act, and all would allow doctors to prescribe lethal drugs to terminal patients who requested them. What was not generally known even by voters who turned down these initiatives everywhere except in Oregon was that previous court decisions give a conservator unlimited discretion in substituted judgement; thus an incompetent patient could "request" suicide through the judgement of his conservator.[11]

Every ballot initiative has included elaborate assurances of safeguards against misuse, and the proposed safeguards have always been shown to be easily subverted. More importantly, the proponents of euthanasia have implicitly conceded that abuse is possible: the elderly and the ill could be encouraged to avail themselves of this "right" and thereby eliminated as a drain on other people's attention and resources. That would be only the beginning.

"Medicide," as Jack Kevorkian has called it, could become the treatment encouraged by insurance companies, simply by balking at any other treatments. Availability of easy suicide and euthanasia would make it permissible to neglect or abandon patients thought to have insufficient

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[8]Cf. Derek Humphry, *Final Exit: The Practicalities of Self-Deliverance and Assisted Suicide for the Dying* (Eugene, Oregon: The Hemlock Society, 1991). The movement web-page as of May, 2001: http://www.rights.org/deathnet.

[9]Daniel Avila, "Medical Treatment Rights of Older Persons and Persons with Disabilities: 1992-93 Developments and Emerging Trends," *Issues in Law and Medicine* 9 no. 4 (1994 Spring) 345. This article continues a series.

[10]Initiative 119, Washington, 1991; Proposition 161, California, 1992; Measure 16, Oregon, 1994. More recently, Proposition B in Michigan failed in 1998. A measure similar to Oregon's law failed in Maine in 2000.

[11]The relevant cases are Conservatorship of Valerie N., 219 California Reporter 387 (1985), and Conservatorship of Drabick, 245 California Reporter 840 (1988).

quality of life. There is today a widespread prejudice against people with major disabilities. When such people express an interest in suicide, that desire is viewed as rational, where it would not be in an able-bodied person in a similar situation.[12] Their needs impose a burden on others' time and resources and on others' openness to co-suffering. The move to get rid of them is of course disguised as accommodation of their rights or as mercy or compassion. Compassion is the most outrageous cover-story, for compassion is exactly what encouraging suicide is not. Com-passion is just the Latin for co-suffering, but it is unwillingness to enter co-suffering that leads people to call assisted suicide compassion.

Significant increase in killing has been effected by blurring the distinction between ordinary and extraordinary care. Starvation and dehydration have become morally permissible, construed as withdrawal of the extraordinary care that is implicit in feeding through a naso-gastric tube. (Why is this extraordinary, when it is easier than feeding by mouth?) But starvation and dehydration are ugly, especially when the patient is conscious. And so, once they are generally accepted, they will lead to active euthanasia when lesser means won't work. If death is desired, and action to achieve that end is permissible, the most efficient and painless way to achieve it will of course be sought. Once again, the governing motive is to relieve those in power of the burden of co-suffering that is imposed on them by the one being starved and dehydrated.

The Netherlands provides a window into what is ahead for America, for it has tolerated widespread euthanasia for some time. It began informally around 1973 and became widespread in the 1980s.[13] It was never legalized during its career in the 1980s and 1990s, but the Dutch courts turned a benign eye toward the practice, with the worst penalties being nominal. Usually there have been no penalties at all. Indeed, prosecution has been extremely rare. Judicial precedents in the mid-1980s legitimized a general consensus in which euthanasia is tolerated.[14] (The Dutch Parliament has since ratified the Netherlands' judicial practices.) What is striking about the Dutch practice is the degree to which the act of killing has been subsumed under the language of healing, care for the patient. This was indeed a consequence of the way in which euthanasia was legitimized: through judicial opinions, which must of necessity give

[12]Cf. Carol J. Gill, "Suicide Intervention for People with Disabilities: A Lesson in Inequality," *Issues in Law and Medicine* 8 no. 1 (1992 Summer) 37; and Paul Steven Miller, Esq., "The Impact of Assisted Suicide on Persons with Disabilities—Is it a Right Without Freedom?," *Issues in Law and Medicine*, 9 no. 1 (1993 Summer) 47.

[13]Gomez, p. 16.

[14]Gomez, pp. 36–40.

a rationale for their decisions. Judges were still in some sense bound by the inherited Christian and covenantal ethic that forbade killing of the innocent, and so the practice had to be characterized in other ways. (Here again one can see the crucial import of H. L. A. Hart's distinctions in "The Ascription of Rights and Responsibilities.")

By the late 1980s, the Dutch practice of euthanasia had attracted misgivings and become generally known, if not openly acknowledged. The authorities wanted to ascertain the extent of the practice, and also to articulate a judicial rationale for it that could be openly acknowledged by the courts. An investigation was undertaken, published in 1991, surveying the activities of the year 1990.[15] It has become known as the Remmelink Report, for J. Remmelink, the Attorney General who chaired the committee. An analysis in English has been made by Richard Fenigsen.[16] The Report in its conclusions gives assurances that are quite at variance with the numbers supplied in its body.[17] It is clear that the incidence of euthanasia in the Netherlands has become quite significant, measured as a fraction of the total number of deaths, and especially as a fraction of those deaths that were leisurely enough to permit medical attention. What is more alarming is that it is commonly active rather than passive, and it is frequently non-voluntary (the patient is unable to request it), and even involuntary (the patient was competent and could request it, but was not even asked).[18]

Now compare the German practice during World War II, in the project to simply eliminate all persons with disabilities or cognitive deficits. It makes a quite striking contrast with the later Dutch experience. There was not much historical attention to it from the end of the war until the 1980s, when euthanasia became a live issue in other countries. Whereas in the Netherlands, euthanasia has been informally pioneered by doctors and rationalized afterwards, in Germany, things were somewhat different. Though it was carried out by doctors, it had original involvement by the National Socialist party and received articulated justification beforehand. Among the recent accounts are those by Hugh Gregory Gallagher and Michael Burleigh.[19] In September 1939, Hitler signed a secret order

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[15]*Report of the Committee to Study the Medical Practice Concerning Euthanasia*, I., and *The Study for the Committee on Medical Practice Concerning Euthanasia*, II., 2 vols. (The Hague: 1991),

[16]"The Report of the Dutch Government Committee on Euthanasia," *Issues in Law and Medicine* 7 no. 3 (1991) 339-344.

[17]Fenigsen, p. 340.

[18]Fenigsen, p. 342. Cf. also John Keown, "A Decade of Dutch Euthanasia: 1984-1994," *Catholic Medical Quarterly* 44 no. 4 (1994 May) 5-11.

[19]Hugh Gregory Gallagher, *By Trust Betrayed: Patients, Physicians, and the License to Kill in the Third Reich*, 2nd ed. (Arlington, VA: Vandamere Press,

allowing doctors to "grant a merciful death" to those who were carefully certified to have incurable illnesses.[20] A secret center for granting permission for euthanasia was set up at Tiergartenstrasse 4 in Berlin, and the program accordingly became known as "Aktion T-4."[21] It continued formally, though still officially secret, until August of 1941. All manner of chronically ill were sent to six centers and usually killed upon arrival.[22] Even wounded veterans were "granted a merciful death." Word got out, as was inevitable. Field Marshall Keitel complained to Hitler that T-4 was hurting morale on the Eastern Front.[23] Clemens August Graf von Galen, Bishop of Münster, denounced the program from the pulpit in July of 1941, and Hitler verbally ordered the program halted.[24] While it was officially in operation, it killed more than 120,000 disabled in Germany by its own count, though the real number may well be over 200,000, inasmuch as the population of mental patients in 1939 (300,000) was reduced to 40,000 in 1946.[25] More grotesque, T-4 pioneered the use of gas chambers disguised as showers, a tool scaled up for use on the Jews in Eastern Europe.[26] Families were notified, but with a false cause of death, and an excuse for cremation.[27] Ashes were sent to next of kin. Sometimes two sets.[28] Sometimes to families with living relatives no longer in hospitals. No wonder word got out. What is perhaps most appalling is that, although the National Socialist party gave permission, encouragement, and administrative support, it was done entirely by the doctors.[29] Though "formally" ended in 1941, the program continued informally. The last of the killing did not stop *until three months after the end of the war*.[30]

The biggest contrast between the T-4 program and the Netherlands in the 1980s is that the German doctors were centralized, methodical, and candid about what they were doing, at least among themselves. (They made every effort that the "patients" not realize what was happening to them, lest they "become excited.") In the Netherlands, as in America

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1995). Michael Burleigh, *Death and Deliverance: Euthanasia in Germany, 1900-1945* (Cambridge University Press, 1994).

[20]Cf. Gallagher, p. 15.

[21]Cf. Gallagher, p. 27; Burleigh, p. 123.

[22]Cf. Gallagher, p. 66

[23]Cf. Gallagher, p. 39.

[24]Cf. Gallagher, p. 196-202; Burleigh, p. 176 f.

[25]Cf. Gallagher, p. 86.

[26]Cf. Gallagher, p. 67.

[27]Cf. Gallagher, p. 80-82.

[28]Cf. Burleigh, p. 164 f.

[29]Cf. Gallagher, pp. *xv*, 25–26.

[30]Cf. Gallagher, p. 206.

more recently, it has been decentralized, without government support, not in the least methodical (yet). But it bears some emphasis that it was the German doctors who did it, the National Socialist Party merely suspended the law of murder. There were fewer cover-stories and more lies to protect the program. There was ideological preparation in eugenic theory, both in Europe and America. That preparation was no doubt greatly accelerated by the virtual hounding of Jewish doctors out of the profession early in the National Socialist years.

It is encouraging that protest worked when it was tried, and discouraging that it was tried so seldom. The existence of the program was generally known within the profession; it is not as if the doctors were ignorant. Most doctors who were invited to send their patients to be killed or to participate in the killing did so. Those who declined were respected, not punished or disadvantaged in any way. In fact, the T-4 Program went out of its way to exempt the patients of the few doctors that expressed opposition. Had the doctors and the churches protested more consistently, or protested on behalf of Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, Seventh Day Adventists and others, perhaps more killing might have been stopped.

A contrast will place the situation in America today. Richard Rubenstein traces what may be called functional genocide through the English-speaking world in an essay in *After Auschwitz*.[31] Economic changes devised and enforced by fiat in England in the sixteenth century (the enclosure of previously public grazing land) created an economically superfluous population which was managed locally to some extent. Mostly, it was eliminated by exporting it, some to America, more to Australia. In both places, the immigrants in turn displaced the aboriginal populations. The English establishment treated the Irish no better; the population of that oppressed island was reduced substantially by British policy in the nineteenth century. The signal contrast between the German and English-speaking examples is that the Germans knew what they were doing, whereas the English and their colonists were "self-deceived" in the sense of Herbert Fingarette: they did not spell out. The Germans spelled out. Rubenstein distinguishes between a genocidal society and a genocidal state. The difference is one of spelling out at the level of state policy.[32] Euthanasia in America will not spell out what it is doing, at least not at first, and not so long as there is a sizeable Christian dissent. Rubenstein's lesson drawn repeatedly throughout his survey of many genocides is that

[31] "Modernization and the Politics of Extermination; Genocide in Historical Context," in *After Auschwitz*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

[32] Cf. Rubenstein, p. 126.

those excluded from the community of moral obligation can simply be eliminated. Where there is no God, there are only political rights, and membership in the community of moral obligation is not automatic, but may be lost or removed. Conversely, to the extent that membership in the community of moral obligation is automatic and open-ended, the society is covenantal. In a functional sense, it is loyal to the God of radical monotheism.

These observations should serve as ample warning that self-deception and cover-stories will abound in any killing programs in America, as indeed they have. Look again for a moment at the prerequisite for self-deception, the ability to conduct an engagement in life without spelling out what is going on. That is to say, without looking at the goals and motives. This is a very remarkable ability—to get from here to there, never having been there before, without what we might have thought are "essential" features of *knowing* what is there. It is an ability to size up a situation, even innocently, for what its next potential is, and to proceed on to the next, and the one after that. When initial choices have been covered up, or not recognized, they can carry implicit within them many of the later choices. There is a common metaphor used to describe this phenomenon, especially in the context of the killing in abortion and euthanasia. It is the "slippery slope": wherein (or whereon) one has made moral commitments that are not obvious at first, and which seem benign or compassionate at first but which nevertheless commit one later on to activities that were formerly thought to be evil. Or at least deprive one of a consistent reason to resist those formerly evil activities. The analogy of a slippery slope well captures the human experience of moral bewilderment and offers a very wise caution that the implications of choices are often not seen at the start. I think the concept of self-deception is more useful than the analogy of a slippery slope, if less economical with words, because it tells something about the process that the analogy cannot. The remedy for acting while self-deceived lies in the fact that people can take responsibility for what they have done, spelling it out after the fact, even when they did not spell it out at the time. And notice of the ability to conduct activities without understanding all that is involved in them is pretty much required in order to understand cultural change. In the present case, we see a drift over the last three or four centuries away from historical-covenantal living and back to mimetic and exilic living, much of which was not really spelled out at all well.

Some particular cover-stories tell important things about the lifestyle of abortion when they are unraveled. Cover-stories work, of course, because the unborn child cannot speak, and so cannot claim its place in the community of moral obligation. Mere lung exercises by the baby

are sufficient to claim its place, and so an abortion must be done before that claim on others can be asserted. Responsibility is an activity, and a dialogical one, wherein one party asks of another, "What are you doing?" When this is impossible, because one party cannot speak, the one who cannot speak can be taken advantage of. When I was in rehab learning to live with a T-12 spinal cord injury (not very disabled, and very articulate), I watched many hemis, who typically had severe speech problems. Often, they were just taken care of, out of practical necessity, rather than asked their wishes. And this was by staff whose dedication and appetite for co-suffering were heroic and unimpeachable. With people who are less inclined to accept the burden of others' suffering, others who cannot speak often get very bad treatment. When someone cannot speak, his relationships with other people can be repudiated with impunity. But even then, a cover-story is usually necessary to save the appearances with third parties.

There are many cover-stories that simply rename the unborn child as less than human or less than a person in order to cover up the fact that a human being is killed, but these are easily penetrated. Others are more instructive.

For example, the "unwanted child," as in the slogan "every child a wanted child." I. e., let us abort all the children that will not be wanted. The hidden assumption is that the parents' wanting or not is decided unconditionally and will not be changed when the child arrives unplanned, as many do. This shows a stance of unwillingness to want the children that come, and thus unwillingness to meet the need they bring.

This is one step away from aborting a child because its life will have unacceptable pains in it, a rationalization that appears again in euthanasia. To say that life is not worth living on behalf of another about to be aborted, indeed, to decide such questions on behalf of another at all, is an act that makes sense only in a community of moral obligation, a community in which people have something in common beyond mere citizenship. One person's joys and sorrows are another's as well. To claim to decide for another in the case of abortion is then a cover-story designed to ward off those who would assert a community of moral obligation. To simply kill another who is inconvenient is what you do to someone who is not a member of the community of moral obligation. And so all attempts to appear covenantal simply witness to the residual prestige of covenantal ethics.

"Forcing women to bear children" is the accusation hurled at pro-lifers. But who got these women pregnant when they didn't want to be pregnant? And who abandoned them, unwilling to care for them? Getting a woman pregnant when she doesn't want to be strikes me as

serious wrongdoing, but it is never called wrong in this culture. There was a man involved, and he is invisible. (Which, of course, says the cover-story and the not spelling out are very effective.)

What is covered up: abortion gives men all the choices about sex and leaves women with choices only about what to do with the baby. Some of these choices have been made already with contraceptives, and abortion removes any remaining ambiguity in those commitments.

"Abortion is between a woman and her God, not something a man has any say in": This is a variant with the same purpose, to keep the male invisible. It appears to be generous to the woman, but in fact it abandons her and evades male responsibility. The act of abandonment decreases her choices, contrary to the appearance of increasing them.

The most common cover-story: "personally opposed but pro-choice." This shifts the question from whether abortion is right or wrong to who should decide, and even has the effrontery to pretend to be pro-life. It dodges responsibility in the simplest sense of stopping the conversation in which those involved in abortion would have to answer for their actions. It is a way to approve of abortion without having to admit as much.

Some cover-stories are embodied in a policy rather than mere words, and an example is the desperate search for benefits to be derived from abortion. Fetal-tissue transplants are offered as a cure to many ailments, prominently among them Parkinson's disease and (maybe someday) spinal cord injury. If only a third-party clientele can be found who will complain loudly if abortion as a source of transplant tissue is taken away, it will become that much harder to displace abortion from American culture. In a way, this is an example of a larger plan to implicate as much of society as possible in the "benefits" of abortion, to make it impossible to return the common ethic to the days when abortion was thought wrong. But the fetal-tissue transplant cure for Parkinson's has been denounced as effectively a scam.[33] The dubious clinical prospects for fetal tissue transplants ought to raise suspicions about the project. Look at the moral rationale for the motive. The tacit offer made to the disabled is, "If you give your blessing to the abortion that supplies the tissue, you can be cured." I. e., if you will buy into a quality-of-life ethic, you can have quality of life. If you were of the persuasion that life is an intrinsic good, independent of its pains, you will of course have to give up that stance; but the change will never be spelled out, no one need say

[33]Cf. William M. Landau, MD, "Clinical Neuromythology VIII: Artificial Intelligence: The Brain Transplant Cure for Parkinsonism," *Neurology* 40 (1990) 733; and "Clinical Neuromythology IX: Pyramid Sale in the Bucket Shop: DATATOP Bottoms Out," *Neurology* 40 (1990) 1337-1339. These were part of a larger series.

anything about it. The radical depth of the offer made to the disabled does not show itself on the surface. If one willingly benefits from abortion, the quality of life ethic that one implicitly buys into reconstitutes one's life orientation. One affirms life only conditionally, and then only when one is in control, and not as a gift that has an integral coherence waiting to be completed. To do this is to turn away from one's own being as it is given by God; to turn away from the relationship that makes a human creature all that he is. An offer with these implications is called leading people into temptation.

As it is, every abortion involves more people as beneficiaries than would readily be apparent. Both parents, often not married to each other, are only the beginning. Both sets of grandparents can be pleased that their children are not burdened with a child who would inconvenience them. Also the wider circle of friends who participate in common activities that are incompatible with having a child just now. All are involved, all have commitments that we call "lifestyle" that require access to abortion.

12.3 A Technology of Disrespect

Hints along the way in the discussion of abortion have suggested that there is more behind abortion than just belated contraception. Or perhaps there is more to contraception than just preventing a pregnancy. Contraceptive technology is necessary in order to support certain kinds of lifestyles. Those lifestyles have an orientation that is consistently different from those of people who do not use contraceptives. Contraceptives might seem a needless (and dubious) digression. But even if abortion itself is the clearing in which one can see what people are doing with their lives, the decisions and commitments are already made with contraceptives. For contraceptives are visible dimly at the edges of the clearing constituted by abortion. If abortion is repudiated but contraceptives are still condoned, I contend that the essential premise beneath abortion is still granted. People structure their lives in ways that cannot receive children when they use contraceptives, long before they decide about abortion. When contraceptives are permitted, access to abortion is a necessity.

The differences between life with and life without contraceptives only begin with attitudes toward new human life implicit in the effort to prevent conception and still engage in sex. The conduct of other engagements with life is profoundly shaped by decisions about children. One frequently has to forego other activities in order to make time for children, or to afford the cost of raising children. These are considerations for men as well as for women. Less obvious is the way that children color

other activities that one does engage in, work most prominent among them. If there are children, the purpose of work is in large measure to support them. If there are no children, work must find other purposes, and the work one is willing to do may change accordingly. This is less obvious for men, but also more profoundly true for them. A woman will often subordinate work to children in terms of scheduling, choice of job and career advancement. A man will bear a work-load with boredom, pains, and hardships for the sake of children that he would not for his own sake alone. The larger purposes of work change for men as well as women, even when the work would not be any different. To some extent, these contrasts can even be seen in degrees, as when there are more or fewer children. And where not only are children refused but sex happens without the commitments of marriage, the basic orientation of the contraceptive lifestyle shows itself most clearly.

The most striking clue to emerge from the discussion about abortion was the invisible man, the one who gets women pregnant when they don't want to be pregnant and who is not there to support them afterward. (Pregnancy is spoken of with a circumspection that likens it to a contagious disease, not something that requires an act from two people.) There is good reason to suspect that in the 1960s, when contraceptives were first widely available, people saw intuitively what they implied, although those intuitions were quickly silenced. They are captured in the dictionary definition of a term used to describe a man of low character, "scumbag." Its first meaning is a condom; its second is a base or despicable person.[34] Clearly the original meaning was just a physical description of the implement of contraception, and it was then extended to describe the character of the man who uses such a tool. A scumbag (person) is a man who uses a scumbag (equipment) in order to get his pleasure and then be gone when it's time for responsibility. While it is coarse and vulgar, it is not unprintable, especially since the first meaning has largely been forgotten. The inherited morality instinctively saw contraception as a technology of disrespect and said as much in its characterization of those who used it.

Earlier in the recent history of contraception, I think it would have been rationalized in ways that minimize and conceal its connections with other parts of life, as "just" a means of timing the birth of children. Today, its connection with the central commitments that shape human lives has been admitted candidly by the Supreme Court in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*. Speaking of acts leading to or preventing conception, the Court

[34]Oxford English Dictionary (1989). The usage cited is from the period 1967-1977.

said,[35]

> These matters, involving the most intimate and personal choices a person may make in a lifetime, choices central to personal dignity and autonomy, are central to the liberty protected by the Fourteenth Amendment. At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life. Beliefs about these matters could not define the attributes of personhood were they formed under compulsion of the State.

Speaking of any attempt to treat abortion for contraceptive purposes as just an occasional tool for transient purposes, and subject to regulation with limited and containable effects on life, the Court a little later said,

> But to do this would be simply to refuse to face the fact that for two decades of economic and social developments, people have organized intimate relationships and made choices that define their views of themselves and their places in society, in reliance on the availability of abortion in the event that contraception should fail.

The Court recognizes that contraceptive abortion is not just an occasional tool used for limited purposes, but is instead the fundamental means of ordering and shaping entire lives and a whole society. It does not say much about the shape that contraceptive commitments give to the lives of those who use them. Indeed, it artfully covers up that shape. The purpose of this section is to inquire into that life orientation.

Abortion and euthanasia, the practices that have preoccupied us in the previous section, do not just happen, without connections to the rest of life. They are the symptoms that disclose the orientation of entire lives. At the center of that lifestyle are human relationships, and the Court speaks of them as "intimate" relationships, but this too is a cover-story. It does not mean loving and close, but rather merely sexual, and casual at that. Essential to this attitude is the ability to reliably foreclose the possibility of a baby. Contraceptives are not entirely reliable, and so even if they were used consistently, abortion would be necessary as backup.[36] As it happens, women do not use contraceptives consistently, often because to do so would in effect spell out to themselves that they are sexually active,

[35]I found the text of the Court's opinion (through a search via yahoo.com) at the Case Western Reserve University ftp site, ftp.cwru.edu, in the directory /hermes/ascii, in the files 91-744.*, in the file 91-744.ZO.filt.

[36]In this exposition, I am following Janet E. Smith, "The Connection Between Contraception and Abortion," *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* (1993 April) 10-18.

something that they would prefer not to face.[37] Once again, we see the working of self-deception, and the spelling-out occurs in action rather than in particular words. (And why should a man use a contraceptive? He has nothing to lose, and it would both diminish the pleasure and also cut through the romantic illusion that this is a "committed" relationship. Again, self-deception triumphs over "prudence.") Contraceptives enable the relationships, attitudes, and moral character that are likely to lead to abortion.

Those relationships have been explored in some detail by George Gilder, in *Sexual Suicide*, since revised as *Men and Marriage*.[38] The commitments that shape and order human lives are centered in marriage or the lack of it. The reason for this is the difference between male and female sexuality. The man's sexual horizons are short-term and directed toward merely releasing immediate sexual tension, and that in the only sexual act the man is capable of. Woman has many sexual acts, intercourse being only one; she conceives, bears, suckles and raises children, all activities with intense sexual gratification and fulfillment. They are activities with a long-term horizon of meaning. "She can perform the only act that gives sex an unquestionable meaning, with an incarnate result."[39] Male behavior, left to itself or carried on with women who do not insist on commitment, is diffuse and unfocused, a lust for immediate gratification or for power, with no long-term goals. Why should there be long-term goals? In the end, we die. Only by giving life to the next generation could there be long-term goals, and that activity is at a woman's disposal. She has the power to grant or withhold sexual favors, and the children are hers in a way that cannot be taken away. They are his only if she allows him access to them.

It is this difference that necessitates the institution of marriage. The woman is endowed with a biologically inherent predisposition on which culture can be built; the man is not. He can serve culture, and do so magnificently, but it is not in his biology. It is women who have interests in long-term horizons, planning ahead, taking thought for the next generation, and the disciplines necessary to achieve those goals. Males can interfere or cooperate, but the natural male biological pattern is transient, here today, gone tomorrow. That does not foster social

[37]Smith's claim at this point is based on the research of Kristin Luker, *Taking Chances: Abortion and the Decision not to Contracept* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975).

[38]George Gilder, *Sexual Suicide* (New York: New York Times Book Co., 1973), and *Men and Marriage* (Gretna, Louisiana: Pelican Publishing, 1986). The basic dynamics of sex and marriage are laid out in the first chapter, with the general consequences for society as a whole.

[39]Gilder, *Sexual Suicide*, p. 9.

stability. "Women domesticate and civilize male nature."[40] Where they don't, civilization weakens and crumbles. The long-term horizons of women are universal, in every culture known to anthropology.[41] Whether men submit to female sexual horizons of meaning or not is variable; but they are always dominant in one way or another, constructively, if they submit to women, or destructively, if they do not.

Gilder goes on in the rest of the book to show how the choice for or against male-pattern sexuality colors every activity in society, including those thought to be "public," especially in the world of work. The ideology of the sexual revolution is the interchangeability of men and women in all roles, as a redress of injustice to women in the past. And any inequality of role definition is treated as injustice, with no regard for the differences in male and female psychology and abilities that those role definitions were informally designed to respect. But the myth of an ideal equality is a cover-story; it covers up a male chauvinism, the idea that the traditional male roles are better, and so women should have equal access to them (only fair!). But it is the irresponsible male ways that are idealized, male work that is "self-fulfilling," rewarding in both the personal and fiscal senses, but rewarding without reference to supporting children. In truth, most male work is not very self-fulfilling; it is endured in order to support wives and children. This work was (and much still is) necessary in order to keep an economy going. It is a fact of life that some necessary work will sometimes be difficult, dangerous, boring, or otherwise "unfulfilling."

Where there is enough money to support the sexual revolution, the pathologies are bad enough. The most prominent is divorce. In its wake follows damage to children. Less obvious is serial polygamy and the abandonment of aging divorced women by men who would deny the realities of aging. Quite apart from the consequences of divorce, the birth rate is less than replacement levels, a trend whose long-term demographic implications are simply ignored. At the top of the social ladder, the strong men get multiple women, whether openly, in serial polygamy, or covertly, in extra-marital affairs. Weaker men are edged out of the market for marriage, as are older divorced women, who are no longer able to start a marriage capable of bearing children.

Where there is not enough money to support the sexual revolution in the lifestyle to which it aspires, the children are either pregnant or in jail, and the rate of illegitimacy is high. Drugs, teen pregnancy, sexually trans-

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[40]Gilder, *Men and Marriage*, p. 12.

[41]Gilder, *Men and Marriage*, p. 11-12, is dependent upon a study of 190 societies by Clellan S. Ford and Frank A. Beach, *Patterns of Sexual Behavior* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951).

mitted diseases, crime to support drugs, and crime as male self-assertion against a society that gives boys no constructive way to become men all plague urban life. In ghettos the underclass is beyond the reach of the law. Unemployment, poor academic performance, and poor job performance are the rule when products of the sexual revolution can get jobs at all. Welfare dependency is widespread. The pathologies of adolescent males arise from absent fathers. There are no role-models of responsible, constructive male maturity. The fathers have been economically cuckolded by the welfare state, because welfare payments compete favorably with the working wages available. Welfare thus structured works in the same way as contraceptives: it excuses people from responsibility. It is no surprise that it should arise at about the same time, coming from the same moral orientation.

It is interesting that the public culture and the establishment are resolutely deaf to assertions of any causal connections between these phenomena and contraceptives or welfare that subsidizes unwed mothers. Or at least deaf to any connection that is intrinsic to the acts involved. They will listen only to surveys and statistical correlations. By now, the correlations are not favorable to the sexual revolution. Inability to reason about the connections between goods intrinsic to acts and their larger consequences comes from an impoverished metaphysics of human action. Unwillingness to reason about such connections comes of course from a desire not to spell them out.

The remedy of the ideologues of the sexual revolution for male-pattern irresponsibility is more "equality of the sexes." It is committed to interchangeability of the sexes in all roles and advocates it as the solution to the problems of male dysfunction, to be enforced on men if necessary. In view of the essential differences between male and female sexuality and the changes a man must make in order to fit into the long-term goals of a woman, bringing women down to the level of men by using contraceptives to redefine their sexuality on male terms is exactly the wrong thing to do. It is the license and not a disincentive for male irresponsibility.

The liberal ideologues cannot or will not see the differences between men and women, or the role of female commitment to long-term stable relationships, or the need to respect differences intrinsic to sexuality. Their over-arching goal is short-term sexual indulgence, what covenantal living would call male-pattern irresponsibility, an abdication of the commitments of generative sexuality. It is the women who demand morality, if it is sought at all. (Urban pathologies have shown how hard it is to enforce what is not first legitimated; in the language of the tripartite anthropology, the second function cannot substitute for the working

of the first.) And since about 1960, American women have been led into temptation by the men who invented contraceptives, and enough of them bought into male-pattern irresponsibility that the sexual revolution became a reality.

Gilder's analysis is directed only to promiscuous sex, not to the contraceptives and easy abortion that make it possible. But even so, it a striking confirmation of the philosophical thesis that human acts acquire their meaning in the terms of the larger stories into which they are fit. How acts fit into larger life-stories is not just an arbitrary fabrication in which they can be made to mean anything (or nothing) at all. The meaning of acts is inherent in the goods sought within the acts themselves, by virtue of which acts fit logically into the lives they are a part of.[42] At the same time, and in a reciprocal way, the goods inherent within particular acts both shape the larger life they fit into and are themselves defined by the shape of that life. This is the structure of a hermeneutical circle, in which the parts and the whole derive their meaning from each other. Thus male-pattern sexual activity, with short-term goals of release from sexual tension rather than integration of sex within longer horizons and service to other people, works to color not just entire lives but also the culture they are a part of, and ultimately, its history as well.

In the light of Gilder's analysis, one can say that the immediate purpose of contraceptives is to take away a woman's last reason to say No. The larger purpose of contraceptives and abortion was to launch the sexual revolution. By separating sex from conception, a woman no longer has a reason to wait for commitment before bestowing sexual favors. Where commitment is no longer necessary, promiscuity soon follows. Male partisans of the new sexual mores will of course say that contraceptives are a technology of respect, and not disrespect: "I would always use a condom, out of respect for her." This is a cover-story, and what it covers up is the tacit assumption that he will get his sexual pleasure in any case, or terminate the relationship if she still says No. (In the context of such rhetoric, it can safely be taken for granted that these people are not married.)

The unspoken reality is that the balance of power in negotiating for sex has shifted to the man, and that it will be fully exercised to his advantage. And so what the pretense of responsibility covers up is a relationship of profound disrespect for the woman. The central dynamic of the woman's body is to be turned off or circumvented in order that the man can have his pleasure. This disrespect corrupts and corrodes

[42]It is possible, of course, for an act not to fit, to be a surd, irrational or meaningless in context. An act that doesn't fit into the intended shape of a life can only be reintegrated into a coherent life by a later act of repentance.

every human relationship that it touches, and directly or indirectly, it eventually touches every human relationship. One kind of disrespect begets another, and disrespect spreads like a cancer. The reason why I would call contraceptives a technology of disrespect is that wherever there is respect by the man for the woman, contraceptives are not necessary. A husband who doesn't know what time of the month it is need only ask. One who doesn't know and won't ask is not a gentleman. That disrespect is *intrinsic* to contraceptives can be further shown quite easily, by simply imagining a somewhat different technology: a reliable fertility meter. Put your finger in the electronic clothespin, and it will show one color light for fertile, and another for infertile. Today, such a technology is imaginable simply by shining a laser through the finger (much as blood-oxygen meters do already) and measuring the blood chemistry by the spectrum of light that passes through. Then the responsibility of both man and woman would be totally clear. (More likely, such a technology would take away a woman's last reason to say No only two weeks out of every four. Still, such an idea shows the existing technology for what it is.)

I once suggested a tax on men who get women pregnant who don't want to be pregnant—as indicated by the fact that they abort. An experienced counselor in the pro-life movement said to me that the women would never identify the men, because they felt so abused they didn't want to see the men ever again. My conjecture on the real import of contraceptives was amply confirmed. In effect, contraceptives have re-defined sex roles. All men are defined to be date-rapists, and this society persists in the delusion that it is possible to be a gentleman date-rapist: one who gets his pleasure while convincing the woman that it is all voluntary on her part. It appears not to be manipulative, because the manipulations are carried out not by anything the man says, but by the mere availability of contraceptives. No words are spoken.

James Davison Hunter has seen some of this and misunderstood some of it. He avers, in a chapter entitled "The Distortions of Interest; What Activists Would Rather Not Talk About," that each side in the abortion debate has an agenda that it would rather not spell out. He sees correctly that men who would rather not be held responsible have a tremendous stake in easy abortion:

> [T]hough women's organizations are most visible in the defense of abortion rights, public opinion polls regularly show that males in their early twenties are among the strongest supporters of liberal abortion laws. Thus we see that men are quite relevant to the discussion—but what do they have at stake in the issue? . . .

> Liberal Abortion policy has created a climate where men can enjoy sexual relations with little or no concern for consequences.[43]

Hunter quotes Catharine MacKinnon with agreement,

> Sexual liberation in this sense does not free women, it frees male sexual aggression. The availability of abortion thus removes the one remaining legitimized reason that women had for refusing sex beside the headache.[44]

He does not suspect the connections with anything beyond sexual promiscuity, certainly not with family structure and the social pathologies that follow on its breakdown. That is probably why he thinks that pro-life men have an interest in forcing women to stay home and take care of children, that pro-life men seek to keep women economically dependent on men. This is just backwards. The purpose of marriage is not to keep women home, it is to get the *men* to stay home, instead of roaming free with no enduring loyalties of any kind other than transient pleasure. Abortion and contraceptives completely undermine efforts to get men to be responsible. If Gilder is right, and the record of social pathology amply supports his case, Hunter gravely misunderstands the dynamics of bargaining power in marriages and the changes the man must make to sustain one. For the burden of change falls on the man, not the woman. As for economic dependence on men, just who has the upper hand at home? To put it a little differently, if the woman won't give the man something useful to do at home, like bring in tangible economic support, of what use is he? Why should he stay? It is pure delusion to think that significant numbers of men will compete with their wives on the ground where the wives are superbly capable and men are not, the care and physical nurture of children.

The delusions appear in the world of employment outside the home also. Despite considerable encouragement, women have on the whole not attempted to displace or even compete with men as primary providers for the family. When they work outside the home, they have sought work that could supplement income but still be subordinated to their primary role at home. The sexual revolution has been resisted in individual terms

[43] James Davison Hunter, *Before The Shooting Begins; Searching for Democracy in America's Culture Wars* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), pp. 70 and 74.

[44] *Before the Shooting Starts*, p. 72. Catharine MacKinnon, "*Roe v. Wade*: A Study of Male Ideology," in Jay L. Garfield and Patricia Hennessey, eds., *Abortion: Moral and Legal Perspectives* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), p. 51.

where people could. Changes in the structure of the work-force have come not from the sexual revolution but from the industrial revolution. Married women usually take full-time jobs only out of necessity, because of desertion, divorce, death, or scarce earnings of their husbands.[45] Given that women participate in the work-force less than men, feminists have cried discrimination against women, as if any differences between work patterns of women and men must come from sexism. But women are not discriminated against, they simply discriminate in favor of their families. Any proposal that women could undertake large-scale movement into male roles in society without damage to the social fabric has a large burden of proof in face of the dysfunction caused by family breakdown. That burden of proof has not been discharged. Where women have been forced to abandon traditional female roles in the home, as by government tax policies in Sweden, the results have been disastrous.[46]

If one surveys the shift in power relationships between men and women over the course of the sexual revolution so far, it bears a very disturbing comparison to the power shifts that Richard Rubenstein characterized as genocidal in England of the sixteenth century and after, when the commons were enclosed and the rural lower classes deprived of pasturage. In England at the dawn of the modern world, some classes gained at the expense of others, but irresponsibly in the sense that they did so in ways that undermined the common interest and undermined the fabric of relationships built on that common interest. Each loser class in turn was then offered a chance to exploit those even worse off. Those rendered superfluous and dispensible—left without practical options other than crime—were eliminated, either by transportation to the colonies or by execution (in Ireland, by famine). Those shifted down were by degrees shifted out of the community of moral obligation. Today, the winners are males interested in "self-fulfillment" rather than work subordinated to the support of a family, and of course also those few women who can participate in male-pattern irresponsibility. Weaker men and various groups of women are shifted down in power, and the lowest, the unborn and increasing numbers of the aged, infirm, and those with inconvenient medical problems, are simply eliminated.

One class or constituency can gain at the expense of another only after there has been a change of the standards by which people reckon gain and loss, the concepts by which people understand commonality of interest, if indeed there is any. Where before there was a community of

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[45]George Gilder, *Men and Marriage*, p. 141.

[46]Cf. *Men and Marriage*, pp. 151–154. Chapter 13, "The Jobs Front," is devoted to the feminist misinterpretation of the statistics of female participation in the work-force.

moral obligation because people thought themselves to be a part one of another, there was afterward no such common human existence. Before, one would not harm or disrespect another, because to do so was to harm or disrespect oneself. The older ethic at least put limits on the mistreatment of others, even if it did not entirely prevent it. After the power-shift, there were only opposing interests that were of necessity reckoned in selfish terms. This has been documented in quite concrete terms with regard to the decade just *before* the advent of easy contraception. A change in attitudes was noticeable, a postponing of marriage, in order to enjoy one's prospects without being burdened with wives or children. (Burdened? Instead of blessed? The shift was carried in the words themselves.)[47] Accompanying the desire not to be burdened with children was a revised assessment of the role of women as mothers, and a very negative revision it was. The roots of feminism in the 1950s took male roles to be better, and then the roles left to women naturally appeared to be oppressed. Where limited choice in prior decades served to foster strong families in a way that was worked out instinctively over centuries, after the shift in presupposed goals it just restricted pleasure, hence was characterized as oppression. There was indeed a silent shift in the assumptions that undergirded any moral characterization of social norms. Their daughters quite reasonably asked to be admitted on equal terms to the roles perceived to be not "oppressed." The assault on motherhood, one mounted by feminists, was never questioned in the "establishment" press, because the prestige press was itself committed to feminism. In that change lay the seeds of the sexual revolution, a turning away from living dedicated to passing on life to the next generation, living with long-term respect for one's own mortality, responding in sacrifice from motives of gratitude.

A shift in how acts and human lives are characterized as radical as this one betokens a shift in a communally shared basic life orientation. It should be possible to interrogate such a shift in theological terms. We have already seen the parallels with Stoic and utilitarian ethics, in the discussion of euthanasia, wherein human life is by no means always to be respected as a common thing shared throughout a community of moral obligation. In the Epicurean companion to the Stoic movement, the ideal was moderate self-indulgence, cultivation of the intellect, and pleasant culture with friends; a life that could be sustained only on the backs of others' labor. Both Stoics and Epicureans sought escape from the pains of life rather than find blessings in them.

They were a stage on the road to Gnosticism, and the Gnostic color of such ethics soon appears in the modern social world. George Gilder

[47]Orania Papazoglou, "Despising our Mothers, Despising Ourselves," *First Things* 19 (1992 January) 11-19, esp. p. 14.

called his first book on the sexual constitution of society *Sexual Suicide*. I thought its title was unnecessarily lurid, but it was certainly accurate. The later version of it, *Men and Marriage*, has a more neutral title, if one that no longer carries its thesis on its spine. Hence Gilder's original title. It indicates a refusal to order one's life to the passing on of life. When this refusal comes from motives of self-indulgence, it may not yet be fully gnostic. When it legitimates itself by deprecating generative sexuality and the labor of passing life on to another generation, gnosticism has become candid. For the essence of Gnosticism is in rejecting the world we live in, with its labors and pains, even if only a part of the world is rejected. It seeks escape from a world of sacrifice for kids and acceptance of mortality to a world of self-indulgence, supported by others, in defiance of mortality (and of the realities of economics). Gnosticism has looked on society as a small minority of the enlightened in a large mass of the un-enlightened. (In the 1970s and 1980s, the terms would have been "consciousness-raisers" and "consciousness-raisees.") Gnostic elites have little basis for regard for the unenlightened, for the unenlightened are not really capable of being saved. They can then be exploited with impunity.

A historical-covenantal ethic starts from affirmation of this life in a world of human mortality. It seeks to respond with gratitude for the gift of life, and here already is a basic difference from Gnosticism. Gnostics aspire to become self-made men, where covenanters are willing to make something of the lives that have been given to them. Covenant will order its life to the passing on of new life out of gratitude. In the Mishnah, every activity that is central to life takes on a religious meaning: its beginning, its end, its sustenance, and its procreation. In a way not so clearly regulated and ritualized, the same can be said for Christian ethics.

The center of a covenant, the community of moral obligation, the command to love one's neighbor as one like oneself, shows itself in the rule of chastity. The heart of chastity is remarkably simple, and it is something that is not obvious in today's world. It is not mere abstinence from sex outside of marriage, for that rule, while necessary, would not remotely capture its spirit. An Anglican monk of the Order of the Holy Cross, Bonnell Spencer, once reflected on the traditional monastic charisms and concluded that the motor or engine of each of them was a form of respect.[48] Chastity is respect for others. One does not say or do to another something that in the light of respect for the other would harm or take advantage of the other, or lead the other into temptation, or even push the other too far beyond the other's abilities.

Natural family planning then emerges as the embodiment of respect,

[48]Bonnell Spencer, OHC, "The Vows," *Holy Cross Magazine*, 9 no. 3 (1970 Autumn) 7-8.

first because it is respect for the woman's body. That respect is contagious and spreads to all areas of life, eventually to all human relationships.

12.4 Never Too Late to Choose Life

It is never too late to choose life.

Hard as it may seem, having an abortion does not mean that one is forever excluded from the covenant of life. The implications of an abortion for the shape of one's life are not irrevocable. They can be changed.

How offensive to secular moral instincts! Wrongs either don't matter, or they are unforgivable. There is nothing in between. Change of character is both impossible and forbidden.[49] (You can't have it both ways, but colloquial instinct can't see that.) Wrongdoers are required to confess, but not allowed to repent, not permitted back into the company of respectable people. Exposure is not allowed to be gracious.

But as we have seen in sections 10.3 and 11.4, on the metaphysics of human action, the meaning of an act can be changed after the fact. It is changed as it is fitted into the changing narrative of a human life, and beyond that, the changing narrative of a covenant in history. There are limits imposed by the past—but they in no way preclude repentance and restoration of one's moral self to the covenant community. What cannot be changed is the motions of the act, and so repentance can sometimes come at cost of great pain. It is labor to turn one's self around. But in every other sense, repentance is free: as a promise commits one (a mystery of language philosophy not well explored), so a mere few words of repentance can commit one to the covenant once again.

What an act means depends on the context in which it is interpreted, and that context is first of all the life within which it fits. As that life unfolds, the act of an abortion can be changed from something that is emblematic and constitutive of an entire life orientation into an aberration, an occasion of grief. It is also an occasion of grace: it becomes the event that turned someone around as her life unfolds in its aftermath. To speak more generally than just about an abortion, what happens is that an act by degrees seems not to fit comfortably into one's life. It becomes a surd, irrational, meaningless in context. This is the dark enigma of sin, and sin is ultimately inexplicable, because as the horizon of meaning is expanded to a whole life and then to history, it does not fit into any scheme of meaning. Proximately, sinful acts have partial explanations, but they are ultimately refractory to integration into a covenantal history. An act that

[49] Cf. above, section 10.3.

doesn't fit into the intended shape of a life can only be reintegrated into a coherent life by a later act of repentance. As in all hermeneutical circles, the interpretation is tested when the horizon of interpretation is expanded to larger and larger contexts of meaning. An act that formerly made sense can become first ambiguous and then pose real problems. When one tries to fit it in, it becomes clear that it can be fitted only at cost of reorienting one's life.

Consider concretely the process of distress, remorse, and repentance after an abortion. Others would like to minimize the woman's natural grief at the loss of her child. If the child had been welcomed, and stillborn, her grief would be enormous. But in the same loss after an abortion, she is not supposed to grieve at all—because for others to allow that grief would open up hard questions, of their own complicity as well as her guilt. Such grief counseling as may happen will be carefully structured so as never to spell out the issues that are hardest to face. When she does begin to spell out, it is a time of psychological and spiritual shock. If it is mitigated by taking it in small doses over time, it can be a protracted agony. Denise Mari has called it a "Judas complex":

> Like Judas after he handed Jesus over to be killed, she feels ashamed, sorrowful to the point of death, and enraged at herself and the others who participated in the killing of her child. The woman is frightened and sickened by the knowledge that she is capable of an evil as great as allowing her own child to be mutilated in her womb. . . . She experiences a grand-scale identity crisis marked by a profound change in her vision of herself.[50]

In her thirst for justice, the woman who has had an abortion may judge herself rather than letting God judge—and save—her, in exposure and repentance that can transform her life. It is not public exposure; the rubrics for confession I think forbid a confessor to require a penitent to disclose publicly. Yet the truth faced with another person saves in a way that nothing in the privacy of one's own mind can ever do. After confession, an appropriate penance becomes a celebration in the thanksgiving of freedom. When a woman has been through post-abortion counseling, and feels free to speak openly, there comes a great relief, a great freedom. I have heard one woman finish her story with belated thanks to her unborn child, brief though the sojourn of the unborn child was, for the blessings after repentance which that child brought at supreme cost to itself.

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[50]Denise Mari, "The Judas Complex: A Stumbling Block to Post-Abortion Recovery," *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* 95 no. 1 (1994 October) 24.

Exposure is usually only partial in the beginning; one seldom sees all parts of the failed engagement with life clearly at once. Indeed, the offer of grace is typically the last thing to show itself. And an abortion is usually a symptom of some larger engagement that has problems; after all, there was a man involved, and if it was not rape or incest, he participated in what was in all likelihood a common failure, and a complicated one too. He may not be willing to participate in the repentance. In the beginning of the attempt to unravel things, it is not clear how to tell the story faithfully. There is usually no shortage of devils, those who would tell the story in ways that offer only damnation, confoundment without possibility of redemption.

And it takes time, often years, to work through the personal change. Norma McCorvey took twenty years, Bernard Nathanson almost as long.

But a long journey begins with a single step, and if the start is clear, it is never too soon to embark. There is a passage in the end of Paul Tillich's sermon, "You Are Accepted," that captures the turning point. In a time of "despair [that] destroys all joy and courage,"

> Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: "You are accepted. *You are accepted,* accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. *Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!*" If that happens to us, we experience grace. After such an experience we may not be better than before, and we may not believe more than before. But everything is transformed. In that moment, grace conquers sin, and reconciliation bridges the gulf of estrangement. And nothing is demanded of this experience, no religious or moral or intellectual presupposition, nothing but *acceptance*.[51]

In ELN, section 4.3, I dwelt some on the test of consistency in the monotheist's commitment to embrace the pains of life as bearing blessing. That was more obvious in the case of limitation and need than exposure. But it applies to exposure too: The pain and shame of exposure is shared by the whole Church, however discreetly in respect of the confessional. The righteous are saved in spite of their righteousness, just as sinners are saved in spite of their sins. And all are sinners.

[51] Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Scribners, 1948), p. 162.

This is the mystery of teshuvah, the re-signifying of acts after the fact, integrating the broken parts of the world into one good creation.

There is grace even for the liberal mainline denominations; they may yet see the covenantal consequences of the history that they are uniquely in a position to understand. For they are the custodians, for better or for worse, of critical history, and critical history shows the way to recover a pro-life covenantal ethic with a radical depth that even the Fundamentalists and Ultramontanists, though far more faithful in these matters, have not suspected. Yet.

Part IV

Languaging Providence

Chapter 13

Covenantal Language

13.1 Taking Stock

At the beginning, there was only the insight, confident yet little more than a hunch, that the defining and peculiar mark of monotheistic faith is its trust that all of life is good, disappointments included. This was made concrete when its radically historical character emerged in ELN, Part II. The alternative religious orientations emerged at the same time. In Part III came the problem of how to engage the providence of God in life and history. What an analytical frame of mind takes as a problem of knowledge, epistemology, the Bible and recent phenomenology treat as a problem of human action, and so knowledge is constituted by human involvement and commitment at its most basic level. And action involves language, for the principal questions in making sense of human action were all questions about how to situate it in narratives.

Language was present in ELN, Part I only implicitly, and even that implication was seldom visible. In ELN, Part II, language was present visibly, but usually very much in the background. In Part III, language advanced to the role of first supporting actor. Here, in Part IV, it will be the lead actor.

This section will prepare the way for making language thematic by reviewing the first three Parts of the book, in aid of showing both the progress of the argument and also the emergence of language. John Courtney Murray's four questions from *The Problem of God* have given this book its structure, and the problem of religious language is the last of those questions. How may one speak responsibly of God, and how may one hope to speak successfully of God? As I have said many times,

the focus has been turned from God to providence. We shall come, in the last chapter of Part IV, from providence back to God.

At the beginning came the central theological commitment: all of life is good, pains included. Not much about language, and only hints of the theology to come. In section 2.1, we saw Murray's four questions, of which the last inquires into whether it is possible to speak of God or not. The problem is that God is both present and absent at the same time, and the presence is a presence-in-absence. Language should reflect this; it will not be like speaking of the presence or absence of bananas in the produce counter at the local grocery. There is then a certain reticence in speaking about God, and indeed, this has been one of the motives for focusing the book on providence rather than on God directly. The name of God reflects this at the most basic level: "I shall be with you as who I am shall I be with you," and the disclosure of this name to Moses twice in Exodus is treated there as the occasion of a profound change in the history of religions. In section 2.2, I stipulated that the work would be confessional and not apologetic, and this logic has ruled the exploration throughout. This is a distinction about a discursive practice, and it shapes how entire religious communities conduct their lives, and how they relate to themselves, their neighbors, the world, and their ultimate focus of loyalty. Aquinas was Murray's guide, and his explanations place a tremendous burden of anxiety on the believer. We can know not very much about God. Unless we can make affirmations that are true, we cannot say the Other is with us—yet God escapes all our concepts. All of the activities in this section were linguistic, though language was not thematized there. It was a plea for some discursive practices, and against others. Along the way, it came out that confessionality is related to responsibility, and responsibility, an essentially discursive practice, has been one of the major themes of the book. It came to prominence in Part III. Confessional language of God is apophatic, speaking in negations, yet speaking truth; it is polyvocal, not univocal; it speaks in irony and analogy; and language discloses and conceals at the same time. Yet language was not thematic, only the logic of confessionality was. These claims were then only promises, some yet to be redeemed.

In section 2.1, the basic structure of faith appeared: confidence, loyalty, acknowledgment. Of these, only the last is visibly a discursive practice, and here the role of history was glimpsed, though not yet explored. The performative way that language commits one in faith was not noticed. Loyalty is a matter of action, beyond just words. Language did not have a role in the rest of the chapter: neither in H. Richard Niebuhr's typology of polytheism, henotheism, radical monotheism, nor in the experience of broken faith that calls forth the possibility that there might be

unbroken faith.

In chapter 3, the exploration of the roots of the Trinity in the structure of Indo-European languages, language was pivotal, but never the focus for its own sake. Here, the title themes of the book were introduced: exposure, limitation, and need. Of these, only exposure calls forth a response that is primarily in words, acknowledgment of the truth in the face of exposure. The "I did it" contains more than was there apparent; but there was there no hint that "I did it" means something different in natures and histories. In sections 3.2 and 3.3, the tripartite ideology emerged as a phenomenon correlated with a certain family of languages. But even here, language *in and of itself*, in its workings as world-creating, was not thematized. At the very end of section 3.3, the reversals contained in the monotheistic transformation of life were mentioned, and with them a sense of irony, to which we shall come shortly.

In chapter 4, we sought mostly to clarify misunderstandings that almost inevitably arise. Of these, only the problem of defending God involved language in any direct way. In keeping with the intent to remain confessional rather than apologetic, any attempt to defend God was identified as logically counter-performative, a phenomenon of language that we shall explore shortly. But language itself was never thematized there.

ELN, Part II was an inquiry into *how* God might be providing good in human life, once it is assumed *that* he is. History became the leading actor in the conceptual drama. History is the locus of disclosure, and also the ontological center of the intentional structures that make human life human. Of these, disclosure will always have a strong linguistic element. We saw then only hints of the role of language yet to come. Heidegger was our pilot at the start of the exploration of history, but only that; he was out of his depth in navigating the long voyage that ended with Troeltsch's problems and their solution. Heidegger was notoriously half-baked in his early understanding of language (and elusive in his late work). It has fallen to others to explore the phenomenology of language, and with a few exceptions, it became thematic only in Part III, and then not in a leading role. Yet even Heidegger knew that language was ontologically primordial, that it creates man, rather than vice versa. As Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann have it in *The Social Construction of Reality*, one receives self, language, and a world together as a package.[1] And language is the vehicle for the package.

In chapter 6, we expanded Niebuhr's typology of religious options into Westphal's, and the entire typology was based on the contrast between history and nature. Narrative there had a different structure in histories

[1]Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Doubleday, 1966). Cf. pp. 133 ff.

and natures, though that claim has yet to be redeemed fully. The beginning of the differences came out in the seven lessons of the Exodus. Of these, the last was the injunction to study history. It may initially have seemed counter-intuitive to put such emphasis on a study-practice. The claim of the importance of studying history was worked out in the particular examples of chapter 8, on the history of Christian anti-semitism, and explored in general in the labor of Part III, relating human action to the larger narratives it is to be fitted into.

History had the leading role in ELN, Part II, but history is a discursive practice as much as it is the narrated events themselves. This came out in chapter 7, in the exploration of analogies drawn across history, principally in typology. Typology is a species of analogy, and analogy in a constructive role first appeared here. (Analogy appeared in a critical role in chapter 5, in Troeltsch's canons of historical method, and there presented a problem that was not fully solved until chapter 9.) It was impossible to explore analogy without attention to its linguistic features, and so the inquiry of chapter 7 was announced at the start as trespass on the area of Part IV. Above all, analogy is the use of language from the past to make sense of the present and future. Along the way, irony appeared again in the example of the Monty Python movie *The Life of Brian*. We have yet to fill out the correlation between irony of language and the transformations in the labor of embracing exposure, limitation, and need. In section 7.2 we saw analogy as challenge and invitation to responsibility, because it can work as disclosure. For the first time spelling out as a discursive practice appeared. And challenge is an essentially linguistic phenomenon, though it was events that made the challenges in chapter 7. Section 7.3 was devoted to the evasions of history. Language is always the medium in which one evades or comes clean before history, but language, as usual, was not thematized; the focus was merely on strategies for living. In section 7.4, on a responsible liberty of interpretation, responsible action took on a narrative and conversational structure, but language then receded in order that the choices in a responsible liberty of interpretation might themselves come to front and center.

In chapter 8, we reviewed a particular history in search of grace. The working of language was only tacit there. It was a re-working of the particular history of relations between the Church and the Synagogue, in order to seek exposure, and beyond it, reconciliation. As such, it was an example of what was to come in Part III, the relocating of events in a narrative re-told in the act of repentance, the re-creation of the meaning of human actions after the fact. Analogy shows itself as a form of discourse, in the stance toward the world that is embodied in the confession, "Such and such disappointments in the past ended in blessings (the Exodus, the

Exile, the disasters of the first century), and we trust that it will be so in the future."

Language became thematic in a subsidiary way in chapter 9, whose central purpose was to address the problems raised by Ernst Troeltsch. Language shows itself in analogy, and given that analogy is the most important characteristic of religious language, it is no surprise that analogy should appear at almost every phase of this book. In the center of Troeltsch's problematic, the historical individual is held together by analogies across history. This was the stepping-off point for Part III, attending in detail to the process of holding an individual together in action.

Part III began with John Courtney Murray's third question, about religious knowledge, and turned it into an inquiry into human action as the locus where real knowledge is to be found. The constitution of human action turned out to involve language in the most basic way. Here we turned from the speculative to the practical, from the patristic, medieval and Baroque philosophical problematic to the biblical and post-baroque existential problematic. The pivotal insight appeared with Joseph Soloveitchik, in the dynamic of repentance, the reshaping of human life. Repentance is first a linguistic activity, and this was the harvest of Part III, though not its theme. The meaning of an act can change after the "fact," and human language is essential to this possibility.

In chapter 11, we explored some analogies between action in general and speech acts and texts in particular. Language carries the meaning and constitution of acts. Here language became thematic, if not yet at center-stage. It was the principal supporting actor. And it was in section 11.1 that cover-stories and spelling out appeared. In section 11.2 acts in time showed a deep parallel with texts, and we turned to Paul Ricoeur for guidance. Acts, like texts, grow in meaning over time, and text is the model for all human actions. Section 11.3, on action and life-orientation, touched the difference between narrative in mimesis and history. Emplotment is different in mimesis and covenantal history. Section 11.4, on conversion of life, showed along the way an emphasis on conscious and deliberate attention to history, with examples of how one can transform human concerns by attention or inattention to history. We shall focus in Part IV on the discursive side of that attention.

In chapter 12, we began, in section 12.1, with a detailed exposition of self-deception and the role of not spelling out in it. Herbert Fingarette was our guide. A clearing in life is a place where you can see what is going on: spelling out takes place here, and indeed, it can even create a clearing. Spelling out is obviously a discursive activity, yet its role as language was secondary to exploring one particular clearing where much

of contemporary culture is brought to its central choices for or against covenantal living.

Thus we have come to language as itself of critical importance. It has figured at every stage in the exploration of the life of monotheism. Often it has attracted attention to itself. The rest of this chapter will begin the exploration of language for its own sake.

Several features of the language of monotheism are striking when one recognizes them. The literary genres of sacred texts in religions all over the world show many similarities. The hymns of the Rig Veda read very much like the Psalms, when inspected merely as sacred poetry, though the theologies of the two collections are noticeably different. In other ways, however, the literature of biblical religion and the language of its partisans are peculiar. The first feature is so vestigial as to be easily missed: language which affiliates the speaker with one or another known figure in history ("The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob"). The second feature is silence, and silence before the mystery of the divine is not unique in radical monotheism, but it will play a characteristic and pivotal role there. The third of our initial features is irony, and it will express the radical transformation of disappointment into blessing that we began with. It will carry its own hazards, too, for irony can be misunderstood or stood on its head very easily. We shall come to these initially peculiar features of the confessional language of historical-covenantal living, affiliatives, silence, and irony, in section 13.4. They would be very incomplete by themselves, for they always occur in a larger context of narrative, even if the larger narrative is only implicit and not spelled out on one or another occasion. The larger framework of narrative is peculiar in the ways it animates historical religion. We shall come to this in section 13.5. It will open the way to the two following chapters.

Section 13.2 will appear at first to be a digression. It is not. It is necessary to understand aspects of performative language theory that have not to my knowledge been developed elsewhere, for they figure prominently in the dynamics of the language of radical monotheism. It can happen that a performative speech act as a practical matter does the opposite of what it purports to do, and I shall in the next section call such language "counter-performative." To say the least, such language can be dangerous and misleading. Section 13.3 will apply the concept of counter-performative language to examples within the life and practice of latter-day biblical religion. Affiliatives, silence and irony work, among other things, to meet the hazards of counter-performative language. The problem of counter-performative language will appear in sections 13.2 and 13.3, and it is necessary to explore it first.

In chapter 14, we will return to the problem of history and nature, and

the differences between narratives in the two sorts of living. It will move from that difference to the ways in which transcendence gets languaged in covenantal living.

In chapter 15, we will focus on analogy and end with some thoughts on the step from the problem of providence to God, on how to speak of God himself. These tests, asking whether it can challenge and whether it can be held responsible, are the central tests of success in the language of radical monotheism. John Courtney Murray saw them in a slightly different form in *The Problem of God*.[2] He poses them in terms not of providence but of God, and it will be helpful to take the problems in stages instead of moving directly to God. If you claim to know more than you can know, what you know is not God but something intra-mundane. If your language does not reach God in any sense at all, then God is not with us, and one has failed in another way.

13.2 Counter-Performative Speech Acts

Some years ago, I essayed an exploration of performative speech acts that do the opposite of what they appear to do.[3] I have reworked some of it here, with a little less attention to theoretical rigor in the interest of brevity and a little more of the presuppositions of speech-act theory for the general reader. It will give us enough to deal with the theological issues that arise in the life of historical-covenantal monotheism. We shall focus on commissive speech acts, though the other possible speech acts will appear as well.

John L. Austin saw that where assertions can be only true or false, there are kinds of utterances that do things, and they can succeed or fail in ways other than by being true or false. Hence the notion of speech-*acts*. He called them happy and successful, or infelicitous and defective. In John Searle's systematization of speech act theory[4] the emphasis was always on articulating the conditions for success.

One of the distinctions presupposed in this literature is that between locutions, illocutions, and perlocutions. A locution is simply what was said. An illocution is what was done *in* the saying of it, and the perlocution

[2]PG, p. 62 and passim.

[3]"Counter-performative Speech Acts." The paper was originally posted at an ftp site in Japan, phil-preprints.L.chiba-u.ac.jp, but has been converted to html and now may be found at http://www.jedp.com/counterp.t.

[4]John Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969); *Expression and Meaning* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

is what was done *by* the saying of it. Thus, "I'll be home by eight with a pizza" is fairly straightforward as a locution, but in saying it, in the simple logic of the sentence, one promises to be home with pizza. By saying it, one may accomplish many things in context, but first of all, of course, the promise plays a role in the conversation in which it happens. The distinction between illocution and perlocution focuses on the difference between the logical action-structure and the working out in fact of the utterance in question. Our interest will focus on speech acts whose perlocutionary effect is intended to be quite the opposite of their illocutionary logic, even if this intent is never spelled out. Discursive practices in the lives of religious bodies can use such contradictions quite effectively to achieve certain interesting goals. We shall see some of them in the next section.

Self-defeating speech acts were explored initially by Daniel Vanderveken,[5] but nothing was remarked beyond the logical structure of their failure as illocutions. It was not suspected that they could be effective and successful as perlocutions. To turn to such speech acts as successes is to turn from illocutionary theory to the study of perlocutions, but the perlocutions in question turn on their illocutionary structure, and so require attention to that structure. Such speech acts need not be vicious; irony is in some sense a self-defeating speech act.[6] When they are objectionable, remedying them usually requires dissecting their illocutionary incoherence. This is a problem, because the inconsistency of the parts of a compound and self-defeating speech act is usually concealed. (It must be concealed, if the illocutionarily self-defeating speech act is to succeed as a non-ironic perlocution.) Let us call self-defeating performative speech acts that work at some level as perlocutions *counter*-performative speech acts. When the counter-performative character of a speech act is obvious, it is ironic; when it is not, the speech act is usually pathological in some way. This section will focus on speech acts with concealed counter-performative character; we shall have some remarks on irony in section 13.5.

To see how some counter-performatives work, consider the following. In a legendary example of a counter-performative, it is said that one of the Three Great Lies is,

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[5]"Illocutionary Logic and Self-Defeating Speech Acts," in John R. Searle, Ferenc Kiefer and Manfred Bierwisch, eds., *Speech Act Theory and Pragmatics*, (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1980), and John R. Searle and Daniel Vanderveken, *Foundations of Illocutionary Logic* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), esp. pp. 148 ff.

[6]When Searle analyzed irony, in "Metaphor" (in *Expression and Meaning*, esp. pp. 112–116), he defined it from the hearer's knowledge in context that the speech act is to be interpreted in a sense *opposite* to its ostensible meaning.

I'm from the government, and I'm here to help you.

This purports to be more than a statement, an offer of help, though it is incidentally also a statement. It is taken as a classic example of a lie, but the problem does not arise from its being counter-factual. *S*, the speaker, is in fact from the government. And he intends business in the life and affairs of *H*, the hearer. But not what the hearer would call "help." It is performative, inasmuch as the social worker does something in saying it (by implication, he offers help), and it goes awry in ways that are characteristic of performatives that are not just assertions. This much has been noticed before, though this sort of utterance has not attracted much attention but has been taken as a theoretically marginal and degenerate instance of performative language. Performatives that work were treated as more interesting than those that don't.

In fact, it *does* work: It does *exactly* what it is intended to do, which is to apply persuasion to the welfare client in a way that is more economical and more effective than patient reasoning, orders, or threats. (And if there is no compliance, the one making this "offer" appears to be in a much better position to apply coercion, because the welfare client is apparently being ungrateful or acting against his own best interests if he does not cooperate.) While appearing to be an offer, an offer of help, this utterance is in fact not an offer at all, but a form of pressure, manipulation. It is a performative that purports to do one thing, but in fact does something quite opposite: a counter-performative. Its effectiveness, its performative force, *requires* its counter-performative sense; its perlocutionary effect of being coercive pivots on its illocutionary appearance of being an offer of help, and on the silent failure of at least some of the conditions for the non-defective performance of such an offer.

Both the social worker and speaker, *S*, and the welfare client and hearer, *H*, know that *H* is in trouble, that *H* has no bargaining power, the appearance of no reasonable options beyond accepting the "help" that *S* offers. It is background information that is played upon in the counter-performative, and it characterizes one act as another: what it calls help is in fact meddling, interference, directing the life of *H*, forcing *H* to comply with the requirements of the Welfare Department, imposing *S*'s hierarchy of ends and order of means on *H*. It is persuasive because the social worker is here to take charge; that is the way welfare works. This persuasion is effectively coercive, because of the limited options of the prospective welfare client. As such, it is directive. In effect, the inconsistency can be exhibited quite simply: "I'm from the government (the preparatory condition for a directive, reminding the hearer of the government's intrinsic power to coerce), and I'm here to help you (a commissive whose illocutionary force is inconsistent with coercion)." A

social worker once admitted the truth, when dealing with elderly clients, for whom "help" means total loss of independence in a nursing home: "I can't tell you the countless numbers of people we've had to, well, brainwash to get them to accept services. They always think it's a step toward nursing homes."[7] In choosing the word "brainwash," the social worker has come as close as it is possible to do without using the technical language of speech-act theory to admitting that his speech is counter-performative.

While counter-performatives are not theoretically central to the logic of *il*locutions, they are crucial to the pragmatic understanding of the same utterances when considered as *per*locutionary acts. Formal performatives, whose illocutionary sense cannot be twisted after the fact, are a defense against counter-performatives. Formal performatives commit the speaker in one way or another, whether sincere or not, and sometimes even without happy preparatory conditions. It is because of the generally understood possibility of counter-performatives that formal performatives are necessary at critical commissive junctures in life (marriages, contracts, induction into various roles). This is the simplest way of defending against counter-performatives in everyday affairs.

The speaker who engages in counter-performative discourse knows how this sort of speech act works, even though he may not be willing or able to spell it out or explain it. He has the skill of counter-performative speech acts, included in which is the opposition between the ostensible illocutionary force and the probable (and intended) perlocutionary effect. All this may be "unconscious"—he does not spell it out to himself—but it is still done with great skill, and so has to be accounted as intentional. It can in principle be held responsible. In no way does the skill of counter-performative speaking require being able to *explain* (even to oneself) that one has misfired in one performative act and has instead effectively performed some other speech act. It is not that the illocutionary force has been literally transformed. But when the speech-act turns on its implications, by way of filling the preparatory conditions for yet other speech acts, its perlocutionary working may indeed not only extend beyond but in fact be in conflict with its illocutionary force. Indirect speech acts, as Searle has observed, are accomplished when the conditions for one speech act are supplied in the performance of another.[8] If a statement or question provides the preparatory conditions for a request or other directive, it may be taken as such. In the question "Can you pass the salt?," the preparatory condition for a stronger directive is satisfied (a

[7] *Wall Street Journal* CXXVII, no. 110 (1992 December 3), p. 1.

[8] "Indirect Speech Acts," in *Expression and Meaning* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

request, not just a question), and by convention, the question counts as a request. Thus an apparently simple speech act may, in its implications, count for much more.

It is difficult to believe that one could utter a performative of the form "I command you to do *A* and I forbid you to do *A*" to any useful perlocutionary end. But the only thing standing in the way of the usefulness of such a counter-performative is its transparently obvious character. We have seen already in chapter 12 several examples of such discursive strategies, the most blatant being those by which some bodies seek to appear to be pro-life while in fact supporting the liberty of abortion.

Are there reasons why a speaker could issue a performative that is implicitly and covertly of the form "do *A* and don't do *A*"? It relieves him of responsibility, no matter what the hearer does. Which member of the counter-performative conjunction is concealed will be chosen so as to maximally conceal the speaker's responsibility. If *A* is dangerous, and *S* does not want responsibility for harm to *H*, it is easy to imagine a plausible context for such a counter-performative. In a similar way, the speaker may appear to promise one course of action (to satisfy demands of some hearers) but effectively intend his words to support another and inconsistent course. We shall see many of these in the next section.

Let me exhibit another suite of counter-performatives from everyday life. It will illustrate how an entire conversation can go awry. In a common multi-speaker counter-performative, it is a grave strategic mistake to give a telephone salesman reasons for declining his offer. Who has not had a telephone salesman call, offering "Eight weeks of the *Tri-Valley Gossip* free, you pay only for the Sunday edition . . . "? After declining the offer, the recipient will next hear, "*Why* don't you want our bargain trial subscription offer?" It is a fatal mistake to give reasons at this point—because the respondent (who received the call) and the speaker (the salesman) will treat the reasons quite differently. The salesman can always treat reasons as an offer to bargain and reply with counter-reasons, and counter-demands for more reasons. But the respondent presumably has no intention of bargaining; he (or she) just doesn't want the paper, but he also wants to be polite. (Note the performative intentions!) But to give reasons at all is to presuppose that under some conditions, the recipient of the call would subscribe. When the recipient has initially declined the offer, the salesman's move in asking for reasons is to get the recipient of the call to concede exactly this presupposition. In effect, he has asked the recipient to treat his own refusal not as the starting point of a chain of practical reasoning but as its end point. Out of politeness, the recipient usually obliges. But from the new starting point implicit in whatever reasons the recipient gives, the salesman can twist reasons

to his own desired end point, a sale. In the end, if the recipient really doesn't want to subscribe, he has to say so, without giving reasons. The direct approach is so rarely taken with telephone salesmen that it tends to produce stunning results: "I'm sorry, I don't give reasons."

The salesman is inviting the recipient of the call to commit a counter-performative: that is, in giving reasons, to offer to bargain, when the recipient has no intention of bargaining at all. The logical form of such a request is, "please justify your starting point." This is to construe an argument *from X* as an argument *to X*. By definition, it is not possible to justify a starting point. We have seen this feature of religious language already. Consider, for example, some of the commitments inherent in doing science: openness to criticism, empirical encounter with the world as it is (rather than with some Platonic ideal world), science open to all and for all. These are not things that could be justified; least of all justified from the fruits they bring. Yet one could answer the question "Why these commitments?" by citing their fruits. Another could then interpret such an answer as an argument of expediency *from* the benefits of science, rather than as the confession of one whose commitment to science is axiomatic, and to whom these other benefits have been given in addition. But an argument of expediency can be modified or suspended at convenience. (It would have been better not to answer the question at all.)

To guess the structure of the self-defeating speech acts in this sort of a conversation, the problem appears to lie in the illocutionary force of the reasons given by the respondent to the salesman. The salesman is asking the respondent to make a commissive whose force is ambiguous, and so can be twisted: a confessional commissive has a force crucially different from that of an offer to bargain. I would say this hazard attends virtually all confessional discourse. It can be taken by those who do not agree with it as proof or as an offer to bargain, in order to reject those meanings where it would be too painful to confront the implicit challenge of the confession in its original sense. And even those who supposedly are committed to the implications of their confessions can wish to evade those implications.

A more bald example is provided in legends of the city politics of Cambridge, Massachusetts, where the dividing issue is rents, and the parties landlords and tenants. Occasionally a politician tries to promise to lower rents for tenants and raise rents for landlords. It is reported that this platform meets more success than one might expect in a city of such sophistication. A counter-performative of the form "do *A* and don't do *A*" can be quite effective if the speaker faces conflicting demands from different constituencies. If he can appear to satisfy one, or at least

neutralize its opposition, he can later gratify the other.

With these prerequisites in speech act theory in mind, let us turn to concrete examples in the language of radical monotheists.

13.3 Religious Counter-Performatives

When supposedly monotheistic language becomes counter-performative, it subverts the apparent intentions of its speakers. It may be intended to do just that: mimesis, exile, and henotheism all offer ways to avoid disappointments and evade the challenges that covenantal religion would have people face. In this section I intend only a short catalog of frequent counter-performatives that occur in the religious language of supposedly Christian Western culture. The illustrations collected here will not all exhibit "clean" misfires owing to one or another easily identified condition for happy success that is lacking. (I leave that analysis to speech-act theorists.) Instead, they will often appear as styles of rhetoric, arguments that have occurred over some length of time, some still in progress. These arguments appear to have one logic but work with another. Why they do the opposite of what they appear to do never really gets noticed. We consider in turn counter-performative discourse practices that subvert apologetics, that silently convert Christianity into a henotheism or a gnosticism, that compromise transcendence, that evade the blessings in exposure, limitation, and need, and lastly some that misconstrue the relations between covenantal religion and the natural world.

One common pathology happens when confessional language is turned into—or heard as—apologetic language, and perhaps then escalated into polemic against other religious options (or even against other communities within historical-covenantal religion). The classic example is Aquinas's five ways of "proving" the existence of God. They are in Part I, Question 2, Article 3 of the *Summa Theologica*, and proceed to argue the existence of God from considerations of the nature of motion, efficient causation, possibility and necessity, gradations in things, and order or final causation in the world. Readers tend to miss the implications of Question 1, thinking that it can be hurried through on the way to more important theology. But Article 8 of Question 1 explicitly stipulates that it is impossible by argument to convince someone who does not grant a starting point in sacred scripture. One can only answer questions and clear up misunderstandings. Thomas did not have much sense of history, at least not by modern standards. But it should be clear to readers who have gotten this far that he has here implicitly admitted the historical contingency of biblical religion. And, as I have been at some labor to

emphasize, one is helpless when an other refuses to buy into the analogies offered to make sense of history. In American education at the turn of the millennium, these are still often taken as "proofs," and here the pathologies begin. They are used to offer some security to those who believe them, thus evading the intrinsic anxieties of historical-covenantal religion. Worse, they can be used as permission to blame those who don't believe such proofs. Incidentally, one may note that *these* "proofs" leave out the sense of history that was so important in the heritage of the Exodus. They turn from history to metaphysics and thus move the Christian side of the House of the Exodus a few steps on the road to nature religions or Gnosticisms.

Somewhat more abstractly, confessional language can become an evasion of the responsibilities of confession. (We have seen this in ELN, section 4.4, "Defending God.") What is at stake is the *point* of the speech act: confession and polemic can both work as directives, but of quite different sorts. Confession is originally, and in its illocutionary sense, a commissive and not a directive at all, but it tends to have perlocutionary effects that are quite directive. Polemic and apologetic are designed to coerce assent logically on grounds that are already shared by the hearer. Confession is about those grounds, and it can only invite. Its challenge may be so fierce that it is unbearable, unhearable; but its logic is never coercive. It is much like the conversation between the telephone salesman for the *Tri-Valley Gossip* in the last section: What was said in a confessional sense then gets heard or used in another and apologetic sense.

We have already seen, in ELN, section 3.1, that the believer who admits to radically monotheistic faith has made promises he is in no position to keep. He is "shooting his mouth off." Implicit in most ordinary promises is the preparatory condition that the speaker is not just willing but able to keep the promise. That is not true in the commitment to historical-covenantal religion, because the believer does not know what may happen to him, and in any case, he has promised to take the pains of life as good, bearing blessing, even when he is destroyed by them, as he eventually will be. There will be an understandable attraction to any strategy that can palliate the anxieties that such a stance entails, and patterns of speech can be used to this end.

More serious than these apologetic speech practices is theodicy. Theodicy has problems at both moral and logical levels. First, the logical levels: by definition, theodicy defends God against charges of working evil. The problem is that it necessarily also defends God in a human court. This is inconsistent with the very concept of God, because God is sovereign and does not answer to human courts. The speech act of even

admitting God as a defendant in a human court, even for purposes of seeking an acquittal, entails that for the speaker, the defendant is something other than the God of monotheism. But the most serious consequences of theodicy are harder to pin down. They come with its handling of the problem of evil as it appears in human lives. Let me only say that the defense of God, what was designed to get God off the hook, ends up enabling theodicy's human practitioners to evade responsibility and especially to evade other people's need.

One could doubtless find many other examples from social ethics in which apparent offers of help and solidarity toward those who suffer in fact leave them bereft of help. These were seen already in the Epistle to James (2.16). Politics abounds with promises of help for various constituencies (or accusations of oppression against them) that in fact work out to the disadvantage of those purportedly to be helped. American political language is a mother-lode of cheap counter-performative discourse, but unraveling its pathologies is relatively easy, and it is quite sufficiently addressed in the relevant opinion press.

Several counter-performative strategies are available to secure a believer's access to gnostic motifs in theology. Of these, the most prominent is the idea of immortality of the soul—instead of resurrection of the body. It is not noticed (or is just ignored) that the early Church, from the first century to the creeds in the fourth century, affirmed resurrection of the body and was usually ambivalent about immortality of the soul.[9] With immortality of the soul, the essential ingredient is secured by which Gnosticism is available should affirming the goodness of this painful world prove too disedifying. When resurrection of the body is maintained along with immortality of the soul, the damage is probably containable. When people forget the eventual resurrection of the body, they effectively move to a Christian Platonism with Gnostic overtones. When the problems of sin and grace are forgotten as well, the move is complete, even though such Gnosticism is peddled under "Christian" trademarks.

We have seen the long history of Christian anti-Judaism in chapter 8. Saint Paul saw the beginnings of it already in the Epistle to the Romans. His purpose in that letter was to plead for letting the gentiles into the Exodus covenant without kashrut and without circumcision, in parallel to the Jews whose faith was expressed in halakhah—and without kicking the Synagogue out of the Exodus covenant.[10] He already suspected the possibility that some might wish to disinherit "The Jews," and moved to

[9]Cf. Oscar Cullmann, *The Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead? The Witness of the New Testament* (London: Epworth, 1958).

[10]Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles, and Other Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976).

forestall it. Most of his readers have assumed that he meant precisely to disinherit the Synagogue.

Many have suspected that something subtle but very damaging happened to the common understanding of God and faith in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Certainly by the Enlightenment many pathologies are apparent. A diagnosis of that period's philosophical errors is offered in William V. Placher's *The Domestication of Transcendence*.[11] Placher considers the traditions of Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin and shows how each was subverted by its own later carriers. Thomas insists repeatedly that we cannot really know God as he is in himself, but later generations have turned his formulations into an invitation to reason precisely about how God is in himself. A perfect counter-performative strategy. One of the ways that such a strategy is implemented is by ignoring the analogical character of religious language and forcing analogies into univocal meanings, on pain of being dismissed as purely equivocal, in the only remaining alternative. Calvin, like Aquinas, respects the unknowability of the divine and respects the intent of scripture to convert, not to discourse on speculative matters. He fared no better than Aquinas at the hands of his interpreters. His theology, consistently anti-speculative, was turned (and with it, scripture) to speculative purposes. Luther's theology focuses on the dark mystery of sin and suffering, and God's participation in that suffering, and the radical and gracious freedom given to human beings in the Cross. The mystery was wild, untamed. His heirs tamed it.

Where Aquinas and the Reformers showed great reticence and respect for mystery in our knowledge of God and the working of divine grace, their heirs turned instead to calculation. It began with Tomaso de Vio, Cardinal Cajetan, who turned Aquinas's scattered and unsystematic remarks on analogy into a systematic doctrine of analogy. He is remembered with affection by Thomists today. Nevertheless, he converted analogy from a species of equivocation that nevertheless speaks truth into something that delivers the comforts of univocation. Equivocation can propose truth that challenges even though it does not admit of disputation, but univocation is tailored precisely for disputation. And the glory of Lutheran theology, the mystery of grace, trusting in God, became in the hands of the seventeenth-century Pietists a matter of rigorous and exacting self-examination, directed not to God but to oneself. The parallel triumph in the Anglican theology of grace yielded to moralism under the goading of Puritans, in Fitzsimmons Allison's account.[12]

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[11] William V. Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996).

[12] Fitzsimmons Allison, *The Rise of Moralism; The Proclamation of the Gospel from Hooker to Baxter* (Wilton, CT: Morehouse Barlow, 1966), is the best guide,

Placher and Allison observe the discursive practices of an entire culture turned to purposes quite opposed to their origins. This is the soul of counter-performative discourse.

The motives were usually insecurity, the desire to evade anxiety, and the desire to gain control. These are instances of desire to evade limitation, the finitude of human existence. One could thereby incidentally evade exposure by protecting oneself in the respectability of seventeenth-century moralism, and as a final corollary, dispense oneself from responding to the needs of the needy, because of one's own already evident election and righteousness.

One of the recurrent features of analogy in Christian discourse is that it is a way of saying something about God within the limits of a via negativa, within the limits prescribed by the knowledge of how little we can know about God. Early in this book I noticed John Courtney Murray's appraisal of Aquinas and his readers: they are panicked by the poverty of knowledge of God that Thomas allows to mere mortals.[13] Yet the attitude is commonly encountered that the via negativa is merely a warm-up exercise, something that is to be gotten beyond, on the way to positive affirmations about God. This is a misunderstanding with counter-performative implications.

Some general observations can be made on analogy and related problems in theological language. Analogy gets the lion's share of the examples of counter-performatives because analogy is central in the language of historical-covenantal living: without it, there could be no transcendent. When analogy is forced into univocating, transcendence is compromised, its immanent presence becomes merely intramundane. Typically, in a conversation between two theologians, one of whom speaks in analogies where the other does not, the univocator simply takes as univocal the analogies proposed by the other. It is then possible to set the terms of the analogy at war with one other, or to extend the analogy from its region of similarity into the greater region of dissimilarity. While the structure of the counter-performative is a little different, this is otherwise very much like the conversation between the salesman for the *Tri-Valley Gossip* and the reluctant prospective subscriber that we saw in the last section. I have in mind an example.

When the univocator finally sees (or is confronted with) the equivocal character of analogy, his common move is to dismiss it as "just metaphor," and this sound-bite carries a complex thesis within its two short words. "Just" means that it is not something else, namely, something capable of speaking truth, of challenging human lives. When analogy is called

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but William Placher's remarks are helpful enough.

[13] ELN, section 2.2; Murray, PG, p. 70.

metaphor, it usually reinforces this message: if religious language is a species of equivocation at all, then it is incapable of really speaking truth. Somehow univocal claims are more true, and therefore more challenging. Indeed, the univocator will typically insist that the language he opposes impoverishes our knowledge of God and therefore leaves us bereft of the presence of God. We have seen these themes already in John Courtney Murray. Analogy is characterized as "just metaphor" and then rejected because it does not permit the kind of knowledge that the univocator desires. But knowledge that can be expressed in univocal language, I shall claim, is an extension of the ordinary knowledge of intramundane phenomena, and so more appropriate to the knowledge that mimesis seeks than that of radical monotheism.

Today, most of the challenges to theology appear to come from naturalism. (The reader by now knows well that more profound challenges have come from critical history, but in popular culture, critical history is unknown, and popular perceptions are a better index of how a culture thinks than any technical literature can be.) Naturalism *in* theology appears as a concession to this spirit. We look at it in the next section.

The question of the "existence" of God is an example. Ignoring Aquinas's position that God is not a being among other beings but rather Being itself, much philosophy of religion since the Baroque period has spoken of the "existence" of God in language whose usage is indistinguishable from questions of existence of other beings. It is an elementary axiom of set theory that if there is a set A and an element x not a member of A, then there is also a set B which includes all of A and also the element x. This is intuitive in the usage of existence-language. The application is simple: the set A was supposed to be the created universe, of which God is not a part, being transcendent. But the universe can trivially be expanded to include God (the x of the axiom above), and at this point, God is implicitly drawn into the universe on its own terms. Assurances of the transcendence of God can do nothing to mitigate this implication.

I would like to defer examination of one last counter-performative (the possibility that *all* language of God is essentially counter-performative) until we have examined the religious language of historical-covenantal monotheism in somewhat more detail. When we come to it, we shall see how promises of blessing in and through exposure, limitation, and need become promises of exemption from those disappointments. Counter-performatives in covenantal religion defend against God in the very act of confessing loyalty to him, and attempt control in the act of acknowledging dependence on him.

Counter-performatives work with three somewhat different dynamics, according as the result is to move from historical-covenantal living to each

of the other major options: mimetic, exilic, or henotheistic life. In the move to exilic living, the pains of life are first treated as barren in a functional way, and later the working of that language becomes generally known but not spelled out. Originally innocent language comes by usage to express the rejection of some disappointments as barren, and then the move to exilic living has been completed in regard to that particular disappointment as it appears typically in the life of a culture. In the move to henotheism of one or another human institution, an institution that has a legitimate place in covenantal life can become ultimate in at least three different ways. Transcendence can be quietly forgotten, where the relativity of human institutions to history is forgotten. In ethics a move with the same root is possible: the moral claims of a human institution become absolute when its relativity to history is forgotten. And when outsiders to an institution are forgotten or rejected, the triad is complete. In the move to mimetic living, the meaning of words changes in ways that are not spelled out but nevertheless readily understandable. The clearest example occurs in debates on acts of God, in which one party asks the other whether God "really" acts if his acts are not visible *to the language of the natural sciences*. It is this last implication that works as code language to draw God into the world of naturalistic control and out of real transcendence. To that possibility we now turn.

13.4 Naturalistic Language

The problem of naturalism in covenantal religion is vast, and it presents a nest of counter-performatives of a peculiar kind. We shall engage it only through its presuppositions in language. It will be simpler if we approach it in its modern form and only then make conjectures about its ancient forms.

Put in the form of a definition, acts of God are naturalized when we try to speak of them with the same language that we use for the naturalistic delineation of intramundane phenomena. That language may be scientific or it may be one of the folk naturalisms of a pre-scientific color. What is pertinent about nature is that nature is orderly, and in that order natural phenomena have an integrity of their own, almost a life of their own. To exhibit that regular order, to place a natural happening as an instance of a regular order, is to provide the only explanations of natural phenomena that the sciences are interested in.

Problems and confusions arise when the phenomena in question are human actions (we come to divine actions in a moment). For human actions are available to us through more than one kind of language. The

language of physiology is one, but we have a very different language in the discourse of intention and reason and responsibility. Call them the languages of intention and of nature. Often they overlap in what they cover, but neither coverage is a proper subset of the other's: birth and death are perfectly describable in naturalistic languages, but not in the language of intention or human experience. And the experience of effort, of trying to convince oneself, of being "of two minds" and the like, can have no naturalistic description. This is so notwithstanding the fact that physiology can doubtless say a lot about what the material substrate (the brain) is doing when I am trying to make up my mind. There is no isomorphism between the descriptions of the two languages here. Charles E. Reagan pointed this out, following Paul Ricoeur.[14] There can be a diagnostic relation between the descriptions of the two languages; there is no isomorphism. I leave it to others to explore whether the analogy of a "diagnostic" relation prevents or facilitates a phenomenology of the relationship.

In any case, trouble brews when terms from one language are transferred to the other. For terms and concepts do not have pre-given meanings that are invariant in all contexts, they get their meaning from their use in discursive contexts. The classic example of the fallacy we are interested in occurs in Augustine, in the *City of God*, Book V.9, where he argues against Cicero—but adopts Cicero's presupposition unnoticed, namely, that human intentions are the causes of human actions. Cicero and Augustine equivocate on the many senses of "cause," but in the seventeenth century, when the notion of cause becomes focused in *physical* causes, the mistake begins to do real mischief.

The faulty language is being dismantled on both sides today, by physiology as well as by humanistic phenomenology. Nevertheless, it has a tenacity that will persist for the foreseeable future, judging from its evident deep roots. I would like to look at the damage it does. For when human actions are construed in naturalistic terms, intentionality is hidden and responsibility becomes impossible. This is a great strategy when the goal is precisely to evade responsibility.

This, as it turns out, is not just confusing in regard to human actions. It has considerable consequences beyond the way in which human actions are understood. Inasmuch as human actions are one side of the analogy by which divine action (providence, in other words) is understood, the consequences for understanding divine action are likewise profound. For a naturalistic explanation for human actions gets people out of taking

[14]Charles E. Reagan, "Ricoeur's Diagnostic Relation," *Int. Phil. Quart.*, 8 (1968) 586-592, writing on Paul Ricoeur's *Freedom and Nature: the Voluntary and the Involuntary* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966).

responsibility for them. For some, this is welcome. Responsibility is dreaded. In the case of divine actions, there are at least two sorts of confusion. Naturalizing divine action can get the believer off the hook for his own confessional commitments. And when divine actions are (allegedly) naturalized, they also become objectivated. The believer can then point to them in their alleged objectivity and use them as "evidence" against non-believers.

The issue is "miracles," the Special Effects in the religious literature of the world. When the non-Christian literature is invisible, the existential question of which miracles to believe, and on what grounds, is not seen either. Then it is possible to take miracles as something like God's driver's license, proof that his checks won't bounce. This transforms the believer's relation to the deity in question, and with it the believer's life. The Gospels reject special effects on this basis even as they include them on another. There, the issue has the somewhat technical name in New Testament criticism. It is a question of whether Jesus is a *theios aner*, a "divine man," a figure seen in examples in other Hellenistic texts. When confronted with this, students and even some scholars appear to yield to critical history, yet maintain at the same time that miracles happened as exceptions to laws of nature—or some such explanation. I shall not repeat Edward Hobbs's argument that instead, the closest modern parallel to the miracle texts can be found in TV advertisements—where special effects are understood by the viewer as such, and the real message is about the product.[15] In fact, if the special effects are understood as "real," "literally" true, the TV advertisement is totally misunderstood. Yet such misreading of the New Testament is all but universal, both by those who believe it and those who don't. When special effects occur in the Talmud, people seem to know better than to take them literally. How does language of miracle come to be taken literally, with radically counter-performative consequences? For taking it as akin to TV ads puts the burden of responsibility on the believer, in a leap of faith that is quite Kierkegaardian in its dimensions. But taking it literally turns the miracles into phenomena in nature that can be questioned as a scientist experiments on nature, even if the result is only that they don't fit this or that law of nature. Such phenomena are no longer ads for covenantal faith but something quite different.

The deity that results is an invisible (and almost undetectable) being that interferes with the natural course of events to the advantage of those

[15]Edward C. Hobbs, "Gospel Miracle Story and Modern Miracle Stories," in *Gospel Studies in Honor of Sherman Elbridge Johnson*, ed. Massey H. Shepherd Jr. and Edward C. Hobbs, *Anglican Theological Review*, Supplemental Series, Number Three, March 1974, pp. 117–126.

who think it exists and the disadvantage of those who don't. It is very much like the 27 electron-volt neutrino, once a leading candidate for the missing mass in the universe, the dark matter that is all but undetectable but which accounts for the motions of the visible parts of the universe, all the galaxies that can be seen. One can easily find language that speaks of the existence of God in terms indistinguishable from the astrophysicists' language about dark matter. Indeed, such a deity results unnoticed when the naturalistic "atheist" demands naturalistic proof of the acts of God, and the believer makes the mistake of trying to offer such proof.

The problem begins to be focused—though not understood well—in the debate on miracles that begins late in the seventeenth century and continues to this day. A useful account can be found in R. M. Burns's *The Great Debate on Miracles*.[16] The British scientists of the day first discovered new methods of thought that were successful in physics and then sought to turn their own new methods to the defense of the faith. Miracles, in effect, were turned into scientific *evidence* for the existence of God. It was noticed on the Continent and then in Britain that such a program had serious logical and philosophical problems (it was epistemologically incoherent). Once it appeared that a scientific defense of the inherited religion (on its way to becoming the "theism" of recent philosophy) would fail, it also appeared that such a failure could be used as a *disproof* of religion. Now the scientists were of a fairly comfortable social stratum. Others of the faithful were not. And theologians among the less than affluent then set out to provide the demanded naturalistic proofs of the existence and benevolence of God; thus the appeal to literal readings and to miracles.

It is instructive to see how the confusion got started. Among those in the Royal Society, the historicality of theological commitments was lost or forgotten, and it is easy to see how only dogmatism was left.[17] And the move from dogmatism to the only available model of responsible epistemology, that of the natural sciences, is just as understandable. The story of philosophy in general and philosophy of religion in particular over the next two centuries is one of the exploration and eventual limitations of a naturalistic and empiricist approach, and the recovery in the nineteenth century of a consciousness of history, with a richness never suspected before the Baroque period. Forgotten at the same time were the roots of the methodological naturalism of scientific discourse in a larger framework beyond naturalism. Scientific discourse was then extended to a comprehensive naturalism of all things, philosophical anthropology in

[16]R. M. Burns, *The Great Debate on Miracles; from Joseph Glanvill to David Hume* (Lewisburg, KY: Bucknell University Press, 1981).

[17]Burns, pp. 31–32.

particular.

The counter-performative logic of the defenders of the faith was on several levels. First, it was an attempt to present an essentially historical religion in naturalistic terms, in order to satisfy the apologetic demands of naturalists, both friendly and hostile. Secondly, and more ludicrous, it was both an attempt to function in naturalistic terms and also an attempt to prevent the normal criticisms of the naturalistic discourse of the sciences. The first is the more disastrous mistake, for it betrays the essentially historical character of historical-covenantal religion. Langdon Gilkey has lamented this phenomenon in contemporary society, observing that the entire culture holds naturalistic and scientific thinking as *the* model for responsible epistemology.[18] The problem is still very much with us.

In the twentieth century, many realized, from somewhat different lines of argument, that modern naturalistic science is a creature of effectively historical-covenantal ways of living. Some, regrettably, have turned this insight to apologetic and polemical purposes. I suppose that given the disagreements with us today, that is inevitable. In a culture where naturalism is used both to attack and to defend the religion as it was inherited, to insist that there is more to human life than nature (namely, history) is unavoidably apologetic. It need not be polemical. It can be true to its confessional obligations if it remembers that the challenge of its appeals is not in the form of logical coercion in an argument in philosophy of religion, but rather ultimately in the example of lives embracing exposure, limitation, and need. There is never an easy answer to the taunts of the naturalists, "Where, now, O Israel, is your God?," a problem in the language of covenantal monotheism to which I shall return briefly in the next section.

If world-affirming and history-conscious forms of life lie at the basis of modern natural science, then how is it that natural sciences are used to promote naturalistic religion? The answer, I think, is a sort of forgetting, by which history is ignored or not even noticed, and the historicality of modern science is also not seen. (This is a form of not spelling out, by the way, and merits regret accordingly.) Ruling God out as an explanation in the sciences was necessary in order to get the sciences started at all. But God was banished from naturalistic discourse in the modern world not as a first step to banishing God from human life utterly, but rather as a way to ground methodological naturalism more radically in an inherited faith that was radically historical—albeit not entirely recognized as such. In the irony that followed, it was an easy next step to banish God from *all* discourse claiming the epistemological status of real knowledge. What

[18]Langdon B. Gilkey, *Nature, Reality, and the Sacred; The Nexus of Science and Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

resulted was a naturalistic world view more akin to that of Democritus and the pre-socratic atomists than to the Canaanite nature religions or the world-wide shamanism that is the usual form of world-affirming nature religion. Yet mimesis it is: for human life is conceived in purely naturalistic terms, to the exclusion of any ontological status for history, historical interpretation, or essentially historical human relationships. Its world-affirming character, however, goes beyond what is typical for mimetic religion, and this it owes to its roots in historical-covenantal religion. In debates between supposedly atheistic and naturalistic "evolutionists" and supposedly Christian "creationists," one cannot help but be struck by the scientists' up-beat and positive affirmation of the world in spite of the absence of the deity of their opponents. But that deity is one that interferes with the natural course of events, and again, one cannot help but be struck by the way in which it interferes for the purpose of exempting its believers from the disappointments of life. Biologists admit among themselves that the theory of evolution is unfinished, and their "creationist" opponents are then wont to heckle. The working of the taunt, "Where, now, O Israel, is your God?" has been reversed, in a very confused way. "Where, now, O biologists, is your theory?" "Where, now, O biologists, is your order and intelligibility in nature?" But it is the biologists who trust in providence as it comes to the human knowing of nature, whether they admit it or not. The position of the so-called "creationists," by contrast, raises the gravest problems for human knowledge of nature. Historical-covenantal faith is effectively represented by the supposedly atheistic scientists, and the supposed believers are promoting a naturalistic deity that exempts from exposure, limitation, and need, rather than brings blessings in them. Here is a thicket of counter-performative speech practices that I leave for readers of unusual diligence and patience.

The demand for a naturalistically visible presence of God occurs in miracles, or allegations of miracles, and related debates (such as about evolution). It has roots in an existential need as well as in the confusions of modern philosophy of religion. For if the deity can be demonstrated in the discourse of nature, then it is visible, disponible, and subject to a form of control, conceptual if not practical. Yet conceptual control is sufficient, for it exempts the believer from the kind of relationship that is essential in covenantal religion. If one has naturalistically demonstrable proofs of the deity, then one is engaged in a radically different sort of responsibility from that of confessional commitment in history. Thus may one evade exposure, limitation, and need, first in principle in one's religious epistemology, and then in covert reflection in the practical affairs of life.

Naturalistic religion is the doorway of exit from historical-covenantal

religion, and it is cracked first in these commitments to literalistic interpretation of the miracle texts. (An interpretation, by the way, that the New Testament is pretty clearly against when the Gospels reject the appeal to "signs and wonders.") When people have made existential commitments to evading the disappointments of life rather than to embracing the blessings in them, those commitments are retained when things come to light. At this point, the mimetic commitments become overt (in rejection of Fundamentalism for "atheism"), or the quest turns to exilic options in the various functional modern gnosticisms. Less often, there is a return to historical-covenantal religion by way of critical history.

Theological counter-performatives are not confined to historical-covenantal provenance. There is a common mimetic attack on the practice of responsibility that is first an attack on the notion of human freedom by way of a claim of determinism. As we have seen in Part III, responsibility is not a property that people might or might not have but a practice that people may or may not participate in. This is the essential mistake of the debates about free will and determinism. The counter-performative moment in the attack on human freedom consists in the fact that it is itself a move in the practice of responsibility, namely, the assertion of a (mimetic) philosophical anthropology and a demand for a response. As such, it participates in the practice of responsibility, if dysfunctionally because of the content of its claims against the practice. That dysfunctionality is incoherent. The claim that people "are not" responsible is undermined by the practice in which that claim is made. Put another way, the usual naturalistic strategy is to demand proof of the property which is prerequisite to responsibility, before it will consent to participate in responsibility. But this is counter-performative, because the demand for proof of the prerequisite property is itself a move within the "game" of responsibility. I suppose after this fact is pointed out, the question that should be addressed to naturalists who would dispense themselves from responsibility is something like "What then is the naturalistic explanation of the *activity* of demanding, giving, and owning reasons?" A successful implementation of a naturalistic basic life orientation must answer this question, and any answer to it will work as a cover-story, seeking to explain away the possibility of the practice it does not wish to engage in.

13.5 Affiliatives, Silence, and Irony

Niebuhr observed in the fourth chapter of *Radical Monotheism* that monotheism shares the same human concerns as are found in ordinary life and in other kinds of religion, but it transforms them radically. This

happens to a large measure in the language with which it appropriates them. Among the peculiar features of the language of radical monotheism are the way it handles affiliation and silence, and even more, irony. Affiliatives and silence do two things. They guard against the hazards of language seen in the last several sections, and, more importantly, they open the way to the central commitments of world-affirming historical religion. Those commitments appear in irony. It will play a pivotal role, for it languages the transformational approach to the disappointments of life.

Affiliation in a sense dodges all the hard questions and merely associates the speaker with persons or a community of known loyalty. Examples of it appear in the Bible, as when we read of the Shield of Abraham (Genesis 15.1), the Fear of Isaac (Genesis 31.42), the Mighty One of Jacob, the Rock of Israel (Genesis 49.24). These were originally the family gods or clan deities of groups that were later merged into the Israelite community. Their affiliative sense was primordial, but its later use built on the earlier; the clans who entered Israel brought with them the root of faith, affirmation of the world. A sense of ancestry was used to identify that faith, but the faith itself became quite transformed over the centuries following. If affiliative language names figures from history, then its meaning entails a sense of history, and here it works to further the life orientation of biblical religion.

Affiliative language grows out of a universal feature of human life, its communal or corporate aspect. It is of central importance for historical-covenantal living in ways that it is not for other basic life orientations. People are part of one another, and affiliative language presupposes as much. The mere fact of affiliative language does not tell all that is implied—that comes out only in the narrative background in the Bible and the practices surrounding affiliative language since the Bible (and so the exploration of covenantal language will not be complete until we come to narrative). For affiliative language can be used to exclude as well as to include, and when it does, covenantal language turns to henotheism. Yet if one believes the accounts in the Common Documents and recent readings of them in critical scholarship, they do display an open community of moral obligation, at the same time as they also display the very henotheistic symptoms that are so obnoxious today. In mimetic or exilic living, the corporate structure of human existence has less significance attached to it, as far as I can see. To the extent that it is valued, such living is similar to covenant, for one of the basic features of covenant is a strong sense of the community of moral obligation. One can thus find parallels in the Buddhist concept of *sangha*, community in Buddhist life. Other examples could be found.

Silence is more interesting than affiliative language, for while it is also not unique to historical-covenantal monotheism, it takes a form expressive of it in a directly functional way. It works both as respect for transcendence and also as a way to forestall certain kinds of counter-performatives.

Begin with silence as a way to avoid counter-performatives. To chatter about the God is to draw the deity from transcendence into the world on the world's terms, rather than respecting it as immanent presence of something transcendent. Immanence and transcendence are correlated; where one is, the other is. Intramundane-ness is not the same thing as immanence, and when God is sucked into the world on the world's terms, he is just another intramundane actor.

In a more fundamental way, silence is often appropriate for the simplest of reasons. The radical monotheist has pledged himself to embrace whatever comes along in life as good, bearing blessing, its disappointments notwithstanding. In making such a commitment, he has promised something he is in no position to deliver. He is shooting his mouth off if he expects to do it on his own. Such an attitude could be read into monotheistic confessions of faith and then become not just a personal stance but an articulated theological position. In fact, the monotheist trusts in grace, help in embracing the pains of life, even though that help may destroy him.[19] Hence there should be a certain reticence before this Void on which one relies.

In a similar way, the faithful monotheist does not engage in theodicy, apologetics, or polemic. A confessional stance respects the other who does not understand or is not committed to finding the goods in the pains of life. Above all, it respects the precariousness of its own basic life orientation.

The injunction to keep holy the name of God, and the prohibition on pronouncing it, serve the same instincts and purposes. What is not named cannot be directly and explicitly disrespected. To refrain from speaking the name of God out of respect is a way to keep it holy: the concept of the holiness of the deity is intimately bound up with silence at this point. Judaism enforces this strictly, and so the name of God is spoken as "Adonai," which just means "The Boss;" Christianity has no such strict policy, but has often observed it in its translations of the Common Documents out of respect for the tradition that both have inherited from Second Temple Judaism. But the problem is about more than just a few words, for if the nature of God is speculated upon as one speculates on intramundane phenomena, then the deity is sucked into the world and the damage is done despite any courtesies shown to its name. We

[19]Cf. Niebuhr, "Though it slay us, yet will we trust it;" RMWC, p. 122.

shall return to this in the final section of the final chapter, on the last counter-performative.

I think that silence is one feature of monotheistic language that contemporary culture tends to understand instinctively and well. For both those who have become secularized and many who are observant don't speak much of God in everyday life. They could not articulate a theory of why they don't talk about God much, they just have an instinct, especially where piety is real but residual, an instinct that circumlocutions are more appropriate. As an example, Tom Wolfe's book, *The Right Stuff*, is named for the military pilot's phrase that articulates with exquisite delicacy his profession's dependence on an intricate and subtle balance of grace and works. Schleiermacher's phrase "absolute dependence" pales in comparison. And in ordinary life, people who retain a little of formerly Christian ways know that if they say much about God, they are in danger of "shooting their mouths off," of making fools of themselves. This strategy carries a terrible cost—it prevents people from spelling out a basic life orientation when it really would be helpful to do so, and to connect it with a long and rich tradition—but it certainly does prevent the kind of counter-performative language that the monotheist is always in danger of.

The confession of faith that the pains of life bring good with them works well for abstract purposes (such as in this book), but it is almost inescapably counter-performative in many concrete situations of distress. When I broke my back, two friends commented in the aftermath, offering support in quite different ways. One, good-hearted though he was, quoted St. Paul to me, about the unnamed affliction which he repeatedly asked to be released from, to the effect that God had given me a blessing in paraplegia. The other simply asked, "What is God beginning in this man?" The first was counter-performative, inviting the unfortunate one to benefit from misfortune without sharing in it. The second was reticent, open-ended, and in that caution also an expression of shared faith. In a corollary way, I can say in retrospect, twenty-odd years later, Yes, it did bring blessings. But they cannot be named short of Judgement Day, because I—and we—do not know enough to do so without serious risk of one or another form of bad faith. In the meantime, participation in The Great Thanksgiving (for Christians; in the life of the Great Congregation, for Jews) is in its proleptic way sufficient.

The positive working of silence in monotheism will emerge from its background in the other religions of the world. The original recognition of the importance of keeping silent (at least in the West) comes in the Greek verb *muo*, to keep silence. From it comes the term *mystery*, and with it, the mystery religions. In its Hellenistic setting, these religions worked

as effective ways to insulate oneself from the disappointments of life.[20] The mystery religions were at bottom doing something quite different from radical monotheism, even though they are one major contributor that was radically transformed in the later Christianity that emerged from the disasters of the first century.

This is by no means the only example of a religious interest in silence, as one can see from Merold Westphal's preliminaries on ambivalence and the sacred in *God, Guilt, and Death*. Only the most obvious example is the opening of the *Tao Te Ching*—"The Tao that can be named is not the eternal Tao." The central document of Taoism is soaked with respect for the un-languagable-ness of the reality that it focuses on. And Zen is conspicuous for its infuriating combination of silence and speech in its approach to the central features of human life in Buddhism.

It is not only silence that appears differently in different religions. Just as the language of Western historical-covenantal religion exhibits features appropriate to its goals, Buddhist language does the same. Zen Buddhism delights in language that flouts logic as a way of expressing its intent to escape from the circle of desire and suffering. This is a feature of its language that has few if any parallels in historical religion because the functional needs of the two kinds of religion are here radically different. If we were interested in the meditational practices in South Asian religions as a way of escaping from the wheel of karma, their language would become the focus. Historical-covenantal religion has its own peculiar features, more than enough for this book. One can find examples from the other great religions easily enough, usually in their central documents. The traditions within Hinduism and Buddhism that seek escape from the illusions and suffering of human existence in the material world can indeed be characterized as an intensifying of silence, particularly in their meditative techniques. We shall see more uses for silence in covenantal religion momentarily.

The roots of an interest in silence are in the ambivalence of the sacred, eliciting both an attracted and a cautioned or repelled human response. The phenomenon of the sacred, as something both attractive and repellent, is common in the world's religions, though certainly not universal. For example, contemporary reductive materialism, what sometimes goes by the name of "scientific atheism," is a basic life orientation that does

[20]The character of the mystery religions in their original Hellenistic setting can be seen from Luther Martin's *Hellenistic Religions: An Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 1987), or from Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*, translated by Jack Lindsay (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1960), a second-century novel recounting a tale of mishaps ending finally in salvation by the mysteries of the Universal Mother Goddess.

not as a cultural movement have a sacred that I am aware of. Brief encounters with individual "scientific atheists," however, caution me that they personally were not without some locus of the sacred on this simple phenomenological definition: what offers life at cost of risk to the beneficiary, what is worth living for.

Turning to the origins in the West, philosophy has been a trail of alternate trust and distrust of language, contending over whether language can disclose reality, and if so, how. Naive trust leads to disappointment and distrust when language used of ultimate human concerns does not work in the handy way that it does in the kitchen or workshop. Radical skepticism appears from time to time, and plays itself out again, returning to a sense that language is not just all we have to work with, it is what makes us human. Undertaken with respect for its limitations, and respect for the transcendence of the things it can point to but not grasp, it is a workable (one could never say *safe*) avenue to that transcendent.

Skeptics, though attacking the machinery of speech, never reject it entirely, and do not see the opening that others will find from skepticism in philosophy to mysticism in theology.[21] But Philo notices silence, and the Gnostics exploit it. The Neoplatonists develop the idea of silence in a systematic way, as the *via negativa*, the way of knowledge through negation. It is not my aim to reproduce the history of the concept of silence, nor that of the via negativa. The contrasts between the start of Greek philosophy and its end, however, are in proportion to a move from the simple affirmation of the world as nature to the recognition of transcendence, albeit an exilic transcendence before a covenantal one. In Aristotle one can see the temperamental roots of contemporary mimesis in its scientific forms. In the later thinkers, both Gnostic and Christian, one can see the philosophical appreciation for the silences of transcendence that appears only in imagery in the Common Documents.

The Neoplatonist Pseudo-Dionysius appropriates that tradition for the Church. For him, the via negativa is the way into analogy, and various forms of analogy are the language that constitutes covenantal monotheism as what it is. In such analogies, the differences outweigh the similarities. The use of intramundane words (the only words we have, after all) to point to something transcendent must cross a gap of difference much greater than any similarities it intends, and differences much greater than the small differences within the range of a word's non-transcendent and intramundane uses. There is always a risk that once the difference of God *from* the world has been named, it can then be twisted into a difference *within* the world by simply enlarging the world to include the God as another intramundane actor. But the God of monotheism is not an object

[21] *From Word to Silence*. Cf. vol 1, pp. 114–118.

or something that could be known as an object, and Pseudo-Dionysius knows as much. Raoul Mortley characterizes analogy not as a proportion between somewhat similar objects but as "a kind of posture in relation to transcendent principles,"[22] thus emphasizing the active role of the one who speaks in analogies. Observing the limits of analogy entails not extending them, hence the role of silence in such discourse.

That role in the language of radical monotheism can be elicited fairly straightforwardly from definitions of monotheism. I begin with Niebuhr's terms rather than Westphal's, and the unfolding of the dynamic of silence will take us from silence to irony, and eventually to history. H. Richard Niebuhr defined radical monotheism as the existential position that "the causes for which we live all die," together with radical trust in the void from which all things come and to which all things return.[23] It must then follow that radical monotheism, while a "cause" in an analogical sense, is still not a cause in the original sense, an object of loyalty identifiable in an ordinary way. This correlation of definitions is paradoxical and ironic. Let me intensify that irony. To be a self is to have a god; the god is what defines the self. "It is the gods that give unity to the events of personal life."[24] When we know what a person lives for, we know something about who he is. And not to live for something, not to live for anything at all, is to miss one of the central achievements of being human.

The problem is that on the definition from p. 122 of *Radical Monotheism*, a monotheist appears to have no gods, no causes (they all die), so how can a monotheist ever achieve real selfhood? This is the problem that the ancient world had with the high-church atheism of the empty temple in Jerusalem. It apparently makes no sense. Is such a God, such a faith, possible at all? Or is it incoherent? Can radical transcendence be coherent? Mimesis and henotheism would answer in the negative; only exile and covenant answer in the affirmative, and they disagree on how to interpret transcendence.

One apparently essential property of a god is that there is some way to tell when it rewards confidence and loyalty. And you should be able to tell when the believer is loyal to it and not to another. Thus you can tell when it gives meaning to life. This definition is in some sense simple: one can "calculate" with it. Certainly for some gods, it is accurate. Further, one can complain that the gods by definition do not disappoint, at least not routinely. There is something defective about a god that does. To be loyal to a disappointer (which the God of monotheism, again, by definition, is) is crazy, sick, masochistic, wrong, incoherent. (But this complaint begs

[22] *From Word to Silence*, vol. 2, p. 227.
[23] RMWC, p. 122.
[24] MR, hardback p. 78; paperback, p. 57.

the question of monotheism.) If such a faith is possible, then monotheism is logically very peculiar. Put another way, to sharpen the charges, aren't claims of such a faith always and inevitably a cover-story for henotheism? How can human loyalty be to something not a god? We began the book with this theme and here focus on its peculiar linguistic expressions.

An initial example of the working of silence can be exhibited easily; it is again a way to avoid counter-performatives, though it becomes more than that. Where one keeps silence, another cannot twist one's words in a counter-performative sense. Where one person names his gods, another can offer to meet the requirements of those gods and demand something in return. Put in somewhat grubby terms, if I don't tell you my price, you can't offer to meet it. I am (supposedly) not for sale. Sometimes, where it is impossible to function without naming one's loyalty, these risks must be incurred. What is that risk? Someone could infer from an ultimate loyalty beyond all causes to an application in a finite cause in some particular situation, and that finite cause could then be absolutized. The derived and secondary cause or object of loyalty then becomes ultimate.

But this simple counter-performative to be avoided opens the way to something more important. For to draw a simple inference from trust in the God of monotheism to expectation of blessing in the form of one or another gratification in a particular circumstance is, in the language of the Common Documents, to put God to the test. That move always unfolds a presupposed faith in some other focus of ultimate loyalty than the God of monotheism. To put God to the test can only be done from a presupposition that delivery of the sought-after gratification is a test of divinity; and that absolutizes the desired gratification. Not to put God to the test, by contrast, is a way of respecting the holiness of God. In language, this reticence works to keep holy the name of God. What is absent, expressed in silence, is so only by reference to what is present, spoken. That is to define silence with respect to a continuing conversation, one that has a history, a feature which we shall come to in the next chapter.

In the meantime, the essential feature before which one keeps silence is an aspect of the paradoxical or ironic quality of the God of monotheism: the cause that is not a cause, the blessing that comes in disappointments, the Void from which all things come and to which they return. Irony is not peculiar to radical monotheism (it occurs densely throughout secular and religious literature), but it *is* essential to the discourse of monotheism. Saying strictly nothing at all is not an option. It leads to half-exilic, half-mimetic living of the Hellenistic variety, in which people rattle from pillar to post, avoiding disappointments as best they can, and evading the blessings in them because those blessings are thought to be unreal or too costly. Silence is essential to monotheism, but silence will only go so far

before it gets into trouble. Irony is a way of continuing the silence and at the same time saying enough to indicate covenantal faith.

There are many ironies in the Bible, but in my contention, the central one is the idea of covenant itself: the ultimate reality is that the world and human life in it are good, including, in some sense, its disappointments. The possibility of irony in such a claim should not be difficult. For some it is simply contradictory, and with that we have one of the essential ingredients of irony. Wayne Booth provides a short anatomy of irony in *A Rhetoric of Irony*.[25] Stable irony is intended, it is not labeled as irony, it comes to rest in one alternate reading after leaving the surface meaning, and it is finite in application. It stops someplace.[26] The reader is expected to reject the literal meaning in favor of some alternate reading. The reader must decide what the author meant; unintentional irony is usually not what we are interested in, if it can occur at all.[27] There are clues to irony: warnings in the author's own voice, known error proclaimed, and conflicts of fact, style, or belief within the text.[28] Irony risks failure more than other literary devices, but if it succeeds, it will be more effective than other devices.

The reader inevitably asks how far to carry the ironic reading. Booth's answer would seem to be to carry irony as far as it augments the power and meaning of the text.[29] Some irony can go quite far: globally in reach, and beyond the limits of almost any stable reading. Unstable irony risks nihilism, a feature that brings us close to H. Richard Niebuhr—whose pronouncements also sound perilously close to nihilism at times.

The process of reading an ironic work exhibits all the features of the hermeneutical circle (a double circle, really). In that circle, the relation between parts and wholes and between the work and the larger context is an iterative one. One makes an initial assumption about parts or the whole of the work and iterates between them, coming to an initial reading of the text. Then the context is enlarged by stages to reach the whole world. Knowledge of the world, larger standards of criticism, experience of similar works in the genre and works of other genres all contribute to a critical reading. Similarly, in irony, the text does not make sense on its surface or literal reading, and the reader is expected to find another reading based on his knowledge of the world, the wider context. Indeed,

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[25]Wayne Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

[26]Booth, p. 5 ff.

[27]Booth, p. 10 ff. Booth thinks irony unintended by the author is impossible. When the author is a community, this becomes less clear.

[28]Booth, pp. 53–73.

[29]Booth, p. 193.

the parts of an ironic text may not make sense when taken altogether in a literal sense, and thus they can compel another reading merely from discrepancies within the text, even before the wider context is taken into account.

Irony works best if it is not explicitly decoded for the reader; elaborating it weakens it.[30] But there is more than rhetorical strategy here, the power to demand a decision from the hearer. It is reticence before the sacred, before what can bestow life and in the end destroy: Niebuhr's Void.

The central logical irony is the conversion of disappointments into blessings, and in radical monotheism, all else hangs on this. Simply to *say* that all of life is good, disappointments included, does not quite capture all of what is intended. In the first place, it risks denying the seriousness of the disappointments. And it risks abandoning others to the good of their disappointments.[31] Irony can acknowledge and respect the weight of affliction as theory never can.

The surface meaning of virtually all language of disappointment is not blessing, and to take it as such is accordingly ironic. The irony hangs on a commitment of the reader or hearer, as irony usually does: if the disappointments are barren, the language of monotheism will be heard one way. If the disappointing events bear blessing, it will be heard another way. Irony always turns on the reader's ability to "get it"—and that ability usually involves a commitment of some sort. Irony thus challenges the reader to such a commitment. There may or may not be people in the foreground excluded from the irony by their own inability to get it. There are always such people in the background, those who regard disappointments as barren.

In practice, this can be quite subtle. It is decided not in the words used, but in the practices and commitments to embrace or evade the pains of life in the surrounding lives of those who speak. And is the blessing supposed to come in the disappointing character of the events that disappoint? Or is it in the events, but not in their disappointing character: a better informed will would not be disappointed at all, if only it knew the blessings earlier?

Let me take Mark as my main example. The other Gospels follow the same logic. Mark has many ironies in its sixteen short chapters.[32] I shall

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[30] Booth, p. 28.

[31] All risks that I have been willing to take, for the sake of clarity and directness. Nevertheless, the biblical texts are not philosophical but directed to forcing a decision from the reader. Irony forces a decision, forces the reader to take responsibility; the responsibility in direct statement can always be put on the text, rather than the reader.

[32] Jerry Camery-Hoggatt, *Irony in Mark's Gospel: Text and Subtext* (New York:

focus on only one, the Resurrection, momentarily. The other disasters of the first century (the destruction of the Temple and the Bar Kochba revolt chief among them) are not usually described in the sort of ironic language that we find in the New Testament, but the issues are the same in *all* the disasters of the first century. Do the limitations of history and human life in history bear blessing? Do they have meaning? Do they offer life? We come to these questions in a moment.

Contrast the rabbinic treatment. I think the rabbis handle these questions more with silence than with irony, at least in regard to the events of the first century. But the motive is the same: respect for the afflictions of those who suffer. Irony does occur, as in Menaḥoth in the account of Moses, God, and Rabbi Akiba.

> Rab Judah said in the name of Rab, When Moses ascended on high he found the Holy One, blessed be He, engaged in affixing coronets to the letters. Said Moses, "Lord of the Universe, Who stays thy hand?"
>
> He answered, "There will arise a man, at the end of many generations, Akiba ben Joseph by name, who will expound upon each tittle heaps and heaps of laws."
>
> "Lord of the Universe," said Moses, "permit me to see him."
>
> He replied, "Turn thee around." Moses went and sat down behind eight rows [i. e., eight rows of students, in the back of Akiba's classroom] and listened to the discourses on the law. Not being able to follow their arguments he was ill at ease, but when they came to a certain subject and the disciples said to the master, "Whence do you know it?" and the latter replied "It is a law given unto Moses at Sinai" he was comforted.
>
> Thereupon he returned to the Holy One, blessed be He, and said, "Lord of the Universe, Thou hast such a man and Thou givest Torah by me!"
>
> He replied, "Be silent, for such is my decree."
>
> Then said Moses, "Lord of the Universe, Thou hast shown me his Torah, show me his reward."
>
> "Turn thee around," said He; and Moses turned around and saw them weighing out his [i. e., Akiba's] flesh at the market-stalls.

Cambridge University Press, 1992) works through many of them and is a guide to more literature on irony in the Gospels.

> "Lord of the Universe," cried Moses, "such Torah, and such a reward!"
>
> He replied, "Be silent, for such is my decree." (Menaḥoth 29b).

Moses asks "Why?" of Akiba's end, and God merely says, "Be still." The irony of affliction seeks another interpretation, can find none, and rests in silence. The risks of not keeping silence but spelling out radical faith are clear enough in both Menaḥoth and the accounts of the Passion. Menaḥoth follows the path of silence, the Gospels say some things—ironically—and then stop. They can be transformed into something else, by turning them into promise of evasion of disappointment, instead of meeting blessing in it. The risks of not spelling out are hardly less; silence, like a vacuum, can be filled with anything. In the end, only narrative of history can survive with covenant intact, and even it can be twisted.

The miracle stories in the New Testament focus the issue. Are the blessings supposed to come in being released from the disappointment, or in and through the disappointing events? The reader is put to the question. The healings build up by stages, first an arm, then legs, then maladies of the entire body, and in John, even a raising from the dead. And the feedings prepare the reader for the Last Supper. The sequence of miracles in Mark prepares the reader for the final test. If the Resurrection texts proclaim known error (because in the end, people die and are not resuscitated) they invite ironic readings, as Booth's test for irony tells us. When the resurrection and its sequel do not even conform to the idea of a resuscitation, the texts do not just invite, they compel alternate readings. That has not stopped readers from suppressing the irony. In the miracles, it was possible, by a "literal" reading. The Resurrection texts do not have a stable reading as literal reports of events, and New Testament criticism in this century has been over this ground many times.[33]

The challenge forces the question of limitation: do *all* limitations bear blessing, even the big one at the end? If the disappointing events bear blessings that can be had only by embracing them, so that one cannot avoid the disappointments without losing the blessings, then one has to choose. Those who hold out for a literal and "physical" Resurrection choose one way, those who read the Resurrection texts as commentary on the significance of the Crucifixion rather than as report of further events choose another way. Some want the texts to say that in the end,

[33]Pheme Perkins, *Resurrection: New Testament Witness and Contemporary Reflection*, (Garden City: Doubleday, 1984) provides a detailed survey as of 1984.

disappointments can be avoided and the challenge in them evaded. They have to rule out the possibility that the disappointments carried blessings available only to those who suffer them. Those who want a physical resurrection need to rule out any other sense of the texts, because other senses would undermine what I think they want. This evasion is not possible if the disappointment is shown to bear blessing within itself—but ultimately, that is a matter of faith, not evidence. The turn to evidence is a turn away from blessings in exposure, limitation, and need, and this is intrinsic to the performative sense of demanding *evidence*. Its sense is "in order to demonstrate a blessing, you must show me how to get out of the disappointment." That stance inevitably seeks a dispensation from pain, and this is presupposed in the demand for evidence.

Various writers have noticed the importance of preaching suffering in Mark. If the Resurrection retracts all that suffering, the message becomes incoherent. If the Resurrection is ironic, that message gets amplified in the short ending of Mark. The reader must make some decisions, and they turn on the question of what enhances and amplifies the message of the texts in Mark, and what detracts from or undermines that message. Mark begins, "The beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ," and ends, "and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."[34] Some get it, some don't. The long endings don't.

Any irony claiming that "the causes for which we live all die,"[35] in Niebuhr's words, can be stable only if it has the elasticity of a great analogy. The forms of historical-covenantal living all grow old and become obsolete along the way of history. Only by analogy could their replacements be called the same. For example, the stance of embracing exposure (to look at only the first function) will have implications after Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud that are radically different from those before. (Or one could name David Friedrich Strauss, or *From Reimarus to Wrede*, and many more; but they would all be in-jokes for theologians.) Niebuhr risked the appearance of nihilism, and this may be one reason why his work has never been popular, respected though it has always been among scholars. Yet Niebuhr's irony was never nihilistic all the way down. It undermined both author and readers, and the reader is invited to embrace that. Here, the irony reaches stability—if "permanent metanoia" (Niebuhr's words) can be called stability.

A question that hovers over all irony is, Who is included? (Those who get it.) Who is excluded? (Those who don't.) Presumably the author gets

[34]I am indebted to Camery-Hoggatt's *Irony in Mark's Gospel* for notice of what here should have been obvious long ago. It may be old news among New Testament scholars.

[35]Even writing theology? Aquinas: yes, straw.

it, since he intended it; but this is not as obvious at it seems. (Some today who have rediscovered history and covenantal commitments apart from sources in biblical religion, at least to a limited degree, would exclude the biblical authors, on the theory that those authors were henotheistic.)

To illuminate the problem of intent, consider an example. In section 11.4, we saw Richard Elliott Friedman's tour through the Common Documents, noticing how God appears face-to-face in the beginning, then recedes by degrees, until in the Wisdom literature, he is all but totally hidden. This has ironic overtones, of a sort: presence in absence. Presence in absence is an example of the general pattern in monotheism, that the disappointments bear blessings, at least in the sense that it would be comforting to have a deity simply present, available, who would answer to human queries.

Consider another defining mark of irony, intent, because the question of intent arises early and urgently in Friedman's account. Intent on the part of one author in the Common Documents is impossible, since there were many authors, and this irony persists through many centuries of texts. A conspiracy seems implausible. One can attribute the changes in the experience of God to changes in the life of First and Second Temple Judaism. That is undoubtedly one cause of the changes in the texts, but it merely shifts the question about intent and irony, rather than answers it. How much irony was intended? How can a community of diverse writers working from even more diverse textual sources over many centuries sustain an intention of irony? Can irony challenge, if it was not "intended"? Can a corporate author be said to have a "mind," intent at all? Can its understanding of the ironic in its experience of ultimate reality come to language "unintentionally" in its literary remains? That seems the most plausible conjecture.

The Passion and Resurrection narratives present problems equally difficult. Can one say that the smaller ironies that come early in the Gospels were intended (they could not have been *not* intended), and then say that the ironies of the Resurrection texts were not ironic, but are literally true? That would be truly incoherent! The task the Gospels pose to scholars is one of reconstructing the history of the tradition from the death of Jesus to the writing of the Gospels, especially Matthew, Luke, and John, where they are fully developed. Usually, when an author intends irony, he spells it out to himself, even if he does not for his readers. But we have seen in the anatomy of self-deception that people can carry on an engagement with life without spelling out even to themselves what is going on. There, the examples were all unhappy, failed engagements with life. But this skill is not intrinsically vicious. Can the life of a community produce irony that it as a corporate author does not spell out

to itself and which nevertheless works as ironic? If the central logic of covenantal religion is ironic, I think so. Such texts do work to convert lives (one can see this in the disappearance of God), but how? And even when people read the New Testament miracle texts literally, as people do from time to time, the texts *still* work to convert lives, and still work in a historical-covenantal way. But how? The reader must pay attention to all the text, but that is hardly a full explanation.

Questions such as this appear even in regard to the parables in the New Testament. Frederick Borsch, in *God's Parable*, asks why not just dispense with indirection and tell straight out what is going on. If direct and univocal language would work, people would use it. It doesn't. A message reduced to such terms would not be heard at any existentially significant level. Borsch quotes Emily Dickinson, "Tell it to me, but tell it to me slant."[36] This epigram touches the phenomenon I have suspected above. Suppose that a community has an experience of irony in its relations to ultimate reality. That irony can come to language long before it gets spelled out *as* irony, or recognized as such theoretically. Long before it can be understood *as* "slant," it can be communicated in a slanted way. This is one benign and even beneficial side of the human ability to conduct complex engagements with life without entirely spelling out what is going on.

Now come from the central irony in the logic of monotheism to typology once more. It has many of the features of irony: In the Gospels it is often not spelled out, and the major *structural* parallels to the Exodus are never spelled out or labeled. The reader is expected to understand and move from the narrative of events in the life of Jesus to the more important understanding of them as antitype of earlier events in the Exodus. It can safely be said that Exodus typology in the Gospels was intended; there is too much of it for it not to be.[37] Whether it was all *consciously* intended is another matter, though I suspect the answer to that also is affirmative. Parody is a form of irony, on the criterion that irony entails moving from a surface meaning of the text to some other, as Wayne Booth and others have noticed. When the surface meaning of the text is re-read in terms of some other meaning, a stable reading should emerge. If parody, then also typology. The reader may get it, or may not. Typology was the key to understanding Jesus's work and Passion, and it moves quickly to the central paradoxes of radical monotheism, for the message of the Gospels is that the Cross is central, because suffering for others

[36]Frederick Houk Borsch, *God's Parable* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), p. 53.

[37]We have seen this typology in ELN, section 7.1.

is what God does.[38] I suspect that Tikkun would be the counterpart in Rabbinic Judaism. Though the use of typology in post-biblical Judaism is noticeably rarer than it is in Christianity, the interest in narrative is not. In effect, Exodus typology is used to make sense of all of life, especially in the present, as indeed the rubrics in the Shema and the short historical creed in Deuteronomy 26 and other places instruct. Narrative is the ultimate vehicle for the life of monotheism. It can keep silence where silence is appropriate, allowing the sequence of events to speak for itself. It carries irony well. It works by exemplifying faith rather than theorizing about it.

[38]This is not particularly new, but Edward Hobbs put special emphasis on it in his instructional materials in the 1970s.

Chapter 14

Narrative and Monotheism

14.1 Narrative in Nature and History

The first things we saw in looking at the language of historical monotheism were affiliation with a historical community, silence in respect for the human obligations of covenant, and irony as an expression of its radical transformation of the disappointments of life into blessings. They led us to narrative as the ultimate context in which they live and acquire meaning. This chapter will be about history and narrative in a thematic way. We will begin with the workings of narrative and then proceed to applications of that initial exploration. The next and final chapter will be about analogy, or the roles of analogy in covenantal discourse. The ways in which we characterize and delineate human actions and take responsibility for them can best be handled separately from questions of analogy and the responsibilities that arise specifically from speaking analogically. The problem of narrative in history will grow into the problem of analogy and transcendence. It will take us to the question about language in John Courtney Murray's posing, if I may rephrase it: Can monotheistic religious language be responsible? Can it challenge, can it achieve its goals? Can it succeed? Or does it leave us bereft? Only at the end will we move from the problem of providence to the problem of God. This is natural in a study whose ambition was only to be elementary.

Ultimately, radical monotheism is marked by radical transcendence, but that transcendence grows out of life in history. One would reach for analogies of a provider only if life in history is experienced as providential, and our focus has always been on the ways in which human life is appropriated as providential. It is history and the logic of living in

history on which the experience of providence pivots, and this section will accordingly begin with the differences between narrative in history and nature. We touched this question in a preliminary way in section 11.3, with the anatomy of action in mind. It is time to explore it further, focusing on language. The remaining sections will draw out the implications for life viewed under the aspect of each of the three functions. The first section is on the anatomy of narrative discourse, or at least some features of its anatomy that we need for understanding religion. The remainder will be about historical discourse in life, one section for each of exposure, limitation, and need.

Language is the chief "place" in life where basic life orientation is chosen and determined. It is in language that human acts are given their meaning. Patterns of language give human lives color, style, commitment, and orientation. It is in language that the possibilities for life are envisaged, and it is peculiar but true that at this point, we "see" by hearing. The possibilities for life are possibilities for human action, and the focus of our inquiry is accordingly on human action. The possibilities for living appear in the language we use to characterize actions and the stories we tell about them. It is in human action that we appropriate the possibilities for human living.

In ELN, Part I, we examined only the rudiments of covenant, the thesis that all of life is good, even its disappointments. We saw early in ELN, Part II the importance of history in the life of covenant, and already there the crucial difference between nature and history showed itself. Narratives play out differently in nature and history, and the time has come to examine that difference in a way that makes narrative thematic. The consequence of the difference is that responsibility appears in historical understanding. If it is present in other basic life orientations at all, it works differently. This is almost definitional, and we shall then expect occasionally to see historical living beyond the customary biblical borders of historical religion. Responsibility and historical narrative are intimately connected.

The first thing to remember (cf. section 11.3) is that responsibility is not a property, something that human beings might or might not have, like brown or blond hair. It is an activity, and one that people participate in on a voluntary basis. This will seem counter-intuitive in some quarters, especially those of analytic philosophy and reductive materialism in which one must first demonstrate in naturalistic terms that human beings are indeterminate in their actions before one could even consider inquiring about responsibility. I shall defend my counter-claim not by addressing the traditions of naturalism or materialism, but simply by observing that the activity happens, and by laying out its features. Or rather, we may

turn to the work of Herbert Fingarette, who has done this for us.

In chapter 12 we examined his anatomy of self-deception, a practice of not spelling out one's failed engagements with life. To spell out is normally to take responsibility. Not to spell out can be a way to evade responsibility. Not to care at all is to defy responsibility. The classic explanation is in a chapter called "Acceptance of Responsibility," in which Herbert Fingarette delineates for us the contrast between irresponsibility and responsibility.[1] In many ways, self-deception is an example of a failure, even a failed attempt, to take responsibility; it is not at all a case of blatant irresponsibility. Fingarette's work will thread through Part IV, as it has through Part III.

The one who rejects responsibility is simply not there when it comes time to take responsibility. Nothing is covered up, he just doesn't care. The marks of moral responsibility are inner moral conflict, concern, self-restraint, remorse, guilt, taking care of that which one is responsible for.[2] They are missing in irresponsibility. The psychopath and sociopath lack the solid affections, relationships, and commitments of moral maturity and health; nor do they desire them: they do not care, and they have no shame about it. If someone simply will not accept responsibility, it is pointless to treat him as responsible.

Fingarette gives an example from sports that exhibits the basic contrasts in illustrating his contentions about responsibility as an activity.

> We have all had it happen to us, perhaps most often when we were youngsters, to try to "get up" a game with someone who, at least at the moment, happened to be uninterested and unwilling. We coax, wheedle, threaten, bribe. Reluctantly, he accepts our invitation. The game commences. And soon we notice that something is missing. Our reluctant partner goes through all the motions, he accepts the rules and follows them; he even appears *in a way* to have accepted the responsibilities of his role as a player. But something is missing. He is not "really playing." He is not playing for all it is worth—indeed, it does not seem to be worth *anything* to him. He does not *care*. He is not concerned to win—or at least not concerned in the right way. His heart is not in it. He shows no sharp regret at losses; there is no triumph at wins; he can neither risk nor sacrifice, for the stakes are obviously of no value to him and hence their loss is no genuine risk, no

[1] Fingarette, Herbert, *On Responsibility* (New York: Basic Books, 1967). The pertinent comments are all in the chapter entitled "Acceptance of Responsibility."

[2] Fingarette, *On Responsibility*, p. 21.

> genuine sacrifice. He does not, at decisive moments, brood, worry, think hard, then act either with conviction or fearful doubt. He never really wanted to play. The fact is, as we see by his not caring, he never really accepted our invitation to play in the spirit in which it was tendered. He is not really playing the game we wanted to play, but a formalistic parody of it. The game itself becomes pointless.[3]

It is the same with the asking and giving of reasons for human actions. Some are interested, some are not. Those who are not interested often don't even seem to know that such an activity is possible. For others, the activity, if it is entered at all, plays out by different rules and in a very different way from the life orientation that we saw with Merold Westphal's historical-covenantal religion.

The lot of those who have to deal with someone who is not responsible is grim. They must endure the "exasperating, stupid, exhaustingly repetitious—and withal casual—character of the genuinely non-responsible" person.[4] There is no recourse but to acquiesce, and to defend oneself, if need be, against the irresponsible one. In him there are none of the vices we expect with real evil: pride, resistance, rebellion, or lack of decency. There is nothing worth rebelling for, and there is no indecency any more than there is lack of decency. There is not only no evil pride, but no pride at all. Then Fingarette completes the analogy. When the other will not play a game, we can fall back on the practices of everyday life. But what if the other will not enter into those practices in the spirit they require in order to work?

It is pointless to hold responsible someone who will not play the game, who will not enter into the activity of responsibility. He may, through moral change, later *become* what he was not, a responsible person, and then accept responsibility for his past acts. But we can only appeal, and then only wait.

It is my central contention that responsibility plays out differently in different basic life orientations. The initial contrast is between turning to archetypes to explain human behavior or exploring the full and non-repeatable individuality of human acts. The first alternative is the way of mimesis and naturalism, the second is the way of living in history. A second contrast appears in the choice of whom to be responsible to. Exilic religion talks a great deal about responsibility, but in the West at any rate, it is usually responsibility to oneself, not to other people. When one begins to answer to other people, one is on the road at a minimum

[3]Fingarette, *On Responsibility*, p. 34 ff; his italics.
[4]Fingarette, *On Responsibility*, p. 37.

to a henotheism, and possibly to covenantal religion. Henotheisms do not go far enough down that road to see the leap from responsibility in intramundane human institutions to responsibility in a context that, expressed in analogies, transcends human institutions and human history.

The way to unpack these claims and give them some dimension is to return to the characterization of human acts that we first saw in the work of H. L. A. Hart, on the difference between ascription and description in the understanding of human actions. We considered Hart in section 11.1, "The Constitution of Acts." A few comments in extension of that exploration will suffice. We saw that characterizing human actions is a matter of judgement, not description. Indeed, it is also a matter of selection: several acts may have been committed in one series of physical motions, and one must decide which acts are interesting. The narrative context determines that selection, or rather, one decides how the narrative is to play out and then selects the particulars of acts accordingly. This is not a matter of just making up stories oblivious to the "facts." One sees the process of selection, for example, in the choices made by New Testament scholars about the background culture and background literature into whose context the New Testament is to be fitted. The story will appear quite different depending on whether that background is the Common Documents or Hellenistic or Gnostic literature. It is a commonplace in history writing that the historian selects what is pertinent to the story, and just because it is crucially important but not a matter of "fact," that work of selection tends to be controversial. All of the particulars that could be included or excluded are "factual," but the import of the story depends not on getting them straight, but on including or excluding them.

Troeltsch saw the work of selection in the formal structure of history in *Der Historismus und seine Probleme*. He located it in the middle of a logic that begins with individuality and ends in development. Along the way, he noted the essential newness and essential freedom of events in history, in transcendence of all "laws" or naturalistic forms of regularity. He also saw that the particulars of a narrated history are known only through their human significance for those in the historian's present, and that they have some narrative coherence. Historical narrative will always live in some tension between its particularity and its general applicability. (Paul Ricoeur insisted correctly that any delineation of human actions relies on some general "desirability character" implicit in the terms of its vocabulary, but it tells a unique story nonetheless.) Not only the people involved but even later historians may not see all of what was involved in the actions recounted. Yet they can be quite creative in the sense of introducing the new and newly intelligible into their lives and their stories. But it all comes together in the last mark of the formal logic

of history, namely, development. Development in history is a narrative category.

The best way to see how much is at stake in narratives as they occur in historical religions is to look briefly at what is entailed in simple statements of the form "I did *A*." For the narratives of a covenant people are of the form "we did *A*," or "our forebears did *A*." This is so even when the events are reported in the third person, as, "they exchanged the God who was their glory for the image of an ox that eats grass," or "My father was a wandering Aramaean, few in number . . . ." The one who tells such third-person narratives takes a responsibility for them akin (if not identical) to the one who says "I did *A*."

"I did *A*" is not just reporting an instance of *x* did *A*, where the free variable *x* happens to be the speaker. To use the first person pronoun, to say "I," is to invoke an entire constellation of responsibilities, whether or not they are seen. If they are seen, the entire stance toward life, oneself, and the world is transformed. The act reported, *A*, can be characterized in quite different ways. In one possibility, *A* is merely chosen from some repertoire of archetypal acts, and its essential features are taken from the archetype. In another possibility, the act *A* is delineated in its particulars and its peculiarity and it becomes unique, non-repeatable, however much analogy it may bear to similar acts. In the second case, where the uniqueness of acts is of interest, the self-involvements and commitments of human actions also stand out in much greater relief.

"I did *A*" can appear as a simple constative speech act, the same as "*x* did *A*" with the speaker substituted for *x*. If it is not recognized as more, it may never become more. If it is recognized as more, one is on the road to history and to the possibility of covenant, the encounter in which covenant is either embraced or turned away from.

Talk of the form "I did *A*" is by no means just constative. It is also a commissive and a declarative, at a minimum, and it has hovering over it expressive implications. There are directives associated with it, but they will be the last to show themselves, and they will come out more in the characterization of the act *A* than in the import of the pronoun "I." The declarative aspects will come out in the locating of the "I did *A*" in a larger conversation, for *any* speech act in a conversation expects and elicits a response, and in that sense it becomes a directive. As a declarative, it is probably already a directive, since declaratives always contain elements of a directive in them. (A judge's declaration can become a dead letter if it is not accepted.)

Look first at the commissive aspect. The "I" is not just an instance of a free variable *x* for the actor. Speaking with the first person pronoun is always implicitly an act of taking responsibility, whether or not that

is recognized and understood, and whether or not it is ever developed. Speaking in the first person pronoun can be interpreted as a move in the "game" of responsibility. In the light of Fingarette's exposition of that game and of the commitment that a potential player may or may not undertake, we would have to say that to say "I" *may* be a move in that game. It may not. When self-deception is involved, speaking in the first person becomes a way of dodging responsibility rather than of accepting it, but the same issue is at stake. There, the difference will come out in the way the act *A* is characterized. If it is spelled out adequately, and the "I" is still spoken, then responsibility has usually been undertaken. What the speaker commits to is that spelling out in characterization of the acts involved. He is committed to as much spelling out as is necessary and appropriate. There may be none required, if the acts are unproblematic and transparently clear to all concerned. There may be great moral labor if there are problems or the acts are not clear.

He commits, further, to respond to the sort of analogies that have been accepted in the historical conversation of which he is a part. This, it will turn out, is a somewhat different obligation than anything undertaken in naturalistic discourse.

For when we come to the characterization of the acts in question, we come to the declarative aspect of the history. This is largely a choice of analogies, and it is simple enough. The "*A*" is not just a selection from a limited repertoire of pre-characterized acts, it implicitly contains within itself a new and free and responsible characterization, one that is open to criticism. The act might have been characterized differently, as we have seen above, in section 11.1. The act may be characterized differently for different purposes; it may have been many acts simultaneously. To offer a characterization of an act is then to moot a declarative, for when the characterization is accepted within the community of judgement, other people respond on the basis of that characterization. Their acts in response objectify the characterization of the original act as *A*, rather than as *B* or *C*.

Now look at the expressive implications of characterizing an act. There always are some. The act brings life or death, it is desired or undesired, it is approved or disapproved, one is proud of it or ashamed of it. It may be humorous. Something human is at stake, always. This is intrinsic to the ontological constitution of a human act: an actor acts for a goal. That goal fits into larger goals, and all these goals are known in narrative, so the ontological constitution of human acts is always situated in narratives. And acts can be told in multiple and even conflicting narratives, so they are constituted in a way radically different from the narratives of the "historical sciences" such as historical geology

or astrophysical cosmology.

Probably the most important performatives are connected with guilt, potential guilt, innocence, credit, discredit, praise or blame, approval and disapproval. These are issues of responsibility. Merold Westphal's definition of guilt was the approval of an other's disapproval.[5] This makes sense only in a context where conversation is possible that would adjudicate the character of the acts and eventuate in approval or disapproval. As I have claimed already, responsibility is an activity, not a property. The difference between historical and naturalistic accounts of human action is then that historical accounts do, as naturalistic accounts of human action do not, participate in the larger activity of responsibility. The categories of explanation that they use are different. The categories of explanation in naturalistic accounts of human action are not intended to fit (or be fittable) into the discourse of responsibility. Explanation in historical accounts is.

In naturalistic accounts of human actions, there are performatives (especially expressives) present, too; the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are soaked in them. But they are the sentiments and feelings appropriate to being the victim or favored child of the gods, to struggling through a destiny that is given in the stars and the gods of nature, not to working out a life in freedom. It is like a struggle to traverse roaring whitewater rapids, not the labor of becoming oneself in freedom and community in history. There are degrees, of course, and just as historical-covenantal religion emerges out of prior mimetic religion and even keeps and transforms its categories and symbols, so also mimetic religion in practice already shows features that will make sense only later from a historical and covenantal perspective. One is always given a choice: whether to move forward into recognition and intention in human freedom in the activity of responsibility, or to return to mimetic archetypal categories, in which there is only participation in nature, harmony or disharmony with nature, but not a truly free responsible action. The *direction* of personal change matters far more than the stage of change or development or maturity: it is possible to affirm the mimetic past without returning to it, in the sense that it has in retrospect become what it was not, namely, history, and as such is to be affirmed as the locus of divine providence. This is a matter of growth in the categories of life and of its interpretation. The covenanter's stance toward mimetic religion is then different from that towards exilic religion. (For the deity who became the God of the Common Documents was in all probability originally a local earthquake and volcano deity of the Sinai, very much a nature god—until his people chose history.) Exilic involvements are different, for they are rejections of the pains of life once

[5] *God, Guilt, and Death*, section 4b, especially p. 78.

seen and recognized, rather than entailments of an undeveloped sense of the categories of human life. As such, they merit the words of the Act of Contrition, "I detest all my sins, etc," in ways that the religion of a mimetic does not.

It is a commonplace among those familiar with the hermeneutical circle that the meaning of texts emerges only when they stand within their larger contexts. As with texts, so with human actions, as Paul Ricoeur observed in ways that I have come to depend upon more than once already. I would like to hazard some conjectures on how this contextual interpretation of human actions works.

But first, in summary, the thesis plays out quite differently in different basic life orientations. The characterization of acts depends on that larger context. If the larger narrative is one of covenant, then acts in the embedded stories can be acts of gratitude or ingratitude. If there is no larger covenant, gratitude is not even an issue. If the larger narrative is one of Gnostic Fall into the body, then embedded acts can be attempts at repatriation. If embodiment did not happen through a Gnostic Fall, then repatriation to the spirit world is not even an issue. If the larger narrative is mimetic and naturalistic, then embedded acts can fit into nature naturally or not. If the larger context is not naturalistic, then good and evil relations to nature will not be characterized as "fitting into it naturally" at all, but in some other way. For example, one might be a good or a bad steward of a nature entrusted to human care in a covenantal relationship. But that is quite different from successful or failed mimesis. Lastly, if the larger narrative is focused on and terminates in some human institution, then embedded acts can be characterized as serving it or not, being informed by it or not, and so on.

The choices made in characterization of human acts in a "local" context are informed by the choice of "global" context. This is an instance of the hermeneutical circle, in which the larger context always determines the reading of the parts of a text. The different possible interpretations are compared not in logic but in living. That is, the light that is shed on human lives comes from how they play out, not from some standard of criticism that is originally independent of human lives and history. Language will of course reflect that light and is even constitutive in mediating it. But it does not generate criticism of life orientations in the sense of producing deductive proofs in favor of one or another orientation. Even to think of it as inductive is to mischaracterize the role of language in orienting life and articulating an orientation. To make a mistake at this point is to misunderstand the confessional nature of basic life orientation and also to misunderstand the way in which responsibility is conducted in regard to basic life orientation. Confessional disagreements are unresolvable, and

yet we do compare lives lived covenantally with those lived mimetically or in exile or in service to some human institution.

Events in history become what they are in language, and in language, they illuminate other events in human lives. It is by analogy that this is possible. The analogies chosen in covenantal living are to responsible human relationships, but the other in the analogy is taken to be transcendent to nature and history. When this happens, the analogies may be refused or acknowledged. To accept them is to acknowledge that they do indeed illuminate human life. When they are refused, it is usually with the dismissal that they are "only" analogies, i. e., that they do not really illuminate human life as it is. If they are admitted as true, that is, as disclosing how human life really is, then that truth is interconvertible with being at some level. Analogy acknowledged determines ontology in one direction; analogy rejected chooses an ontology of some other sort. The ontological questions will, of course, turn on whether nature alone or history as well are credited with some ontologically interesting status. This is a choice, one involving the human will, and so at some primordial level, will, intellect, and ontology are all intimately parts of each another.

Consider an example, from the history of covenantal religion, the prayers in Nehemiah 9.6-33. The books of Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah are generally dated late, sometimes as late as the third century BCE. [6] This is noticeably after the editing of the Pentateuch and the major prophetic works. More importantly, the style is subtly but noticeably different from that in the Pentateuch and the Prophets. We have come to the stage when a historical people reflects on its history as a *received* history. Otto Kaiser concludes that the Chronicler (editor of Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah) knew the books of Kings in more or less the completed form in which we have them today. In other words, he not only reflected on the events of history, but also on a settled and more or less stable document recounting those events. His remarks are reflective in ways that the accounts in the Pentateuch are not. In this sense, he is closer to the present and to us than he is to the Exodus or the events of the monarchy and the Exile that produced the Deuteronomic History. This is an early example of what I am looking for: the characterization of events in terms of history and covenant in a way that is at least potentially self-conscious.

The text speaks to God in the second person, recounting the events of the Exodus, "You saw . . . ," "You worked portents . . . ," "You divided the sea . . . ," "You led them by day . . . ," "But our fathers grew proud, were obstinate, and flouted your commands." "They refused to obey . . . ," "They became obstinate . . . ," and so on. These are all characterizations

[6] Cf. Otto Kaiser, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1975), p. 185.

of events or of human responses to events. The events could have been characterized and appropriated in other ways, without any reference to a transcendent deity acting within history at all. Natural events are spoken of (analogically, to which we shall come) in terms of human relationships, here to the transcendent reality that appears (another analogy) in history and nature but is not reducible to ordinary forces of nature or actors in history. These analogies are used to structure the human appropriation of the original events and to structure the reception of them as history by later generations. It is this structuring of human life that we are interested in. It is important to notice that the Chronicler is clearly more aware of what he is doing. In the events of the Exodus, by contrast, a volcano and earthquake deity becomes the Lord of History almost by accident. He acts in history, but the events *become* radically historical (as different from a phenomenon of nature) only in the perspective of time over the years that followed. This is an instance of what we have seen already: what an event is, insofar as it is its meaning, grows and changes as the story of which it is a part unfolds in later time.

In Nehemiah, we have reached the stage when the historization of the events has long since been externalized and objectivated, to use the terms of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann. It is being internalized by later generations. By contrast, the original events were not experienced, and the original actions were not engaged in, as *continuance* of a covenant—indeed, not even as institution of something already known but not yet actual. For the covenant concept emerged only out of the events; it was not conceived before them and then implemented according to a plan. Not even the rudimentary form of the patriarchal inheritance would count as a vision of what the Exodus was to become. Thus what an action *is* is not entirely clear in its first occurrence and gets externalized only in hindsight of that event. Articulation and spelling out of what was intended frequently come only after the fact. Then when it is something someone *else* did (the forefathers), it can be experienced as objective, and so be internalized by later generations. Externalization and objectivation are more or less complete by the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, and we see internalization in their literature.

Look at the context before and after the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. Nehemiah echoes the prophets, who already are using history to interpret their own circumstances. Some readers think that the J stratum of the Pentateuch was originally put together to question Solomon's conscience, to hold him accountable for the gifts of history. Be that as it may, later texts, such as the beginning of Amos, are clearer. Amos opens with a litany of wrongs in the peoples of the neighborhood, boxing the compass and coming to rest in little Israel. But the indictment of Israel is twice

as long, and whereas the other nations merely get accused of various wrongs, Israel is called to account in a different way. The indictment continues, after the list of wrongs, with words to the effect of, "By the way, I am the one who brought you out of Egypt." The logic is simple enough:

> If you had studied history (as Deuteronomy repetitiously told you to do), you would have been grateful, and if you had been grateful, you would have been nice to your neighbors. As it was, you cut class and flunked history, you became ungrateful, and then you were nasty to your neighbors.

Human events and human actions are construed in the light of history, as parts of a narrative that continues in the present. In the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, the rebuilding of the Temple, things were not going as well as they might have, and all witnesses (the Chronicler, Haggai, Trito-Isaiah) agree that the people were more inclined to grumbling than to gratitude. Hence the appeal to history.

Later, when the friends of Jesus needed to make sense of their own experiences, they turned to the Exodus in typology. When the rabbis of the Mishnah needed to make sense of their own situation, they turned to the covenant law inherited from history. In each case, the light comes from history, and human events are construed as fitting into a covenant in history well or poorly.

In lesser ways, examples from recent history abound. To live anywhere today is to know that major features of life are an artifact of the Second World War. To live in America through and after the 1960s is to live with the fruit of the Civil Rights movement and subsequent changes in race relations. To live after Roe v. Wade is to live with the consolidation of a system of sex relations and gender identities entirely different from those that obtained until the 1950s. To live as a Christian after the Reformation is to live with the settlement of those conflicts. To live in India after 1947 is to live with the legacy of the British—some of it gone, some of it shaping India to this day. To live in India after Muslim rule in the medieval period was to live with a similar legacy, though one not obvious without some study of history. To live in America as a native American after the invasion of "Western" culture is to live mimesis with the bitter historical legacy of destruction by supposedly covenantal newcomers who were in realty more henotheistic, not at all displaying the openness and generosity that covenant enjoins. To live with many disputed constitutional questions in America today is to live with the legacy of the eighteenth century, both statesmen who read the philosophers of that century, and preachers who had a somewhat different understand-

ing of their covenantal inheritance. That legacy, in many strands, bears some striking resemblances to the Exodus and settlement: diverse peoples united, a new political order, government accountable to the people and to standards transcending any human institution. And with all that, a trail of blood, sin, toil, and tears that has not entirely been acknowledged to this day.

Consider in brief contrast the strategies by which human actions are appropriated in other basic life orientations.

In the ancient naturalistic religions, the power of nature and nature's gods does not leave room for real human freedom, and the ontology of the world, construed as nature, is not unambiguously good. The human will and its biblical agonies of choice and self-knowledge do not appear, they are not a problem. Yet human freedom intrudes, as the memories expanded by writing allow it to. Greek tragedy is the late response trying to make sense of the tensions and misfits in this constellation of ideas. It is a stage on the journey out of mimetic religion, but it has not yet found covenant. Before (and outside of) the tragedies, the pattern is a little simpler: the activity of responsibility does not happen, gratitude is not a category of response, one is simply in a struggle with limitations both external and internal, trying to strike the best bargain with reality that one can.

The intelligibility of nature is in some sense that of regularity and predictability—clearly so today, and even in ancient Greek philosophy, real transcendence of the limits of predictable nature was seldom if ever achieved. But the intelligibility of history is that of a narrative of responsible freedom. Even if the terms used to delineate human actions have some analogical intelligibility beyond particular uses, they only get their full meaning in particular events from the particular narratives they appear in. In freedom, there is no predictability or regularity. Where some human acts are routine, and thus to some extent predictable and regular, they merely provide a background against which other human acts are not routine. It is the free acts, the chosen acts, that we are most interested in. *Deviation* from prescribed routine may also be a responsible act; it is in any case usually unpredictable and irregular. Mimesis takes it as *ipso facto* wrong; deviation from natural regularity is evil, and to engage in such is to commit the mimetic version of sin.

One may point to examples in which non-covenantal cultures or individuals have acted with historical freedom and historical intent, but these do not constitute counter-examples, they are merely steps that could lead the way to a historical-covenantal life orientation. There are several more steps necessary if that path is to be traversed to completion. Responsible freedom has to become *recognized* and *intentional*, life in history has to

be affirmed as good (this is the covenantal part), and there has to be some recognition of transcendence. The objects of intention are not located in nature or human institutions; how they transcend nature and human institutions is much more difficult to explain. *That* they do so is clear enough from the biblical and philosophical record.

Contrast the strategies of modern scientific naturalism. It focuses on the material substrate of human existence and so can limit its categories of explanation to those of nature. In doing this, however, it presupposes and obscures the hermeneutical choices that enable a discussion of that substrate in naturalistic terms, such as all the choices that deliver formal causes to the natural sciences: the hermeneutical choices that define the phenomena that natural science can then explain naturalistically. This strategy, when applied to talk about human actions, works fairly well to conduct human life without straying into the activity of taking responsibility for it. Final causes, without which human actions would be incomplete, get spelled out only in part and are not integrated into a history that matters much. If one is of the historical-covenantal persuasion, this naturalistic strategy looks very much like a cover-story, in the sense of Fingarette.

The strategy of exilic religions varies some, but there are some common features. Responsibility is first and foremost to oneself, not to others or to a deity, because one is oneself divine. Saying "I did it," I am guilty," or saying "thanks" is not part of the Gnostic program. (Before whom would one be guilty or grateful?) Those who speak this way tend to be treated with condescending indulgence accorded to the ignorant who don't know any better. At least this is true of the Western examples of Gnosticism.

Other features may be noted. Is the "I" an epiphenomenon, as in Buddhism? If so, how is this reflected in narratives of oneself? Or is it that such narratives are occasionally told, but are discounted? What does it mean for the "I" to be real? The different life orientations have quite different answers to this question. Radical responsibility makes sense only in the historical-covenantal option. To admit that one is capable of responsibility implicitly undertakes an obligation to participate, even if one is irresponsible and does not.

At another point of demarcation, is the body part of the self? Not in gnosticisms—only the soul is. This devaluation of the body should appear in narratives, if any are told.

Buddhism today does provide examples of talk about responsibility, even repentance. I am not aware that it ever plays out in the sense of responsibility *to* a transcendent and covenantal reality in the way it does in Western historical-covenantal religions. But Buddhism today, especially

in Western scholarship, is very much in a state of re-understanding its own history, and covenantal commitments should not be ruled out casually.

The strategy of henotheisms is, as usual, something of a miscellany. The ultimate context of narrative is just the human institutions that define one or another henotheism. Full transcendence is not reached. The Greek tragedies are in a sense an example of henotheism that knows it is incomplete, yet does not see how to make the move to real transcendence. In the not making of that move, whether it is refusal or not-seeing, there lies an act of respect (silence, again!) for the human anguish of tragedy. Candid henotheisms actually *like* terminating inquiry in human institutions; that is not only their ultimate loyalty, but a happy one. Aristotle serves as a ready example. He looked down on women, accepted slavery as natural, and referred all human action to the life of the *polis* as he knew it. He treats humility as a vice, not a virtue, and assumes that the poor, slaves, and the lower classes are simply incapable of achieving some of the virtues. Aristotle's moves all make sense within the limited reference horizons of the Greek *polis*.

Aristotle knows well that there are sources of motion other than in nature, as in art, technology, accident, fate, fortune, intelligence, and so on. But the human will does not appear in the sense that it later does in Augustine, and Augustine picks it up from the Bible and from some Roman usage. In the same way, the analogies by which history is appropriated as the stage for action by a transcendent deity in the here and now do not appear in Aristotle as they do in the Bible. Thus human actions do not quite rise to the level of responsibility, for the context of responsibility in larger history is not reached.

One could object that the activity of responsibility appears in mimetic, exilic, and henotheistic contexts, that it is not a monopoly of historical-covenantal religions. Of course it does: but in that moment, people are partly historical-covenantal in outlook and are moving from mimesis and so on to historical living. Whether covenant is avowed as much as history is acknowledged is another question.

In mimeses, nature is the ultimate focus of reference. It may be personified or not. The ancient mimetic religions gave it many personalities, Leucippus and Democritus and others de-personalized it, and modern "scientific atheism" depersonalizes it even more radically. Historical explanation, by contrast, introduces new categories for the understanding of human action. Disagreements then become a question of which categories to use, which language to use in appropriating the phenomenon of interest. At stake is whether only one language-game may be used, or several; and whether they are in conflict. If only one language-game is permitted, then its ontology is privileged and dominant, and that dominance

may be culturally enforced. The ultimate focus of reference determines the parameters of the language game. In Aristotle's distinction between natural motions and other kinds, natural motions are in-built, even when characterized as "ensoulment" and because in-built, they admit of no radical choice. Here there can be no real discourse of responsibility. If the discourse and explanatory categories of nature are privileged, then the activity of responsibility is eclipsed or shut down altogether. And insisting on nature as the sole explanation effectively serves to eliminate responsibility.

The activity of responsibility is peculiar to historical-covenantal living. It is not done at all in mimesis, is truncated in henotheism, and is turned in on itself (or just skipped) in exilic religion. In covenant, it ultimately requires transcendence if it is to be intelligible.

How it works out in more detail is the focus of the next section, in which the theme of responsibility is exposure. The language of exposure will lead by turns to the linguistic practices engaging limitation and need.

14.2 Historical Narrative and Exposure

The essential difference between nature and history is that the categories of explanation appropriate to history make possible the taking of responsibility, and the descriptive language in nature does not. That activity of responsibility has more in it than we have seen in section 14.1. Some of its anatomy was sketched in Niebuhr's *The Meaning of Revelation*, but Niebuhr did not see the performative implications of taking responsibility in the narratives of history. Indeed, awareness of the performative implications of ordinary language did not become widespread until some time after he wrote *The Meaning of Revelation*. Sketching that performative dimension of historical language will be the primary work of this section. Its task will be to ask and begin to answer the question whether the language of monotheism can do the work assigned to it. In the first function, this is a matter of whether exposure in history can achieve truth and whether it can bring grace. The second and third functions, limitation and need, will be handled in the two following sections. All three sections will come up to a sense of transcendence, a place where the language and concerns of life in history depend on references that go beyond what is seen in history. The analogies by which they speak in history must, in order to work at all, extend beyond the history and the life that we see.

In most of the course of Christian history after about the third century, questions have been asked in a somewhat different form, directed to the language *of God*. More precisely, they inquire about the *names* of God,

on the assumption that if the names of God actually succeed in naming God, then the devout can successfully address God in prayer and be heard. Rabbinic Judaism has not to my knowledge had such an intense focus on these problems, although Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* not only handles them carefully but stands upstream in the tradition that Niebuhr himself lived in.[7] Islam also encountered these questions. Can the names of God succeed, or do they fail? If the names of God do not succeed, the devout do not succeed either, but are delusional. Failure appears to be conceivable in two ways. In the first, the names of God (and by extension all knowledge of God) claim to know too much, to know God as he is in himself. Such claims are of the same sort of knowledge as of objects in the world, and so they implicitly draw God into the world and make him like other things in the world. The names of God can thus mislead by naming something within the world, something less than transcendent. Such language is deceived (and deceives others) in its claims about transcendence. It converts covenantal living into something else, most likely mimetic or henotheistic. In the second failure mode, language does not even attempt to convey real transcendence. The failure is just as great, if in this case much simpler. In either case, such a failure of language would leave its users bereft, abandoned.

Actually, failure is possible in a third way also. God could refuse to listen. The God could deny efficacy to the human names by which he is addressed. Thus names of God are always dependent on divine grace, divine permission, in order to work at all. At least that was implicit in the problematic inherited over the centuries, whether or not it was seen in the tradition. We shall come to it in time, but for now it will remain in the background.

The possibilities that were traditionally seen in regard to the names of God are mirrored in the issue of providence, to which the present inquiry is limited. Here, too, the inquiry will depend on assumptions that will have to be discharged in the next chapter. Indeed, they will not entirely appear until the next chapter, but fair warning is appropriate at this point. Limited to providence and exposure, the questioning focuses on the possibility of truth and grace in history. If I may rephrase the tests of success for covenantal language, they can be put thus: whether the disappointments of life can bring blessing is a matter of confessional choice. How they might do so depends on many things, but most of all on the language that is used to reappropriate them *as* blessings. That language will depend on analogies whose reference reaches beyond any particular historical community or events, even as it nevertheless always reaches *from* particular historical events. The question in regard to language

[7]Cf. David B. Burrell, *Knowing the Unknowable God*, pp. 16–18.

about God was a question about failing to language transcendence. The question of the language of providence must proceed in smaller steps. It begins in a somewhat different and more concrete form. Can covenantal language in history challenge? Can it respond responsibly? Can it offer hope? These will in due course open into transcendence, but before we get that far, there is much to be learned just from looking at how the language of responsibility plays out in history. These are questions about truth in history, what truth in historical narrative might be. The answers will come from looking at how historical narrative works.

We have already seen and put much weight on Niebuhr's central insight that revelation is that history which makes sense of the rest of history. He has more concerns than that in *The Meaning of Revelation*. Many of them were anatomical in the sense of laying out the features and details of what happens when people think historically. But central was the recognition that just as nature can support many gods, history, when considered without some indication of how it is appropriated, can also support many gods, most often not covenantal. Covenant comes only when certain choices are made, choices that we saw in ELN, section 6.4, the seven lessons of the Exodus. Yet those lessons are inseparable from the events; the animating spirit of them is gratitude in history, and gratitude in history without reference to particular history makes no sense. In the various kinds of narrative of history it is possible to see somewhat different categories of explanation, with their commitments and implications.

As we saw in ELN, section 5.5, for the believer who thinks inside the history of a covenantal community, history brings all the graces of exposure, limitation, and need. This theme is perhaps the best known part of *The Meaning of Revelation*. The moments in which history becomes intelligible to itself make the past intelligible for the believing community. It becomes possible to make coherent sense of it all. In this sense, revelation saves the past from senselessness. This is history working in the second function, as limitation. Revelation resurrects the forgotten and buried and embarrassing past, sins, betrayals, follies, what was denied or suppressed. Unburying the past is confession of sin, conversion of memory. This is history working in the first function, as exposure. And history as revelation works as appropriation, when people entering a community adopt its past as theirs. Conversely, the community also adopts the history that newcomers bring as its own. Niebuhr saw this, and Common Documents scholars have come to appreciate this pluralism in the accounts of the patriarchal history and the Exodus. I am following Niebuhr's own description and his language fairly closely in order to

summarize it briefly.[8] Niebuhr's argument in *The Meaning of Revelation* works to delineate how having a common history brings life to a community. What comes after fills it out in detail. What came before was a Neo-Kantian construction devised to make it ontologically plausible. I would like to review only enough of that Neo-Kantian framework so that it is possible to see what Niebuhr intended to accomplish by it, and to see how it has raised problems since.[9] I would like to achieve something similar to his ends, but by slightly different means, and in the process, the problems raised in his explanation can be avoided.

Niebuhr spoke in terms of two distinctions: between external and internal history, and between critical realism and critical idealism. Here are the central ideas in the two distinctions. History works in a way described by critical idealism in the sense that it bring categories to the history it knows, and the categories are different in internal and external history. This I shall actually agree with, if in somewhat different terms paralleling the distinctions in regard to history and nature introduced in the last section. In Niebuhr's own words, outer history is of things, inner history is of selves. Outer history is impersonal, inner history is personal. External history uses the categories of individuality, internal history those of personality, selves in community with other selves. External history is the realm of pure reason, internal history that of practical reason. Despite Niebuhr's modifications of his Kantian inheritance at various points, a very Kantian flavor persists. And in my own recasting of the argument, the Kantian instincts will remain.

There is a critical realism in history as well as critical idealism, for the events and actions studied are indeed real and not just artifacts of ideal categories (or worse, figmentary). For external history, one distinguishes primary facts from secondary and subjective accounts of witnesses. The reality and knowability of the events are evidently guaranteed in those primary facts. Internal history is the realm of values, and the reality of those values is guaranteed by the fact that they are not private and transient but common and shared in a community of selves.

The shapes of value, time, and human association all appear differently in external and internal history. For external history, value is strength, cause in the sense of the magnitude of one event's effects on others. For internal history, value means worth for selves, cause in an entirely different sense: the causes for which people live. For external history, time is quantitative, just as it is in physics. For internal history, time is inherited and present, the time of selves, remembered in community (and so not subjective). It is a dimension of life, not a cat-

[8]MR, hardback, pp. 110–117; paperback, pp. 81–86.
[9]Cf. MR, hardback, pp. 64-71; paperback, pp. 47-53.

egory like space. And human association appears differently also. In Niebuhr's appraisal, external history sees communities as made up of atomic individuals related by external bonds, depersonalized complexes of psychological and biological forces, a vast and intricate structure. Internal history sees society as a community of selves who are parts of one another. Niebuhr evidently takes the categories of explanation in external history to be generic in form, and those of internal history to be corporate. (We have seen these distinctions in ELN, section 8.2 already.) Whether he is right at this point I do not know and have my doubts. Certainly internal history is essentially corporate.

The problems arising from Niebuhr's distinctions can be indicated easily enough. His account of living in history could be mistaken for what has come to be labeled a "perspectival" theory of history. I am not convinced that that is entirely what he was doing; in his own words, it was a confessional approach. Perhaps the best-known guide to the controversies was Van Harvey's *The Historian and the Believer*, and I shall not repeat its arguments here. But the theme is simple enough: truth is perspectival, and the truths of revelation depend on the perspective of the one who hears them. I suppose they do, in a sense, one implicit in the confessional character of religious language and commitment. But not in the sense that the hard perspectivist targets of Harvey's critique thought. Harvey's chief complaint was against using perspectivism to shield its proponents from responsibility in history. The central issues were usually "miracles" interpreted as exceptions to laws of nature, and then used as a kind of "proof" of religion that would shield its believers from responsibility for their belief. The most conspicuous advocate against "orthodox" belief was Ernst Troeltsch, whom I have embraced as not opponent but carrier of radical monotheism in history, in chapter 9. Harvey called Niebuhr's position "soft" perspectivism, in contrast to the "hard perspectivisms" that were the real targets of his disagreements. He liked Niebuhr, as I do, and his discomforts were more in the nature of seeking a better explanation of a position he liked than of real disagreement with the position. "Hard perspectivism" seemed to Harvey simply to dodge the moral obligations of a historian. In slightly different terms, it is irresponsible in its claims.

I would like to accomplish Niebuhr's ends with somewhat different means, but they will work much the way his own did, although I think they will avoid the hazard of the abuses of perspectivism. The distinction between internal and external history was basically sound, I think, for it recognizes that there is something importantly different between history written within and for a community of faith and the accounts of the same events written by outsiders not committed to that community. The differ-

ence between insider and outsider, however, is not able to do all the work Niebuhr assigns to it. One and the same writer can at various times speak in both roles, as "insider" or as "outsider," and so the insider/outsider distinction may not in the end really capture the idea that we are looking for. Recall that in the last section, we looked at the difference between the categories of scholarship and the categories of explanation in the natural sciences. A parallel distinction appears in historical thinking, if not in exactly the same way. The categories of scholarship in any field are a specialized discourse of responsibility. This is true whether the writer is doing external history or internal history (or, for that matter, any other discipline). Scholars think and write in conversation with other scholars, often in dispute with them, and it is the dialectic of such dispute that is essential to the activity of responsibility: the asking and giving of reasons for the claims and conclusions of scholarship, and the personal commitments implicit in making such demands and claims and answers. As much is true for popular historical thinking; responsibility in history is not a phenomenon confined to scholarship. Just as in the natural sciences the categories of explanation and the categories of scholarship are different, they differ in history also. What is peculiar about history is that the categories of explanation work differently in what Niebuhr called internal and external history. In external history, the scholar is not taking responsibility for the actions of those whose history he recounts, nor is he trying to assign responsibility for those actions, even when that responsibility may be quite apparent from his narrative. In internal history, by contrast, responsibility is the whole point of the narrative. Or more precisely, the insider takes responsibility for the *tradition* he stands in. Even as he is necessarily not guilty of all the sins committed in that tradition, he *is* responsible for telling the truth about them and for his own choices as to how to continue the tradition. Niebuhr's account of the texture of history is quite apposite at this point. External history is about causes in the sense of magnitude of effects. Internal history is about causes in the sense of foci of loyalty. The categories of explanation in internal history are supposed to be precisely the categories of responsibility: *my* father was a wandering Aramaean, etc., and so *I* am mindful, trusting, grateful, and obligated etc.

Niebuhr's distinction of internal from external history approximates a distinction of performative intentions in history-writing. It would better be formulated as a way of recognizing different kinds of responsibility in history. One can take responsibility for the history one tells or one can bracket that responsibility. If one is truly an outsider, then taking responsibility for the history as for one's own is difficult at best. Nevertheless, "external" history always involves responsibility in some

surprising ways. As a matter of course, an "external" history, written about a people other than one's own, nevertheless entails the responsibilities of scholarship (just as the literature of the natural sciences does, even though the explanatory categories of the sciences intentionally rule out responsibility from the start). But external history becomes responsible in more ways than just this. It presupposes that someone else (the actors it speaks of) can take responsibility for the human actions it studies. In other words, external history presupposes that the actions it studies are, for those who did them, an internal history. If this is not true, then what it studies is not *history* but something else. Psychology, perhaps, or a natural phenomenon, but not history.

Yet "external" history has implications for the historian that go well beyond this. For when a historian in one culture studies the history of another culture, the human actions that he studies always have implications for his own culture. If human action is intelligible at all, its desirability character (as Ricoeur called it in "The Model of Text") sheds light on what happens in the world of the historian's own culture.[10] What happened over there illumines what has happened, or could happen, here. This is in the nature of human action and the analogies by which we understand it. Georg Iggers' account of German historiography in the nineteenth century tells how this was noticed. German historians, ever self-conscious and critical of their own methods and inferences, noticed early that Papal or Turkish history (for example) had consequences for the understanding of German history. Indeed, they knew what problem in their own history they were trying to shed light on in their study of other histories: the question of German polity, of a German constitution.[11] One consequence of this is that external history is never as "external" as it appears to be. The historian working on a culture other than his own nevertheless shapes the story he tells for reasons that arise within his own culture. And those considerations open up a kind of responsibility that goes beyond that necessary merely for open scholarship. Someone else's history implicitly makes claims on the "external" historian, because it sets an example, one that illuminates the possibilities for life. What was done once can be done again. The light of others' history is thus exposure for the external historian. Conversely, the external historian makes claims on insiders. His version may accuse them where they were not

[10] "The Model of Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text." Reprinted in *From Text to Action; Essays in Hermeneutics, II* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991).

[11] Georg G. Iggers, *The German Conception of History: The National Tradition of Historical Thought From Herder to the Present* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1968, 1983).

willing to examine their own conscience. He is exposure for them. It works both ways. The external historian can dodge responsibility, just as insiders can, and their history has applications in and implications for his life. He can pass over those implications in silence or acknowledge them candidly.

For example, imagine an American historian writing a Chinese history for American readers. When the American outsider sees successes and failures in the life of the Chinese insiders, the narrative carries the force of exposure for the Chinese chronicled, at least by implication. What is more interesting is what happens when issues in Chinese culture are seen to have implications for American readers.[12] Not only does the narrative assume a place in the historians' own culture (here, American), but because Chinese events have implications for American culture, the Chinese who inherit that history as natives come by implication to make demands on the American readers of the narrative that results. And the possibility is raised of two peoples acknowledging a common humanity, at least in the wider context of universal covenant. Covenantal history, whether written as insiders' or as outsiders' history, tends to subvert the distinction between insiders and outsiders.

Niebuhr's account in *The Meaning of Revelation* has neither sold very well nor has it been rebutted. In my conjecture, this has been because of the somewhat complex Neo-Kantian framework in which he cast it. But if one attends not only to the Neo-Kantian categories as he handled them, but also to the kinds of responsibility that are performatively intended in the various degrees of "internal" and "external" history-writing, his account is quite usable. Its formidable character evaporates and misgivings about it can be allayed. Attending to performative responsibility can make it "user-friendly." And, indeed, distinctions about responsibility parallel his own Kantian attention to the difference between speculative and practical reason. One of the fruits of such an approach is that one can criticize internal history as irresponsible when it is done badly without thereby endangering the possibility of doing internal history well. Charges of irresponsibility presuppose the possibility of responsibility.

What, then, must a historical account do to be responsible? The most elementary requirement is that it not falsify events. Yet this is not

[12] Alasdair MacIntyre's essay on virtue in Chinese and Aristotelian conceptions will serve well enough as an example. Cf. "Incommensurability, Truth, and the Conversation between Confucians and Aristotelians About The Virtues," in Eliot Deutsch, ed., *Culture and Modernity; East-West Philosophic Perspectives* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991). A Westerner does not read it without some sense of engagement by the Chinese notion of virtue, despite its strangeness.

trivial. It is not just a matter of saying nothing contrary to fact. What is required to be truthful is only clear in an ongoing conversation in which a community's past is appropriated by each successive generation. Such a conversation may be conducted by insiders or outsiders, with the differences in performative intentions that I have already noted. In either case, some idea of what has happened is inherited from the conversation that has already taken place. The inherited conversation will give some idea of what has to be included in a historical narrative in order not to deceive by omission. That, of course, may not be enough, for all too often, the work of exposure is to bring to light what has not yet been acknowledged, what has been covered up, or even just not noticed. For the internal historian, the duty is above all to spell out the failed engagements in the life of his community. Recent historiography is full of complaints of the form "You're stepping on my toes!" just as we saw in section 6.4, in the sixth lesson of the Exodus. Many constituencies have lately complained that they have been left out of the received histories. Responsibility is a matter of accommodating the other members of the community of moral obligation in a world and a society that are both open and unpredictable, and therefore to some extent a matter of moral negotiation.

Any narrative of a community's past will always have normative overtones. Adjudication of its failures and pride in its successes are implicit in such narratives. The word "adjudication" touches the essentially declarative function of history. If it is responsible, it has emerged from a conversation in which all members of the community have been allowed to speak and have been heard. The narrative has been accepted in community, and this is the sense in which it has acquired a declarative performative force. It can be fitted into larger narratives of covenantal history.

When Van Harvey called Niebuhr's position "soft" perspectivism and placed it beside "hard" perspectivisms, he thereby indicated some misgivings about it. I think the misgivings are an expression of an anxiety whose roots are imperfectly understood. That anxiety is inevitable in a confessional stance. Speaking confessionally means acknowledging candidly one's own insecurity before the ultimate reality that one professes loyalty to. The rub is that one may not then turn around and pretend to any sort of security before one's other-believing neighbors. Confessional candor in effect displays up front the place one enters the hermeneutical circle in the understanding of covenantal history. Interpreting history takes place at many levels, of course, from making sense of particular events and texts to the existential stance one takes toward the whole history from its beginnings to the present and prospects for the future. And corrections

are made as one iterates around the hermeneutical circle at each of these levels. It is possible of course to accuse such a confessional stance of circular reasoning, much as Heidegger and Gadamer intuited would happen in their depiction of the hermeneutical circle already in *Being and Time* and *Truth and Method*.[13] In this sense, one could accuse confessional history of violating the standards of historical responsibility. The logic in such a charge needs to be dissected carefully. It is somewhat perverse. The implication is that responsibility accrues only to a position that is not relative to any historical standpoint, and so any position that candidly confesses its relativity to its own time and place and culture is brazenly irresponsible. But if it is impossible to escape historical relativity, then such a confessional position is not a defiance of responsibility but the very essence of it. The demand to abstract from time and place and culture covers up an attempt to impose the scholarly responsibility of the natural sciences on the existential concerns of human living in the world. With exclusively naturalistic categories of explanation comes exclusion of the very categories of responsibility in history that covenantal living so prizes. It would be a move from covenant to mimesis. In effect, the demand is that covenanters think and act on the basis of a naturalistic life orientation. The wording of such charges would be that religious language is "not scientific" and therefore suffers various cognitive defects. And such complaints will have the *appearance* of demanding responsibility of those who most espouse responsibility, and of indicting them for not being responsible. But any demand that people think and orient human life in naturalistic terms is by definition anti-responsible, for it would undermine the very activity of taking responsibility. Historical-covenantal language and narrative in history achieve responsibility in another way, not by *abstracting from* particulars of one's own history, but by speaking in *analogies* that reach *beyond* one's own history. That reach will be realized and consummated only in later generations and other cultures who continue the narrative that the present speakers stand in, and even then, the narratives will remain open-ended, still continuing. Such implications of analogy are also an act of trust. It is undergirded from the human side by Niebuhr's openness to permanent metanoia, permanent repentance, permanent openness to being found wrong. Hence the surrender of all security in such a faith. Niebuhr said this often enough so that it was clearly of central importance to him. But the unlimited openness to correction is *itself* the confessional stance. How could one test or question it? Yet it is not a matter of universal agreement, for many would not live in terms of the narratives of history at all. So covenantal

[13] Section 32 in *Being and Time*, esp. p. 191 (German p. 150). See also *Truth and Method*, 2nd edition (New York: Crossroad, 1989), pp. 190-192 and 291.

history is perspectival, in the sense that doing history at all is perspectival and voluntary. The truth that comes in it is also perspectival, which really says nothing more than that it is what Niebuhr called "insider's history," or what I am locating as the kind of discourse whose performative force is the taking of responsibility for one's own tradition. The truth that comes in this kind of discourse is accessible only after an act of will to enter into the activity of responsibility out of which that historical narrative arises. But if it is truly covenantal in the sense of embracing exposure as exposure comes to it, it is committed in an open-ended way to revision as may be necessary.[14]

Questions persist in two ways. The first is, What about those who are not "insiders"? For one can always stand outside of a tradition and complain that its insiders have not answered to the questions of outsiders. Covenantal openness to truth means a covenantal community that is itself open to any who wish to participate in the activity of responsibility, the activity of getting the history straight. Some outsiders will want to make sense of life in historical terms, some will not. Any who wish to order their lives in historical narrative and to affirm human life in history find themselves in a world where others do the same. This is where covenant subverts the distinction between insiders and outsiders.

The natural next question is, Can such a conception of truth in history as we have sketched here actually work? Can such an openness to permanent revision lead to anything but confusion, bewilderment, and in the end confoundment? Are its promises anything more than delusional? If confessional language is the way that covenant expresses itself in historical narrative, what would it mean for it to succeed? And what for it to fail? What has to happen in order to bring providence in history to language? (And how would success at languaging providence correlate to the more traditional problem of the names of God, the problem of languaging God? We shall come to that only in chapter 15.)

Exposure in history could fail in at least two ways: It might be impossible to bring out the truth *in language*, or the truth might bring no grace.

In the first possibility, it might be impossible to tell what really happened in history, and what history bequeaths to the present. The events might escape the grasp of language, or language might be insufficient to

[14]What does one do about the many so-called "historians" who advance theses such as that Jesus was a figment of his friends' imagination, or that he didn't really die but survived the cross, eloped with Mary Magdalene, and then retired to the French Riviera? Such people then demand that Christianity show cause why it should continue at all. But there will always be frivolous charges in history that pretend to be serious, and only time sorts them out.

tell what they leave to the present. In this vision, people in the present are indeed bound to work with the language of history, but it only misleads. It is incapable of comprehending the historical forces that people are subject to. Human action is then shaped by historical forces for which it does not make sense to take responsibility. One's actions are not one's own and are ultimately not even intelligible. Alasdair MacIntyre has characterized human actions that are determined by forces outside oneself as a form of suffering.[15] In this vision, meaningless suffering is the ultimate verdict on history. Real meaning is then to be sought someplace other than in history, because there is none in history; perhaps in nature, perhaps in escape, perhaps in some project of human devising.

To test such an accusation, to see its power and its limits, it needs to be framed in terms applicable particularly to my account of Niebuhr's description of internal history. The charge then is that, revise the historical narrative as much as one likes, it never achieves enough truth to be really true. What actually happened always eludes the historian, internal *or* external. The narrative can always be revised, there is always too much not seen in any version of it. Perhaps the very openness to revision that radical monotheism so boasts of is the tell-tale sign that there really is no difference between truth and falsehood, it is all arbitrary. Let me borrow an analogy from mathematics. Sometimes an equation can be solved only by guessing an approximate solution and then improving the approximation in successive iterations. Such an iterative process can fail. It may not converge to a solution at all, or it may even converge to a wrong solution. In a similar way, interpretation of texts and human actions in the hermeneutical circle is indeed an iterative process, but the fear is that it either never converges to a stable reading of history, or, unnoticed, produces a reading that is seriously wrong.

In another failure mode, external history is possible, but internal history is not. Taking responsibility does not work. Internal accounts of history are psychologically satisfying, but they do not produce knowledge. External history is then like natural history; there is no responsibility, and existential concerns have lost the central category of Existentialism, human choice, the correlate of responsibility. What is not determined by knowable historical forces is random, *essentially* uncaused and inexplicable. This produces an analog of the explanatory categories of the natural sciences, and human history becomes just an extension of natural history. This is the way of mimesis.

If one thinks there is no grace, then reconciliation is impossible, and repentance is impossible or ineffective or doesn't count. Knowledge of

[15]Cf. *After Virtue*, p. 210. Actions unintelligible even to their agent are a form of suffering.

history is possible, but predestination is the human lot. And that lot is not pretty. Getting the story straight, telling it like it is, and understanding history don't do any good, because there is no possibility of amendment of life anything like what we saw in Part III with Joseph Soloveitchik. The past is past and unchangeable, and life already lived cannot be reconstituted by placing it in a story that turns in a new direction. Here, even the language of human action, saying what I or we did has lost the meaning implicit in the practical possibility of amendment. And so no grace leads to no truth. The impossibility of grace changes the very working of the language that could produce truth.

Consider the logic of monotheistic confessions of faith:

> I trust that in the hindsight of history (if not sooner), I shall be found wrong, and in that exposure, saved and redeemed.

There is a performative commitment implicit in this confession of faith. It may misfire if it is not sincere or is not carried out later, but the promise is there clearly enough, to embrace the goodness of life as it unfolds. What it means to embrace the goodness of life changes in history, and so in the perspective of later history earlier actions will appear in a new light. The fear is that I shall be found guilty in an unredeemable way, that I shall die in my sins, never know their full extent, remain committed to them and committed in them. The fear is that this would render my intent hollow.

But not quite everything is vulnerable to the acids of exposure. For the confession imagined just above *is* a commitment, and if its analogies can reach far enough, it is not wrong and cannot be found wrong. The worst charge is that the believer has written a "blank check," payable in his life, and he is in no position to make good such a commitment. But this presupposes the very analogical reach that makes the commitment valid and binding. What makes the check good comes to the believer as a gift, not under his control, in and through the contingent disappointments of life (here the focus is exposure more than limitation or need), and not in spite of them or in some other way. The reality of that gift cannot be proven. If it could be, it would no longer be a gift but would come under human control. In its unprovableness, it always remains a gift of grace, on which human beings are dependent.

14.3 Historical Narrative and Limitation

Language always works to make a humanly significant world, no matter what the basic life orientation of the speaking community. The categories

of explanation, however, are different in different ways of living, and different for history and nature. We saw that for those who chose to recognize history, freedom and responsibility are the central categories. The characterization of events and of human actions in response to prior events and actions is itself a responsible activity, a matter of ascription more than description. Section 14.2 explored the working of exposure in the language of historical narrative. The mode of responsibility in narratives depends on the intent of the speaker, and works differently for speakers "inside" and "outside" a community whose history is told. Only when history from the inside is seen, with assumption of responsibility for the tradition received and recounted, is it possible to see the full human import of the events told. The critical question there was whether historical narrative could challenge or enact responsibility. In this section, the focus is not on exposure but on limitation, and the problems will be proportionately different. The task is to see how language and historical narrative shape lives and work to embrace limitation in covenant. We shall begin with the dynamics of limitation in history and then come to language as the way limitation is appropriated, and as medium in which life is shaped in response.

When things are easy, the limitations present opportunities that, if not what one wanted, are nevertheless something that one can adjust to. Gratitude is easy in the end, even if it is not easy in the beginning. Here, new possibilities for life show themselves, and as with all human actions, they do so as they are worked out, articulated, and disambiguated in language. People can learn how to handle some new area of life from others who have already figured it out. It usually escapes focal attention that this is a process of language, but the ontology of *practical* possibilities in human living is essentially linguistic. What the limitations are, how to deal with them, whether and how they bring good are all characterized in language. Whether and how to treat the good as *blessings*, i. e., whether to give thanks for the limitations, is also worked out in language.

When new problems arise in the lives of individuals or societies, how to cope with them may not be obvious. But if the cost in adjustment is not too great, one can go on with life, often not less but more able to cope. It is akin to the bargaining phase of grief, when bargaining actually works. Then anger and depression can be skipped, and one comes to a stance of hope without facing radical limitation that cannot be avoided, that cannot be worked around.

So much for limitation when limitation is easy. Limitation is hard when its pains are unavoidable and no way can be found that is free of serious pain. When the disappointments can't be made to go away, we see the problem of limitation in full clarity. The task is to see how covenantal

language works through such limitations. The difference between easy and hard limitation lies in whether there is merely initial frustration and then creativity and celebration, or whether there is unavoidable grief. There may or may not be any celebration in or after grief; for covenantal living, there is.

Niebuhr in *The Meaning of Revelation* defined history as the clearing for limitation when he said that the revelatory moment makes the past intelligible.[16] The past is no longer haphazard or random. Nor is it determined by cosmic or natural forces, as it would be for mimesis. To focus once again on the hard part of limitation, revelatory history is typically another culture's history that gives meaning to one's own. Whoever the "we" is, we did not ourselves come out of Egypt, nor return from Babylon, nor improvise in the crises and disasters of the first century. The "we" of today only becomes the same as the "we" of the Exodus, the Exile or the first century by an act of narrative, one to which I shall come momentarily. In the present, if history is easy, covenanters remind themselves of something in the narratives of hardship in the past. It is not exactly that they could themselves have it hard once again, though that implication of the narratives is surely present. It is not just that they should be grateful for present blessings, though that is almost central. To identify with those who went through the hardships of the past is provisionally to undertake those very hardships, as they or their analogs may present themselves in the limitations of the present.

Hardship and disappointment are inevitably a matter of grief. Probably the most celebrated anatomy of grief in contemporary literature was Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's *On Death and Dying*, in which grief is worked through in five stages.[17] The first stage is denial, whether pretense or disbelief. The limitations are not real. Second comes bargaining, in which limitation is appropriated provisionally as merely an opportunity, an occasion in which, with a little effort, it is possible to get what one desired, or some acceptable substitute. (This much we have already noticed in the possibility that dealing with limitation is merely a matter of engineering.) The third stage comes when limitation is real and may not be evaded. Here, the response is anger. To some extent it is "built-into" the human hardware, and a matter of nature. Even the covenantal faithful, those for whom limitation brings blessing, still have to work through the stage of anger. The fourth stage is depression, and perhaps this could be called grief proper. The fifth stage may or may not be reached: it is hope; not hope of escaping the limitation, but hope in and through it. Thus

[16]MR, section III.ii, hardback, p. 110; paperback, p. 81.

[17]Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying; What The Dying Have to Teach Doctors, Nurses, Clergy, and Their Own Families* (New York: Macmillan, 1969).

Kübler-Ross's account of grief in facing death.

As it happens, H. Richard Niebuhr found most of these stages of the pilgrimage of faith, though he did not see them in a five-fold sequence, and they would not be noticeable in his work were it not for Kübler-Ross's later account.[18] He does not to my memory arrange them in a sequence or progression as Kübler-Ross does. The focus is in the little essay "Faith in Gods and in God," appended to *Radical Monotheism*, and one of the starting points of this book. For Niebuhr, the problem was not death alone, but all the unavoidable disappointments in life, of which death is only the last, the one that back-stops all the rest. In his words, as we heard in ELN, Part I, "the causes for which we live all die."[19] At first one denies this reality, and then comes something akin to bargaining. These stages of faith Niebuhr assimilated to polytheism. Anger, in the form of defiance he certainly did see, for he cites Bertrand Russell aplenty as exemplar of it. Nihilism he saw, and perhaps that is the correlate of depression. Nihilism is always possible in face of frustration, after all attempts to bargain out of it have failed, and anger is exhausted. But beyond nihilism lies the possibility of a different kind of hope.

Hope, the fifth and last stage in the series, is the interesting one. It is here that radical monotheism is embraced or declined. It comes on p. 122 of Niebuhr's essay, when the believer, in full view of the destruction of all the causes for which we live, nevertheless says, with Job, "Though it slay us, yet will we trust it." This turn is what we are centrally interested in. For it is hope after a kind of despair—despair of getting what one wanted, despair of evading or avoiding limitation. It is here that limitation becomes real, and the choice between embracing it, defying it, or turning away from it becomes apparent.

Bargaining always assumes that the disappointments can be avoided or evaded. In avoidance, one hopes one can get something agreeable, something desirable, something pleasant and pain-free. Avoidance is possible when engineering of a sort is successful. Such strategies can be found in great sophistication and wisdom in Indian and Chinese cultural practices that have grown from aboriginal mimetic religion. In evasion, even if the disappointments are unavoidable, they can be limited, or at least one can preserve one's heart and soul untouched by them. One does not have to embrace them, one does not have to be grateful. One can ignore them and locate the things that matter in life elsewhere. This is an inarticulate form of exilic religion. The disappointments constitute

[18]This in itself is an example of how language works in history: we see events in the light of what has been told, often after the event or in initially unrelated connections.

[19]RMWC, p. 122.

defects in life, and the real living goes on in some other part of life.

When suffering becomes noticeable, when suffering has to be faced, then things begin to change. This is the opening to Tikkun Olam, the healing of the world, a process that goes on almost from the start, and will continue as far as can be seen. It is done by both God and man, and at some considerable cost to each. In the same way, Edward Hobbs has seen among the lessons of the Gospel of Mark this: Since "*suffering for others* (both *because of* others and *for the sake of* others) *is what God does*," it follows that "*Suffering for others is part of the calling of those who would share in God's life*."[20] Many more have seen the importance of suffering.

Not entirely at random, consider Simone Weil. Her writing is striking in its focus on suffering, taking it to heart, making it part of oneself. She sought to share the privations of the poor before World War II and the oppressed in occupied France during it. (Cf. ELN, Part I, that one who believes that another's need and limitations bear good seeks to share in them.) Yet that biographical sketch hardly tells what she saw and wanted to embrace. For she realized how much affliction simply destroys people and concluded that compassion for the afflicted was therefore impossible—and so a miracle when it happens.[21] But the focus of her thinking was on the destruction of human life that takes place in the middle of living human life, because of the limitations that are placed on it.

Another phrasing of the same irony is in the Holy Week Collects of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer: "Mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace." When one moves too quickly to the miracle, it becomes an evasion of limitation rather than an embracing of it. Simone Weil saw that. It was a stroke of genius on the part of the Standing Liturgical Commission to give that Collect the place of prominence that it has in Holy Week and its echoes throughout the year. For contemporary culture, especially secular culture, it goes without saying that embracing limitation when it destroys is simply folly. It is no wonder that when marriage brings suffering or deprivation or too much need, people say, "It just didn't work out"—and thereby also decline to name or characterize their own active and responsible parts in the not-working-out of their marriage.

The test of limitation is perhaps harder than exposure. At least it is seen as harder. When I ask students, "Does the truth do you any good when the truth hurts?" they always answer—after a short pause—in the

[20] Private communication; instructional materials from New Testament courses. (His emphasis in the original.)

[21] Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951), p. 120.

affirmative. The pause indicates that they know the right answer, and they also know how real the hurt of truth can be. I have not asked the coordinate question in regard to limitation, "Does limitation do you any good when limitation hurts, or can't be escaped from?" In the first place, I think it would not be understood. But even if understood, contemporary culture is too committed to avoiding limitation, or surmounting it, to see what Simone Weil saw, what the BCP Holy Week Collects see.

The test of limitation is whether it can bear blessing when it cannot be avoided. It can always be evaded or refused or ignored, even when it cannot be denied. But blessing is more a matter of how it is appropriated, of the meaning of the limitations, than it is of any motions made in response to it. Sometimes there are no motions in response to it. It is simply accepted.

The response to limitation is at the center of one's basic life orientation. It is made in actions, but the actions get their definition in language, both the particular utterances said on particular occasions and also the language practices that set the larger tone of life. Just as we saw in the easy limitations, the ones that one can convert into opportunities as soon as someone else tells us how, the hard limitations, the ones that won't go away, become the focus of faith also in language, language shared with other people. It is our task to see how language constitutes basic life orientation in face of limitation. We do not see, we shall not know, how blessings are consummated ultimately. For the present, there is plenty of work in what can be seen, what can be understood.

Essential to limitation is that it is a limit on what the actor and believer can do. This presupposes that the believer would have done more or other if it were possible. Limitation is limitation of the possible, limitation on action. Action is always action for a goal, action for a way of being-in-the-world, action for life, action for living, action for goods desired. Limitation is the impossibility of getting one's "druthers," impossibility of action, unavailability of certain desired goals, limits on life: in the end, death. Here being-in-the-world comports itself toward death. It also takes a stand on what it would mean to achieve ultimate happiness. Limitation puts us to the question of basic life orientation: Gratitude? Blessing? Acceptance? Consent? Offense? Complaints? Manipulation? Bargaining? Denial? Rejection? Escape? Co-suffering with others? Being-present-to, being-not-there, being-absent, being-closed-off-from others? All these choices are made and disambiguated in language.

These choices further presuppose that disappointment is disappointment of *desire*. And working through disappointment is always then to some extent a matter of transforming desire, or when it cannot be transformed, transcending it. It follows further that disappointments, whether

small frustrations, major suffering and affliction, or impending death, call into question the structure of the desires that are disappointed. The structure of desire is also a structure of projections, it is human being's vision of itself, its sources of meaning and support. It images one's focus of loyalty and hears the call of what one will serve. Human existence has a natural tendency to see itself against its possibilities only in terms of the gratification of its desires, and not their disappointment. Why all human projects should be frustrated in the end and human existence come to naught in death has no easy explanation. Niebuhr called it simply a vague and shadowy reality with which we all have to reckon.[22] When Merold Westphal drew on the phenomenology of the sacred, in chapter three of *God, Guilt, and Death*, he described it as an ambiguity that calls into question the power and worth of the beholder. Our focus is power (and its deprivations), rather than worth. But suffering is then the clearing in life in which one finally encounters the sacred. Niebuhr does well to be reticent in naming it, first as "the Void," and then in an act of interpretation by which it is appropriated as God.

How one responds to that Void gets worked out in living. We see it in stories, and disaster stories are the most conspicuous. Though they are not in the end the most illuminating, they are a workable place to begin. Typical of the genre is a group of people traveling together, and some mishap either bids to kill them all, or to kill many of them, or leaves them stranded with a poor chances of rejoining civilization. It is then that we see what people are made of, and that is why people tell such stories, in both fact and fiction. All of denial, bargaining, anger, depression, and hope appear in the responses to disaster. We see limitation rejected as barren, and see it embraced stoically, heroically, and in the end with hope in full view of its finality. People respond with courage and cowardice, selfishness and generosity, baseness and gallantry, panic and coolheadedness. It is because disaster is a clearing in which we can see people's true loyalties that disaster stories have such a hold on us. We admire courage, generosity, gallantry, and coolheadedness. We tell such stories because we would like to know and acquire these virtues.

The main theme of such stories is virtue in face of limitation. Exposure and need come out, of course, but they are secondary to limitation. Exposure happens merely in seeing how people respond to limitation. And need arises when limitation offers to let some survive at cost of the death of others. Without the major limitation that is presupposed in disaster, such stories wouldn't work. They wouldn't make sense without mortal endings. It wouldn't be courage in face of death without the death. And without the deaths, they wouldn't present the life-defining moment

[22]RMWC, p. 122.

that makes them interesting. The events and actions would not be a response to ultimate limitation. Or at any rate, they would not appear as such in a clearing that can be told in narrative.

For most of us, disaster is not part of our experience. If it comes at all, it is rare. It is never a daily affair. Nevertheless, when we tell stories to give shape to our lives and loyalties we tell disaster stories. It is much harder to shape a story so that it shows life orientation and virtue in meeting limitation without the narrative clearing afforded by a disaster. But it can be done. Chaim Grade's three novellas in *Rabbis and Wives* are examples.[23] We see faithful Orthodox Jews living ordinary lives in Lithuania in a time vaguely identified, but probably in the 1920s or 1930s, perhaps late in the nineteenth century, but without hint of either world war. They struggle with minor frustrations in the lives of their families, their neighbors, and their synagogues, and eventually die in bed. They worship. They study Talmud. They ask themselves how to live by its teaching. We see their ambitions, desires and disappointments, their mitzvot, all played out in the course of ordinary lives. It is as if their stories are in miniature in comparison to disaster stories, but their stories are closer to ours. It is not an accident that we see them praying and studying, the business of adding recognition and intention to basic life orientation, and asking themselves how to implement that orientation in particular choices. In contemporary culture, such things are too "religious," and stories of them are usually not mainstream cultural fare. Usually, stories of religious struggle give us the lives of saints, not really close to the ordinary scale of living. Grade's setting is very ordinary, there is not even a hint of any supernatural in it, nor of other devices that biblical narrative routinely uses. Over it all—for a reader on this side of World War II—stands the impending shadow of the Holocaust, and Grade has an awesome restraint in betraying not the slightest hint of what was to come. He set out to portray the lost world of Lithuanian Judaism, the culture of the mitnaggedim as it was in pre-war peace.

If language is to give direction to life lived in the presence of limitation, it has an enormous task to discharge. In practice, the orientation of lives is set in time of peace rather than in time of disasters, for it is in ordinary time that people make commitments, almost always inconspicuously. One's true commitments really only get seen in the clearings of disaster. There are a handful of basic choices possible in meeting limitation with one's life. For purposes of sociology of knowledge, Peter Berger called it the problem of theodicy, the problem of justifying the

[23]Chaim Grade, *Rabbis and Wives* (New York: Random House, 1983). Brian Moore's fiction might provide Catholic examples if more than Chaim Grade is needed.

pains of life. One option is karma: what goes around comes around, and so both wrong and unjust suffering are compensated in the end. Another choice is masochism in its religious forms. The remedy of historical religion is much harder, for in it the transcendent reality comes into the world in one form or another (not necessarily Jesus) and participates in human suffering. It is the lesson of the end of ELN, Part I: if all of life is good, pains included, even another's pains, then the faithful believer is willing to share in those pains. It is indeed as Edward Hobbs has said: "Suffering for others is what God does." That is the performative implication of following the sequels to Job as they unfold in historical narratives. One says that ultimate reality takes suffering onto itself, and does so with and in the company of human beings. The test of such talk is in the limitations of life.

The usual inventory of performative senses helps to unpack the working of such covenantal discourse. The commissive aspect is the most obvious, for one is committed to embracing limitation in trust. This we have seen. What is more interesting are the declarative implications of covenantal language in face of limitation, for they shape how reality is experienced. If it is appraised in a covenantal way, then what is possible in life has been understood in a way quite different from the way of karma or of religious masochism. When people commit their efforts and resources in support of a covenantal appraisal of reality, it becomes a shared structure of meaning in a covenantal community. And inasmuch as newcomers find it "already there," it becomes objective reality. It is then the framework of reality within which events and actions make sense. It is always a precarious reality, for its human origins and its "leap of faith" are never to be obscured if the community remains truly covenantal.

The expressive import of covenantal language does more than one might think. It is not entirely the non-cognitive affair that it might appear to be. It is in expressives that the limitations of life are appropriated as life-giving and death-dealing. It is here also that the labor of faith gets worked out in re-appropriating the pains of life as bearing blessing. One's own history may be initially destructive or deprivational. Revelatory history is life-giving in the sense that it shows how that negative present history can be re-appropriated.

It is only after the appraisals implicit in expressives have been accepted in commissives and declaratives that they make sense in directives or constatives. Constatives are simple; once the framework of reality is set up, particular events and actions can be "described" more than ascribed or appraised, for the groundwork appraisal of life has already been carried out.

Directives are harder. In recent Catholic language, the limitations

of life are to be "offered up," and there is nothing more frustrating, even infuriating, than being *told* to "offer it up" in face of limitation. To the credit of Catholic parochial education and its graduates, explicit directives come only in regard to the small limitations of life. But the small examples are practice for larger things, when a bystander is in no position to *direct* another to offer up his or her suffering. Yet the character of action acquires some implications of a directive, especially when to tell another to "offer it up" would be counter-performative in the extreme. For the bystanding believer's own actions in embracing his own limitations both say to another that the pains of life are part of a good creation and also offer to share in them.

The language that shapes life happens at leisure, when people have time to reflect on their lives, rather than when they are trying to accomplish some particular goal or deal with some major limitation. It is a language of stories told in the background of practical life and of crises. Yet that background commits the people who tell these stories, whether or not the commitments undertaken at leisure are honored in crisis. To tell the story commits the tellers and community in which it is told; to tell the story instructs the speaker and hearers in the obligations of covenant; to tell the story with commitment entails the expressive involvements of a heritage also; and only then do the constative elements of the story make sense.

Consider an example. There was an inexpensive paperback Haggadah produced in the early 1970s, with a series of illustrations in the background of the Hebrew text and English translations.[24] What one can do with the words is fairly closely restricted by tradition. The illustrations, however, allow much more room for creativity. They spell out a context in history that is well known if not an obligatory part of the Seder liturgy. The illustrations depict various ghettos, and life lived since the Exodus in the light of the Exodus: The onion-domes of Russian Orthodox cathedrals, a Czar with miniature hanged Jews dangling beside his medals, a Jew holding the Torah scrolls with a concentration camp number tattooed on his arm, Nazi SS officers, Russian Orthodox cathedrals turned into museums under the Bolsheviks, Commissars, a hammer and sickle, dead babies on the ground, the image of the State of Israel from a map. At the plague stories, a two-headed imperial eagle from Eastern Europe, a Red Army tank, Jews leaving an ancient fortress under an imperial sun-symbol, a Cardinal Inquisitor from fifteenth-century Spain, a Nazi gallows, more onion domes, another swastika, and finally the great Warsaw synagogue before it was destroyed by the Nazis. To live this way is to live a covenant in the face of others' opposition. It is also intended

[24]Mark Podwal, illustrator, *Let My People Go; A Haggadah* (New York: Macmillan, 1972).

to shape life in America (where the Haggadah was published, after all) in the light of the pogroms of Eastern Europe. The history recounted is not just the first Exodus told in the canonical text, but that of all the other Exoduses shown in the illustrations. It shapes and informs and defines life now, in the present. Affliction supplies the guide-marks for life in comfort.

One may well ask, Why turn to affliction in order to find the images to shape life in comfort? In part, it is because in the limitations of life one can see the orientation that shapes a life or a community when it is in comfort. But there is more than this. For ordinary life in peacetime is intentionally shaped in terms of past limitations. In the present, people intend their actions, their relationships, and the structural commitments of their lives to be defined and interpreted in terms of their history. Specifically, in covenantal living, they intend that their lives in the present shall be a continuation of the thanksgiving that was first lived in the Exodus, and continued and sharpened in the Exile and the disasters of the First Century. They tell stories of people since the close of the canon, how one or another figure fit his or her life into that continuing story. They tell such stories in order to see and to show how to fit their own lives into that story.

It is not as if life in comfort faces no limitations. But the limitations usually are not conspicuous. They are taken for granted: some things are "givens," whether they enable or restrict human action. People have been "thrown" into the relationships, the culture, the society, the families and communities they are members of. One inherits roles, assets, liabilities, a place in relationships and institutions, "rules of the game"—for many games. Some of these limitations can be changed, bent, or "surmounted." Some cannot. Narratives usually take wing from a question about how people deal with these givens of life. Something or someone disturbs the expected, and a drama unfolds as people take action in response.

And mortality is always present, at least in prospect, and sometimes imminently. Life orientation can be seen in ordinary lives when people approach death, and, a little less obviously, when people shape their lives earlier in deciding what they want to accomplish before dying. One determines what one will live for, what causes to serve.

What does *serve* mean here? It means putting out some effort. And it usually means something different from just trying to get one's desires, despite the fact that one presumably desires what one strives for in service. Seeking one's desires means trying to get things that are enjoyable, and things one would choose for oneself, rather than goals set by or for another. That is the key to service: in service, one works for goals set by another. The word "cause," in the sense of working for a cause, captures the point. Working for a cause is different from seeking one's

own preferences.

At this point limitation appears. For up against limitation, one can, of course, seek to overcome the limitation and get one's desires in spite of their apparent difficulty or impossibility. But there are other possibilities. One can look instead for some goals within the compass of the apparent limitations, and that is a matter of great creativity and also a matter of interpretation. That interpretation comes to being in language. That language gathers together the experience and the effort of working for goals that emerge from the situation one finds oneself in, as its limitations and possibilities. They emerge and show themselves and are appropriated only in the light of past and inherited language practices about how to characterize events and possibilities. The language of "service" in its original human context has been transferred in order to characterize a human relationship to ultimate reality. There are doubtless many possible ways to find and serve goals within the not-so-obvious limitations one finds oneself in. Things come to a focus, however, when limitation imposes the frustration of the servant's preferences, or ultimately, the non-being of the servant. Niebuhr spoke here of a last shadowy reality that dooms all our causes to frustration.[25] As we have seen, of course, the believer responds with trust, even when limitation dooms all our causes to naught in the end. Trust becomes a kind of service, for one expects good in what one trusts, and to act accordingly is exactly what the analogy of service aims to bring to language. The performative import of such language is radically confessional, and great trouble is invited if that confessionality is forgotten or hidden. But when its character is in plain sight, the language of service works to shape both the experience and the effort of dealing with limitation in trust, in creativity, and in hope.

Affirming human life as history in this world and not some other seems easy enough until one adds that it is affirmed in its entirely, including its pains. Then biblical religion can seem to be world-denying on presuppositions that are widely held and not widely recognized. When the good in life is equated with gratification of desire, it follows that to admit unavoidable disappointments in life then seems an ascription of evil to the world. The tacit equation of good with gratification begs the crucial question. When good is more than the gratification of desire, affirmation of human life can become an affirmation of being, as such.

We have seen enough to know that in fact biblical religion today can become world-denying, not as a confusion and misunderstanding but intentionally, albeit in intentions that are self-deceived. In one form, this becomes a denial of death, and it is expressed in eschatology. This is a functionally exilic stance clothed in the truncated rhetoric of latter-day

[25]RMWC, p. 122.

Christianity. One hopes for, hopes to go to, "a better life." One hopes to get a better deal than was available in this life. The cash value of such talk is more than ultimate denial of death. It is a pretense that one does not have to reckon with limitation in the here and now. (Exposure is usually not seen, and need is evaded in shadow. Limitation cannot be hidden.) The alternative to this exilic stance is hope in affirming this life, oneself, and one's neighbors in it in its present limitations.

Affirmation of human life is something that happens first in language. We have seen it in the language of history, telling stories of others who have lived covenantal lives in history, telling stories of events that have been appropriated as providential. History is exposure, as we saw in the last section, but it is also guide to meeting limitation, as we have seen in this section. In the next section, we come to need.

14.4 Historical Narrative and Need

Language works to create community, for it is language that people first share in common, and language which creates a common life. Ultimately, we shall ask whether historical-covenantal language can succeed in meeting need, meeting human concerns in the third function. But first we need some familiarity with what it is supposed to do, how it is supposed to work before we can see whether it can succeed. It is as it was with exposure and limitation. In asking how covenantal language is supposed to work, we see places where it presupposes or implies concepts and some sort of reality that transcends the intramundane world of naturalistic cosmologies. We shall come to that in the next chapter. Historical-covenantal language can fail by abdicating or compromising transcendence, but that will not make sense until we see how it is supposed to work. That, in regard to the third function, is the task of this section. Here, we focus on need; exposure and limitation have been dealt with in the last two sections. The task of this section is to look at how need gets met in historical narratives.

Doing history, telling and writing history, is a way to create a community. This is a fairly prominent theme in *The Meaning of Revelation*. We first saw this in ELN, section 5.5 above, "History and Grace." The revelatory moment in history makes the past intelligible, thus meeting limitation; it resurrects the forgotten and embarrassing past, in exposure, and it functions as what Niebuhr calls *appropriation*, by which he means that new entrants are enabled to adopt the community's past as their own. The full scope of the last claim is easy to overlook. His focus is christological, and for Christians, the entry into history and community and the openness of community that comes with covenant is through Christ. But

these things come with Jesus because they first came in the Exodus. It is through that earlier history that the later history came to have a covenantal meaning that can be extended to welcome everybody, everywhere, a meaning that can grow as culture grows and changes.[26] And it is not just that new entrants to biblical monotheism adopt the biblical history as their own, they bring their own prior history with them and add it to the common history of the ongoing biblical community.

The non-Christian world and especially the present Western world has a sense of offense at a perceived Christian religious imperialism at this point. Niebuhr's prescription may be how things should have been, but it certainly is not how things worked out in fact. Missionaries are accused of a kind of culture-cide, eradicating aboriginal cultures and substituting European culture, and often European culture-Christianity as a religion. The hymn in Philippians is to the point, in the words "until every knee shall bow, every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord." The meaning hovering over the texts is that the "we" who glory in Christ will be the administrators of this new empire and will lord it over the newcomers. In the original context, in the Roman empire of the first three centuries of the Common Era, the idea of a condemned criminal being lord of anything was absurdly ironic. But today, all sense of irony has been lost. The hymn originally was a hope for liberation of the oppressed, not creation of a new oppression. It can be hard not to hear this song as the banner of a new empire.

Thus we can see at the outset one possible failure mode that is particularly prominent in the working of covenantal language in the third function. Yet Niebuhr's prescription is our guide, for failure is not inevitable, and success is possible. We know this at a minimum from the present-day reading of the patriarchal histories, in which tribes from various origins were knit together by the Yahwist into one family and their eponymous ancestors arranged in one genealogy.[27]

My plan for this section is to work from the abstract to the concrete. Narrative creates community differently in mimetic and historical-covenantal worlds, as historical communities can demonstrate. Language becomes a repertoire for the interpretation of life. The hard cases are histories of conflict, in which several communities have been estranged from

[26]Cf. MR, section III.ii, "Interpretation Through Revelation," hardback p. 116; paperback, p. 85.

[27]Cf. Edward C. Hobbs, "Pluralism in the Biblical Context," a paper discussed by the Pacific Coast Theological Society, November 16-17 1973. It is reprinted in Wilhelm Wuellner and Marvin Brown, eds., *Hermeneutics and Pluralism* (Berkeley: Center for Hermeneutical Studies, 1983). It is available on the Internet at http://www.pcts.org/pluralism.html.

each other. History can be retold in such a way as to enable a reconciliation. Covenantal religion holds a special place in such concerns. In the next section, we shall see what it takes to engage in evangelism without falling into one or another error that subverts or betrays the covenantal commitments one is supposedly evangelizing for. We shall then be on the doorstep of transcendence, the work of chapter 15.

Niebuhr outlines a program of considerable complexity in *The Meaning of Revelation*. The way to appropriate the parts of that project that are about need and community is first to ask what historical narrative is supposed to do for a community, or do in order to create a community. We shall later come to how it does its tasks *as* narrative.

We share a common past, we are a part of one another. The community is open. It is at least supposed to be open. This means the community understands itself as a community of moral obligation, a religious innovation that we first saw in ELN, section 6.4, "History and Covenant." At a deeper level, the fact that we share a common past means that life makes sense. The world makes sense if we have a common past. Community is the basis for meaning, and in a real sense, community is the basis for dealing with all the disappointments of life, exposure and limitation as well as need, on a scale from the cosmic to the trivial. Making sense of life is a corporate activity, and it appears as a communal activity in all religions, not just historical-covenantal ones. The alternative to making sense is what Peter Berger called "anomy," lawlessness of the cosmos. Social construction of reality is an ordering of experience; conversation with others is the mechanism of reality construction and maintenance. Reality is a nomos or lawful order, and if it falters, anomy results. Anomy is nightmare, terror. The sacred is universe construction with mystery and awe. "Religion is the audacious attempt to conceive of the entire universe as being humanly significant."[28]

The order that is constructed in various religions can be quite different, and mimesis and covenant differ notably in the way they conceive order. For mimesis, making sense of the universe means finding order and harmony in it, and nature is the system of harmony that results. Sense does not come from the disorderly freedom of history. We saw this initially in ELN, section 6.2, "Religion of Nature." For nature religions, disorder does not bring blessing. Evil is disorder, and disorder is evil, the very essence of evil.

For covenant, disorder is not evil however much it may hurt. Disorder is appropriated on the analogy of interpersonal relations. One person

[28]Cf. Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, (New York: Doubleday, 1967), at the end of chapter 1, "Religion as World Construction," p. 28.

gives another a gift, and it is precisely as a gift that it is out of the ordinary, an act of free blessing, of providence. Pain is just pain, and wrongdoing is the rejection of parts of life as evil. On the assumption of monotheism, it is wrong to reject parts of life as evil, because all of it is good.

For mimesis, order and sense are read out of the cosmos; for historical-covenantal living, they are created in community. As for everybody, they are created above all in language, but mimetic language creates a cosmos noticeably different from that of covenant. Self-conscious attention to language as world-creating seems most conspicuous in covenantal or quasi-covenantal or formerly covenantal societies. The creation of meaning in language carries some cost in anxiety. It is the anxiety of being open and responsible about the social construction of reality, of admitting one's own role in meaning-creation. The potential for anomy is acknowledged at this point, and with it, the cosmic chaos that lies beyond the light of a community's structure of meaning. There is also a cost in meeting others' needs, for in order to stabilize and secure meaning in the cosmos, it is necessary to close one's community. Keeping a community open admits challenges to the order of the cosmos, simply because newcomers will remind the old-timers of their role in human creation of meaning when the newcomers ask questions as they take on the structure of the cosmos as the community they are entering understands it.

To some extent, this happens in all religious communities, whether mimetic, covenantal, exilic, or henotheistic. At this point, historical-covenantal categories can explain the successes and failures of mimetic living better than mimesis itself can. For concepts of communal openness and responsibility in community are essentially covenantal. People make demands on each other in all communities (this is the activity of exacting responsibility), but this is recognized and acknowledged and made intentional only in covenantal communities. Only there is this activity conducted in such a way as to protect all members in a community of moral obligation. This is not to say that covenantal communities as ethnic groups are better than those of other life orientations, but rather that people, *any* people, become covenantal to the extent that they do these things. It is a matter of definition.

The corporate structures of living in mimetic communities may not be intended if they are not recognized. And they cannot be recognized if they are to be explained within the categories of nature, in which the possibilities for human action are essentially given and determined by the understanding of nature. In historical and covenantal communities, human action is free in ways that cannot be explained in naturalistic categories. What is treated as natural, not recognized (or just denied) as

human in origin, cannot be intended. It follows that ontological structures and human relationships built on such features of life are impossible. History is not seen at all, or is not seen as important, and cannot become a place of responsibility and locus of salvation.

What results for mimesis is not a community of moral obligation but an ecosystem. The human and the natural are to some extent on the same footing in an ecosystem, and that is conspicuous in both ancient and modern mimetic cosmologies. In an ecosystem, the human structures are relations of exploitation and of self-interested cooperation. The recent literature of modern scientific mimesis affords claims that this is all that is possible (covenantal living is denounced as delusional altruism), and claims that a human-natural ecosystem is in fact good, the way things ought to be. This represents a degree of recognition, overtness, and candor in the 1980s and 1990s that was not apparent in the 1950s or before. At a popular level, it can be seen in the slogan blazoned across a T-shirt advertising a popular brand of athletic gear: "It's not not how you play the game, it's if you win or lose (No Fear)."

This is not at all what is supposed to happen in a community of moral obligation. In the 1950s, that slogan would have been received as in extremely poor sportsmanship. But what do the winners have in common with the losers, in an ecosystem? In the end, very little, and then only what can be derived from self-interest. In a community of moral obligation, with its moderations on competition, winners and losers are ultimately part one of another. At a very minimum, there is supposed to be a sense that sooner or later, we are all dead, we all lose, we all meet the void out of which things come and to which all things return. When this is seen, people have much more in common than just relations of mutual convenience and advantage.

How, then, can we see the creation of meaning working in historical-covenantal living? History is first of all disorder, it transcends the order and predictability of nature. This is the price of freedom, and it carries a burden of anxiety with it. There is fellowship in facing anxiety and responsibility together, and it may be open, or it may be collusion in denial and evasion. It is because history is disorderly that one who would appropriate it positively needs the analogy of providence. Openness to others is the key to openness to the possibilities of disorderly history. Why? It is. I don't entirely see how or why. But it is. Is there something in the nature of being human, being constituted as anxiety, that is essentially corporate? Yes. Is Dasein-ish anxiety impossible except in community? Without others, it is just animal naturalistic anxiety? Physiology, but not yet real existential dread? Naturalistic anxiety is just neurophysiology; existential dread presupposes existential relationships that come to being

only in language. They may or may not be recognized, as we have seen.

Openness to others comes only at the cost of meeting others' needs. This is one of the differences between a community of moral obligation and an ecosystem. Cooperation in an ecosystem can be costly, but it is always an investment that is expected to pay off. In a community of moral obligation, obligations to others are in a radical sense unlimited, because one's own being is shared in community with others in a community that is open to all. For covenant, this means construing limitation and its opportunities within the limits imposed by embracing it as good-bearing. The alternative is to stonewall exposure and to stiff need, and then construe limitation and opportunities in a spirit of *libido dominandi*. One may then exploit others. Need and limitation are intimate with one another at this point; meeting need openly makes it possible to face limitation together.

In a real sense, fellowship is the remedy for chaos and anomy. Merold Westphal did not focus explicitly on chaos or loneliness, seeing only guilt and death, although chaos at least is present implicitly in his discussion of the sacred. Loneliness got less notice. It is common that the first two functions get seen and the third missed. But the third in this case undergirds the responses to all three. Ambivalence and the sacred (which Westphal most assuredly did see, in detail) presuppose some chaos or anomy. Where there is only order, there can be no sacred. What is the existential meaning of chaos and anomy? It is always dread, but not *just* dread. It is the uncanny, it lies beneath the projecting of meaning on the cosmos. In the hermeneutically circular interpretation of the cosmos as a whole, the pre-understanding iterates but doesn't converge, and there is no obvious way to correct the iteration. It is in that non-convergence that chaos and anomy reassert themselves. Here one catches a glimpse of something that is both life-bestowing and life-denying at once. Niebuhr called it a Void, Westphal merely said that it is both attractive and repellent, it induces a sense of both unworthiness and of powerlessness.[29]

Ambiguity presents itself not only in the cosmos but in the responses of a human community. People can live in everydayness and inauthenticity, un-Eigentlichkeit, hiding, covering up, concealing, closing off chaos and anomy. Or they can, occasionally, open, disclose, and welcome the anomy that lies beyond all human attempts to ascribe meaning to the universe. It is possible to do both at the same time, at least in Heidegger's sense that what reveals one phenomenon inevitably conceals another. Beyond the inevitable, a community may embrace chaos and anomy in language that is not free of counter-performative implications. In a world of original sin, we should expect as much. But this is one of the risks of

[29]GGD, Chapter 2, "Ambivalence and the Sacred."

failure of language in covenantal communities.

The import of all this is that the framework for cosmic order is social order, or at least social structure. Cosmos mirrors society. Community and existential need are the framework for dealing with chaos, anomy, and loneliness, as well as the limitations and exposures of life.

We may next ask how the language of a covenantal community accomplishes these results. Language functions as a repertoire for the interpretation of life. It is not as if declarative utterances could create community once and for all, as an act of Congress or a Supreme Court opinion makes law once and for all, though there certainly are declaratives in the histories of covenantal communities. A common past is the presupposition of intelligibility of life, the cosmos, and human actions. What is a "common past"? It is shared language, shared involvements, risks, commitments, enterprises, shared successes, failures, blessings, pains. They become shared by an act of narrative and by the assumptions of responsibility that go with it. These assumptions are made by tellers and hearers alike. People accept the story as a common past, and that is a commissive and declarative speech act whose perlocutionary effects go far beyond the immediate and obvious meanings of what is said. Any of the covenant assemblies in the Common Documents could serve as examples, but they are places where the language is spelled out "officially." Much more than that happens in the life of a covenantal community. Language and the heritage of language work on the common past and undergird the intelligibility of life in the cosmos. Even the sense of "shared" in "shared language" may differ between covenant and mimesis, because people in a community of moral obligation and people in an ecosystem have quite different stakes in each other's lives.

Language (including especially its narratives) functions as a matrix or background within whose resources people act and make sense of life. Known and told histories work in the present to shape life in the present. Stories told yesterday, television from yesterday, dramas, soaps, football games, or a movie, all affect how life is lived today: they tell it how it is, tell what's important, they display (and thereby advocate) a basic life orientation. They are remembered and presupposed, their entailments and consequences still hold.

The language of action, the terms of ascription, have an intelligibility, albeit an analogical one, that is comprehensible to all in the community. The categories of human action presuppose the hearers' ability to extend and apply them in new contexts. The skill of making sense of human actions is an intensely linguistic ability. It has ontological implications, for it is not as if actions are given and interpretations added on later. It is interpretation that enables us to pick out which physical motions count

as part of the act, what the acts are, and what larger stories the immediate acts are meant to fit into. The habits of language, the available memories, the sedimented interpretations are what enable an ongoing interpretation.

The hard test for any account of language meeting need in an open community comes with conflict and histories of conflict that have been passed down through many generations. Conflict presents both limitation and need. At least one group tries to impose its will on the other. Each needs something from the other—at a minimum, a shared world and community in it. Beyond that, needs (especially material needs) may not be symmetric, and therein lie the seeds of conflict. Mere difference or otherness is both exposure and need, as we saw in chapter 8, where the presence of multiple covenantal communities constitutes exposure of the responsible liberty of interpretation in each one. That very responsible liberty of interpretation contains within it the resources to meet need. It is worth returning to the birth of that liberty of interpretation in the Exodus to see how it worked and what it attests as possible today.

We saw pluralism first affirmed in the Exodus and the literary settlement that came out of it, in which the eponymous ancestors of the various tribes entering Israel were put together in one genealogy by the editors of the Pentateuch, as may be seen in Edward Hobbs's paper on pluralism. The appraisal of the Exodus events that we saw in Richard Rubenstein in ELN, Part II above explains a little more of the reasons for the change in basic life orientation that came out of it. Diverse groups violating the naturalistic cosmology of the Egyptian sacred state were both forced into history (the alternative to nature) and forced into each other's arms (community, out of need). History opens up a liberty of interpretation in how to conduct human affairs, at the simplest level because history is disorder, what is under-determined by nature. Mutual human need is universal, but the affirmation of all of life requires people to move from an ecosystem (i. e., a system of mutual exploitation, however mutually advantageous) to a community of moral obligation, in which people are radically a part of one another, and are open to outsiders as well. A community of moral obligation is the reason why the liberty of interpretation has to be responsible, why it has to inculturate mechanisms of holding people responsible.

People usually hear at least one of the "liberty" and the "responsibility" parts of a responsible liberty of interpretation. Somewhat less often do people hear both of them together. Taken together, they are profoundly conducive of anxiety. One is responsible, and ultimately responsibility must face something like the Void that Niebuhr spoke of in *Radical Monotheism*. Liberty ensures that responsibility for the human social construction of ultimate reality is faced. For when liberty is seen,

it is impossible to hide the human role in construing ultimate reality in one way rather than in another. The way is blocked to that most comforting of universes, one in which reality is *simply* "objective." For reality is most threatening when it is not just "out there," external to human commitments, but also reaches into the human heart. When it is not just objective, it can call human existence into question in ways that go far beyond any merely "objective" reality.

Liberty and responsibility, each seen without the other, can both open the way to evasion of anxiety. When liberty of interpretation in history is denied, it is possible to set up a standard of conduct and order that appears to be independent of human choices. An external standard can be used to settle disputes, and thus to hold people responsible, and such a standard can be projected onto natural phenomena. If there is an external standard, then it is the standard itself (and not its human creators) that takes the responsibility. When an external standard ultimately takes the responsibility, in the sense that human beings have then externalized and objectivated the socially constructed reality they live by, and have become alienated from it, then they lose the power to acknowledge it as a human social product. What Berger and Luckmann called alienation is a very effective defense against anomy and the anxieties of anomy.[30]

Responsibility can be evaded in another way, where liberty is seen but responsibility is denied, and so little or nothing matters. This is the way of libertarian gnosticisms. Needless to say, this way undercuts any community of moral obligation very effectively, and people are thrown back into relations of mutual exploitation, usually covered up by a complacent cooperation that works very well in time of prosperity but disappears rapidly in time of trouble. In short, without responsibility, freedom degenerates into mutual exploitation, mutual abuse, every man for himself, something ultimately a-communal and anti-social, or social only as convenience, not as radical commitment. Without liberty, it is impossible for the community to *take* responsibility for its own actions. Its actions at the largest scale have not been owned as its own, the scale at which it creates order out of chaos in the universe.

When mutual need is an issue, this liberty of interpretation shows itself when people seek a reconciliation after conflict. The story of conflict can be told in more than one way, as all human affairs can be. There is more than one true version of any story. And just as the past can be told in more than one way, it can be continued into the present in more than one way. At one level, this is because limitation itself opens up multiple possibilities. But it is more than that, for language itself is much richer and more open than any one version of a story. Telling a story is not

[30]Cf. *The Social Construction of Reality* and *The Sacred Canopy*.

determined by the motions of its participants. The narrative paths can be chosen in many ways, and the paths not chosen and not even seen can in hindsight later reshape the telling of what actually did happen. The openness of language in characterizing and then re-characterizing a conflict can be seen if we imagine a conflict in history and its aftermath. Suppose such a conflict, one that will later be surveyed in hindsight with a view to reconciliation. As the original conflict unfolds, the action is told by the actors to themselves as they take action and the events happen. This is just part of any human action: where two or three people take action together, there has to be some conversation (even if not at the time) in which they agree on what they are doing. Needless to say, they also make clear to their adversaries what they are doing. This is implicit in the opposing demands of the two parties to the conflict. Each side attempts to impose its will on the other (this is experienced as a form of limitation for each of them), and each refuses to meet some of the needs of the other. A told narrative grows out of the conflict, each side has its version, and each version is parasitic on the other and opposing version for its intelligibility. We saw this in Niebuhr's basic anatomy of human actions as responses in an action-sequence that has the structure of a conversation. Each response presupposes prior actions and anticipates more actions in responses in turn. What comes out of the whole sequence is some agreement on what the dispute was about. And there has to be some minimal agreement about what the disagreement is about, or else it is not even possible to have a disagreement.

If both sides live to carry on a long-term estrangement after the conflict (instead of one side anihilating the other, whether literally or rhetorically), then positions become hardened. And in that hardening, the construal of the original conflict becomes sedimented. It is very much like the declarative status of a verdict, an appraisal or characterization of the conflict. What happened has been decided—even if there are now two conflicting verdicts and the dispute goes unresolved. Reconciliation would require revising those narratives, and this is delicate, because the efforts of both sides have to be saved, not condemned.

Look once again at the presupposition of a conflict, a disagreement, in the underlying agreement on what the several parties disagree about. Without these, the disagreement is unintelligible. Where the disagreement is conducted without physical violence but rather in rhetoric, arguments and politics, if the disagreement is unintelligible, the two parties cannot really engage each other, and they go their separate ways. One who accepts a challenge to fight *as offered* thereby accepts the presuppositions of the challenge. At least it can be said that he did. It is those presuppositions that have to be revised if there is to be reconciliation.

When the fight happens, people invest the effort of their lives, possibly also major suffering, consecrating their living and dying to their respective causes. Their children to the *n*th generation and all who voluntarily inherit meaning from them are committed by that sacrifice of lives to that declarative understanding of the shape of their world. The heirs are committed to the original version of the conflict. The identity of peoples depends on such narrative legacies. To be born into history is to inherit a place in a narrative, here one of conflict.

Revising that narrative to find a reconciliation is extremely delicate. One must respect the sacrifice of lives and so in some sense vindicate the combatants on both sides. At the same time, one must say that it would have been better if they had not fought. Nearly impossible, unless a struggle with God can be found in each one's struggle with limitation as encountered in the other. This means finding something to play the role of God that transcends their struggle. For now, it is enough to find in each party's struggles merely an encounter with limitation and each other's need. If each party's effort can be relativized before some possibility larger than what was seen or what was directly at stake in the actual past conflict, that is sufficient. In such struggles, people encounter ultimate reality as limiting their efforts. It could be seen as relativizing their desires. It was seen as presenting the other's need, albeit a need refused. It is possible now, in hindsight, to see it as exposing.

In a famous example, after the Civil War, when musicians asked Abraham Lincoln what he wanted to hear, he asked for Dixie—and that has become a song for Yankees too. At longer distance and deeper estrangement is the conflict we examined at length in chapter 8, the split between the Church and the Synagogue. Both sides drank the assumption from the poisoned chalice, that only one daughter could legitimately inherit from Second Temple Judaism. But in fairness, and in hindsight, it was not possible then to see that there would be only two surviving constituencies from the much larger pluralism of first-century Judaism. During much of the intra-Jewish disagreement of the first century, it was not at all obvious what would come out of it, and it is only in hindsight that the first-century acts and events *became* the creative moments in two daughter religions. Each side sought to delegitimate and exclude the other from its inheritance in the religion destroyed by the Romans, and each side used somewhat different rhetorical strategies.

We have seen early in this study the taunt that the mimetics hurled at Israel during the monarchy. Israel apparently knew well that its covenant was for all of life, not just the comfortable parts. Evidently her neighbors knew, too, and found such an idea preposterous or foolish, for they asked, "Where, now, is your God, O Israel?." That insult is recorded too many

times in the Common Documents to have been just occasional or minor. It attests the understanding by both sides of the true import of radical monotheism. One could expect such insults from mimetics or exilics. But in the estrangement after the disasters of the first century, to be cursed and expelled from covenant by another covenantal community? The hurt—on both sides—is understandable.

At the root of the conflict was the all too human desire to evade the anxieties of living in history. That craving for refuge from anxiety in time of mortal disaster is hardly surprising, lament it though we may from a position of comfort later. It happens not just *even* in a historical religion, but *especially* in a historical religion. For it is only in a historical religion that history can even be seen. History is invisible in mimetic religion and irrelevant in exilic religion. Covenantal religion accordingly tends to degenerate, when it does degenerate, into a henotheism in which history may be seen, and a limited covenant claimed, but the full rigors of covenant are evaded.

If my general recipe for reconciliation after conflicts in history is to retell the stories of what happened, it could sound like the truth is being sacrificed to political expediency. (After all, if one did not agree with the Yahwist's goals, one could protest against linking various tribes together in one genealogy.) What I am promoting is not a spin in which wrong-doing is covered up. Nevertheless, truth is not "Just the facts, please," as if there could be facts apart from interpretations. It is not as if there could be a unique and unambiguous way to tell a story. We get answers only to questions we actually ask, and changing the questions can open up possibilities that were not previously seen. One may ask, How might conflict have been avoided? How is reconciliation possible now? The answers will be tragic in proportion to the devastation and heartache of the conflict. Whether tragedy can be redeemed or not is a matter of faith—can exposure bring grace? Is forgiveness even possible? In the present one asks how the story can be told so as to redeem as much as possible of the history. The conflict has to be reconceived on some basis other than as it actually was played out, or other than the then-declarative characterization of the actions. That now-seen possibility re-frames the past acts and even reconstitutes them as a struggle with unseen or misunderstood larger possibilities. That reconstitution is ontological, if Rabbi Soloveitchik's instincts are correct. What was not seen then is nevertheless true now. Events then were the start of things bigger since then. Events then are transformed by possibilities seen now.

14.5 Narrative and Other Religions

Conflict is one place where need presents itself in human affairs. We focused on religious conflict in chapter 8, and political conflicts could be handled in similar ways. But conflict is not the only form in which need presents itself; need can come as simple difference, simple otherness. Here the phenomenon presents itself in inter-religious contact, often met with evangelistic responses. This will bring us back to the problems of confessionality and relativity.

The typology of Westphal and Niebuhr has obvious apologetic potential, and it could be turned into a refutation of all heresies. But what is not seen, unless Niebuhr's warnings are heeded, is that apologetics embodies within itself a presupposition of henotheism. To move to apologetics is to alternate from historical-covenantal life orientation into a henotheistic stance. There is an essential difference between what is today called "apologetics" and what is merely the answering of questions, despite the fact that the root of *apo-logeo* just means something close to answering questions. Answering questions is a confessional activity, and it is candid in its confessional stance. Apologetics in practice seeks to prove its claims, and in that act of attempted proof, it dodges confessional responsibility for those very claims. What is proven is no longer the basis of a life orientation, because it is then reasoned to, not reasoned from.

There is a sense in which evangelism is a wholesome response to a situation of encounter with a religious other, for it desires to share the good that it has been given. In a much less attractive mode, however, it can be imperialistic. Religious imperialism probably crested with European political imperialism in the last century. (It is not an accident that when Ernst Troeltsch sought to appraise what was peculiarly Christian, his remarks sounded like a henotheism of European culture.)

Beneath this less attractive side of evangelism lies a real poverty of philosophy of religion. It is the result of centuries of deferred philosophical and theological maintenance, of challenges evaded, of entrenching and defending against the religious other, where the other was first Judaism, and then merely one or another Christian neighbor in Europe in the modern world. After that, when the natural sciences came into real growth in the seventeenth century, philosophy of religion was helpless to recognize, much less criticize, the implicit mimetic turn that the sciences took when they became for some more than just science and took on the central focus in a basic life orientation. One of the principle roots of this defensiveness was the lack of a sense of a responsible liberty of interpretation in the conduct of a covenant. With consciousness of a responsible liberty of interpretation comes a sense of the confessionality of religious

commitments. Aquinas had it, for he spells it out quite clearly in Article 8 of Question 1 of the first part of the *Summa Theologica*. And it was not only in that article, for in his strict limits on what we can know of God, he frightens people, as John Courtney Murray well saw. Aquinas's sense of analogy in religious language and its correlates in reality was pressed by his successors in the direction of univocation. If language is univocal, it is possible to settle disputes, to keep order, to enforce responsibility (of a sort, a one-sided sort), and above all, to evade the responsibilities for analogical language. A sense of history might have developed earlier if Aquinas's concept of analogy had not been turned to univocation as it was. Without an openness to the liberties of history, theology and philosophy were helpless before the new naturalism of seventeenth and eighteenth-century science, one born ironically of the essentially historical-covenantal commitments of believing scientists.

At this end of this lamentable philosophical history, some things can be said. If historical-covenantal living is what I think it is, it should not need evangelism of an imperialistic kind. History and a sense of history are just available in the way people live in the modern world. To be sure, many, even in the West, choose not to think historically in the larger decisions of their lives. History and historical thinking are voluntary, but they also are generally intelligible. Covenant, if it is clear, candid, and open, will attract some. Those who reject it are entitled to a certain kind of respect for their choices. Hard choices come when an entire society has to decide whether to conduct its affairs as a community of moral obligation (e.g., in issues such as racism, or contraceptives and abortion), or to demote some and exclude others from full membership in society. The alternative, as we have seen, is a social structure more like an ecosystem than a community of moral obligation.

The presupposition of a community of moral obligation and its attendant liberties of interpretation is history, for only in history can such liberty make sense. Some examples may help.[31] Start with Hinduism, and what is known of Hinduism by scholars in the West. Arvind Sharma is a native Hindu and a critical scholar working in a North American academic department of religious studies. He wrote the chapter on Hinduism in the collection *Our Religions*. After a discussion that presents the themes one expects in a chapter on Hinduism, an account of its more prominent ideas and its literature, he turns to a history of Hinduism. Then the observation almost forces itself out into the open: Hinduism itself does not think historically. It tends to mythicize its own history. He notes that Hinduism has historical origins, but they are not focused on one event or one individual (such as the Exodus and Moses), and then

[31] We foresaw the possibility of such an encounter in ELN, section 9.1.

continues:

> It has been suggested that that the lack of a historical founder indicates an absence of a sense of history. Hinduism in this respect would then be unique among the ethnic religions as both Judaism and Shintoism mock such a generalization. But the suggestion is only partly true. Hindus do not always attach the same theological value to historical events as do the religions of the West. The Hindus pull a switch here: They derive theological value from converting history into myth. By converting historical strifes into mythical struggles, the past is prevented from becoming an enemy of the present.[32]

Hinduism is usually oblivious to history, and thinks instead of spiritual truths that are independent of history. Here is the encounter and the challenge. For purposes of scholarship, history is real and an essential part of the story. Reconstructing the history keeps historians of religion employed, but there are other ways to do that, and there is more to a scholarly interest in history than just a desire to find employment. Historians of religions tend to affirm what they study, as a human cultural phenomenon, without becoming partisan among the religions.

There is then an implicit challenge, on both sides, one of the sort that I constructed in the analysis of Niebuhr's *The Meaning of Revelation* in section 14.2. History written by outsiders challenges the outside writers themselves, for it shows possibilities for their own lives. It also challenges insiders, and for similar but not identical reasons. Historians of religion are content to be patient, letting challenges emerge in the course of an inquiry that is a long way from being complete. They seem to be confident that the truth of history can redeem any who wish to be redeemed by it, though no such confessional commitment would ever be articulated. Insiders are met by another challenge, something more akin to "Is this your history?" Is this *your* history, is this really you?

It is not as if present-day Hindus are being held responsible for the actions of all Hindus in the past. Rather they are merely being asked whether they want to think historically at all.[33] Scholars think historically, for their own supposedly limited purposes, but do present bearers of

[32] Arvind Sharma, ed., *Our Religions* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1994), p. 36.

[33] And it is not as if Christianity, supposedly one bearer of the tradition that first discovered history for theological purposes, is completely agreed on whether (much less how) to think historically for theological purposes. Critical history has a reflexive challenge directed at those who invented it every bit as much as it does for people of other traditions, as we saw in chapter 9.

Hindu tradition want to think in historical terms? And to echo Arvind Sharma's explanation, is the past the enemy of the present, and if so, does this mean that history cannot be redeemed? How is history to be redeemed without it becoming an enemy or ceasing to be history? If it ceases to be history, then the present is deprived of the ability to think historically and to understand and acknowledge its debts to history. If reality is *not* historical, this is a feature and not a bug. But how are things, really? Thus unfold the confessional challenges that are inevitable when historical thinking meets other religions. If the human reality is historical, then there are many unanswered questions. Hinduism is one of the richest traditions on this planet, and no responsible scholar in history of religions that I am aware of would simply condemn it ("idolatrous" is the term of polemic) or judge that it should go out of business. Nor would I, despite the fact that I write confessionally in the present work. The challenge can be restated slightly as a question: How to appropriate and pass on a beautiful and treasured tradition when it is understood historically, despite the fact that for most of its history, it did not think of itself historically? How, in a world-affirming way, to tell the history of a religion that is not always world-affirming?[34] All this can be done—but it will take history writing that is both careful and very creative.

The issue arises for outsiders as much as for insiders, for the outsiders (secular historians of religion in America, for example) are co-heirs to the whole of human history. As they adopt the history of India as their own, because it is part of the larger human history, though they live in, for example, America, they still have to tell the story (if they would affirm human life in history themselves) in a world-affirming historical way. The question for such non-Hindus (as most of them are) is one of how to tell the larger history of which they are a part, without omitting or writing off some parts of that history as unredeemable.

The problems of covenant, of whether to affirm the world as good, are companion to the problems of history. There are certainly some world-affirming themes in Hinduism, even if there are also many that in their original context were world-denying, much as Merold Westphal observed in his reading of Shankara's Advaita Vedanta. Yet Advaita Vedanta itself has a history, and as historical, it is itself a worldly phenomenon. By creating a world-affirming historical context in which the story is told, it is possible to redeem all of human history. How to do that will not be clear for some time; there is much work to be done in the history of religions.

[34]The same problem obviously arises merely in the history of Christianity, for Christianity has from time to time made compromises with exilic and henotheistic religion in ways that should seem theologically disastrous.

Buddhism, so similar to Hinduism in some ways, yet presents striking theoretical challenges in others. For one could ask, is it a historical religion? Yes and no; the history of Gautauma and the later buddhas is treasured. But is it essential for theological purposes? That's hard to say, and it is something for Buddhists to answer more than for outsider historians of religion.

Is Buddhism world-affirming or world-rejecting? Again, the answers are not as obvious as they might appear. To superficial appearances, Buddhism is world-denying. But Buddhist practice is by no means as clear even to this naive outsider as the guidelines of the Four Noble Truths might suggest.

Is Buddhism affirming of being, simply as being (the question that H. Richard Niebuhr takes as central for radical monotheism)? Again, the answer is not obvious. Outside of India, Buddhism may not have nearly the interest in being *as being* that the Western traditions do.

Is Buddhism interested in co-suffering, the common Western root of the word *compassion*, which is used so often in translation of ideas in Buddhist texts? Co-suffering in biblical religion means that ultimate reality, something transcendent, has come into the world immanently to bless it as good. But in Buddhism, either in theory or in practice? I could not say how it is with Buddhists. Is the Buddhist stance toward ultimate reality one of thanksgiving and blessing? Not obviously. Affirmation of personhood? It would appear no, in the doctrine of *anatman*. But is the appearance the reality? Not obvious.

There are too many unanswered questions, and both Buddhists and scholars would probably complain that these questions are not native to Buddhism. Indeed they are not. But they are the questions that an outsider from historical-covenantal religion would ask, and if Buddhism is allowed to challenge historical-covenantal religion, surely challenges are permitted in the other direction as well.

On my suspicions, the exilic language of Buddhism can be counter-performative in a good sense, ending by affirming a world that it set out to reject, doing better (by covenantal standards) than it on the surface intended. This can happen in ordinary Western exilic projects as well, by the way. For in an exilic appraisal of life, in discontent, one takes some situations as barren. Yet as that discontent works itself out in its struggle with the limitations of reality, it comes in the end to find some blessing where none was thought to be. Prometheus and Jacob the son of Isaac both struggled with ultimate reality, and they are very different figures in their basic life orientation. One is radically exilic, the other is radically covenantal. But it is not as difficult as it might appear to convert one into the other, different though they are.

Islam, the closest to Western religions, presents another context of challenge. Most of the Islamic critiques of Christianity and Judaism seem to me to come from misunderstandings of what Christianity and Judaism are about, but those misunderstandings need not be cleared up here. Closer to my own interests in this section of this book are the challenges to Islam that come from a philosophy of history that is open to critical history. Islam is undeniably a historical religion at some level, and it makes its history central and essential in a revelation of ultimate reality that is much like Jewish or Christian understandings of revelation. But do Islamic theologians and believers want to engage *critical* history? Do they want to think historically as historical thinking is coming to be understood after the doing of *critical* history? Some clearly do. Critical history exposes above all (or underneath all, one might say) the confessional nature of basic life orientation, and the responsibilities implied by the choices of basic life orientation. And the question that comes to every culture and every people, Christian or not, comes also to Islam: does Islam want to affirm human life in this world as good? In all its parts, the hard as much as the easy, the painful as much as the pleasurable? The answers must come from Islamic theologians, not from Christian outsiders.

In Taoism, to consider only one East Asian religion, one finds themes that offer a possible conversation with radical monotheism of a most intriguing sort. In chapter 3, we saw the tripartite thinking characteristic of Indo-European cultures as it expresses the radical inversion of disappointment into blessing in covenantal religion. No such tripartite thinking is as pervasive or as systematic in Chinese culture as it is in Indo-European culture. We have seen hints of themes and patterns in other cultures, such as the four-part schema of Uto-Aztecan religion, or the propensity of Jews to think in sets of number $3n+1$. None of these themes leap out at a reader of Taoist texts in translation. But one translator of the *Tao Te Ching* has remarked that there are more than seventy sets of paired opposites in that short book, and in each one there is a tension between the poles of the contrasting pair. Lao Tzu usually prefers one pole over the other, but his preference is never absolute, and there is usually a sense that the two poles interconvert into each other at some level. (This is the point of the two eyes in the yin-yang symbol.) Is there here a conversation partner for the idea that the disappointments of life are converted into blessings? Taoism is a very sophisticated and cultured version of what was originally a world-affirming nature religion. How world-affirming does it want to be? Does it want to enlarge its horizon to think historically?

These are only some of the questions that will inevitably arise in an encounter between religions. Challenges come from each religion to its

neighbors. A challenge from Buddhism to Christianity may be seen in the work of Thich Nhat Hanh.[35] But the Christian reader who understands both his own religion and also some phenomenology of religion will quickly see that Thich Nhat Hanh has chosen those parts of Christian tradition that are closest to Buddhism and silently ignored the rest. The selection works out in a functionally exilic way. In particular, history is simply missing. It has no central or essential role, it does not *do* anything in the Christianity that Hanh sees. There are many varieties of exilic living, and Hanh's is only one, and only partially world-denying at that. But it would appear to be significantly different in its overall emphases from the historical-covenantal affirmation of this world as blessed in all its grubby materiality that we have seen in its origins in the Common Documents.

In the light of these examples, the challenge of evangelism can be restated. The experience of teaching a world religions course is an invitation to fall in love with every one of them. At the same time, I remain in various disagreements where the various religions do not clearly affirm this life in history as good. The stance toward other religions then becomes a dialectical one, rather than an attempt at religious imperialism. It becomes not a subpoena but a question, "Do you really want to construe human life historically, and do you want to affirm all of it as good?" The traditional subpoena took the form of "Accept Jesus Christ as your lord and savior, or go to hell." Such is not in the spirit of Jesus himself, it is imperialistic and obnoxious, and it is implausible because arbitrary and gratuitous. The subpoena is less than catholic and universal and it seeks to fend off need rather than open up to need. The question in its place does, nevertheless, offer a challenge, formulated from a confessional stance: Now that history can be seen clearly, do you want to think historically? Do you want to participate in responsibility? Do you want to live covenantally? Do you want to live as part of a community of moral obligation, and not just an ecosystem? Do you want to live as Talmud Berakoth 60b enjoins—bless for the evil as for the good?

It is possible to tell the history of all the world's religions and to affirm it all as part of creation. Or at least it should be. It may take centuries of work to get that story straight. Some will want to respond affirmatively, some will not. When the issues are clarified, many really do not want to think historically about human life; it is too uncertain, too open, too engendering of anxiety and responsibility. The comforts of one or another mimetic ontology are too sweet to surrender. ("Were there not graves enough in Egypt, that you had to bring us out into the

[35]Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ* (New York: Riverhead, 1995).

desert to die?") To affirm all of life hurts too much, and the hurt is not the way of life and peace, but just pain, and should be avoided. It is also possible to reinvent radical monotheism, and an attempt to do that would not surprise me.

In summary, we may say that there are many needs to care for in the conduct of a covenant in history and in encounters between traditions. There are many ways to evade those needs and so subvert covenant. And narrative affords many ways to meet those needs and open the way to covenantal living in the process. All this happens in language, in the way that narratives are told, in what gets included, what gets left out, how actions are appraised, how they are fitted into the larger narratives of history.

Chapter 15

Facing the Void

15.1 Transcendence

We have come a long way. From the barest embracing of disappointments in ELN, Part I, we came in the balance of ELN to history as the basic context for human life. The reality that shapes human life as it gets integrated into a whole in history, hard parts included, is one that we know in the act of embracing exposure, limitation, and need. While exploring the relation between knowledge and action, we were never far from the doorstep of language.

In the last two chapters we have begun to explore the language that shapes historical-covenantal monotheism. Its first feature to alert us to something peculiar was silence, reticence before the holy. Irony presented to us the essential transformation of radical monotheism, and with it transcendence becomes unavoidable. Nothing simply intramundane can completely articulate the contradictions in the central irony of monotheism, the transformation of disappointments into blessings. That transformation was developed in narrative, and there transcendence was implicit in several ways. The openendedness of the monotheist's commitments was one, but more conspicuous was the finality of some disappointments, and the persistence of hope in face of them.

The test of monotheistic language announced in chapter 14 focused on responsibility. Can it answer responsibly? Can it hold others responsible, can it challenge? These questions come to a head in transcendence.

Everywhere, we bumped into presuppositions of covenantal narrative that go beyond the particulars of any historical actor or natural phenomenon, yet I have deferred focusing on that "going beyond" for its

own sake. It is time to return to those questions and, in such manner as they can be, to answer them. They all focus on transcendence, and it is in the nature of transcendence that some things about it remain ever unsayable. Yet it is possible to see the immanent presence of transcendence and to recognize it as such in ways that do offer some help. It will then be possible to see how language brings that immanent presence to light.

Some examples in retrospect from the last chapter may help. When the believer undertakes to participate in the narrative history of covenantal religion, he commits to a continuing conversation, to its language, to the life that it discloses. He commits to accept whatever it discloses about himself and his family and neighbors, even though that disclosure will not be complete in his own lifetime. The responsibility that he undertakes is open-ended in the sense that there is no point within history when his obligations are fully discharged. If truth is a process, it does not come to final completion in history. The best one can hope for is to do the work of one's own day, and hope that it gets done in a way that really leaves it open to and welcoming toward the disclosures of history. And so one can well ask what it is that the believer trusts in, if it is not something that ever fully and finally appears in history.

In the case of limitation, and trust and hope in the face of limitation, we saw the immanent presence of transcendence in the fifth stage of grieving. For there hope is not denial of limitation, nor is it an attempt to return to bargaining, and so avoid or escape the real limitation. When limitation destroys the believer, what does it mean to trust, to hope? What is trusted in? What is hoped for?

Shared life in community is always an attempt to erect human meaning in the cosmos in face of a chaos that threatens to overwhelm human life with anomy. That anomy presents transcendence at perhaps its easiest. For it discloses the weakness and unworthiness of human lives most directly, which is to give it the principal marks of the holy. In face of chaos, people of course turn to each other, but in that togetherness they can turn away from chaos, or they can face it together. Here, thinking about transcendence brings us back to its immanent presence. It always will; we never rest in transcendence in and of itself, much though we can intend it.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the language of transcendence in stages. In this first section, we look at a few signals of transcendence, places in life that cry out for some explanation beyond simply more of the intramundane. In the second section, we come to analogy. It enables us to understand human life and the world, and transcendence is its furthest reach. In the third section, we come to the central analogy, in which human beings speak of ultimate reality in human terms. What

would possess people to do such a thing? In plain English, it is by that analogy that people speak of and, more importantly, *to* ultimate reality as to a person. In the fourth section, I inquire about the prospects for this analogy, its risks and hazards today.

Why transcendence? At all? At least two simple answers can be given. In the first place, some disappointments are, so far as we can see in the terms of this world, irremediable. We are destroyed by limitation. Exposure can leave us bereft, without apparent hope of truth. And in need, we are up against loneliness and chaos in the universe. If we trust anyway, it is necessary to say something about why, about what it is we are doing, and about what it is we trust in.

For a second and somewhat different answer, one can rephrase the question as, Why, in the end, embrace exposure, limitation, and need? The answer is that because of the way things *are*, this is the right thing to do. This claims more than just that one or another disappointment can be transformed into a blessing. It says that "doing this" is what life is about, "that's where it's at!" in street language. *Doing this*: telling narratives in ways that show freedom in human actions and take responsibility for it. *Doing this*: working with limitation in ways that are proximately creative and ultimately at peace, consenting, affirming, affirming of Being, of one's own being, as it is, in its limitations. *Doing this*: a shared community of moral obligation. Being a part of one another, solidarity, togetherness in face of chaos and anomy. One does not have to live this way. One can.

It should be noted, by the way, that affirming the goodness of being is first affirming the goodness of Being, and only secondarily affirming the goodness of oneself. Human selves are affirmed in a derivative way, not at the center of the goodness of being. That very subordinate status was in traditional language called creaturehood, and the concept of createdness is radically transcendent. One need not affirm human life in this way. Some do. One could instead affirm human life as the ultimate center of value, with or without any transcendent. People do that, too.

If two simple answers can be given, the details are a little more complex, but not essentially difficult. There are at least three ways in which talk about human life leads into transcendence of one sort or another. In the first, some kind of transcendence is necessary just to be able to answer what is the *same* in various instances of disappointments transformed into blessings. What makes different cases of exposure instances of the same thing? Or limitation, or need? One can always find enough differing aspects of two particular instances of a phenomenon so that they no longer appear to be really the same thing. Whatever it is that makes two limitations instances of the same thing is something

that transcends their particular features. And given the large range of characterization possible for human actions, the questions can become much more daunting. We shall not resolve them in full generality in this short chapter, merely noting that all concepts at this level become analogical, and the reach of analogy is broad indeed.

One can suspect even here that the mind is reaching for something more than just an inventory of all instances of one or another kind of happening in life. Experience of many instances of limitation (for example) produces concepts that are open-ended, a skill of experiencing that intends more than anything in any particular instance of limitation, or indeed in all of them taken together. Limitation *itself* comes into view, for its own sake, as an abstract concept. There is no definition that could capture all the experiences that would later be apprehended under the rubric of "limitation;" it is as open-ended as human experience can be.

But most pressing is the experience of unavoidable limitation, the experience that elicits questions like "Why?" "Why me?" and so on. Here, the mind reaches well beyond the features of the limiting situation itself, and even beyond any abstract or general concept of limitation. (As much can be said for exposure and need, although they work out somewhat differently.) Whether one complains in face of urgent limitation, or trusts in blessings to be found in limitations present or possible, both complaint and trust are directed to something well beyond the particulars of the situation. (There are responses possible other than complaint or trust, such as taking offense, but these two are central for historical-covenantal living.)

Look first at trust. I have said that providence appears in history, but transcends both history and nature. Talk of providence comes in the course of a certain kind of questioning. Ultimate reality appears in the phenomena of nature and history but is not reducible to them. History transcends nature, and historical-covenantal ultimate reality transcends both, but cannot appear until history is seen.

In its starkest form, the question appears like this: Shall I (or we) trust history and human life in history? In view of the uncertainty, risk, unpredictability, uncontrollability, disorder, injustice, destructiveness, confusion, and so on? Not exactly. Yes and no. Yes we trust, our trust is historical, and our understanding of our trust is radically historical. But it is not exactly history *itself* that we trust in. Even less is it any actor or phenomenon *within* history. At least it is not history or anything in it that merits ultimate trust, though there are proximate trusts within nature and history. What then is the "object" or focus of trust? That is much harder.

We trust that in history we shall find life, life more abundantly, in

spite of its disappointments, but it is not history that we trust in. Not only do we trust that in history we shall find life (or be given life) more abundantly, but we trust that in history, *in this life and not some other*, we shall be given life more abundantly. That is hard. In the ordinary or intramundane sense, we really do not get life more abundantly "in this life and not some other." We face disappointments and deprivations that are crushing, that destroy us. It then becomes clear that while the correlates of trust are in history, the object of trust is not. Yet the object of trust is not escape to some *other* life; it is *this* life, with all of its pains, that is to be transformed and consummated, so that its createdness (blessedness) is patent and not just latent, manifest and not forever hidden. In more traditional language, what we trust in transcends history, but what we see is only its immanent presence in history.

Is it that what we can see is only this? The immanent presence of something we cannot really bring to language as it is in itself? We trust that the immanent presence of transcendence will be present to us? We trust that we will be met by life more abundantly *as* the immanent presence of transcendence? But that we never see or know transcendence itself, *as such*? We can say or know *nothing* of transcendence?[1] I think not quite: it is possible to say a little, if not much. But what we can say keeps returning to the immanent presence, leaving the transcendent reality itself forever beyond our grasp. In exposure, truth meets us, and we meet truth: life, as knowing and being known. In limitation, life and the possibility of life meet us. In need, fellowship meets us, bringing life as solidarity. What meets us in each case is something beyond the particulars of the events that come to us as exposure, limitation, and need. But what? What I speak of as "truth," "life," "fellowship" and so on? Even the terms exposure, limitation, and need themselves? They have a reach beyond all their particular instances. So what are they, beyond the universals present in all their particular instances? Everywhere we turn, we are sooner or later rebuffed.

Thus lives trust in an ultimate reality beyond any particular features of history. Look at the cry that goes up in the hour of distress, first in the case of limitation. The questioning is familiar. Why limitation? Why disappointments, at all? Why me?

I once listened to a talk by Kenneth Kendler, a psychiatrist specializing in brain chemistry and its experiential manifestations. He described a

[1]Cf. Murray, PG, p. 70: Aquinas says that " 'One thing about God remains completely unknown in this life, namely, what God is' (Commentary on Romans, chapter 1, lesson 6). He states the truth so often and so uncompromisingly that some of his commentators have become a bit alarmed at the patent poverty of the knowledge of God he permits to man in this life."

patient who suffered greatly, and he could explain a lot of the chemistry behind that suffering, though not yet all; nor could he treat it.[2] Then the mode of questioning shifts, and with it the mode of explanations: The patient was wont to ask, "Why did this happen to me?" and answer, "If it had not happened to me, I would not have been thrust into helping so-and-so, who needed the help greatly, and for whom I have made a great difference."

This is to move from naturalistic to narrative and existential categories of explanation, as we have already noticed in chapter 14. But it is not just that; it asks for a "more" that is both in and beyond these particular human interactions. (I am returning to the problem at the heart of section 14.3.) The question asks not for efficient causes, and though it seeks final causes in *some* sense, it is not in the sense of looking for the purposes of any intramundane or intrahistorical actor.

Yet the question persists. It can be declared a mistake and not pursued, but that is a confessional move. (It is indeed a mistake, for henotheisms and naturalisms.) To persist in the question is also a confessional move. And one can give up hope of a positive answer and simply take offense at occasions of limitation. This is also a confessional move. But the offense is directed at something beyond the particular limitations, and beyond any intramundane or intrahistorical causes or actors. This is the exilic stance. But if you persist in the question "Why?" you are close to a historical-covenantal basic life orientation.

The questioning seeks transcendence and then returns to immanence, the immanent presence of transcendence. It is not as if transcendence has been abandoned, rather the intramundane (all that we can see, after all) has been reconceived as the immanent presence of transcendence. Some in henotheisms and naturalistic religions would like to declare transcendence null and void on the grounds that what we see is only the immanent, but that move begs the question of transcendence rather than answers it. Thus the problem is posed. It cannot ever really be solved, if a "solution" would be to know and language transcendence as it is in itself. We can, however, get to know the language in which we encounter the problem, and we will see some of the power and hazards of that language in the next sections.

How does exposure parallel limitation? We ask "Why limitation?" but we do not ask "Why exposure?" in simple parallel. "Why must I be exposed?" gets very little sympathy; "Why must I be limited?" gets a lot. ("Why must I be needed?" gets overlooked and unasked—unless, of course, it takes the form, "Why must I be pestered?") Once exposure is

[2]The talk was at a conference given by the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences, Berkeley, CA, June 1998.

seen, and seen as truth, it makes no sense to ask "Why truth?" What we ask is a little different, and the non-parallelism of limitation and exposure is in proportion to the differences in how the first and second functions work; they are different kinds of concepts, after all.

What we *do* ask: Can there be grace? Can there be real truth? (This appeared in section 14.2, and was there postponed.) Will I ever know the truth about myself? Will I ever be free from my sins? Can we ever know the whole story? Can we ever know what should be included in the narratives, and how? Whether to ask these questions at all is a confessional move.

Yet all point to something that gets worked out slowly in life—things come together providentially, if one trusts in exposure, limitation, and need. At least we trust that they will, even when we cannot see how it happens. Thus exposure parallels what we saw for limitation; transcendence returns to its immanent presences. We return to dealing with *this* exposure and its lessons and the tasks it sets; we trust that the larger story will get told truthfully, hopefully in history to come, but ultimately it is a truth that transcends history; that is where the real hope comes to rest.

And need? Need is different in turn from both exposure and limitation. For behind and beyond all the grubby instances of need lies something much more awesome. Loneliness Merold Westphal did not see. He saw guilt and death well enough, the correlates of the first and second function. In the third function, when one looks for some general phenomenon, loneliness presents itself plausibly enough. And beyond loneliness, the human experience, lies chaos, its correlate in the universe at large. What if the universe were at bottom radically chaotic, radically anomic, refractory to human inquiry? We would be alone, more radically alone than anything possible in a universe with even hints of order. Chaos means no support, no sustenance. What is disorderly (a first-function concept) cannot be relied upon (a third-function concept), and it is this third-function aspect of disorder and chaos that I focus on here. Chaos leads to loneliness, because in a universe that is indifferent and uncaring, we have each other. Yet we are more alone together in an anomic universe than we could ever be in an orderly universe.

Is the universe indifferent, uncaring, *and hideous*? So here we take offense at it and do so in solidarity against it? That is the way of exilic religion and some henotheisms. Is the universe indifferent, uncaring, and beautiful? In that beauty is the opening to holiness, what both attracts and repels, what discloses our unworthiness and weakness. The ability to see that beauty, that holiness, comes from human community in history; where we see the beauty in nature and its challenge of holiness is very

culture-dependent.

Consider an example, in nature: The precession of the equinoxes was discovered in 125 BCE by Hipparchus. That discovery was followed by the start of the Mithraic mystery religion in about 90 BCE.[3] Mithraism is a human response, but one not implicit in the natural phenomenon itself; at least so anyone familiar with the modern explanation of precession would say. Today, the counterpart in contemporary astrophysical cosmology would probably be the Big Bang. And many look at the Big Bang and ask about God, but they stand in a relatively recent tradition, one dating from the seventeenth century to the present, one that tends not to see history, even history of science, yet thinks in terms of biblical religion (usually just Christianity). And in one sense, it would be right to look at the Big Bang and ask about God; the Big Bang is the only scientific cosmology we have (today). Yet in another sense, and in the light of what we now know about the precession of the equinoxes and the history of Mithraism, it would not.

It may help to look at the physics of precession. It can be demonstrated in a spinning top as its axis of rotation precesses, or slowly moves in a circle about the vertical. In the case of the astronomical phenomenon, the causes are in the non-sphericity of the earth and the gravitational pull of the sun and moon. The earth itself precesses like a giant spinning top. Any undergraduate physics student with a little calculus can easily master it. And as for the Big Bang, someday undergraduates will solve six baby-universe problems before breakfast, in order to hand in a homework problem-set at an 8 A.M. lecture after pulling an all-nighter to study for a P-Chem mid-term later in the morning. It will become routine.

Consider another example, the earthquake Psalms (114 is typical): "The mountains skipped like rams, and the little hills like young sheep." Growing up in Ohio, on the edge of the Canadian Shield, one might not notice that these Psalms are about earthquakes. In California, one notices. At modest levels, Richter magnitude 4 or so, one can wake in the middle of the night, and when the brief tremor is over, be left chanting, "We want an aftershock!" "We want an aftershock!" It can be quite thrilling. At higher magnitudes, when buildings actually tumble down, when there is some loss of life and danger of much more, then I imagine it is truly terrifying. Today, earthquake physics is semi-routine. (We are not yet far enough along for the State of California to actually *schedule* earthquakes and charge admission to out-of-staters. But don't rule it out.) One could dismiss the phenomenon as something between a nuisance hazard and an unsolved engineering problem, leaving it in entirely naturalistic terms.

[3]Cf. David Ulansey, *The Origin of the Mithraic Mysteries* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

In the first millennium BCE, when these Psalms were written, there were only earthquakes, without any scientific explanations. Earthquakes were not just a nuisance hazard, they were clearings in which human life could be seen as at few other times.

Look again and focus on the history in how Psalm 114 begins: "*When Israel came out of Egypt*, . . . , the mountains skipped like rams," etc. Here the holiness of nature in its awesome glory is transposed into history. In hindsight, it is amazing that the Hebrews turned from nature to history, that they translocated the meaning of this most awesome of terrestrial disturbances into a marker of *history*, of their deliverance in the Exodus years before. How can history compete with nature for awesomeness? How can history compete with nature for chaos and anomy? But as we saw early on in ELN, Part II, in human and existential terms, nature is the locus of the orderly and history is the first experience of disorder. Nature is the orderly, though that order is a human interpretation of "nature's ways." History is disorder, and order returns only when history is abolished (mimesis), or disorder is interpreted as freedom, in the step into covenant. Chaos and loneliness are radicalized in history. The disorder of history has a kind of existential awfulness that is appalling, not awe-inspiring. It appears in being marginalized, being conquered, being hauled off into exile, being simply destroyed. In being not-in-the-know, being left out, being in the dark, being not in a position to know where history is going, always a patient and never an agent. Here yearning reaches out—but for what? For fellowship.

Yet the sense of yearning in face of these disappointments is more than for any particular community or solidarity in face of chaos, though it will always be expressed in a very particular and historical community. To stop at the limits of such a community would also be to fend off chaos, to shut it out rather than to face it. If we could talk to whales, they would be members of the community of moral obligation, because they would then be able to make demands of us and to answer us in turn. A community of moral obligation is intrinsically open, essentially open, or it is not a true community of moral obligation in the historical-covenantal sense. Even self-sentient plasma fluctuations in the upper atmospheres of red giant stars would be members, if they could talk on the same timescales we do. That openness is what stands in parallel to the "Why?" question for limitation, and to the "Is there truth? is there grace?" questions for exposure. They all point to transcendence.

Turn now to the mirror image of questioning *in extremis*, thanksgiving. It is not just the questioning and yearning in face of disappointments that point to transcendence; thanksgiving in time of joy does so also. For example, it sometimes happens that one receives help from other people in

circumstances where afterward one has a "surplus" of thanks—more than just to the individuals who helped. One is grateful to them directly, as individuals, but also grateful to God—as we shall come to call transcendence in section 15.3. But for now, look only at the yearning-in-thanksgiving, the feeling that seeks to give thanks beyond the intramundane particulars and so transform them or reappropriate them as the immanent presence of transcendence.

For limitation, Kenneth Kendler's example would do. "Why do I have to put up with limitation" becomes thanksgiving for fortuitous limitation that is truly an opportunity. And the thanks is intended to go beyond the particular actors—especially if there are no human actors, as in a fortuitous event *in nature* that is received as providential. Then there really is nobody who could be thanked. What if one has a surplus of thanks anyway? To whom is such thanks to be given? It is that feeling of thanksgiving that is a signal of transcendence. When the event one is thankful for is natural, we can see with special clarity the surplus of thanks that raises questions of transcendence. One can suppress or dismiss such gratitude or find ways to express it.

It is a little harder to find examples for exposure and need than for limitation. Exposure can bring freedom (we expect it to, after all, as we saw early, in chapter 3). When someone else gives one the means to articulate, to spell out what one has been doing, it is in a sense an exposure, because the truth comes out. But it comes with grace, and so is the occasion for thanksgiving rather than the ache that dare not complain because it is guilty. It comes as a gift, a relief, not as the sort of exposure that hurts. It can be an occasion for thanksgiving, but more than just to any other people involved. That "more" is the signal of transcendence. On every occasion on which exposure palpably brought freedom, there is occasion for thanksgiving, but the thanksgiving readily goes beyond the events themselves.

And need? The joy of fellowship with other people—often it comes at cost of meeting need, and meeting need can always lead to it; it is occasion for thanksgiving, but that thanksgiving is for more than just the particular people involved.

Why does thanksgiving "go beyond" the particulars of all these events? Because one's own being is at stake? Because human existence is situated in a context so large that one has to go beyond the particulars of these events? To say that is a confessional move. As usual. Is the largest context (i. e., ultimate context) of human life one of gratitude? One that merits gratitude as a response? Or does gratitude occur, when it does, only in the ultimate context of some other basic life orientation? If the largest context elicits thanksgiving, then thanksgiving is a signal of

transcendence.

A few things should be noted at the end of this section. The first is a counterpart of the perhaps frustrating tendency of this discussion never really to escape from the particulars of human experience. We always returned to the particulars of human life, but they were always changed. In section 14.3, in the end, we saw all too briefly some consequences of treating limitation as the immanent presence of a transcendent. If proximate limitations are seen as manifestation of good and blessing (and that is to see them as the immanent presence of a transcendent reality), then one's response will be proportionate. It will be very different from what one would do if proximate limitations are not seen in terms that reach as far as something transcendent, at a minimum the "that's just the way life is" that we saw above in one of the earliest and easiest statements of transcendence. If proximate limitations are seen instead as merely intramundane, without any transcendent interest at all, then they can be met on such a basis by utilitarian manipulation, if the intramundane is itself inanimate, or by manipulative involvements with animate intramundane phenomena, if nature is animate. That is the way of the world-affirming nature religions. If they are seen as evidence of the transcendent barrenness of this life, then they carry no blessing, they can be manipulated or ignored at will. This is the exilic position. But if one's basic life orientation is covenantal, then proximate limitations are part of a larger covenant, and while we do not see the full transcendence of that larger covenant, we do respond to its immanent manifestations covenantally.

We have seen many big "why?" questions in this section. They reach for transcendence, but they get transformed by stages into something more like "How can I respond in covenantal trust?" Among the stages one could find a rhetorical sense that means "I am devastated" and responds with "I complain," crying for help, and then moves to "How could I trust?" in the rhetorical sense that presupposes that I cannot, and then to "How can I trust?" in the open sense that seeks a positive answer. Thus does transcendence gently turn our inquiring into what we cannot know back to what we can know and what we can do about it. Transcendence is safeguarded.

A certain frustration would be natural. All this talk about a "more," and "going beyond," but no talk about what that more might be, or what lies beyond. In fact, it was often a "more, but what?" That "more, but what?" that has appeared so often reflects the fact that real transcendence can't be caught, is always elusive, always demands a via negativa in its knowing, can't be pinned down. Transcendence returns to its immanent manifestations, with consequences for the living of this life. That has been the theme of these two volumes, embracing exposure, limitation,

and need in history, a formula that could seem "too simple" to be real religion. In the immanent manifestations there is a certain philosophical safety, safety from a recurrent danger, of drawing transcendence into the world on the world's own terms, thereby annihilating the transcendent character of transcendence.

We shall come in the next section to analogy, the way in which transcendence gets languaged. And so it is important to remain aware of the dangers of analogical language and the remedies. Always return to the immanent side of transcendence, because that it is where life is lived, that is where decisions are made, that is where life is embraced as a blessing or construed on some other basis. We have bumped into what is called the "via negativa," the negative way of knowing transcendence. It is not just some necessary but preliminary step on the way to more important positive affirmations one could make about transcendence. Rather, the via negativa itself discloses essential features of transcendence that are of the first importance. If it is forgotten, the way has been opened to drawing transcendence into the world on the world's own terms. That is not quite the same thing as welcoming transcendence into the world on its terms, not the world's.

15.2 Analogy

Whether trusting when *in extremis* or giving more thanks than any intramundane actor could receive, we found ourselves in need of language. Peter Berger called such situations "signals of transcendence."[4] He found five, more than we have considered, and doubtless many more could be found. The term transcendence is relatively recent, but it serves well enough as a label for our predicament. The language that will carry us over the threshold of transcendence has traditionally been called analogy. Analogy showed itself as the pivot in speaking of God, and the names of God attracted philosophical questioning early, as a place of risk where believers' language could easily fail them. Though it has already appeared frequently in roles that are not very problematic, analogy still has some features that we have not yet seen.

Analogy as a thematic concept in the philosophy of religious language has traditionally found its main (and often only) application in making sense of language about God, specifically the names of God. But it has appeared already in other roles, many of pivotal importance. We saw analogy first as a historian's critical tool, in chapter 5 and again in chapter

[4]Peter Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural*, 2nd ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1990).

9. The historian is helpless to make sense of past events without some analogies or chains of analogies to present experience. Analogy quickly appeared also in a constructive role as the heart of typology, the language by which covenanters make sense of their present lives in the light of history. A few features may be recalled from those explorations. The covenanter trusts that the future will be gracious as the past was. Analogy has a performative character: it can challenge both hearers and speaker. I have no power over those who reject my analogies; analogy is radically confessional. The analogies by which a believer orients his life challenge others, by their power to disclose (and expose) possibilities for living that the other would prefer not to see. Loss of the coercive power of logical proof in no way renders analogical and confessional discourse powerless.

The term *providence* has appeared frequently in this book, but usually without inquiring into any provider. Providence is a part of human experience, or at least it is one possible way of experiencing the ups and downs of life. But any provider in that experience can be spoken of only by analogy. We have already seen many of the features of analogy in covenantal language. Analogies are voluntary, analogies shape human lives. Analogies can speak truth, analogies can challenge. Among the concrete analogies we saw, the analogy of service appeared in meeting limitation, but it appeared without one served. The possibilities that analogy opens up cannot be calculated. But that does not mean that analogy cannot be responsible. Analogy brings anxiety, challenge, responsibility, confessionality, a responsible liberty of interpretation, a loss of "absoluteness," and so an openness before other religions.

In the last section, we saw our problem without pressing the analogies that could address it. Can there really be truth if there is no absolute truth, if there is only exposure? Ultimately, what is the taking of responsibility? Is there a *whom* before whom it happens, or only other human beings, alone before chaos? Can there really be success or gratification in life if in the end we face limitation? What is presupposed if limitation is to be responded to with something akin to service? Can there really be fellowship if we are alone? Can there be fellowship if there are always beyond it a sea of others, alien to it and not members of it? In what context could there be a community of moral obligation with *everybody* in it?

I suppose in their clumsy way, these questions all sound like the human before the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, or some such phrase for the holy. They could be collected together, borrowing H. Richard Niebuhr's words in *Radical Monotheism*, in the question, Is the Void before which and in which we ultimately live *trustworthy*? But to put the question that way is to move too fast. It is to introduce God before we are ready,

and to do that too rapidly, confident that the reader already understands such a concept, and so will accept it as natural, is to conceal some of its presuppositions that I would like to bring to light. A Void has no being in any world we know or could conceive of. If we look for it directly, it appears a little too fast to be Nothing, a sacred or holy Nothing, with a capital N. But what we find is just nothing, without the capital N. If we press the search, we find only ourselves. This was exactly Heidegger's point in *Being and Time*, and for what it is worth, in the short essay "What is Metaphysics?," he saw that out of the nothing eventually comes awe. The nothing become Nothing is the root of awe. But his remarks are enigmatic and elusive. In our own homespun way, we can do well enough for our needs.

The remedy of caution is to turn the question around, to interrogate the questioner and ask why, or ask what is going on, when people start talking about a "Void" with a capital V, a void that is sacred or holy. And so, a little more slowly, the questions that we saw in the first section of this chapter all come out of the center of human existence. They were the harvest of the last chapter. At that center of human existence one finds confrontation with one's own mortality, a sense of unworthiness. Then loneliness. And chaos. Signals of transcendence implicitly presuppose human life as their basis, and that is what needs to be unpacked. We focus to the roots of analogy in human living. What follows is an exploration, not a theory of all analogy.

My instinct in ELN, section 7.1 was to say that analogy happens when one thing gets seen in the light of another. I would say that when we see one phenomenon in the light of another, we see by analogy. This definition is broader than the traditional one, in which it is *language* from one engagement with life that gets transferred to another. Actually, the traditional definitions are much fussier and more precise than that. They conceive analogy itself on analogy with various mathematical usages; proportionality, for example. I think the phenomenon is broader and looser than that, and also closer to the things themselves. We shall come to analogy in language, but when we do, the engagements with life themselves will call for it.

For now, it is sufficient to recall examples that we have seen already. In the light of the Exodus, Jews see their lives now; cf. Mark Podwal's Haggadah, seen in ELN, section 7.1 and again in section 14.3. In the light of the Exodus, early Christians saw the life of Jesus. We saw this in the Exodus typology in the Gospels, also in section 7.1. In the light of this or that event in the past, we see what is possible now and in the future. In the light of European religious wars after the Reformation, people rethink anathemas and declarations of heresy, and indeed all rela-

tions between different ecclesial bodies. In the light of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century science, people rethink biblical history and historiography. In the light of nineteenth-century history, people rethink human interpretation, and in the twentieth century, rethink human interpretation even in the natural sciences. In the light of the Shoah, Christians rethink the relations between Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism. In the light of even an imaginary through-the-finger laser fertility monitor, one can see the technology of disrespect for what it is (cf. section 12.3). In the light of the pictures of themselves that the murdered son brought back with him, the mother and daughter see themselves anew (cf. ELN, section 3.1). One can usually take these clearings in life and transform them into paradigms of analogy in language on the model of the analogy of attribution or the analogy of proportion (the classical construction of analogy). But the clearing happens on a more basic level, and we don't really reach for mathematics as the first analogy to explain it. In any of these examples, it would be artificial, in some difficult. In the now fictional example from Camus, the innkeeper mother and daughter who murder single guests and unknowingly murder their son and brother, what term, what words, what concepts could be transferred from the events in which they are exposed to themselves? And transferred to what? It is not as if something attributable to the son is transferred analogously to themselves. There has to be some sort of transference if either model of analogy, attribution or proportionality, is to fit. Perhaps something attributed to themselves in this event is transferred analogically to themselves in the larger shape of their lives, in their character. But such an explanation makes analogy secondary to the events. In so doing, it shields the events themselves from real philosophical scrutiny.

Staying with the events themselves in the examples we have recalled, there is a simpler explanation. It is to say that, in the light of failure in one engagement with life, we can see failure in another. One might have said they were causally related, and sometimes they are, but only sometimes. Closer to what happens in human existence as it is experienced is just the original statement, that we see one failure in light of another. In the light of the failures comes the questioning about what sort of person I want to be, and this, as it turns out, is the pivot. Successes can shed light also but usually not with the urgency, nor the ability to concentrate the mind, that failures have. The disappointments and failures point back to possibilities for living. Successes point to possibilities for living also. The disappointments, if prospective and specific, appear as fear. If we see only raw possibility for living itself, without particular fears, we are in anxiety; successes can lead to anxiety directly. Anxiety is about disappointments, but before that, it is about just being, being human, about the possibilities

for being. Potential disappointments show themselves as fear; when the disappointments are dealt with, there is still something left, the anxiety about being a self at all. Anxiety comes even in prosperity, and it is not disappointment but the potential-for-being *as such* that leads to anxiety.

Will I achieve selfhood? (And what kind of self might that be?) To put it all in street language, What do you want out of life? And what if you don't get it? What sort of person do you want to be? Let him deny or ignore these questions who can. They are at the center of any basic life orientation. If it is not believable that anxiety is a human universal, I don't know what would make it so. We see one thing in the light of another, but above all, we see in the light of our own being and possibility for being; and when particular concerns are dealt with, this remains. Without particular concerns to mask it, it can be experienced as anxiety. The answers to these questions are open and can be chosen in many ways. Before them comes something more like, "How do you take the world?" or "what sort of place is it?" Assumptions about the world are the correlate of a sense of self, for only in a world can a self be a self. These questions rarely get spelled out in any deliberate form, and their answers are just presupposed in the things people do and the ways people live their lives. We have seen radically different answers to them in chapter 6, in mimetic, exilic and covenantal basic life orientations.

The answers all come by analogy, and the parts of the analogies are easy to find. In the light of finitude in time, the larger limitations of life, and of death, the ultimate limitation, how do you see the little limitations in life? What is your mood or attunement to the world, your state-of-mind, your where-it's-at, as you encounter this or that small limitation? How *do* you understand the limitations in your life? Both the negative and positive ones, the ones that prevent and the ones that enable? How do you take them? What do you think the real limitations are? How do you language limitation in your life? How do you articulate these limitations so they fit into your larger life plan (if your life has one)? What is your model of success in facing limitations, of all sizes? How do you find life, in the face of limitations big and small?

In the light of your own living, how do you take man's place in the cosmos? How, ultimately, are things? What is the ultimate reality, into which your life might fit? Here, it is a question of truth rather than of action. When people ask you "Why?" questions, and you have no more answers, how do you say, "Because that's the way things are"? What would be a fitting answer? A fitting place to end a line of "Why?" questions? An answer that could be capitalized, as that's The Way Things Are (or acronized, to TWTA (!)), thereby indicating its ultimate status, in some sense sacred? What comes from a sense of The Way Things

Are is a sense of truth. Truth in little things gets determined by truth in big things, because the little things have to fit into the larger shape of life. The Way Things Are functions as a guide for how to make sense of human life, a guide for narratives of human lives, and a standard for criticizing such narratives. It tells when I should accept the judgement of others, even when that judgement goes against me. It tells what the judgement of others should be. And it thereby provides a matrix in which exposure and claims of exposure can be judged.

Lastly, before your neighbors and before the universe at large, how do you take human society? Relations with your neighbors? Considering them as neighbors in the cosmos, not just on this city block? What is your model here, where need appears?

What do you take as models? Which experiences? Here one chooses basic analogies for explaining life: What models from *within* human life and living in the world, from your experience, do you use for the ultimate framework of meaning, of interpretation for human life? The choices are almost endless. H. Richard Niebuhr catalogued a few in *The Meaning of Revelation*. Even his short list included naturalistic images, mathematical logic, economic accounts of human life, and accounts from sociology or psychology or anthropology. They are all true, in their way, but are any to be taken as *ultimate*? Each of these images has many who take it as ultimate. In their way, most of these are naturalistic images, and nature can itself be conceived in many ways. One thinks of mechanical, organic, ecological models from modern science alone. Ancient naturalism found animist models aplenty. A complete menu would be impossible; people will always think up new ones, but Niebuhr gives some idea of the variety possible. And these were only the naturalistic images. One aware of history would have to ask whether they can sustain a basic life orientation. Can they make life intelligible? In all its sufferings and joys?

Some will know enough to be alarmed at the phrase, "ultimate reality," because if the concept is taken to mean the *whole* of reality, then it may be incoherent. Similar concepts in mathematics are flagrantly incoherent. The set of all sets and kindred antinomies of the mathematical logic of Frege and Russell can stand as examples. Most scientific concepts of the "whole" universe, Theories Of Everything, the wave-function of the entire universe and the like raise troubling logical questions that are not always pursued. The idea that ultimate reality is somehow a concept of "everything" also assumes things about the mode of knowing, to which I shall return in a moment.

Consider the other possibility, that there is no ultimate reality. Then basic life orientation gets languaged in some other way. And then "there is no ultimate reality" itself becomes the ultimate reality, the framework

for human living. That's what reality means in this context. There is always some framework for meaning, even if its import is that all is meaningless. The notion of ultimate reality is always relative to human life, prospects for human beings. It is a sense of what reality holds for human beings. One can abstract from the human origin, but it's always there in the beginning of the concept. If the universe is one which started before us, doesn't care about us, and will go on after us, *indifference* is nevertheless a concept that can be defined only relative to us. If the universe of astrophysics is "all there is," that, too, is a statement relative to the prospects for human living. If there is a "more," whether in an invisible or supernatural extension of the natural, or in some other mode of being and truth, that "more" is also conceived relative to human life.

So a concept of ultimate reality clearly can have problems. But what if it is not conceived in ways that are incoherent? What if it is conceived in ways so that you don't try to grab hold of it, and it doesn't have to elude your grasp, as it always will? Then what of basic life orientation? How do you language the openness of it all? Incoherence comes from assuming you know more than you know. In the mathematical example, the faulty assumption was that there even *is* a set of all sets. Yet despite the possible difficulties, we yearn, if not for a "theory" of everything, at least for some effective sense of everything. Is that yearning misguided? Should one give up on it entirely? If you do, it just comes back and shapes your life without recognition and intention. It is a vague yearning before it gets languaged. Maybe there is another way to language it.

We want to language ultimate reality without claiming to know more than we do, without implicitly limiting the reality we claim to know. Such language will not abstract from or hide its human origins. Its logic will be candid about its own relativity to human existence. It will pay a price—or seem to—for its great reach: it will surrender the capacity for logical coercion. It will reach to "everything," or at least as much of everything as human beings will encounter, and it will therefore be a kind of language-in-history. Its great reach will grow from its relativity to human living. As far as human living goes, language relative to it can go. If human life changes but still can be called *human* living, such language can change and follow. What we see in the light of our lives, others will be able to see in the light of their lives. Its truth and challenge will come not from logical coercion ("proof") but from the challenge of being human, the experience we all have of being an Other to each other.

Now we can see what the theories of everything assume about the knowledge they claim (or reject, if their incoherence is seen). They abstract from human relativity of concepts in order to control and to regulate the working of those concepts. This is how univocal language works. Its

regulation of language makes it possible to settle disputes, because the human living that has been abstracted from is in fact shared and agreed-upon. It "cancels out," as a mathematician would say. The result is that any disputes are not radical but are to be resolved on the basis of underlying agreements. (That's why the agreements are called "fundamental," because they lie "under" any disagreements.) Such language pays a price, in truncating the reach of its concepts. But the natural sciences have found the price well worth paying, and naturalistic language will accordingly always in some sense be univocal. The sciences abstract from human commitments and purposes in their categories of explanation and focus instead on material and efficient causes. This abstraction gives them precision, and within their reach, great power. Grandiose theories of everything tend to follow this path. By contrast, attempts to make sense of everything and still leave room for commitments and human purpose have to be open-ended enough so that they cannot abstract from the openness of history, and so cannot follow any even quasi-naturalistic path. Even attempts to make sense of only all that is within the world have to leave room for how much we do not know. So much more so when what our language reaches for is something intentionally beyond any beings within the world.

Assume that we can avoid the pitfalls of images that are used univocally in languaging a basic life orientation. Univocation is the move that leads to incoherence when images are stretched far enough to reach the "whole" of human life and its context. What of the other possible trap, in which basic life orientation becomes *simply* voluntary? We saw many questions above like "What experiences from within life do you choose or use to make sense of all of life, of the world and the cosmos as a home for humanity?" The answers to these questions are all choices, and their voluntary character opens the way to a claim that ultimately things are not just relative to standpoint in history, but a matter of indifference, not subject to moral judgement. Questioning, or at least answering, comes to an end when one says, "that's just the way things are." It would be a counter-performative to say "That's *your* TWTA." The way things really are is supposedly not a matter of confessional choice, and that is in the logic of the concept. So how can the way things really are be a matter of confessional choice? The rejoinder in argument, "That's *your* TWTA," takes advantage of the confessional character of basic life orientation to deprive it of any right to speak truth.

How to handle the paradox or puzzle (whichever it is) for the time being, until better explanations are available? Alasdair MacIntyre proposed a solution to similar problems in ethics, and his position has been characterized as one of tradition-bound rationality. We have seen it in

chapter 9, as a remedy for Troeltsch's inability to handle the problem of competing traditions. MacIntyre observed that even if there is no neutral standpoint from which to judge competing traditions, it is nevertheless sometimes possible to see that one tradition can handle a problem better than the other can.

Our problem is not just ethics but basic life orientation, and it is not a theory of the virtues but the choice of images by which life as a whole gets languaged. The present account is intended as one side of the sort of criticism MacIntyre has in mind. The critiques of the other kinds of basic life orientation are simple enough in form.

The naturalistic categories of explanation in mimesis are incapable of languaging the experiences of history *at all*. In their modern scientific form, this was intentional. History and its categories were removed from the discourse of the sciences in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in order to get on with the business of naturalistic explanation unencumbered. Those who would nevertheless explain all of human life on the terms of the natural sciences must do so by distracting their audience from the phenomena that are left out, and hope their audience does not know enough history to catch on. This is done with dazzling descriptions of the quite genuine achievements of the natural sciences and promises that all will be explained in time, promises that are no more likely to be redeemed now than when Laplace said, "I have no need of that hypothesis." A sleepy audience will not notice that a plan to reduce final cause to efficient cause is a plan to abolish final causes utterly.

For exilic life orientation, the critique is somewhat different. The issue is not the categories of explanation but the disappointments of life, and it is the more fundamental issue. Disappointments come in all sizes and shapes. Each of us of course will make our own answer to the questions that they pose and live with the consequences of our choices. But we shall be compared with those who are prepared to make enormous sacrifices in order to live the thesis that all of life is good, hard parts included, in spite of their pains. If you decide that not all of life is good, but rather only some of it, you will be compared with those who found good and blessings, at great cost to themselves, where you saw life as only defective and barren.

The henotheistic positions, hardest to characterize, not systematically interesting in a theoretical way, can be the most troubling cases in practical affairs. For the henotheists stop short of transcendence, and locate truth, loyalty and confidence in some human institutions because they are unwilling to make the existential commitments that transcendence requires. We shall see more of those commitments in the next section. And some *within* covenantal traditions, thinkers who are quite willing

to commit to living for a transcendent reality, are unwilling to look too closely at the language of transcendence, for fear the risks that scrutiny carries. To both, the rejoinder is the same. If it is right to embrace exposure, limitation, and need, then why? Ultimately, why? In view of the ultimate destruction of human life in the only world that we can see with our eyes?

We shall come to the central analogy by which historical-covenantal traditions have lived (at least until the present) in the next section, the analogy that goes by the name of the God. For now and in summary, we can say this: The analogies with which we make sense of life are an active process, and they change us. (We shall see much more of these features in the next section.) What we see, we see by analogy with other areas of life, and originally, we see in the light of our own being, our risks, successes, and failures. That seeing happens in terms of a basic life orientation, and such an orientation is chosen. It is not as if one chooses from a menu; one is thrown into it. But one takes it over and makes it one's own, and that is an act for which it is possible to take responsibility. One's basic life orientation determines the sort of self he becomes. And what we see changes us: the choices we make in order to see at all are choices that commit us to a life orientation.

15.3 Why This Analogy?

Whatever possessed these people to think of ultimate reality as like a person that one confronts? Why do people talk this way, when all we see is this world? Why, when any ultimate reality beyond it is just nothing, a void, a void that existed before us and will after us, in our brief sojourn in this the only world we really know about? If it is a nothing from which we "come" and to which we "return," then we already use terms that open the door to the problematic analogy. The alternative is that we come from nature and return to nature. It is no different if we come from human history and in death return to it; history transcends nature, but history by itself does not provide the essential transcendence that covenantal religion intends. Since this world is all that we can see, anything more, any transcendent, carries a certain air of implausibility. The more so at this end of this long history of biblical religion, and especially after the slow crisis of plausibility that has been simmering since the seventeenth century (and arguably in preparation since the fourteenth).

Today, if the analogies that go by the name of God were not known, would any group that wanted to affirm human life in history invent such analogies? If we had it to do over again? To affirm human life in all its

existential openness and freedom, well understanding how that freedom transcends nature, is it really necessary to language ultimate reality in the terms of encounter with a person? Would anyone who proposed to embrace exposure, limitation, and need as a systematic and radical way to embrace all of life as good, do so with this analogy? Why *this* analogy?

One might just as well ask, why this *question*? Why isn't talk of a personal God just natural? The answer to that question is actually fairly simple. After several centuries when "atheism" has been gaining plausibility, it is entirely plausible to ask why one would even want to think of ultimate reality in personal terms. When "atheism" has been the main challenge to biblical religion, when society has become secularized in the sense of no longer taking biblical religion and its ways of thinking for granted, at least not in public, then it makes sense to ask why people would think in personal terms about ultimate reality.

If we could do biblical religion all over again, "from scratch," as the saying goes, we would do it from concerns and resources in present history. But what was done long ago could not be done *over again* in the present that we have; today it is possible to go on only from what we inherit from the past. And the present that we have stands very much at the end of a long and complex history. So the question itself ("Why this analogy?") has problems. Yet it expresses a sense of bewilderment in the present, a sense that the central analogy, the analogy of God, has lost a lot of its taken-for-granted inevitability. And it expresses a sense that how to continue in the future from this present is problematic. In this section, I will speculate on how the central analogy works, the analogy in which ultimate reality is addressed as one speaks to another person. The problems with the analogy itself can wait until the next section. The first task is an existential exploration of the problem. In closing this section, I shall look briefly at a confirmation of our efforts in a reading of Pseudo-Dionysius, one that anticipates much of what I have argued in our existential questioning.

There are of course different ways to language ultimate reality, and they all have consequences for how life is lived in the here and now. We saw already in section 14.3 that choices about transcendence have immanent consequences, and it is worth remembering the possible choices. For if proximate limitations are seen as good, as in some sense blessings, then life has been given a direction. To take proximate limitations as blessings, especially when they are painful, is to see them as the immanent presence of a transcendent reality. This can be done by means of analogies that can be crafted only *in language*. One's response will be proportionate—and very different from what one would do if proximate limitations are not seen as blessings and as parts of a larger reality of

blessedness.

If the disappointments of life are seen instead as merely intramundane, without any transcendent interest at all, then they can be met on such a basis. Dealings with the world and with other people will have the character of utilitarian manipulation, if the intramundane is itself inanimate, as it is for modern scientific rationalism. If nature is understood to be animate, in the ancient mimetic pattern, then dealings will still be manipulative. One bargains with the gods of nature, because that is how nature works. If successful, one comes into harmonious living with nature. If the intramundane extends to history, but not to anything transcendent, then things are not much different, even though the historical world is considerably expanded over mere nature. The disappointments of life can only be avoided or written off as losses. If unavoidable disappointments are to bear some good, then some other approach to life is necessary. The only way they can bear blessing is by being the immanent presence of something transcendent. That is virtually a definition of transcendence as it applies to the pains of life.

If proximate disappointments are seen as evidence of the ultimate barrenness of this life, then they carry no blessing, they can be manipulated or ignored at will. This is how exilics deal with the world and other people. In practice, people frequently handle different engagements with life in different ways. Some disappointments may be embraced in openness and honesty, some simply rejected, some met with manipulation.

If one's basic life orientation is covenantal, then proximate disappointments are part of a larger covenant, and while we do not see the full transcendence of that larger covenant, we do respond to its immanent manifestations covenantally. There are many analogies for ultimate reality even within the covenantal traditions. Perhaps the most frightening is the one that H. Richard Niebuhr invoked in his short essay on Christian faith in the end of *Radical Monotheism*; he spoke of ultimate reality as simply a void, a void from which we come and to which we return. To respond to it in covenant is to trust it. But that is to bring the language of trust from ordinary interpersonal relations to the business of making sense of human life as a whole, making sense of ultimate reality. In other words, to trust is to relate to ultimate reality on analogy with one way of relating to other human beings. In language, this takes the form of speaking *to* the void.

Without speaking to the void, one does not put one's life on the line with respect to it. This is the theme of the present section, and our task is to explore a little of this analogy, its consequences, and how it works. Without speaking to the void, one does not make certain kinds of commitments, commitments that this kind of analogical language enables.

Covenantal language will do more than just undertake commitments, but the commitments can stand as typical, and we can take them as representative. In this kind of language, the void becomes the Void, the focus of the holy, and one that is understood as a reality that human persons can relate to *as persons*. It is then possible to say, with Job, as Niebuhr has it, "though it slay us, yet will we trust it." Analogies are seldom entirely what they appear, and they are never what they would be if they were heard as univocal or literal language. How this one works will take some unpacking. And it carries hazards that will appear in the next and final section.

To begin, when we look into the Void, we generally see only ourselves. To go no further, and instead just turn in, looking only at ourselves, is the path of gnosticisms. This choice, like all choices in the language of basic life orientation, has immanent consequences. The language of a covenantal ultimate reality does not work in quite the same way. Where the turn inward flinches before the Void, covenantal language does not. It does not give us manipulative (or "objective") access to it as "a" being, or "a" reality. But it really does do something in human life in the here and now. Transcendence itself always escapes our grasp, but its immanent consequences are palpable enough, and they are quite different from the consequences of a life lived without transcendence or with an exilic instead of a covenantal transcendent.

I have said that without speaking to the void on the analogy of persons speaking to a person, we are not really committed to it, we do not really trust in it. At least not with recognition and intention. Now, commitment to embracing exposure, limitation, and need as life-bearing is certainly possible without using the language of God as the analogy of the to-whom that one is committed to. For certainly it is possible to embrace the disappointments of life without speaking to any void as to a Void. Indeed, to embrace exposure, limitation, and need, but without the language of God, is surely more committed than to use the language of God without embracing the disappointments of life as bearing blessings. And so the commitments of faith probably can be undertaken without monotheistic language, if also without the recognition and intention that such language enables. The alarming possibility is that the analogical practice of speaking to a Void is delusional or corrupt. Then indeed, one *should* not talk like that. More needs to be seen, both to undermine this objection and also to see what kind of commitments are undertaken only in something like the language of the personal. Something existential in the nature of commitment is not undertaken without the language of speaking *to* the to-whom that one is committed to.

There is no commitment if there is no promise, and promises are not

promises unless they are made to somebody *else*, that is, to an other who can know whether the promise is kept or not. A promise is not really a promise unless there is an other who can hold me accountable. Any sense of promise to myself is derived from and analogous to the prior experience of promising to other people, and of being held to one's promises to other people. This is the experience from *within* human life that was used to make sense of *all* of human life and the cosmos, and it has been passed down to the present in various ways in the Exodus traditions. The difficulty is that there is nothing to make a radical-monotheistic promise to, and so it is precisely to that Nothing that the promise is made, with all the irony that such a language entails. It should be noted in passing that what can be said of commitment, and with it loyalty, can also be said of confidence and acknowledgment, the other two modes of faithing. One is not confident, not in the way one is with respect to other humans, except to another who is an Other, a reciprocal person. And one does not acknowledge truth to a thing, but to another person. The analogy of an Other works for all three functions. The question, then, is this: Can we speak to the Nothing, Lord Nothing, have mercy, Lord Nothing, your Holy Name be praised? There is nothing that will save you, so you'd better ask Nothing for help? Trust in Nothing, irony intended? Nothing, *you* will save us, so can we talk to the Nothing? Plead with the Nothing? Acknowledge our dependence on it, to it? And call it Holy, as in "The Holy One, blessed be His Name?," the constant refrain of the Siddur? Or call it Father, Daddy, as in the Our Father? Almighty Nothing, Father of all mercies, we your unworthy servants give you humble thanks for all your goodness and loving-kindness to us and to all whom you have made?

The immediate hazard is that one is tossed between the terror of too much holiness and an inability to keep a straight face, uncontrollable laughter. (It sounds too much like the "O God, thou art so huge, so absolutely huge," of Monty Python's *The Meaning of Life*.) Let us assume that these hazards can be avoided. The act of prayer is one paradigm of covenantal language, and narrative of the acts of God in history is another. Between them, prayer and salvation history probably exemplify most of the features of covenantal language. The act of prayer puts one's self on the line, whether the implied commitment is sincere or not, whether it is counter-performative or not. (It usually is, sadly.) By implication, narrative of acts of God in history commits its narrators just as much as prayer does, but let us stick with prayer. What is the personal commitment entailed and undertaken in talking to nothing? In asking it for help, in giving thanks to it, in acknowledging it as truth?

The answers are perhaps a little surprising, at least as they seem to

me. When I pray, I hear myself, not God, in my anxiety, my distractions, my fleeing from myself, and so on. When I come to God in prayer, I can't stop talking. I would be afraid to. My chatter protects me. When I come to God in prayer, trying to hear what he has to say, what I hear, if I am patient and attentive and my chatter can subside, is what I would say if I were him. At least this is what can be said of prayer in literal language, univocal language. Within its limits, it is true. It may not be contradicted or retracted when speaking in some other voice. But that, of course, is exactly what we do in the analogical practices of talking *to* the Void, and therein we see again the central irony of monotheistic language. What analogy says by way of contradiction is highly ironic—even if it is a joyful irony, not a bitter or despairing irony. If that irony is forgotten, then the voice of covenant really does contradict the voice that says there is nothing there, there is nothing that will save us. Then the truth about human life among the things of this world really has been retracted. The upshot of the irony in covenantal language is that in the end, I am responsible instead of God. By now, I should expect as much. And readers who have come this far should expect it too. But what more is going on? Remember, this is world-affirming historical religion. It affirms that *this* world is good because created.

When we talk to God, or attempt to, and listen to God, or attempt to, what happens is that we are gently returned to the immanent.[5] As was said in the first section of this chapter, the "why limitation?" question, typical of questions that reach for transcendence, gets transformed by stages into something like, "How can I respond in covenantal trust?" The complaints of prayer begin by meaning something like, "I am devastated," and one then naturally responds with, "I complain, cry for help." They start from something like, "How can I" in the rhetorical sense that presupposes that I cannot, and then slowly become, "How can I" in the open sense that seeks a positive answer. The immanent, as always, is not just the intramundane, it is the immanent presence of the transcendent. We are returned to ourselves in our constitution as creaturely selves. That, as it turns out, is pivotal.

If our language of God as Other always returns us to this world, then why not dispense with God entirely, if the transcendent is known to us only in its immanent presence, why not dispense with the immanent and just deal with the intramundane? Remember that the language of ultimate reality in a world-affirming historical religion *should* return us to this world. If we think we have grasped God as he is in himself, then we

[5]Even in Exodus, in both versions of Moses' initial job interview, God tells Moses, "Go back to Egypt, and deal with what you find there; I shall be with you"—with precious little hint of who He is.

have violated the intent of the phrase "without body, parts, or passions, etc." and we have compromised divine transcendence. But again, why not dispense with God entirely, if the transcendent is known to us only in its immanent presence, why not dispense with the immanent and just deal with the intramundane? *With* speaking to the Void, human selves become creatures; Without that commitment, they are something else. With speaking to the Void, in all the irony of such language, being human entails a kind of absolute dependence that is peculiar to being a creature.

When human language speaks to the Void as to one it trusts, the human speaker effectively consents to his status as a creature. Not just any old prayer will do. Prayer is as old as the oldest indigenous religions, and it is from them that it came into covenantal religion. It is preserved in the Rig Veda, and there are probably older texts from Egyptian sources. So prayer to what? To whom? To what sort of Other? If it is to the Void, or to Nothing acting in history, in all the irony that entails, it can become radically monotheistic. It is this relationship to the Void as to creator that makes one a creature. If the personal relating is to parts of nature as one relates to persons (e.g.), then one is something else, something quite other than a creature.

"Creature" is not just a synonym for "entity," material or otherwise. To be a creature means to participate in several relationships. Whether or not a living being is regarded as a creature, it is a relation that relates itself to itself, and this is what makes it a self. The phrase "relation that relates itself to itself" comes from *The Sickness Unto Death*.[6] In the human case, this relationship has an intensely linguistic constitution, but the relationship of a self to itself appears even in animals and plants. We shall, in time, no doubt have naturalistic explanations for how an organism's material substrate underlies a biological self's relationship to itself. Even artificial life research has tumbled to ideas that earlier appeared in Heidegger, and before him, in Kierkegaard. That is, a living self is something that is concerned about its own being. (To do that or be that, it must have a sense of the difference between self and world.) That relationship may be constituted by itself or by another, as Kierkegaard says. It is the covenantal conviction that it is constituted by an other. That other ultimately is not to be located in all the naturalistic and intramundane phenomena that one could perhaps cite as the antecedents of one or another human selfhood. It is enough to call that constitution an accident, if you like, for within the terms of explanation of the intramundane,

[6]Cf. *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death*, translated by Walter Lowrie (Princeton University Press, 1941, 1954), p. 146. Or the translation of *Sickness Unto Death* by Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 13.

it is only an accident. But that accident is then languaged, by ironic analogy, in another way. In the first place, the contingency and ultimate powerlessness of human selfhood are experienced as blessed. They are declared good, in their limited power. This is the embracing of creaturehood. The self that knows itself as so constituted is also related to that Other that gives it its selfhood. To respond to an Other as to a person seems to be the simplest way to respond in gratitude for the limitedness of one's life, and similarly for one's exposedness and neededness. If there are other ways than to respond on a personal level, they are not obvious.

To call something a creature is to declare its status, not merely its existence in the intramundane and colloquial sense (it can be numbered, weighed, measured: it has matter, it takes up space). Its existence in the colloquial sense fails to grasp most of what existentially matters. That human existence transcends nature, and it even transcends the intramundane senses of history. Yet it is weak, dependent, finite, and subject to the necessities and contingencies of the natural world. But that weakness and contingency is not in any way a source of evil, for the world in all its worldliness is created good. Instead, evil comes from refusal to acknowledge dependence and insecurity, thereby aggravating the very insecurity from which man seeks to escape.[7] The reader will have noticed my care and concern to explain monotheistic language in ways that do not inadvertently try to reach above the status of a creature, even if only in thought, to the kind of knowledge that is not given to creatures.

Is there some other way to undertake the commitments of radical monotheism? In my limited imagination, I don't see another as effective as this one. The search for a way out of talking to the Void strikes me as an attempt to evade this sort of commitment. *Could* there be other ways to undertake and to language historical-covenantal commitments? Probably there could be. Any claim that there could *not* be strikes me as reckless: it would invite a demonstration that there can be (and are) other ways to affirm human life with transcendence in history. In this section, we have seen the inherited language of God as a way to undertake historical-covenantal commitments, and the next section will show how the same language can be used to avoid or evade the very same commitments. Before turning to the next section, and in order to provide some relief from the austerity of this one as well as respite before the warnings of the next one, let me notice some precedents from history. They parallel my extreme caution about the language in which we speak of God. People before the present have understood both the risks and the audacity in humanly understanding ultimate reality in personal terms.

[7]Cf. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Human Nature*, ch. 5 (New York, Scribners, 1941), p. 150.

It is clear from what I have already said that we can know nothing about God as he is in himself, but only as he comes to us.[8] It should also be clear that the analogies which we use to understand God are themselves voluntary. These observations are hardly original with me. The first is common enough, though not the unanimous voice of Christian tradition. The second is less often heard, but it can be found in at least one ancient voice, Pseudo-Dionysius, the sixth-century Neoplatonist theologian. Why look at Pseudo-Dionysius? He is the original theoretician of analogy, standing behind the later tradition of analogy as vehicle for knowledge of God. He is also the theologian of the via negativa, the sense of caution and respect for the limits of human language. The via negativa seems both a warning and a comfort from the voices of tradition in facing the problems we live with now. The Areopagite is a somewhat ambivalent figure. For it is his witness that Aquinas takes up as the voice of our radical unknowing of God. But it is also his voice that shows us analogy as the way to transcend (but never overcome or eliminate) our creaturely unknowing. Some have turned analogy precisely into a way to overcome and eliminate our creaturely unknowing.

My guide is an article by Vladimir Lossky. In his reading of Pseudo-Dionysius, we can know strictly nothing about God as he is in himself, but we can know God as he comes to us.[9] Knowledge of God comes in a process that he calls analogy, and this analogical process is active and voluntary. It is active in the sense that we know God by participating in his virtues. And it is then obviously voluntary, because such participation is itself voluntary. If analogy is an active process instead of a passive form of knowing, it would involve the will in a central way. For Lossky's reading of Pseudo-Dionysius, the will is not only central but indeed constitutive. Analogy is the means by which created beings participate in the virtues of God.

Lossky's paper received wide attention, and his interpretation of the Areopagite brings out things that are not obvious to a merely casual reader. His assessment of Pseudo-Dionysius is quite striking. "Analogy in Pseudo-Dionysius signifies the proportional capacity in creatures to participate in the creative virtues of God, who confers on them their being and all their perfections."[10] Analogy is not a passive faculty, but the "desire of the creature to conform itself to the virtues of God, who appears to it as the Good and the Beautiful."[11] "All this leads us to think

[8] It is not even clear what it might *mean* to know God as he is in himself.

[9] V. Lossky, "La notion des 'analogies' chez Denys le pseudo-Aréopagite," *Archives d'Histoire Doctrinale et Littéraire du Moyen-Age* 5 (1930) 279-309.

[10] Lossky, p. 292.

[11] Lossky, p. 294.

that analogy, in changing, changes the degree of the being, its order in the hierarchy of creatures."[12] Indeed: analogy reflects the choices made in basic life orientation. Of course the human is changed in the process; how could it be otherwise? "The desire to know God outside of his manifestation is charged with arrogance; this would aspire to know him in his transcendent and unknowable Essence. God is not an object; he does not make himself known except by participation in his virtues."[13] That would seem to safeguard the transcendence of God, if some find thin the human language he allows us for speaking of God.

A comment on Lossky and Pseudo-Dionysius by Raoul Mortley is quite striking. Pseudo-Dionysius himself is totally a figure from late antiquity, even in his technical philosophy. Mortley and Lossky, of course, are thoroughly modern. They stand on this side of Kant and Schleiermacher and begin with the human rather than the divine, and they deal with the human in a phenomenological way. But what Mortley says, after reading Lossky, is that "Analogy, then, is a kind of posture in relation to transcendent principles, and ultimately God."[14] That sounds to me like other words for "basic life orientation." Lossky asks modern questions of Pseudo-Dionysius, questions framed in terms Dionysius probably would not himself have used, but nevertheless questions that are entitled to answers today. The human activity in knowing God that was in the sixth century a barely noticed theme has become the central focus in the twentieth century. For Pseudo-Dionysius, God is not an object of knowledge, as he is later in Scholastic philosophy.[15] Whether this criticism is fair to Aquinas, I do not know. But certainly later, in the Baroque period, God indeed became an object of knowledge. My own skittishness in talking about God comes precisely from a desire to avoid anything that could imply knowledge of God as an object. We do not know God even in his presence in history, other than by participation in his virtues. In naming God by the virtues, we intend the divine virtues.[16] This was the brunt of my argument in Part III, and Pseudo-Dionysius follows the instincts of the Common Documents, were they to be articulated: To walk in the ways of the Lord is to know the Lord. As I said in the end of section 10.2, we faith by walking as much as walk by faithing. Certainly others have followed the Areopagite in his caution to make sure that we do not ruin the language of God by misappropriating its logic. It is perhaps only in our own time that we could hear the radical human

[12]Lossky, p. 297.
[13]Lossky, p. 301.
[14]Raoul Mortley, *From Word to Silence*, vol. 2, p. 227.
[15]Lossky, p. 280.
[16]Lossky, p. 284.

responsibility in the language by which covenant speaks of God.

One might reply at this point, feeling that the Areopagite and his modern soul-mates leave too little for the believer, or that the names of God on his view (and mine) don't really name anything real. The reply might go something like this: "You have said that the language of God speaks *as if* there were a God, but *really*, there isn't one." That little word "really" contains both an ontology of God and also a theory of religious language. The theory of language sees itself forced to choose between nominalism and naive realism. This imagined reply would foist that dilemmatic understanding of the names of God onto my position. On a nominalist view, language effectively loses its power to name God; it merely pretends. The objector, of course, is a realist. But what sort of realist? There are many ways to be realistic in philosophy of being and of language. The realism of the objector is one in which the God can be said to "exist," and saying that is a move that I would be very hesitant to make. (I would be much more inclined to say that God does not exist; he causes to exist created beings that do exist. But God does not exist not in the sense that he could exist and does not, but rather in the sense that "existing" doesn't make sense when predicated of God.) Such an ontology as the imagined objector's takes God for "a" being among other beings. That is but one step away from drawing God into the world, and there is nothing to prevent that final step. My response to this objection is to reach for a different sort of realism. The language of God, the names of God, really do language ultimate reality. Here, "really" means truthfully, by disclosing how reality really is, rather than by denoting as terms do in Platonist realism. The language of God is intentionally ironic with respect to the non-existence in any humanly comprehensible world of anything divine, because that irony is an essential part of the truth to be languaged. This sort of language of God tells how it is with human beings, and it enables human beings to relate to ultimate reality in a covenantal way. It thus enables human beings to be what, on its own confessional commitments, they ought to be. It leaves human beings dependent on God in all areas of life, even in the activities of doing philosophy and of speaking of God. In respecting that dependence and human creaturehood, it respects the transcendence of God. When the objector persists in tones of, "Yes, but not *really*," the objector has simply made a demand: It is a demand to assent to the naive realist's ontology and theory of language, to convert to a world in which there are only two options, the sort of realism that can draw God into the world as one being among others, and nominalism as a reaction. (I wouldn't rule out the possibility that some can do both at the same time.) In any case, that demand is simply to be refused. If the demand persists, it is an argument

by tantrum.

15.4 The Last Counter-Performative

There is a joke told in which a man needed to hire someone good with numbers. It is one of a large genre, one in which comparison is made between different professions or nationalities in order to illustrate their characteristics.[17] This man interviewed a physicist, a mathematician, and an accountant. He decided to ask something simple. What is two times two? The physicist whipped out a slide-rule, came up with 3.98, and said, "It's approximately four; close enough." (You can tell how old the joke is; I still have several slide-rules but haven't used them in many years, because electronic calculators have replaced them.) Next, the employer interviewed the mathematician. The mathematician began with sets, and after much labor, had an axiomatic system for naive set theory. After an hour, he had gotten to the number one, and the number two (much less addition or multiplication) was nowhere in sight. The employer got tired and cut him off. (The mathematician was doing the short version; the long version begins with logic and gets to set theory only after much *more* labor.) Last, he interview the accountant, and asked, "What is two times two?" The accountant went to the windows, pulled all the blinds, went to the door, listened for eavesdroppers, and checked to see that it was locked. And then he asked, "What do you *want* it to be?" Needless to say, the story was told to me by an accountant.

All three traditions are well represented in theology. In the mode of the physicist, the hermeneutical moves made by the theologian are unnoticed, because they don't need to be. They just work, intuitively and unselfconsciously. They don't call attention to themselves as they would if they had problems. Nobody gets into trouble, so why engage in hermeneutical theory when it is unnecessary and only makes things difficult and confusing? In the second mode, theologians function like mathematicians when they ask how their concepts actually work and how they arise in human life. For theologians, the critical mode of thinking is probably new with Immanuel Kant. Even today, not everybody believes that critical thinking in theology in the style of Kant is a good idea. And theologians work in the mode of the accountant when they realize that human religious concepts are human creations, even in one's own religion. The accountant's categories of explanation are possible only *after* the mathematician's. In the same way, it is possible to look at the human origins of human religion only after Kant, if Kant may stand

[17] I am indebted to John Martin for this story.

for the reflexive turn in which critical thinking criticizes itself. Then it becomes possible to see that there really is a responsible liberty of interpretation in basic life orientation, and its exercise can be admirable or deplorable. When people learn to think like the accountant, and can see human responsibility for human religion, sometimes they turn to a hermeneutical nihilism, so fashionable today. Sometimes human responsibility for human religion is denied altogether. Sometimes people are willing to own and embrace the liberty of interpretation and even seek to exercise it with openness and creativity and generosity.

This book has arrived at the question of God himself only in its ending, and then only touched the issue, in the next-to-last section. This is the language of speaking personally to an ultimate reality that brings blessings in exposure, limitation and need, and does so in human history, with all the open-endedness, chaos, and opacity that history entails. The previous section only opened the door to the language of God, as a way to language faith in providence, for it was the experience of providence that called forth the language of covenant in the first place. The experience that we have over the centuries come to call first covenant and then providence was an experience that was languaged at all only in the light of ordinary human interpersonal relations, in which one person meets another and is exposed, limited, and needed, and yet finds grace, room for action, and fellowship in the encounter with the other person. In a sense, it was only natural to language the stance that covenanters take toward ultimate reality in terms borrowed from human covenants (Hittite suzerainty treaties, originally!). Yet today, after the perplexities of philosophical theology of the last five hundred years, it is natural to ask about the Israelites, as we did in the last section, "What ever possessed these people that they should use the analogy of human interpersonal relationships to make sense of their place in ultimate reality?" That very modern questioning is modern in the sense of being post-baroque, post-Kantian, i. e., contemporary, not of the Enlightenment. Such questioning echoes one not-so-obvious idea from Pseudo-Dionysius. For Dionysius, we know God and so language our experience of God only as we participate in the divine virtues, and not as we would know a rock or a tool or even a human body in its thingly and natural aspects. From the point of view of both history of religions and critical philosophy, those divine virtues are humanly chosen virtues. And in that choice people make a confessional commitment to historical-covenantal religion, a world-affirming historical life orientation.

One could say, "How like a mathematician, to spend all this work on the meaning of monotheism, and only come to God in the last few dozen pages, and then not really explain God." I suppose so. Actually, if I really had followed the example of the mathematician, the name of

God would not have crept into this exploration long before it became thematic. It has appeared discreetly through much of the book, even though it was not the focus until recently. But the accountant's problem is the more serious one: How to account for human responsibility in the constitution of human life orientation? And what to do when the audit shows problems?

It is my brief thesis in this last section of the book that the language of historical-covenantal religion will *always* have problems. Some of them are remediable, some are essential and cannot be removed. As we have seen already, monotheism has a tendency to degenerate into other basic life orientations, and its language then becomes counter-performative. In section 13.3, we examined a long list of counter-performatives as they arise in the handling of particular issues in the life of a covenant people. Here, I reflect a little on how the counter-performative possibility arises in the essential meaning of the names of God, and how it and its hazards may not ever be completely removed. We end Part IV as we ended ELN, Part I, reflecting on the ways in which monotheism can go bad and at the same time redeem the last of the promises made in *Exposure, Limitation, and Need*, section 4.1 about degeneration in language.

Basic life orientation, whether of an individual or a corporate body, is not always easily ascertainable. The concept of a "religion" is not like a flavor of ice cream. Chocolate does not surreptitiously turn into vanilla (for better or for worse?). But human culture and life orientation are quite changeable, and they can easily change unnoticed. Confessional commitments (when they are spelled out at all) have a certain binding force, but people can and frequently do live in ways that depart markedly from their avowed commitments. Clearly, it is possible to say one thing and do another. And it is possible for one's *language* formally to say one thing and do another; that is the difference between mere hypocrisy in action and counter-performative effect in language. It can be non-trivial to say what a body's life really is oriented to. That discernment requires the ability to spell out what is going on, to see what really matters, to see what action concepts and narrative themes really are intended by a body as it shapes its life. When one coherent basic life orientation is professed and another is lived, then it becomes possible to characterize the situation. If the professed one is approved and the lived one is not, then we can say that the real basic life orientation has "degenerated" from its original commitments.

The idea that monotheism could degenerate into something else has appeared somewhat casually in many places in this book. It got extended exploration in one concrete and particular example in chapter 8. There, we saw henotheistic themes in the stances of the two Exodus traditions

with respect to each other. The degeneration was most egregious in the case of Christianity's stance toward Rabbinic Judaism, and there has included exilic as well as henotheistic themes. To say that the change from one basic life orientation to another is a degeneration is of course an evaluation that is possible only from within a confessional tradition. From the point of view of history of religions, it is merely change.

Change and mutability in basic life orientation have been themes in the history of religions from the beginning. We saw covenantal religion emerge out of world-affirming nature religion as Moses the shaman goes on a vision quest in the desert and then leads a mixed multitude of peoples out of Egyptian mimetic living back into that same desert. Normally, a shaman seeks visions for his clients, and the visions put them in harmony with nature. Whatever happened at Sinai instead opened a door to a way of life focused on history rather than nature. What they got in the desert, at least as their literary executors have it, was not a theophany but a legal covenant, and the difference became a radical shift in life orientation. It is possible to move in the other direction also. Whatever may have been the state of Israelite religion in the time of David, by the reign of Solomon, the icons of mimetic deities were probably present in Jerusalem, to accommodate Solomon's wives. They certainly were ensconced in the Temple itself in the time of Ezekiel.

What happened to Israelite religion has happened often enough in the modern world, if in quite different ways. This is hardly the place to explore all the places and all the ways in which life orientation has returned to focus on nature in the modern world, losing even the ability to understand what is essentially historical about human living. And this has happened notwithstanding the growth and radicalization of historical consciousness since the nineteenth century. More obvious are the moves to henotheism, in which the Church surreptitiously comes to worship itself rather than the transcendent deity it grew up on. It thus comes to worship a deity whose transcendence has been tamed. And when one or another painful engagement with life is quietly written off as barren, it moves to partially exilic religion. All this we saw in section 13.3.

In one sense, people choose a basic life orientation when they choose the larger narratives they intend their actions to fit into. That choice is often utterly tacit. People know instinctively how to weave the larger narratives their lives fit into. They know just as instinctively and skillfully whether those narratives should locate human actions among natural phenomena, or understand them as free in a way that is essentially historical. The character of responsibility hinges on the narratives chosen. The categories of explanation for human action can and do change as culture itself changes, and with those changes, the way in which responsibility

is taken also changes.

The possibilities for degeneration appear also in a few other ways that are perhaps simpler. If the language of a historical-covenantal people has compromised the transcendence of God, then the God is spoken of in terms befitting some force or phenomenon within the world, and the route to mimesis or henotheism is open. If the ironies of covenantal language are forgotten, or turned in ways that subvert the blessedness of some painful part of life, then the way is opened to exilic religion.

It is in language that these changes first happen. Where there is degeneration, the language of covenant has come to function in uncovenantal ways, counter-performatively. We examined a considerable laundry list of counter-performatives in section 13.3, and there reserved only one for this section. It is possible to load counter-performative freight onto the names of God, the concepts by which we know God himself. And in some ways, the names of God will never be free of counter-performative entanglements, even when more flagrant counter-performative implications are avoided.

The names of God have become something that they were not. They were supposed to language human trust in what H. Richard Niebuhr called just a Void, and that trust was supposed to come after or in prospect of the failure of all our causes. The names of God have become instead what will save us and our causes from failure. This is the essence of the counter-performative turn in the language of God. How it happens can be seen in the move to name ultimate reality as an Other to humans at all. That move happens in capitalizing a single letter, when "void" becomes "Void." The "nothing" in "nothing will save us" becomes "Nothing will save us, and though it slay us, yet will we trust it."[18] But of course no one has the right to speak to Nothing, much less the right to speak for or in the name of Nothing, as the Bible often does, when a seer announces to his community, "This is the word of the Lord." And of course (N)othing will acknowledge any human claims to speak in its name. If these unavoidable risks were not enough, there are more that are avoidable but serious nonetheless. For all the other meanings of "nothing" can come along with it. The term "nothing" can be used in many ways. It can be utterly mundane and trivial, and it can merely indicate some logical negation. And it can also be used to language basic life orientations that are not in the least covenantal.

At this point, one may well ask whether historical-covenantal language of God is *essentially* counter-performative. Does this problem lie

[18]Ray Hart at Boston University has observed that the word "nothing" can be substituted for "God" surprisingly often, preserving the truth of language about God.

at the root of all the counter-performatives we saw in section 13.3? Not really. The counter-performatives we saw in that section are all remediable, all avoidable or at least containable. It is not necessary to attempt proof of the existence of God, or of the correctness of radical monotheism. Nor is it necessary to defend God in a human court against charges of ignorance, impotence, and malice (the "problem of evil"). Nor to carry immortality of the soul to gnostic or even semi-gnostic conclusions; nor even to flirt with immortality of the soul at all, when resurrection of the body is available. Nor is it necessary for Christians to engage in anti-Jewish theology. Nor to pervert the various analogies of theological language, nor to suck God into the world, nor to domesticate transcendence. It is not necessary to turn miracles into a theological way to evade limitation rather than embrace it. And one is not forced to use the sacredness of scripture to protect it from critical scrutiny. Yet all these have been tempting in the past and present, and they and others like them will always be possible in the future.

What runs through all of them, in one way or another, is a move that converts embracing the pains of life as blessing-bearing to simple evasion of those blessings in order to avoid the pains that come with them. We inherit centuries of abusing the name of God, of loading it with counter-performative freight, in senses that were quite avoidable. It is not clear how (or even whether) that counter-performative freight can be unloaded. Today, the prospects are at best ambiguous for a language that speaks of a provider as well as of providence in the disappointments of life. The potential counter-performative senses of the name of God may overwhelm its covenantal meanings.

Although historical-covenantal language is not *essentially* counter-performative, a little reflection will show that it is always essentially *open* to counter-performative interpretations. Any attempt to close off such interpretations will itself become such a counter-performative interpretation. Human beings are always "finite," that is, insecure yet craving security, relativized yet craving absoluteness. This is in the nature of creaturehood. And so language that intends merely to *transcend* the insecurity of creaturehood, at the same time as it embraces and accepts that creaturely insecurity, can always be reinterpreted to step out of, beyond that creaturehood, to overcome it, and so abolish that very creaturely insecurity.

I have said that covenantal language is ironic, but it is essential to irony that it can be missed or forgotten. Covenantal language keeps silence at some points, but it is always possible to speak where one should keep silent, or to say the sorts of things that one should not say. It is analogical, but it is always possible to treat its analogies as univocal instead of as

a species of equivocation. It speaks in terms of history, but it is always possible to forget history. It is always possible to interpret historical narratives in naturalistic terms.

The believer, in view of these potential abuses of historical-covenantal language, may try to erect safeguards against them in his creedal definitions or his philosophy of religious language. But then he has simply tried to sequester off one tiny area of life in which he is secure, really secure, immune to the depredations of exposure (even if limitation and need can still get to him). That safe area contains his "faith," and it becomes something possessable, something that he can then use to justify himself. And that secure area of life can then be bootstrapped into at least a conceptual security in larger and larger areas of life. From there, it can warrant a grander quest for security, seeking immunity from exposure, limitation, and need in any engagements with life. In view of these daunting hazards, some irremovable, one might say that covenantal language works at all only by the grace of God. No human efforts could warrant it to succeed.

At this juncture, the obligation of silence is the most conspicuous of the peculiar forms of covenantal language. It is also the hardest to respect. In Israelite religion, it was expressed in a prohibition on speaking the divine personal name. Rabbinic Judaism, more careful of the Hebrew language heritage than Christianity, has been more aware of the holiness of the name of God than Christianity has been. In scholarship of the last two centuries, the names of God have taken on critical roles in understanding the history of the Common Documents, and it becomes even more difficult to observe the rule against pronouncing one of them. In any case, the remedy of creating a Name that may not be pronounced, while expressive of good intent, is perhaps necessary, but no longer sufficient today. Philosophy of religion is quite capable of getting around it, defining names of God which can be used to speak of him oblivious of one's lack of right to do so. And popular language can easily follow where philosophy of religion first explores.

Perhaps the task of silence in covenantal language can be illustrated again with the example of the word "nothing." As I said a moment ago, one can speak to or even for nothing, capitalizing it as Nothing. Such a theological vocabulary, while a bit strange, can say quite strikingly covenantal things. It is even a fairly good vehicle for the irony of covenantal faith, and not just because locutions like "Though Nothing will save us, yet will we trust it" express the believer's trust in blessing that comes in and through the disappointments of life. Beyond the basic irony of looking for good in the pains of life, the word *nothing* is further ironic because it so well calls attention to the believer's utter lack of justification for such language. No believer has any right to speak that

way—hence the obligation of silence. But he must speak, for without language, there cannot be any coherent life orientation, and even less a covenantal one.

When one sees how people can be destroyed by each one of exposure, limitation, and need, how could anyone profess trust in blessings coming in them? Anyone who confesses such a faith is shooting his mouth off, as I have said more than once already; he is making promises he is in no position to keep.

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