

The Art of Living



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PROJECT



CHAPTER ONE

Reverence

MORAL VALUES are the highest among all natural values. Goodness, purity, truthfulness, humility of man rank higher than genius, brilliancy, exuberant vitality, higher than the beauty of nature or of art, higher than the stability and power of a state. What is realized and what shines forth in an act of real forgiveness, in a noble and generous renunciation, in a burning and selfless love, is more significant and more noble, more important and more eternal than all cultural values. Positive moral values are the focus of the world; negative moral values, the greatest evil, worse than suffering, sickness, death, or the disintegration of a flourishing culture.

This fact was recognized by the great minds, such as Socrates or Plato, who continually repeated that it is better to suffer injustice than to commit it. This pre-eminence of the moral sphere is, above all, a basic proposition of the Christian ethos.

Moral values are always personal values. They can inhere only in man, and be realized by man. A material thing, like a stone or a house, cannot be morally good or bad, just as moral goodness is not possible to a tree or

a dog. Similarly, works of the human mind (discoveries, scientific books, works of art), cannot properly be said to be the bearers of moral values; they cannot be faithful, humble, and loving. They can, at the most, indirectly reflect these values, as bearing the imprint of the human mind. Man alone, as a free being, responsible for his actions and his attitudes, for his will and striving, his love and his hatred, his joy and his sorrow, and his super-actual basic attitude, can be morally good or bad. For, far above his cultural accomplishments rises the importance of man's own being: a personality radiating moral values, a man who is humble, pure, truthful, honest, and loving.

But how can man participate in these moral values? Are they given to him by nature like the beauty of his face, his intelligence, or a lively temperament? No, they can grow only out of conscious, free attitudes; man himself must essentially cooperate for their realization. They can develop only through his conscious, free abandonment of himself to genuine values. In proportion to man's capacity to grasp values, insofar as he sees the fullness of the world of values with a clear and fresh vision, insofar as his abandonment to this world is pure and unconditional, will he be rich in moral values.

As long as a man blindly disregards the moral values of other persons, as long as he does not distinguish the positive value that inheres in truth, and the negative value that is proper to error, as long as he does not understand the value that inheres in the life of man, and the negative value attached to an injustice, will he be incapable of moral goodness. As long as he is interested only in the question of whether something is subjectively satisfying or not, whether it is agreeable to him or not, he cannot be morally good.

The soul of every morally good attitude is abandonment to that which is objectively important, is interest in a thing because it has value. Two men are, for example, witnesses of an injustice that is being inflicted upon a third person. The one who in every situation asks only whether something is agreeable to himself or not will not be concerned about it because he calculates that no personal damage to himself can result from the other's injury. The second man, on the contrary, is willing to take suffer-

ing upon himself rather than remain disinterested in the injustice that is about to be done to the third person. For the second man, the preponderant question is not whether something is agreeable to him or not, but whether it is important in itself. The one behaves morally well, the other one morally badly, because he indifferently bypasses the question of value.

Whether one chooses or rejects something that is agreeable, but is indifferent from the point of view of value, depends upon one's own pleasure. Whether one does or does not eat an excellent meal is up to oneself. But the positive value calls for an affirmation, and the negative value for a refusal on our part. Confronted with these, the way in which one should behave is not left to one's arbitrary pleasure; instead it should be the subject of preoccupation and the right response should be given, for interest in and adequate responses on our part are due to values. Whether one does or does not help another person who is in need does not depend upon one's arbitrary pleasure; he is guilty who ignores this objective value.

Only he who understands that there exist things "important in themselves," that there are things that are beautiful and good in themselves, only the man who grasps the sublime demand of values, their call, and the duty to turn toward them and to let oneself be formed by their law, is capable of personally realizing moral values. Only the man who can see beyond his subjective horizon and who, free from pride and concupiscent, does not always ask, "What is satisfying for me?" but who, leaving behind him all narrowness, abandons himself to that which is important in itself—the beautiful, the good—and subordinates himself to it, only he can become the bearer of moral values.

The capacity to grasp values, to affirm them, and to respond to them, is the foundation for realizing the moral values of man.

Now these marks can be found only in the man who possesses reverence. Reverence is *the* attitude that can be designated as the mother of all moral life, for in it man first takes a position toward the world that opens his spiritual eyes and enables him to grasp values. Consequently, in these chapters that deal with moral attitudes, that is, attitudes that give a basis to the whole of moral life, and are presupposed for this life, we

must first of all speak of this virtue.

The irreverent and impertinent man is the man incapable of any abandonment or subordination of self. He is either the slave of his pride, of that cramping egoism that makes him a prisoner of himself and blind to values, and leads him to ask repeatedly: "Will my prestige be increased, will my own glory be augmented?" Or he is a slave of concupiscence, one for whom everything in the world becomes only an occasion to serve his lust. The irreverent man can never remain inwardly silent. He never gives situations, things, and persons a chance to unfold themselves in their proper character and value. He approaches everything in such an importunate and tactless way that he observes only himself, listens only to himself, and ignores the rest of being. He does not preserve a reverent distance from the world.

Irreverence can be divided into two types, according to whether it is rooted in pride or in concupiscence. The first type is that of the man whose irreverence is a fruit of his pride, that of the impertinent person. He is the type of man who approaches everything with a presumptuous, sham superiority, and never makes any effort to understand a thing "from within." He is the "know-it-all," schoolmaster type who believes that he penetrates everything at first sight, and knows all things *ab ovo*. He is the man for whom nothing could be greater than himself, who never sees beyond his own horizon, from whom the world of being hides no secret. He is the man Shakespeare has in mind in his *Hamlet*:

*"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy."*

He is the man possessed of a blighting incomprehension, without yearnings, like Famulus in Goethe's *Faust*, who is completely filled by "how wondrously far he has gone." This man suspects nothing of the breadth and depth of the world, of the mysterious depths and the immeasurable fullness of values that are bespoken by every ray of the sun and every plant, and that are revealed in the innocent laughter of a child, as well as in the repentant tears of a sinner. The world is flattened before his imper-

tinent and stupid gaze; it becomes limited to one dimension, shallow and mute. It is evident that such a man is blind to values. He passes through the world with a blighting incomprehension.

@t:The other type of man who lacks reverence, the blunt, concupiscent man, is equally blind to values. He limits his interest to one thing only: whether something is agreeable to him or not, whether it offers him satisfaction, whether or not it can be of any use to him. He sees in all things only that segment that is related to his accidental, immediate interest. Every being is, for him, but a means to his own selfish aim. He drags himself about eternally in the circle of his narrowness, and never succeeds in emerging from himself. Consequently, he also does not know the true and deep happiness that can flow only from abandonment to true values, out of contact with what is in itself good and beautiful. He does not approach being as does the first type, in an impertinent way, but he is equally closed up within himself, and does not preserve that distance toward being required by reverence; he overlooks all things and seeks only that which is momentarily useful and expedient to him. Similarly, he can never be inwardly silent, or open his spiritual self to the influence of being and allow himself to receive the joy that values give. He is also, as it were, in a perpetual egospasm. His look falls on all things flatly, "from the outside," without comprehension for the true meaning and value of an object. He also is shortsighted, and comes too close to all things, so that he does not give them a chance to reveal their true essence. He fails to leave to any being the "space" that it needs to unfold itself fully and in its proper mode. This man also is blind to values, and to him again the world refuses to reveal its breadth, depth, and height.

The man possessing reverence approaches the world in a completely different way. He is free from this egospasm, from pride and concupiscent. He does not fill the world with his own ego, but leaves to being the space that it needs in order to unfold itself. He understands the dignity and nobility of being as such, the value which it already possesses in its opposition to mere nothingness. Thus there is a value inherent in every stone, in a drop of water, in a blade of grass, precisely as being, as an entity that possesses its own being, which is such and not otherwise. In

contradistinction to a fantasy or a sheer semblance, it is something independent of the person considering it, and is something withdrawn from his arbitrary will. Hence each of these things has the quite general value of existence.

Because of this autonomy, being is never a *mere* means for the reverent man and his accidental egoistic aims. It is never merely something that he can use, but he takes it seriously in itself; he leaves it the necessary space for its proper unfolding. Confronted with being, the reverent man remains silent in order to give it an opportunity to speak. The man who possesses reverence knows that the world of being is greater than he is, that he is not the Lord who can do with things as He likes, and that he must learn from being, not the other way around.

This responsive attitude to the value of being is pervaded by the disposition to recognize something superior to one's arbitrary pleasure and will, and to be ready to subordinate and abandon oneself. It enables the spiritual eye to see the deeper nature of every being. It leaves to being the possibility of unveiling its essence, and makes a man capable of grasping values. To whom will the sublime beauty of a sunset or a Ninth Symphony of Beethoven reveal itself, but to him who approaches it reverently and unlocks his heart to it? To whom will the mystery that lies in life and manifests itself in every plant reveal itself in its full splendor, but to him who contemplates it reverently? But he who sees in it only a means of subsistence or of earning money, that is, something that can be used or employed, will not discover the meaning, structure, and significance of the world in its beauty and hidden dignity.

Reverence is the indispensable presupposition for all deep knowledge—above all, for the capacity to grasp values. All capacity to be made happy and uplifted by values, all sanctioned abandonment to values, all submission to their majesty, presupposes reverence. In reverence the person takes into account the sublimity of the world of values—in it is to be found that upward look toward that world, that respect for the objective and valid demands immanent to the values that, independently of the arbitrary will and wishes of men, call for an adequate response.

Reverence is the presupposition for every response to value, every aban-

donment to something important, and it is, at the same time, an essential element of such response to value. Each time one gives oneself to the good and beautiful, each time one conforms to the inner law of value, the basic attitude of reverence is implied. This can be verified by examining moral attitudes on the different levels of life.

The fundamental attitude of reverence is the basis for all moral conduct toward our fellowmen and toward ourselves. Only to the man possessing reverence is revealed the full grandeur and depth of the values that inhere in every man as a spiritual person. The spiritual person as a conscious, free being, as a being who alone, among all the entities known to us, is capable of knowing and grasping the rest of being, and of taking a meaningful position toward it, can be comprehended only by a reverent mind. A being who is able and destined to realize in himself a rich world of values, to become a vessel of goodness, purity, and humility—this is a person. How could one really love another person, how could he make sacrifices for him, if he senses nothing of the preciousness and plenitude which is potentially enclosed in man's soul, if he has no reverence for this being?

The basic attitude of reverence is the presupposition for every true love, above all, the love of neighbor, because it alone opens our eyes to the value of men as spiritual persons, and because, without this awareness, no love is possible. Reverence for the beloved one is also an essential element of every love. To give attention to the specific meaning and value of his individuality, to display consideration toward him, instead of forcing our wishes on him, is part of reverence. It is from reverence that there flows the willingness of a lover to grant the beloved the spiritual "space" needed to freely express his own individuality. All these elements of every true love flow from reverence. What would a mother's love be without reverence for the growing being, for all the possibilities of values that yet lie dormant, for the preciousness of the child's soul?

A similar reverence is evident in justice toward others, in consideration for the rights of another, for the liberty of another's decision, in limiting one's own lust for power, and in all understanding of another's rights. Reverence for our neighbors is the basis for all true community life, for

the right approach to marriage, the family, the nation, the state, humanity, for respect of legitimate authority, for the fulfillment of moral duties toward the community as a whole and toward the individual members of the community. The irreverent man splits apart and disintegrates the community.

But reverence is also the soul of the correct attitude in other domains, such as purity. Reverence for the mystery of the marital union, for the depth and tenderness and the decisive and lasting validity of this most intimate abandonment of self, are the presuppositions for purity. First of all, reverence assures an understanding of this sphere; it shows us how horrible is every illicit approach to this mysterious domain, since such an illicit approach desecrates us and involves so serious a debasement of our dignity and that of others. Reverence for the wonder of the coming into being of a new life out of the closest union of love of two people is the basis for the horror of every artificial and irreverent act destroying this mysterious bond that exists between love and the coming into being of new men.

Wherever we look, we see reverence to be the basis and at the same time an essential element of moral life and moral values. Without a fundamental attitude of reverence, no true love, no justice, no kindness, no self-development, no purity, no truthfulness, are possible; above all, without reverence, the dimension of depth is completely excluded. The irreverent person is himself flat and shallow, for he fails to understand the depth of being, since for him there is no world beyond and above that which is visibly palpable. Only to the man possessing reverence does the world of religion open itself; only to him will the world as a whole reveal its meaning and value. So reverence as a basic moral attitude stands at the beginning of all religion. It is the basis for the right attitude of men toward themselves, their neighbors, to every level of being, and above all to God.