

Virtue and Way

The first of the virtues is veracity, for without truth we can do nothing. The second virtue is sincerity, which consists in drawing the consequences of what we know to be true, and which implies all the other virtues; for it is not enough to acknowledge the truth objectively, in thought, it must also be assumed subjectively, in acts, whether outward or inward. Truth excludes heedlessness and hypocrisy as much as error and lying.

Sincerity implies two initial concrete attitudes: abstention from what is contrary to truth, and accomplishment of what is in conformity to it; in other words, it is necessary to abstain from all that draws one away from the Sovereign Good — which coincides with the Real — and to accomplish all that brings us closer to it. This is why to the virtues of veracity and sincerity are added those of temperance and fervor, or of purity and vigilance, and also, even more fundamentally, those of humility and charity.

Without virtue there is no Way, no matter what the worth of our spiritual means may be; virtue, directly, is sincerity, and indirectly, veracity. Virtue is not a merit in itself, it is a gift; but it is nonetheless a merit to the extent that we exert ourselves towards it.

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I and others: the moral qualities that correspond respectively to these two dimensions of our existence are effacement and generosity; or in other words, humility and charity, not as attitudes a priori sentimental but as moral and spiritual adaptations to the nature of things.

The quintessential basis of the virtue of effacement or humility is that man is not God, or that the human "I" is not the Divine "Self"; and the basis of the virtue of generosity, of compassion or of charity is that our neighbor too is "made in the image of God," or that the Divine Self is immanent in every human subject. It is this deformity that likewise explains the quality of dignity, which moreover results from our capacity — deform as well — to participate in the Divine Majesty through our awareness of it.

Effacement and generosity: on the one hand, one must efface oneself with dignity; on the other hand, one has to be generous with measure, for the interests of others do not abolish our own interests, and besides, not all men have the right to the same consideration, except in the quite general respect of the human condition. Moreover, charity does not necessarily offer what is immediately agreeable, otherwise there would be no bitter remedy; to punish a child justly is more charitable than to spoil him. To think otherwise would amount to abolishing all justice and all moral and social health.

The question of the balance between effacement and dignity calls forth the following specification: while recognizing that the creature is a nothingness in relation to God, we must not lose sight of the fact that God has willed the existence of the creature and that in this respect it can possess a certain greatness in the world that is its own; it does not possess this greatness merely in its cosmic ambiance, it has it also, and a priori, in the Divine Intellect itself, since in creating a given being God wished to create a given greatness. The same holds true for freedom, to add only this particularly controversial example: to the argument that God alone is free and

that all else is predestined, we reply that nonetheless, in creating free beings, God wished to manifest freedom and nothing else, and that consequently beings are really free with respect to this divine intention. The mode or degree of cosmic manifestation implies limitations — the mere fact of manifestation already implies them — but the content of this projection nevertheless remains identical to what constitutes its reason for being.

For pious sentimentality, humility means that man not be aware of his worth, as if intelligence were not capable of objectivity with respect to this phenomenal order that is the human soul; it is precisely this objectivity which implies that the fully intelligent man be aware also of the relativity of his gifts, his qualities, his merits.

Clearly, the quintessence of humility, we insist, is the awareness of our nothingness in the face of the Absolute; in the same order of ideas, the quintessence of charity is our love of the Sovereign Good, which gives to our social compassion its most profound meaning. Indeed, not to love God is to deny Him, and to deny Him is ipso facto to deny the immortality of the soul and consequently the meaning of life, which takes away from our beneficence if not all its meaning at least the greater part of it; for charity towards the strictly earthly man — the human animal if one will — must be accompanied by charity towards the virtually celestial man, all the more so in that purely "horizontal" charity can be combined with the murder of a soul, whereas a suffering that is shared by no one else can be a good for the immortal soul. Let this be said, not in order to discourage intentions of charity of course, but in order to recall that for man every value must refer to the Sovereign Good, on pain of remaining a two-edged sword.

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All virtue has its aspect of beauty, which renders it immediately lovable, independently of the aspect of usefulness or opportuneness. The combination of effacement and generosity, or of humility and charity, or of modesty and compassion — this combination, which in fact is consubstantial, constitutes virtue as such and therefore the spiritual qualification sine qua non. It will perhaps be objected that if such is the case, no one is fully qualified for spirituality; now part of virtue is the intention to realize it, so that essential virtue is at once a condition and a result. God does not at the outset ask perfection of us, but He does ask of us its intention, which implies, if it is sincere, the absence of serious imperfection; it is only too obvious that a proud man cannot aspire sincerely to humility. God asks of us that which He has given us, namely the qualities we bear in our own depths, in our deiform substance; man must "become what he is"; every being is fundamentally Being as such.