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A PHENOMENOLOGY FOR CHRISTIAN ETHICS

Richard C. Prust

This paper argues that by describing phenomenologically what is distinctive about the significance of human acts as opposed to human events we provide a basis for distinguishing absolute from relative value. These distinctions will be used to articulate what Christians claim about divine Activity and then to describe—on the basis of the relationship between human and divine acts—what it means to call an act moral or immoral. What I hope will emerge will be useful as a description of faithful reasoning in moral matters.

In short, we'll begin by describing how all of us know what we're doing and end up by saying how some of us decide what to do.

I. Three Structures of Significance

What is distinctive about signifying *x* an *act*, *y* an *event* and *z* a *thing*? What is distinctive about what we mean by “*x*,” “*y*,” and “*z*” by virtue of our regard for them as, respectively, an act, an event, and a thing? Asking this is a different matter from asking how we decide whether our regard (in a given instance) is for an act, an event, or a thing. We will assume that our regard is committed already. Our concern will be for the generic differences in how we comprehend the significances of *x*, *y*, and *z* given that we have already fixed our regard for them as, respectively, act, event, and thing.

Here we are assuming, safely I believe, that in a broad range of common matters we agree conventionally in our designations. I picked up the morning newspaper: that was an act. I noticed your picture in the sports section: that was an event. I bolted upright at the squeal of tires in the driveway: an event too. I looked to see if there had been an accident: that was my act. The sports section and the tires were, of course, things.

It is possible, of course, to get some disagreements on such judgments, especially from people with theories, but for our purposes that's not terribly important: what we're interested in is what rides on the judgment. We are interested in what we are saying about the significance of *x* in calling it an act. And of *y*, an event. And of *z*, a thing.

An ordinary language observation will be helpful in getting us started. Whether we are talking about knowing an act, an event, or a thing, the word “comprehen-



sion" is appropriate. I *comprehend* an act, an event, or a thing in intending its significance. Intending that significance is my comprehension of x, y, or z.

Now what makes this suggestive is the way the etymology rings through in each instance of "comprehension." The significances of x, y, and z each constitute a "holding together" of certain elements. That is to say, it makes sense to see a structure for the significances of x, y, and z which in each case is a holding together of a group of subsidiaries as having *a* significance.

Think of any act, such as one of those a police detective, a biographer, or a clinical psychologist might try to comprehend. The significance can be said to be a joint significance for a set of subsidiaries. Take for instance my act of writing this. There are muscular moves of my fingers, the knitting of brow muscles in concentration, various verbal moves and removes. Jointly they mean "my writing this," the act in which they are subsidiary elements. When you come to see the various subsidiaries as jointly signifying "my writing this" then you comprehend my act "of writing this."

Let us call these subsidiary elements of an act the act's *projects*, and let us pause just long enough to notice two essential characteristics of the structure of the significance of such a comprehension. First, when we can be said to comprehend an act, the significance of each of the projects of that act is transparent to the significance of the act itself. If you see me move my fingers and fail to comprehend that I am writing this, you have failed fully to comprehend my moving my fingers. The meaning of the projects of an act is in terms of the act; the act is the comprehensive meaning of its projects.

Second, because the projects bear on the same significance, i.e., intend for their meaning the same significance, they enjoy among themselves a degree of integrity of bearing. By this I mean they are executed in a mutually facilitative way, one project never contending against the accomplishment of another. My verbal moves and my finger moves work together, facilitating each other in mutually accomplishing my act. To the extent we count my act successful we remark grace in the execution of its projects.

I comprehend an act, then, as the integral execution of a set of projects each of which intends the meaning of the act, which is the significance I comprehend.

We move on now to look at the significance of an *event*. Here, by an event's significance, I mean what we commonly articulate in answer to the question "what happened?," or "what is happening?," or "what will happen?": the sort of answers attempted by chroniclers, chemists, and weather forecasters. And here too we can regard the significances as comprehending subsidiaries, subsidiaries we articulate when we are asked to describe "what happened."

"The barn caught on fire!"

What happened?

“The cow kicked over the lantern, and there was dry straw ankle deep on the floor.”

Here we unpack the meaning of “what happened” by referring to various explanatory elements or causal conditionals which have contingently come together as an event. The cow kicked, the lantern was in her path, and there was straw on the floor. What we comprehend as that event, *y*, the barn catching on fire, we comprehend as the *coming together* of these factors. They come together as the explanation of what happened, the signification of the event, the saying of what happened. We claim to comprehend an event when we hold these factors together as significant in saying what happened.

Finally: *things*, as comprehended by topographers, musiologists and antique dealers, can be seen to be comprehensions of subsidiaries. In the case of things, the subsidiaries are the myriad phenomena which are significant to us as that thing. What are held together is a collection of appearances each of which I deem an appearance of that thing. The meaning of the thing is the jointly held meaning of all its appearances (along, of course, with expectations of future appearances and the conviction that others comprehend similarly).

To recapitulate then: in *comprehending* the significance of *x* as an act we appreciate the integrated bearing of projects on their joint accomplishment. In comprehending the significance of *y* as an event we appreciate the contingent bearing of certain causal factors. And in comprehending *z* as a thing, we appreciate the joint meaning of an indefinite series of appearances. In these distinctive senses then the significances “*x*,” “*y*,” and “*z*” are holdings together of series of elements, appreciations of which constitute my various comprehensions.

Our point in representing each of these three “comprehensions” as properly so called is to provide a basis for seeing what is *distinctive* about comprehending the significances of acts, of events, and of things. So we move now to draw those distinctions. I propose we do so with reference to what might be called the “*focus*” and the “*resolution*” for each type of significance. By “*focus*,” I mean the *level* in the structure of significance (i.e., either the level of the subsidiary meanings or the level of the meaning of the comprehension of those subsidiaries) on which the meaning of the act, the thing, or the event gets articulated. And by “*resolution*” of significance I mean the completion of a definition fully adequate to the comprehending it facilitates. We can make these two notions clear by spelling them out in each of our three types of comprehension.

Take things first. As we noted earlier, to comprehend *something* is to find certain subsidiaries transparent in their significance to the significance of their comprehension. I regard *that* as my clock over there on the table. I do not regard it as the appearance of my clock. No matter from which angle I look at its dial, I am looking at a round dial. So the focus of significance here is on the level

of the comprehension of the subsidiaries, not on the level of the subsidiaries themselves.

We can say too that that significance is resolute. It comprehends all of its subsidiaries. In my intending "my clock" from its every appearance, those appearances find complete and definite meaning precisely to the extent I can be said to comprehend the clock. If any appearance failed to be transparent to its comprehension, that appearance would call into question that comprehension.

We need to go on to analyze the significances of acts and of events as to their focus and resolution. But before we do, let me at least hint at the bearing this way of discussing significance has on moral reasoning. We are in a position to do that now, for the notion of *resolute* significance is, I want to argue, crucial to an understanding of moral significance. If an act has moral significance, its significance is resolute.

Think of it this way. Moral significance, if there is such, is significance that one's acts have. Moreover, it is inconceivable that your moral acts are essentially incompatible among themselves, that doing one necessarily undid another. If one act counteracted another act, they could not be comprehended as "moral," for if the various acts we call "moral" were incompatible, both act and counteraction could be called moral; and that would be inconceivable, for "moral" would then have lost its power to distinguish from what is contrary to moral acts.

Therefore the moral significance of an act must be resolute significance. It must be signification from which *all* of my acts derive moral significance. Only under this condition can an absence of counteraction be guaranteed.¹ There are some important implications to be drawn from this point, and we can do this in the course of remarking on the focus and resolution of the significances of events and things.

The significance of an event is distinct from that of a thing on both counts, on where it comes to focus and on whether it finds resolution. Think of how we focus on what happened: we do so with reference to the subsidiaries of our comprehension of what happened, namely whatever we comprehend as the conditional and causal factors explanatory of what happened. When I say what happened I offer a set of significances, those of the individual factors, none of which can be said to be transparent for their significances on the comprehension, but each of which in its own right is brought into focus as an element in the comprehension of the event.

If our focus, when we comprehend an event, is on the subsidiary level, that makes it impossible that the focus could be a resolute one, at least in the sense required for moral significance. The foci of the significance of an event have among themselves only a contingent relationship—the relationship they share by virtue of having eventuated the way they did. The various causes and conditions do not share a joint meaning which is essential to their individual meanings.

This means that the list of these causal conditional factors is an indeterminate one—a fact we acknowledge when we refuse to regard any historical account as finally definitive. We cannot claim to comprehend a complete, resolute meaning for what happened, for there are always causes beyond our ken. Since the meaning of the event, articulated in terms of its causal antecedents, is an indefinite collection of contingencies, that meaning has no essential resolution such that it could be said to comprehend its subsidiaries resolutely.

Finally, we need to look at the focus and resolution of the significance of acts. This topic is particularly important for our purposes, for it is in discussions of the significance of various acts that moral discourse makes its moves!

How do we focus on the significance of an act?

Suppose I see you climbing a flag pole. What is he doing, I ask a mutual friend who happens to be standing by. Suppose our friend merely recites the various projects of the act in progress, your various muscular feats for the most part. Obviously this would be inadequate as a signification of what you are doing. But—and this is crucial—neither would it be adequate to answer in terms of the comprehension of those muscular moves: “He’s climbing the flag pole.” The significance of those words too is incomplete; it does not say fully what you are doing. Knowing you, I know that you don’t just climb flag poles unless that act has some further significance, like replacing the pulley cord, or trying to spy over the garden wall, or escaping the teeth of a rabid dog.

Suppose our friend answers helpfully: “He’s replacing the pulley cord.” Ah! Here I begin to comprehend what you are doing. And notice in what terms! The significance of your act is now being explained in terms of another comprehensive significance, one which *comprehends your “flag pole climbing” as its subsidiary!* And it is this structure, I want to contend, which is essentially that of the significance of every act. An act is intentional: it intends for its significance some more comprehensive significance which in turn can be said to comprehend it as a subsidiary. If we are to be said to comprehend an act, we comprehend some yet more comprehensive act (or thing, or event: we have not foreclosed those possibilities as inconceivable) which the act in question serves as a project. What you are doing *intends* the more comprehensive act of roping the pulley, and we mean “intend” here both in the common sense of the intention of an act and the phenomenological sense of being significant in terms of. Your act intends in the latter sense by having as its significance the significance of the more comprehensive act. You are climbing the pole to fix the pulley. In other words, I comprehend what you are doing as “fixing the rope pulley.”

Our claim then is that we signify what we are doing with reference to some comprehension in which what we are doing functions as a project. When my act of moving my fingers took on significance as writing this, it was comprehended as a project in a more comprehensive act. And it is on the level of the more

comprehensive act that the significance of what I am doing finds its focus.²

These distinctions among what I have called the structures of significance by which we comprehend acts, events, and things are useful enough in a variety of ways. Recognizing them can lead us to correct the fallacies of reasoning which ignores them. For example, we can criticize reductionistic behavioral sciences for treating human acts as though they were events whose significance could be exhausted in terms of causal antecedents. Or we can brand a view superstitious for treating events as though they had intentional significance, as though they were acts.

But for our purposes in developing a phenomenology for Christian ethics, the crucial question we must pursue has to do with the resolution of the significance of an act. Could an act have a resolute significance? The problem is posed by our disclosure of how we focus the significance of an act. The significance of an act, understood in terms of what comprehends the act as its subsidiary, is still not resolved completely if what comprehends the act is a yet more comprehensive act, for then that act's significance would in turn have to be intentionally resolved. This suggests we could only disclose the significance of an act by continuing to press for the intentional significance of its successively more comprehensive intentional acts: What is your intention in fixing the pulley, etc?

Or suppose for example I am trying to comprehend my act of writing this essay. I ask myself, what is my intention in writing this? Perhaps I would answer by summarizing my first paragraph: to describe the way one faithfully signifies acts as moral or immoral. What is my intention in this description? To remove an intellectual stumbling block to faith. And my point in doing that? To match my philosophical interests to my sense of vocation.

My questioning takes me higher and higher among the intentional hierarchies by which I integrate my acts, i.e., by which I signify my acts as mutually bearing, as, if you will, "co-projective" of some very comprehensive act which comprehends them. Such a search could only end if there were an act which comprehended all that I did.

Think of how we signify our intentional hierarchies, how we articulate them. Since they must (by definition) present themselves as the joint significance of an array of intentional activity, it seems appropriate to look for that joint significance in the telling of the acts serially. In other words, we comprehend our acts in *narratives*, narratives about what we do or did. We unfold whatever self-comprehension we enjoy in tales of how we act or acted. Sometimes these are little episodes we use to support a generalized narrative like "I am a good father." Even when we discuss these as though they were facets of some *thing* (my identity, my mind, my soul),³ we unfold them in terms of narratives: "I cuddle and feed her; I sing her to sleep sometimes; I wash the diapers."

It may seem odd to speak of a narrative we tell as *an* act, in the singular. But

it is useful to do so, for it enables us to see that these narratives too are fully understood only as episodes in a greater narrative, one which knits together what I am variously doing. If I think about why I am a good father I might reflect on the bearing which being a good father has in the more comprehensive act of being a good family man, for my role toward my little daughter is integral in my marriage.

We can call to mind any number of self-defining comprehensions in terms of which what we do has coherence—in our families, on our jobs, in this or that relationship, even through our consumption habits. And it is by these comprehensions that we understand what we are doing at any particular time. Thus it is by these comprehensions that we bring the various projects of a given act into graceful enactment, that is, into a bearing of execution wherein each is accomplished harmoniously with the others, and the whole is accomplished expeditiously.

But these ways we have of giving joint significance to the various things we do: how might they come to have resolved significance? When we discussed the resolution of the significance of things, we counted the significance of “my clock” to be resolute in that it fully comprehended all the appearances I signify as “my clock.” Comparably, if my acts were to come to have resolved significance it could only be in terms of some significance which could fully comprehend all of my acts! Is such a significance available to me?

This is, indeed, the crucial question, for if you or I have a complete resolute meaning one by which we can be said to be comprehensible to ourselves and if the multitude of acts we do are what are comprehended by that significance, then that significance functions as the focus of meaning for all we do. If there is such a resolution for the significance of my every act, then and only then is there a measure for all that I do (namely how well its execution subsidizes or projects that comprehensive significance). In short, then and only then do I have a non-relative ethic, a focus for the significance of all that I do, a single meaning in terms of which all that I do takes on value in accomplishing.⁴

To ask whether there is a basis for moral good then, we have to ask whether human beings have (or being human has) resolute significance. Our discussion so far has opened three possibilities: that a human has the significance of an event, of an act, or of a thing. For reasons that will become clear later, we will put off the third alternative until section III of this paper. For now let us ask whether it is conceivable that a human being could have a significance such as would provide for the moral evaluation of all that he did if his significance were that of an event (or series of events) or if his significance were that of an act.

Let us begin with the former alternative. Can what is named by each of our proper names have the significance of an event, or a series of events?

To conceive of this calls for us to picture all of our acts as ultimately intending

events. That is to say, anytime we follow the hierarchy of intentional significance of one of our acts, we eventually signify an event.

I ask you why you are boiling water. To cook an egg, you reply. Why cook an egg? to prepare my lunch! Why prepare lunch? Because I'm hungry; I want to fill my stomach!

But does "filling my stomach" have an intention? Normally, the only answer that could be made to this question is that you intend your stomach to be (pleasantly) full, or at least that your hunger pangs be quelled. But notice that we have slid over into the comprehension of an event (in this case, the coming to be full of your stomach): we have designated it in terms of a causal conditional (in this case, your intention to fill your stomach).

It strikes me that measured by the structure of the significance it has for us, at least a great deal of what we do bears on events. That is to say, if we pursue the intentional significance of what we are doing we will come to a point—perhaps very early on, perhaps after tiers of intentional disclosures—when it is inappropriate to name a comprehension which itself has an intention. The comprehension we name we signify as an event.

Let us call such acts, acts whose intentional significance is ultimately the significance of an event, *eventuated acts*. And we can say that events which are occasioned by my acts (like the event of satisfying my hunger enacted in cooking and eating an egg) are *actuated events*.

If a human being is to be conceived of as a series of events it must be the case that his *every* act eventuates, that is that every account of what he is doing ends with its most comprehensive significance that of an event. It strikes me that this is a perfectly coherent way to conceive of my nature. But if my significance is to be resolute—resolute in the sense required if the significance is to function as the moral focus for all that I do—then a series of events will not do, for, as we saw earlier, even a single event could not provide the resolute significance required as a condition for moral significance. So then even if it were possible to comprehend the whole series of events which define me as a single event, that event's significance could only be articulated in terms of the significances of its subsidiary events which among themselves have only a contingent relationship. Their significances, therefore, could not be brought into single focus so as to be resolute. The comprehension of the Event (as with the comprehension of any event) would be merely a comprehension of contingency having no single essential significance.⁵

For this reason, if we conceive of a human being as an Event or series of events, there is no basis for conceiving of any non-relative values. There being no resolute comprehensive meaning for the series of events I identify with, each event provides a source of value only for such acts as eventuate it. The event has no meaning in terms of any other event. Being an Event would mean having

a series of values which have no coherent significance among themselves, no principle of integrity, and which are only contingently related. Whether the significance be resolved, as with Moses by a single God behind all Law, or as with John Stuart Mill by a single principle of happiness, or as with Immanuel Kant in the unity of reason, the significance, to be moral significance, must find an all-comprehensive meaning, one the likes of which an event's significance cannot provide.

We have been looking into a class of acts which seem to have the intentional significance of an event, the so called "eventuating acts." We suggested that a good bit of what we do might be so classed. And we went on to argue that any such act cannot enjoy moral significance, since its irresolution precludes the significance of an eventuating act from bringing moral value into focus.

The recognition of this pure relativity of value in a life of eventuation is, for reflective people, the occasion for anguish. If in articulating my intentions I begin to talk in terms of causal antecedents, then what I am doing has no bearing beyond the events it brings about, no source for significance beyond the fact of the event. This feeling of the truncation of the significance of what I'm doing, this sense that it can never finally be comprehended as having a point, but only having a cause: this is anguish. If my vitality is directed only toward events, then my pursuit of meaning is betrayed, for my intention of an event can never provide the closure of significance I pursued. The existentialists saw this betrayal disclosed as a sense of the absurd, for the practical reasoning of intentional pursuit gets cut off in the act of eventuating. The significance it reasoned toward is incoherent by virtue of being uncomprehended. Itself it comprehends only contingency.

II. *The Moral, The Good*

We suggested earlier that one's pursuit of the meaning of what one was doing led one to name more and more comprehensive acts, and in so doing to stretch toward the moral significance of what one was doing. And we defined my act *a* as comprehending my act *b* when *b* (along with other of my acts) functions as a project in *a*. Therefore *a* comprehends, holds in integrated bearing, more of my acts than does *b*. The farther up the levels of intentional meanings we pursue the resolution of the meaning of what we are doing, the broader is the range of our intentional life brought to bear in the significances we comprehend. "Making lunch" is the integrated bearing of more of what I do than is "boiling water."

If, as we also suggested earlier, my act is moral only when it is transparent to some significance in terms of which all of my acts could be judged, then there must be a single significance for all that I am doing morally. Only such a

single focused significance could resolve my action and thereby define my moral bearing, for only by intending a single focus can my acts be drawn into integrity of bearing. Under this condition, all of my moral acts would come to project the same act, the act whose significance defines the integrity of my myriad acts, defines, in other words, my personhood.

To picture such complete resolution of significance through a unity of intentional bearing, it helps to reflect on how we typically signify the various hierarchies of our intentional lives. We do so, as we said earlier, in the narratives we relate, to ourselves and to others, about ourselves. What is narrative if not the joint significance of acts? But now, what is demanded for that joint significance to be a moral significance is that it must itself be an episode in a single, coherent narrative, one in which all my moral acts function as projects! All of my stories must be part of a single, coherent narrative with which I identify.

The notion of a coherent narrative derives from what it means for any set of acts to function as projects of a single act. Among themselves the coherency they enjoy could at very least be described as a compatibility of execution: The accomplishing of one could not preclude the accomplishing of another. So too in coherent narrative, no episode enacted counteracts another episode. As we saw earlier, only such a compatibility of execution could guarantee that moral obligations do not countermand each other such that one could not *but* do wrong.⁶

But how, conceivably, could our intentional activity have such integral meaning? What source could there conceivably be for my story's meaning? There is an answer to this question to be read out of our depiction of one's integral life story as a single life *act*. Since an act's significance has an intentional source, if we are to conceive of our unity of personhood as a single act, realized as the coherency of our narrative, this narrative must itself be comprehended in a yet more comprehensive narrative!

This means the question of whether there is a source of resolute personal significance as a unified life act refers us on to the question of whether there is an unfolding story in which my life as a whole could be an episode such that by intending my significance as a project in this story, I can come into integrity as a person. If such a possibility were realized, not only would the various intentional hierarchies I identify with be drawn into integrity among themselves as projects of my life act, but I would enjoy as well integrity with the other persons whose lives bore coprojectively with me. The significance of this comprehensive story in which my life functioned as an episode would resolve me by being both the focus for my significance as a person (by being the principle of my integrity of bearing) and the source of my community with other persons (by being our shared bearing as persons).

By now it is probably abundantly clear what my claim is: it is precisely this possibility which is what is claimed in Christianity. There is an Act, an ongoing

Act in history, the Act of God. This Act is signified and comprehended by a sacred narrative. Human beings through the courses of this story have become episodes and in the course of so doing have found both the basis for their personal integrity and the realization of a new basis for human community. Their personal significance, derived as it is from the story it intends, successfully sustains their intentional integrity as persons and their correlation as persons in community (the love that is sustained among them). These integrities, personal and communal, authenticate the personal act which sustains them and, in turn, the story in the context of which that personal life takes on significance. Our significations as persons are really sanctifications as characters in the on-going story, a story which executes us personally and communally.⁷

Two claims which Christian ethicists insist are implicit in theological orthodoxy can be seen to be implicit in this phenomenology of acts as well: once we signify the good as enActment, i.e., acts which are episodes in the Act, it follows both that spirit, not law, is good's determination, and that we enact the good as members of an intentional community. Briefly considering these implications will go toward characterizing the ethical reasoning which follows from the Act theology we have read out of our phenomenology of an act's significance.

It is Christian orthodoxy that what signifies an act as good is itself spirit not law. We can see that this doctrine is implicit in the significance of good as the integrity of intentional activity, for what we recognize as "spiritual" relates to the integrity of intentional activity. Spirit emerges as we see mutual bearing in someone's acts. When we see a great deal of integration among acts, we see the actor as great-spirited. Full spirituality is full personhood, the total integration of what one intends. In finding the resolved significance of what one does in what comprehends *all* persons, Christian theology points to a Person as the good, for it points to the full comprehension of all personal acts.

By this account law has a derivative status. It has its role, of course. It functions to record patterns of obedience, both to remind us of the Act, as in Hebrew cultic law, and to anticipate the terms of obedience. But law's capacity to function this way rests on its being a record of a moral discernment which was not based on law but on spirit. This prior discernment was a personal one, a discernment of the terms of my project status in the Act. So even if a law perfectly recorded this personal discernment, and even though that personal discernment might well have been shared by the whole community of faith, the law could at best be seen perfectly to record the terms of obedience for a given community's enActment. But those need not also be the terms of my or my community's enActment. Executed in the present, such activity might be incoherent in the narrative of current holy history. Conceivably, it could even be incompatible with the terms of obedience to the Act. Thus it is that faithful moral reasoning can never cite the law as its final authority.

Second, since the Act defines me as a project in it, it defines me as a co-project, i.e., in correlation with other personal projects. The enActments by which I am sustained as a person are therefore communal enActments. We enAct communally. By contrast, in a non-intentional, open society we interrelate as individuals. We do not necessarily define our interests with some intention we share, rather we seek to protect our mutual freedom to pursue intentions which very well may not be coprojective.

In intentional communities (be they marriages and other personal intimacies, political movements, army units, or churches) at least some range of our activities enters into coprojection with the acts of others, and in that range of activity, in what we do together, we enjoy the integration of our acts among us.

Now if the Act is to be significant as such by its focusing my complete intentional integrity as a person, meaning that none of my acts counter my bearing on the Act, then radical community becomes possible, for if you and I are integrated in the same story, we need suffer no alienation from one another. Our persons enjoy mutual integrity—like the hands and feet of the same somebody.

Thus persons intend the Act as the significance of the new community created among them. Since it is their significance as projects which orients their various integrities as persons, and since projects are multiple in the unity of what they enact, the reality of personhood is also the reality of communal unity, the Kingdom, Agape.

The claim we have advanced in this section is that absolute good is intended as an enActment whose resolute meaning is what comprehends me and draws me into community. All values come to be polarized around the role in sacred history my acts can play, for it is only in terms of that bearing that there can be said to be a non-relative good. Good is the act which enActs: all other acts must be measured morally by that significance.

III. *The Immoral, The Evil*

Discerning an act moral for its bearing as a project in the Act leads us to deem an act immoral when we recognize it as somehow incompatible with the Act. I think it can be readily seen that the judgement that one act is incompatible with another is one we make almost constantly in the course of our practical reasoning. We see that certain acts preclude or undo or counterproduce the effects of certain other acts. Punching holes in the sauce pan or vandalizing the stove is incompatible with boiling the water for the egg, so if in some scenario the latter were enActive, the former would be evil acts. If we can talk about incompatibility among acts as counteraction we can say simply that immoral acts counterAct.

This suggests that while the integrity of acts defined as good establishes them

as spirit, evil acts do not necessarily have integrity among themselves. They are defined only negatively, as counterActs. This means that while we need to account for the good in terms of Person, the source of immorality demands no such accounting. While accounting for evil in terms of “the Devil” or “Satan” may be colorful pedagogy, it has no basis in our phenomenology of the significance of immoral acts.

But then if immoral acts do not bear on some integrated anti-Act, can they be said to have any bearing? We have, of course, excluded the possibility that they bear enActively, by definition. Might we alternatively, see them bearing on *events*? We can, to be sure. But recall what we saw in section I, that in the absence of any focus on an Act, the picture of the complete series of acts I identify as my acts, each bearing on an event, is the occasion for *anguish* at the pure relativity of acts’ goods.

In anguish I recognize no unity of bearing for what I do. I recognize that there is only relative value, the value of eventuation. It is an important question to ask ourselves: *dare* we picture ourselves that way? Sartre argues, of course, that it is the only honest way of being human. But he also argues that it is only tenable with great difficulty. There is a great tendency to want to resolve one’s significance, and with it the significance of what one does, by insisting that one is comprehensible as already having resolved significance, in short, as having the significance of a *thing*. For Sartre, faith in resolution of one’s significance as a thing is “bad faith” because it is self-deceptive: it is patently implausible to regard one’s significance as that of a thing (a being-in-itself). Nonetheless we are willing to deceive ourselves to deliver ourselves from anguish.

We need not pass judgment on the argument that the self cannot be construed as a thing.⁸ We need not because from what has already been argued we can see that one’s very attempt to comprehend oneself as a thing fits our definition of an *evil* act! In my attempt to define myself substantially as an identifiable entity, my action precludes the possibility of my taking on intentional significance for the comprehension I call myself. If I were to succeed in comprehending myself, I would have made it impossible to take on personal significance as a project in the Act. Thus the act of self-signifying, precluding as it does an act bearing on intentional significance for myself, is necessarily counterActive.

Not only is our flight from anguish into self-signifying counterActive, it is such in a special way, one which gives it priority over other counterActions, and one which therefore justifies theological regard for it as “original sin.” All my counterActivity can be seen as derivative from this “original” sin when we recall that in the flight from anguish I try to establish a meaning for myself so as to give intentional significance to *all* that I do. I seek to establish a comprehension the very sustenance of which becomes my morality. Only such could deliver me from anguish. But this in turn means that every act I now regard as moral,

i.e., my every act by which I enact my significance, becomes by definition an immoral act, for it is executed in a way precluding my transparency of significance to that of an enActment. By trying to comprehend myself as a thing, by trying to regard myself identical with myself in the way I regard any thing identical with itself in each of its manifestations, I try to take focus on a resolute and complete significance for myself, i.e., one comprehensible intentional reference. The resolved focus of my meaning is to be accomplished on the level of my individual significance. Thus I make myself opaque with meaning precisely when morality mandates I become transparent for my meaning.

We can spot this quest for thinghood in various moves of popular practical reasoning. Two worth singling out are, first, the timely “identity seeking” so popular during the last decade, and second, more perennially, the popular insistence that one “has a soul.” If my analysis of these is correct their very popularity can be seen as a measure of the priority of the quest they represent; for if one fails, the cost is anguish in the face of the complete relativity of the value of what one does.

But how can “having an identity” spare me anguish? It could if my significance, that of the “identity” I “have,” could be articulated such that it could measure the appropriateness of what I do. This is not difficult to imagine. We need only follow Aristotle in insisting that the function of anything is part of its definition (its “formal cause”). Presumably having a significant identity involves “having a certain nature” in accordance with which my activity is natural (moral) or unnatural (immoral). My identity then could be the significant focus in which what I do takes on value, positively or negatively.

But notice that if this argument were sound, we should have to conceive of the relationship between me and myriad acts as analogous to that between something I comprehend and the myriad phenomena which are signified in that comprehension’s significance. In that case the question would become paramount: can a *thing* have *acts* as the subsidiaries of the comprehension its significance achieves.

Now in some contexts our everyday discourse seems to assume that it can. We speak as though governments or families or colleges were things, yet we would, if asked, analyze them in terms of what certain people do. So ordinary language does not necessarily find the notion inconceivable in principle.

But suppose now we qualify this “thing” as the identity one seeks in one’s flight from anguish. What about the conceivability of that?

If we have depicted anguish realistically, the answer must be, No: if anguish arises in my recognition that all of my acts *eventuate*, and that among these events I actuate there can be *no* joint significance (because of the very nature of how we signify events), then it is inconceivable that someone in anguish could come to discover a significance for himself which could deliver him from

anguish (by giving him a natural way to act, a natural morality). Such an individual could see only a contingent collection of events among which no joint meaning prevailed, at least none such as could give significance to other events not in that collection. But if there is no comprehension of a set of events to be discovered such as could found a natural ethic, then any creation of one *ad hoc* could hardly be expected to comprehend yet-to-transpire events! Yet this is what would be required to be the case if an artificial identity were to outfox anguish. So then, for all its popularity, the notion that I can see all of my acts as subsidiaries of an entity of resolved significance does not seem to be a coherent one, at least not in the context of alleviating anguish.

The other popular notion—one which is popular, ironically enough in religious discourse, but one which also sometimes functions originally sinfully as a purported deliverance from anguish—is the notion that human persons are or have immortal souls. Of course the notion has had and to some extent continues to have legitimate uses in faithful discourse, uses where the metaphysical naiveté is not pernicious. But I think it is clear that when it is used to try to forestall anguish by signifying the self as an entity, it is subject to the same criticisms we found applicable to the notion of an identity. The notion has a dark ambiguity about it, one which blinds us to its incoherency more than identity is able to. Anguish breaks through even the most confidently espoused identity in an occasional dark night. But so obscure is the illusion of having a soul that when we try to resolve our significance in it we often get away in confidence we have succeeded. That is why from the standpoint of practical theology we need to be aware of the originally sinful ploy the belief in one's soul can come to be.⁹

Our phenomenology of human activity has shown us the connection between the quest for resolution in the meaning of what we do and the basis for a moral significance for what we do. Seeking such resolution by conceiving of oneself as an event or a series of events cannot deliver one from the anguish of a meaningless existence and a merely relative morality. If, on the other hand, I conceive of myself as an act, I am led to ask the religious question: is there an Act which could be the resolute significance of my acts and define the value of what I do? Our contention is that Christianity can be stated as an affirmative answer to that question. Moreover, we have argued, in the light of this answer, the alternative of seeking resolute meaning by conceiving of oneself as an entity must be seen as a species of sinful activity. Human acts, in this view, come to have resolute and moral significance only as God's Act. As such they enjoy an integrity, a resoluteness, which makes them graceful and establishes them as morally definitive personhood.

NOTES

1. In holding that the moral significance of an act must be resolute in the sense of providing a criterion of moral value for all that one does, we are not denying that some of one's acts may have *amoral* significance. An Act would be counted as amoral if its execution, while compatible with my moral act, did not itself appear to have moral meaning. We can think of the moral significance of an amoral act as a certification that the act does not counteract what is done morally.

2. It might be tempting to make a parallel claim about events, insisting that an event is to be understood as a subsidiary of *another* event which comprehends it (as one of *its* causal factors). In other words, it might be tempting to say what it, in turn, eventuates. After all, in ordinary discourse we do talk about an event's significance in terms of just this sort of eventuation: "That barn fire was significant in that it started the Chicago fire!"

Indeed, if I'm going to counsel not yielding to that temptation I'm going to have to argue successfully that it is wrong-headed to regard an event's consequences as essential to its significance. This can be done, I believe, by appealing to that essential criterion for *y*'s being an event: that it happen, that it take place in the moment. An event is, essentially, in the moment. It is what it is in the eventful moment.

The consequent of an event cannot be in the moment: the consequent's significance has determination undeterminable in the moment of that event, namely the other causal antecedents of the consequent event. So if the essential characteristic of the event is that it is in the moment, and the significance of the moment must (logically) exclude what is consequent to the moment, it must be, strictly speaking, incoherent to speak of the essential meaning of an event as comprehending its own consequences.

But how is it that ordinary usage sees the significance of the barn fire as the Chicago fire it caused? Does this not show that it *becomes essential* to the significance of that event, that fire, that it had such and such consequences, that it started afire a large section of Chicago?

What delivers us from having to make sense of the notion of "becoming essential" is the recognition of the fact that whenever I signify an event by its consequences I am thereby comprehending the consequent act. That is to say, the context of my assigning consequent significance to an event is my recognition of that consequent as eventful, as "of moment," as worth comprehending.

We can put this in perspective by thinking of the varieties of ways we talk about an event's consequent events. If we assume that such talk constitutes an act, i.e., that one has intention in talking, then it must be in terms of one's intentions that one selects for comprehension only some of what happens. What happens is significant to the extent that it impinges on what we are doing, to the extent that it forms the arena of eventualities in which we act. If we see the origin of our regard for the consequent significance of an event in the context of whatever personal activity called forth the marking of the events, then it becomes apparent that *designating a consequent significance for an event is only a mode of comprehending that event as the causal antecedent of its consequent event, in short, a mode of comprehending the consequent event*. That being so, we need not resort to regarding the consequent significance of an event as essential to the significance of that event, for in all cases the relevant event, the one impinging on my activity and thus worthy of my notice, is the consequent event. If I can construe every event to which I give consequent significance as the causal antecedent of an impinging event, then only one focus of comprehension need be regarded as essential to that comprehension, the significance of the moment of the event.

Because the consequent significance of an event is best thought of as a contingent not an essential significance, the significance of an event should not be construed as transparent to its consequences in the way an act's significance is transparent to its intention. The event is, essentially, the eventuation

of certain causal antecedents. If a clock ticks, or a storm knocks out the power, or you see a comet, or you get delayed by a parade, or you stub your toe, we sufficiently signify these events and thereby comprehend what happened when we name together the crucial conditional and causal factors that led to them.

3. We will suggest an account of why we have this tendency when we discuss “original sin” in section III.

4. The distinction I am using between relative and absolute goods follows the traditional one, I believe. If I am out driving to enjoy the scenery, taking the skyline drive is a “good” choice. If I’m in a hurry to get where I’m going, taking the interstate is a “good” choice. Here “good” is an evaluation made on the basis of the intended act: does the act evaluated promise to be a successful project in the intended act? The assumption is that the act’s significance as “good” pertains only to that intention. If I were in a hurry, driving the skyline route would not be considered “good.” “Good” here is relative good.

Only if there were a single significance for my life such that with reference to that significance all of my acts could find integrated bearing, could we talk about absolute or moral values, for only in that case would “good” have a non-relative meaning. If and only if there were such a single significance for my life could my actions enjoy resolute significance.

5. Think of how pathetic the “self-made man” in Sartre’s *Nausea* appeared as he tried to focus centrally on the event of reading all the books in the municipal library. The event of that happening which he tried to actuate, diligently, everyday, still could not make sense of the rest of his life.

6. When this sort of countermanding goes on in Greek drama, the point seems to be precisely that no ethic is absolute.

7. What enables us to say that in this character my personal significance, i.e., the integral significance of my activity, is complete and resolute? Why don’t we have to press on to questions about the intention of the Act? Indeed, what keeps us from an infinite regress which finds every act intentional in the source of its significance and forces us to climb an endless mountain of them?

What spares me the climb is that the climb becomes pointless beyond the point at which my personal significance becomes resolute. This happens when every act I undertake comes to bear coherently as my role in the story. The story then is fully the source of my significance: all of my activity either enacts my role in it or at very least eventuates compatibly with it.

8. *Being and Nothingness* tries to demonstrate the plausibility of construing human reality as *Nothingness*.

9. For a more complete account of how the metaphysical notion of a soul can be avoided in theological discussions of destiny, see my “The ‘Self’ as ‘Saved,’ ” *The Personalist*, July, 1978, pp. 278-287.