

Seeing Life as the Creation of Character

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I suppose each of us has his or her own way of making sense of his or her faith. By that I mean that underlying the various things we believe and value are some fundamental, often unexamined, notions and attitudes that give coherence to what we believe and do. It is these notions, and the attitudes that are dependent on them, that make for us the connection between the public historic dogmas of the Church and our own intimate, immediate lives. They are not themselves dogmas or articles of faith, but much vaguer, more ordinary-seeming but also more all-pervasive notions. Their origins are, and will always remain, obscure, though in part, of course, we have acquired them through the history of our involvement with Christianity itself.

Various things have prompted me recently to do a bit of digging in my own hidden conceptual foundations and I want to share the results of this mental archaeology with others. Inevitably one's presuppositions are partial and the language in which one holds them muddy and obscuring. So I invite your detached, less biased assessment of notions that I hold too closely to me to see as clearly as I could. In the process of looking at what I have to show, you will probably become aware of how different, or differently expressed—which is after all a real difference too—my insights are from your own. And so you may become more aware of the notions that do the same work for you.

It was mainly reaction to the ideas of others that prompted my examination of my own. Amongst the students I teach at the University of Cape Town I come up against two very different ways of understanding the Christian faith. One is, I suppose, a version of liberation theology. Everything is seen against the background of the imperative of changing the political institutions of our society. The other is more recognisably mythical: our faith has primarily to do with God's battle against the devil and his angels; miracles are always happening, and we have detailed knowledge of what happens after we die.

My colleagues typify yet a third set of assumptions about reality, one which I reckon many students and others share as well. It could be

called the outlook of secularism. There is no God, or any overall purpose or direction to evolution, history or an individual life. Reality is matter in motion, more or less highly organised. Death is the total destruction, beyond repair, of the human personality. This set of assumptions about the world seems peculiarly at home in the environment created by western technology: medicines, motor cars and telephones.

Finally, I have recently been confronted vividly by various forms of suffering. There is the suffering of the poverty-stricken squatters around Cape Town. Then there was a newspaper story that horrified my wife: it told of a little boy in an English mental home who had to be tied to a pole because his need for emotional re-assurance was so great that he would otherwise spend all his waking hours simply clinging to anybody he could find. And I myself saw a friend dying of cancer in such continuous pain that he could not even concentrate on the answers to questions he asked me, and could not prevent a small involuntary sound coming from his throat each time he breathed.

I am not sure why these four things seem especially significant. Perhaps it is that between them they both present me with a vision of what the real problems of life are and of a variety of ways of responding to them. And surely it is true that the Christian faith, or any faith, does at least see itself as the answer to a problem. That, at any rate, is an assumption in what I am going to say.

The notion I want to explain to you—which seems to me to be the central, co-ordinating notion in my grasp of faith—is that of *the creation of character*. It seems to me that the ultimate aim of everything that God does in the universe, in the evolution of nature and the history of persons, can best be described as *the creation of character*.

“Creation” is certainly a very orthodox word. Usually it is distinguished from “salvation” or “sanctification”, or something like that, and used to denote the initial bringing into being of human beings in their natural setting rather than the development of persons in history. I want to use it to refer to both processes in order to stress the unity between them, and also to counteract the idea that we are created (in the old sense) finished or complete. The truth is, rather, that what is initially brought into being in the case of each of us is simply the *capacity* for personal development. This capacity, or system of capacities, is what constitutes our human nature. It is equally part of Christian faith as I understand it that the development of this capacity is as much the work of God as its initial bringing into being. It certainly cannot be the case that the process of “salvation” or “sanctification” or whatever, is less wholly God’s work because it is one in which we also are personally involved.

This brings me to my second word. It has a decidedly old-

fashioned, almost Victorian ring—character! It is what enlightened headmasters of English public schools used to hope that rough games would produce in their pupils. I have deliberately chosen it because I think that no-one now will be tempted to like it without thinking about it. It is certainly not a “favourite” word of mine. One can get at what I want to mean by it by thinking of what is referred to by the word “character” in a novel or a play. Characters in plays and novels do not really exist, but they are known as sets or systems of insight and choice, of feeling and action. Certain ideas or emotions or ways of behaving are typical of them, and these diverse elements form a more or less integrated system that we refer to as the character so-and-so. I would think that central to the notion of a person’s character, whether fictional or real, is the notion of value. It seems to me that a person’s character is determined by what he judges to be truly valuable, whether and to what degree he consents to this insight and lives by it, and how far his convictions enter into and organise his emotional life. I could go on a great deal longer about the notion of character but it is not necessary for my present purpose. I hope I have said enough to indicate the sort of notion that it is. It is a notion rather like that of “nature”, as in “he has a generous nature”. It is a “sort-of” word in that it tells you what sort of person a person is. And it tells you this by giving you what is most uniquely theirs, what has been most personally appropriated by them, and made their own.

Having said all this, I hope it will not surprise you when I say that I think that what God is most concerned to create in the whole of the universe is precisely characters. Everything else is either the necessary means to this end or else it provides the conditions under which character can be expressed. This is my notion. Now I must say why I think it is important.

I believe, on Jesus’ authority, that God wants me to be happy by sharing in his life. I find it easiest to envisage transactions between myself and God by using the metaphor of marriage. If a husband and wife are to be happy in their marriage to each other they must both develop certain qualities of character (humour, patience, generosity, imagination). It is fatuous to expect to be happy without such qualities of character. Similarly, to be happy sharing in God’s life certain qualities of character are required. What, one may ask, could they be? Well, I do not think they are entirely different from those that make for a happy marriage. But in this case I think that one can describe them in such a way as to make it clearer where they come from and how they work.

If God is infinite, then so is his life, and the qualities of character required to live it must have something of infinity about them. If God wants me to share his life he will have to develop such qualities of character in me. I must therefore have at least the capacity for

acquiring such qualities from the very start. That is, I must have that sort of nature. In fact I think that having the capacity to share God's life is a very good definition of human nature. It is the scholastic equivalent of being "the image of God".

How does the possession of such a natural capacity for infinite life show itself in people? In two ways chiefly, I think: in being self-conscious in such a way that we are capable of self-possession, and in being self-determining to the extent that we are capable of self-donation. These self-referring capacities of human nature do have a "sort of infinity" about them. Being present to ourselves in the radical way of which we are capable enables us to have real knowledge, to enter into the being of others and so transcend our own limitations. Being self-determining means being free of, that is unlimited by, domination by others and so able to respond freely to them, to love them for themselves.

This "infinite" side to human nature is not at all a matter of faith. It is a matter of common experience, or, rather, of reflection on common experience. It could be given the most thorough-going philosophical foundation. It is in fact the source of all the astonishing creativity and perceptiveness and selflessness that mankind is capable of. It is present to the same degree and in the same way in every child born of human stock in whatever circumstances or whatever society and with no matter what genetic endowment.

This capacity for self-possession, or alternatively, for self-transcendence, is what makes us, in traditional terminology, spiritual beings. Because spiritual beings possess a certain "sort of infinity" they cannot be wholly explained as the result of finite causes. Nor can their spiritual capacities be developed in an environment of merely finite beings. Hence, if they do develop, then it must be as the result of the influence of a properly infinite being. That such an influence is exercised in the lives of human persons, and indeed in the life of everyone without exception, is not something that science or philosophy can demonstrate. It could only be a matter of faith; but for Christians it is at least that. We do believe that as a matter of fact God shares his life with all persons from the first moment of their existence and whether they know it or not. There is no such thing as a human nature without grace. And this without prejudice to the possibility of an ultimate refusal of grace on our part.

If it is true, then, that God is actually at work in the lives of all persons, no matter what their origins or cultural tradition, bringing into being in them those qualities of character that will enable them to be happy sharing in his life, then it is a legitimate question as to how this actually occurs. On the one hand, the development of character in spiritual beings cannot be reduced to the working of natural or social forces in us. On the other hand, we do not want to resort to merely

mythical explanations that involve all sorts of divine interventions and miracles. There can be subtle forms of myths. One is the doctrine that grace is imputed and not imparted to us in this life. That is, we do not undergo a fundamental change in character this side of the grave. All the real transformation, since it must be done, is done "the other side". Against this, for the sake of sanity, one must hold that this life, and just because it is *real* life, is the place where the fundamental change must take place. How then does it occur, in actual fact?

It occurs, it seems to me, of necessity, in our relations with other human persons and as a result of their agency. We cannot realise our distinctively personal capacities except in relation to other human persons. It is a nice question as to whether God could have created a finite person who stood in no need of others of his species in order to realize himself. This is in fact the medieval notion of an angel. But angels are purely spiritual beings, whereas we are certainly material as well. The meaning of materiality in the philosophy of St. Thomas is that of being *incompletely* actual (and therefore as existing in time) and depending essentially on what is *other* than oneself for one's self-actualisation (and so existing in space as well). As material beings, therefore, we must always be more than one of a kind, and this plurality is essential to our being the sort of beings that we are. So my relations with other human persons are as much "me" as my qualities of character. They are, if you like, both the causes and the expression of those qualities. And also, being essentially incomplete and so existing essentially in time, my completion is essentially bound up with the peculiar event known familiarly to us as death. Death is the event in which our materiality, and hence the finiteness of our persons, is most manifest. Death is the negation of all material power. And hence it is the ultimate test for finite persons who are material. As *persons* we are spiritual and possessors of a different sort of power, finite it is true, but having an infinite capacity for a life that is not finite at all. Our attitude to our death will express which aspect of our composite nature we have really identified with. And this identification will in turn grow from and define our relationships with other human persons. Our attitudes to death and to other persons will mutually condition one another.

So, if God wants to create character in the universe, he can only do it to the extent that he does it simultaneously in a number of finite persons, and by working through the natural capacity they have for an infinite, that is to say, self-possessing and self-transcending life. And he is bound to do it by what one could call either a spiritualizing of the material (without obliterating the material) or, better an expressing of the spiritual in the material. This process must of necessity take the form of suffering and dying, in both senses, spiritual and material; the infinite is to be expressed in the finite, and this cannot occur without a

conscious turning from what is familiar and controllable and a growing alienation from a selfhood that is merely exclusive, valued simply because it is one's own.

There is no time now to spell out the way in which the notion of creating character can be applied to the various aspects of Christian faith. But I can relate it briefly to the problems with which I began this reflection. Seeing the drama of evolution, of history and of individual lives as the creation of character is a useful antidote to what has become the dominant myth of our time, namely the development of persons through the transformation of social institutions. That persons only exist in relationships with others is something I have already stressed. That these relationships gain their distinctive features not only from the individuals involved in them but from the institutional structure of society is a further insight in the same direction, and one which has become more and more influential since the time of Hegel and Marx. But this is but another consequence of our materiality and it is therefore important for a Christian to stress the capacity of human persons essentially to transcend institutions. We cannot exist without them, just as we cannot exist without food. But "man does not live by bread alone..."

Grasping the reality of character as it exists in us liberates one simultaneously from, on one hand, the myth-making and miracles of the fundamentalist and, on the other, the impersonal universe of the secularist. There is mystery enough in our own familiar persons without requiring more. And if our faith is right, we have to do with and wield a power in our everyday lives that is genuinely supernatural and yet expresses itself through faculties common to the whole of human kind...and so is mysterious without being *unusual*. Grasping this depth in ordinary human persons seems to me to be an inseparable accompaniment of a mature faith. A world-view that denies it must make it difficult to conceive of the sort of being Christians worship in calling Father.

Finally, my notion helps me with suffering: other people's and my own. To translate St. Paul rather loosely, "suffering produces character". Suffering is not, however, what God ultimately wants for us; happiness is. So insofar as we share in his life that will be our attitude too. Yet suffering of a certain kind is the necessary means to this for material beings. And because suffering produces character, even the other kind of suffering, the sort that comes from sin, can be turned to good account.

Well, there is my notion. And now that I have expounded it, it occurs to me that it is probably an expression of my present preoccupations as a parent. Being a parent is a task fraught with such frightening responsibilities that it is good to be able to think of oneself as an instrument in God's hands in the truly divine task of creating character.