

DIVINE REVELATION: INTERVENTION OR SELF-COMMUNICATION?

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THIS ESSAY takes up a crux in systematic theology: the understanding of supernatural divine revelation—a doctrine whose credibility has been widely called into question at least since the mid-eighteenth century, especially in cultures where Christianity has encountered the challenge of Deism. Thus the problem can responsibly be regarded as one of the principal intellectual challenges, if not the principal, offered to Christianity by widespread (if often implicit) judgments characteristic of the modern era. It is a problem with multiple ramifications as well. For further down the line, it involves the interpretation, philosophically as well as theologically, of a number of fundamental relationships in Christian doctrine and theology: those between grace and nature, positive revelation and natural human religiosity, historic Christianity and the universal possibility of faith. Ultimately, of course, what is involved is the truth of the Christian doctrine of God as triune, as well as its theological intelligibility.¹

This essay is divided into three parts of unequal length. An introductory first part serves to define the issue and propose some dimensions of a fresh approach. This approach will be detailed in the second part, the body of the essay. Finally, a brief third section will offer some concluding reflections designed to insert the ideas we have developed into the wider context of the contemporary, post-Vatican II understanding of divine revelation.

REVELATION: DIVINE INTERVENTION?

This introductory part will attempt to define the issue of divine revelation. It develops in four relatively short sections. The first of these will briefly orchestrate the issue itself; the second will offer a succinct

¹ This article is preparatory to a treatment of revelation that will mark the transition from fundamental theology to the doctrine of God in the projected second volume of the author's systematic theology. It also carries out a promise made in §23.3.b of the first volume of that work, which appeared as *God Encountered: A Contemporary Catholic Systematic Theology 1: Understanding the Christian Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989) henceforth quoted as *GE*. For the second part of this essay I am substantially indebted to sensitive and constructive criticisms offered by two friends and colleagues at Loyola University, Chicago: Jill N. Reich and James J. Walter.

analysis of a fairly representative, though unsatisfactory treatment by a contemporary English theologian of note; the third will venture a quick glance at a few patristic themes, in the interest of suggesting a correct placement of the issue. On this basis, the fourth will propose some dimensions of a fresh approach.

The Issue

At the heart of the issue lies a dilemma: the forced choice (or so it seems to many) between integralism (or fundamentalism) and modernism (or reductionism).² Must we theologians bow our reflective, critical heads before any scandalous facts, before what is often referred to as the "objectivity" of the Christian faith? In other words, are we to acknowledge that the substance of the Christian religion is a matter of true divine "intervention"? Or can we adequately account for Christianity if we reduce it to historic experiences that are immanently human, experiences that have yielded, and continue to yield, Christianity's historic self-expression in worship, life, and teaching? The dilemma can be posed less abstractly in the form of oft-heard concrete questions, as follows:

Does the Creed mean to affirm that the living God has been, and is being, actually encountered in the world? Or can this metaphor be reduced, ultimately, to a dramatic manner of giving symbolic expression to a particular set of human religious experiences? Does Israel's Covenant refer to a reality of partnership, one that involves, not just historic Israel, but the living God as well? Or is this a naive picture, which simply conveys an intense experience of partnership on the part of Israel? Is Israel's experience essentially available naturally and universally to all nations (where, of course, it is liable to be expressed in different, but virtually equivalent, sets of symbols)? Or, to take an explicitly Christian theme, is it truly *God* who is known in the real, historic person of Jesus Christ, and moreover, is God thus known in a wholly unique, definitive, unsurpassable manner? Or is it enough to understand Jesus Christ as the symbol of a new, definitive level in the immemorial development of human religious consciousness; and hence, is Christianity reducible to the highest form of humanity's awareness of God? In other words, is the orthodox interpreter of the Creed forced to opt for the (naive?) acceptance of the order of Christian grace as a genuinely *new reality*, one that encompasses and perfects the natural order? Or is it legitimate to propose a critical reconception of the order of grace as a reinterpretation of the one, single natural reality that we know as "creation"?

Issues like these are explicitly raised (and usually answered in a

² Cf. *GE* §§18-20.

reductionist spirit) by theologians with existentialist leanings.³ In the Anglo-Saxon and North American world, somewhat less pervious to the mood of existentialism, the dilemmas just formulated often explicitly hinge on the neuralgic issue of divine "intervention." This is doubtlessly due to the influences that derive, not just from liberal Evangelicalism and Deism,⁴ but specifically also from the atmosphere created by Newton's theological cosmology, in which the inner coherence and consistency of "the system of nature" bulks so large.⁵ As long as the normative world-picture was "premodern," it is often suggested, there was relatively little questioning of the possibility of divine intervention ("inbreaking") in the natural order; this allegedly made it easy (or at least relatively easy) to accept supernatural intervention as well, specifically in the form of scriptural inspiration, miracles, and revelation. But we moderns (so the explanation continues) now live, if not in a closed natural order, then at least in an autonomous one. This predisposes us to regard grace and revelation as purely alternative, elective, not strictly demonstrable interpretations of a world order that is essentially stable (if evolutionary, and in that sense historical). Such a world order spontaneously suggests one single, consistent, *natural* divine plan. As a result there is, for many of us, a curious, arbitrary otherworldliness involved in conceiving of the world order as reflecting an integral divine plan of a *supernatural* kind—even if it is one in which grace is carefully coordinated with natural reality. For even in this coordinated scheme, revelation is liable to be experienced as opposed to nature. "Nature," after all, evokes a sense of autonomy: it sums up the (relatively) independent universe created by God, knowable by the human mind exercising its native independence. "Grace," on the other hand, evokes a sense of heteronomy: it sums up the universe of Christian faith, produced by a mysterious, saving divine intervention in history, to be acknowledged only by a profession of utter dependence. Faced with this dilemma, we moderns are naturally reluctant to fall back upon a naive "interventionism"; as a result, we sometimes find ourselves (only slightly less reluctantly) settling for what really amounts to a form of Deism.

³ Well-known examples are Rudolph Bultmann's essay "New Testament and Mythology" in *Kerygma and Myth*, ed. Hans Werner Bartsch (New York: Harper & Row, 1961) 1-44, with its rejection of all divine intervention as a throwback to mythology, and Willi Marxsen's *The Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), with its reduction of Jesus' resurrection to a human, if Christian, *Interpretament*.

⁴ Cf. *GE* §20.2-4, §28.2.

⁵ On this whole complex of issues, and on its influence on the question of the very possibility of Christian faith, cf. Michael J. Buckley's delightful monographs *Motion and Motion's God: Thematic Variations in Aristotle, Cicero, Newton, and Hegel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ., 1971) and *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ., 1987).

Maurice Wiles' Proposal

The dilemmas just stated are strikingly, as well as representatively, instanced in Maurice Wiles' elegant and stimulating *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine*.⁶ In Wiles' view, God, being the creator of the universe, cannot but be committed, foundationally, to its independence. This axiom yields a fundamental criterion with which to test the credibility of all religious affirmations: we are to refrain from "claiming any effective causation on the part of God in relation to particular occurrences." In Wiles' proposed reconstruction of Christian theology, this becomes *the* criterion. Together with the two (formal) criteria of coherence and economy,⁷ it determines the whole "pattern of belief" to be developed; but in doing so, it also determines the content of what can be credibly proposed as the true substance of mature belief. This criterion operates negatively: like Ockham's razor, it shaves away anything in the profession of faith not required by itself. The motive behind the operation is the classic—and valid!—concern of the apologist: to test the Christian faith by the standard of human intellectual integrity in believing. Many of our thinking contemporaries, Wiles implies, cannot be fairly compelled to give intellectual assent to more than what can survive the application of this principle. He admits that the operation does yield a form of deism, but one that is acceptable: it does not cut off all relatedness, on the part of God, to the world, even if it does restrict that relatedness to God's being "source of existence and giver of purpose to the whole."⁸

In keeping with the restrictions demanded by the principle, Wiles proceeds to whittle away at the doctrines of Christ's person and work, as well as the doctrine of the working of the Holy Spirit, till they have become mere instances of one single, *universal* proposition: God's "purposive concern" in regard to the world as a whole. Since this proposition is universal, it does not depend for its validity on any historic instances; for God's concern for the world, God's "care," is sufficiently ascertainable from creation.⁹ That is also why the doctrines themselves can continue to be affirmed as having real meaning. Still, it is understood that any such meaning must be reductively understood: it derives, not from the doctrine claimed as true because revealed in history, but solely from the

⁶ London: SCM, 1975. For Wiles' dilemmatic approach to the issue and his proposal for a "middle way," cf. esp. 115 ff.

⁷ *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine* 17–19.

⁸ *Ibid.* 38, 17–19.

⁹ This is a truly rationalist conception, reminiscent of Lessing's dictum: "Accidental truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason." Quotation from Henry Chadwick, *Lessing's Theological Writings* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Univ., 1957) 53.

affirmer's judgment of what can possibly be meant by *any* affirmation concerning God in relation to the world. In this way, God having been reduced to the status of the provident, caring creator of all that is, the intractable particulars of Christianity's positive profession of faith have ceased to be an embarrassment.

From some of the examples Wiles gives, we may infer with a fair degree of probability just where that embarrassment lies. Wiles' rendition of some of the central Christian doctrinal claims is excessively "interventionist": claims made on behalf of direct biblical inspiration,¹⁰ on behalf of Jesus' divine Sonship viewed as a hard historical fact that should be establishable apart from Christian faith,¹¹ on behalf of the universal, totally objective atoning efficacy of one particular historical event: Jesus' death on the cross. It must be granted, doctrines thus proposed *are* unbelievable to anyone who prizes, as Wiles does, human freedom, maturity, and responsibility.¹² But the question is whether Wiles' versions of these doctrines are not straw men. Is the crude interventionism Wiles finds implicit in these revealed doctrines really integral to them? Or, for that matter, does the great tradition require it? The main argument of the present essay will imply that the answer must be no on both counts, and that Wiles' proposal involves a reduced version of the Christian faith—specifically, a modernist one.

Placing the Issue

Before we attempt to develop a basic understanding of revelation (often misleadingly called "divine intervention") by means of systematic reflection and argument, let us suggest a broad historical and cultural placement of the issue, as well as a first philosophical analysis.

Let us start with a few witnesses from the second and third centuries. The apologists, Irenaeus, and Origen are obviously innocent, not only of the modern "turn to the subject," but also of the scientific mentality that objects to divine intervention in the chain of cosmic causation. Still, this does not mean that their view of divine self-revelation was naively "interventionist." Thus the *Letter to Diognetus* explicitly insists that God does not intrude by means of physical force of the kind that overcomes opposing forces; rather, God sends the Son in gentleness.¹³ Irenaeus insists that God, being creator, is at home in the world, and therefore, that God does not need to break to enter; being immanent (that is,

¹⁰ *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine* 106, 116.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 41–60.

¹² *Cf. ibid.* 116 ff.

¹³ *Letter to Diognetus* 7.2–5.

immanent in such a fundamental way as only a truly transcendent God can be), the Logos does not intervene in the world from outside.¹⁴

Origen draws a conclusion from this. He agrees with Celsus that God does respect the world's integrity as it develops toward its intended completion. But he reminds Celsus that the road to that completion runs through that particular repository of the Logos which is the human person, made in the divine image. Hence, if God guides the world, "God does not take care, as Celsus imagines, only of the universe as a whole, but in addition to that He takes particular care of every rational being."¹⁵ One and a half century later, Gregory of Nyssa rounds out the argument. God is not remote, but close to the world, for "the divine is equally in all and it permeates the whole of creation in the same way, and nothing could remain in being apart from the One Who Is."¹⁶ Hence, unlike the meddling gods of the ancient pantheons, God does not "intervene." But, Gregory implies, God does relate to each being in accordance with its nature; specifically, God intimately relates to the human person, capable, by virtue of the divine resemblance and the capacity for moral action, of making the perfection of God a matter of inner-worldly experience, by "being perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt 5:48).¹⁷

The conclusion is obvious. The Church Fathers' notion of God's activity in the world is not rooted in a naive (in Bultmann's language, "mythological") conception of "effective causation on the part of God in relation to particular occurrences." Instead, the Fathers place all divine action in the world in the context of an understanding of divine immanence, an understanding in which the human person plays a decisive role. This, it would seem, leads to a hermeneutical ground rule. In cases where patristic passages do seem to imply or express a naive understanding of the divine activity in the world, the realization that their thought is embedded in a deep sense of God's immanence should temper our modern eagerness to attribute mechanical, "interventionist" ideas to them.¹⁸ In fact, could it not be argued that the Fathers could afford to sound naive precisely because the theological and cosmological metaphysics they were operating on were anything but naive?

¹⁴ *Adv. Hær.* 5.2.1.

¹⁵ *C. Celsum* 4.99 (*Contra Celsum*, trans. Henry Chadwick [3d ed.; Cambridge: Cambridge Univ., 1980]) 262-63. Cf. *GE* §27.4.c.

¹⁶ *What Does the Christian's Profession Mean? (De professione christiana)*, Gregorii Nysseni Opera, ed. W. Jaeger et al. (Leiden, 1921-) 8.1, p. 138.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 8.1, pp. 137.12-138.24.

¹⁸ Thus I must disagree on hermeneutical grounds with Maurice Wiles, who alleges that the patristic understanding of scriptural inspiration, with very few exceptions, looked upon the Spirit as a foreign, "additional" factor, and hence regarded the human author's role as purely instrumental and, consequently, as entirely passive (*The Remaking of Christian Doctrine* 89-90, 106, 116).

Where, then, in the history of Western culture, are we to place the problematic idea that God “intervenes”? Not in the Middle Ages, which were familiar with divine immanence and recognized the hand of God in the world, while at the same time enjoying a sophisticated philosophical understanding of the distinction between God as *causa prima* and the inner-worldly causality exercised by the whole range of secondary causes. These latter operated under the sustaining, immanent impulse of the *causa prima*, understood as the transcendent source, not just of efficient causality, but also, and especially, of formal and final causality.

The answer, therefore, must be: in the first half of the sixteenth century, which witnessed the rise of the cultivation of “objectivity” as never before. The world began more and more to look like an immense collection of discrete, relatively impenetrable objects, all of which offered themselves for description and definition by means of discrete truths, capable of being spelled out objectively on the printed page. Mathematics and mechanics began to be the paradigm of both truth and reality, and even of art, as, among other things, the laws of optical perspective began to be rigorously enforced. And since all objects began to be thought of as affecting each other only extrinsically, efficient causality gained an almost absolute prominence.

The problem is, of course, that efficient causality best explains the mutual relations of solid bodies, inanimate objects. But lifeless things are inert; they are foreign to each other, or at best contiguous; if they affect each other at all, they do so only extrinsically (at least in the macroscopic world of everyday observation, on which the new cosmology was based). Living beings, by contrast, exist differently, though they share many of the properties of inanimate things. They actively transcend themselves so as to take on their physical environment; they are characterized by an immanent ability both to communicate with other beings like themselves and to seek self-actualization by means of growth and development, both in inner consistency and in interactiveness, i.e., in an interplay of immanence and transcendence. Human persons are characterized by an immanence that gives rise to an even further transcendence. They transcend not only themselves but also their physical environment, and they do so self-consciously. Though part of the material order, they are *selves*, open to *otherness as such*—other persons and, ultimately, God. Efficient causality fails to account for all these forms of immanence and transcendence; to account for them, both Jewish and Christian philosophical traditions have appealed to formal and final causality, as David B. Burrell has recently explained once again.¹⁹

¹⁹ Cf. his “Divine Practical Knowing: How an Eternal God Acts in Time,” in *Divine Action: Studies Inspired by the Philosophical Theology of Austin Farrer*, ed. Brian Hebblethwaite and Edward Henderson (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1990) 93–102.

In this light, David Jenkins would seem to offer a skewed analysis of cultural developments when he writes: "Christianity, having settled down into its medieval moulds, was largely unable to 'take' the strictly neutral and secular approach to everything in the universe (including eventually, man in so far as he is homogeneous with the rest of the universe), which is the essence of the scientific approach and which gives it its liberating and creative effect."²⁰ As a matter of historical fact, the separation of humanity from the universe is not the result of the scientific mentality at all, or at least not initially. It was an implicit assumption of that mentality's favorite method, which favored the reduction of all causality to efficient causality. The method was immensely successful, and hence persuasive. In time, however, the method helped drive the synthetic, interpretative spirit out of the world of objectivity; it had to take refuge in a different world.²¹

Thus the protest against "divine intervention" is part of scientific method as it arose in the sixteenth century. The mechanization of the Western world picture²² and its aftermath created a theological problem. Curiously, Christians ended up joining the movement set afoot by the method; many of them became pious Cartesians, too, and withdrew from the world to save their purely spiritual souls. In light of all this, it would have been more correct, perhaps, for David Jenkins to write that, with few exceptions (Pascal being one of them), Christians failed, not so much to "take" the undifferentiated scientific and secular approach to everything in the universe, as to take it on.

We can now go back to Maurice Wiles' *Remaking*. Wiles fully realizes that efficient causality fails to account for revelation; hence he rejects

²⁰ *The Glory of Man* (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1967) 62.

²¹ To take one eloquent example, the great anatomist Vesalius (1514-1564), whose anatomical atlases show that he was the first to see the body scientifically, clinically, dispassionately, with an eye as keen as his scalpel, is a Platonist as well as a Cartesian *avant la lettre*. He completely separates soul from body and spirit from matter, and names God, not creator, implying a coherent world, but *opifex* ("craftsman"), implying a world of mere things. Vesalius can write: "And thus we will render thanks, singing hymns to God the maker of all things, for having bestowed on us a reasonable soul, which we have in common with the angels (as Plato also suggested, not unmindful of the much-abused philosophers). On the strength of that [soul], if there is but faith, we shall enjoy that eternal happiness, when it will no longer be necessary to inquire into the seat and the substance of the soul by the anatomizing of bodies or by means of reason weighed down by bodily shackles" (trans. from J. H. van den Berg, *Het menselijk lichaam* 2 [Nijkerk: G. F. Callenbach, 1965] 221 n. 5). On Vesalius, cf. *The Illustrations from the Works of Andreas Vesalius*, ed. J. B. deC. M. Saunders, and Charles D. O'Malley (New York: Dover, 1973); cf. also F. J. van Beeck, *Christ Proclaimed* (New York—Ramsey—Toronto: Paulist) 41, 45, 525-32.

²² Cf. E. J. Dijksterhuis, *The Mechanization of the World Picture* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1961).

any notion of special divine presence associated with particular instances of "effective causation." The problem, however, is that he does not confront the defective anthropology implicit in modern culture's unawareness of the concepts of formal and final causality. The concept of revelation that Wiles rejects is neither supernatural nor attuned to humanity; hence, he is right to reject it. But he himself remains incapable of developing a concept of revelation that accommodates what he so obviously prizes in human beings: freedom, maturity, and responsibility—the very features that are the authentic human correlates of the self-revelation of God, as the second part of this essay will argue.²³

Some Dimensions of a Fresh Approach

The realizations developed so far must give us our cues to a fresh approach to the problem of divine revelation, an approach that must respect both the tradition and the culture we live in. The patristic tradition suggests that the abiding immanence of the transcendent God in the natural order is an essential key to revelation, and that the presence of the specifically human element in the world is of crucial relevance to both the reality and the understanding of God's immanence in it. Our culture, for its part, insists that faith be wedded to human authenticity and integrity; consequently, it wishes to satisfy itself that Christian revelation is not predicated on a naively interventionist concept of divine activity in the world.

Other realizations will have to guide our analysis as well. If divine revelation is specially connected with the presence of the specifically human in the cosmos, then our analysis is well advised to pay special attention to the distinctive ways in which the world of things functions in the world of persons. In the process of doing so, we are likely, incidentally, to discover remedies for some of the painful dichotomies typical of modernity. There is the Cartesian rift between matter and spirit, between the world and God, and hence, between human reason and divine revelation. Since Kant, there is the added dichotomy between

²³ The extent to which the sixteenth and seventeenth century mechanization of the world picture is an intellectual watershed in the understanding of the "effects" of God's saving action is well demonstrated by the fact that Aquinas has as yet no problems attributing efficient ("instrumental") causality to both the sacraments and Christ's Passion, even though he adds that formal ("exemplary") causality must play a part in explaining the effects of his Resurrection; see, e.g., *ST* 3, q. 62, a. 5, in c and ad 1; q. 56, a.1, ad 3. By contrast, a modern theologian like Karl Rahner resolutely opts, both in an early essay and in his mature *Foundations of Christian Faith*, for formal causality as the central category to understand grace as *communication* of divine life. See "Some Implications of the Scholastic Concept of Uncreated Grace," in *Theological Investigations* 1 (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966) 319–46; *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Seabury, 1978) 120–22.

(infrahuman) nature and (human) freedom. Nature, we must rediscover, is neither fixed nor a closed circle, but pliable—that is, amenable to historicity and, consequently, to freedom. And since nature is not an inert, purely material prison, reason is not its prisoner; hence, human understanding really does reach beyond the world of objects (even if Locke and Kant strongly suggest the opposite); reason is natively open to the presence of spirit in the world and hence to nature's attunement to the order of grace. And if this implies (as it does) that grace is not intrusive, then revelation cannot be narrowly historical; that is, it cannot occur purely adventitiously, in the shape of discrete, readily identifiable historical occurrences entirely wrought by God; rather, it must in some real sense be the flower of nature's immanent aspiration towards transcendence.

It is with themes like these in mind that we must attempt a fresh theological understanding of divine revelation. We will do so by way of analysis of a specifically human phenomenon: communication between and among persons. Our expectation that human communication will prove to provide a useful analogy to divine revelation is based on two well-known claims. First, language about God cannot but avail itself of metaphors borrowed from human concerns and experiences in the world. Secondly, divine revelation is a form of communication.

Our analysis will discover that the reality of divine revelation is inseparable from the very processes that serve as analogies toward its understanding. Human communication, in other words, will prove to be the indispensable anthropological infrastructure of divine revelation.

DIVINE REVELATION AND ITS ANTHROPOLOGICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

We must now develop in detail the fresh approach which we have proposed. The body of our essay offers neither a new theology of revelation, nor a systematic account of its ramifications in specific areas, e.g. in regard to scriptural inspiration. It offers rather a set of basic, primary steps which create room for a satisfactory contemporary understanding of the traditional doctrine of divine revelation. Specifically, our argument will develop, in five consecutive moves, an understanding of communication among human persons as the anthropological infrastructure of divine revelation.

Communication: Process and Content

Anyone whose experience has been shaped by encounters with other persons realizes that communication between persons involves more than the transmission of content, even though all communication does involve

some kind of identifiable content.²⁴ Human communication involves more than things communicated; communication is not a mere transfer of “matter” between and among people. For content to be communicated relatively undistorted from one person to another, what is required on the part of both is an interpersonal context—an awareness of mutual presence, of actively and receptively being with one another. Such a context, in fact, is not required only for the satisfactory conveying of content already possessed by one person involved in the encounter; in intellectual communication, we require a context of interpersonalness to succeed in satisfactorily articulating the content we are conveying.²⁵ Thus, to repeat Martin Buber’s insight, communication as encounter (“I-Thou”) is the matrix of communication as articulation and sharing of content (“I-It”). Or, *communication-with is the matrix of communication-to*. Or again, in communication, parts taken from the world of things are meaningfully integrated into an encounter between or among persons.

It follows that interpersonal encounter and content-sharing are not two discrete events related to each other in a merely occasional fashion—events that only happen to occur simultaneously. In actual communication, the personal encounter and the content conveyed are intrinsically correlated; if they were not, it would be impossible to tell the difference between appropriate and inappropriate communication.

²⁴ The content of communication consists in the things we communicate *to* others. These things are “goods”: material goods like merchandise, professional services, money, and gifts; “somatic” goods like handshakes and kisses; “mental” goods (usually conveyed verbally) like birthday wishes, promises, and (especially) ideas and concepts. With regard to the latter, it must be noted that there prevails a real analogy between the verbal communicating of ideas/concepts and the behavioral conveying of things, in that both are interpersonal transactions. Of course, words (especially terms) are also cognitive; this gives them a capacity for “impersonalness” and abstraction that things and somatic goods do not have, at least not to the same extent. That capacity lies in the ability of words to signify, i.e., to represent things and ideas/concepts outside the context of particular situations. In that sense, words enable us to take our distance from interpersonal situations so as to transcend them intellectually; for that reason, verbal communication, being cognitive, often favors the content of communicative activity at the expense of its interpersonal elements. But we must remember that in using words we not only know things but also handle them, especially by using words to name them, i.e., verbally point to them; and in the interpersonal sphere, we use words (even abstract ones) performatively, as J. L. Austin has shown in his classic *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1962). Consequently, *all* communication, including verbal communication that is chiefly cognitive, is a form of behavior; it is “gestural” (cf. F. J. van Beeck, *Christ Proclaimed* 85–98). From this it follows that all content, including material and somatic goods, functions symbolically, as will be explained.

²⁵ That context may be remote. Think, for example, of the “audience” that any author imagines, whether implicitly or explicitly, while writing with a view to publication.

Whenever human communication is experienced as appropriate, the content communicated is harmoniously integrated into the encounter. In appropriate communication, therefore, there is broad symbolic consonance between the quality of mutual presence and the content communicated, both at the giving and at the receiving end. That is, the content positively carries and conveys the encounter, while at the same time shaping, tempering, and regulating it. Thus appropriate communication ranges from the simple kindness that is fitting when, say, a travel agent gives a customer the required information about airline schedules, to the deep tenderness that suits the encounter between, say, two persons sharing their love of God.

Needless to say, there is a wide area of possibilities for inappropriate communication; human communication is essentially precarious; in most instances, communication involves a struggle with elements of inappropriateness. Inappropriate communication is characterized (not by integration but) by alienation—that is, by appreciable symbolic dissonance. Among countless possible instances, we can think of drastic ones, like the case of the frustrated lover angrily shouting, “But I love you!” or, at the other extreme, the case of the bank teller who, disconcertingly, seems to put his very soul into the cash he counts out to me.²⁶

Interpersonal Self-Communication

Let us now begin gradually to take our distance from the element of content-sharing in communication, so as to focus mainly on the element of personal encounter. A first point to be made is that in every act of content-sharing, we always share more than *what* we share. In actual communication-situations, there is, inherent in all content, a surplus value, a reality that (mostly) remains unstated; for in whatever we do and say, we also express our own reality. Thus in communicating, we always do more than just exactly what we do, always say more than just exactly what we say; for in and beyond what we do and say, we convey ourselves, albeit symbolically. This communication of self remains limited, of course; nothing that we manifestly do or say ever succeeds in conveying the full, integral reality of our selves. That is, if symbolic communication reveals us, it also falls short of wholly giving us away;

²⁶ Here lie the experiential roots of Jean Paul Sartre’s thesis that interpersonal communication is nothing but a bitter illusion, which illustrates the absurdity of human existence. Our struggle to communicate amidst the intractable world of things is perpetual; we humans find ourselves forever attracted to others, yet without ever being positively capable of reaching them as others. This shows we are ultimately doomed, as persons, to remain alienated; locked up inside ourselves, we are as isolated as things, but worse off, since, being self-conscious, we cannot help rebelling against it (*pour-soi*). And with the weariness characteristic of *ressentiment*, Sartre suggests that the simple, unselfconscious existence of things (*en-soi*) is a more appealing form of being than human life.

what we do and say manifests us, but something about us is bound to remain implicit in the manifesting. In fact, what is left implicit about us is often accentuated by the manifest: persons we have come to know really well are often more mysterious to us than others whom we know only superficially. All of this leaves the full reality of "*who we really are*" a perpetual mystery, never to be either expressed or captured in any particular act of communication.

This combination of self-manifestation and persistent hiddenness is carried ("symbolized") at the level of content. What we communicate is always necessarily limited. No matter how much content I communicate, it is never exhaustive: I could have thought of a different gift; to the handshake I could have added a kiss; I remember I left an important point of information to my partner's imagination. Thus the very limits of what we make manifest in communicating suggest the many goods not shared and the untold things that remain unstated; the content that I manifestly communicate also serves to symbolize the content that remains recessive.

But this means that I reveal and conceal myself not only in what I manifestly communicate, but also (and, in fact, often more eloquently) in the things I leave undone and unstated. And thus it is in the chiaroscuro created by what we do and do not do, say and do not say, that we most adequately communicate—that is, both reveal and conceal, both surrender and hold back—two realities, distinct yet integrated: our personal selves and what we mean to communicate.

This leads to one further, more radical step. In communication, the interpersonal conveying of self is the active, originating element: it undergirds and sustains what occurs at the level of content. For even if I withhold content—that is, if I communicate "nothing in particular"—I cannot help conveying myself, somehow. That is, while we are physically with others, we are bound to convey something. Among other things, this accounts for the unpleasant fact that absent-minded persons can be ever so annoyingly present; it also explains why, in any encounter, those who are not involved, whether by design or out of impotence, have such a frustrating way of obstructing communication among those who are. As persons, therefore, we cannot not communicate; we cannot help "revealing," or "manifesting," ourselves, if always incompletely, and hence, never without at least some puzzlement. In any situation, we are players and participants, like it or not. This holds even when we absent ourselves physically: we cannot help suggesting some kind of message, even if we do not always articulate just what it is, in which case we leave it to others to second-guess what we might mean. Thus, whether by action or by default, we always communicate something, and in that "something" we also symbolically communicate ourselves. To exist as a person is to self-communicate, if always in particular, and hence partial, ways.

Now in communicating ourselves, both in what we manifest and in what we leave undone and unstated, we invite a response in kind. That response is the self-communication of others. Every act of self-communication is an appeal, a plea addressed to others to render themselves present to me in actuality. These moves, of course, involve sizable risks on both sides, for full symbolic consensance between what I communicate and who I am is never insured in advance, neither in my offer of self-communication nor in others' response to it. Unintentionally, I may botch the way I come across; equally unintentionally, others may misinterpret me. Worse still, my invitations and appeals can meet with deliberate indifference and cold rejection on the part of others; and I myself have it in me to turn devious in addressing myself to others and seek to manipulate them.

Still, all these ominous realizations serve only to reinforce, rather than detract from, a fundamental truth: we can no more help appealing to others to communicate themselves to us than we can help communicating ourselves to them. To exist as a person is to invite the self-communication of others, if always in particular, and hence partial, ways.

Responsibility and Freedom

But this is where a fundamental human responsibility emerges, and inseparable from it, a fundamental human freedom. This can be explained in two successive moves, as follows.

The first move. At the interpersonal level, communication involves more than one bare personal existent acknowledging, in and through what he or she communicates, the bare existence of another person. Persons are valuable, not just derivatively, by reference to an extrinsic set of moral norms, but originally and inherently. The simple givenness of a person, therefore, is not a bare, neutral fact; it creates an ethical situation; each and every person intrinsically demands to be responded to, in a way each and every thing does not; among persons, factual availability for response establishes moral responsibility.²⁷

²⁷ Readers of Emmanuel Levinas will recognize in this proposition my deep indebtedness to his central thesis that the personal identity we bring to our encounters with others is not self-constituted, but responsive. That is, it is fundamentally beholden to the unconditional, essentially unilateral demand for justice that resides in the face, both utterly vulnerable and sovereignly authoritative, of the other, who precisely as other reveals God. The present treatment differs from Levinas' in that it places personal relatedness, and the responsive identity-experience that is inseparable from it (cf. *GE* §35.1), in the context of communication among fundamentally equal, and hence equally responsible partners. As a result, I understand the inescapable imperative inherent in personal encounter in terms of fundamental symmetry and mutuality. This implies an understanding of encounter (and the moral obligation inherent in it) as a matter of sympathy, and ultimately, of God as compassionate love, demanding the active pursuit of justice without limits.

In the self-communication by which I invite others to convey themselves to me I must acknowledge this responsibility. My self-communication should suggest an offer of positive regard and acceptance of the other as such. The self-revealing plea, "Be there for me," must imply the commitment, "I will be there for you." My offer of self-communication, no matter how implicit, must always intimate that, in the actuality of communicative behavior, I will encounter the other person, no matter how clumsily, in accordance with his or her intrinsic worth as a person.

This means that in every particular communication-situation, symbolic consonance in communication is not just a pragmatic issue that touches on the orderly transfer of content; it is a moral issue predicated on the abiding nature of personhood. Both my own integrity as a person and the integrity of the other demand that, in and through whatever we communicate, we do justice both to each other and to our own authentic selves.

Needless to say, this justice is an elusive pursuit, since the personal integrity of both ourselves and others is beyond full comprehension or expression; the selfhood of persons, our own as well as others', and our mutual presence are indeed available to us, but only in symbol—that is, precariously and tentatively, in the ongoing experience of patient negotiation and interpretation. But it is precisely in thus seeking to do justice that we empower each other to overcome our inherent trepidation in the face both of what we are and of what we are meant to be more fully: persons responsively and responsibly present to one another.

Communicating our selves and inviting the self-communication of others, therefore, is not something we can suspend at will; it is inherent in our existence as persons. Hence, the demand for justice and integrity in interpretative communication is coextensive with human life itself; it is always with us, even though it surfaces only in particular communicative interactions, in the form of a demand for symbolic consonance. Thus personal integrity, our own and others', ceaselessly urges us to do justice to others, by sharing with them such things as we have at our disposal, and to do so in such a way as to share, in some fashion, our authentic selves with them as well. This sharing encompasses, on our part, a morally authoritative appeal extended to others to do justice in turn; thus we invite them to share with us such things as they have at their disposal, so as in some fashion to share themselves with us as well.²⁸

²⁸ The opposite of all this is disregard of others. This occurs in pardonable (if often culpable) ways when, to whatever extent, I treat another person inconsiderately, i.e., as subhuman, as a thing. But even things are entitled to an appropriate level of positive regard; between persons and things, true encounters (if sub-verbal ones) do occur; "mere things" do not exist. For this reason, inconsiderateness, however immoral, still involves

The second move. Inseparably from the exercise of this fundamental responsibility between and among persons we become conscious of a fundamental freedom as well. As persons, we have seen, we are living gestures of responsible communication extended to others, as well as appeals for responsible communication in turn. Yet every time appropriate communication comes off, we are delighted and surprised—even thankful, so much so that we will want to talk about it, to the point of bearing witness to it. Much as appropriate communication is an obvious and natural thing to engage in, we apparently find it is not to be taken for granted. This begs for further reflection.

At the heart of the issue lies the following experience: in the presence of other persons, we never feel neutral. We feel either in touch or out of touch, basically connected or largely alienated. How to account for this?

To exist with other persons is to self-communicate and to invite self-communication. This is given; we cannot suspend it at will. Being with others is tantamount to being called to responsiveness; others call upon us willy-nilly; we are responsible to each other's personalness. No wonder factual inability or, worse, refusal to engage in appropriate communication strikes us as a moral failure, a failure of fundamental mutual justice. Not surprisingly, when, in a particular situation, we sense that communication is failing, we are liable to feel driven into some form of personal isolation; a curious self-consciousness (of a self-centered, nonliberating kind) may take hold of us; by way of cover, we may strike a pose or two, deliberately or instinctively; but the posturing only further checks the flow of encounter, or blocks it altogether. Symbolic dissonance has set in; inappropriate communication takes over; we become actors. Somehow the suspicion may come to us that we are being unpleasantly and unfairly judged, and found wanting. We only pretend we are communicating; we may even think this is the best we can do for now. Still, vaguely or keenly, we are conscious that we are betraying what we are, namely, persons responsibly present to persons. In failing to communicate appropriately, we are falling short of what is morally incumbent on us as persons, as well as being deprived of what is owed to us as persons.

that minimal form of positive regard that consists in the acknowledgement of the other's existence as part of the world. The ultimate immorality, and the true source of all violence against humanity as such, consists in actively ignoring human personalness as such—treating persons as non-persons without value. This frightening possibility looms on the horizon of any world view to the extent to which it is enslaved to things and desensitized to the whole range of the universe's spiritual ingredients. As a result, such a world view is liable to recognize as really real only things, especially its own favorite ideas, ideologies, and idols.

But thank goodness, there is the other experience, too. Few things are so satisfying, exhilarating, or touching as "hitting it off," at any level of appropriateness, with other persons. Yet, curiously, whenever communication comes off, it will strike us as somehow unexpected—as a bounty we cannot wholly account for, let alone take credit for. We are satisfied, and in giving expression to our satisfaction, we are likely to recount, with gratitude, elements that contributed to the positive experience; but the elements never quite seem to fully explain why "it clicked." This drives home the realization that appropriate communication, while the most natural and pertinent thing in the world as well as a fundamental moral imperative, can never be compelled; it is a free interpersonal gift. How can this be?

In self-communicating, I freely extend to others what it is my deepest duty to extend to them as persons: my very self—that is, that which it is my sole as well as deepest privilege to extend. Others may jeopardize this freedom; they may succeed in tricking the gift of myself out of me by feigned love, or even in extorting it from me by violence; but it would be immoral for them even to try to do so. Others may also enhance this freedom. They can accept the gift of myself from me. They can even elicit it from me, by freely communicating themselves with me. In fact, it is precisely in response to acts of free self-communication that I find myself encouraged and empowered to communicate myself in turn. Without the inviting presence of others drawing me out of myself, and without myself agreeing to be drawn out, I might end up finding myself unmoved, habitually powerless to extend myself to anyone. That would be moral impotence indeed! Abandoned by others, or worse, having myself abandoned others,²⁹ I would find myself powerless freely to choose to be what I can neither deny I am nor help being: myself. Destined for an open identity cherished and developed by habits of relatedness, I would find myself mired in futile self-concern—my identity turned, perversely, into a prison.

Thus in the very act of appropriate communication we find ourselves personally exercising and enjoying, in constructive mutuality, a gracious, liberating inner freedom. This freedom is as fundamental to our life together as persons as the obligation to respond to each other; in appropriate communication, in other words, we freely agree to empower each other. Thus we freely endorse and enhance what we cannot help

²⁹ Note Martin Buber's observation that there is a decisive difference between these two forms of failure of relatedness: "the one who is abandoned by those to whom he uttered the true *Thou* is accepted by God, not the one who himself abandoned them" (*Ich und Du*, [2d ed.; Köln: Jakob Hegner, 1966] 123; *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970] 152).

being: our selves—that most precious of things which we are also free to diminish and even reject, in self-defeating and ultimately unsuccessful self-contradiction.³⁰

To sum up, to exist as persons is to communicate, and this communication consists in the actualization of ourselves and each other as persons dynamically present to each other; this actualization is successful to the extent that it is inspired by mutual empowerment freely given and accepted.

Self-Communication, Significant Others, and Traditions

This is where a twofold issue arises. We are impotent to communicate without at least some others to draw us out; our mutuality in communicating, in other words, is shot through with dependence, and what is more, dependence on the part of all. This dependence is at once ontic and actual, the former being foundational, the latter at least partial. It is *ontic* inasmuch as, for any communication to occur, *all* persons are dependent on the givenness of other persons—that is, on their factual availability for response; it is *actual* inasmuch as, in particular situations, at least *some* are at least partly dependent on the free initiative of particular others. We must explore the implications of both.

Appropriate communication constantly needs free initiative; it is neither self-originating nor self-sustaining. Whenever and wherever two or more persons are available to each other for encounter, all are indeed summoned to respond, but the question is who will grasp the opportunity. Or when an actual process of communication flags, the question is who will make the decisive move to revive it. Who will freely and creatively respond, and to whom, to actuate the process of mutual empowerment?

Many of us can name persons who have been personally significant to us. Not infrequently, they are people who have also been functionally significant to us; they gave us many things we are grateful for. More importantly, they had a way with things: the seemingly effortless way in which they did things suggested they were in control of what they had to give. Yet their real significance for us lies in the fact that they had a way

³⁰ Here we have laid bare the anthropological infrastructure of the experience of supernatural grace. Limiting communication to the conveying of content involves a neutral treatment of persons, as if they were mere agents designed only to manipulate the world of things by efficient causality. On account of their immanent authenticity, however, human persons are transcendent; they operate by formal and final causality as well. Hence, persons are owed gestures of communication, which involves a degree of benevolence; mere correctness is morally deficient; it amounts to a slight. Yet actually encountering others in keeping with their inherent nature as persons is an activity that can only be freely undertaken, and in that sense gracious—something which cannot be extorted as owed by right. In the interpersonal world, therefore, there is no such thing as “pure nature”; in dealing with each other, we either fail to meet the just demands of “nature” or we graciously and freely exceed them.

with *us*; that suggested what kind of persons they were. Thus we have come to remember them, thankfully, as part of who we have become; they are integral to our autobiography, to the story of such enlightenment and self-awareness as has become ours. If they did train and model us, it was not in *their* favorite mold; in fact, they discouraged admiration and smiled at our self-conscious attempts at mimicry. Instead, they were creative, functionally and personally; thus they helped us find a shape of our own. Curiously, if they made problems for us (as quite often they did), they usually turned out not to be part of them. That is, they managed to identify with us without interfering with us; we sensed they were concerned, but in such a way as to let us be; we felt free. They may have added to our self-knowledge by sharing with us (in a way we could accept) their informed judgments about us; yet they seemed less interested in *what* they understood *about* us than in understanding *us*. Apparently undaunted by the disparateness and incoherence of our experience of ourselves, of others, of our world, and of God, they succeeded in providing us with a welcoming, searching, illuminating presence. That presence felt like a pledge of acceptance. Thus we were enabled to let our philosophy of life and our self-knowledge, our judgments and our convictions take shape in our own minds; they were instrumental in revealing us to ourselves. And so, here we are, having grown into tolerably self-accepted and well-integrated persons, with a fairly comfortable sense of self-identity, and hence, with a reasonable ability (as well as quiet courage) to reach out to others as scattered and confused now as we once were.

Invariably, we remember such persons as remarkably well-integrated and hence as quite self-sufficient. While they obviously enjoyed dealing with our immature or impotent selves, they did not seem to revel in helping us; if they were at all dependent on us, our dependence on them was far greater; we really needed them. Yet what seemed to matter to them was not so much our need as our selves, our inner potential for freedom and identity. In fact, what made them especially capable of enhancing us was that they clearly did not expect to be enhanced by us. Modest without self-abasement, engagingly unselfconscious, and clearly unimpressed by their own level of personal integration, they were carefree enough to be freely present to our struggling selves, penetratingly yet unobtrusively.

Persons like this illustrate a fundamental thesis. The actual event of appropriate interpersonal communication is always a matter of mutual presence and empowerment. But to initiate and sustain both the presence and the empowerment, what is needed is personal presence freely, i.e. onesidedly, undertaken, which is the fruit of personal identity come to maturity. The generous inner freedom of the mature is the soul of constructive communication.

This can also be formulated as follows: to the extent that persons acquire a habit of integrating the world of things, and thus a habit of transcending their immediate involvement in it, to that extent they will attain their true personal selves. To that extent they will also be capable of personal presence to others, of freely identifying with them, and of communicating themselves to others in such a way as to enhance the latter's identity. Put more radically: the more transcendent persons are, the more immanent they are liable to be.

This has an important consequence: encounters in which significant others reveal themselves to us are appreciated by us only to the extent that, in encountering them, we find ourselves revealed to ourselves. This can be rephrased in the form of another crucial thesis: encounters in which we meet significant others as truly other are inseparable from authentic self-experience. Unlike the self-awareness predicated on various forms of self-analysis, self-examination, and introspection, authentic self-experience is responsive; in it we find, in ways inaccessible to our autonomous egos, self-enlightenment, self-recovery, self-correction and conversion, and growth. Even more pertinently, responsive self-experience guarantees and authenticates to us the reality of the significant other's presence. From the depth of our self-experience, therefore, we should never draw the conclusion that we are only experiencing ourselves. Rather, what we experience in our self-experience is the other precisely as other—that is, as one who encounters us without our ever being able to fully account for his or her identity.

Responsive self-experience becomes manifest in the phenomenon of witness. Most commonly, witness involves two levels of affirmation. First, we pay tribute, in both word and deed, to significant others on account of what they have given us. But secondly and more pertinently, we witness to significant others on account of who they have been for us; they are integral to ourselves inasmuch as we have become authentic, creative persons. Thus in "testimonial autobiography,"³¹ we tend to place whatever things others have given us in the context of who they have been for us; what they did and said has come to symbolize who they are for us as persons. Grateful self-awareness rather than functional indebtedness prompts us to bear witness to significant others.

Not surprisingly, however, in testimonial autobiography we will also find ourselves attributing to significant others things which, as a matter of naked fact, they never did or said. But then, in giving a thankful account of ourselves we are not interested in naked facts; it is out of the fullness of our responsive self-experience that we make the attribution; there are certain things we cannot imagine we would do or understand here and now if we had not encountered them there and then.

³¹ Cf. *GE* §41.2; §45.2; §46.2.

All of this can be put more theoretically. The self-revealing presence of significant others originally occurs in interpersonal encounters freely animated by initiators. Still, it is the recipients that will proceed to cherish the encounter as an abiding element of their self-awareness; they, therefore, are also the ones that will proceed to witness to it in the form of content—that is, by means of definite actions and articulate statements. Typically, they will credit these doings and sayings not so much to themselves (even though they are authentically theirs) as to the significant others who continue to inspire them.

All of this serves to make a point crucial to our analysis: Significant (self-)communication that comes to us from others is never experienced as a mere intervention from outside. In interpersonal encounter, when the free (and in that sense transcendent) presence of another person communicates itself to us, it does so with an impact that is immanent. In interpersonal encounter, the inner testimony of self-experience matches the testimony of outward engagement with otherness. Our best touchstone of the significance of any encounter is immanent: it consists in the experience of finding our deeper, authentic selves engaged, actuated, restored, enhanced—surprisingly yet unmistakably.

So much for our analysis of the fact that all appropriate interpersonal communication is actually dependent on the mature freedom of significant others. Now we must explore the implications of the fact that we are ontically dependent on others for communication. It involves two levels of experience, of which the first is an experience of tradition.

Appropriate communication, we have said, is neither self-originating nor self-sustaining. This implies that whenever it occurs, not even the mature persons capable of authentically identifying with less mature others completely account for its occurrence. The reason for this is that mature persons that animate appropriate communication are not wholly self-made. Those to whose mature freedom and generosity we bear witness once encountered others to whom they came to bear witness; typically, significant others will acknowledge their dependence on the positive regard once freely extended to them by others significant to them, others not actually present. For mature persons, therefore, to engage in a communicative encounter is not the reinvention of the wheel every time they do it. Rather, the opposite is the case. As we encounter more and more persons as truly other, we discover that they become, in us, a quiet company of friends who equip us for encounters with yet others.³² Significant others, in other words, are active participants in a tradition of freely undertaken benevolence to others.

³² True encounter, in other words, enhances our disposition to engage in further encounters. It is enlightening to contrast this experience with the experience of accumulating things. As we collect things (that is, whatever fits the category of content), we find that

However, there is something comparable on the receiving end as well. Those to whom significant others communicate themselves are not *tabulae rasae*; no matter how immature they may be, they are not without an identity of their own to start with. Interpersonal communication invariably builds on what is given; and we know from experience that this givenness includes an observable initial preparedness for interpersonal communication.

We conclude that authentic capacity for interpersonal communication is at least partly habitual, a matter of preexisting tradition. Our factual availability to each other for responsive and responsible encounter—the ground for our ontic dependence on each other for communication—is never completely formless.

Lest we make the mistake of casting the dynamic we are analyzing in narrowly (inter)personalist terms, an important point must be made here. Recipients of the mature presence of significant others, it was explained, will witness to that presence to others in word and deed, and they will do so also in the form of content—that is, by means of definite actions and articulate statements that convey the freshness of the experience. Typically, it was added, they will attribute these doings and sayings to the significant others that inspired them. Witness to the creative maturity of significant others, in other words, will breed new communication, not only of the live interpersonal variety, but also of the instrumental institutional kind, the kind that promises *stability*. Testimony borne by trustworthy witnesses founds reliable schools of action and thought; it tends toward the structuring of *traditions* (and eventually of a *culture*), in the twin forms of organized common life and traditional community wisdom.³³ Still, neither shared norms nor shared wisdom are sure-fire devices; they will function as means of appropriate communication only to the extent that they function *symbolically*, i.e., as vehicles of a truly communicative, responsive life together. For such a meaningful life any community and any culture needs symbolic consonance; shared norms for action and the truths that enshrine shared wisdom must be experienced as meaningful and authentic. But all norms and wisdom

they tend to crowd each other out (not only in space and time, but also, say, in books, not to mention the memory, the mind, and especially the heart). It is to be noted that the category of things can include persons, to the extent that we collect them as if they were objects.

³³ Note that the relationship between interpersonal encounter and witness to significant others in deed and word is analogous to the relationship between the worship of God and Christian witness in conduct and teaching (*GE*, §47.5). Note, too, that any kind of norms for common life and any community wisdom must be learned in order to be understood, as George Lindbeck has well explained in *The Nature of Doctrine*.

depend for their meaningfulness on interpretation by authentic witnesses. All communities and cultures, therefore, need prophets, people who creatively shape the intractable here and now out of an affinity with the soul of the common tradition. In the long run, tradition is kept alive by authentic communicators, not by critics, and certainly not by taskmasters, letter-worshippers, and hacks.

Interpersonal Communication and its Transcendent Precondition

Traditions, both of live interpersonal benevolence and of lifeshaping structures of communication, go a long way to account for the actual occurrence of constructive interpersonal communication. Still, it would be rash to conclude that they adequately account for it. It is surely pointless to deny, at the strictly interpersonal level, that people do indeed grow in freedom and generosity from the benevolence shown to them by others. Still, it is primitive to think of sustained traditions of interpersonal communication solely in terms of a chain reaction of strictly personal empowerments; and in any case, we know from experience that any such imagined chains have weak links: we find ourselves also failing to live up to the positive regard extended to us by others, and thus we interrupt the flow of constructive communication. At the level of institutions, it is true that people do indeed rely on stable traditions for appropriate communication; but we know that traditions can also harden and become a hindrance to communication rather than a help.

Thus we are faced with the fact that ultimately we find ourselves presented to each other for appropriate communication simply as we are, naked and without ado; just by being around each other, we mutually invite constructive ("creative") acceptance, and we discern each other's habitual capacity for it; in the final analysis, what we must respond to in communicating is our naked, unadorned selves, presented to each other in our irreducible otherness.

Yet the fact is that we do actually respond, and with a spontaneity that is never quite reducible to the merely appropriate. True encounters with others do occur, transcending the world of things; others get the best out of us, i.e., the truly unexpected response we did not know we had inside us. When truly appropriate communication—the free mutual sharing of ourselves—does occur, it somehow reveals a spiritual wealth that surpasses the expectations prompted by the merely given. Living, immature as we are, in a precarious world, here we are, actually communicating; while not creating one another in any absolute sense, we do decisively affect each other as we grow as persons. Thus the fact that fruitful interpersonal communication animated by freedom and personal maturity does occur, even in the midst of chance and immaturity, is a marvel that eludes complete rationalization. There is something about

the experience of interpersonal communication that suggests that, ultimately, it is simply a *gift*—one that will forever surprise the anticipations of even the most mature.

Not surprisingly, therefore, the free, mature, truly integrated, self-giving person is experienced, in some religious traditions, as a *witness* to a better world. Secure personal identity freely, unself-consciously, and indeed unselfishly shared with others, we sense, must be somehow embedded in, and encompassed and supported by, a larger Presence that is ineffably free, eternal, generous, indefeasible, and mysteriously self-manifesting,

Ground of being, and granite of it: pást áll
Grásp Gód, throned behind
Death with a sovereignty that heeds but hides, bodes but abides.³⁴

Ultimately, that is, it must be a transcendent, gracious self-communicative Presence that inspires and guarantees the freedom with which the best among us communicate themselves to other persons. Only an unconditional, all-enabling Presence is transcendent enough to move our innermost immanence to open itself to others without anxiety about ourselves.³⁵

But in that case that same Presence must also be so penetrating as to ground the deepest identity of all persons, in an acceptance so unconditional as to be wholly creative. There, at the core of each person, it establishes, not only the unconditional demand for positive regard that marks all persons as persons, but also their irresistible attractiveness. That is, God's everlasting offer of self-communication must be the transcendent precondition for the immanent appeal that invites us to touch and affect others so close to the core of their identities. By way of

³⁴ Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Wreck of the Deutschland*, stanza 32.

³⁵ We can think of persons of extraordinary maturity and commitment like Dag Hammarskjöld, whose reflections, collected in *Markings*, have led many to a renewed, truly responsible sense of God. Fictional characters may come to mind as well: Prince Leo Nikolayevich Myshkin in Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, consciously modeled after Jesus Christ by its author; Tarrou in Albert Camus' *The Plague*, who has decided to identify with victims rather than join the cause of violence by fighting evil; and, in Iris Murdoch's novels, figures like Max LeJour in *The Unicorn* (1963), with his mature belief in the nonviolence of the Good, or more recently, in *The Message to the Planet* (1989), the eccentric Marcus Vallar, who, after remarkable early careers as a mathematician and a painter, sets out on a tightrope search for the truth beyond the cosmic network, until at length he charms others by a wordless, enigmatic kindness, to which, however, he himself succumbs because it leads to "pure suffering," which is an attribute of God alone. On the truly adult person as a witness to the living God, cf. Thomas Merton's observations on "final integration" in *Contemplation in a World of Action* 205–17; cf. also his *Faith and Violence* 111–18. I am indebted to Walter E. Conn's anthology *Conversion* for the last two references.

a variation on a theme played long ago by Aquinas, we might say, "All those who encounter others encounter God implicitly in whomever they encounter."³⁶ God's (self-)communication, therefore, could not possibly be experienced as a mere intervention from outside; it graciously addresses us at the core of our identity, where we are made in the divine image and likeness, i.e., in the image of Christ.

But in that case the divine Presence also encompasses our failures in communication; that is, it patiently and faithfully holds out hope for a renewal of encounter even when those involved in interpersonal communication prove inadequate, and when the traditions that support it languish and lapse. "God writes straight with crooked lines."

A well-known passage in Augustine's *Confessions* illustrates this insight. When at last he finds himself in communion with God in and through the community of the Church, Augustine is free, finally, to recall the implications of his experience of being, not so very long ago, the Prodigal Son. Completely at a loss, he recalls how he had wandered, first among the poets, then among the philosophers; none of them had connected and communicated with him in such a way as to nourish him and lead him to a mature sense of identity; he had been

... barred from You as much as from the husks I gave to the swine to eat, ... struggling and straining, short of truth.

Now a Christian, he has become a witness. With profound gratitude he recalls the significant others he has encountered on his slow, winding road to the Church: Monica, Alypius, Ambrose. They have been to him, not only reliable supporters of his authentic, long-lost self, but also faithful and effective witnesses to God's enduring presence. But that is not all. Participation in the community of faith has enabled Augustine also to discover what lay behind the communicative impasses and failures in his life. Ultimately, therefore, it is God, transcendent and immanent, who has led him to the truth, both by the banality of illusion and error and by the faithfulness of trustworthy friends. So he can conclude:

Yet You were inside, deeper than my innermost self, and above, higher than my uppermost self.³⁷

Here is the core of the catholic understanding of revelation. The divine self-communication comes from on high, yet it is inseparable from

³⁶ Cf. *Quaestio disputata de veritate* q. 22, a. 2, ad 1: *Omnia cognoscentia cognoscunt implicite Deum in quolibet cognito* ("All beings that know implicitly know God in whatever they know").

³⁷ *Confessions* 3.6.11 (CSEL 33.52-3): "longe peregrinabar abs te exclusus et a siliquis porcorum, quos de siliquis pascebam"; "laborans et aestuans inopia veri"; "tu autem eras interior intimo meo et superior summo meo."

authentic human immanence. But far from simply becoming a matter of self-experience, the God who reveals the divine Self becomes more, not less, adorable and ungraspable for being so intimately manifest.³⁸ Thus divine self-communication makes witnesses of human persons: God is “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob,” and ultimately the “God of Jesus Christ.” Yet while touching us as persons, God bids us reshape the world of both persons and things. In that world, we cannot hope ever to convey or understand God’s self-revelation fully, whether in action or in speech, whether as a church community or as individual Christians. So we treasure such ways as the tradition has tried, while we keep on seeking inspiration to try new ways as we travel.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

Let us conclude with a few assorted reflections to establish linkage between the basic explorations spelled out in this essay and the understanding of divine revelation happily current today.

If our analyses are an attempt at broadening the basis of the Catholic understanding of revelation, they may also help remove some of its traditional rigidity. This rigidity is rooted in recent history. Explicit Catholic doctrine on divine revelation as such is a late development; it did not occur until the nineteenth century. Accordingly, the theological reflections associated with it took their cue, not from the great tradition, but almost exclusively from an eighteenth-century agenda: the deadlock between reason and Christian revelation. Practically speaking, therefore, “revelation” had come to be identified exclusively with the *mysteria proprie dicta* of the Incarnation and the mysteries directly connected with it (cf. DS 2779; 3015-20; 1341). This had led to two interconnected positions, misleading not only because of their unnecessary rigidity but also on account of their being out of touch with the great tradition.

The first position concerns both anthropology and Christian theology. The understanding of the “mysteries” of the faith, and of the way in which they had been delivered to the Church, had become far too content-oriented and rational. “Mystery” had long ceased to be understood as a matter both of God’s ongoing self-communication to humanity and of the corresponding revelation in history of humanity’s own authentic nature and destiny. Instead, it had come to be understood as a “deposit” of absolute truths, inaccessible to reason by definition, and hence, acceptable only by God-given faith, upon the sole authority of the magisterium—an authority ultimately guaranteed by the revealing God. In response to this, the Second Vatican Council based its teaching about revelation on a broader, less rationalistic anthropology, enshrined in the

³⁸ Cf. *GE* §34.2.

Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (cf. esp. *Gaudium et spes* 12). On a more strictly theological front, it described revelation in the salvation-historical terms proposed by the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei verbum* 2-4). The explorations offered in this essay are substantially indebted to both of these moves.

The second position is likewise connected with salvation-history and aims at correcting a narrowly Christological understanding of revelation. In making the divinity of Jesus Christ into the sole determinative truth of revelation, Christian doctrine and theology had separated the historical Jesus from the mystery inherent in Israel's faith-tradition and in the "cloud of witnesses" (Heb 12:1) produced by it. The "pioneer and accomplisher of our faith" (Heb 12:2), the "faithful witness" (Rev 1:5; cf. 1 Tim 6:13), had almost entirely disappeared behind "the Word made flesh" (Jn 1:14). As a result, any Christology from below had become impossible, whether of the transcendental kind or of the kind that could take the historical life of Jesus the Jew seriously. Vatican II made essential corrections in this area. It recalled God's self-revelation to Abraham and to the People of Israel through Moses and through the Prophets (*Dei verbum* 14; cf. 4), and it insisted on salvation-historical revelation, by means of which "the deepest truth regarding both God and human salvation has shone forth to us in Christ, who is the mediator as well as the fulfillment of all of revelation" (*Dei verbum* 2). It will have escaped no one that the analysis of revelation proposed in this essay is fundamentally indebted to Israel's monotheism and the humanism that has been its fruit. In Israel's faith, it is precisely God's utter transcendence that guarantees the intimate divine presence to a humanity made in the divine image, and hence, natively attuned to the privilege of hearing God's silent Word in the utterances of a succession of witnesses calling for responsiveness and responsibility.

In his important monograph *Models of Revelation*,³⁹ Avery Dulles has explained that revelation takes many forms, and hence, that it allows for a variety of partial, yet convergent, theological approaches. Thus it can be viewed as doctrine, history, inner experience, dialectical presence, and new awareness. Readers familiar with Dulles' treatise will have noticed that the analysis proposed here attempts to do justice to the models proposed by Dulles in their organic interconnectedness. They will also have noticed that our treatment endorses Dulles' own constructive proposal: revelation is God's self-revealing presence mediated symbolically.⁴⁰

³⁹ Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983.

⁴⁰ On the subject of symbolism and the usefulness of "dialogue" as a model of revelation, cf. also David Brown's "God and Symbolic Action," in *Divine Action: Studies Inspired by the Philosophical Theology of Austin Farrer*, ed. Brian Hebblethwaite and Edward Hender-

Finally, our contention that significant (self-)communication that comes to us, both from others in their relative transcendence and from the utterly transcendent God, is never experienced as a mere intervention from outside involves an endorsement of an important thesis of Karl Rahner's: only those whose authenticity has been inwardly transformed by God's self-communication can interpret the historic symbols of revelation, i.e., can understand divine revelation as it has taken shape in concrete, "categorical" forms.⁴¹

son (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1990) 103-22. The following proviso, however, is in order. Brown's appeal to telepathy and telekinesis (104) is an *argumentum ex ignoto*. It suggests (mistakenly, I think) that we are dealing with reliably established experiences and, what is more, with reliable insight into the structure of these experiences. More pertinently, however, the appeal to paranormal phenomena is not essential to Brown's argument; hence it could have been omitted.

⁴¹ *Foundations of Christian Faith* 149-50: "This transcendental knowledge . . . must be distinguished from verbal and propositional revelation as such . . . [It] is a modification of our transcendental consciousness produced permanently by God in grace. . . . And as an element in our transcendentality which is produced by God's self-communication, it is already revelation in the proper sense. . . . Only when God is the subjective principle of the speaking and of man's hearing in faith can God in his own self express himself."