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893RD ORDINARY GENERAL MEETING

HELD IN THE CAXTON HALL, WESTMINSTER, S.W.1, ON MONDAY,
1ST MAY, 1950.

THE VERY REV. W. R. MATTHEWS, K.C.V.O., D.D., D.LITT.,
DEAN OF ST. PAUL'S, IN THE CHAIR.

The Minutes of the previous Meeting were read, confirmed and signed.

The following elections were announced:—Rev. Albert Hughes, B.A., B.D., Fellow; John J. Brunt, Esq., M.B., Ch.B., Fellow; W. J. Reed, Esq., Member; R. H. Reed, Esq., Member (on transfer from Associate); D. A. Burgess, Esq., Associate; N. L. Dunning, Esq., Associate.

The CHAIRMAN then called on Professor H. D. Lewis, M.A., B.Litt., to read his paper entitled "The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr."

THE THEOLOGY OF REINHOLD NIEBUHR

By Prof. H. D. LEWIS, M.A., B.Litt.

SYNOPSIS.

Reinhold Niebuhr opposes his own view to two other views, designated by him respectively "The Classical View" and "The Modern View." Both these views of history, as Niebuhr describes them, attempt to rationalize the meaning of history too exhaustively, the first by seeking the meaning of history in certain immutable forms or ideals and thus lessening the importance of actual historical process, the second by expecting some eventual consummation of history to exhibit it as the realisation of a fully rational end. Niebuhr agrees with the Classical View that the meaning of history must be found beyond history, but he conceives of it in terms of a transcendent reality which is also immanent in historical process. In presenting this view he centres attention especially on the "ambiguous" nature of man as a creature bound to act selfishly and yet aware of a wider claim, a creature of "necessity and freedom." But it is argued in the following paper that this does not do the slightest justice to fundamental ethical principles, and the position is shown to be fraught with other serious confusions. In the closing sections it is also urged that the account of the irrational element in human nature offered by Niebuhr has little real relevance to the problem of immanence and transcendence.

DR. NIEBUHR is one of the most influential religious thinkers of the present time. Nor is it merely in religious matters that his influence is felt. He exercises much direct influence on politics also, and he has helped to sway opinion on public matters of great importance, notably during the war. But this

is not a case of the same person playing two rather different roles. For Niebuhr's religious thought is largely concerned with problems of practice, and especially with the application of Christian ideals to public action. He is aware of the dangers which beset the vigorous reaffirmation of the Protestant faith in the modern world, where Protestants have often been held responsible for political quietism and a shelving of responsibility under cover of an other-worldly religion in which salvation is mediated for us in ways that seem to have little to do with the way we live. It is plain that there cannot be many accusations more serious than this, and it is therefore of the greatest interest and significance that Reinhold Niebuhr should have devoted his latest work to the examination of the place which Christian teaching finds for the life of historical change we live in the present existence. He appreciates the importance which religious thinkers have ascribed to history, and he wishes himself to support and emphasise the view that the Christian revelation draws its significance for us from its embodiment in historical circumstances. But how is this emphasis on historical process to be reconciled with the belittlement of human action in traditional Protestant doctrine, and how must history be understood in the new assessment of its importance? These are the questions we wish to put especially to leading Protestant thinkers, and when one of them singles out these particular questions for discussion in a major work, it calls for our most careful consideration. There seems, therefore, to be ample justification for confining attention this evening, as I propose to do, to Niebuhr's account of historical processes in his newly published work, *Faith and History*. I have in any case ventured to comment on other occasions on much of Niebuhr's earlier writings; and the publisher furthermore assures us in a note on the dust-cover that Niebuhr offers us in this book "a re-examination of beliefs until recently regarded as axiomatic, and . . . a positive, if not actually exhaustive, statement of his position."

There are two views which Niebuhr seems especially anxious to avoid, designated by him respectively "the Classical View" and "the Modern View." It is by contrast with these two views that he develops his own position; and we must therefore give a brief account of them.

Both the Classical and the Modern view of history, as they are understood by Niebuhr, regard historical changes as being fundamentally intelligible. But they do so in very different

ways. According to the Classical view the world of historical change can only be made intelligible in relation to a world of changelessness which is altogether beyond it. The former participates somehow in the latter and is significant solely in relation to it. It is the intelligible patterns exhibited in the course of history that are therefore important, the problem of the recalcitrant intractable stuff of things and their embarrassing particularity being shelved in favour of a concentration of attention on the 'form and structure,' "the Nous or Logos which forms chaos into order and gives the unformed matter or Hyle its form. This version of the creation of the temporal world makes the sensible world intelligible by reason of its relation to the world of eternal forms; which means it is not intelligible in and for itself. Thus the mystery of creation or of the relation of time to eternity is banished. In this simply intelligible world the mystery of dynamis, of the propulsive force from past to future is obscured and the question of the origin of the stuff which is formed by NOUS is left unanswered."¹ The participation of the world of change in the changeless intelligible world takes place through 'a cycle of changeless recurrence,' in this way excluding the emergency of novelty in the world. For Aristotle, for example, "God as Prime Mover is required to explain the world of movement and change; but the temporal process makes eternal potencies actual in endless recurrence. Aristotle does not deny the emergence of contingent elements in temporal order; but they are not subject to scientific knowledge. Only that which is necessary is subject to such knowledge; and the necessary, according to Aristotle 'must be cyclical—*i.e.*, must return upon itself. It is in circular movement and cyclical coming-to-be that the absolutely necessary is to be found.'"² Greek naturalism, in spite of some glimpses—in the case of Lucretius, for example—of a progressive view of history, adhered very closely to these "cyclical concepts of history."

There are two main objections to this view. The first is that it hardly conduces to a high regard for the way our lives are lived in the present existence. In its more estimable forms it offers at best a strenuous asceticism, in which the present world is persistently foresworn in the attempt to liberate ourselves altogether from its toils. The aim should be to draw the soul away

¹ *Faith and History*, p. 45.

² *Op. cit.*, p. 45.

from the world of becoming towards the supreme unchanging reality of Pure Being. Plato's thought is the clearest example of this derogatory view of the world of change and the asceticism in which it culminates. But Aristotle's position is in some ways even more significant. For although his interest in the historical is more robust and induces him to find in historical institutions some tentative approximation to the cosmic order, this is very finally transcended in the superior worth and completeness ascribed at all points to the life of pure contemplation in which the merely human is transcended and the divine achieved. "We must not follow those who advise us, being men, to think of human things, but must so far as we can, make ourselves immortal."

Here, according to Niebuhr, "we have the clearest final rejection of the realm of the historical, so characteristic of classical thought. It is also quite clear that the fulfilment of life requires emancipation from the historical and that the possibility of such emancipation lies in a dimension of a rational freedom which is in man and yet not of man. It is the gift of NOUS which relates him to the immortal world. This rigorous dualism, which modern culture persistently but erroneously ascribes to Christianity, is the price in classical culture for the construction of a realm of intelligibility in two dimensions: one for rational man above the flux of time and one for history reduced to the dimension of natural time.¹ The wholeness and unity of the life of man is altogether imperilled by this kind of intelligibility.

The second objection to the classical view is that it has no room for mystery. It seeks to "resolve life's mysteries into rational intelligibility."² This, however, needs some qualification. For there is an important mystical aspect, for example, to the philosophy of Plato. The 'Form of the Good' is 'beyond being and thought,' for rational explanation can never be quite exhaustive. Some questions remain, and the final initiation into supreme reality must take the form of a glimpse or noesis in which understanding as such is transcended. This, however, does not substantially affect Niebuhr's present view. For Plato acknowledges mystery only at the end of a rational quest, and not in any way intertwined with the stuff of history itself—much less is there any revelation of supreme reality in any intractable

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 70.

² *Op. cit.*, p. 42.

residuum which the particularity of things presents. Individuality as such is never a positive medium of enlightenment. It is a surd that has no significance in the ultimate scheme of things, and it tends to be wholly overcome in "Plato's faith that the universe is filled with every kind and form of living thing required to explicate the goodness of God. Thus the irrationality of the givenness of things is completely overcome and all things are brought into the realm of the rationally intelligible."¹ There is thus no significant mystery which is written into historical processes as such.

The Modern view does, however, find the historical process significant. Indeed, its characteristic feature is that it finds nothing else meaningful. Historical existence explains itself. There is thus no need to postulate any mystery within the processes of history, nor to refer them, for their final explanation, to any transcendent or eternal reality. All that we need to do is to allow sufficiently for genuine process and the emergence of novelty. In its final fulfilment the factor of growth within history itself, so much neglected in classical culture but stressed in Modern thought and Christianity alike, will present itself to us as "the clue to the mystery of the origin and the end of life."²

This confidence in the intelligibility of the world in time was mainly due, in the first instance, to the discovery that natural forms are subject to mutation. But it has been much reinforced by the rapid advances of modern science, both in the way of providing more exhaustive explanation of natural phenomena, thereby increasing the prestige of natural causation as an explanatory principle, and also by heightening man's confidence in his power to wrest her secrets from Nature and subdue her to his purposes. Sometimes this confidence took a religious form, but religion itself is so attenuated in this case that an exhaustive rational account of it is possible in terms of the historical process. "In Hegel's thought time is not God; but God requires time to become truly God," and L. T. Hobhouse carries this further by conceiving of "the world process as a development of organic harmony through the extension and control of mind, operating under mechanical conditions, which it comes by degrees to master."³ "This is clearly a new temporal version of the old

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 44.

² *Op. cit.*, p. 47.

³ *Op. cit.*, p. 49.

classical concept of the creative power of *Nous* over chaos."¹ "The growth which gives meaning to both the natural and the historical process is the growth of reason," and the mystery of the end is also resolved by regarding God "as the mystery of the culmination of the process."² "In so far as God is what we must rely upon it is time that is God."³ This presupposes also that evil can be regarded as representing "life and nature's provisional fragmentariness and that the growth of reason gradually overcomes all that is contradictory and at cross purposes in nature or history."⁴

This view also is very open to objections which have been made very obvious to us of late. It overlooks the fact which has been so much stressed by theologians recently that there is a "realm of mystery which is at once the beginning and the end of any system of meaning."⁵ "Nothing in the world should be considered absolute"⁶—not even the time process itself—and it is thus altogether mistaken "to interpret the penumbra of mystery which surrounds every realm of meaning as nothing but the residual ignorance which the advancing frontiers of scientific knowledge will gradually obliterate."⁷ No advance of science will ever eliminate "the depth of reality where mystery impinges upon meaning."⁸ There are, furthermore, many specific ways in which the attempt to rationalise the process of history throughout is unsuccessful. There are many set-backs and disasters which do not fit easily into any scheme of inevitable development—much less a development where everything subserves some over-riding purpose. It is by no means as evident as was supposed at the turn of the century that inclusive purposes will steadily supersede the narrow ends which natural necessity prompts. New triumphs bring new perplexities and new possibilities of evil and disaster. Selfishness, if frustrated at one level, can take on subtler and more sophisticated forms. Technical advance does not guarantee cultural progress, and as Niebuhr shrewdly notes, there is observable in some regards "a law of diminishing returns in the relation of technics to culture."⁹

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 49.

² *Op. cit.*, p. 50.

³ *Op. cit.*, p. 51.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 49.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 52.

⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 54.

⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 60.

⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 52.

⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 81.

Accumulation of historical knowledge does not always guarantee a better imaginative grasp of the events recorded. In politics the 'methods of force' are not obviously giving way to 'methods of mind.' There is no consistent emancipation of culture from irrational authority. Niebuhr also holds that the development of man's inherent rational faculty is slower and more limited than the collective cultural achievements which are elaborated by these capacities.¹ And although there are also factors in the present situation of mankind which lend a brighter hue to our prospects and encourage optimism, there are surely few to-day who would look upon the course of history itself as an absolute guarantee of the ultimate triumph of reason and the negation of evil. There is in any case one final proof of man's creaturely limit in "a fact of his individual life: his death."² No triumph of man over nature overcomes his involvement in this respect in the 'coming to be and passing away of nature.'³ "This is the final and most vivid expression of the paradox of the human situation."⁴

If, therefore, we are not to represent the process of history as fully explaining itself, but as pointing for its explanation to something altogether beyond the temporal sphere, and if, at the same time, we cannot represent this more ultimate reality as itself an entirely distinct intelligible sphere which lends exhaustive rationality to the historical process which it somehow governs, we have to conceive of some transcendent reality which is at the same time immanent in history and which, by its very transcendence, complicates the meaningfulness which it lends to history. How is this possible? This is the problem to which Niebuhr attempts to provide the answer.

The answer is thought to turn largely on the nature of freedom, and much of Niebuhr's book centres on this topic. But his account of it is by no means clear.

On its negative side, the freedom of man seems to mean for Niebuhr emancipation from natural necessity. This is taken to be guaranteed mainly by our exercise of memory, and Niebuhr accuses other thinkers of under-estimating the importance of memory. In this I think he is mistaken. The account of consciousness, for example, in Kantian philosophy, and in the

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 84.

² *Op. cit.*, p. 87.

³ *Op. cit.*, p. 84.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 87.

idealism which takes its start from it, turns largely on an analysis of memory and its implications. And Niebuhr's own account of our freedom as consisting in our power to rise 'above the flux of events' because we have memory of past events and anticipations of the future, is in important regards reminiscent of the views, in some ways much derided by Niebuhr, which dominated European thought until quite recent times. The view that "time is in him as surely as he is in time"¹ is very markedly reminiscent of nineteenth-century idealism² and not nearly as startling or original as Niebuhr supposes. But it must be added that Niebuhr seems to think that something more is involved in the freedom which memory renders possible than ability to rise above the immediate promptings of the present by giving it a wider meaning in relation to a fuller understanding of our situation made possible by memory and anticipation of the future. For the memory of the past is thought to be memory of events that were themselves free and unique because of their freedom, and this suggests more than that the past decisions themselves involved memory of earlier events. And this is, I think, Niebuhr's view. Although he sometimes writes as if freedom could be identified with the mere coherence of thought and conduct which provides some "structure of meaning which will give various events a place in a comprehensive story,"³ he seems in the main to be thinking of freedom as involving more than this, and in one place he actually speaks of "freedom to choose between new alternatives"⁴ which are presented to us by our survey of the facts that have led to a particular situation. On this view the power of memory is only "one of the facets of man's freedom."⁵ And that is, I think, Niebuhr's real view, but I do not think he takes very seriously the 'choice between alternatives' to which he pays incidental tribute in the words just reproduced. There is no real freedom of choice in Niebuhr's conception of human action, but there does seem to be something involved over and above integrated action.

It is worth stressing further at this point that the view of freedom as coherent conduct is totally inadequate to the sense of freedom which is involved in moral responsibility. There has,

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 20.

² *cf.* Bosanquet, *Essentials of Logic*, p. 17: "In one sense I am in space, in the other sense space is in me."

³ *Op. cit.*, p. 25.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 22.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 20.

in fact, been much confusion over these matters. The freedom which is required in art or pursuit of truth consists essentially in the ability of the individual to take up into the unity of his own personality such external influences as determine his experiences and actions. This means that experiences so determined cannot be properly predicted in the same way as events in nature can be anticipated accurately by the scientist. There can be no strict science of mental processes because these cannot be resolved sufficiently into separate factors each with its assignable independent force. This is why idealist thinkers spoke so much of 'self-determination,' determination through the transmutation within ourselves of such forces as influence us, a process which is realised in part in the way an organism assimilates its nourishment. Niebuhr himself in a passage where he leans heavily towards this 'idealist' view of freedom puts this point well. He writes: "History is thus comprised of causalities and sequences, coherences and structures which are not easily comprehended as meaningful. They are too varied and unique to fit into any simple patterns of meaning. The freedom of the human agents of action results in diverse and novel modes of behaviour and action which make scientific generalisations, based upon the observation of recurrence much more dubious and hazardous than the generalisations which constitute the stuff of natural science."¹ We may, however, allow that the coherence of rational experience is of this peculiarly incalculable kind, and thus very different from the sequence of events in nature, but this does not really make them less, but, on the contrary, more meaningful. They are more shot through themselves with meaning, and for this reason they are, in spite of their uniqueness, more obviously inevitable in themselves than processes which are determined more mechanically. This is one reason why Niebuhr, in another highly ambiguous feature of his theory, urges that our conduct involves freedom and necessity. But what I wish to stress now is that just because freedom conceived in the present fashion is also necessity, it does not give us the freedom required in ethics.

This is because moral worth is entirely different from æsthetic value of the worthwhileness of knowledge. There is plainly a combination of freedom and necessity in these latter. The artist has to create in a certain way, he is moved, possessed, inspired;

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 63.

and the thinker does not think at will but rather as the laws of thought require. But just because these activities are of this kind the ideas of guilt, blame, remorse, do not apply. We commiserate with the artist who fails and we are sorry for stupid or inartistic people; we regret our own failures, but we do not censure ourselves because we fail to produce works of art or to understand some scientific theory. But censure is appropriate when we fail to do good works, and this is just because we have a very different and much more genuine sort of choice here. It is a choice to do or not to do an action such that it is our own fault if we fail. And, however much the two have been confused, as they most certainly have been again and again, the freedom of rational self-determination which is present as much in thought and artistic activity as in morally responsible choice, falls very far short of the absolute freedom which makes us morally responsible.

But to return, I do not think that it is the more traditional coherence theory of freedom that Niebuhr wishes to put forward, much though his own view would have benefited by closer study of the various forms which that theory takes. We shall get closer to Niebuhr's main point if we note now his insistence that there is "a bewildering mixture of freedom and necessity in every historical concretion."¹

Now this might mean merely that physical factors enter into human action at every point, and there are many passages where Niebuhr seems to understand our immersion in "the world of change and temporal flux"² simply in this sense. He writes of "the interpenetration of a unique human freedom with the impulses of history"³ and refers to the persistence, albeit in a transmuted form, of animal gregariousness and the sex impulse in human life. He observes that "no spiritual transfiguration of man's sexual life can either negate or obscure the natural root from which it is derived. Significantly, when the mystics, seeking to renounce natural impulses for the sake of obtaining a pure equanimity of spirit, make a report of their state of bliss they find difficulty in eliminating tell-tale notes of eroticism from the account."⁴ But if this is all that Niebuhr has in mind, it is a very trivial and artificial way of speaking of the combination

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 20.

² *Op. cit.*, p. 17.

³ *Op. cit.*, p. 18.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 19.

of freedom and necessity. Nor is it strictly accurate. For the physical impulse is not strictly a part of our action. It is something we ourselves can control in the exercise of our free choice and as such is no more than a factor in the total situation within which we have to act. It does not, therefore, of itself point to necessity in human action.

But although Niebuhr is obviously confused about these points, he has something more important in mind when he speaks of the combination of freedom and necessity. Nor is he thinking mainly of the combination of these two which we find, as already indicated, if we assimilate moral choice to experiences, like art, in respect of which we are not directly open to moral praise or blame. Niebuhr is certainly very prone to make this assimilation, and he is confused in his thought as a result, but this does not appear to be uppermost in his mind when he insists that "both freedom and necessity are involved in every human action."¹

What he appears to have in mind, and what constitutes the crux of his theory as a whole, is that although, by the exercise of memory, we are able to rise above the promptings of immediate impulse and conceive of ever wider and more inclusive purposes in which the aims of other persons will be integrated with our own, man remains unable in practice to sacrifice his own interest to a greater good. He succumbs to "the self's persistent self-centredness,"² and disturbs "the order and harmony of human life by placing himself, individually and collectively, perversely into the centre of the whole drama of life."³ So that, although in some respects this self-seeking is over-ruled with the growth of institutions which frustrate it and direct it into more co-operative activities, the selfish motive remains and finds expression in more sophisticated and sinister ways at another level of action. This is what the optimists who believed in inevitable progress and the elimination of conflict by the triumph of reason in human relations have overlooked according to Niebuhr. "The possibility that increasing freedom over natural limitations might result in giving egoistic desires and impulses a wider range than they had under more primitive conditions seem never seriously to disturb the modern mind."⁴ But the beginning of wisdom, according to Niebuhr, is to give up that expectation.

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 19.

² *Op. cit.*, p. 140.

³ *Op. cit.*, p. 141.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 77.

It appears, moreover, that our being necessitated always to seek our own good is itself an essential part of our freedom. Freedom is very curiously held to depend on the combination of freedom and necessity, and this peculiar doctrine is, I think, to be understood in the following way. If our conduct were altogether rational, although it would thus exhibit freedom in one way, namely, by being coherent and harmonious, a sense of freedom which Niebuhr himself on occasion takes to be the fundamental one, yet in principle it would be capable of being understood throughout; there would be no irrational element in it. But our self-seeking does, it is presumed, provide some interruption of the otherwise smooth and essentially meaningful course of our conduct. It provides an irruption into our actions of a wild and incalculable element. If this were not tamed there would be no recognisable human action; at best there would be natural necessity. "If human freedom were absolute, human actions would create a realm of confusion." But "if the patterns and structures, whether natural or historical, were absolute, human freedom would be annulled."¹ And thus, although the term freedom is used in a number of very different ways, as our last quotation shows, the more persistent theme seems to be that man owes his freedom to this 'ambiguous' position in which he finds himself as a creature able to rise above natural necessity in a vision of purely rational purpose and yet unable to give effect to this vision because of his essential selfishness. He is "more than natural and less than purely rational."²

But this is a most astonishing view, a parody of all that freedom really means. For apart from the many subordinate confusions introduced into the theory by frequent equivocation in the use of the term freedom, it is evident that our action is no more free and unpredictable in principle because its motivation is essentially selfish, allowing for the moment that it is so, than it would be if we were guided always by reason; it is clearly no less determined, and in some ways prediction might be facilitated by knowledge of a selfish motivation. But even if this were not the case, if in fact our conduct was more incalculable in proportion as it was selfish, and if this could properly be described, as I am sure it can not, as an 'ambiguous' irrational character of human action, it is plain that this is not the

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 65.

² *Op. cit.*, p. 64.

'ambiguity,' to use Niebuhr's own imprecise terms, which makes us free. Freedom is certainly not just irrationality; nor will *any* kind of 'ambiguity' provide it. It is true that a free action is not one that we can understand throughout or explain. So far Niebuhr is quite right, and the point needs stressing. But the reason for this is that the sort of freedom which makes us responsible is a freedom to choose one action or the other independently of the particular force of inclination at the time. We can describe the factors which made the choice possible, including qualities of our own character, and there is much in human action which we can foresee for this reason. But on the occasions when we have to make a truly moral choice, although the terms of it are prescribed and its scope thus limited, nothing prescribes the choice itself. The choice is a partial break in the natural continuity of life and conduct. And as such it is certainly not rational in the sense of fitting into any scheme or pattern of things. But it would be quite misleading to describe such choice as irrational; it is not blind or impulsive and it need not be opposed to what reason requires. Niebuhr is, however, taking a sense in which we cannot altogether rationalise freedom of choice and exploiting it in the interest of a view of freedom which does not allow of any genuine choice, as is evident especially in damaging admissions like the following:

"The real self, in its transcendent unity and integrity is involved in the evils, particularly the evils of self-seeking, which it commits. This self is always sufficiently emancipated of natural necessity, not to be compelled to follow the course dictated by self-interest. If it does so nevertheless, it is held culpable both in the court of public opinion and in the secret of its own heart. The self finds itself free; but, as Augustine suggested, not free to do good. The self seeks its own despite its freedom to envisage a wider good than its own interest. Furthermore, it uses its freedom to extend the domain of its own interests."¹

Here we have it plainly. The self just is 'not free to do good.' And there can be no compensating for this by pointing to some other peculiar and freakishly figurative sense in which we may be said to have freedom. The dignity of man as a morally accountable creature is irretrievably lost if our freedom does not include freedom to do good.

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 105.

There is, in fact, only one course open to anyone who holds Niebuhr's view of human nature, namely, to repudiate responsibility and all strictly moral notions. This is what Hobbes did in effect, and one respects the cynicism of Hobbes because of its frankness. But when precisely the same view as that of Hobbes appears in the guise of a theological work designed to recall us to the Christian faith it cannot but revolt us and invite the severest condemnation. Nor is this lessened by ostentatious assumption of prophetic roles. Obnoxious doctrines are not to be redeemed by the vigour with which they are trumpeted forth.

But far from being perturbed or daunted by his own cynicism, Niebuhr seems to take an obstinate courage from it. On the top of one page he writes :

The self "has some knowledge of a responsibility towards life beyond itself and a vagrant inclination to be loyal to it. But there is a 'law in its members' which wars against the 'law that is in its mind,' a powerful inclination to bend every new power to its own purposes and to interpret every situation from the standpoint of its own pride and prestige."¹

But later in the same page Niebuhr denounces the naturalists who reduce human action "to the level of physical events to which no praise or blame can be attached because they have always sufficient antecedents." He urges that "the common sense of mankind has never accepted this ridiculous denial of a unique freedom in human life and of a consequent responsibility and guilt in human action. The life and literature of the ages is replete with condemnation of cowardice and self-seeking and of praise for acts of bravery and lives of selfless devotion. . . . Thus the responsible self (and the guilty self in so far as it always falls short of its highest responsibilities) peeps through even the most intricate and elaborate façade of modern thought."² We are also told that "the more consistent naturalistic versions of our culture are involved in the absurdity of ostensibly guarding the dignity of man while they actually deny the reality of the responsible self."³ Niebuhr will thus have no truck with those who seek to rid man of his responsibility and "the fact of his guilt."⁴

But if it is perverse to attempt to save man's dignity at the

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 106.

² *Op. cit.*, p. 107.

³ *Op. cit.*, p. 112.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 113.

expense of his responsibility, it is much more perverse and much more sinister and unhealthy to preserve the ideas of guilt and shame and remorse and the 'Judgment of God' without the genuine freedom which makes them meaningful. Yet this is precisely what Niebuhr does. No sooner has he reaffirmed the need for 'moral censure' in consequence of man's guilt than he adds:

"The self is indeed divided. It would do the good but does not do it, it would avoid evil but finds an inclination more powerful than its will towards the evil which it would avoid. The power of this inclination to self-seeking is more potent and more mysterious than the natural impulses. The self in its totality is in the force of the inclination. Yet in moments of high reflection the self feels the inclination to be a power not its own but sin that dwelleth in me."¹

Divided the self most certainly is on such a view, but not free. If 'the self in its totality is in the force of the inclination to evil' there is no self which can oppose itself to such inclination and control it. But I do not think Niebuhr minds that very much. He is quite happy to flagellate himself for sins he never committed, and this masochism is admirably matched by the sadism with which he chastises his fellows for evils which spring not from their individual actions but from some mysterious source in a vague 'human situation.'

In all this the victims have only one consolation offered them, and that only worsens the offence. We are reminded that we do *know* the better course which we are unable to follow.

"The real situation is that the human self is strongly inclined to seek its own but that it has a sufficient dimension of transcendence over self to be unable to ascribe this inclination merely to natural necessity. On the other hand, when it strives for a wider good it surreptitiously introduces its own interests into this more inclusive value. This fault may be provisionally regarded as the inevitable consequence of a finite viewpoint. The self sees the larger structure of value from its own standpoint. Yet this provisional disavowal of moral culpability is never invincible ignorance. It sees beyond itself sufficiently to know that its own interests are identical with the wider good."²

This plainly will not do. For while it is some concession to admit that we are not to be censured for what we do in sheer

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 108.

² *Op. cit.*, p. 108.

ignorance, the position as a whole is hardly improved by assuring us that it is in proper knowledge of its nature that we embrace the evil we cannot escape.

But it is also plain that Niebuhr does not intend even the concession which he seems to make to be taken very strictly. For in spite of vague allusions to our discernment of a 'wider good' than our own he distrusts altogether our power to specify its requirements in particular situations in the form of reliable ethical judgments. He seems to have very little use for ethics as normally understood, and believes that the circumstances of the present time have put out of court altogether any ethical truths which we can accept on their own account; and this is for Niebuhr a further reason for distrust of human action. He writes:

"Furthermore, a culture which has learned to scan the vast varieties of social and cultural configurations in history is not certain that any law is adequate for all occasions. It is the more sceptical because it has learned to discount the pretensions of universality and eternal validity which have been made for various structures and forms of ethics in various cultures. It has learned, in short, that the so-called 'self-evident' truths in the sphere of morality usually cease to be self-evident under new historical circumstances and in new occasions. The modern moral temper is naturally and inevitably relativist."¹

But there is here a whole 'nest' of fallacies, the most important of which is the failure to realise the sense in which ethical truths are, and the sense in which they are not, universal. There are few persons to-day who would claim that there are ethical principles about which all are agreed, and Niebuhr, I think, spends far too much of his time in attacking a man of straw when he rebuts the claims that there is unanimity in our ethical beliefs.² It is quite plain that there is no such unanimity except in the sense—a most important one—that the meaning of fundamental ethical ideas like ought and value remain the same in our differences of view about their specific applications. Even very primitive people, provided they are able to appreciate ethical distinctions at all, must consider observance of their own code to be required of them in the same sense as we feel obliged to conform to our more enlightened principles. It is about specific duties and standards of worth that we differ, and

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 195.

² *Op. cit.*, pp. 195 ff.

here the difference is often superficially considerable. But we should remember that the differences are often differences about matters of fact, such as the actual effect of this or that course of action, rather than about strictly ethical evaluations. We do, however, differ in our views about strictly ethical matters, but this does not imply that ethical truths themselves vary with our opinions about them. Our eagerness to convict others of error implies that we believe that the truth does not vary with our opinions.

The case of science presents a close analogy to ethics here. Opinions are constantly changing in science, but we do not for that reason despair of advance or conclude that one opinion is as good as another. We believe that there is a truth to be known and that we may repose more confidence in the likelihood of certain opinions attaining it rather than others. No one is infallible, and we have therefore always to retain open minds even about well-established theories. For principles of very long standing have had to be discarded or modified. But there are ways of trying to make our opinions more probable, and there are many respects in which we can have all the certainty we need. So also in ethics. The absence of agreement on all points does not leave us at the mercy of every 'wind of doctrine.' We can have all the assurance that we need that many of our judgments do conform to independent ethical facts, and we have means of trying to reduce the likelihood of error.

It does, of course, often happen that we have to compromise in cases where other persons hold different views from ourselves, but this only makes ethics *indirectly* dependent on opinion, and is not in the least inconsistent with moral objectivity.

One may also readily admit that ethical requirements vary with circumstances. Niebuhr again makes a great deal of this. He urges that even the duty of keeping our promises may admit of exceptions—"There are situations in which contracts ought not to be kept."¹ We have always to be judging between conflicting claims. This is very true, and I believe that it still needs to be stressed. For we do not seem to have heard the last of 'inalienable rights' and unlimited freedoms. Few things have caused so much confusion in political and ethical thinking during the last three hundred years than the failure to appreciate how one claim—a claim to property, for example—limits others and is limited by them. American thought and practice has suffered especially in this respect, and we can perhaps account

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 214.

for Niebuhr's preoccupation with these matters by the persistence in America to this day of attitudes springing from falsely abstract conceptions of right. But to insist that no right is absolute in the sense of holding without exception or in all circumstances is one thing. To conclude from this that moral objectivity is impaired by variations in the application of general principles to specific cases is quite another. There is, in fact, one course and no other which is finally binding upon us in any situation, and this is absolute in that specific situation.

We have, of course, to bear in mind that the moral worth of particular agents depends on their loyalty to the ideals that commend themselves to them. I am not to blame for what I do in ignorance, provided I have done my best to find out what is my duty. Admittedly these are matters about which we are very apt to be confused in times of change and transition, and Niebuhr is right in concluding that in one way or another scepticism spreads in periods of uncertainty and social upheaval. But there is nothing new here. It all happened in much the same way, for example, in Athens in the fourth century B.C., and much of the thought of the great Greek philosophers was designed to counter it. We are faced with a similar task to-day, and good men ought to bend their minds to it with great resolution.

But these are not matters which can be discussed in detail in this paper. There is not, in any case, anything new that I would wish to add to what I have said repeatedly in similar contexts in the past. The mistakes which Niebuhr and other theologians make are just those which could have been most easily avoided by due attention to careful discussions of moral objectivity in recent ethical writings. But these are the writings with which theologians seem most ostentatiously to refuse to grapple, in spite of their exceptional relevance to their own doctrines. They take their cue more from popular writers and psychologists who do not, as it happens, reflect at all the solid advance in ethical thinking in recent times.

It is peculiarly regrettable that this should happen since it brings the theologian into a most unholy alliance with the nihilist, as may be seen in Niebuhr's own insistence that the moral relativism which he finds unavoidable on the strictly ethical plane "frankly plunges into the abyss of nihilism."¹ To facilitate this plunge in the expectation of saving us from it

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 196.

at the last minute by theological dexterity seems to me an altogether wrong-headed and irresponsible procedure, and one which is very far removed from a true discernment of the relation of saving faith to life and history.

But this brings us back to the question of the way in which Niebuhr himself conceives this latter relation and provides in that way an alternative to the Classical view and the Modern view of history as he conceives them. But here his theory is more than usually hard to follow. He seems at times to believe that there has been genuine advance in history, both in thought and practice. He assures us in his own rather curious terminology, that there are "tangents of moral meaning in history."¹ We are warned "not to deny the provisional meanings, the significant rebirths and the necessary moral judgments of history."² We must not "reduce historical existence to complete darkness illumined only by a single light of revelation."³ We are assured that the eschatology which reduces "historical striving to complete frustration, relieved only by the hope of a final divine completion" is "as false as the optimism which it has displaced."⁴ We must, therefore, not "negate the permanent values which appear in the rise and fall of civilisations and cultures." There are "facets of the eternal in the flux of time."⁵ But apart from the very great difficulty of understanding how this more optimistic side of Niebuhr's thought is to be understood, and how his admission of 'permanent values' is to be reconciled with his strong partiality for relativism, the general tenor of his discussion seems to reduce these brighter features of his thought into very thin and formal admissions which do little substantially to relieve Niebuhr himself from the pessimism he denounces in others.

We are told, for example, that, although there are "indeterminate renewals of life in history," "the total historical enterprise is not progressively emancipated from evil. The Christian faith expects some of the most explicit forms of evil at the end of history." Christian love is "normative for, but not tenable in history."⁶ "There is no justification in revelation for any good man." Human history is "perpetually and on every level

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 150.

² *Op. cit.*, p. 244.

³ *Op. cit.*, p. 244.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 244.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 262.

⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 162.

of its achievements, in contradiction to the divine."¹ For although, in the words quoted with approval from Herodotus, men have "consciousness of much" they have "control over nothing."² We must, therefore, not bring Christ "into a system of simple historical possibilities,"³ or forget "that the teachings of Christ have a rigour which point beyond simple historical possibilities."⁴ History is the scene of conflicting claims, but the ethics of the New Testament seem "to imperil every discriminating concept of justice by which men seek to arbitrate conflicting claims." Christianity seems to be, in this respect at least, quite irrelevant to history.

This cynicism seems to be especially intensified in Niebuhr's appraisal of public and political action. He rules out altogether, for example, the possibility that a nation might "venture beyond its own interest into a system of mutual security." We are also told that "no one is particularly shocked by George Washington's dictum that a nation is not to be trusted beyond its own interest. That bit of cynicism is common currency in the affairs of mankind; and statesmen would be impeached if their policies ventured too far beyond its warning."⁵ Whether Niebuhr believes it possible for nations to some extent to put their own interest second is not at all easy to determine. He speaks of "the responsible self in the collective life of mankind," and adds that nations "never adequately meet the wider claims of the responsible self,"⁶ implying that they can do so to some extent. But the general impression is one of the futility of endeavouring to proceed on any principle other than that of self-interest in politics; and while this does represent a necessary reaction against unrealistic optimism in politics, it seems to come strange from a theologian in particular to take such a dim view of the possibilities of genuine public morality.

The conclusion that is forced upon us is a double one. On the one hand, it seems evident that Niebuhr is dissatisfied with the extreme and uncompromising kind of Protestantism which deprives human activity of all significance and worth. He wants to make some concession to the more liberal and 'Modern' views which emphasise 'growth' and achievement in history.

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 163.

² *Op. cit.*, p. 176.

³ *Op. cit.*, p. 188.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 192.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 107.

⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 110.

and he wants religion not to seem an escape from present reality but the transformation of it by infusion into it of spiritual forces. He deplores the tendency of certain Protestant versions of the Christian faith "to betray a defeatist attitude towards the social existence of mankind,"¹ and he condemns Luther for placing "the Gospel in Heaven and the law upon earth." But, on the other hand, Niebuhr is not able to provide an effective alternative to these gloomy views, and he has nothing to offer us in the way of a new understanding of the nature of revelation as the impact of the divine upon finite experience. All that we have, therefore, is a very desperate attempt to subject the traditional Protestant view to modifications, of which it does not really admit, and which compel Niebuhr not only to become extremely obscure and paradoxical in his thought, but to remain, for all practical purposes, no less distrustful of human action than any of his precursors.

It is indeed significant that Niebuhr should have felt the need to qualify the cynicism of the theological school to which he belongs, but this avails little, since he has not provided us with anything that takes us effectively beyond this sense of dissatisfaction. The concessions he makes to the more liberal view are formal ones which do not seem to touch the substance of human action. There is no genuine freedom of choice, nothing we can effectively relate to individual action, but only a substitute for this in the form of a curious metaphysical construction in which an alleged compulsion upon us to put our own interest first is itself some kind of necessary counterpart of the freedom claimed for action. But no amount of theoretical juggling, no presentation of old ideas in a new way, will avail to reintroduce freedom and individual responsibility into a system that has cut them out at the start. Nothing less than a genuine modification of the original presuppositions will suffice, but Niebuhr thinks the problem is solely that of being ingenious enough within the old scheme.

It is only in this way that we are to understand his contention that "the meaning of history is not completed within itself. It is completed only from beyond itself as faith apprehends the divine forgiveness which overcomes man's reluctance."² The completion from beyond is indeed affirmed to lead to new births in the present and to replenishment of life "by impulses of grace

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 226.

² *Op. cit.*, p. 163.

in which there are no calculations of mutual advantages."¹ But it takes little effort to perceive that these admissions are not intended in any ordinary sense. What Niebuhr seems to have mainly in mind is the way we ourselves are able, by faith and revelation, to become aware of the sinful pride which inspires all our actions and, in this way, prepare for our redemption from it by way of a spiritual new birth which affects our experiences as a whole, without, however, preventing us from subjecting the visions of 'wider' claims set before us in this way to the selfishness and pride from which, it appears, we can never escape in the present existence. The worst forms of evil, both morally and outwardly, are expected to continue to the end of history, not merely in the sense that new triumphs bring in their train new temptations to which we *may* succumb, but in the sense that nothing we shall ever do will be free of the taint of our sin. Sin is universal and reveals itself, not in the wrongful choices of this or that individual, but equally in all human experiences and actions. But within the theoretical scheme which Niebuhr sets before us it is possible for him to have room for some kind of development whereby we become increasingly aware of the 'ambiguous' situation of freedom and necessity which he has described, our freedom being enhanced at the same time as the necessity which it presupposes is intensified. The eternal is thus made to seem relevant to the temporal and to penetrate it in a way that gives some kind of spiritual or eternal dimension to the process of historical growth itself, the latter not being in any way an achievement of man himself or reflecting any credit or finite activities as such. I do not pretend to understand all this, for I do not think it really makes sense. But it can be seen at any rate what it is that Niebuhr is attempting to do. He wants the temporal process to count, but he wants it to count as the scene of something which is at the same time eternal. His problem is thus real enough; it is the essential problem for a religious view of life, namely, how to bring the transcendent into significant relation to finite experiences. No solution of this problem is possible in the sense of a completely rational answer to it. But this does not warrant us in indulging in any irrationality we please. There are certain things which are incorrigible *for us* and which we must accept as essential factors in any solution of our problem. These include the

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 210.

deliverances of the moral consciousness, and it follows thus that no solution of the problem of revelation, and of time and eternity, which sets these moral convictions at naught can be entertained at all. It is not enough to provide a mystery, or to set before us bewildering schemes which have nothing solidly to commend them beyond the bafflement of reason. The supra-rational aspect of religion is not at all a warrant for sheer disregard of reason. Our procedures need to be far subtler than that. Moreover, there is little in Niebuhr's scheme which really savours of the sort of mystery we find in religion. So far as his scheme can be accepted at all, it seems to be as easily acceptable to the non-religious person as to the man of faith, and the arguments which commend it consist in ordinary analyses which seem to require nothing of a specifically religious character beyond the extension to their incoherences of a licence to defy logic altogether in the name of religious mystery.

But if we are to turn our minds seriously to this crucial problem of revelation (and if we fail to do so it will be a sorry day for religious practice as well as religious thought) there is one condition which we must learn anew to respect, and that is to cultivate a truer sense of the worth and distinctiveness of the individual, as seen especially in his responsibility and freedom. Lip-service to the worth of the individual is not enough, and therefore any scheme which represents human life, as Niebuhr's does, as "not so much a contest between good and evil forces in history as a contest between all men and God,"¹ and which thinks of history as a kind of drama in the experience of some collective humanity, stands condemned at the start. Neither can we sacrifice distinctions of good and evil which we normally feel impelled to draw. It is these in the first instance that enable us to give distinctive meaning to human existence; but if, as seems to me inevitable, that meaning cannot be completed at its own level, we have then the properly religious problem of discovering how there can be apprehended within these limited finite experiences an absolute or eternal significance which does not annul the finite. If we succeed, we shall indeed find what Niebuhr also seeks, namely, a "mystery which enriches meaning," but I suggest that we shall find it, not in abstract conceptions but informing the particularity of individual things and events and flashing out at us from them in moments of high religious insight; and we shall find it most of all in moral

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 141.

experience. To examine how revelation is written in these ways into the concretions of finite experience, to know how God has made himself known to individual men, and to consider how this, in turn, has affected and enriched other experiences will be a genuine and highly rewarding study. It will also be most exacting, and will summon us to much more than an effort of ingenious thinking; it will require the consistent exercise of religious imagination. This seems to me to be especially lacking in the theological writings which appear to have most influence to-day, especially on the Continent. It is in the travail of real imaginative thinking about religion, the thinking which requires to be itself informed by deep religious feeling that we shall come to understand the subtle way in which revelation comes to birth and acquires some pattern of its own within the very processes of history. I do not think we have really begun this study, but to undertake it will be one of the major ways in which we can make religious claims significant and relevant to-day; it is especially indispensable to due appreciation of the claim to uniqueness in the Christian revelation. But such a task requires much more radical reconsideration of theological assumptions than theologians are usually prepared to undertake. It will also require the very greatest respect for moral qualities. Any theology which jeopardizes these debars itself at the start from insights indispensable to its own work. Niebuhr has come nearer the truth than most in defining for us what the crucial problems of religion are, and in setting before us those problems which concern especially revelation and history, but he has blinded himself to the condition of their solution as effectively as anyone could.

DISCUSSION.

The CHAIRMAN (The Very Rev. Dr. W. R. MATTHEWS) said: The philosophy of history has moved into the centre of intellectual interest partly no doubt because of the need which many people feel to gain some understanding of the events which have shattered our former way of life. Christian thinkers have felt the need to restate and rethink the Christian view of history and we are indebted to Professor Lewis for his lucid exposition and criticism of Reinhold Niebuhr's contribution to the discussion of the meaning of history. There can be no doubt that Niebuhr is an important religious and intellectual figure in our times and we need a careful estimate such as Professor Lewis has provided.

In the main it would be true to say that Niebuhr represents a modern version of St. Augustine's position. Like Augustine he seeks to understand history from the point of view of Providence, and like Augustine he maintains that there is a radical evil in human nature as such. Professor Lewis is certainly not an Augustinian in his thoughts and I could not help reflecting that what he has to say in criticism of Niebuhr was very much what Augustine's opponent, Pelagius, would have said if he had been acute enough. I believe Pelagius was a Welshman, and it is appropriate that he should speak to-day as it were through the mouth of a contemporary Welshman!

The idea of original sin is often rendered more confused than it might be because we are satisfied with rhetoric and avoid definitions. Augustine cannot be accused of this fault. He says very plainly what he means, and I venture to think that no one is really prepared to accept his doctrine with all its consequences. Carried to its logical conclusion, in conjunction with his doctrine of predestination, it undermines all moral freedom and consequently all moral responsibility.

I believe that the chief cause of confusion is the failure to distinguish between two quite different conceptions—that of moral evil and that of guilt. It is obvious that a man may have evil traits in his character for which he is not responsible in the sense that he inherited a warped nature. The evil is really evil, but he is not the cause of it. He becomes guilty of course if he becomes aware of the evil in his nature and consents to it. In the traditional doctrine of Original Sin moral evil and guilt are not distinguished and we have the monstrous consequence drawn that infants are damned because of inherited "guilt."

We ought to be grateful to Professor Lewis for his faithful dealing with Niebuhr on the subject of his tendency to ethical relativity. In my opinion one of the main interests of those who defend a religious and spiritual view of the world should be to maintain the objectivity of values and pre-eminently that of moral values.

Probably Professor Lewis has convinced most of us that Niebuhr's philosophy is very far from being satisfactory, and that most damaging criticisms can be levelled against it, but we should pay Niebuhr the tribute due to one who has discussed a large question

in a large way. He has the power to awaken thought in others, and I cannot doubt that he has stimulated many readers to reflect upon the meaning of history and the Christian answer to the question: Has it any meaning?

Dr. WATNEY said: What we have heard this evening seems to be the very antithesis of all St. Paul's teaching, which seems to have been quite forgotten by you, Sir, and the lecturer. Surely the very essence of Christianity is, as St. Paul writes, "Oh wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord." Surely, Sir, this is the very heart of the Gospel which you and I delight to proclaim, and is the answer to all pessimism and self-effort. The glorious fact is that we are not alone to struggle in a losing battle with sin and all its consequences, but that we have always at our disposal and help God's Holy Spirit and His might to make us more than conquerors through Him that loved us and gave Himself for us.

Mr. W. E. LESLIE wrote: Professor Lewis is to be thanked for his outspoken criticisms.

Would he agree that when theologians discuss philosophic questions they ought to do their utmost to express themselves clearly, and avoid ambiguity and the use of what, in less exalted circles, would be called catch phrases and fashionable clichés? There is a tendency to use metaphorical terms in a loose way. Professor Lewis calls attention to Niebuhr's use of the word "tangent". The word "dimension" is often borrowed from physics and used obscurely.

AUTHOR'S REPLY.

I am grateful to the Dean for his generous remarks about my paper. I also heartily agree with him that we need to distinguish sharply between the sort of evil in which guilt is involved and other kinds of evil for which we are not directly accountable. I am sure that this is the way out of many confusions.

I also welcome the plea made by Mr. Leslie for greater clarity of expression in theological discussions. There are, it is true, matters which do not admit of very precise statement and which must be hinted at in some "sidelong" way, to use the late Evelyn Underhill's term. But where metaphorical language has to be used there lies upon us the grave responsibility of seeing that it does

convey the best impression we can give of the truth. In many cases, however, obscure language is used where quite ordinary expressions would be better, and in recent years especially a cult of obscurantism has been made the excuse for downright distortions of truth and evasions of simple objections to influential views. To exploit the difficulties of a subject in the interest of one's own view is a form of irresponsibility which theologians in particular ought to avoid.

The suggestion that my view is not in accord with the teaching of St. Paul would require another paper to answer effectively. The most that I will say now is that it has always seemed to me absurd to suppose that a denial of man's responsibility is a prerequisite of our acceptance of the notions of faith and grace as they appear in the New Testament. There are, moreover, many facets to the teaching of St. Paul and we must pay very careful heed to the precise religious context in which they must be understood. I think we are still very reluctant to do this, partly because we are still very far from appreciating properly the nature of religious truth.