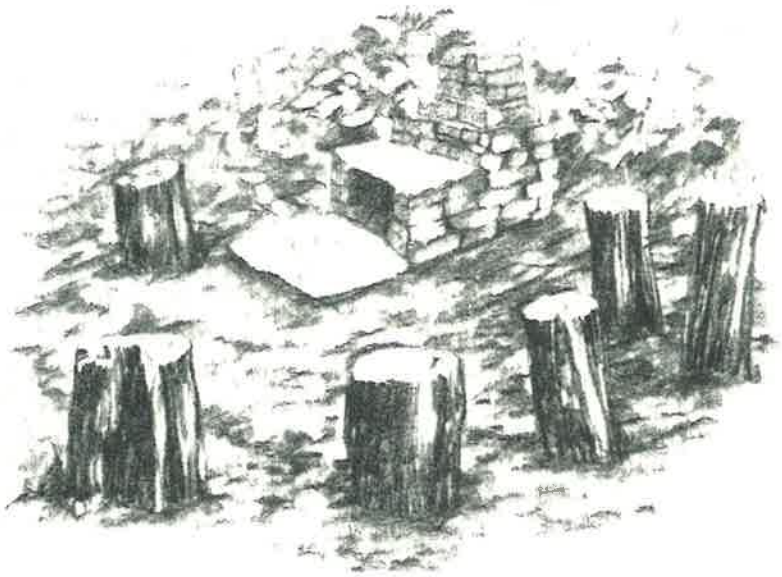

A Philosophy of Personalism

There still is night, many-splendored, all-reconciling, and there is the new day that rises up in the gray autumn dawn. There is a promise of snow in the graying sky. The forest, its summer profusion muted by the heavy blanket of damp leaves, awaits its coming. The trees, bare against the sky, are ready for it. Even the boulders take on their autumnal mood. Whatever may seem true in the simplified human environment of the cities, here the ultimate metaphysical question stands out in a profound simplicity. Shall we conceive of the world around us and of ourselves in it as *personal,* a meaningful whole, honoring its order as continuous with the moral law of our own being

and its being as continuous with ours, bearing its goodness—or shall we conceive of it and treat it, together with ourselves, as *impersonal,* a chance aggregate of matter propelled by a blind force and exhibiting at most the ontologically random lawlike regularities of a causal order? Is the Person or is matter in motion the root metaphor of thought and practice? That answered, all else follows.

Nor is it a question of reflection alone. Given the awesome power with which our technology endows us, not only our fate and the quality of our lives, but the fate of our planet may well depend on the answer. Yet it is a difficult question to reach with our familiar cognitive apparatus. It is not a question of fact or theory which could be settled on empirical ground. Nature lends itself willingly to either interpretation. The forest around me, my community of kin, obligingly assumes the mask of board feet of lumber, the living beings around me, my fellow humans included, no less obligingly conform to a model of stimulus and response, susceptible to behavioral conditioning.[28] Only the ego, the irreducible *I* who is the subject of moral acts and the author of textbooks of behavioral psychology, seems to resist the reduction. In truth, philosophers have ever been driven by doubt back to the certainty of the ego—Saint Augustine with his "Si falor, sum," Descartes with the "Cogito, ergo, sum," Commenius with his "ráj srdce," the paradise of the heart, or Husserl with the "transcendence in immanence" of *Ideen I* § 57.

Solitude convinced me of the futility of such a retreat. The *ego cogito* so clearly does accompany all my apperception, as real as the strength of love and labor. It shrinks, though, to a paltry thing, brittle and ephemeral, whenever I seek to retreat into it. A person alone, locked into the solitude of his reflection, cannot even guarantee his own reality. He must open himself out to the world—and be filled with whatever he conceives of the world as being. Whatever a person perceives around him will seep within as well. Humans cannot conceive of the world as an absurd play of blind forces, yet retain the confidence of their own humanity. Descartes's ego can be a starting point but not a retreat. If it is, it will go the way of the world. The crude reductionism of J. B. Watson may be intrinsically unbelievable, his own missionary fervor testifying against it. But there are other models, believable if we choose to lend them credence. There is the historicist model, reducing even the reality of good and evil to the vicissitudes of history, or the psychoanalytic model, reducing the reality of the subject to a product of subhuman drives and superhuman constraints. No empirical datum can prevent us from adopting them. A metaphysical model is in principle compatible with any state of the universe, since it is not an attempt

to catalog its facts but rather an attempt at reading its sense. The fundamental metaphysical question calls for a choice.

It is a metaphysical question, and the option is a binary one: shall we opt for the model and posture of a meaningful cosmos ordered by a moral law, or shall we opt for the model and stance of a chance aggregate of matter? Is the Person or is matter in motion the ultimate metaphysical category? There really is no third. Vitalism, proposing *life*, the vital principle, as a third option, is really not an alternative, though it is tempting in its intuitive appeal. At the turn of the century, it did seem an attractive option. To vitalistic thinkers from Bergson to Teilhard de Chardin, life, *élan vital*, seemed to accommodate the best of both possible worlds. It appeared to account for the purposiveness of human life, yet lend itself to the needs of the sciences, compatible, in its teleological determinism, with their categories. Though the natural sciences for the most part discarded vitalism in their turn to mechanism, vitalism, minus its name and mystique, became deeply rooted in psychology. The attempt to explain conscious comportment in terms of putative needs, from "tissue" needs to "higher" needs, provided a paradigm which combined determinism with teleology and was essentially vitalistic.[29]

Still, in retrospect, vitalism seems more to combine the failings of both alternatives. As Ricoeur pointed out with devastating effect, the purposiveness of needs cannot account for the teleology of behavior in beings for whom hunger can be the motive of theft, labor, or a hunger strike. Here the conception of life is intelligible as an expression of spirit, not as an autonomous explanatory principle. Conversely, for the purposes of chemistry, the concept of life or *élan vital* is too purposive, too teleological. Here the parameters of causality and extension will serve far better, and quite legitimately, as long as we attach no ontological validity to them. For all the utility of the concept of life for describing the doings of animate beings in the order of time, the ultimate metaphysical question remains a bipolar one: shall we conceive of the order of the cosmos as primordially and ultimately causal or moral?

Personalism in philosophy—for personalism is a perspective in philosophy far more than a particular philosophical system[30]—is the decision to treat the Person, the Person-al mode of being, as the ultimate metaphysical category. It is less a speculative conclusion than an act of trust that the harmony of the embers that glow with the warmth of the human heart and the stars that proclaim the glory of God, the primordial vision of the cosmos as a society of persons[31] governed by a moral law, is not only the naïve first impression of a primitive mind

but also the ultimate conclusion of deep thought. Between the primordial and the ultimate vision, there stands the fruits of *skepsis*, rejecting the moral sense of nature as an illusion and probing for other, impersonal models of explanation. Personalism in philosophy is the recovery of the primordial insight, the vision of a *kosmos*, on the other side of skepsis.

Or so it may be in principle, though as a matter of historical fact that is not how personalism in truth emerged on the American philosophical scene. To Czechoslovakia's Emanuel Rádl, heir of Hans Driesch's vitalism and of the moral humanism of Czech thought over the centuries, the link between the moral sense of nature and the personal view of the cosmos may have seemed obvious. The man who introduced the designation *personalism* to the American scene, however, Borden Parker Bowne, was a student of Hermann Lotze's and an heir to Immanuel Kant.[32] The result is a contrast: Bowne's immense sensitivity to the presence of God in all His creation on the one hand, the harsh Kantian contrast between the Person, the sole bearer of intrinsic value, and things, mere things, purely phenomenal, devoid of ultimate ontological dignity, to be used and expended to serve human ends.[33] Perhaps, too, Bowne was a child of his age, the ebullient age of "progress" and technological "conquest of nature." Whatever the reason, his personalism often seems more closely akin to existentialism than to the personalism we have been presenting, a vigorous affirmation of the irreducibility and reality of the Person, the moral subject, amid a world which Bowne is content to regard as impersonal, value-free, and ultimately unreal.

The contrast is jarring: Bowne's delimitation of personal reality is perceptive and valuable. His analysis of personhood as the model capable of subsuming unity-in-plurality, being-in-becoming, is philosophically invaluable and seems to cry out for a wider application, not simply as a description of the being of God and humans, but as a fundamental metaphysical principle. Bowne's pupils, Edgar Sheffield Brightman the best known among them, put the tools he bequeathed to them to excellent use. The personalism they represented provided the philosophical foundation for Martin Luther King's transformation of the American consciousness, and not by chance. The personalist insistence on the metaphysical and moral irreducibility of the person provides the one secure bulwark against all arguments of expediency and tradition. Injustice can always find utilitarian justification. It must be challenged on moral grounds, and those personalism provided, no less in Czechoslovakia than in America.

Still, even in Brightman's thought, there persists the bifurcation of reality between the dignity of the personal and the putative instrumentality of the nonpersonal. Brightman, to be sure, is willing to extend the category of the personal, at least in lesser degrees, even to much of the nonhuman world, speaking, in one passage, of the "mind of the grasshopper."[34] He insists on the personal as the ultimate metaphysical category and on the perception of reality as a society of persons. Still, he treats personhood not as coextensive with individual reality but as contingent on the presence of certain characteristics. The world as a society of persons, in Brightman's writings, does not refer in the first place to the nature of the cosmic order and the relationship among beings but to an alleged characteristic of certain of those beings, their personhood. One of Brightman's most perceptive, sympathetic critics, Frederick Ferré,[35] attributes that hesitation to a fear of pan-psychism: if we extended the Kantian command, "as an end, not as a means merely," to all beings, would we not have to attribute a mind to all beings, as, on Ferré's reading, Whitehead seems to do?

No, I do not think so. I do not believe that Whitehead's recognition of the "subjective aim" of all beings constitutes a pan-psychism, the attribution of a psyche to all material entities. Perhaps it is because, in the radical brackets of the forest clearing, nature does not present itself as "material," waiting to be endowed with a psyche to merit ontological dignity. Here the dignity of the world of nature, of the lichen-covered boulders no less than of the old badger and the young oak trees, is the primordial starting point. It is not contingent on the attribution of any set of traits. Nor is the overwhelming sense of the clearing as a "society of persons," as structured by personal relations, a function of any alleged personality traits of boulders and trees. It is, far more, an acknowledgment of the truth, goodness, and unity of all beings, simply because they are, as they are, each in his own way. That is the fundamental sense of speaking of reality as personal: recognizing it as Thou, and our relation to it as profoundly and fundamentally a moral relation, governed by the rule of respect.

It is in that sense that any consistent ethic must needs be personalistic, and doubly so—according to all beings the respect due to persons and recognizing the model of a community of persons which Kant described as the "kingdom of ends" as the root metaphor for understanding the moral sense of reality. For a person, ultimately, is not just a being who possesses a psyche or manifests certain personality traits

as much as a being who stands in a moral relation to us, a being we encounter as a Thou.[36]

That is a metaphysical option, and the reason for choosing it cannot be theoretical or empirical, the conclusion of arguments faultlessly, futilely constructed in an impeccable British manner, valuable as such arguments can be. There can be arguments, surely—and the report of the Club of Rome presents a compelling one: an ethic of universal respect is essential to our survival. The true reasons, though, are of a different order, the product of a vision rather than of speculation. They are the product of the philosophic wonder with its open-eyed recognition of the evident moral sense of being—and of the far more difficult decision to trust that wonder in spite of the corrosive suspicion of skepsis.

Fechner's time-worn terms, *Nachtansicht* and *Tagesansicht,* if we translate them with a bit of poetic license as the shadowy perspective of suspicion and the clear vision of trust, might serve well. More than aught else, the personalism of the radical brackets is a reaffirmation of the reality and veridicality of what humans encounter in ageless philosophic wonder. To an age conditioned by habits of suspicion to rejecting the evident as naïve and to searching out tortured speculative explanation, such act of trust must appear as naïveté—and so it is. It is, though, a second-order naïveté, a willed, conscious reaffirmation of the reality of meaningful lived experience, motivated by the chastened admission of the futility of cunningly devised fables.

The shadowy perspective of suspicion has conditioned our thought for three centuries and more. We have made a cult of sophistication, dismissing the clearly present moral sense of life, of true and false, of good and evil, of right and wrong, in favor of cunningly devised fables. The personal reality of our being and the moral sense of nature, our primordial givens, appear to us as something to be explained away by the prepersonal realm of dark drives or the suprapersonal realm of History. The great personalist inversion is a reaffirmation of the primacy of meaningful being, the primacy of personal categories in a morally ordered cosmos. Within such a framework, there is room for categories of vitality and utility, of need and satisfaction, as describing ways in which the order of value is acted out in time and animate nature. In turn, within it, we can recognize the order of efficient causality as the way in which the order of value is acted out in space and material nature. Without the framework of an order of value, utility would reduce to futility—and causality, as Hume recognized, to constant connection. Within such a framework they become useful concepts. The chemistry and the biology which to initial naïveté may

appear a deadly threat to our humanity, appear to the second naïveté as legitimate ways of describing the way in which it acts itself out in life and matter. While the claim to the primacy of the material denies the legitimacy of the vital and the moral, the recognition of the ontological primacy of the personal establishes the validity of the vital and the material.

That is the gift of the radical brackets, the gift of the forest, of the porcupines, and of the wayfarer with whom God comes into the house. It is the reaffirmation of the validity of being human in the cosmos, the great personalist inversion. It is an act of trust, and, as all acts of trust, a gift.

4. Skepsis