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# IS SELF-LOVE ALWAYS A VICE? AN EDWARDSIAN CRITIQUE OF REINHOLD NIEBUHR

Kevin Twain Lowery

## ABSTRACT

Reinhold Niebuhr is often criticized for the negative attitude he has toward self-interest. The author contends that the writings of Jonathan Edwards, especially his understanding of natural morality, can form a counter-argument against Niebuhr's claims. After examining both views, an attempt is made to show that Edwards can easily withstand some of the more prominent critiques made against Niebuhr.

WHENEVER I FEEL LIKE BEING ANGRY, PERPLEXED, OR DEPRESSED, I read Reinhold Niebuhr. After all, there's nothing like a good dilemma or paradox to give you a bleak outlook on life and keep you in an emotional quagmire. If the world were as sinful as he claims, we might each be tempted to find a bridge and prepare to jump. In all seriousness, however, one wonders why Niebuhr believes sin to be so ubiquitous and why the hope he offers is strikingly limited. Numerous critics have concluded that the critical issue in Niebuhr's doctrine of sin is his interpretation of self-interest. Niebuhr's basic argument can be constructed this way:

1. Self-interest is the root of all evil. It is at the heart of every sinful ambition and inclination.
2. The only way for human intentions and actions to be morally pure is for them to be free of self-interest. Pure love must be utterly disinterested.
3. Self-interest is pervasive and taints every human motive and action.

Therefore,

4. There is no possibility of attaining moral purity in this life.

The third premise is the one which I believe is the most difficult to refute, and there are very few who attempt to do so. Acting in a purely disinterested way would be

difficult enough to achieve, let alone explain. Additionally, I do not believe that it is necessary to refute the first premise to challenge Niebuhr's argument, neither do I believe that such a move would be judicious. For instance, one might argue that all evil is not caused by self-interest, that some evil has a cause which is not self-interest. However, this would not damage Niebuhr's argument, for it is not necessary to maintain the entirety of the first premise to support the second. What Niebuhr needs to claim is that all self-interest necessarily leads to evil. If this postulate can be undercut, then the second premise cannot be maintained, since it would be possible that some self-interest does not lead to sin. The last step in dismantling the argument would be to show that the type of self-interest which leads to sin does not taint everything (assuming that disinterestedness is unprovable). This could be true even if self-interest in general could be held as pervasive.

Essentially, the counter-proof would look something like this:

5. Not all self-interest leads to evil. Some self-interest can be regarded at least as morally neutral, if not beneficial.
6. Human motives and actions can be truly virtuous as long as they are free of the self-interest which corrupts.
7. The kind of self-interest that leads to sin is not pervasive. Even if all motives and actions are influenced by self-interest, not all of this self-interest is corrupt.

Therefore,

8. It is possible that some human motives and actions could be morally pure.

I believe that this type of counter-argument essentially follows Jonathan Edwards' development of the notion of self-interest, and I suggest that Edwards' position can be used to oppose Niebuhr's. This will be the main thrust of the paper. First, I will outline Niebuhr's conception of self-interest so as to validate the interpretation I have given

above. Next, Edwards' understanding of self-interest will be introduced so as to provide a coherent theory to support the counter-argument. Finally, I will briefly mention some of the other critiques which have been leveled against Niebuhr's account of self-interest, attempting to show that Edwards' account is better able to meet the criticisms.

## 1. Niebuhr on Self-Interest

### 1.1 *Self-Interest as the Root of Sin*

Niebuhr takes the Kantian starting point by asserting freedom as the basic category of morality. "Since the sin of man lies in the corruption of his will and not in his weakness, the possibilities of evil grow with the development of the very freedom and power which were supposed to emancipate man" (1953, 106). In fact, Niebuhr believes that human will is corrupt to the extent that "where there is freedom there is sin" (1996, 2:80). Colin McKeough explains that for Niebuhr, "The doctrine of original sin proceeds from a logical absurdity in the Christian conception of free will: sin proceeds from a defect in our will; since the will presupposes freedom, that defect cannot be attributed to a defect in our nature" (39).

Niebuhr thus faces the same dilemma that Kant does in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*. Both of them want to regard the human inclination toward evil as an innate defect of the will, but since sin is a corruption of freedom, each person must ultimately be responsible for attaining this disposition. As such, they must claim that this inclination is not an inherited defect in human nature, although it is still innate. This emphasis on freedom leads Niebuhr to conclude that "the root of sin is in spirit and not in

nature” (1946, 294). Consequently, sin is not a physical trait, for it is the bad soul which causes the good body to sin and not vice versa (1953, 123).

The freedom which human beings enjoy grants us a capacity for transcendence, which is what Niebuhr considers to be selfhood (1996, 1:xxv). However, human beings are also finite and can only transcend to a limited degree. The Christian doctrine of the *imago Dei* recognizes this polarity, juxtaposing human beings between finiteness and freedom (1996, 1:166). Niebuhr believes that our attempts to transcend finitude in pursuit of the infinite can have both desirable and undesirable effects. On one hand, the effort to transcend helps stimulate creativity. On the other hand, it also leads to sin (1996, 1:122). In trying to escape finitude, we essentially try to make ourselves God (1996, 1:140). Grasping at divinity is what caused the fall in the garden of Eden and it is what brought Lucifer down from his exalted state.

Sin thus occurs when we do not observe our limits. It is “man’s inclination to usurp the prerogatives of God” (1951, 121). Nevertheless, Niebuhr sharply points out that sin should not be equated with finitude itself, rather sin is really the pride which tries to deny and escape finitude (1996, 1:16). It is pride which specifically expresses itself in the will-to-power (1996, 178-9). Although finitude varies from person to person (since each one possesses differing abilities), the same temptation ensnares everybody. Even “the most intelligent and disinterested person can never escape his fate as a child of nature and finitude” (1940, 156). Evidently, Niebuhr understands our ability to transcend to be the presence of higher reasoning, since he affirms that “man is the only finite creature who knows that he is finite and is therefore tempted to protest against his fate” (1940, 156-7).

As rational beings, we resist what would otherwise be our fate, and we attempt to alter the course of events. Hence, our capacity for transcendence enables us to “make history” (1996, 2:1). However, the ability to alter history is limited, for there are many things which lie beyond our control. Our awareness of this causes feelings of insecurity and we try to overcome these feelings with “self-seeking.” Albeit, “the phenomenon of self-seeking may be related, not to specific forms of insecurity, but to the insecurity of life itself” (1953, 9). Borrowing from Kierkegaard, Niebuhr refers to these feelings of insecurity as a state of anxiety. Once in this state, humans will either attempt to escape their true but limited selves (resulting in pride) or they will attempt to submerge the self into some other form of human vitality (resulting in sensuality) (1996, 1:185-6). Niebuhr himself confessed his feelings of insecurity: “Every moral position which has left the absolute basis is in danger of becoming a rationalization of some selfish purpose. I am not unconscious of the fact that my tendency to criticize others so severely for their alleged rationalizations and hypocrisies springs from my own sense of insecurity” (1960b, 223).

The evolution of sin is represented by the following stages: 1) finiteness and freedom, 2) insecurity, 3) anxiety, 4) will-to-power, and 5) pride (McKeough, 41). This progression illustrates Niebuhr’s declaration that the will-to-power is not “the vestigial remnant of barbarism,” a claim which separates him from Nietzsche (1951, 91). Indeed, the will-to-power is a product of the “spiritualization” of the survival impulse (1944, 18-9). Besides the will-to-power, the survival impulse also gives rise to the will-to-live-truly (1944, 21). Once again, the culprit is human will which exercises freedom to transform “nature’s harmless will-to-live ... into a sinful will-to-power” (1940, 206).

Unfortunately, the means of defense which human beings have at their disposal can be easily used for aggression, so there is no way to clearly distinguish the will-to-live from the will-to-power (1960a, 42).

Ultimately, Niebuhr draws from Augustine's conception of selfhood, since it locates the "seat of evil ... in the self." Consequently, the true source of evil can also be labeled as "self-love" or "egocentricity" (1953, 121-3). Now the feelings of insecurity are more specific, for the sinner does not merely experience some type of existential anxiety. Instead, the person ultimately lacks trust in God and tries to compensate for this lack with inordinate self-love (1996, 1:252). In other words, when we do not trust/love God enough, we end up trusting/loving ourselves too much.

As self-love elevates itself to inordinacy, it takes self-interest along with it. Moreover, as the subject's love and interest are directed more toward the self, they are correspondingly directed away from God and others. In this respect, "evil is always the assertion of some self-interest without regard to the whole" (1944, 9). Once again, this undue self-concern is the result of corrupted freedom (1996, 1:xxv). It is not surprising that Niebuhr was so critical of the liberalism of his day, which he believed denied human sinfulness and replaced it with egotism guided by "prudent self-interest." In his opinion, this approach is entirely opposite from what is needed. As a result, liberalism has brought an even greater imbalance of power and destruction of community (1953, 106). Niebuhr adamantly contends that human lusts and ambitions are not sub-rational impulses which can be managed through psychiatry or social engineering (1953, 7). The problem of self-interest is difficult to correct and it is even difficult to identify, for "even

a true religion frequently generates false identifications of some human interest with God's will" (1953, 99)

### *1.2 Sin as a Corrupting Force*

According to Niebuhr, one of the real dangers in self-interest is that self-seeking behavior leads to self-destruction (1951, 174). This is also one of two opposite poles which the exercise of freedom allows. This leads Niebuhr to conclude that the Christian concept of freedom "is a radical one because the self is not easily kept within the confines of nature's harmonies. This freedom is the basis of the self's destructive as well as creative powers; and there is no simple possibility of making nice distinctions between human destructiveness and creativity" (1953, 6).

The pervasive presence of self-interest also creates great difficulties in the performance of good deeds. First, the self-centered self is not submissive, so it will only obey by coercion (1996, 1:293). This coercion might be negative (i.e. through the use of force) or it can be positive (i.e. through enticement). "On the whole, people do not achieve great moral heights out of a sense of duty ... People must be charmed into righteousness" (1960b, 113). Second, self-centered persons rationalize their behavior, so it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to appeal to them intellectually. In fact, Niebuhr goes so far as to say that "human ideals are but the rationalizations of human interest" (1940, 189). Third, the difficulties of self-centeredness are multiplied in groups. "The larger the group the more difficult it is to achieve a common mind and purpose and the more inevitably will it be unified by momentary impulses and immediate and unreflective purposes" (1960a, 48).



Niebuhr thus views groups as collections of individuals, at least in terms of interest. Of course, it does happen from time to time that the interests of individuals will intersect and allow some degree of unity. However, “since there can be no ethical action without self-criticism, and no self-criticism without the rational capacity of self-transcendence, it is natural that national attitudes can hardly approximate the ethical” (1960a, 88). Groups are unable to achieve the objective point of view which is necessary to be self-critical. Additionally, the fact that unselfishness generally requires sacrifice makes it less likely that a group will be unselfish (1960a, 267-8). It is difficult enough to get individuals to make sacrifices. Multiplying this resistance in a group only makes it more difficult. Group pride is the amalgam of individual pride, but the deleterious effects are multiplied (1996, 1:208). The group pretends to be God just as individuals do (1996, 1:212).

### 1.3 *A Self-Proclaimed Realist*

Niebuhr calls himself a “realist.” He considers his view superior to that of “defeatism,” which is characterized by a “God-world, spirit-body dualism” (1960a, 76-8). Here he returns to Augustine, whose worldview takes into account the factors of self-interest and power (1953, 119). The plain and simple fact is that we must acknowledge our own sin, finiteness, weakness, etc. (1996, 1:137). Modern scientific examinations ignore this reality; instead they presuppose two dubious tenets derived from religion: 1) the perfectibility of humanity and 2) the idea of progress (1953, 3).

In Niebuhr’s opinion, the realist will admit that “‘man’s reach is beyond his grasp’ and that his historic destiny remains inconclusive to the end” (1958, 22). Hence,

the trustworthiness of history is called into question. Michael G. Cartwright indicates that at the heart of the Christian view of history, Niebuhr sees a theodicy (363). The whole world is perceived to be a paradox, for we must continue to trust God in spite of the fact that evil seems to prevail. McKeough argues that Niebuhr's view of history, as well as his understanding of human nature, is what separates him from the pacifists (30). Given the evil state of the world and the dismal outlook its future holds, Niebuhr believes that lesser evils are sometimes necessary to defeat greater evils.

The pervasive influence of self-love also taints all other forms and expressions of love, imposing a limit on the purity they can attain. The best that can be expected in society is mutual (i.e. reciprocal) love, which is the degree of love needed to support justice (McKeough, 67). Ironically, mutual love must be initiated by sacrificial love, which "dispenses with historical justice" (Niebuhr 1996, 2:247). What Niebuhr is basically saying is that societies can at best have standards of fairness, but before people can be fair, they must be willing to concede something, else they will never get beyond their own interests to honor the interests of others.

The size of the group is again a factor, limiting love even more as the group increases. For this reason, Niebuhr criticizes the Christian Left for naïvely thinking that love will work internationally (McKeough, 21). To him, the sentimentalists have "insisted that the law of love is a simple possibility when every experience proves that the real problem of our existence lies in the fact that we ought to love one another, but do not" (1953, 109). Since the law of love cannot be met, we must have a balance of power to achieve justice. Mutual love is what makes this possible (1940, 26-7). The balance of power serves to prevent parties from achieving domination (1996, 2:265). In the end,

“realism” must be carried over into systems of justice, since self-interest must be presupposed here, too (McKeough, 66).

Besides the Protestant liberals, Niebuhr also deems the revivalists to be “utopian.” He says that they “are always assuming that nothing but an emotional commitment to Christ is needed to save the soul from its sin and chaos. They never seem to realize how many of the miseries of mankind are due not to malice but to misdirected zeal and unbalanced virtue” (1960b, 71) He also finds it ironic that the revivalism of Billy Graham “gives even simpler answers to insoluble problems” (e.g. nuclear bombs, school segregation, juvenile delinquency, etc.) than do the utopian (i.e. liberal) illusions of the day (1958, 21). Nevertheless, “the saddest part about these highly evangelistic churches who put everything into the recruiting task is that they generally tempt those who are already “won” to imagine themselves perfect, or at least “saved” (1960b, 210).

Niebuhr prefers the term “realism” to optimism, because “optimism and human self-sufficiency are almost identical. Most optimistic creeds, when reduced to their essentials, prove themselves to be confidence in some human virtue or capacity” (1946, 115). He contends that Christian faith is not optimism. Instead, Christians must remember the fact that they are sinful and live in a corrupted world (1946, 131).

#### 1.4 *Offering a Limited Hope*

In spite of the fact that human beings are plagued by self-love, they are not utterly corrupt, because “the corruption of human freedom could not destroy the original dignity of man” (1953, 145). Indeed, the very fact that we have an awareness of evil indicates that we have a basic goodness (1996, 1:2). This gives us hope of attaining some type of

virtue, even if it is limited. The world is both good and evil. We must be grateful for God's mercies, which are the ultimate cause of goodness, yet we must also remain contrite for the evil which is created by our sin (1946, 210).

However, the battle between good and evil is not only a cosmic one, it is also fought within the individual, because, "the conflict between love and self-love is in every soul" (1953, 138). And yet it is love, not self-love, which is the law of our existence. This means that we can only have health and peace if we are drawn out of self-love and saved from its "self-defeating consequences" (1953, 130). This is not an easy task, though, for self-love is both elusive and persistent. If it "is defeated on a lower or more obvious level, it will express itself in more subtle forms" (1960a, 40).

This is precisely where the Christian stands at an advantage. Whereas the "children of light" recognize a higher law to which self-love must submit, the "children of darkness" do not have this awareness (1944, 10-11). In effect, religion provides an inner restraint on self-assertion and it is a guide in seeking complete disinterestedness. Subsequently, this can actually encourage and permit undue self-assertion in others, since their own self-assertion will not be kept in check (1960a, 261-2).

The recognition of a higher law is indicative of our need to see beyond our own interests. Robin Lovin observes that the self-interest in Niebuhr's realism does not operate independently, but it resists values, goods, and norms which exist beyond it (9). It is then the case that we can only comprehend ourselves with a principle which is beyond us (1996, 1:125). Given the fact that self-interest precludes progress, human progress is only possible when we "envisage more perfect goals for life" (1940, 157-8). "The self is so created in freedom that it cannot realize itself within itself. It can only

realize itself in loving relation to its fellows. Love is the law of its being. But in practice it is always betrayed into self-love” (1996, 2:108). “Consequently, the highest forms of self-realization are those which are not intended or calculated but are the fruit of some movement of ‘grace’ which draws the self out of itself despite itself into the love of God and the neighbor” (1951, 175).

### 1.5 *Why Self-Interest Is Bad*

If we now ask ourselves just what it is about self-interest that makes it inherently noxious for Niebuhr, I believe that we will find four basic reasons. First, self-interest is problematic because it effectively limits freedom. “The self is always sufficiently emancipated of natural necessity, not to be compelled to follow the course dictated by self-interest ... The self finds itself free; but, as Augustine suggested, not free to do good. The self seeks its own [sic.] despite its freedom to envisage a wider good than its own interest” (1951, 93-4). As such, self-interest appears to blind the subject to the good, so that the good cannot be properly reasoned. Sin proceeds from blindness, which in turn springs from vain imagination (1996, 1:250). This relationship between self-interest and reason explains why Niebuhr says that the mystery of original sin lies within the fact that the corruption of freedom cannot be overcome with more freedom (1951, 101). Self-interest narrows one’s perception of the good, and this corruption can only be overcome to the extent that the subject is somehow able to again perceive that which lies beyond self-interest.

The second problem with self-interest follows from the first, namely, that it precludes pure love, which must be completely disinterested. At the highest level, love

becomes sacrificial, ceasing to calculate what is due. This is why sacrificial love surpasses justice, which must engage in such calculations (1953, 135, 160).

Consequently, the mutual love of justice starts with the self. In contrast, sacrificial love starts with the other (1996, 2:82). In fact, sacrificial love must be entirely focused on the other if it is to be utterly disinterested. Richard A. McCormick faulted Paul Ramsey for adhering to the doctrine of disinterested love, claiming that it arises from a deformed conception of agape, since a properly ordered self-love is regarded as impossible (505).

Several critics surmise that Niebuhr's understanding of love may be an adaptation of Anders Nygren's thought. The following passage summarizes Nygren's position:

The fact is that the resources of natural human life are exhausted in and with egocentric love. There is nothing in the life and activity of the natural man which does not bear the marks of ... seeking its own. It is therefore wholly under the dominion of sin, and on that basis there is no possibility of manifesting love in the Christian sense of the word, a love that seeketh not its own, but loves God with all its heart and its neighbor as itself (Nygren, 722-3, quoted in Outka, 59).

Gregory Stevens notes that agape only exists in the "supernatural order" for Nygren. All other love is self-seeking, including the love of God, which Nygren refers to as "celestial Eros" (331). Niebuhr contests Nygren's separation of Eros and Agape, asserting that it erodes both types of love. If they are regarded as separate, then "Eros has no goal beyond itself. And Agape has no real relevance to the human situation" (1953, 163). Instead, Niebuhr holds that the two types of love are interrelated, so that we are able to attain levels of love which surpass Eros but never attain pure Agape, since self-interest is ever present.

Third, human reason has great difficulty identifying self-interest, making it impossible to eliminate. The most moral act, should it exist, would originate in

disinterested motives. Nevertheless, the morality of the act could not be judged, because “only the agent of an action knows to what degree self-seeking corrupts his socially approved actions.” This is why “society, on the other hand, makes justice rather than unselfishness its highest moral ideal” (1960a, 258). In light of the fact that only we can know our own motives, the only way selfishness can be checked is if we do it ourselves, and this will not occur unless we are more critical of ourselves than we are of others (1960a, 271).

Albeit, Niebuhr does not believe that reason is able to clearly identify self-interest (1960a, 45). Not only are others unable to judge our morality, we are unable to judge it for ourselves. The reason for this is that we are too “ambiguous” (1951, 101). Human beings are ambiguous because they occupy an “ambiguous position in nature.” Niebuhr explains, “As a creature of nature he is subject to necessities and contingencies, which may be completely irrelevant to the wider purposes, interests, and ambitions which he conceives and elaborates as creative spirit” (1951, 120). In other words, the dualism of the material and spiritual realms creates an ambiguous situation for us. This is compounded in the admixture of finite mind with passion and interest, producing an “ideological taint” of interest in human knowledge (1996, 2:214). The end result is that all knowledge becomes sinfully egocentric (1996, 2:191).

Fourth, even if it were possible to identify one’s own self-interest, Niebuhr believes that there is no universal reason from which to judge it anyway. Once more, he follows Augustine’s view of radical freedom, which makes it impossible to accept “fixed forms of human behavior” and “to assume the identity of the individual reason with a universal reason” (1953, 133). This leads to the conclusion that “there is no universal

reason in history, and no impartial perspective upon the whole field of vital interests, which compete with and mutually support each other” (1996, 2:252).

To add insult to injury, our rational forces are also inadequate to provide us with an impartial perspective since they are tied to “the forces they are intended to discipline.” In fact, the will-to-power uses just enough reason to justify itself (1960a, 44). Here the point is reinforced that self-interest becomes somewhat of a slave master over reason, which is limited by its finitude in the first place.

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 finally convincing. The self’s ignorance is never invincible ignorance. It sees beyond itself sufficiently to know that its interests are not identical with the wider good. If it claims such identity nevertheless, there is an element of moral perversity, and not mere ignorance in the claim (1951, 95-6).

The only possibility we have to judge ourselves morally is in comparison to a perfect ideal. “The actions and attitudes of the soul are judged in the light of an absolute moral ideal, and are found to fall short in comparison with it.” This check on egoism “is a potential support for the spirit of love” (1960a, 60). Obviously, the moral ideal is Christ, who: 1) discloses meaning beyond the self and 2) shatters hopes and expectations which are founded on the self (1996, 2:215). Niebuhr strongly believes that we must cease from trusting in our own efforts and follow the example of Christ, who modeled sacrificial, disinterested love. He exhibited the “purest form of agape,” which is the “love of the enemy and forgiveness toward the evil-doer” (1996, 2:85).



## 2. Edwards and Natural Morality

Paul Ramsey describes four elements of Edwards' natural morality: 1) a sense of secondary beauty in moral dispositions and relations, 2) self-love extended by the association of ideas, 3) instinctual kind affections, and 4) natural conscience (Edwards 1989, 33). In order to better emphasize the role that self-interest plays throughout, I will address these elements in a slightly different order. The section will conclude with a brief description of Edwards' account of true virtue, which will help to define the limits that Edwards places on self-interest.

### 2.1 *The Appreciation of Beauty*

Edwards recognizes the fact that each of us has interests and that these interests reflect the objects of our love. However, he does not reduce all of our interests to self-love. Rather, he differentiates self-love (i.e. active love) from the "love of complacency" (i.e. passive love). The notion of complacent love is essentially one in which the subject passively enjoys the experience of beauty (1996, 6). It is complacent in that we cannot choose to be attracted to certain objects, rather, they possess certain qualities in and of themselves which are naturally attractive to us. In other words, Edwards believes that certain objects command an aesthetic appreciation which is not to be confused with self-love. Instead, the possibility exists for objects to be loved in and of themselves.

The beauty of creation is called "secondary" because it is inferior to the beauty of Christ. Edwards believes that this secondary beauty can also be separated into two basic categories. First, objects are beautiful when they are in agreement, when they consent

with one another, or when they exist in union. Hence, we seem to have a natural appreciation of cohesion and completeness. Second, human beings also find a certain appeal in the concepts of order, harmony, and proportion. Hence, things which are more intelligible tend to be more fascinating. These two aspects allow Edwards to relate the universe to the design of its Creator. He believes that God has created the world “so that one thing seems to be made in imitation of another, and especially the less perfect to be made in imitation of the more perfect” (1947, 65). We can study the beauty of the natural world and gain a better understanding of the unity, harmony, and order that God desires in the spiritual realm. The structure of the universe is not a result of probability, for “God does purposely make and order one thing to be in agreeableness and harmony with another” (1947, 44).

This correlation between the material and the spiritual realms provides a possible bridge from natural beauty to natural theology. It could function in this way, since the two realms are not entirely distinct. For Edwards, the spiritual realm is a deeper, ultimate reality which underlies the material realm and reflects greater meaning and purpose, bestowed by its Creator. Thus, the works of creation bear the stamp of God (1947, 61). In fact, “That the works of nature are intended and contrived of God to signify and indigitate [sic.] spiritual things is particularly evident concerning the rainbow, by God’s express revelation” (1947, 60). Edwards holds the beauty of the natural realm to be symbolic of the spiritual realm, similar to the way hieroglyphics symbolizes language (1947, 132-3).

Edwards’ construction contains what would be the basic elements of a natural theology: 1) God bestows creation with natural beauty and value, 2) the material and

spiritual realms have order and harmony within themselves and with each other, 3) the material is symbolic of the spiritual, and 4) beauty in the material points to the deeper reality of the spiritual and ultimately to the Creator. This holds great possibilities for supporting a natural theology. Nevertheless, Edwards is only willing to carry the argument so far, because he does not believe the natural self (i.e. the unregenerate, unconverted self) to be capable of apprehending the deeper principles of agreement and proportion which underlie aesthetic beauty. At best, the natural self is able to recognize and enjoy aesthetic beauty, but the level of perception remains superficial (Holbrook, 74). Only true virtue can allow the deeper level of apprehension.

In any event, Edwards does not believe that all of the pleasure we experience is egocentric. For him, there are certain types of pleasure which are created by the inherent value of their objects. This possibility apparently does not exist for Niebuhr. If he truly is a psychological egoist, then pleasure for him would be a property only to be found in the subject. Objects would only have the subjective value that is projected on them. Even if he were able to deny these charges, he would still most likely claim that the presence of pleasure eliminates the possibility of things being loved for their own sake.

## *2.2 Instinctual Kind Affections*

For Edwards, our inclinations and appetites are not merely subjective, for we have certain instincts in common. Of these, three can be labeled as “kind affections.” These instincts are given to us by God for the purpose of preserving humanity and helping it to flourish (1996, 83). First, we have an instinct for marital companionship. Edwards believes that the natural sexual instinct is heterosexual, that men and women need one

another as partners in life. This instinct guarantees the reproduction of the human race. Second, each of us experiences feelings of pity for those in distress. Helping one another out of trouble helps to preserve the human race. Third, a sense of gratitude comes over us when our well-being and interests are advanced, leaving us more inclined to promote the interests of others. In this way, the human race tends to flourish (1996, 79-84).

Since these are all instincts, they too are not truly virtuous. However, they play a positive and necessary role in promoting the well-being of others, even when they are motivated by self-interest. Edwin S. Gaustad says that Edwards' ordinary morality, which arises from self-interest,

does include the instinctive affections for the family, the sense of proportion or harmony between an injury on the one hand and the punishment meted out on the other (a sense of fair play, or of justice), pity to others in distress, and the like. Ordinary morality, therefore, is part of God's structure in the universe; it is useful, it can even be noble (52).

### *2.3 Natural Conscience*

The natural faculty of conscience must approve duty and disapprove sin for Edwards (1996, 72). At first glance, this seems to be a rather ambitious claim, considering the fact that true virtue has still not entered the picture. The individual is still motivated by self-love. Edwards is able to construct a natural account of conscience, based on two principles: 1) a sense of desert and 2) a desire to be consistent with oneself (1996, 65-6). When others love us, we naturally feel that they deserve our love in return. The converse holds as well. When we love others we feel that we should be loved by them, too (1996, 51). Therefore, we have a sense of desert in regard to motive. But what about action? How do we have a sense of desert concerning the acts themselves? We

have it simply through the ability to recognize and perceive beauty and proportion, as expounded above (1996, 59). Acts that tend toward unity, harmony, order, consent, etc. command praise in and of themselves.

Edwards sees a practical application of the sense of desert in the Golden Rule. He does not suggest that our actions toward others be guided by self-interest, instead, he exhorts us to sympathize with others, understanding their interests and seeking their well-being. To be sure, the Golden Rule does not address the relative worth of particular acts. It does, however, give a fuller account of the sense of desert in reciprocal love. Ramsey calls this the “reversibility test” (1989, 23-5). John E. Smith points out that this “reversibility” requires imagination and projection, since we must put ourselves in the place of others “by ascribing to them ‘ideas’ we have of ourselves” (Smith, 113; Edwards 1989, 591, n5).

Conscience also operates out of a desire for self-consistency. In fact, Edwards believes that human beings are disposed to experience feelings of uneasiness whenever they are inconsistent (1996, 61). It is not precisely clear why this should be so, but the assertion is consistent with the account of natural beauty given above, which claims that humans have a natural appreciation for unity, harmony, and order. In any case, it must be understood that natural conscience does not act disinterestedly (1996, 70). Moral choices cannot be reduced to logical inferences and conclusions. After all, Edwards understands the faculty of human will to ultimately be the capacity for love and hate (1996, 43). Whether from a sense of desert or out of a desire for self-consistency, conscience is moved by particular feelings and passions.

## 2.4 *Self-love*

Edwards affirms the fact that human nature has certain inclinations and appetites (1996, 45). In essence, each of us possesses both the capacity and the desire for pleasure. We love those things which bring us pleasure and hate those which either bring us displeasure or preclude us from experiencing pleasure. As stated above, Edwards believes the desire for pleasure to be so strong that he defines will in these terms. Choice is simply a matter of following one's desires. Indeed, he reduces human action to the pursuit of the strongest motive (Holbrook, 41).

Each of us has self-love/self-interest. In the strictest sense, self-love is indispensable, since it is tied to the natural appetites of hunger, thirst, etc., which are both useful and necessary (Levin, 183). In a more general sense, saying that we have self-love only says that we take pleasure in our own happiness, according to Edwards (1996, 42). We enjoy being happy, so we make choices that tend toward our happiness. This is evidenced in several ways. First, we love others who promote our interests and well-being. Edwards classifies this as loving those who love us (1996, 42). Second, we love actions which promote our interests and well-being. In this way, self-love often restrains us from evil acts, since they are harmful. In fact, self-love can even lead us to pursue true virtue once we see it as the true source of happiness (Levin, 183). Third, we tend to love others who are like us. Edwards says that such persons have interests similar to ours, so it is in our best interest to promote their interests (1996, 51).

Hence, the favorable treatment of others can be derived from the principle of self-love. In this way, self-love can tend toward beneficence. It is possible to be nice to people out of self-interest. Albeit, this can never be classified as true benevolence, since it always arises from the ulterior motive of self-interest. Edwards does propose that true

virtue must be achieved before true benevolence can be produced. As Clyde A. Holbrook argues, self-love “in this complex or ‘compounded’ sense is therefore not to be condemned. The ordinary or ‘simple’ sense of self-love, however, is a quite different matter in Edwards’ thought” (58). If self-love is a concomitant to other motives, or if it tends toward beneficence, then it is acceptable. On the other hand, self-love as the sole motive, or as the motive of an act that does not benefit others, does not deserve applause or reward.

Daniel Walker Howe says that self-interest can be a legitimate motive for Edwards if it is enlightened (86). There must be an awareness of how the interests of others coincide with self-interest. Ruth H. Bloch concurs, contending that self-interest must be expanded to include these interests. Given the fact that “compounded self-love” moves beyond the self to some degree, it is not entirely separate from the love of God, which requires the same type of expansion (137).

## 2.5 *True Virtue*

Edwards defines “true virtue” as that which is “truly beautiful” (1996, 2-4). Naturally, he has a theological purpose in mind, for if God can be identified as the source of all beauty, then God is logically the source of all virtue. This definition of the word seems to carry a connotation of “worth” or “value,” yet it extends even further. It is not only the possession of beauty that concerns Edwards, it is the recognition and appreciation of beauty that is crucial. The profound appreciation of God and others is what produces true/pure love. Those who acquire pure love actually become beautiful and virtuous themselves.

However, true virtue is also “that consent, propensity and union of heart to being in general, which is immediately exercised in a general good will” (1996, 3). It is the disposition of the will not only to appreciate beauty, but to desire union of being with others, most specifically, human beings. Virtue for Edwards is not to be understood as an intellectual habit. It is the natural propensity to be motivated by love. In the case of natural virtue, it is the love of oneself; for true virtue, it is the love of God and others.

Earlier I pointed out that the natural self cannot appreciate beauty on a deeper level. Self-love may be able to produce beneficent acts, but it can never escape itself. Ultimately, self-love cannot appreciate anything other than itself. In contrast, true love values the object in and of itself. This principle holds for conscience as well. In lower/natural conscience, our basic inclination is to agree with ourselves. In higher/divine conscience, we attain agreement or union of heart with God and with others (1996, 62). This account thus explains how human beings can exceed and break free of self-love and fulfill God’s expectations of them. It is not so much the act as it is the motive that God requires (1989, 178-80). God wants us to love that which is good, not merely give it our approval. This includes loving other human beings as well as the rest of creation, since God pronounced all of his creation good.

True/pure love also enables the “reversibility test” to be applied at a deeper level. In pure love, the “hearts” (i.e. interests) of the parties are united so that the mind receives others as part of the self. In other words, others become connected with my emotions in such a way that their interests become my interests; their well-being becomes my well-being (1996, 61). Whereas the person motivated by self-love must have imagination and projection to consider the interests of others, the truly virtuous and loving person has



already incorporated the interests and well-being of others into the self. This cannot be attained through self-love, but through this principle of attachment the subject breaks free of the limits of self-love. Once this occurs, the subject can possess benevolence, which Edwards describes as taking pleasure in the well-being and happiness of any and all beings (1996, 6). Gaustad points out that Edwards' universal love can be particularized, since it is a product of true virtue, but particular love, which arises from self-love, cannot be universalized (46).

Howe rightly argues that the ability to transcend self-interest and acquire true virtue can only be effected: 1) in the individual through religious conversion and 2) in society through a religious awakening (86-9). Edwards describes it this way:

In conversion, graces do spring forth in the soul which are like the sweet flowers that adorn the face of the earth in the spring, and like the sweet melody of singing birds. The soul of one upon whom Christ has shined differs as much from the souls of the wicked as the earth, beautified with the vernal sunbeams, and, when covered with ice and snow, and vexed with storms in the dead of winter (1992, 41-2).

In the "new birth," the newly regenerated person receives: 1) a new principle of understanding in order to perceive God and spiritual things, and 2) a new principle of will and inclination, enabling a level of love and obedience that is otherwise impossible (Edwards 1999, 187-9). True virtue becomes a reality in the heart. Paul Ramsey attributes this newfound virtue to the communication of God's love to the regenerate (Edwards 1989, 20). He compares Edwards' emphasis on the divine infusion of virtue with that of St. Thomas Aquinas (Edwards 1989, 55). Additionally, Edwards holds the "graces" to be concatenated. When one is infused at regeneration, all are infused concurrently. Just as a baby in the womb has all of its parts, though not fully formed, so

the regenerated person possesses all of the Christian virtues, though imperfectly (Edwards 1989, 334-5).

Just as conscience is not disinterested, neither is pure love, both in regard to others and in regard to oneself. Pure love does not preclude self-interest. As Stephen Post notes, the very fact that the saint shares in God's happiness limits love's ability to be disinterested (359). However, there is a difference in the way that the saint loves. For the reprobate, self-interest is the foundation of love. In contrast, self-interest is a "superstructure" for the saint, who loves from a foundation that is unmixed with egoism (360). God does expect us to love ourselves. The difference lies in pure love's ability to transcend self-interest and bring union between God, others, and the self.

### 3. Noteworthy Criticisms of Niebuhr

#### 3.1 *Criticism One: Sin Does Not Collapse into Pride*

Since the publication of Judith Plaskow's critique of Niebuhr and Tillich, Niebuhr's account of sin has incited several other feminist responses (cf. Plaskow 1980). For instance, Daphne Hampson argues that Niebuhr's use of Kierkegaard is selective, reflecting a bias which is not inclusive of women's perspectives. She points out that Kierkegaard identifies two causes of despair. First, there is the despair of trying to be your true self all by yourself. This is what Niebuhr calls pride. Second, despair can result when you are not willing to be yourself. The second type Kierkegaard refers to as the "womanly," while Niebuhr calls it losing oneself in sensuality. According to Hampson, Niebuhr makes pride the dominant characteristic of sin. Thus he ignores the

second type of despair, which cannot be characterized by self-interest, because it actually reflects an inadequate level of self-interest.

Building upon her interpretation of Kierkegaard, Hampson contends that this second type of despair is more relevant to the experience of women, while the category of pride applies more to men (46-58). Susan Nelson Dunfee agrees with this assessment, concluding that Niebuhr's tendency to subsume sensuality within pride ultimately collapses finitude under freedom. This makes the "sin of hiding" (i.e. self-hatred; denial of one's freedom) an impossibility (320). For the many women who must suppress their true selves, such an account only adds to their bondage (321-6). Carol Lakey Hess adds that Niebuhr's overemphasis on pride as sin ignores both the role of self-actualization and the plight of the weak (355).

Edwards attributes the cause of "all vice, sin, or moral evil" to either: 1) a lack of love for others or 2) malevolence (1996, 67). In both cases, Edwards does not claim that an improper love for others corresponds with inordinate self-love, the claim which Niebuhr seemingly makes. For Edwards, it is possible that one could be apathetic, lacking in love both for others and for oneself. Therefore, Edwards does not make the claims which warrant this feminist critique. Niebuhr makes no room for apathy and is thus subject to the criticism.

Niebuhr is consequently unable to distinguish pride from self-interest. Howe says that Benjamin Franklin makes such a distinction, holding the view that while self-interest contains an element of rationality, pride does not, because it is a passion. In fact, pride can even blind us from our true self-interest (79-80). In giving such prominence to self-interest, Niebuhr could be called a psychological egoist in many respects. Gene Outka

highlights two points which are commonly made against psychological egoism: 1) we must distinguish the desire we have for an object from the satisfaction we feel when the object is realized and 2) psychological egoism has difficulty explaining benevolent tasks, e.g. healing and instruction (286). Ruth L. Smith similarly opines that theories of self-interest cannot account for self-interested individuals entering into the shared relations of a community (286).

Regarding Outka's first point, Niebuhr could admit the difference between the desire for an object and the satisfaction it brings, but he would still argue that they are indistinguishable. For all practical purposes, they might as well be considered as one. Edwards is able to make the distinction with his accounts of natural beauty and the sense of desert, both of which explain how an object can be loved for its own sake. Regarding Outka's second point, Niebuhr would respond to it as he would the first point. He claims that there are no purely disinterested tasks, but he does allow for benevolence that is mixed with some degree of self-interest. Again, the problem is distinguishing desire from satisfaction. Regarding Smith's point, Niebuhr would have to conclude that shared relations provide a mutual benefit for the participants, applying some type of contract theory to explain it. In contrast, Edwards could affirm shared relations in any case, acknowledging the possibility that sharing can be motivated by self-interest or by the love for others.

### *3.2 Criticism Two: Self-Sacrifice Is Not Always Virtuous*

Since Niebuhr believes that self-interest is virtually impossible to identify in one's motives, he concludes that self-sacrifice is the only type of action which can be identified

as being virtuous. Hess points out that this conclusion is short-sighted, for self-sacrifice “may be more an expression of ‘self-centered’ existence than a yielding of the ‘self’” (362-3). This assertion carries some weight against Niebuhr’s claims, because he argues that motives can only be known by the agent, and even this knowledge is uncertain. Hess goes on to convey Dorothy Soelle’s assertion that an overemphasis on submission and self-sacrifice is not proper piety but “Christian masochism” (363).

Soelle’s critique rules out the possibility of self-sacrifice as a willing choice, for the interest of the agent would taint the act. Therefore, virtuous self-sacrifice would need to be dictated by circumstances beyond the agent’s control. Nevertheless, the agent must have the power to prevent the sacrifice from taking place, else the killing would be nothing more than a murder. In effect, self-sacrifice must be a matter of non-resistance. However, this is precisely the position that Niebuhr takes, so it appears that Soelle’s critique can be met. Albeit, I suggest that self-sacrifice must have a purpose, otherwise there is no way to interpret it as an expression of love. In other words, the agent must permit herself to be sacrificed so that some benefit might be realized, else the sacrifice would be reduced to a senseless death. I believe that this is where Niebuhr gets into trouble, for the agent would need to take some interest in the purpose of the sacrifice.

Since Edwards allows actions to have different gradations of virtue, based on the gradations of love within the agent, he again comes through the critique unscathed. If self-sacrifice is guided by self-interest, Edwards would affirm the goodness of the act (based on the benefit it brings) while recognizing the fact that it is not a truly virtuous act. The same would hold true whether the self-sacrifice were performed for selfish reasons or for masochistic reasons.

### 3.3 *Criticism Three: Self-Love Is Only Bad When It Is Inordinate*

Outka argues that self-love has a legitimate role, because we must see ourselves as creatures of God, not as the means to other ends (291). As Kant would express it, we must be treated like ends and not like means. Outka views self-love as a natural instinct. In and of itself, it is not blameworthy (63-7). Indeed, self-interest is a necessary ingredient in our emotional health. Just as too much self-regard precludes loving others, so does not loving oneself at all, since we close ourselves up from others (73). Rather than condemn all self-love (as Niebuhr does), Outka identifies “nefarious” self-love as that in which “the agent’s predominant aim is individual and private satisfaction.” He categorizes it as “acquisitiveness” (56).

In Outka’s mind, there must be a proper balance between self-regard and other-regard. Inordinate self-regard (i.e. acquisitiveness) does not treat others properly and inordinate other-regard (i.e. prodigality) does not treat the self properly (70). In this regard, he quotes M. C. D’Arcy: “Selfishness is only a vice if it means an undue regard for self; unselfishness is only a virtue if it is countered by self-respect. The two loves, therefore, so far from being opposites appear to require the presence of each other” (D’Arcy, 348, quoted by Outka, 70). McCormick also suggests that neighbor-love which has no self-concern is actually discriminatory against the self, and to discredit the self is to discredit others since love must be universal (507). This principle holds true in a more general sense as well, for since ethics must be universalizable, the agent must be treated as any other agent would be treated in the same circumstance. In other words, roles must

be interchangeable (i.e. the same thing is required no matter who the agent and the recipient are), so the agent and the recipient must be regarded equally.

Not only does Edwards argue along the same lines as this critique, he proceeds to say that it is possible for us to adopt the interests of others as if they were our own. In this way, self-interest is not viewed as the malignancy which must be extirpated, but as a potential place for love to progress toward true virtue.

#### 4. Conclusion

Niebuhr overlooks the fact that acting in a disinterested way can actually feed the egoism of others. After all, if we assume that all people act out of self-interest, then we would need to be careful not to encourage that attitude. In terms of practical politics, Niebuhr separates himself from the pacifists for this very reason. While some pacifists would hope that a non-violent, non-resistant witness would win the hearts of the aggressors, Niebuhr believes that this is whimsical. Instead, he concludes that resistance is often necessary to stop tyrants. However, he does not want to face the fact that this can also occur on a smaller scale in interpersonal relations. Just ask the parents who have made the mistake of giving in to their children's every whim. Many times that which is in our best interest is not what we would choose. This coincides with Niebuhr's belief that self-seeking behavior is self-destructive. Complete other-regard allows others the possibility of regarding themselves as egoists. Our neighbors must learn to have other-regard as well, and often this is learned when they encounter our self-regard.

Finally, Niebuhr admits that the line between realism and cynicism is a fine one. "A realism becomes morally cynical or nihilistic when it assumes that the universal

characteristic in human behavior must also be regarded as normative” (1953, 130). Perhaps this is why Niebuhr refers to himself as a “tamed cynic.” If we accept Niebuhr’s other premises, it is difficult to avoid cynicism unless we can: 1) recognize a certain amount of self-love as legitimate or 2) provide a strong account of grace which provides a means of overcoming this dilemma. Niebuhr offers us neither. Edwards believes that ignoring the “prudential” aspects of self-love in Christian ethics opens the door to “melancholy and desponding temperament” (Post, 359). For our own emotional health, we would be wise to agree with him.



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