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THE VIRTUE OF FAITH

Robert Merrihew Adams

It is a prominent and very well-known feature of the Christian tradition that faith is regarded as a virtue, and unbelief (at least in many cases) as a sin. This seemed puzzling to me as long ago as I can remember thinking about it all, for two reasons: (1) Belief and unbelief seem to be mainly involuntary states, and it is thought that the involuntary cannot be ethically praised or blamed. (2) If belief is to be praised at all, we are accustomed to think that its praiseworthiness depends on its rationality, but the virtuousness of faith for Christians seems to be based on its correctness and independent of the strength of the evidence for it. I shall try to deal with these issues in the first two sections of this paper, arguing in the first section that many cognitive failures, though not voluntary, are ethically blameworthy, and in the second section that there are many cases in which it is rightness rather than rationality that ought to be praised in beliefs.

I approach this topic with some hesitancy because in addition to being puzzling, for the reasons I have mentioned, it might be felt to be offensive. Fears may be raised that the stigmatization of unbelief as sin will feed the flames of persecution. We may reply, correctly, that persecution does not spring from the virtue of faith, but from a deceptively faithless fear of other people and their opinions. But it cannot be denied that the Christian Church, as a concrete community of sinners, has much to be embarrassed about in this regard. I think it will be best to concentrate our attention, as far as possible, on *our own* sins of unbelief.

This essay is addressed therefore to Christians. It is intended as a rather rough-and-ready sketch for family discussion. And it is not my aim here to justify Christian belief, either to those who are in it or to those who are out of it. The question we shall be concerned with is "What is virtuous about faith, *given that it is true?*"

I see two motives that Christians have for studying the idea of faith as a virtue. The first, which will concern us especially in the third section of the paper, is that we are conscious of unbelief as a sin in ourselves—indeed as one of the most fundamental sins in ourselves. The second motive is that the Bible presents God as prizing faith so highly as to make it one of the principal goals of His dealings with the human race. This motive will be central to the fourth and final section of the paper.



I. *Cognitive Sins*

There are many cognitive failures that we regard as morally reprehensible. Some examples are: believing that certain people don't have rights that they do in fact have; perceiving members of some social group as less capable than they actually are; failing to notice indications of other people's feelings; and holding too high an opinion of one's own attainments. These failures are not in general voluntary. *Trying* to pay attention to other people's feelings will not necessarily be successful, if I am insensitive or afraid of emotions. And *trying* to assess my own abilities and accomplishments accurately may not keep me from thinking too highly of myself, if I am vain. We do give people credit for trying in these matters, but we still regard the failure to notice other people's feelings or one's own deficiencies as a fault—and in some sense an ethical or moral fault.

To be sure, not all cognitive failures are moral faults. A false mathematical belief, for example, would not normally be regarded as an ethical fault—though in a professional mathematician it might be evidence of a morally culpable negligence. How, then, are we to draw the line between those cognitive failings that are ethical faults and those that are not? I confess that I do not have a complete or general answer to this question. I will mention three types of cognitive error that seem to me to be morally culpable. But the classification is not intended to be exhaustive; there may well be additional types of cognitive sin.

(1) False *ethical* beliefs are apt to be culpable, even if they are not acted on. If someone thinks there is nothing wrong with shoplifting, for example, I think that would be morally blameworthy in most cases—even if the person never shoplifted, for fear of getting caught. I do not know whether *all* false ethical beliefs are sins. Some opinions seem heinous; belief in the principles of Nazism would be an extreme example. But errors of judgment on some difficult, disputed ethical issues do not seem particularly dishonorable. Perhaps the best argument for blaming *all* errors about ethical principles is this: Suppose I have done something that is materially wrong, believing it to be right. Now that I recognize the action to be wrong, I should not blame myself for it if I did it out of ignorance of a non-ethical fact that I could not be expected to have known (for instance, if I did not know that my light switch was wired to set off a bomb in a neighboring apartment). But if my relevant non-moral beliefs were correct, and I did the materially wrong action because of what I now see to be an error about ethical principles, I think I should blame myself in every case. And it is plausible to say that an error that is or could be the root of a blameworthy action in this way must itself be ethically blameworthy in some degree.

(2) Harmful false beliefs about any subject are culpable if they are due to *negligence*. That is, they are blameworthy if we hold them because we have neglected to perform *voluntary actions* that we ought to have performed, and that would have

cured or prevented the error in us. Many maintain, indeed, that this is the *only* case in which cognitive errors are culpable. In a very interesting recent discussion of the issue, Alan Donagan maintains this position: "Ignorance, whether of the principles of morality, or of precepts derived from them by means of specificatory premises, is culpable or inculpable according as it proceeds from negligence—from want of due consideration."¹ Donagan points out that false beliefs about moral principles may be due to bad education rather than to negligence, and concludes, "A graduate of Sandhurst or West Point who does not understand his duty to noncombatants as human beings is certainly culpable for his ignorance; an officer bred up from childhood in the Hitler *Jugend* might not be."²

I disagree with Donagan on this point. I think the cruel graduate of the Hitler *Jugend* is in terrible sin, even if he is also a victim of his education, and even if he has no opportunity to act on his corrupt beliefs. Bad moral beliefs can make a bad man or woman, no matter how we came by the beliefs. There are at least two ways of being a sinner: one is to have done a bad thing; the other is to be, in some respect and in some degree, a bad person. The second way is no less dreadful and no less fundamental than the first. Badness of character need not be explained by a previous bad deed of one's own. We may be corrupted by our own wrongdoing, but that is not the only way in which we can be corrupted.

This is not at all to deny that someone who has been corrupted by an evil education is also a victim, and has a claim on our sympathy. From a Christian point of view sin is in any case a bondage that should elicit a compassionate concern for the sinner. The purpose of identifying cognitive failures as sins is not to find a stick to beat the sinner, but rather to learn what we have to repent of. If we have a wrong attitude, if we are for the bad and against the good, if we do not recognize rights that other people have, if we see ourselves as the center of the universe, we have to repent of this—we have to acknowledge our wrongness and change our minds and our lives—regardless of whether it was our own voluntary action that got us into such a state. These questions of stance—of what we are for, what we are against, what we acknowledge and believe on certain points—have an importance, for the ethical quality of our lives, that is not entirely dependent on questions of what we cause, produce, or voluntarily do.

(3) False beliefs and other cognitive failures are sometimes morally objectionable at least in part because of bad *desires* that are manifested in them. One reason why it is morally offensive to hold too high an opinion of oneself is that that usually manifests a desire to aggrandize oneself at the expense of others. Indeed I believe that blameworthiness of cognitive failures arises much more from bad motives of this sort than from duties of self-culture that one has failed to perform (not that it is to be explained entirely by either or both of these causes). If I have failed to recognize another person's feelings, how much I should blame myself depends much more on whether I have the respect and concern that I should have for that person

than on whether I was conscientiously trying to notice his or her feelings.

These motives—respect and concern for other people on the one hand, the desire to aggrandize oneself on the other—are involuntary in much the same way as beliefs are. One cannot develop the right sort of desires and concerns simply by deciding to have them. On the contrary, it is the testimony of moral experience that the improvement of one's desires and motives is difficult and often remains imperfect even with the most earnest efforts. Nonetheless I believe that bad desires and motives are sin, and to be repented of—but that is a subject for fuller discussion than can be given here.

What concerns us now is the connection between bad motives and culpable cognitive failures. I have pointed out that cognitive failures may be culpable partly because they *manifest* a bad motive. It is worth noting that a bad motive, or morally offensive attitude, may be *constituted* in part by an offensive belief. Thus the belief that certain people lack certain rights is not just a *consequence* of the bad motive of disrespect or contempt for those people; it is part of what *constitutes* disrespect or contempt for them. As such it is as vicious morally as any other aspect of contempt.

II. *The Importance of Being Right*

Many morally offensive beliefs are also unreasonable, but that is not why they are *ethical* faults. Right ethical views can also be held in a very unreasonable way, and that does not necessarily keep it from being a credit to the person that he holds those beliefs. Perhaps there has been someone who accepted in principle a strict hedonistic act utilitarianism but also believed (inconsistently) that one ought not to punish an innocent person in order to procure a slight net increment in the sum or average of pleasure in the world. Suppose on being confronted with his inconsistency such a person concluded that one ought indeed to punish an innocent person if it were certain that that would slightly increase the sum of pleasure. I think this would be a change for the worse morally, even if it would make his system of beliefs more rational, because more consistent.

It is commonly more important for moral beliefs to be right than to be reasonable. And when they are wrong we may rightly blame them even if they are not unreasonable. I cannot prove that it is unreasonable to regard infanticide as a morally permissible method of population control; but I still think it a sin to hold that belief. (If any believers in infanticide should chance to read this statement, and think it rude, I ask them to bear in mind that I confess myself to be guilty of many of the sins discussed in this paper.)

We are so used to thinking of rationality as the paramount intellectual virtue that it may be useful to pass in review some of the areas of life in which it is morally or at least humanly important to be right in a way that is not accounted for by ration-

ality. Let us begin with the learning of language. We would never have learned to speak or understand the speech of others at all if we had not had a marked ability to *guess correctly* what other people meant by the sounds they uttered. Children acquire a large body of beliefs about the meanings of words long before they have either the intellectual capacity or adequate evidence to justify those beliefs. Indeed it is doubtful that we can ever have adequate evidence to justify a large part of the beliefs that we rightly hold about other speakers' meanings. Even among adults communication would be gravely impoverished if we understood each other's verbal and non-verbal signals only so far as we could give a compelling justification for our interpretation. And the ability to learn a new language quickly and well depends to no small extent on one's willingness to trust one's hunches in these matters. Communication among human beings depends on a sort of natural empathy which enables us, with remarkable reliability, to *guess* each other's meaning from very fragmentary evidence.

Belief that goes beyond the evidence is as important in *trusting* other people as in understanding them. Trust for other people is based on a conviction of their honesty and good will. When this conviction is strong, it usually outruns any evidence for it that we could specify. It is important that we often trust other people in circumstances quite different from any in which we have previously known their honesty and good will to have been tested. Sometimes we trust another person on very little evidence indeed; and that is also of great value for human life.

Alas, one is sometimes deceived and disappointed in one's trust in other people, so that the question whether one's trust is warranted does arise. But I think the question whether trust is *rationally justified* is much less important here, and less apt to be present to our minds, than the question whether the other person is *in fact* trustworthy. If you are in fact honest and loyal, you will (rightly) feel offended against, if modest grounds for suspicion lead to distrust for you in someone who knows you rather well—not because the other person seems *unreasonable*, but because he or she ought to have *sensed* your trustworthiness. Similarly, if I trust A and not B, being well acquainted with both, but can't explain why, that is terrible if B is in fact trustworthy and A is treacherous; but it is at least less terrible if my attitude is factually correct—that is, if B is indeed treacherous and A is trustworthy.

Self-knowledge is another area in which getting it right is important and rationality will not carry us far enough. It is an ethical fault to be blind to one's faults—to think oneself generous when really one is stingy, or to believe that one is free of resentment or hatred or contempt toward one's fellows when really one is full of them. Much of the philosophical ink that has been spilled on this subject has coagulated around the question whether and to what extent it is correct to say that we *deceive* ourselves in these matters. We need not worry about that here. My question is rather to what extent our problem with self-knowledge is one of rationality. It surely can be irrational to refuse to accept that one is, for example, jealous,

when confronted with all sorts of evidence from one's behavior. But I think that failure to recognize one's real desires and attitudes is very often a matter of blindness rather than irrationality. One has not reasoned badly, and one has not knowingly averted one's gaze from the evidence, but the facts have not registered. One has been influenced by a certain desire without feeling it; or it has never occurred to one that that ugly name could be applied to this attitude in oneself. This happens because we do not want to know—because we cannot stand to know—a certain fact about ourselves; but we are not conscious of what is going on. Here I think we are not irrational but blind. In most cases we ought to know what desires and attitudes we have, not by reasoning but simply because we have them. But sometimes we do not know it because we do not want to know it; and we are to blame for that.

Let me try to place these reflections in the context of a wider view of the limitations of rationality—a view at once theological and somewhat skeptical. We are cognitively dependent creatures. We would like to be able to justify all our knowledge, deriving it by indubitably correct arguments from first principles certified by a luminous self-evidence. But we cannot. We are creatures to whom cognitive starting points, which we cannot justify, must be *given*, again and again.

This need permeates our empirical thinking. In relying on induction at all, and in trusting our judgments of simplicity or plausibility of hypotheses, we are guessing, relying on intellectual impulse or hunch; and we have to hope we are guessing right. Indeed we *believe* that we are guessing right; and it is some sort of cognitive disorder not to guess right. Theists will say that in guessing right in such matters we are understanding God's signals—the language by which God communicates to us His intentions as creator.³

And the dependence of our knowledge on guessing right is not limited to a few first principles. Daily and even hourly we have new occasions to judge the weight of evidence, to interpret the utterances and character and intentions of other people, to recognize our own feelings and attitudes. There is much in these occasions that we must simply guess or see; and rationality cannot guarantee that we will get it right. By nature or grace the right guess, the right cognitive impulse, must simply be given to us.

This applies also to ethical convictions and religious faith. Without going so far as to say that moral and religious truths are irrational, or rationally indefensible, I imagine we can agree that rationality alone will not assure us of reaching all that we ought to reach of them. Something more than rationality must be given to us here. As Christians we will say it is the testimony of the Holy Spirit; but presumably He may speak to us through a great variety of social influences and apparently natural inclinations, as well as through more dramatic experiences.

III. *The Sin of Unbelief*

Thus far I have said relatively little about specifically religious faith and unbelief. It is time to turn our attention to them, and particularly to the sin of unbelief, as it occurs in the experience of Christians. We might think of unbelief as occurring in two forms: (1) not believing God when He speaks to us (that is, not believing what He says); and (2) not believing in God (that is, not trusting Him, or not believing that He exists at all, or not believing important truths about Him). In fact, however, these forms of unbelief cannot be sharply separated. If we do not believe God when He speaks to us, it is probably because we do not trust Him; and if we sin by not believing in God, it is what He says to us about Himself that we do not believe.

Let us dwell a bit on this last point. I think the sin of unbelief always involves rejection of something God has said to the sinner. Simply not believing that God exists is not the sin of unbelief, if God has never spoken to you. Butterflies presumably do not believe in God, but they are not therefore guilty of the sin of unbelief. If we, unlike butterflies, are guilty of the sin of unbelief, it is not because we are supposed to be able to *figure out* divine truth for ourselves, but because God has spoken to us. For this reason it behooves us to be particularly reluctant to accuse others of the sin of unbelief. How do we know what God has said to them? For it is the *internal* testimony of the Holy Spirit that most concerns us here.

You may expect me to say something here about atheism. But I will not, because I have never been an atheist and I think it is not my business here to anatomize the sins that atheists may be committing. No, I will take a concrete example of unbelief as it is found in the Christian life.

It is suggested to me that I ought to follow a certain course of action. Perhaps my wife suggests it, or perhaps the thought arises in me spontaneously, or is prompted by something I hear in a sermon. Initially the thought comes to me with the force of a minor revelation. But the more I think about it, the more I think of good reasons for not acting on the idea. I come to the conclusion that it would be a mistake; yet I remain disturbed about it.

What is going on? Maybe God was telling me to follow that course of action, and I am not believing Him. God's speech is not ineffectual; so we should expect that if we do not believe something He has said to us, His word will leave at least a trace of uneasiness in us. In the state that I described I may no longer be in a good position to tell whether it was God or a foolish impulse of my own that pressed me at first to do the action. What is clear is that if it was God, I do not want to hear Him. And that is sin.

Why don't I want to hear God if He is telling me to follow that course of action? Quite possibly because I am *afraid*. Perhaps the course of action is one that would risk offending people whom I fear to offend. And in this fear we find a deeper level of the sin of unbelief. For why am I afraid? Don't I believe that God will bless my

obedience if I sincerely try to do His will? Don't I believe that He can bring greater good out of any disasters that may befall me? Don't I believe that there is greater happiness to be found in venturing for God than in playing it safe for myself? Yes, I believe all those things. That is, I would sincerely assert them. I might even preach them in a sermon, or exert myself to defend them against philosophical attack. But obviously I do not believe them with all my heart.

This is, I think, the central form of the sin of unbelief in the Christian life. It is not a refusal to assent intellectually to theological truths, but a failure to trust in truths to which we do assent. Of course an attempt to resolve the conflict could lead, unhappily, to withdrawal of assent from the truths, rather than to trust in God; but more than intellectual assent is involved here.

The relationship between unbelief and fear is important. Trust can be understood in part as a sort of freedom from fear. It is a conceptual truth that if I fear that God will let me down, I do not entirely trust Him. Conversely, perfect trust in God would free us from that fear, and from many others.

The emotional ingredient in faith, and in unbelief, is significant for their relation to the intellectual life. There ought to be room in our conception of faith for honest investigation of all questions, and for feeling the force of objections to our faith, even while we are sustained in that faith. Three things should be distinguished: (1) To recognize that God's goodness is in some sense less than 100% probable, that it is less certainly established, more open to doubt, than one's own existence, or than ' $2 + 2 = 4$,' is to see the element of venture in our faith. It is not necessarily to fall into the sin of unbelief. The sin is something else in our response to these objective facts about our epistemic situation. (2) We may *fear* that God will let us down. The fear adds something emotional, felt or unfelt, which pervasively poisons our attitudes and which normally does constitute some failure of trust in God. The certitude of faith has much more to do with confidence, or freedom from fear, which is partly an emotional state, than it has to do with judgments of certainty or great probability in any evidential sense. (3) To be complete, let us note that we might let the indecisiveness of the evidence affect our *action*. We might try to factor all the arguments, pro and con, into our decisions about what to do. In other words, we might hedge our bet on God's goodness. That would surely be a sin of unbelief.

There are of course cases in which evidence against beliefs that we hold ought to be factored into our decisions. If a hunter believes that the animal behind the bush is a deer, but recognizes that there is some reason to think it might be another hunter, the evidence against his belief ought certainly to influence his conduct. Some philosophers may hold that rationality, or even morality, requires us to factor into our decisions any uncertainty we recognize in the objective case for *any* belief we hold. But I think that is wrong. Our bet on God's love should not be hedged. Reasons to doubt other people's trustworthiness should sometimes be totally ig-

nored. And our commitment to many ethical principles ought to be similarly unqualified. Suppose I see reason to doubt that there is any validity or binding force to morality at all; ought that uncertainty to be factored into my decision-making process? Surely not. So long as I do believe in morality, I must think that I ought absolutely to repudiate any hesitation to act on it, no matter what theoretical basis the hesitation may claim.

I have noted in section I that cognitive failures often owe their moral offensiveness at least in part to bad desires that are manifested in them. We may wonder whether a failure of trust in God is sinful on account of sinful desires that are manifested in it. This is a difficult question. The web of sin is a tangled mess of fears and desires which we cannot completely unravel. The fears that are obstacles to my believing what God says to me are not only fears of being let down by God; there are also fears of the frustration of my sinful desires. Perhaps to some extent I do not want to trust God because I sense that that threatens some idolatry that I have been cherishing. On the other hand, I wonder whether my sinful desires do not all *pre-suppose* a lack or weakness of trust in God's love. Could they stand in the face of a perfectly confident and vivid assurance of the riches of His goodness?

One motive that I think is particularly important in this context is lust for *control* of my own life and its circumstances. I would like to be able to plan my life and have it go according to plan. Or if I want to have some room in my life for the unplanned, the spontaneous and surprising, I would like the spontaneity to be my own caprice, and the surprises to be of certain sorts that please me. (Santa Claus is welcome any time he cares to call.) This sort of control depends heavily on my having a stable and reliable view of myself and my world. It depends also on my having a trustworthy method of modifying and extending my picture of reality as new events occur. I suspect that much of our emotional attachment to *rationality* has to do with our counting on it as a crucial part of our intellectual equipment for controlling our lives. We rely on rationality for at least three functions: (1) to enable us to know where we are going as we plan, scheme, contrive, or indulge a whim; (2) to tell us how to manipulate situations and people to achieve our goals; and (3) to give us judgments of probabilities so that we can limit our risks and place our emotional investments in the safest and most promising areas.

The control of which I am speaking is obviously related to freedom and the satisfaction of desire, but must not be identified with them. The power of the lust for control shows itself, indeed, in the extent to which we may be willing to sacrifice freedom and desire in order to stay in control. We will adjust our desires to "reality," and restrict our projects to those that are favored by other people and our circumstances—all in order to avoid unpleasant surprises and the feeling that our life is out of our control.

The same motive may lead us to curtail our hopes. We adjust our plans easily to pleasant surprises, but unpleasant surprises threaten our control. From the

standpoint of control, therefore, pessimism seems a stronger position than optimism. I think this fact is the main source of the intellectual machismo that prides itself on a sort of “tough-mindedness” that refuses to hope for very much. The desire for control tempts us to believe that if we hope for too much we will make fools of ourselves, whereas if we turn out to have hoped for too little we will only have proved to be “stronger” than we needed to be. This machismo is no more rational than the wishful thinking of which the hopeful are often accused. And when there is talk of “wishful thinking,” we would do well to realize that if we have a non-rational motive for believing the best, most of us also have a non-rational motive for believing the worst. Pessimism is not happier than optimism; hope is happier than despair. But it is quite possible to prefer control to happiness.

What Christianity promises may seem “too good to be true”; the emotional meaning of this is that Christianity promises more than we can hope for without giving up control. The supreme threat to our control, however, is God Himself. In Christian faith we are invited to trust a person so much greater than ourselves that we cannot understand Him very fully. We have to trust His power and goodness in general, without having a blueprint of what He is going to do in detail. This is very disturbing because it entails a loss of our control of our own lives.

God promises life; and the life that He promises is encounter with the alien and new. It is grace and good surprises. In this context the continued lust for control of one’s life, in preference to opening oneself to grace, is sin. But what is its relation to the sin of unbelief? Is the desire for control something that inhibits me from trusting God? I must say that in my experience it seems to be so. The feeling that it is stronger, more controlling, to expect evil than to expect good is a powerful enemy of faith. On the other hand, when I consider the question whether I would have this passion for controlling my life if I were not afraid to begin with, I am inclined to think that the lust for control *presupposes* a lack of trust in God. Perhaps the two sins support each other and neither is absolutely prior to the other.

IV. *The Advantage of Faith over Sight*

The opposition between trust and the desire to control one’s own life is closely connected in my mind with the question, what is the good of faith or trust. The answer that Christian thinkers have most often given to the question is that as it is our highest good to be related in love to God, and as we have to believe that He exists and loves us in order to be related to Him in that way, we need faith in God in order to attain our highest good. “For whoever would draw near to God must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who seek Him” (Hebrews 11:6). And I would certainly agree that as the world is actually set up, we have to have faith in God in order to be rightly related to Him here and now. But why should that be? Why should God set up a world in which it is faith rather than knowledge that is offered

to us? The Bible indeed suggests that God particularly prizes a faith like that of Abraham, who “went out, not knowing where he was to go” (Hebrews 11:8); a faith that is tried by sufferings (I Peter 1:6-7); a faith that trusts Him in the very blackness of death beyond which we cannot now *see* anything. Is there, then, some way in which faith is preferable to sight?

Well, suppose we always *saw* what people were like, and particularly what they would do in any situation in which we might have to do with them. How would we relate to people if we had such knowledge of them? I think we would manipulate them. I do not mean that we would necessarily treat people in a selfish or immoral way, but I think we could not help having an attitude of control toward them. And I think the necessity we would be under, to have such an attitude, would be conceptual and not merely causal. If I pursued my own ends in relation to you, knowing exactly how you would respond to every move, I would be manipulating you as much as I manipulate a typewriter or any other inanimate object. And if at some point I refrained from pursuing my own ends, in order to defer to some desire of yours, *I* would still be making the decision; I would be manipulating you in the service of your end that I had made my own. By the very nature of the case I could not escape from this manipulative role except insofar as I could forget or ignore what I knew about the responses you would make.

There is one loophole in this argument. I have assumed that my actions would be governed by teleological considerations; that is, I have assumed that my choices would be choices of ends to be pursued, or of means to those ends. But I do not believe that actions must, or should, always be governed by teleological considerations. Sometimes one ought to act on principle in spite of the probable or certain consequences. So even if I always knew how you would react to everything I might do, perhaps on some occasions that knowledge ought not to affect my choice of how to act in relation to you. And if in such a case I did conform my action to certain rules regardless of what I knew you would do in response, then I think I would not be manipulating you. But this affords only a very austere possibility of non-manipulative relationships. We are not interested in personal relationships simply as occasions for doing our duty. We wish to aim at a relational *goal* that involves the cooperation of the other person. That is what I could not do without manipulating you if I always knew exactly, and with certainty, what your response would be.

Our actual uncertainty about what other people will do makes it possible to *depend* on another person in a way that is much more personal. It enables the other person to be more truly other. To the extent that I realize that I do not know how he will respond to my action, I cannot regard him as an extension of my faculty of action, as I regard my typewriter.

Even in the actual world, with all its uncertainties, trust is often manipulative. If I trust the busdriver, it is to take me exactly where I expect her to take me, with no unpleasant surprises en route. Even your trust in your doctor is apt to be manipula-

tive, serving an end you have already settled on—namely, your health; and you will quite appropriately object if she does not tell you enough to make as many as possible of the crucial decisions for yourself. In cases like these the trust, and indeed the whole personal relationship, is not an end in itself, but a means to the individual ends of the parties involved.

There are other relationships, however, in which we open our lives to be influenced and partly shaped by the other person in ways that we cannot predict very precisely except that we have some confidence that they will be good. And even in that confidence we may be allowing the other person some part in defining our good. Uncertainty allows these relationships to be largely non-manipulative, and I believe the relationships that seem most intensely personal are of this type. It is not easy to say exactly what is so good about the dependence—usually a mutual but often an unequal dependence—in these relationships. But I am sure that it is logically and not just causally necessary for whatever it is that we value so highly in the best personal relationships.

Some reference to Martin Buber seems to be in order at this point. It is one of the important differences between an I-It and an I-Thou relationship, as Buber conceives of them, that the former is implicitly or explicitly manipulative and the latter is not. One of the interesting claims that Buber makes is that the *I* of an I-Thou relationship or attitude is different from the *I* of I-It. I don't know how far that idea can be pushed, but I think the following is true. The non-manipulative trust that uncertainty makes possible involves a sacrifice of some of our *control* over our own lives, but it does not necessarily make us less *free* on the whole. On the contrary, it seems to free us *to be ourselves in a different way*—perhaps because do not see ourselves as responsible for the outcome in the same way as if we were clinging to a more controlling role.

God demands of us the greatest trust, the acceptance of the most complete dependence. In death He confronts each of us with a total loss of control over our own destiny. I do not believe that He has given us a map of Heaven or a system of salvation by works that would enable us to extend beyond the grave our scheming and contriving for our own personal future. But in relying not on themselves, “but on God who raises the dead” (II Corinthians 1:9), St. Paul and many other Christians testify that they have experienced His love and power in a way that they would not give up in exchange for control over their own destiny.

Extreme as our dependence on God is, I would not say that it is entirely lacking in mutuality. I believe that He also opens Himself to be influenced by us; and this is particularly important in dealing with a *trial* of faith. If troubles impinge on a relationship of trust, they may seem to come from oneself, or from the person one trusts, or from outside the relationship.⁴ It is when the difficulties appear to come from the trusted person that one's trust is in the fullest sense tried. In such a case it is most important where one goes for help. If you turn to a third party to be your

champion against the person you trusted, there is a serious breakdown in the relationship of trust. But if you go to the person you trust, to work through the problem or conflict with him or her, your trust is tried but not yet broken. (I do not mean that this working through precludes the assistance of a third party who is not a partisan.)

The classic way to go to God to work through the problem or conflict with Him when one's faith is tried is *prayer*. This will be petitionary prayer, or perhaps even a complaint addressed to God, as we find quite freely in the Psalms and the prophets, or an acknowledgement of the anger and fear one feels towards Him. Prayer is not magic, and it is not to be believed that we can control God by our prayer. But I think a belief that God is open to be influenced by our prayer, in ways that we can neither predict nor control, is important to the function of prayer in working through a trial of faith. Without it we could hardly see the working through as real. I also think this belief is in accord with the nature of trust, which at its best is not an exchange of control for simple dependence, but an exchange of control for dependence in the context of an open relationship, in which there is real interaction, each party being open to be influenced by the other. Indeed the elimination of my influence on the person I trust would eliminate part of the venture of trust. I trust God some if I believe I will not be destroyed by what He does to me. I trust Him more, not less, if I also believe I will not be destroyed by what I do to Him in the relationship of trust.⁵

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NOTES

1. Alan Donagan, *The Theory of Morality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 134.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 135.
3. This way of putting it is inspired by Bishop Berkeley's conception of a divine language in our sensations. See, e.g., the fourth dialogue of his *Alciphron*.
4. Here, and in the rest of this paragraph, I am drawing on ideas suggested in discussion by Paul Oppenheimer.
5. Versions of this paper have been presented to several groups, and many people have helped me clarify my thoughts. I am grateful for some discussion with Gregory Kavka that led to an improvement in the paper, and for thoughtful written comments from James Muyskens and Allen Wood. I am indebted to Marilyn McCord Adams for much discussion of these topics, and especially for her insistence on the centrality of trust in the midst of uncertainties and trials, as a part of God's goal for human life, in the Bible. I owe a debt of another kind to A. Orley Swartzentruber. I enjoyed a sabbatical leave from UCLA, and the hospitality of Princeton Theological Seminary and Princeton University, during the period when this paper was written.