

The Rev. Dr. Paul Tillich On The Motivating Power Of Law And Morality

The principle of *agape* expresses the unconditional validity of the moral imperative, and it gives the ultimate norm for all ethical content. But it has still a third function: it is the source of moral motivation. It necessarily commands, threatens, and promises, because fulfillment of the law is reunion with one's essential being, or integration of the centered self. The law is "good," as Paul says. But just at this point its deepest and most dangerous ambiguity appears, that which drove Paul, Augustine and Luther to their revolutionary experiences. The law as law expresses man's estrangement from himself. In the state of mere potentiality or created innocence (which is not a historical stage), there is no law, because man is essentially united with that to which he belongs: the divine ground of his world and of himself. What ought to be and what is are identical in the state of potentiality. In existence, this identity is broken, and in every life process this identity and non-identity of what is and what out to be are mixed. Therefore, obedience and disobedience to the law are mixed; the law has the power to motivate partial fulfillment, but in so doing it also drives to resistance, because by its very character as law it confirms our separation from the state of fulfillment. It produces hostility against God, man, and one's self. This leads to different attitudes toward the law. The fact that it has some motivating power leads to the self-deception that it can produce reunion with our essential being, i.e., a complete self-integration of life in the realm of the spirit. This self-deception is conspicuously represented by those who are called variously the righteous ones, the pharisees, the puritans, the pietists, the moralists, the people of good will. They are righteous, and they deserve to be admired. On a limited basis they are well-centered, strong, self-certain, dominating. They are persons who radiate judgement even when they do not express it in words. Yet just by their righteousness they are often responsible for the disintegration of those whom they encounter and who feel their judgement.

The other attitude toward the law, probably that of the majority of people, is resigned acceptance of the fact that its motivating power is limited and that it

cannot bring about a full reunion with what we ought to be. They do not deny the validity of the law; they do not fall into anti-nomianism, and so they compromise with its commandments. This is the attitude of those who try to obey the law and oscillate between fulfillment and non-fulfillment, between a limited centeredness and a limited dispersion. They are good in the sense of conventional legality, and their fragmentary fulfillment of the law makes the life of society possible. But their goodness, like that of the righteous ones, is ambiguous -- only with less self-deception and with less moral arrogance.

There is a third attitude toward the law, one which combines a radical acceptance of the validity of the law with a complete despair about its motivating power. This attitude is the result of passionate attempts to be a "righteous one" and to fulfill the law without compromise in its unconditional seriousness. If these strivings are followed by the experience of failure, the centered self is disrupted in the conflict between willing and doing. One is aware of the fact (which has been rediscovered and methodologically described by present-day analytic psychology) that the unconscious motives of personal decisions are not transformed by commandments. The motivating power of the law is defied by them, sometimes with direct resistance, sometimes by the process of rationalization and -- in the social realm -- by the production of ideologies. The motivating power of the divine law is wrecked by what Paul calls the opposing "law of our members." And this is not changed by the reduction of the whole law to the law of *agape*, because if *agape* (toward God, man, and oneself) is imposed on us as law the impossibility of fulfilling it becomes more obvious than in the case of any particular law. The experience of this situation leads to the quest for a morality which fulfills the law by transcending it, that is, *agape* given to man as reuniting and integrating reality, as new being and not as law.

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