

Symbolic Value

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Religious ethical teaching has placed great value on explicit profession of religious belief, and on its explicit expression in ritual and other religiously symbolic behavior.¹ To a modern mentality it may be perplexing that such matters should be thought ethically important. In this essay I shall try to remove some of that perplexity.

1. MARTYRDOM

Let us begin with a puzzle about martyrdom. 'Martyr' is a Greek word for witness, lightly anglicized. An act of martyrdom is an act of testifying to, or standing for, something that one believes. It is distinguished from other sorts of testimony by the fact that the martyr pays a substantial price for her action. The word 'martyr' brings first to mind cases in which the price was death, but I shall not confine my attention to such cases. The costliness of the action, it should be added, is due in some way to other people's opposition to the martyr's cause. Someone who impoverishes himself to build a monument to a hero universally admired is not a martyr.

Martyrdom is praised by many religious traditions, and demanded, in certain situations, by some. The ancient Christian Church was uncompromising in its insistence that Christians must not deny their faith, and must not offer a pagan sacrifice, under any threat or duress whatever. Yet it is not obvious what was the good of martyrdom, in many cases, or what harm would have been done by conforming outwardly to the pagan demand while retaining the Christian faith in one's heart. For the Church demanded a willingness to bear witness that was not conditional on the likelihood that the consequences would be good. The blood of the martyrs may have been the seed of the Church, but the obligation of confessing the faith was not seen as conditional on historical fruitfulness. Without entering into the question whether it was right to regard such a stance as obliga-

tory, we can probably agree that the martyrs command our intuitive admiration. And what I am interested in elucidating is a rationale, presumably not consequentialist, that might lie behind our admiration.

What reason can be offered for being willing to pay the price of martyrdom for no obvious good result? Why wouldn't it be better to stand up for one's beliefs only when the consequences are likely to be good? One possible response to these questions would be an appeal to religious authority. Christians, it may be said, are forbidden to deny Christ, or to worship anyone but God, and therefore must not conform to demands such as the Roman Empire periodically addressed to them. It is hard to rest in this answer, however. For we can hardly help asking why God would want you to be a martyr if it would do no good. And if there is no good reason for God to command martyrdom under such circumstances, that will undermine the plausibility of the belief that it is commanded.

Moreover, the problem can be duplicated in a secular context, in which the appeal to religious authority is not available. Martyrdom over a political issue can seem admirable, if not imperative, to many people of a wide variety of religious and secular persuasions. The following incident comes from the life of a theologian, but I think our feelings about it will not depend on the religious faith of the protagonist. The story is about Dietrich Bonhoeffer, well known as a leader of resistance to Hitler in the Protestant church in Germany, who was put to death by the Nazis towards the end of the Second World War. His friend and biographer Eberhard Bethge records that on the afternoon of 17 June 1940, while he was sitting with Bonhoeffer in an outdoor café at a German seaside resort, the café's loudspeaker, with a sudden fanfare, broadcast the news that France had surrendered.

The people round about at the tables could hardly contain themselves; they jumped up, and some even climbed on the chairs. With outstretched arm they sang "*Deutschland, Deutschland über alles*" and the Horst-Wessel song. We had stood up too. Bonhoeffer raised his arm in the regulation Hitler salute, while I stood there dazed. "Raise your arm! Are you crazy?" he whispered to me, and later: "We shall have to run risks for very different things now, but not for that salute!"²

On Bethge's interpretation, which certainly seems to be confirmed by later events, Bonhoeffer had not gone over to Nazism, or even lost his nerve. Rather he was in the early stages of a change of strategy and personal response, from public protest in the 1930s to conspiracy within the German government during the war—conspiracy that actually involved Bonhoeffer's employment in the German military intelligence service. The epithet 'martyr' is widely, but only very loosely, applied to Bonhoeffer. His public opposition in the 1930s certainly involved some degree of martyrdom. He suffered for it. But he was not killed or even imprisoned for *that*. What he died for was heroic enough, but it was precisely not martyrdom. He was executed for his part in a conspiracy to kill Hitler. That activity was not testimony; it was not publicly acknowledged but secret. It involved much necessary, and in my opinion commendable, deception.

I admire Bonhoeffer, and I would not presume to say that he *ought* to have chosen a different course on the occasion described; but I would *like* his life story better if it did not contain that Hitler salute. On first reading about the incident I shared his friend's apparent shock at Bonhoeffer's action. And even on reflection I do not think it would have been "crazy" to have refrained from the salute, even if it would have involved some sort of martyrdom. This is indeed the first point that I want to use the story to make. Even if we think that Bonhoeffer's path of secret and ultimately conspiratorial opposition was defensible, and maybe heroic, I imagine that most of us, perhaps all of us, will feel that it would also have been admirable to have refused to give the Hitler salute. And this reaction clearly needs no appeal to religious authority to sustain it. It is grounded rather in a conviction, widely shared by people of many religious and nonreligious orientations, that Nazism was a great evil. But it does not rest on a belief, which I do not hold, that an act of silent protest, in Bonhoeffer's situation, would be likely to have had good consequences. So I face the question: What is admirable about a costly and probably ineffective act of protest?

Some may think that this way of putting the question overlooks the effects of the action on the agent. Could the reason for refusing to offer a salute to Hitler, or a pinch of incense to the genius of the Emperor, be that offering it would be harmful to your own moral or spiritual life? I grant that it would be harmful, if you see the act as one of religious disloyalty or abandonment of your moral ideals. But why should you see the act in that way? This is just another version of the original question: What religious or moral value is there in the act of martyrdom?

Our quest for a better answer to this question may begin with the central idea in the concept of martyrdom, the idea of *testimony*. The main thing that is ethically required of testimony, we may think, is *truthfulness*. But we are not likely to find an adequate explanation of the value of martyrdom in the general value of truthfulness. Most of the lies and deceptions that Bonhoeffer was obliged to practice in his conspiratorial activity, for example, are much easier to accept, morally, than the Nazi salute. And if we would admire at all the quixotic truthfulness of someone who would not use forged identity papers to escape from the Nazis because it would involve lying, we would certainly admire that much less than a refusal to give the Nazi salute. This indicates that the value we see in martyrdom is something more than the value of truthfulness.

In particular, the content of one's testimony matters, as well as its truthfulness. Being truthful about one's name and address does not matter in the same way as expressing what one believes about a great moral or religious issue. And I think that is because in the latter case one is testifying, not just *about* something, but *for* or *against* something. The issue in martyrdom is not just one of truthfulness, but also, and more importantly, of what one is for and against. Expressing one's loyalty to Christ in verbal or symbolic behavior is an important way of being for Christ. Refusing to engage in behavior expressive of loyalty to Nazism is an important way of being against Nazism. And it is a major part of virtue to be for the good and against the bad. This I believe to be the main con-

nection between martyrdom and virtue, and the main source of the value of martyrdom.

2. THE MORAL VALUE OF SYMBOLISM

We take it for granted that an action can be good or bad because of what it *causes*, or is meant to cause. I claim that an action can also be good or bad because of what it *symbolizes* or stands for. That is the main idea of this essay, and it deserves some development.

When we think of an alternative to valuing an action for its consequences, we think naturally of regarding the action as *intrinsically* valuable. And no doubt symbolic value could be contrasted as intrinsic with merely instrumental value. But there is another way in which the label 'intrinsic' is not very apt for the sort of symbolic value that most interests me. For in the ancient contrast of *nomos* and *physis*, convention and nature, we associate the intrinsic with the natural; but the symbolism involved in martyrdom is conventional rather than natural.

Theories of signification and communication have long noted that there are natural signs, which are causally rather than conventionally connected with what they signify. And a natural sign is sometimes regarded as a symbol of what it signifies. "The midnight oil," for example, is (or was) a natural symbol of diligence in study. It required no convention to establish this connection, because diligence naturally caused students to burn oil in their lamps late at night.

Natural signs or symbols, like conventional symbols, can be used both to communicate information and to mislead or deceive. For instance, you could leave a light burning on your desk, to give a misleading impression of diligence, when you go to a movie. Many of us customarily leave some lights on in our homes in the evening, whether we are at home or not, to give potential burglars the idea that someone is there. If we are there, what we suggest is true; if we are out, we are trying to deceive.

We may frown on such deception if it causes undeserved harm, or if it amounts to pretending to a virtue that one does not possess. But we do not regard it as lying, and even people who would have qualms about lying to potential burglars normally have no compunction about leaving the lights on. There is no false testimony in misleading natural signs—for the simple reason that there is no *testimony* at all in them. For testimony (like lying) requires *commitment* of a sort that is (logically) possible only within a conventional system of mutually understood intentions, such as a language. It is the conventions that determine that an action is testimony, and what it attests. Lying is a kind of violation of the conventions. And martyrdom, as I have said, is first of all testimony. No doubt we could have conventions by which natural signs would be used to attest what they naturally signify. But that is not the usual case.

This may seem to intensify the problem about martyrdom. We are being asked to value an action not only apart from the value of its consequences but also on the basis of a meaning that does not belong to it naturally, but only in

relation to certain conventions. This objection can be overcome, however. What is positively or negatively valued is not raising one's arm or making certain sounds as such; it is expressing commitment or loyalty to a belief or cause. Such expression, I have argued, is good or bad insofar as it is a way of being for or against something good or bad. Expressing love of the good, and opposition to the bad, is naturally and intrinsically good, though the form it takes is variable and conventional.

This is not to say there is a form it could take without any conventions at all. Indeed it is only by virtue of our systems of conventional symbolism that we are able to be "for" or "against" most goods and evils. A dog can desire food, and perhaps can love its mistress. A dog can also be mean or gentle. But if we said that the dog loves gentleness or hates meanness, all we could mean is that it tends to like gentle actions and tends to dislike harsh ones. There is no way that the dog could be in favor of gentleness in general or opposed to meanness in general. How is it that we can be for or against such goods and evils in a way that dogs cannot? Clearly it is by virtue of our ability to make use of conventional symbolism to express explicitly, to others or to ourselves, our allegiance or opposition.

And while it is certainly possible to be for or against a good or evil without expressing that openly, it is not easy. If you express explicitly, sincerely, and openly, to your friends at least, your Christian faith or your hatred of Nazism, you take a stance. You are for Christianity; or you are against Nazism. Now suppose that, under the pressure of persecution, and perhaps justifiably, you suppress all outward expression of your loyalties. After a while you yourself may begin to wonder how much reality there is in your opposition to Nazism. Are you actually opposed to it, or do you only wish you could be? These considerations make clear, I think, the importance of symbolic expression for morality, if moral goodness consists largely in being for the good and against the bad.³

Ethical theory has paid little attention to the value that can belong to actions by virtue of their expressing symbolically an allegiance to the good or an opposition to the bad. The value of consequences, by contrast, is a dominant consideration in most ethical theories. If it is not exclusively the consequences of the actions themselves, as in act utilitarianism, then it may be the consequences of adopting certain rules, as in rule utilitarianism or (with somewhat different tests applied to the consequences) in Rawls's theory of justice. Theories of virtue, alternatively, may focus on the consequences of dispositions or traits of character. The tendency to evaluate the way a person lives in terms of consequences is pervasive in contemporary ethical theory.

The value of consequences is certainly important for ethics, but we may well wonder why the symbolic value of actions has been neglected. We take it for granted that the value of what we cause, or at least of what we intentionally cause, is important to the moral quality of our lives. Why should we not assume that the value of what we stand for symbolically is also important to the moral quality of our lives? We sometimes speak of that quality, after all, in terms of the "mean-

ing” of our lives—and there is no reason to suppose that conventional symbolism is irrelevant to meanings!

One reason for the focus on consequences, no doubt, is that ethical theorists have been concerned to show that ethical thinking is *rational*, and an argument from the value of consequences to a *prima facie* value of the means of attaining them is viewed as the clearest paradigm of practical rationality. There are also reasons for symbolic action, however. I have tried to indicate the most important, which is that symbolic action is a way of being for what one loves and against what one hates. Wanting to find significant ways of being for what one loves and against what one hates is an important part of loving and hating. One therefore has an important reason for giving symbolic expression to one's loyalties. Symbolic action expressing love for the Good and hatred of evils is therefore *prima facie* rational for those who love the Good.

This may be viewed, however, as a self-regarding reason; and that may be a further cause of the neglect of symbolic value in moral theory. Morality is thought to be concerned with our lives as they impinge on the interests of other people; and the expressive significance of my action as a part of my life does not impinge on your life as clearly, heavily, or inescapably as some of the consequences of my action may. It is for reasons of this sort that the “clean hands” motive for refusing to employ evil means to good ends is often thought to be selfish. And “clean hands,” though hardly a matter of conventional symbolism, is a matter of expressing one's loyalties and convictions clearly in one's life.

This objection is not altogether to be dismissed. It would be selfish to give the symbolic, or more broadly the expressive, value of one's life an invariable precedence over the value of consequences. Some aspects of the task of weighing these two types of consideration against each other will be considered in the next section. But the argument that would dismiss all appeal to symbolic value as at best irrelevant to the concerns of morality rests on a misconception of the interests that it is morality's business to protect. If our interest in each other were merely competitive and exploitive, we would view each other only as potential obstacles or instruments, and would not care, at bottom, about the intrinsic quality of each other's lives, but only about their consequences. But those are surely not the only interests for which morality should care. In a morally more desirable system of relationships we care about each other as partners and friends, and therefore have interests in the intrinsic quality of each other's lives. In particular, it matters to us what other people are for and against, as that profoundly affects the possibilities of alliance and social union with them. A morally good person, from this point of view, is not just a useful person, but an ally of the Good and of those who love the Good. And such a person will have reason to perform acts that symbolically express love for the Good, and hatred of evils.

This point applies with special emphasis to theistic ethics. An omnipotent deity can hardly have a *merely* instrumental interest in any creature. The causal consequences of our actions God could secure without our aid, if willing as well as able to intervene in the course of nature. What even omnipotence obviously

cannot obtain without our voluntary choice is our voluntary expression of allegiance to God or to the Good. This is a reason for thinking the intrinsic and expressive value of human actions more fundamental in relation to divine omnipotence than their extrinsic and instrumental value.

3. ESCHATOLOGY AND ETHICS

It is not only symbolic action, of course, that expresses our loves and loyalties. Loving the good gives us plenty of reason to care about the consequences of our actions, and striving to produce good consequences can be an expression of such love. Indeed, if the obtaining of good consequences of significant magnitude, or the prevention of bad ones, is a realistic possibility, it commonly will and should seem more important to love for the good to do that than to make a purely symbolic expression. The expressive value of a symbolic act can be undermined if its expected consequences are too costly to the concerns it is supposed to attest.

Whether it would be good to perform an act whose value is mainly symbolic, such as an act of martyrdom, may therefore depend on what other possibilities of action are available in the situation. If Bonhoeffer had a unique opportunity, by pretending to be a Nazi, to assure the success of a conspiracy to overthrow the Nazi regime, then I think it would be irresponsible for him to refuse to give the Hitler salute, despite its moral distastefulness. On the other hand, if there was no realistic hope of successful resistance, conspiratorial or otherwise, to Nazism within Germany, then the symbolic protest of refusing to salute might have been the best available way of being against Nazism. Probably Bonhoeffer's actual situation lay somewhere between those extremes, though closer than he could believe to the more pessimistic one.

This illustrates a more general point which is of great importance for the relation of religion to ethics. What it is reasonable or good, or even makes sense, to do depends on our possibilities of action, and thus on our situation in the world. What that situation is is a largely empirical question; and its details are subject to political, economic, medical, and other sorts of analysis and prediction. Comprehensively, however, and very often in detail, it is subject to great uncertainty. The future is largely unknown to us; and so (in my opinion) are the metaphysical grounds of our existence. These mysteries are a main topic of speculation, faith, and meditation in all religious traditions. And it is very largely because it affects our view of our situation in the world that religion affects ethics.

One way in which this works can be seen in a dispute within contemporary Christian ethics. In the middle of our century the "Christian realism" of Reinhold Niebuhr, with its endorsement of participation in political conflict and its acceptance of some violence as a necessary evil, was the moral theory with the greatest influence, not only on American Christian ethics but probably also on American public life. Some of the most interesting recent work in Christian ethics has criticized Niebuhr sharply from the point of view of what is often called the "Anabaptist" tradition of Christian pacifism. In an unusually systematic pres-

entation of that position, James McClendon has located a major part of his disagreement with Niebuhr in the area of eschatology;⁴ and that poses the issue I wish to examine.

In traditional theological parlance, 'eschatology' signifies the doctrine of "last things"—death and resurrection, the return of Christ, final judgment, heaven and hell. Beliefs on these subjects have been an obvious part of Christian views of our situation in the world and have played a correspondingly important part in Christian ethics. In my opinion (though not McClendon's) the main point of disagreement between him and Niebuhr in this area is in what has been called "*realized* eschatology."⁵

This term might seem contradictory. How can a claim about what has already been realized be part of a doctrine of last things? The phrase is used in fact to express the claim that part of what has been expected in an earlier eschatology has already happened. It might be clearer and more accurate to speak here of a theology of history rather than an eschatology. In another way, however, the title 'eschatology' remains appropriate, particularly for ethics. For while we are dealing with a view of history that embraces the past and the present as well as the future (and that has always been at least implicitly true where eschatology is spoken of), there remains, at least for ethics, a special interest in the future. We need and strive to form some opinion about what we can expect or what we should hope for, though for realized eschatology and for ethics the accent may fall on the nearer future. This is true of both Niebuhr and McClendon.

McClendon's pacifism is rooted in his conviction that Christians as such are called to live the life of the Kingdom of God in the midst of this present age, and that the extent to which the Kingdom has already come is sufficient for that attempt to make sense. Accordingly he criticizes "Niebuhr's rejection of the efficacy of the Holy Spirit to make Christians Christ-like, his downplay of the new birth as a real transformation of human life," and "an overemphasis [on sin] that makes of Niebuhr's ethic a strategy for (discriminately) sinful living in an (indiscriminately) sinful world, rather than a strategy for transformed life in a world become new in Christ Jesus." "Niebuhr," he charges, "is too grimly 'realistic' in his assessment of the revolutionary possibilities of Christian community; his realism overlooks the new life in Christ."⁶

I agree with McClendon that Niebuhr seriously underrated the possibilities of a real spiritual transformation of human life, here and now. But I think history might support Niebuhr in responding that McClendon's view of "the revolutionary possibilities of Christian community" goes too far in the opposite direction. It is one of the lessons of Christian history, as Niebuhr saw it, that the Christian commitment of even the best of Christian communities is itself a standing temptation to spiritual pride, and that all such communities fall from time to time into very harmful sins and errors. This may lead one to doubt that the contrast between church and world can bear the moral weight that McClendon wishes to lay upon it.⁷ And if, with Niebuhr, one finds it less plausible to think that God's grace is at work preeminently in sanctifying a revolutionary Christian community, one may also, with Niebuhr, find it more plausible to seek God's

grace in a fairly rough-and-tumble participation in the secular life of one's society.

I incline more to Niebuhr's side in this dispute, but I am not trying to settle it here. My aim is rather to show how differences in what we might broadly think of as eschatology inevitably and appropriately affect views in ethics. This applies to secular as well as theological ethics, though the eschatological assumptions may be less explicit in secular ethics. The dispute between McClendon and Niebuhr finds a clear parallel, indeed, in contemporary moral philosophy.

McClendon's counterparts are those who would devise their ethical theory primarily for an ideal society. Rawls's theory of justice, for example, is offered to us as a "strict compliance" theory, assuming general conformity to the principles of justice. How it is just to respond to widespread injustice, or to other practical obstacles to the implementation of ideal principles, is left to be worked out later.⁸ This seems reasonable if we take a fairly optimistic view of our chances of approximating full compliance with the ideal of justice. Those who take a more Niebuhrian view of human sinfulness, however, might expect more guidance from a theory that devoted less attention to ideal conditions of rational agreement and more to the acceptance and limitation of conflict. Derek Parfit's emphasis on "Ideal Act Theory," which says "what we should all try to do, simply on the assumptions that we all try, and all succeed,"⁹ puts Parfit, I think, in the same eschatological boat with Rawls, or in a similar one; but I haven't space to develop that point here.

Search for a secular counterpart to Niebuhr might begin with act utilitarians (or "utilitarians," for short). They do not rely on a supposed possibility of any group approximating strict or general compliance with an ideal code.¹⁰ For the utilitarian agent is supposed to do what will probably have the best results, given the *actual* probabilities regarding the behavior of others. If the others are virtuous, the utilitarian takes that into account. If the others are vicious, utilitarian principles apply in exactly the same way, though the best obtainable results may not be so happy.

In another respect, however, utilitarianism is not so Niebuhrian, and may be charged with needing an excessively optimistic eschatology. For utilitarianism is an ethics for people who think they can plan the future. This is not to say that the utilitarian must be able to shape the future to her heart's desire; her lot may be harder than that. But she must have a measure of control over the future; and utilitarianism holds each of us responsible, in principle, for the *whole* future. Two conditions must be satisfied if utilitarian reasoning is to be useful in a situation. One is that we must be able with reasonable reliability to estimate the conditional probability of alternative possible consequences of alternative courses of action. The other condition is that we must have possibilities of action that have a significant chance of substantially improving the outcome as we see it. In many, perhaps most, contexts of choice it is a serious question whether these conditions are satisfied.¹¹

This is a question that obviously confronted Bonhoeffer in the situation I described earlier. I suspect that in fact neither condition was satisfied for

him; that is, he did not have a significant chance of improving the outcome, and his best estimates of his chances were not reliable. There is a gaping hole in most modern ethical theories, and not just in utilitarianism, at this point. They have nothing to say to us in a situation of helplessness. This has not always been true of ethical theory. Most religions have much advice for the helpless, though some contemporary religious ethics is more exclusively activist. In philosophical ethics, Stoicism is famous for its views about how to cope with outward helplessness.

One reason for the difference may be that many modern theories construe the task of ethics too narrowly, as guidance for *action*. Ethics is not only about how to act well but more broadly about how to *live* well. And whether we like it or not, helplessness is a large part of life. Human life both begins and ends in helplessness. Between infancy and death, moreover, we may find ourselves in the grip of a disease or a dictatorship to which we may be able to adapt but which we cannot conquer. Even if our individual situation is more fortunate, we will find ourselves relatively helpless spectators of most of the events in the world about which we should care somewhat, and many of those about which we should care most, if we are good people. Dealing well with our helplessness is therefore an important part of living well. An ethical theory that has nothing to say about this abandons us in what is literally the hour of our greatest need.

A central part of living well, I believe, is being for the Good and against evils. We face the question, how we can be for and against goods and evils that we are relatively powerless to accomplish or prevent. One of the most obvious answers is that we can give more reality to our being for the goods and against the evils by expressing our loyalties symbolically in action. For this reason acts of martyrdom represent a particularly important possibility of living well for people who find themselves in situations of comparative helplessness—oppressed peoples, persecuted minorities, and inmates of concentration camps, for example. For the same reason, also, sickbeds are rightly surrounded by acts of mainly symbolic value—though the degree of costliness and the context of conflict that would make them a martyrdom is normally lacking. When our friends are ill, most of us are not able to do much about their health. But we can still be *for* them, and that is important to all of us. Sending cards and flowers are ways of being for a sick person symbolically. They may also have the good consequence of cheering up the patient, but that will be because he is glad that his friends are for him. The symbolic value of the deed is primary in such a case.

This line of thought might seem to lead to the conclusion that Bonhoeffer *ought* to have refrained from the Hitler salute in the incident I described, if I am right in suspecting that his real political situation was one of powerlessness. But this inference should be resisted. Martyrdom is a way of being for the Good, and against evils, even when one is helpless, but it is rarely the only way. Pursuing a conspiratorial struggle against an evil regime is also a way of being against it, even when the struggle is hopeless, and even if one knows it is hopeless. I am skeptical of any general rule about *how* to be for the Good in such a situation; it seems to me rather to be a matter of vocation.

4. WORSHIP

These considerations about eschatology (in a loose and extended sense) and the place of symbolic value in ethics apply equally to secular and religious ethics. There are reasons, however, why symbolic action is especially important for religious ethics. One is that there is a tendency for religion to see human life in a framework that emphasizes or even magnifies the place of helplessness in human life, and that consequently enlarges the need for symbolic action. This can be illustrated from the best-loved sacred text of theistic Hinduism, the Bhagavad Gita. A rich and many-stranded poem, rather than the consistent development of a philosophical theory, the Gita presents multiple possibilities of interpretation. But one can hardly deny the centrality of the idea that one ought to engage in action (*karma*) while in some sense renouncing its “fruits.” The fruits are the consequences the action will naturally have, both in one’s present life, by empirical causal laws, and in future incarnations, by the retributive laws associated with the Indian conception of *karma*. The fruits will certainly follow, except insofar as one is able, through mysticism, to break out of the whole system of *karma*; but one’s action should not be for the sake of the fruits. Underlying this idea, I believe, is a mystical intuition of a true Good, unattainable by *karma*, beside which all possible fruits of *karma* pale into insignificance.

Why, then, engage in action at all? This is one of the first questions the Gita considers, and it gives the answer that it is simply impossible to refrain from action. “For no one remains inactive even for a moment. The states of all existence make everyone act in spite of himself” (III, 5). If this is not to be a bondage, one needs a way of acting that is an alternative to acting for the sake of the fruits. Perhaps not the only alternative, but one that is repeatedly proposed in the Gita, is to offer one’s actions as a *sacrifice*. “It is true, this world is enslaved by activity, but the exception is work for the sake of sacrifice. Therefore . . . free from attachment, act for that purpose” (III, 9). “Whatever you do, or eat, or sacrifice, or offer, whatever you do in self-restraint, do as an offering to me,” says Krishna (IX, 21).¹²

Sacrifice, in the literal sense, is of course a ritual action. Its significance is highly symbolic, and largely conventional. The Gita records a primitive view of sacrifice as instrumentally efficacious (III, 10–16) but emphasizes a different view, in line with the renunciation of the fruits of action. To treat all one’s actions as sacrifice, as recommended by the Gita, is in effect to adopt a convention that gives the actions symbolic significance as expressions of one’s devotion to God.¹³ In this way symbolic value is invoked to fill the place of the instrumental value that has been disparaged.

The devaluation of the consequences of ordinary action in at least a main strand of the Gita may seem extreme from Western points of view; but Western religion has a counterpart in the idea that the most important goods cannot be controlled by our action but depend on God’s grace. Where this idea is stressed, it naturally produces an emphasis on the symbolic value of action. The Heidelberg Catechism, for example, asks,

Since we are redeemed from our sin and its wretched consequences by grace through Christ without any merit of our own, why must we do good works?

and answers,

Because just as Christ has redeemed us with his blood, he also renews us through his Holy Spirit according to his own image, so that with our whole life we may show ourselves grateful to God for his goodness and that he may be glorified through us. . . .

To be sure, the Catechism goes on, with debatable consistency, to add a consequential bonus, adducing as “further” motives for good works

that we ourselves may be assured of our faith by its fruits and by our reverent behavior may win our neighbors to Christ.¹⁴

But the symbolic value of Christian behavior, as an expression of gratitude to God, is clearly given precedence over its instrumental value. The parallel with the Bhagavad Gita, both in the question and in the answer, is striking, especially given the distance that in many ways separates the two religious traditions.¹⁵

Both of these texts illustrate the centrality of *worship* in theistic ethics. The whole ethical life is clearly assimilated to worship when its value is interpreted in terms of sacrifice or the expression of gratitude to God. The importance of symbolism to religion is nowhere more evident than in the phenomenon of worship, where the significance and value of actions as worship depends heavily, if not entirely, on the conventional significance of symbols.

Something of ethical importance can be done in worship that we cannot accomplish except symbolically. We may or may not think that the Bhagavad Gita and the Heidelberg Catechism underrate the instrumental value of ordinary human activity. But we can hardly deny that our ability to do good, and even to conceive of good and care about it, is limited. Our nonsymbolic activity, perforce, is a little of this and a little of that. Getting ourselves dressed in the morning, driving or riding or walking to work, and then home again to dinner, we try, on the way and in between, to do some good, to love people and be kind to them, to enjoy and perhaps create some beauty. But none of this is very perfect, even when we succeed; and all of it is very fragmentary. I believe that one who loves the good should be *for* the good wherever it occurs or is at stake. But we do not even know about most of the good and opportunities for good in the world, and we cannot do very much about most of what we do know. We can care effectively only about fragments that are accessible to us. Intensively, moreover, as well as extensively, we cannot engage the whole of goodness nonsymbolically. I have an inkling of a goodness too wonderful for us to comprehend, but concretely I must devote myself to getting my essay a little clearer and more cogently argued than the last draft.

Symbolically we can do better. Symbolically I can be for the Good as such, and not just for the bits and pieces of it that I can concretely promote or embody.

I can be for the Good as such by articulating or accepting some conception of a comprehensive and perfect or transcendent Good or goodness and expressing my loyalty to it symbolically. There is no way that I can do it without symbols. It is for this reason, I believe, that when religious thinkers have sought alternatives to the instrumental value of actions, they have tended to focus on symbolic rather than on naturally intrinsic values. My actions can have naturally intrinsic goodness insofar as they imitate or image God. But the relation to the transcendent Good is never as clear in the imitation as it can be in the symbolism. Hence the symbolism provides something for which there is no adequate substitute.

Theists find this value of symbolism supremely in worship. Limited as the extent of my love and beneficence and political influence must be, I can still *pray* “for all sorts and conditions of” people.¹⁶ Qualitatively limited as I must be in the goodness of my life and even in my conception of the Good, I can still name and praise a transcendent Good. And fragmented as my concerns are in dealing with various finite goods, I can integrate my love for the Good in explicit adoration of the one God.

Grave moral and religious temptations attend this symbolic integration. It must not be allowed to become a *substitute* for such nonsymbolic goodness as is possible for us, fragmentary and imperfect as the latter must be. The biblical prophets sternly and rightly denied the value of merely symbolic worship in lives that included no concrete imitation of the divine justice.¹⁷ In most situations symbolic expression by itself does not constitute love for the Good—or for anything. But a genuine love for the Good can find in symbolic expression an integration and completion that would otherwise be impossible. It is perhaps because there is a real need in this area that reformers who have wanted to do away with traditional religious beliefs have sometimes tried to introduce symbolic rituals that would be a functional equivalent of traditional worship.

In view of what I have said about helplessness I cannot find it surprising that the need for worship is felt especially in connection with death. In Jewish liturgy it is striking that the prayer that is most strongly associated with mourning and commemorating the dead, the Kaddish, has hardly anything to say about death or mourning, but is mainly devoted to praise of God. The first sentence sets the theme: “Magnified and hallowed be his great name in the world which he has created according to his will.”¹⁸ Precisely because there is nothing we can do about a death that has occurred, we want to affirm the meaning of life in the face of it by expressing symbolically our allegiance to the supreme Good. However little we can do, if we can do anything at all we can worship. As a voice from my own tradition has put it,

I'll praise my Maker while I've breath,
And when my voice is lost in death,
Praise shall employ my nobler powers:
My days of praise shall ne'er be past,
While life and thought and being last,
Or immortality endures.¹⁹

NOTES

This essay has been presented to philosophical audiences on a number of occasions. I should note in particular that it originated as one of a series of Wilde Lectures in Natural Religion delivered at Oxford University in 1989, and was one of the Jellema Lectures delivered at Calvin College in March 1995. I am indebted to many people for their helpful comments and questions.

1. This is not to deny the religious significance of *implicit* attitudes, about which I hope to say something elsewhere.

2. Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York, 1977), 585.

3. The assumption expressed in this clause deserves emphasis. Some of my hearers have asked if my argument does not depend on the assumption that there is a God, or at least a transcendent good, to be an object of symbolic affirmation. I think not, though I am in fact a theist. The argument depends, not on an assumption about the nature of the good one is for, but on the assumption that it is morally good to be for the good (whether or not one's being for it is effectual). The argument, however, probably does depend on the assumption that moral goodness has a more than merely instrumental value.

4. James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1: *Ethics* (Nashville, Tenn., 1986), 320. McClendon claims that Niebuhr lacks an eschatology in the sense that his vision of sin and grace in human history "form[s] a seamless whole without recourse to any future consummation." It should be noted that McClendon prefers, with some reason, to name his tradition "baptist."

5. Ironically, the idea of a future consummation does not play a very fully articulated role in McClendon's own ethics, so far as I can see. See my review of McClendon's book in *Faith and Philosophy* 7 (1990): 117–23, esp. p. 122f.

6. McClendon, *Ethics*, 320, 161.

7. *Ibid.*, e.g., 17f., 234.

8. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), 8f. and §39. Rawls acknowledges that the issues thus postponed are "the most pressing and urgent matters" (p. 9) but believes they will be best illuminated by the ideal theory. I am more skeptical of that.

9. Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford, 1984), 99. Parfit says that when deciding on a moral theory, "we should first consider our Ideal Act Theory." Such a theory is "ideal" rather than "practical," Parfit agrees, because it is a fact that "[w]e are often uncertain what the effects of our acts will be," and "some of us will act wrongly." (I would add that we are often mistaken about such matters.) Nevertheless he maintains that a moral theory "fails in its own terms" if successful implementation of its Ideal Act Theory would have worse consequences than the successful implementation of some other Ideal Act Theory. Why should this be a decisive test for an ethical theory? We may well be skeptical of Parfit's test if we take a Niebuhrian view of the possibilities of human virtue and moral agreement. The beauty of an unattainable ideal may rightly inspire us when we are thinking about the intrinsic value of an act or a practice. But when we are evaluating an act or a practice on the basis of something so extrinsic as consequences, it would seem to be only the actual or probable consequences that matter, not the consequences that would obtain in an ideal state that will never be realized. If our eschatology is sunnier, on the other hand, at least as regards the nearer future, and if we suppose that reflection on these matters, and on the benefits of a certain ideal practice, might actually lead to sufficiently general conformity with the practice to achieve a good measure of the benefits, then Parfit's test may begin to look more relevant and more reasonable.

10. For this point I am indebted to Lanning Sowden's review of Parfit's *Reasons and Persons* in the *Philosophical Quarterly* 36 (1986): 514–35; see 526.

11. I have not resisted the temptation to take a pot shot at utilitarianism. My larger argument in this essay is not, however, a refutation of utilitarianism. The focus of my argument is on the ethical importance of what we stand for, as distinct from what we cause or try to cause; and I have not tried to prove that symbolic value cannot be accommodated as a special sort of

“utility” in a broadly utilitarian calculus. I do not, in fact, think that such a calculus provides a very natural context for symbolic value; in some of the most interesting symbolic actions, the agent throws such calculations to the winds and simply affirms her values symbolically, and may be quite right in doing so; but that is not the main burden of my argument here. An important recent attempt to incorporate “symbolic utility” in a calculus of utilities is in Robert Nozick, *The Nature of Rationality* (Princeton, 1993), esp. 26–35, 48–49; but I am not sure how similar Nozick’s conception of symbolic utility is to my conception of symbolic value. Freudian symbolism plays a prominent part in his account (pp. 26–27, 32) that I think it could not play in mine. Conversely, a value derived from symbolizing a deity or an ethical principle, which is central to my account, does not cohere neatly with the emphasis on (causally evaluated) outcomes and actions in his stipulation that “the symbolic utility of an action *A* is determined by *A*’s having symbolic connections to outcomes (and perhaps to other actions) that themselves have the standard kind of utility” (p. 48)—where the standard kind of utility “is measured in situations that are wholly causal” (p. 48n). Nozick’s account and mine agree, however, that symbolic value or symbolic utility need not itself be *causally instrumental* in producing any kind of good (Nozick, p. 48).

12. *The Bhagavadgita: A New Translation*, by Kees W. Bolle (Berkeley, 1979), 39, 41, 109. I have also been helped by the translation and commentary of R. C. Zaehner, *The Bhagavad-Gita* (Oxford, 1969).

13. The convention may of course have been divinely instituted. On Zaehner’s interpretation (*The Bhagavad-Gita*, 394), doing one’s caste duty counts as an offering to Krishna because Krishna is the author of the system. Here the value of obedience is seen as mainly expressive.

14. Question 86; in *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*, Part I: *Book of Confessions* (New York and Atlanta, 1983), paragraph 4.086.

15. To sacrifice and thanksgiving, as categories for the ascription of symbolic religious value to behavior, may be added witness or testimony. Karl Barth, the most eminent twentieth-century protagonist of the tradition represented by the Heidelberg Catechism, claimed that “the essence of [Christians’] vocation is that God makes them His witnesses” (Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 4, part 3, second half, translated by G. W. Bromiley [Edinburgh, 1962], 575). The meaning of life, or a large part of it, can be found in expressing the truth about God.

16. At this point I have more than once encountered the objection that intercessory prayer is meant to be efficacious. I grant that one who prays, typically, hopes to influence the course of events by influencing God. But it is important to distinguish prayer from magic. Even if God responds to it, prayer is communication with God, not placing one’s hands on the levers of the universe. They remain in God’s hands. In central cases of intercessory prayer one’s action is not based on calculations of expected utility or of probable results. For example, if one starts observing which formulations in prayer “work” in terms of results, and using those that do, one is crossing the line from prayer to magic. In praying, no doubt, one may be *trying* to obtain what one asks, but the attempt proceeds solely by *symbolizing* that one is *for* what one asks. The symbolic value of the prayer is more fundamental than any instrumental value it may have.

17. Amos 5:21–24; Isaiah 1:10–17, 58:1–9; Micah 6:6–8; Jeremiah 6:20.

18. David De Sola Pool, *The Kaddish* (New York, 1964), xii f.; Rabbi Marvin Luban, *The Kaddish: Man’s Reply to the Problem of Evil* (New York, 1962), 20f.

19. Isaac Watts, quoted from *Congregational Praise* (London, 1951), 8.