The Theological Ethics of the Young Rawls and Its Background

Robert Merrihew Adams

My aim in this essay is to illuminate the content of the senior thesis that John Rawls wrote as an undergraduate at Princeton in the fall of 1942, and his use of the authors to whom he refers. The scope of the thesis is wider than might be suggested by the title, *A Brief Inquiry into the Meaning of Sin and Faith.* At the heart of the theory is a contrast between what Rawls calls "naturalism" and a "proper ethics" that is focused on personal relationships and community. In section 2 I will discuss the concepts (notably, those of egoism and egotism) in terms of which this contrast is framed; in section 3 I will examine Rawls's critique of naturalism; and in section 4 I will look at the conceptions of values and ends that emerge in the critique. Community is the end that Rawls values most. His account of it leaves far too many questions unanswered, but I try in section 5 to bring out as clearly as possible the views about community that are expressed in the thesis. Rawls's concepts of egoism and egotism help to structure his account of moral and religious evil, or sin, which is my topic in section 6. Closely related to the account of sin, and in my opinion the most impressive part of Rawls's senior thesis, integrating many of its themes, is his account of conversion, the transition from sin to faith, which I will examine in section 7.

What will be most striking to many about this undergraduate essay by one who is widely regarded as the most significant moral philosopher of his generation is the unmistakably theological character of the ethical theory it presents. It states flatly that "there can be no separation between religion and ethics" (114). A form of Protestant Christianity is affirmed in the thesis, without serious discussion of other religious alternatives. Section 8 of my essay is focused on what the thesis says about God.

I begin, in section 1, with some observations about the historical setting in which Rawls wrote his undergraduate thesis.

1. 1942 and Neo-Orthodoxy

The cultural and intellectual background of the thesis Rawls wrote in 1942 was quite different from that of the moral and political philosophy he published in later years. Indeed, some of the authors mentioned in the thesis may be unfamiliar to readers of the later work. The index of *A Theory of Justice* (1971) contains no entries for any of the authors that the bibliography of the undergraduate thesis lists as "chief sources" for Rawls's own view. One of them, Philip Leon, who seems to me to have had as much influence on the thesis as any other, is all but forgotten now. The movement that has come to be known as "analytical philosophy" already had a significant history in Europe by 1942, but it was not widely established in America, and not yet dominant in the Princeton philosophy department. It hardly casts a shadow on the pages of Rawls's senior thesis, even though his work on the topic began in a class taught by the ardent Wittgensteinian Norman Malcolm.

The thesis was clearly influenced, however, by the best-known Protestant theological movement of its time. Rawls wrote it during the heyday of neo-orthodoxy. The label "neo-orthodox" was applied to a rather disparate group of Protestant theologians working in Europe and North America during several decades following the end of

the First World War. The movement lost its agenda-setting position during the social and cultural transformations of the 1960s and 1970s, although the most famous neo-orthodox theologian, Karl Barth, has never ceased to have a following.

The term "neo-orthodox" obviously suggests a revival or renewal of orthodoxy—orthodoxy with a new twist. Typical neo-orthodox theologians, having become disillusioned with the "liberal" or modernizing form of Protestant theology in which they had been educated, sought to reappropriate aspects of an older orthodoxy—specifically including, in Barth's case, the "orthodoxy" of Protestant theologians of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As the prefix "neo" suggests, they remained indebted in some ways to the liberal theology of their teachers, while at the same time engaging in vigorous polemic against them.

Neo-orthodox theology claimed a biblical basis, but rejected "fundamentalism" or literalism in the interpretation of the Bible. As one of the first neo-orthodox theologians, Emil Brunner, put it,

> What I said of God incarnate is true of the revelation in the Bible; to be a real revelation it must be veiled. . . . The words of Scripture are human; that is, God makes use of human and, therefore, frail and fallible words of men who are liable to err. But men and their words are the means through which God speaks to men and in men. Only through a serious misunderstanding will genuine faith find satisfaction in the theory of verbal inspiration of the Bible. . . . He who identifies the letters and words of the Scriptures with the word of God has never truly understood the word of God; he does not know what constitutes revelation.[1]

One of the major projects of neo-orthodoxy was developing less literalist, but no less serious, ways of interpreting the Bible as a vehicle of God's self-revelation.

1. Emil Brunner, *The Theology of Crisis* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929), p. 19.

An earlier label for the neo-orthodox movement was "the theology of crisis." "Crisis" is intended in this context in two senses. It refers on the one hand to the crisis of European civilization that was widely thought to have been precipitated, or revealed, by World War I.[2] On the other hand, it refers to God's *judgment* (*krisis* in the Greek of St. Paul's letter to the Romans). In his commentary on Romans, in which the theology of crisis first burst upon the Protestant scene in 1918, Barth speaks of

> the fact that the whole concrete world is ambiguous and under KRISIS [judgment] . . . If . . . God were . . . an object among other objects, if He were Himself subject to the KRISIS, He would then obviously not be God, and the true God would have to be sought in the Origin of the KRISIS. . . . The true God, Himself removed from all concretion, is the Origin of the KRISIS of every concrete thing, the Judge, the negation of this world in which is included also the god of human logic. It is of this true God we speak—of the Judge of the world of which He forms no part.[3]

The transcendence of God—God's complete otherness, Barth says—is one of the main themes of neo-orthodox theology.[4]

Barth's conception of *krisis* connects knowledge of the transcendent God with recognition of negativities in human life.

> The vast distinction between God and man is their veritable union. . . . All 'law', all human being and having and doing, the whole course of this world and its inevitability, are a sign-post, a parable, a possibility, an expectation. For this reason they are always deprivation and dissatisfaction, a void and a longing. But once this is recognized there appears above them all the faithfulness of God, who forgives by condemn-

2. Ibid., pp. 1ff.

3. Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans,* translated from the sixth edition by Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), p. 82. Barth completely rewrote the book for the second edition in 1921, and it is that rewritten form that appears in later editions and in the English translation.

4. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans,* p. 115.

> ing, gives life by killing, and utters His 'Yes' when nothing but His 'No' is audible. In Jesus God is known to be the unknown God. In the light of this KRISIS also the deepest unity of men with men is apprehended.[5]

I have no reason to believe that the young Rawls had read Barth. And the form of relation between human beings and God that Barth seems to set before us in this passage looks different from that favored by Rawls in his senior thesis.[6] Nevertheless, the idea of a God who utters a "Yes" by making a "No" audible finds an echo in Rawls's account of conversion;[7] it is a neo-orthodox theme.

In the preface to his senior thesis Rawls says he thinks that Brunner is the theologian from whom he has learned the most (108). Brunner's theology was no duplicate of Barth's; and although he agreed with Barth that knowledge of God depends on God's self-revelation, they had a furious public falling out in the 1930s over natural theology, which Brunner would not reject as thoroughly as Barth did.[8] Brunner's work was less influential in Europe than Barth's, and attracts relatively little attention today (less, perhaps, than it deserves).

5. Ibid., p. 114. The idea of a divine affirmation that is uttered when only a "No" is audible is developed at greater length, and in a different form, in Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952).

6. I find it natural to read "a void and a longing" in the passage just quoted as expressing a form of the Platonic eros piety that Rawls rejected in his senior thesis. By 1942 Barth himself might well have opposed his earlier book on this point.

7. "Out of the feeling of being dissolved," Rawls says, "there thus grows this perception of givenness, of the bounteous mercy and love of God which gives even in the face of denial, and the understanding of dependence upon God" (238).

8. The primary texts, *Nature and Grace* by Brunner and *No* by Barth, have been published together in English translation, under the title *Natural Theology,* by Peter Fraenkel (London: The Centenary Press, 1946). See also John W. Hart, *Karl Barth vs. Emil Brunner: The Formation and Dissolution of a Theological Alliance, 1916–1936* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001).

But Brunner was many people's introduction to neo-orthodox theology, particularly in America. He had an American audience before Barth did, and his work may still have been better known in America than Barth's in 1942.

There were some advantages to reading Brunner. One of them is that he wrote in a more accessible style than Barth did. Moreover, I would say that the theology is more thoroughly integrated with ethics in Brunner's writings of the period than in the most important of Barth's works that were available in English in 1942. For Rawls, among others, that would have been an advantage. As Rawls notes, Brunner's enthusiastic personalism also appealed very strongly to him. He might well have preferred Brunner to Barth even if he had read Barth.

Brunner helped himself to gain an American audience by lecturing in America in the 1920s and 1930s, as Barth would not do until 1962. Brunner's visibility in Princeton in particular was enhanced by his presence as a celebrity visiting professor at Princeton Theological Seminary during the academic year 1938–39, just before Rawls came to Princeton as an undergraduate. Although Rawls may not have heard Brunner in person, Brunner's ideas would certainly have been "in the air" at Princeton, and it would be surprising if any student with the interests of the young Rawls didn't talk with people at Princeton who had heard Brunner speak at the Seminary. So although Rawls cites three of Brunner's books in the thesis, Brunner's influence may have reached him through oral as well as printed sources.

It is tempting to describe Rawls's undergraduate thesis as an essay in neo-orthodox theology.[9] I have vacillated about that. Such vacilla-

9. It is described in that way in Eric Gregory's valuable essay, "Before the Original Position: The Neo-Orthodox Theology of the Young John Rawls," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 35 (2007): 179–206. I am grateful to Gregory for helpful correspondence.

tion is encouraged by the looseness of neo-orthodoxy as a category; it covers such a range of different views that an ascription of neo-orthodoxy offers little precise information. Sometimes the term "neo-orthodoxy" refers to a fairly well defined movement or school of thought, of which Barth was the main leader and Brunner a prime exemplar, despite his disagreements with Barth. Often, however (perhaps indeed more often), the term has been used to refer to something more like an intellectual climate which most Protestant theologians, from the 1920s to the 1960s, except the most conservative and the most modernist, inhaled to some extent.

Those who have spoken of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich, for instance, as neo-orthodox theologians, as many have, were presumably thinking of neo-orthodoxy as an intellectual climate rather than a tightly unified movement or school. For Tillich was regarded as much less orthodox than Barth and Brunner, and Niebuhr did not share their preoccupations with theological methodology and the epistemology of religious belief. Indeed, Niebuhr himself said, with regard to the continental neo-orthodox theologians, that he thought he belonged "more to the liberal tradition than to theirs."[10]

To the extent that there was a theological climate called "neo-orthodox," it is fair to say that Rawls's senior thesis is a neo-orthodox document, for it certainly took shape in that climate. If we think of neo-orthodoxy as a movement or school of thought, on the other hand, it is more questionable to classify the thesis as a piece of neo-orthodox theology, for Rawls gives in it little evidence of allegiance to such a movement.

The theological work of Barth and Brunner in the 1920s and 1930s was intensely polemical, and the concept of the theology of crisis, or

10. In a letter of 13 March 1943 to John Bennett, quoted in Richard Wightman Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 214.

neo-orthodoxy, as a movement was formed in a polemical context, defined by opposition to theological liberalism on the left and to fundamentalism on the right. Eventually, bitter polemic broke out even between Barth and Brunner. Rawls's senior thesis seems rather innocent in relation to these polemics. He appropriates ideas from Brunner, but shows little interest in the controversies in which Brunner was engaged and, indeed, little knowledge of them. Rawls comes close to many neo-orthodox writers when he says it is one of his main aims "to attack a specific Christian problem . . . using the concepts which are derived from Biblical thought," rather than from "the Greek tradition" (107–108) (by which, like many who said such things, he meant in effect the Platonic tradition). And his conception of the Word of God as God's act of self-revelation (which I discuss in section 8) is very similar to views of Brunner and Barth. But Rawls's references to the Bible itself seem methodologically quite unself-conscious, and the battles about the authority and interpretation of the Bible that were raging in American Protestantism at the time are hardly addressed in the senior thesis.

Rawls did agree on many points with Brunner, who was a central figure in the neo-orthodox movement. But Brunner's work, like that of Niebuhr and Anders Nygren, who exemplified neo-orthodoxy as a theological climate, seems to have been treated by Rawls as grist for his own mill. His preoccupations, as I will argue in subsequent sections, were different from theirs. I believe his senior thesis project was primarily one of working out a religious and ethical position for himself. He was not participating in a polemical movement in theology, was not fighting loyally in its battles, and may not even have informed himself very fully about those battles.

The thesis can certainly be classified as an essay in theology. As to genre, however, it is equally an essay in ethical theory. Most precisely, then, it is an essay in theological ethical theory. And though its ethical

theory is theological, its theological presuppositions are less fully developed than its ethical conclusions. The thesis is written from an explicitly Christian point of view, but it contains only a fragment of Christian theology. In marked divergence from the famously christocentric character that Brunner's theology largely shares with Barth's, Rawls's thesis contains no developed christology, no articulated doctrine of "the person and work of Christ." Indeed, the ethical theory of the thesis does not seem strongly connected with any christological view.

The primary object of evaluation in this first of Rawls's ethical theories is not actions but states of mind. He proposes no criteria of right action, but criticizes and commends attitudes and motives. This is not an unusual focus for a Protestant "inquiry into the meaning of sin and faith." In the thought of Luther and other Protestant Reformers, sin is primarily a state of mind, a complex of attitudes and motives, rather than a straightforwardly voluntary act or a pattern of action. Conceptions of sin as primarily a state rather than a particular deed were characteristic of broadly neo-orthodox theologians, but can also be found in liberal Protestantism.[11] In keeping with this, evaluation of attitudes and motives has held a central place in Protestant ethical thinking. This focus is a classically Protestant feature of Rawls's senior thesis.

2. The Natural and the Personal

If Rawls is engaged in any polemic in his senior thesis, it is a polemic against "naturalism." The first in his list of two main aims of his thesis is "To enter a strong protest against a certain scheme of thought which

11. Notably, in the most famous prototype of liberal Protestant theology: Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (1830), trans. H. R. Mackintosh et al. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928), p. 273 (§66).

I have called naturalism." He immediately offers an explanation of the term:

> By naturalism I mean something far broader than is usually meant by the term. Naturalism is the universe in which all relations are natural and in which spiritual life is reduced to the level of desire and appetition.

He adds that naturalism in this sense has been so "prevalent in the West since Augustine" that his protest against it proposes "more or less of a 'revolution'" (107). Elsewhere he says of "naturalism,"

> We intend to use the word in a different sense than it is usually used. When we think of naturalism we are inclined to imagine a view resembling materialism and kindred philosophies. For us, however, naturalism is the type of thought which speaks of all relations in natural terms. (119)

Two main features of Rawls's conception of naturalism are adumbrated in these explanations. The first is that he conceives of naturalism primarily as a view about *relations.* Indeed, although he often speaks of "nature" or "the realm of nature," or of a universe or cosmos as "natural," his central use of "natural" seems to be in a sense in which it is not clear that anything but relationships can be natural. The second main point is that Rawls connects naturalism also with a certain view of *motivation*—as not rising above "desire and appetition." What we must next try to determine, therefore, is, first, what it is for a relation to be "natural," or spoken of as natural, and what sort of relations Rawls contrasts with natural relations; and, second, what counts for him as "desire and appetition," and what motives he regards as superior to them.

Rawls holds that "there are two types of relations, natural and personal" (112). It is in terms of the contrast between natural and personal relations that the type of ethics that he advocates is distin-

guished from the alternative that is his polemical target. His own outlook, he says,

> will be contrasted with another point of view which we shall call "natural ethics," which is the ethics of Plato and Aristotle, and to which we oppose the Christian or "communal" ethics. Proper ethics is not the relating of a person to some objective "good" for which he should strive, but is the relating of person to person and finally to God. (114)

Thus naturalism is the kind of ethics that Rawls ascribes to Plato and Aristotle, and he contrasts it with a "communal" ethics of personal relationships.

Such an opposition of the "natural" to the "personal"—or to the "spiritual," which Rawls regards as interchangeable with the personal (111)—was certainly not unprecedented. He could have found polarities expressed in these terms in both Brunner and Nygren, two of his main sources.[12] Neither Brunner nor Nygren, however, assigns a central theoretical or polemical role, as Rawls does, to a conception of "naturalism" defined in terms of relationships. In the end we must look, not to such precedents, but to what Rawls says about naturalism, for an understanding of what he meant by a term he said he was using in an unusual sense.

An initial statement suggests that Rawls conceives of the difference between natural and personal relations simply in terms of the nature of the terms of the relations. He says,

> In experience as we know it there are actually three types of relations: (a) personal and communal, (b) natural and (c) causal. The first type is

12. Emil Brunner, *Man in Revolt: A Christian Anthropology,* trans. Olive Wyon (London: Lutterworth Press, 1939), p. 364, speaking of relapsing "into the animal and natural sphere" if one neglects or ignores "the spiritual life for which [one] is destined." Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros,* trans. Philip S. Watson, 1-volume edition (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), pp. 287–288, speaking of a conception of salvation that is "naturalistic" rather than framed "in personal or ethical terms"; see also ibid., p. 225.

> between two persons, the second between a person and some object insofar as personality is involved in the relation, and the third is the relation between two objects. (114)

Unfortunately, it soon emerges that this is too simple for Rawls's theory. For he notes that there is a "type of relation in which the 'thou' is used as a thing," which "is an impersonalized personal relation . . . not in itself personal." Though it is obviously between two persons, it is not personal enough to meet the requirements of the kind of ethics that Rawls regards as "proper." It is indeed "one type of sin" (117), and endorsement of some instances of it is, I believe, one of the main things Rawls objects to in what he calls "naturalism."

His more extensive discussion of the difference between natural and personal relations in section II.2 of Chapter One is more subtle and more satisfying. One important point that emerges there is that in a relation that is personal in the intended sense, one relates to another person as a "thou," and the "thou" not only "gives, shares and loves," but also "it is this 'thou' which constitutes the judge in personal relations" (116). In other words, in fully personal relations, one is morally accountable to the other person; and personal relations are, at least in part, "moral relations," as Rawls calls them at one point (146), in a sense in which "moral" contrasts not with "immoral" but with "non-moral."

The second main feature of "naturalism," as noted above, is that it reduces human *motivation* to "desire" and "appetition." There are large problems of understanding on this point also. For both "desire" and "appetition" are often used to signify motives aiming at any sort of end whatever, including personal relations. There also exist narrower senses or uses of both—or at least of "desire" and "appetite," if not "appetition"—but I think there is no one precise narrow sense that is assigned to them in ordinary discourse. To understand Rawls's polemic against "naturalism" we need a reasonably precise understanding of what motives he assigns to the natural and the personal

realms respectively, and what is the difference between them. Among other things, we may well wonder what the motives belonging to the personal realm are, if they are not desires or appetitions, and whether Rawls has a most general term that applies in both realms, to motives aiming at any end whatever.

Rawls seems not to have been altogether content with his treatment of these questions. Trying, in Chapter Five, to provide some illumination on an "obscure" point, he says,

> Our natural natures are frustrated, but as persons we are disappointed; appetitions are satisfied, as persons we are happy and joyful; impulses and instincts in a sense drive us forward, but personality longs; and whereas nature hunts, personality seeks. (220)

In the next paragraph, however, after saying more in a similar vein, he feels obliged to add: "The above discussion is obscure and vague, and for that reason we should not make too much of it" (221).

The questions are addressed with a somewhat more satisfying directness and clarity at the beginning of Chapter Four:

> In the following sections we shall use these definitions: (a) Natural relations mark off that sphere of experience in which a person desires, strives for, wants, or needs an object or a concrete process. The activity may be described as desiring, wanting, or striving for. (b) Personal relations mark off that sphere of experience in which one person seeks to establish a definite relation or a definite rapport between another person and himself. The activity cannot be described as desire or wanting or needing in the appetitional sense. The activity is not an urge or an impulse, but something different. It is the sharing of fellowship, of communion, of mutual presence; or it is giving, loving, and sharing; or it may be, as it most usually is, hating, envying, despising, priding oneself over the other and so on. (180)

These definitions offer a fairly clear distinction in terms of the *ends* aimed at by the motives. The motives belonging to the personal

sphere aim at the establishment (or, presumably, the maintenance) of a personal relationship. The motives belonging to the natural sphere aim at something else, described as "an object or a concrete process." Similarly, Rawls says, "The criterion of appetition is that it seeks some *object,* something which is impersonal, objective and self-revealing by nature" (180). The definitions also contain material that may be intended to distinguish the two classes of motives in terms of their *modality;* but no such distinction seems to me very clearly provided here. We are told that the "natural" motives (as we may call them for short), or their "activity" or exercise, "may be described as desiring, wanting or striving for," and that the activity of the "personal" motives cannot be described in terms of that sort; but that is of little help if we are struggling to understand what modality is signified by the terms affirmed on the one side and denied on the other. And the positive terms suggested, for the personal sphere, in the last sentence of the quotation are also of little help. For it is far from clear why the "sharing" mentioned could not be an activity or an end of "striving." And while "loving," "hating," "envying," "despising," and "priding oneself" do indeed suggest an emotional modality rather different from the modality of desire and appetition, it also seems true that an emotional modality of loving and hating is found outside the realm of personal relations—for instance, in loving and hating certain foods or styles of music.

Rawls's definitions at the beginning of Chapter Four bear clear marks of the influence of *The Ethics of Power* by the British philosopher Philip Leon. The mention of "concrete process" is reminiscent of Leon's view, described by Rawls (150), that appetition seeks concrete processes. And the classification of "hating, envying, despising, priding oneself over the other and so on" as belonging to the sphere of personal relations is part of Leon's conception of egotism, which Rawls describes and accepts as his own (150–151). In his taxonomy of

motives, in fact, Rawls is closer to Leon than to any other of his sources. A sketch of Leon's taxonomy, which is more sharply defined, may help us at least to frame the right questions about Rawls's taxonomy. Leon summarizes it very clearly and concisely:

> Appetition, or biological striving or the desire for processes or experiences as such in oneself and in others, yields the egoistic life or egoism, which includes altruism or alteregoism . . . Ambition is the desire for position (or relations), and for processes or experiences only as symbols of this. It seeks for . . . soleness or allness . . ., difference or separation, identity, supremacy, superiority, equality. It makes the egotistic or egotism . . . The moral desire or *nisus* is for right structures or situations (union, at-oneness, communication) embodying or expressing Goodness, and for processes only as ingredients in these. It makes the genuinely moral life and man or the good man.[13]

The main division of Leon's taxonomy of motives is thus a trichotomy of egoism, egotism, and the moral desire or *nisus.* Rawls's taxonomy differs from it in that its main partition is a dichotomy of motives belonging to the "natural" and "personal" spheres. Motives that aim at personal relations, good or bad, for their own sake are contrasted with all other end-directed motives. I think this is a point of originality in Rawls's treatment of these ideas. The importance of this difference should not be exaggerated, however. Both egotism and the moral *nisus* are conceived by Leon as taking states or situations of personal relationship as ends in themselves, and thus as belonging to what Rawls would call the personal sphere.[14] And Rawls, undoubtedly under the influence of Leon, divides the motives belonging to the personal sphere into two main classes, one egotistic and the other

13. Philip Leon, *The Ethics of Power: or The Problem of Evil* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1935), pp. 23–24.

14. As regards egotism, this is clear from the definition of ambition quoted above. As regards the moral *nisus,* see, for instance, Leon, *The Ethics of Power,* p. 282.

aiming at community. "Personal relations," Rawls says, "are motivated by egotism or by fellowship and love" (118).

The prominent place assigned to egotism is an unusual feature of a taxonomy of motives, in which Rawls follows Leon. 'Egotism' is used here in a rather broad sense. It does not just signify conceit, or an excessively high opinion of oneself. For both Rawls and Leon, I would say, it signifies all sorts of lust for social position, or for the appearance of social position. Forms of egotism include pride, conceit, competitiveness, and lust for power. This last form was a particularly important topic for Leon, whose book was pretty clearly meant to have an anti-Fascist polemical point. Lust for any sort of social position is, of course, a desire for a sort of relationship between persons rather than for an individual process.

Rawls's use of "egoism" and "appetition," as well as "egotism," largely follows Leon's (cf. 150–151). However, he clearly does not follow Leon's use of "desire." For Rawls "desire" generally is distinctive of the "natural" sphere, whereas for Leon it belongs equally to egoism, egotism, and moral action. He uses it as a quite general term for end-directed motives of any sort, and says that it can "denote any urge, 'making for' or 'hormic drive'."[15] The term that comes closest to fulfilling that general role in Rawls's senior thesis may be "seek." In a passage I have quoted, he self-consciously assigns it to the personal sphere (220); but in practice he applies it both there and in the natural sphere.[16]

In section I.3 of Chapter Four (180–182), Rawls classifies appetitions in four "categories," according to the type of object at which

15. Ibid., pp. 295–296.

16. For instance, in the personal sphere: "love seeks equality with the person to whom its givenness is directed" (207). In the natural sphere: "The criterion of appetition is that it seeks some *object,* something which is impersonal . . ." (180); this is not an exceptional case.

they aim. (a) "Concrete" appetitions are desires for bodily states or processes. (b) "Rational" appetitions include "the desire and longing for truth, for coherence or for necessity in the interpretation of experience." Rawls believes there are rational appetitions, but grants that a "pragmatist" might deny it. (c) "Aesthetic" appetition is "the desire to enjoy an object of beauty." Typically we would "enjoy it for its own sake." Professing ignorance of aesthetics, Rawls is somewhat agnostic about the actual existence of aesthetic appetition. Finally, (d) the "religious" appetition "is the appetition which seeks God as its object, or the Form of the Good, the Alone and so forth. It is the appetition directed to the highest object, to the source of all Beauty, Truth and Goodness." Doubts may well be raised as to whether this partition really covers all types of appetition. In particular, many desires for mental processes don't uncontroversially or obviously fall under any of Rawls's four categories.

Rawls regards appetitions of the first three types "as being legitimate, as being proper for man, and as forming the substance of natural activity in the natural sphere of our experience" (183). I count Rawls as substantially in agreement with Leon's view that the appetitional life is an indispensable basis of the moral life because "we cannot have the moral life without processes and the desire for processes," since "processes are life and the moral life is life."[17]

However, Rawls rejects the fourth category of appetition, the "religious" appetition. "Whether such an appetition exists," Rawls says, "I do not know; but if it does exist, it should not be allowed to exist. To have such an appetition is to sin." That is "because one of the forms of sin, as we shall see, is to turn a personal relation into a natural relation," and it is especially sinful "to do this misdeed in relation to God" (182).

17. Leon, *The Ethics of Power,* pp. 244–245.

Rawls rejects the religious appetition "as constituting the sinful extension of natural relations to a sphere where they do not apply" (183). The "extension" to which Rawls refers is no doubt the enlargement of the domain of natural relations that results in "the extended natural cosmos" that he discusses in Chapter Three and that perverts the merely natural into the natural*ism* that he attacks. Should we infer from the terms in which he rejects the religious appetition that the only illegitimate extension of natural relations that is involved in naturalism and the extended natural cosmos is their extension to our relation to God? It is hard to believe that Rawls meant that. His discussion of "the extended natural cosmos" is certainly less than cosmic in the range of topics it touches.[18] But he does recognize "impersonalized" relations between human beings, which he surely regards as an illegitimate "extension of natural relations."

Rawls's objection to extending natural relations cohabits uneasily with a recognition that in actual human life, interests in personal relationship are complexly and pervasively interwoven with appetitions. "In sensuality we seek," among other things, Rawls says, "community and fellowship" (150). In this reference to sensuality he presumably has sexual appetition in mind. He says that "the sexual appetition . . . is utterly unique because the object of the appetition is intimately bound up with another *person.*" This way of putting it suggests that "the object of the appetition" is not identical with the other person. And indeed that, or a generalization of it, seems to be the main (though not fully articulate) thesis in this discussion of sexual relations. Rawls seems to be arguing that although there are mixtures, so to speak, of natural and personal motives, they do not ever form with each other an organic whole. In particular, he seems to mean to

18. As one of the official readers of the senior thesis, T. M. Greene, pointed out in a comment on Rawls's copy.

exclude the possibility of a single motive aiming at both a broadly moral personal relation and a physical sexual process as a more than merely instrumental part of the relation. However, the clearest argument he offers, from the phenomenon of prostitution, seems not to show that no single motive can be both sexual and personal, but only that a person *can* want sex without wanting a personal relationship that is more than sexual (187–188).

In any event, the senior thesis contains no systematic effort to explain where appetition is legitimate in human relations and where it is illegitimate. Rawls's systematic argument against illegitimate extension of natural relations deals only with relations with God. That will accordingly be our focus as we turn to consider Rawls's criticism of naturalism.

3. The Criticism of Naturalism

The main historical targets of Rawls's critique of "naturalism" are Plato and Augustine, whom he discusses at length in Chapter Three. I will focus on Augustine, as the discussion of Plato is less theological and, for reasons just stated, I believe the issue of illegitimate extension of "natural" relations is most fully engaged by Rawls at the theological level. His main objections against Augustine are made clear enough in a summary in the last paragraph of Chapter Three:

> The natural cosmos is marked by the following characteristics: (a) all relations are relations to objects; even God may be treated as an object; (b) appetitional desires are the energies of all relations, and all love is acquisitive, hence not love in the Christian sense; (c) grace (when the system is Christian) is likewise spoken of in terms of an object presented to the will as an object of desire; and (d) all natural systems lose communality, personality, and the true nature of God, and are therefore not really Christian but individualistic. (178)

The characteristics listed are four, but they indicate two main criticisms. The one most obviously linked with the idea of an illegitimate

extension of natural relations is that "communality, personality and the true nature of God" are lost in a system such as Rawls ascribes to Augustine. This is in effect an accusation that Augustine has committed the sin of turning the relation of a human being to God into a "natural," impersonal relation.

It must be said that on this point Rawls's interpretation of Augustine is neither persuasive nor fair. Rawls does not actually use the terminology of "personal relationship" in discussing Augustine in Chapter Three of the thesis. The key term that he uses instead is "object." Sometimes he uses it in the well-established sense in which "object of" signifies a relation of something to an action or attitude. But sometimes he uses it in a sense defined early in the chapter, in which an "object" is something that "exists as the 'other' in what we have termed a natural relation" (160). And he does claim, evidently in this sense, that according to Augustine, God is to be loved as an "object" (175). Given the definition that Rawls is using, this is tantamount to claiming that in Augustine's view, love toward God should not be understood as seeking or participating in a personal relationship with God. Rawls gives little argument to support this interpretive claim. Augustine does not actually say that God is an object in the sense Rawls uses (nor does Rawls ascribe such a statement to him). In fact, I think it is quite clear (from his *Confessions,* for example) that Augustine does think of his relation to God as a personal, broadly moral relation—though he also sometimes uses impersonal models in speaking of it (as the Bible does too). In this respect, Rawls's historical argument is weak. However, that deficiency does not touch the systematic claim, in his own theoretical framework, that it is reasonable to object to any view that treats the relation of humans to God as wholly impersonal.

The other main criticism indicated in the summary at the end of Chapter Three is that in a wholly natural system of relations (and hence in Augustine's view, on Rawls's reading of it), all love, even love

toward God, is acquisitive, and that cannot be true of Christian love. This criticism may be better grounded historically than systematically. I take it that what is meant by saying that Augustinian love toward God is "acquisitive" is that in it God is loved as *one's own* highest Good, and the relation to God is sought as good for oneself and able to make one happy. That is surely true of Augustine, who was profoundly influenced by the eudaemonistic framework of ancient Greek and Roman philosophical ethics. Whether Augustine thought that God is loved *only* as one's own good is more controversial, however. And if he did not, it may be less clear how far Rawls disagrees with him on the point. For in Chapters Four and Five of his thesis, as I will argue, Rawls holds that our salvation (and hence in some sense, surely, our good) depends on fellowship with God, and he seems to regard that as a consideration that can appropriately motivate us to some extent.

The historical framework for Rawls's critique of Augustine is largely borrowed from Anders Nygren. In particular, Rawls follows Nygren in accusing Augustine of taking over from Plato a conception of aspiration for the highest Good that is ill suited to Christianity. The debt to Nygren on this point is acknowledged (174n37). However, Rawls also departs from Nygren's views and arguments in important respects.

Nygren's *Agape and Eros,* first published in Swedish, in two parts, in 1930 and 1936, is the last century's most famous and influential study of Christian ideas of love. It is structured throughout by a contrast of two ideals of love; Nygren calls them Eros and Agape, and sees them as having archetypal protagonists in Plato and St. Paul, respectively. Not coincidentally, *eros* is the Greek word for love used in many significant contexts in Plato's dialogues, and *agap*e is the usual word for love in the Greek New Testament. But Nygren wisely declines to rest his historical analysis or his theological argument on such lexico-

graphical facts.[19] As a historian, he argues that many Christian thinkers have tried to synthesize Agape and Eros—thus compromising the essence of Christianity, in Nygren's opinion. He sees such a synthesis most notably in the conception of Christian love or charity (*caritas*) developed by St. Augustine, and embraced by medieval theologians following him. At the end of Nygren's narrative, Luther comes on the scene to purify the Agape motif again.

Rawls's complaint that Augustine presents love toward God as acquisitive and egoistic is one of Nygren's arguments too. However, Rawls's other main criticism, the one most deeply connected with his polemic against "naturalism"—that human community with God is lost in Augustine's view—is not one of Nygren's arguments. Though Nygren does say that "Greek thought has no place for fellowship with God in the strict sense of the term," he means this as a charge against the *pure* Platonic form of the Eros motif. He does not level this charge against the Augustinian *caritas* synthesis as he understands it. Indeed, he explicitly (though not often) mentions "fellowship with God," rightly, as having a place in Augustine's theological views.[20]

Is Nygren's critique of Augustine solely based, then, on the charge of egoism? Far from it. At least as important to Nygren is another argument that does not clearly play any part in Rawls's polemic against "naturalism." Nygren was a Lutheran bishop and theologian, and his book breathes the spirit of an early-twentieth-century Luther renaissance that was akin to neo-orthodoxy. The deepest motive of his argument, I believe, is Luther's conviction that salvation is by grace alone, to which Nygren attempts to give ethical form in his delineation of the concept of Agape. For Nygren, "Agape is God's grace" and

19. Nygren, *Agape and Eros,* p. 33. In fact, I believe, *agape* and its cognate verb *agapan* are simply the most general words for love in biblical Greek; see, e.g., the "Septuagint" Greek translation of 2 Samuel 13:1.

20. Nygren, *Agape and Eros,* pp. 528–529.

"God's way to man," and in Agape "salvation is the work of Divine love"; whereas "Eros is man's effort" and "man's way to God," and in Eros "man's salvation is his own work."[21] In agreement with Plato's *Symposium,* Nygren conceives of Eros as an expression of *need,* so that God's love cannot be Eros, since God is not needy at all. In contrast, Agape is an expression of overflowing abundance, and therefore, at the most fundamental level, can only be God's love.[22]

From this conception of Agape Nygren draws the remarkable, and perhaps paradoxical, consequence that "in the life that is governed by Agape, the acting subject is not man himself," but God. In developing this conclusion Nygren embraces a strikingly impersonal model of the divine-human relation involved—a model that would hardly be at home in Rawls's rigorous personalism, although it is a biblical model. Nygren says, "God's Agape can be described by Paul quite realistically as a kind of 'pneumatic fluid', which is 'shed abroad in our hearts through the Holy Ghost which was given unto us' (Rom. v.5)." In Agape toward one's neighbor, therefore, "God is not the end, the ultimate object, but the starting point and permanent basis"—not the final cause of Agape but its efficient cause. Rather, in neighbor-love, "Agape-love is directed to the neighbor himself."[23]

Nygren has a polemical point here against Augustine, who can be interpreted with some plausibility as maintaining (in certain passages anyway) that in Christian love (or *caritas*) one should relate to one's neighbor, not as an ultimate object of love, but only as a means to be used to attain the ultimate end of enjoying God.[24] That Augustinian

21. Ibid., p. 210.

22. Ibid., pp. 211–212, 219.

23. Ibid., pp. 129, 215–216.

24. Augustine, *De doctrina Christiana,* I.xxii.20. See also Robert Merrihew Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 185–187.

view is not attractive. Shouldn't we love our neighbors for their own sake? Christians might well think that Christians themselves, and not just God, can and should be active subjects of such a love. With debatable consistency, Nygren too seems to suppose in many contexts that in some sense that is so, and that human beings sometimes love their neighbors in the sense of Agape.

Another striking aspect of Nygren's emphasis on God's grace is his insistence that Agape "must be spontaneous and unmotivated, uncalculating, unlimited, and unconditional."[25] Unlike Eros, which is essentially a response to perceived value, Agape is to be "unmotivated" in the sense that it finds no motive in the value of its object. It is grace not just in the sense that it is forgiving and looks past faults, and is not strictly proportioned to the value of its object, but in the sense that it is not a response to any value at all that it sees in the object. Agape is "*indifferent to value,*" and "*any thought of valuation whatsoever* is out of place in connection with fellowship with God."[26] Indeed, it is Nygren's view that the object of Agape has no value prior to the Agape.

> God does not love that which is already in itself worthy of love, but on the contrary, that which in itself has no worth acquires worth just by becoming the object of God's love. . . . Agape does not recognize value, but creates it.[27]

This obviously suggests a divine love theory of the nature of value; but *Agape and Eros* manifests relatively little interest in metaethics, and no such theory is developed there.

One consequence that Nygren draws from the thesis that Agape must be "unmotivated" is that God can hardly be, in the most straight-

25. Nygren, *Agape and Eros,* p. 91.
26. Ibid., p. 77; italics in the original text.
27. Ibid., p. 78; cf. pp. 86–91.

forward sense, an object of our Agape. There is a "difficulty" in the conception of Agape toward God. "Agape is spontaneous, unmotivated love. But in relation to God, man's love can never be spontaneous and unmotivated." "Is not our love for God in fact 'motivated' in the very highest degree . . . by the Agape He has shown towards us?"[28]

Despite this difficulty, Nygren affirms that there is a sort of human Agape toward God. It is not wholly unmotivated, and if it is an expression of overflowing abundance, that can only be God's own abundance reflected back to God. But there is one main respect in which human Agape toward God is like God's love: it "is not an appetitive longing." Rather, in Agape "man's love for God signifies that man, moved by [God's] love, gratefully wills to belong wholly to God." This tells us rather little about what Agape's attitude toward God is. Elsewhere Nygren indicates that Agape's attitude toward God is one of *obedience*. He says that in Agape, love for God "devotes its whole attention to the carrying out of God's will. It is obedience to God, without any thought of reward."[29]

Contrasted with Agape are Platonic Eros toward the highest being (the Form of the Good) and Augustinian *caritas* toward God, which are forms of appetitive longing and expressions of human need. For Agape, God "is not the 'Highest Good', in the sense that He is more desirable than all other objects of desire, but He is simply not to be classed with any objects of desire whatsoever."[30] This is the point at which Nygren's critique of Eros and *caritas* is motivated by his commitment to a very strong form of the doctrine of salvation by grace alone. He thinks that in *seeking* God at all, Eros does not adequately recognize the primacy of grace. For it is part of Nygren's view of grace

28. Ibid., pp. 92, 213, 93.
29. Ibid., pp. 213, 94–95.
30. Ibid., p. 213.

that "*there is from man's side no way at all that leads to God*" but "God must Himself come to meet man."[31]

Should Rawls's attack on what he calls "naturalism" be seen, in Nygren's terms, as an argument for "Agape" as opposed to "Eros"? Rawls does not use the terms "Agape" and "Eros" in his own voice,[32] but the terminological point does not settle the question to what extent he was following Nygren. Specifically, we can ask whether Rawls uses the terms "desire" and "appetition," which he associates with the "natural" realm, to signify Eros, and whether the conception of "Christian love" that has an important place in the motivational ideal developed in his senior thesis (250–252) is a conception of Agape.

Nygren certainly associates desire and appetition with Eros.[33] And Rawls contrasts desire and Christian love in a way that clearly has something in common with Nygren's contrast of Eros and Agape as acquisitive and giving, respectively. Rawls says, "Desire leads us to acquire something. Christian love, on the other hand, seeks not its own; it manifests the spirit of giving" (250). Nonetheless I think it is misleading to read Rawls's contrast of the natural and the personal as a version of Nygren's contrast of Eros and Agape. The two contrasts differ both in structure and in content.

The structural differences are quite fundamental. Nygren's contrast is precisely between Eros and Agape. For Rawls, on the other hand, if Christian love is one pole of a binary polarity, the other pole is egotism, and the polarity is *within* the realm of personal relations. And the binary polarity in which desire and appetition are involved, in

31. Ibid., p. 80; italics in the original text.

32. They occur in his senior thesis only in citations of Nygren. Similarly, when Rawls uses the Latin term *caritas* in quoting or paraphrasing Augustine (174–175), there is no suggestion of Nygren's interpretation of Augustinian *caritas* as a synthesis of Eros and Agape.

33. Nygren, *Agape and Eros,* pp. 175, 180.

Rawls's view, puts not Christian love, but the interest in personal relations in general at the other pole.

An even more important structural difference concerns the strength of the opposition between desire and Eros and the opposite pole of each. For Nygren, Agape and Eros are "two entirely opposite motifs," "two general attitudes to life." He declares that "there cannot be any real synthesis between two forces so completely contrary to one another as Eros and Agape," although there have been repeated attempts in Christian history to join them together.[34] Rawls, on the other hand, despite his contrast between the natural and the personal, assumes that human lives that include personal relations will also include natural relations, with desires and appetitions related to them. This applies even to lives ruled by Christian love. Desires and appetitions that can be domesticated in this way within a life dominated by Christian love do not fit within Nygren's conception of Eros, which is defined primarily by the religious aspect in which it is incompatible with Agape. For Nygren, Eros is a "force . . . which, beginning with a sense of poverty and emptiness, seeks God in order to find in Him satisfaction for its own wants," as opposed to "the Agape which, being rich through God's grace, pours itself out in love."[35]

In content as well, Rawls's conception of appetition or desire is not a version of Nygren's conception of Eros. Rawls defines desire and appetition in terms of their object: they are not aimed at personal relationship as an end in itself. That is not a criterion of Eros for Nygren. For him, the difference between Eros and Agape "is not a question of the object of the love, but of its nature and ground."[36] Augustine's longing and quest for God has the character of Eros, in Nygren's view, even if it has fellowship with God among its ultimate ends, because

34. Ibid., pp. 227, 209, 231–232.
35. Ibid., p. 232.
36. Ibid., p. 142.

the fellowship is conceived as Augustine's own good and the quest is conceived (by Nygren at least) as "man's way to God."

Despite some points of agreement,[37] Rawls's conception of Christian love also differs fundamentally in content from Nygren's conception of Agape. For Rawls's conception is not constrained by Nygren's conception of divine grace. Rawls does emphasize the "givenness" of Christian love as "a fruit of faith which is given to us by the Word bursting in upon us" (251). He holds that the establishment of community is a gift of God, and impossible without God's grace (231). But Rawls does not see that as excluding our activity in establishing community. On the contrary, he says, "The elect are chosen to re-establish the community. To restore the community is their prime intention, or should be." He conceives of them as cooperating with God in this project: "By their efforts, together with the Holy Spirit, others can be brought into community" (247–248).

Likewise, Rawls does not imply that, strictly speaking, God is the only lover in Christian love. In his senior thesis, I believe, the anti-Pelagian emphasis on our need for grace is accommodated through a theology of conversion as wrought by God, rather than through a theory of a love of which we are merely conduits and not subjects. Rawls's alternative to ("natural") "appetition" is defined by its phenomenology and by the kind of relationship it seeks, not by who its subject is; he seems to think of us as potential subjects of it.

Nor does Rawls see our dependence on God's grace as a reason for disparaging motives and activities of *seeking* community with God. He speaks of "man's longing aloneness" in sin, and says, "Man seeks not to pry into [God's] privacy, or at least he should not; but he does seek to know *something* of His person." Rawls does not condemn this longing and seeking, for which indeed he mentions a good rea-

37. For instance, in emphasis on "the spirit of giving" (250).

son: "Man must have this knowledge of God before he can be restored. If the 'other' does not reveal itself, then the establishment of community must end in failure." He adds that "such knowledge of God can come only from God," but does not seem to draw any ethical conclusion from that except that "man must wait for God to speak to him" (224–225).

4. Values and Ends

In his senior thesis Rawls does not present a developed theory of value or of the good. He is more explicit in what he denies than in what he affirms about goodness as such. In what may be the clearest statement in the thesis on this subject, he says,

> The first concept to go, as we have already suggested, is the concept of the good as an object of desire. We maintain that objects of desire have nothing to do with salvation whatsoever except insofar as they are part of man's natural nature, which receives its due only after personality and community have been set in order. Community in the full sense, that is, the heavenly community, is the end in itself. It is the goal of creation, and while it may be true that man's natural being is fulfilled therein, such fulfillment is secondary to the community itself. (219–220)

On the negative side, Rawls denies that the good is to be identified with any object of desire. On the positive side, while the quoted passage is likely to leave readers with the impression that Rawls thinks the true good is community, that is not exactly what he says here. In a way that I think is typical for the text as a whole, he avoids the vocabulary of goodness and value in what he says positively about community. The preeminence he ascribes to community is expressed in terms of the way in which we should value it (as *end* in itself) rather than in terms of value that it has objectively (as *good* in itself). I will discuss first the way in which he relates objects of desire to the good, and then his treatment of community as an end in itself.

Rejecting "the concept of the good as an object of desire" is of a piece with Rawls's polemic against "naturalism." It is the starting point of banishing "all of the terms of the natural cosmos" from the discussion of salvation (220). The relativization to the topic of salvation is significant. At many places in the senior thesis Rawls says that "desires for food and drink, for beauty, and for truth and thus for the goods of nature as a whole . . . are good and their objects are good" (120). Indeed, it is a main thesis of his essay that "the natural cosmos is good and not bad" (179). Verbally, however, he is not altogether consistent on this point. He says of appetitions that "we can presume that they do not lead to good," and he uses "shudder quotes" when writing of "the 'good' which is the proper end of natural desire" (186–187, 120). But I think in these cases his point is to contrast appetitions with the seeking of community, which is what he values most. What Rawls most clearly rejects, I take it, is the idea (which he associates with Plato) of seeking our supreme end by way of "natural" rather than personal relationships (see also 160). As "part of man's natural nature," objects of desire are to receive their due, but "only after personality and community have been set in order." Rawls asserts a priority here—not exactly that the right is prior to the good, but that the ends of community are prior to the ends of "natural" desire.

He does not tell us *how* "man's natural being is fulfilled" in community, or *what* is the due that natural desires are to receive. So far as I can see, his view could be developed in either of two directions. He could suppose that what is due to natural desires is grounded in the ends of community, and that they are to be satisfied only insofar as that serves the ends of community. Or he could suppose that natural desires are worth satisfying for their own sake, but not at the expense of community, so that what is due to them is limited, but need not be grounded, by the ends of community. The tenor of Rawls's vindication of natural desire in Chapter Two suggests that he would, if asked,

have endorsed the latter approach, which is clearly more generous to natural desire, as it does not require a positive community-based justification for each satisfaction of a natural desire.

On either approach it would be plausible to claim that there are at least *some* natural desires whose satisfaction, in some contexts, is supported, or even demanded, by the ends of community. In particular, it is plausible to think that good communal or interpersonal relations require us to try, altruistically, to satisfy some of each *other's* natural desires. It would be hasty, however, to jump to the conclusion that in this way altruism regarding the ends of other people's natural desires is unproblematic for the young Rawls. We can approach the problems altruism poses for him by reference to problems it poses for Leon and even for Nygren.

Nygren notes that for ancient Greek philosophical ethics, "the problem of the Good was . . . the problem of a 'Highest Good'—that is, of something which could in every respect satisfy the individual." It is the question, we might say, of what is supremely good *for* an individual. It is a central question of eudaemonism (in which the ethical criterion is the happiness of the agent) and utilitarianism (in which the ethical criterion is the greatest good of the greatest number of persons). That is the sense in which Nygren conceives of Eros as seeking the Highest Good. He denies that God is the Highest Good in that sense. Agape, he says, is less individualistic; it "is a social idea . . . and when the question of the Good is approached from the point of view of social relationships . . . it becomes dissociated from eudaemonism and utilitarianism and turns into the entirely independent question of 'the Good-in-itself'."[38]

Viewed in such a social perspective, what is the Good-in-itself? In dissociating it from eudaemonism and utilitarianism, Nygren is evi-

38. Nygren, *Agape and Eros,* pp. 44–45; cf. p. 213.

dently implying that it is something whose goodness is not to be understood as goodness *for* particular persons, either individually or in aggregation. What else could the Good-in-itself be? Nygren's answer is, "The Good is *agape.*"[39] I take him to mean that the decisive goodness of Agape is not a goodness *for* persons, but a non-person-relative intrinsic goodness of a feature of personal relations, a certain kind of love.

Agape, or Christian love, is generally supposed to be altruistic. Can it, or any form of altruism, really be wholly "dissociated from eudaemonism and utilitarianism" and uninterested in what is good *for* persons? Perhaps the likeliest alternative to caring about what is good for other persons, as a form of altruism, would be responsiveness to the preferences of other persons. Something of that sort is suggested by Philip Leon's account of the relation of the moral motive to appetitions.

Leon tries not to use "good" in his own voice (without quotation marks) to express the concept of goodness *for* a person. For him Goodness properly speaking (typically with a capital "G") "is that which we embody in individual right situations,"[40] which he conceives at least mainly as situations of personal relationship. But he does not locate it precisely in love. Leon thinks that "if [the reader] calls by the name of goodness that which is expressed in personal relationships, seeing how different in kind this goodness is from everything else, he will refuse that name to anything else." This consideration "may further persuade him that the whole domain of the so-called 'values' is a branch . . . of Psychopathology."[41]

39. Ibid., p. 48.

40. Leon, *The Ethics of Power,* p. 297. He adds, "or in situations which embody Goodness"; the (otherwise unilluminating) circularity, he says, is intended "to show that no definition [of Goodness] is intended."

41. Leon, *The Ethics of Power,* p. 23.

In Leon's view "there is no class of really good appetitions or processes." He thinks appetitions for processes are presupposed by the moral motive, but they do not have the same kind of value as the moral motive. He holds that

> Morality does not presuppose 'goods'. . . . If anything is presupposed by morality, it is not good and bad processes, but processes which are liked and wanted and processes which are disliked and the objects of aversion.

In the view I take Leon to be proposing, the (largely social) requirements of "the right situation" do not call for us to regard the objects of appetition—our own or anyone else's—as really good, but only to be responsive in certain ways to each other's appetitions.[42]

Conceiving of altruism as responsiveness to other people's preferences rather than as caring for (what one takes to be) their good may have some appeal to thinkers worried about paternalism. But can it provide a wholly adequate account of altruism? Appropriately altruistic parents of young children, for instance, surely need to think in terms of what is good for their children, and not just in terms of their children's preferences. If the parents are philosophers, they may perhaps analyze the notion of what is good for a person in terms of the person's hypothetical preferences; but that does not touch the present argument. For hypothetical preferences are not actually preferences, and the parents in such a case are still relying on a conception of what is good for their children.

Because Rawls holds that the objects of many appetitions are good, his senior thesis, in any event, does not commit him to rejecting the conception of something being good for a person, or to denying that satisfying people's appetitions can be genuinely good for them. His position, however, might still severely limit how highly he can, con-

42. Ibid., pp. 285, 287–288; see also pp. 289–290.

sistently, value an altruistic concern for the satisfaction of another person's material needs. The end at which such a concern aims is not external to the single self of the other person for whom the altruist is concerned; it is, in Leon's terms, a "process" in that person. It seems to follow that such an altruistic motive must be placed in the "natural" part of Rawls's taxonomy of motives, in which all motives that do not aim at personal relationship as such are classified as natural.

It seems to follow also that an altruistic concern for satisfaction of the material needs of others as an end in itself must be valued by Rawls decidedly less highly than concern for the quality of personal relationships as an end in itself. Placing motives of satisfying others' material needs on a lower evaluative plane is certainly not unprecedented in Christian thought. But such an ordering of valuations seems at best very questionable in an account of Christian love, given the emphasis placed on the satisfaction of material needs in the New Testament.[43] I doubt that Rawls would have wanted to be saddled with this problem; and I have not noticed any indication in the senior thesis that he was aware of the problematic implications to which I have called attention.

Rawls has little to say there about altruism as such, and does not directly address the question of what place in his ethical taxonomy of motives should be assigned to altruistic interests in possible facts about other persons that would not be facts of personal relationship. But perhaps we can draw some inferences from things he says about other subjects. Concerning the motives belonging to the "natural" realm, Rawls says that all of them are acquisitive, egoistic, or self-centered. In "the natural cosmos . . . appetitional desires are the energies of all relations, and all love is acquisitive" (178). "Natural relations are

43. E.g., in Luke 10:25–37 and Matthew 25:31–46.

egoistic . . . Desires and appetitions are by nature egoistic, and therefore self-centered" (118).

So what would Rawls say about an altruistic interest in a process in another person, such as her recovery from illness, that does not essentially involve any personal relationship? Would Rawls deny that anyone has altruistic interests of that sort? Or would he agree with Leon in classifying them as egoistic or "alteregoistic" motives?[44] Or would he claim that such interests actually belong to the realm of personal relationships, simply by being interests in another person's well-being, even if one has no interest in interacting with the other person or being related to her otherwise than by wishing her well? All of these alternatives seem problematic, and none of them is addressed by Rawls.

As noted above, in his senior thesis Rawls tends to express his valuation of community in terms of the way in which we should value it (as *end* in itself) rather than in terms of value it has objectively (as *good* in itself). He associates the term "good" much more closely with his subordinate valuation of objects of "natural" appetition than with his supreme valuation of community. This is not to say that he never implies that community is good, and indeed supremely so. Rather, he manifests an ambivalence regarding the use of "good." This appears vividly in a single sentence in which Rawls both objects to the phrase "good life" and uses it to express his own valuing of personal relations above "any object." He says, "We do not believe that the so-called 'good life' (detestable phrase) consists in seeking any object, but that it is rather something totally different, a matter of personal relations" (161).

Rawls says that "community in the full sense, that is, the heavenly community, is the end in itself. It is the goal of creation." The implica-

44. Leon, *The Ethics of Power,* p. 23.

tion is clear that as "the goal of creation," community is the main and ultimate end that God sought in creating the world. There is also a very strong suggestion in this context that community is *our* highest end in that "salvation" or the fulfillment of our personal nature is to be found only in community (219). Rawls implies that community must be willed as an end in itself—that it cannot exist, properly speaking, except as it is willed as an end in itself by those who participate in it. "No community can be based on egoism" (187). A society based on social contract "is no community at all" if (as the young but not the later Rawls assumes) the social contract is "a scheme of mutual advantage which uses society as means only" (229).[45]

Rawls insists on valuing community as an end in itself. Nygren, on the other hand, seems to exclude analysis in terms of ends altogether where Agape is concerned. He declares that "no teleological explanation or motivation of [God's] love can be entertained." And he says of Luther, whom he considers a paradigmatic agape-ethicist, "The whole construction of his ethics is not teleological, but causal." These statements may be connected with Nygren's rejection of eudaemonism and utilitarianism. Nevertheless I believe they are misleading, because important distinctions are not made. The point Nygren seems to be after can be stated more precisely, and is relatively narrow. It is that Agape has in certain respects no *ulterior* end. In particular, "God does not love in order to obtain any advantage thereby, but quite simply because it is His nature to love." And in Agape toward one's neighbor, God's role is as cause of the Agape, not as a reward to which the neighbor is used as a means.[46] Neither of these points entails that the structure of Agape is not to be analyzed in terms of ends that are sought in

45. This view of social contract may have been influenced not only by Hobbes, but also by Leon's account of it (in *The Ethics of Power,* pp. 174–177) as a "mutual equilibration of egotisms."

46. Nygren, *Agape and Eros,* pp. 201, 737.

Agape. And in fact I think it is not easy to understand Agape in Nygren's account otherwise than as taking fellowship and the neighbor's good as ends in themselves.

Neither Nygren nor the young Rawls focuses on the sorts of alternatives to teleological motivation most likely to be discussed in moral philosophy today. Neither of them discusses either expressive action, or acting on a principle, as an alternative to trying to bring about an end extrinsic to the action. This is not to say that the senior thesis contains a teleological theory of right action; nowhere does it focus on defining the nature of right action as such. However, seeking to establish community is front and center in the ethics of the young Rawls without any expressed thought that there could be situations in which the end of this motive should be sacrificed to some less teleological consideration.

It is worth considering to what extent seeking community as an end in itself is a *selfless* motive in the view of the young Rawls. He had before him, in the work of Philip Leon, a clear formulation, if not an altogether clear discussion, of this issue. Leon holds that the moral motive is "objective" in the sense that it does not "refer essentially to the self." Its end is simply "that the right be done or that Goodness be embodied in a certain situation." The situation will normally be one involving some action of one's own.

We may have our doubts about this account of ethical objectivity. What about the desire that *I* embody rightness and goodness in my relations with others, as an end in itself and not for the sake of anything else? That desire refers essentially to the self, but looks like a very moral motive. Indeed, it looks very much like Leon's own conception of the moral motive when he says, "The genuinely moral man seeks to be at one with Goodness, to be inspired by Goodness, to embody Goodness."[47] For surely, insofar as you are seeking to embody

47. Leon, *The Ethics of Power,* p. 196.

Goodness, you have as an (essentially self-referential) end *your* embodying Goodness. The later moral philosophy of Rawls suggests a similarly self-referential motive: the interest in expressing one's own nature as a free and equal person.[48]

In his senior thesis Rawls is less articulate than Leon, but more cautious and arguably more consistent, in his treatment of self-referential motives in relation to his ethical ideal. He emphasizes that his ideal is not egoistic. "Christian love," he says, "seeks not its own . . . Its end is to give something to the other person as person" (250). Such a desire to give would not normally be counted as egoistic or self-seeking. Its end is not a process in oneself but a fact of personal relationship. But that fact of relationship, that stated end, is essentially self-referential. The end is not just that the other person receive a gift, but that the other person receive a gift from *me,* if I am the lover. That is implied if the end is *to* give something to the other person.

Moreover, Rawls says that Christian love, "although it is giving, does not overlook the personality of the giver. The self is not destroyed when it gives, but it is completed." To be sure, he goes on to say that in Christian love the self of the lover "is completed, however, not in an appetitional sense nor, of course, in an egotistical sense, i.e., by being glorified." But that just means that the self is not completed, "appetitionally," by satisfaction of a desire for "concrete impersonal processes," or "egotistically," by satisfaction of a lust for superiority over others. Rather, it is completed by participating in community in a way that essentially consists partly in loving. "The spirit completes itself in faith and love because it is communal by nature, and faith and love in all their intensity are proper to it" (250).

Nygren, I suppose, might still object to a love that in this way "does not overlook" the lover's own selfhood. He might think it comes much too close to an aspect of the self-love that he would exclude al-

48. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (1999), p. 417.

together from Agape, which has room only for love toward God and neighbor, and too close to the "sidelong glance" that he would exclude from Agape's neighbor-love.[49] But Nygren's ideal may be untenably austere on this point. If one's motivational ideal includes having it as an ultimate end to participate in a good community, doing one's part as a member of it—which is certainly a feature of Rawls's motivational ideal both in his senior thesis and in his theory of justice—then one idealizes having an end that is essentially self-referential (though not one that would normally be called "self-seeking").

One further issue about values calls for comment here. Both Nygren and the young Rawls refuse to speak of God as *beautiful.* Nygren situates his refusal in the contrast between Eros and Agape, with specific reference to the question "what it is that awakens love in man." With themes from Plato obviously in mind, he says that "Eros is of a markedly aesthetic character. It is the beauty of the Divine that attracts the eye of the soul and sets its love in motion." In Agape, on the other hand, "What awakens love in man is nothing else but the Agape shown to him by God." It is presumably a conception of beauty as inseparable from the competing value system of Eros that accounts for the otherwise surprising vehemence of Nygren's statement, "To speak of the 'beauty' of God in the context of Agape . . . sounds very like blasphemy."[50]

There may be an intentional echo of Nygren's vehement statement when Rawls says, "To speak of God as the most beautiful object, the most satisfying object, the most desired of all objects is to sin," and "if one cannot have faith in God just because He is what He is, but has to add that He is most satisfying in His beauty and such an *object* that we shall never crave anything else—then perhaps it is better not to be

49. Nygren, *Agape and Eros,* pp. 215–216.
50. Ibid., pp. 223–224.

a Christian at all." As suggested by Rawls's italicized use of the term "object," his claim is motivated, and has been thought through, on the basis of his contrast between the "natural" and the personal rather than Nygren's contrast between Eros and Agape. It is because it "is to turn a personal relation into a natural relation, and to do this misdeed in relation to God is surely sin," that to speak of God as the most beautiful object is to sin (182).

This reflects Rawls's classification of beauty as an object of appetition—"aesthetic appetition," which like all appetition belongs for Rawls to the "natural" realm (181). On that assumption, to speak of God as beautiful introduces the category of "religious appetition," and thus extends appetition beyond its rightful territory of the natural into that of the personal. Rawls's claim that it is sin to call God beautiful is explicitly part of his rejection of "religious appetition."

Issues arise here that Rawls does not address. Is it sin to speak (or think) of a human person as beautiful? Does that "turn a personal relation into a natural relation"? An affirmative answer to these questions looks pretty inhumane. As applied to sexual relations, it might have some resemblance to the particular form of inhumanity known as prudishness. The most plausible reading of the senior thesis, in my opinion, allows ascription of beauty to human persons to be innocent, as part of the normal mixture of the natural and the personal in our motivation. I suspect Rawls was thinking in terms merely of mixtures, and not of natural and personal motives as forming organic wholes with each other—though without providing (so far as I can see) any good reason for denying that such organic wholes occur. Be that as it may, it is only of God that Rawls actually says it is sinful, or contrary to community, to predicate beauty.

This suggests that the claim about God has another motive besides that of avoiding depersonalization. Perhaps the likeliest motive is simply the desire to avoid admitting any aesthetic value at the highest

level of value. I think it is plausible to read the senior thesis as motivated by a belief that broadly moral relations among persons are, or can be, on a plane of value that transcends all other types of value, including the intellectual and the aesthetic. This belief might be compromised if the supreme being were acknowledged to have (also) aesthetic value. Why accept the belief, implying as it does that the value of the best personal relationships cannot have an aesthetic dimension? Two possible motives come to mind.

(1) It may be feared that admitting beauty of the beloved as a factor in love will compromise the unconditionality of love. This raises a serious problem. On the other hand, it may also be feared that refusing to admit beauty as a factor in love will compromise other important aspects of love.

(2) The other motive is that aesthetic values appeal to contemplation; and many strenuous moralists, as well as many interpreters of Christian ethics, are convinced that the more active moments of ethical and religious decision and enactment must be ranked above any more contemplative moment. This is not inevitable as interpretation of the Bible, however. Notable on the other side is a verse from the Psalms included in a passage that Rawls quotes from Augustine: "One thing have I desired of the Lord, that I will seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, that I may behold the beauty of the Lord" (175).[51] This passage ascribes beauty to God, as a theme of religious devotion, and expresses a clearly contemplative aspiration in doing so. Such themes have been important in several streams of biblically inspired piety. The opposite emphasis on religious and ethical decision and action, and a concomitant suspicion against the "contemplative life" and against mixing the aesthetic with

51. It is possible (though I am not sure how likely) that the biblical source did not register with Rawls. The reference (to Psalm 27:4) is supplied by the editors in the present edition of the senior thesis, but was not given by Rawls.

the religious, have arguably been more influential in Protestantism than in other forms of Christianity.

It may be significant in this connection that the writer Rawls cites as holding "much the same point of view" that he expresses in saying that it might be better not to be a Christian than to think one must say that God "is most satisfying in His beauty" is not Nygren but Kierkegaard (182). Kierkegaard does hold that it is important for Christianity, and for religion and ethics in general, not to grant aesthetic values a place at the highest level of value. And he connects this with the view that religious and ethical forms of life are centered in a stance of decision rather than contemplation.[52]

To what extent does Rawls's relegation of aesthetic values to a lower level remain in force in the rejection of "perfectionism" in his theory of justice? The first and most obvious thing to be said about that is that the perfectionism rejected by the older Rawls is a *political* doctrine which would treat excellence in aesthetic and other non-political dimensions as considerations appropriately grounding political decisions. In his final view, in *Political Liberalism* and later, Rawls is not necessarily objecting to individuals having beauty as one of the highest values in the "comprehensive view" that they personally embrace, so long as that valuation works, in their case, in such a way that they can join in an "overlapping consensus" supporting the liberal political principles of justice that Rawls advocates. Nevertheless, I do not believe that someone who did include beauty among her highest values would be likely to write exactly as Rawls wrote in *A Theory of Justice*.[53] We can say at any rate that in the senior thesis Rawls devel-

52. Rawls cites Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript,* trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), pp. 221–222. Statements of the relevant views are distributed widely in Kierkegaard's writings, including especially the *Postscript* and *Either/Or.*

53. See, e.g., *A Theory of Justice* (1999), pp. 387–388.

ops a religious outlook that, by virtue of the extreme priority it gives to broadly moral personal relations, is already a possible basis for participation in an overlapping consensus on political principles of justice.

5. Community

Acknowledging his debt to Emil Brunner's work, Rawls mentions, as something he particularly admires in it, "a clear and unflinching recognition that the universe is a *community* of Creator and created" (108; italics added). Brunner affirms the preeminence of community in terms that Rawls quotes and embraces with enthusiasm:

> As Brunner puts it: "The distinctively human element is not freedom, nor intellectual creative power, nor reason. These are rather the conditions of realization of man's real human existence, which consists in love. They do not contain their own meaning, but their meaning is love, true community."[54] Thus man is a being made to live in and to live for community. His gifts are means to this end. (192–193)

Rawls's use of the word "community" was likely inspired by (the English translation of) Brunner's *Man in Revolt.* The other sources that Rawls cites in the thesis make less prominent use of it. The English translation of Nygren's *Agape and Eros,* for example, usually prefers the term "fellowship."

Rawls says less by way of defining or explaining the notion of community than we might expect in an essay in which he declares that "the problem of ethics" is one of establishing community (128). He comments that "community" is "a difficult word to define" (111). I am not confident that Rawls was thinking of the distinction between *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society) in German social theory, although his conception of community agrees with standard

54. Brunner, *Man in Revolt,* p. 74.

conceptions of *Gemeinschaft* in signifying an association that is valued by its members for its own sake and not merely for its service to self-interest (189, 229). In stark contrast to Rawls's later work, the senior thesis says virtually nothing about *institutions* that might structure community. We might see a foreshadowing of a main theme of his later political philosophy in a comment on the traditional Christian doctrine of the *equality* of the three persons of the divine Trinity: he says they are "each equal with the other because that perfect community is bound by that perfect love and faith, and love seeks equality with the person to whom its givenness is directed" (207).[55]

Perhaps the best indication of what sort of personal relationship, or system of personal relationships, Rawls has in mind in speaking of community is to be found in his account of Christian love (250–252). Love is "giving," not self-seeking (see also 186). "There is . . . affection in love." More than that, "love is an intense and full personal contact," which involves "the very center of the spirit" rather than "the border of the person." It is directed toward the other person, but completes the personality or self of the lover. It is not egotistic, and thus is not interested in obtaining any sort of superiority in relation to other persons.

Other characteristics of community as Rawls understands it are that "community involves responsibility and obligations," and trust rather than fear and suspicion (249, 229). He holds that community cannot be based on merit, and indeed that an interest in merit is a barrier to community (229–230, 241)—a point that I will discuss more fully in section 7. He emphasizes that community is characterized by "openness," and by communication or mutual revelation of feelings and thoughts (250, 153–155). His connection of commu-

55. That love seeks equality with the beloved is a central idea of the second chapter of Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments,* which Rawls cites at this point.

nity with communication is shared with Brunner, whom he cites as his source for the thought that "speech is something for community" (155). Brunner speaks of speech as "reason-in-community."[56]

In excluding egotism and emphasizing communication, Rawls's conception of community also has something in common with the conception of the good or right relational situation, which holds a corresponding place in Leon's scheme of things. Leon says,

> The right situation is . . . made up of personal relationships . . . such that in them these persons seek and maintain neither mutual separation nor mutual identification, no form of conquest, but at-oneness in distinction, cooperation through complementation, harmony through diversity, communication without fusion or confusion.

And the last words of his book describe "the development of free personalities living and growing and having their being in that free, full and intimate communication with each other in which is embodied Goodness."[57]

A significant aspect of Leon's statements just quoted is their emphasis on the "at-oneness in distinction" of "free personalities." A similar emphasis is present in Rawls's senior thesis, and it is extremely important for a sound understanding of that document in relation to the popular contrast between individualism and communitarianism. The word "individualism" is used a number of times in the thesis, always as something that Rawls is against (e.g., 227, 246). It is explicitly connected with sin (230), and contrasted with "communal thinking" (108). The word "communitarianism" does not occur in the thesis.

Clearly there is nothing that Rawls commends more highly in the thesis than community. And it is an explicit and emphatic doctrine of the thesis that "unless we have community we do not have personal-

56. Brunner, *Man in Revolt,* pp. 176–177.
57. Leon, *The Ethics of Power,* pp. 282, 309.

ity. Individuals become persons insofar as they live in community" (112). This is something affirmed by many who regard themselves as communitarians, and it is often regarded as a communitarian doctrine. Rawls does not really argue for it, nor does he cite a source for it. It could have been inspired by Kierkegaard's claim that "the measure for the self is always that in the face of which it is a self."[58] But here again I think the likeliest source is Brunner, who says, "I am not man at all apart from others. I am not 'I' apart from the 'Thou'," and "man can only be fully 'himself' when he lives in love."[59] This flows from Brunner's interpretation of the idea of the human person as an image of God, which Rawls adopts. In contrast with the majority of traditional accounts of this idea, which identify the image of God in us with our rationality, Brunner identifies it with our capacity, and divinely ordained destiny, for personal relationship—responsible, broadly moral relationship above all with God, but also with each other.[60]

However, Rawls also affirms that "all persons are individuals, that is, separate and distinct units," and "unless we have personality, we do not have community" (111–112). Like Leon, he explicitly refuses to regard the values of community and personality as opposed to each other. He says,

> Likewise mistaken are the fears of those who, in wanting to preserve the independence of the person apart from the community, repudiate the person's necessary dependence on community. They fail to see that a person is not a person apart from community and also that true com-

58. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death,* trans. Walter Lowrie (published with Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), p. 210. *The Sickness unto Death* is explicitly cited in the senior thesis: at 244 for an idea that is clearly Kierkegaard's, and at 208 for a thought that features "aloneness" where Kierkegaard evidently had despair in mind.

59. Brunner, *Man in Revolt,* pp. 140, 291.

60. Ibid., pp. 91–113. Rawls's appropriation of Brunner's view is evident at 192–193, 206; see also 202, 205.

> munity does not absorb the individual but rather makes his personality possible. True community, meaning one integrated in faith under God, does not dissolve the person, but sustains him. (127)

The senior thesis does not speak of a good of the community as a whole to which individual interests must be sacrificed—nor even of principles of justice or right for a community as constraining conceptions of individuals' good, as in Rawls's later theory of justice. To be sure, if such thoughts of sacrifice or constraint did not seem necessary to the younger Rawls, that could be due chiefly to the dominance of aspirations for community in his conception of appropriate aspirations for individual lives. More deeply significant, therefore, in relation to present-day debates about individualism and communitarianism may be the absence from the senior thesis of any thought that ideals of individual autonomy should be regarded with suspicion, out of deference to the *authority* of a community's institutions or traditions.

These points reflect a tendency in Rawls's senior thesis to describe community in terms of person-to-person relations rather than in more holistic terms. A similar tendency is present in Brunner, whose discussion of "the individual and the community" surely influenced Rawls. They both could be described as having, in a sense, an "individualistic" conception of community. Brunner, moreover, is emphatic in affirming a positive rather than a negative relation between individual autonomy and community. "True independence [can] be developed," he says, only in the right sort of community, which for him as for the young Rawls is one that lives in contact with God. And "love is free self-positing in perceiving the claim of God which meets us in the other." The target of Brunner's fiercest polemic in his discussion of community is "collectivism," which he describes as a misunderstanding of "the destiny for community," a "perversion" which subordinates "personal being" to what should have been merely means to personal life. Such "means" include "the associations of civi-

lization"; the culture and institutions which should have served personal life; the State; and even, or especially, "the collective power of the Church."[61] Writing in German in 1937, Brunner undoubtedly had Nazism in mind in this polemic (but not only Nazism). I see no reason in Rawls's senior thesis to doubt that he was thoroughly in sympathy with Brunner's attack on collectivism (though his own criticisms of Nazism there are rooted in the rejection of egotism, and thus more in line with Leon's arguments than with Brunner's).

It seems fair to say, on the whole, that in his senior thesis Rawls values both individuality and community very highly, and the same is true of his mature writings, as is argued in the Introduction to the present volume. In the thesis, and especially in the later theory of justice, themes of individuality and community are interwoven in complex and subtle ways. If we are going to speak of Rawls as an "individualist" or a "communitarian" at all, I think it would be most accurate to use those terms in a sense in which he is both an individualist and a communitarian. That applies in similar, though not identical, ways to both his senior thesis and his later theories of justice and political liberalism.

6. Sin and Egotism

Rawls defines sin as "the repudiation and negation of community." It is plausible to suppose that in this he is following Brunner, who says,

> The sin of Adam is the destruction of communion with God . . . ; it is that state of 'being against God' which also means 'being against one another.' . . . As we know ourselves in Christ . . . as the community of the elect, so we perceive in Him also sin as the opposition to the electing Word and the dissolution of this community intended and prepared in the fact of election.[62]

61. Brunner, *Man in Revolt,* pp. 292–295.
62. Ibid., p. 141.

Brunner's formulations in this passage are more theological than the definition I have quoted from Rawls, but Rawls supports his definition with theological ideas similar to Brunner's. Given that "'sin' is a word which we use solely in relation to God," Rawls asks, "Why use the word 'sin'?" He devotes several paragraphs to answering this question. "The repudiation of another, the negation of community," he argues, "is therefore repudiation of God as well. Implied in the abuse of our neighbor, is sin against God," because of "the nexus-like character of personal relations." He connects God's participation in the nexus with the thought that "we are all related to God, by virtue of being persons in His image." Further theological arguments for Rawls's definition of sin are indicated in his statements that "egotism is sin because it is the negation and destruction of that spiritual community for which man was made," and "thus, repudiation of community is the repudiation of man's end and of his Creator" (204–205; see also 193).

In addition to his definition of sin, supported in the manner indicated above, Rawls's account of sin has two main parts. One is a vivid portrayal of "aloneness" as "the result of sin" for the sinner, in the third and final section of Chapter Four. The other, larger part is an argument for the view that moral evil or sin has its root mainly, or even solely in the spiritual part of a person—not in the "natural" part and its "appetitions" but in interests in personal relations, and specifically in egotism or pride. It is a rambling argument, extended through the first three sections of Chapter Two and the first two sections of Chapter Four. It is largely devoted to subsidiary arguments for three theses regarded as supporting the view.

In the first subsidiary argument Rawls addresses the view that physical appetites as such are morally bad, or something to be escaped. Rawls gives himself an easy victory over that view, which he presumably did not take seriously as a live option. He does this in the

first two sections of Chapter Two by marshaling evidence from the early "fathers" of the church for the thesis that Christianity historically supports the view that the human body and its physical appetites are good rather than bad. There is nothing new in Rawls's historical account in these sections, and he follows an interpretive line that was extremely influential in mid-twentieth-century Christian theology. Certainly the Christian theologies most widely regarded as orthodox have maintained that the human body is in principle a good creation of God, and that its normal and natural processes are in principle good too. This historical argument, at best, supports rejection only of quite extreme views. Even among orthodox church "fathers" one often meets quite negative or ambivalent attitudes toward physical appetites, as Rawls acknowledges to some extent. And most scholars writing today would be less ready than scholarship was half a century ago to let orthodoxy dominate the narrative.[63]

The alternative to his own view that Rawls, rightly, takes more seriously is a view typified by Aristotle. It sees physical appetites as necessary and appropriate for human life, if wisely governed by reason and ethical understanding, but also as taking, sometimes, the form of passions that threaten to overturn or prevent such wise self-government. In accordance with this view, the idea of a struggle of moral reason to dominate the passions and physical appetites has persistently played a major part in many streams of moral and spiritual thought. Rawls's other two subsidiary arguments are directed against this view, and they do not rest on an appeal to ecclesiastical authority. They are both concerned with the question, "Does the spirit pervert the flesh, or does the flesh pervert the spirit?" (148). Or to use Leon's terminology, which Rawls employs in parts of his discussion of sin, does egoistic

63. Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), is a splendid example of the more recent historical approach to this topic.

sin arise from more fundamental egotistic sin, or does egotistic sin arise from more fundamental egoistic sin? That is, does an excessive, selfish, or otherwise perverse interest in "processes" in individuals arise from a perverse (superiority-seeking) interest in personal relationships, or does the latter sort of sinful interest arise from the former sort?

Rawls quotes Leon as holding that "there is nothing in appetition itself to bring about egotism in any of its expressions," and Rawls heartily agrees (151; 183).[64] His argument that egotistic sin cannot be grounded in merely egoistic sin, found chiefly toward the end of the first section of Chapter Four, consists mainly of phenomenological argument for the distinctness of interests in personal relations (including those of superiority) from "appetitional" interests in individuals' life processes. If we accept its premises, such an argument might well persuade us that appetition cannot ground an interest in social superiority purely or mainly for its own sake, which is what both Leon and Rawls mean by "egotism." Rawls does not seriously address the hypothesis that apparently "egotistic" grasping for superiority in wealth or power, for example, might actually have purely or mainly instrumental motivation, being inspired by "egoistic" anxiety about the satisfaction of one's own life process needs. Such a hypothesis should have been recognized as a serious competitor, however, in the theological context in which Rawls was writing in 1942. It is suggested, for example, by Reinhold Niebuhr's account of sin in the first volume of *The Nature and Destiny of Man.* Niebuhr's was certainly the theological treatment of sin that was most discussed in America then, and Rawls explicitly drew on it.

Of the three subsidiary arguments, the most important to Rawls, I think, was the argument for a grounding of egoistic sin in egotistic

64. Citing Leon, *The Ethics of Power,* p. 158.

sin, which is found mainly in the third section of Chapter Two, and is reinforced in Chapter Four. The argument in Chapter Two proceeds by offering rather speculative psychological explanations of some imaginary or generic cases of sexual sins and gluttony and drunkenness, largely drawn from Niebuhr's attempts to explain apparently "sensual" sin as rooted in a deeper spiritual sin. Rawls explains sensual sins as manifestations of underlying pride or egotism. As he admits, these arguments are "superficial." Their largely anecdotal character (not to mention the largely fictional character of the anecdotes) renders them plainly insufficient to justify his sweeping conclusion that "sensuality, whenever it becomes sin, will be found to be completely interfused with those spiritual perversions and aspirations from which no man is free" (149–150). Nor does his similar use, in Chapter Four, of a fictional example of the greed of an egotistical capitalist provide support of a stronger sort for such a conclusion about the motivation of greed (194–195). We may well agree that many cases of greed, drunkenness, and sexual aggressiveness or insatiability have deeper roots in desires for social superiority, without being persuaded that all cases of those vices have a correct explanation of that sort. And Rawls provides no compelling argument for even the more cautious conclusion that although "it is conceivable that appetitions may lead to sin, . . . (a) such is not often the case, and (b) in any event the appetition itself is not evil, but rather the situation to which it leads" (152).

Misgivings about the thesis of the derivative character of egoistic sin may also be suggested by Rawls's argument for the distinctness of appetition from interests in personal relationships. In discussing the "pure" appetition of a cold and weary man for rest and warmth, he imagines him asking someone else to warm a cup of coffee for him, and comments that "other people can only enter into his consciousness as means to the achievement of the desired end. The other per-

sons do not enter as persons at all, but purely as means" (187). A Kantian might well think that a state of consciousness in which one regards other persons as means only and not as persons is already a sinful state, which could easily lead to immoral disregard of their interests and well-being, without any egotistic motive of competition.

Another problem, involving consistency, in Rawls's marginalization of egoism cuts close to the center of his account of the spiritual life. As we have seen, in the first section of Chapter Four Rawls rejects what he calls "the religious appetition" for God as a source of personal satisfaction. He classifies it as sin precisely because he sees it as an appetition and *not* a seeking for personal relationship, and therefore as depersonalizing one's relation to God. He does not suggest that this sin is rooted in an egotistic interest in social superiority. I imagine that Rawls would have agreed that such an explanation would implausibly trivialize the Augustinian type of piety that he has in view in his critique of religious appetition. His target here seems to be in his terms a fundamentally egoistic sin, and not an unimportant one.

Nonetheless, I believe that the desire to see both moral good and moral evil as rooted primarily in interests in social relations is deeply connected with central motives of Rawls's senior thesis, and indeed of his later work. This point can be developed in comparison with Niebuhr's account of sin. Niebuhr begins a chapter on the roots of sin by stating that "the uniqueness of the Biblical approach to the human problem lies in its subordination of the problem of finiteness to the problem of sin."[65] Rawls would not have been entirely wrong in seeing in this statement (which he had surely read) a commitment, similar to his own, to the priority of the ethical as an area of human con-

65. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man,* vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941), p. 178.

cern. There are important differences, however, in their views of both the nature and the priority of the problem of sin. In a nutshell, Niebuhr's conception of the nature of sin is more metaphysical than Rawls's, and not as thoroughly social; and the priority Niebuhr ascribes to the problem of sin is a priority on the moral and spiritual agenda and not a priority in explanation. He in fact holds that the problem of finiteness occasions and motivates sin at the deepest level.

The most fundamental sin, in Niebuhr's view, is refusal to accept our own finiteness. This is the "pride" that he has in mind when he says it is the predominant "biblical and Christian" view "that pride is more basic than sensuality and that the latter is, in some way, derived from the former."[66] This pride can take the form of trying to override one's social limits in competition with others; but it can equally take the form of an indiscriminate struggle for resources to prolong one's life, or of escaping from knowledge of one's finite self. It is thus not an essentially social pride, except insofar as it is rebellion in relation to God; and even that rebellion, as such, is not necessarily part of the proud person's intention, since the refusal to accept our own finiteness is a motive as accessible to atheists as to theists.

Rawls actually quotes Niebuhr as arguing, "Does the drunkard or the glutton merely press self-love to the limit and lose all control over himself by his effort to gratify a particular desire so unreservedly that its gratification comes in conflict with other desires? Or is lack of moderation an effort to escape from the self?"[67] But when Rawls tries to incorporate Niebuhr's argument into his own by paraphrase ("put in our terms," as he says), it becomes, "Does [sensuality] involve merely natural relations or does it include personal relations, and if

66. Ibid., p. 186.
67. Ibid., p. 233.

both are present, which is dominant?" (149). Escape from self has disappeared from the argument, and has been replaced by an interest in personal relations which is not part of the explanation quoted from Niebuhr.

The differences between Niebuhr and Rawls in the conception of sin are, I think, profound. Rawls offers one sharp criticism of Niebuhr, noting that Niebuhr

> wants to argue that man, being both bound and free, both limited and unlimited, is in a state of anxiety. Although anxiety is not sin, it is the precondition of sin. Man sins when by pride he tries to deny his contingency and when by sensuality he tries to escape from his own freedom. (191)[68]

Rawls disagrees in two ways with this account of the root of sin (in which Niebuhr was evidently inspired by Kierkegaard's book, *The Concept of Dread*).

The disagreement more emphasized in this context may involve more misunderstanding than real disagreement. Rawls regards Niebuhr's account as an instance of the "Manichean" effort to blame our sin on something external to ourselves. Instead, Rawls says, "We have to admit that the spirit simply corrupts itself. Personality depraves itself for no reason that can be found external to it." But Niebuhr largely agrees that the human spirit corrupts itself. "Sin posits itself," he says; and "the situation of finiteness and freedom would not lead to sin if sin were not already introduced into the situation. . . . For this reason even the knowledge of [sin's] inevitability does not extinguish the sense of responsibility."[69] And on the whole, Rawls seems largely to agree with Niebuhr about the inevitability of sin. He refers to "the apparent inevitable tendency" of the spirit to deprave itself, and com-

68. Citing ibid., pp. 182–186.
69. Ibid., pp. 181, 254.

ments that "the beginning of sin must be conceived as taking place in this unfathomable 'causeless' way." That is substantially Niebuhr's view (191).

It is also part of Rawls's objection to Niebuhr, however, that far from being part of the explanation of sin, "anxiety is the result of sin. It is the state of the sinner in the cosmos he creates for himself, namely, the cosmos of aloneness." This is a deep disagreement. For Rawls, hell is aloneness—so to speak. He does not speak of hell in his own voice, but quotes lines from T. S. Eliot that speak of "active shapes of hell" as less fearsome than "emptiness, absence, separation from God" (191, 208). This is a passionate personal conviction for Rawls, as his portrayal of aloneness makes clear. I think it is fair to say that the senior thesis expresses a view in which our nature is most fully expressed in preferences regarding personal relations, and he finds it difficult to believe that such preferences would be grounded in even deeper, less social, more metaphysical or physical concerns regarding our finitude or, more concretely, regarding death and material insufficiency.

That remains true to a large extent of Rawls's mature work as well. Certainly *A Theory of Justice* manifests a serious respect for reasonable economic sufficiency as a necessary condition of a well-ordered society. But Rawls still expects those who enjoy a good and just social and political system to satisfice easily regarding non-social goods. This is clearly expressed at the end of his career, in *The Law of Peoples,* in his argument that liberal peoples will be "satisfied peoples," and, being freed from temptations of social superiority-seeking by the just internal structure of their societies, they will "have nothing to go to war about."[70]

70. John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 47.

This argument is connected with one of the most striking and important differences between Rawls's view of sin and Niebuhr's. Niebuhr's views on the relation of sensuality to pride are not particularly distinctive, and his account of the root of sin, or inescapable temptation, in anxiety is largely borrowed from Kierkegaard. What is most characteristic about Niebuhr in this area, and most strongly connected with the "Christian realism" that he championed in his role as one of the most influential political thinkers in mid-twentieth-century America, is his belief in the *persistence* of sin. "There is," he declares, "no historical development which gradually eliminates those sinful corruptions of brotherhood which stand in contradiction to the law of love."[71]

Both at an individual and at a sociopolitical level Niebuhr sees real possibilities of important victories over sin, but no possibility of eliminating sin as a terrible problem. At an individual level, he says that "it is logical to assume that when man has become aware of the character of his self-love and of its incompatibility with the divine will, this very awareness would break its power." The account of conversion in Rawls's senior thesis can easily be read as an account of just such a breaking of the power of sin. Niebuhr thinks that "this logic is at least partially validated by experience. Repentance does initiate a new life." But he does not believe that any conversion observable in history comes even close to eliminating sin from a person's life. "The sad experiences of Christian history show how human pride and spiritual arrogance rise to new heights precisely at the point where the claims of sanctity are made without due qualification."[72]

At the collective level Niebuhr says, on the one hand, that there is "no social or political problem in which men do not face new possi-

71. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man,* vol. 2 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1943), p. 96.

72. Ibid., pp. 121–122.

bilities of the good and the obligation to realize them." He insists there are approximations to justice that are achievable and worth working for. Niebuhr would surely have criticized Rawls's senior thesis as expecting too much from individual conversion and too little from reformation of institutions. On the other hand, he says, "No human community is . . . a simple construction of conscience or reason. All communities . . . are governed by power." At the heart of democracy he sees conflict, limited so as not to result in anarchy or violence. He says, "It is the highest achievement of democratic societies that they embody the principle of resistance to government within the principle of government itself."[73]

The difference between Niebuhr's hopes for a democratic political order and those of the older Rawls is undeniable, even if it is to some extent a difference of tone and emphasis. It is associated with a difference in their choice of political problems to write about. In the first chapter of *A Theory of Justice,* explaining his decision to focus on ideal theory and on cases of "full compliance" with principles of justice, Rawls acknowledges that "the problems of partial compliance theory are the pressing and urgent matters. These are the things that we are faced with in everyday life." He argues for "beginning with ideal theory" as offering the best prospects for a "systematic grasp of these more pressing problems."[74] Niebuhr's voluminous writings on politics, on the other hand, focus largely on non-ideal situations. This may reflect to some extent his greater personal engagement with

73. Ibid., pp. 207, 257, 268. The second volume of Niebuhr's work was first published in January 1943, the month after Rawls submitted his senior thesis; but Niebuhr's views about the permanence of sin in politics were already well known, in an even more pessimistic form, from his earlier book, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932). See Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr,* pp. 212–214.

74. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice,* p. 8.

practical (and partisan) politics. But Niebuhr's more pessimistic view of the prospects for ideally just political systems doubtless led him to see the problems of moral wisdom in dealing with non-ideal situations as even more urgent, and more difficult, than they seemed to Rawls.[75]

These differences are deeply connected with the disagreement between Niebuhr and the younger Rawls regarding the root of sin. The problem of finiteness, in which Niebuhr sees the deepest temptation to sin, is not going away. It is not a problem that we could *solve,* individually or collectively. Nor does Niebuhr think that God is going to take the problem away at any time in human history. Our moral and spiritual task, in Niebuhr's view, is not to solve this problem but to learn to live with it. He does not think we should learn to be *satisfied* with the best attainable spiritual and political conditions. On the contrary, he believes we should constantly subject such conditions to criticism by reference to a standard of transcendent goodness (that is, a standard of sacrificial love). But he also regards the belief that we might actually realize the ideal as a dangerous delusion.

The problem of egotism, in which Rawls saw the root of sin, seems more amenable at least than the problem of finiteness to individual and social moral improvement. And Rawls might well think this an advantage in providing a basis for the hopefulness that he and Niebuhr agree is necessary for moral and political effort. I think the basis of hopefulness is indeed one of the most difficult points in Niebuhr's thought. To the extent that Niebuhr thinks that anxiety about our finitude can be purged of "the tendency toward sinful self-assertion," it is through "faith in the ultimate security of God's love." How does God's love address the source of the anxiety? Niebuhr speaks, for instance, of a hope that "eternity will fulfill and not annul the richness

75. See, e.g., Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man,* vol. 2, p. 88.

and variety which the temporal process has elaborated." But he speaks vaguely about such things, and is less ready than Rawls was in his senior thesis to affirm in literal terms the traditional Christian hopes of a future life beyond the vicissitudes of history.[76] On the other hand, Niebuhr would surely say that his account of the root of sin is more realistic than Rawls's. In particular, he might well think it an advantage of his account, an aspect of its realism, that it does not assign a uniquely fundamental motivational role to interests in personal relations, and therefore gives him no reason to deny that we remain capable of selfishness in regard to economic goods quite independently of competitive interests in social relations.

7. Conversion and the Rejection of Merit

The section on conversion (Chapter Five, section III) is perhaps the most original and interesting in the whole senior thesis. Rawls himself affirms emphatically the centrality of conversion for Christian thought. He says, "It is undoubtedly true that a full understanding of conversion is absolutely essential for the understanding of Christianity. . . . conversion is crucial because its character constitutes the womb of Christian theology. It is in this experience that Revelation, Sin, and Faith achieve their full meaning and contrast." He sees in it "the true source of the doctrine[s] of election" and creation and, more generally, of "the true conception of God" (233, 242).

The emphasis on conversion is characteristic of some traditions in Protestantism. And Rawls's account of "the Word of God break[ing] into the closedness of sin" in the event of conversion is classically Protestant (233). Strikingly personal, however, and I believe quite original, is Rawls's account of the phenomenology of conversion, in terms of the "flatness" of "lying in exposure before the Word of God"

76. Ibid., vol. 1, p. 183; vol. 2, p. 295. See also Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr,* p. 215.

(233–237). The experience is outwardly undramatic, inwardly transforming. Rawls goes so far as to say, "Sin cannot help but be destroyed before the grace of the Word. . . . The in-coming of the Word has so exposed the sins of the self that they have no longer a hiding place" (239).

This seems to affirm an extirpation of sin more radical than Niebuhr would have asserted without emphatic qualifications. Brunner too holds that conversion from sin is never completed in this life: "The eggshells of the old nature still cling to [the person who has responded to God in faith] as something which has been overcome, but still also as something which has to be overcome again and again."[77] Rawls himself would perhaps have wished, on further reflection, to qualify his claims of efficacy for conversion, but his discussion in the senior thesis evinces little sense of a need to do so. A note of caution appears when he says that as a result of "the experience of [God's] Word . . . we act, *or try to,* according to the analogy of His grace" (249; italics added). But he states flatly, in the same context, that the converted sinner "now leads his life in right relations to others. . . . Therefore there grow from the conversion experience those actions which restore and reconstruct community. Thus obligations are now fulfilled" (248).

The account of conversion is a central node in an argument and theoretical structure that integrates much of the contents of the thesis. The following points (at least) are linked here.

(1) The fundamental sin, which closes us off from community, is egotism (that is, the sin of pride, more or less—or perhaps, more fundamentally, lust for social position).

(2) Although the conversion which is required for salvation is depressing in some ways, it is not pain that is crucial in it, but the

77. Brunner, *Man in Revolt,* p. 488.

crumbling of egotism "into the flatness of exposure" (238), without histrionics.

(3) In this (and even before this, in the hearing of God's Word) the conversion is an encounter with the generosity, the gently judging love and mercy of God. "It is mercy and not wrath which is the most powerful condemnation of all" (239). It is the perception of the contrast between God's love and the sinner's own egotism that precipitates the dissolution or crumbling of the egotism. The idea that it is only in the revelation of God's mercy that we can truly recognize our sin was certainly current in Protestant theology in the 1930s,[78] but Rawls develops it with uncommon richness and vigor in the thesis (237–242).

(4) Rawls's account of conversion is deeply connected with the denial that God is angry or punitive. This connection is reflected in the emotional flatness he ascribes to conversion, and in the claim that it is God's *mercy* that undoes our sin. "Fear," says Rawls, citing William Temple, "is the most self-centering of all the emotions." Because it gives rise to fear, the belief (false, according to Rawls) that God is angry is a barrier to faith, and leads to a further barrier that Rawls calls "the bargain basis" of interpersonal relationships. Bargaining, he says, is "a method used by the sinner to bind the 'other' and to protect his own self," and it "springs from fear." This is true, as Rawls points out, of the social contract as Hobbes conceived of it; but it cannot result in genuine community, which must be based on mutual trust rather than distrust. Similarly in religion, distrust of God motivates bargaining with God and is the source of "any 'merit' scheme of salvation" (227–230).

(5) The senior thesis proposes two reasons for rejecting *merit* as a

78. This idea is expressed succinctly, for instance, in Emil Brunner's christological book, *The Mediator: A Study of the Central Doctrine of the Christian Faith,* trans. Olive Wyon (New York: Macmillan, 1934), p. 602.

basis for salvation, or indeed as an object of any legitimate interest whatever. Both reasons are connected with the conversion experience. One is that with the crumbling of egotism, "The human person recognizes that every thing he has received is a gift and that he has nothing that had not been given to him." This is partly a matter of what parents, friends, and "community" have given him; but there are also "the land" and "nature," and "he can now see that the totality of what he has possessed and enjoyed has been the gift of God" (238–240).

(6) The other reason for rejecting merit is that "achieving good deeds as merits serves only the demon of spiritual pride," and that therefore "merit is beside the point [indeed counter-productive] in establishing community" (241, 230). Merit is viewed here as a sort of social superiority. And if interest in social superiority of any sort is egotism, and conversion is in large and essential part a turning away from egotism, then conversion involves a turning away from interest in merit.

Rawls identifies "a lack of faith and trust," issuing in a desire "to flaunt some merit before the decisions of the divine election," as "the real core of Pelagian falsity" (229). This is not proposed, I take it, as exegesis of Pelagius, but as Rawls's own view of what is most deeply wrong with views that have been called Pelagian. It is an authentic expression of the Pauline theme of salvation by grace alone through faith which was central to the theologies of Augustine and Luther, and it is developed by Rawls in what seems to me an original and interesting way. That "God . . . does not want merit that He can reward" (241) is not stated in the letters of Paul in the New Testament, but it articulates an idea that can plausibly be seen as motivating such passages as Romans 10:3-4.

In his critique of the interest in merit Rawls has more in common with Leon, among his contemporary sources, than with the more traditionally theological writers Brunner and Niebuhr. That the interest

in merit is an expression of egotism is an idea extensively developed by Leon. In fact, Leon's discussion provides an explanation of a curious extension of the idea that emerges in Rawls's thesis only in an occasional turn of phrase. Rawls says, "Egotism seeks to set the 'thou' below itself, to turn the 'thou' into an admirer or into an object of admiration" (194; see also 203). It is easy to see how turning the "thou" into an admirer would be setting the "thou" below oneself, but by the same token we might think that turning the "thou" into an object of admiration would be setting the "thou" *above* oneself—setting the "thou" on a pedestal, as we say. Rawls offers no explanation on this point, but Leon has a lot to say about it. He explains admiration of another as a manifestation of a covert egotism exalting itself by "identification" with the admired other. He argues further that admiration is incompatible with community because it turns away from the individuality of the other person to "generic attributes" which are abstractions from the individual.[79] He says that

> there can be no intimacy with abstractions (qualities, attributes), which are the objects of valuation. Nor is there intimacy with persons whom we esteem, respect, honour, praise, admire, or otherwise laud (that is, we laud their attributes or "characters").[80]

Leon carries this idea to a point that is contrary to the traditions and practices of virtually all the theistic religions: he objects to admiring and praising God. He asks, "Does the moral or objective life exclude, then, worshipping, awe, reverence, veneration, all of which have been called laudatory attitudes?" He answers,

> It only does not exclude that at-oneness with, and inspiration from, God experienced as Goodness and Love, which . . . is certainly not de-

79. Leon, *The Ethics of Power,* pp. 196–201; see also pp. 98–99.
80. Ibid., p. 201.

> scribable nor described by the terms 'awe,' 'worship,' 'reverence,' 'veneration,' 'the sense of the numinous,' as these are ordinarily used.

In a note, Leon adds that he "is prepared to be judged and sent to the stake" for "the assertion that all religion which centres around the notions of power, absoluteness, and supremacy is sheer egotism."[81]

I do not believe the young Rawls had any intention of following Leon in this rejection of worship. Considered in isolation, Rawls's statement, "God's call is not a call to praise, but a call to repentance," might perhaps be read in such a sense. In its context, however, its sense is pretty clearly that we are not to *be* praised, but to repent. "To make God's motive His own honor is to make Him into an egotist," Rawls says; and he objects to "imagin[ing] God as a glorified egotist." But though God is not "seeking His own glory," still "His community will manifest His glory." And in the final paragraph of the senior thesis, the joyous consummation of community is envisaged as one in which "all the creatures of God will kneel at His feet" (242, 246, 227, 252).

As pointed out in the Introduction to the present volume, the rejection of merit is a point of "particularly striking continuity between the thesis and Rawls's later views." It is one of the distinctive, and controversial, features of Rawls's theory of justice that it does not treat either reward of merit or punishment of demerit as a fundamental requirement of justice. This feature of the theory is supported by arguments that the sources of moral merit depend on advantages that were not earned and that no one individual deserved any more than anyone else. These arguments have much in common with the argument, in the senior thesis, that every advantage any one of us may have enjoyed "has been the gift of God." The less essentially theological argument of the senior thesis, that the interest in merit is inimical to community, as an egotistic interest in social superiority, is not fea-

81. Ibid., pp. 196–197.

tured in *A Theory of Justice,* perhaps because it is less directly and obviously connected with ideas of fairness and deserving.

In *A Theory of Justice,* to be sure, the argument against desert is not presented in theological terms, but in terms of a natural lottery, the idea of being fortunate or favored by nature.[82] Rawls certainly had reason enough in his conception of the nature and aims of political theory to avoid arguing in theological terms in his theory of justice. But he may also have been motivated by a personal unwillingness to "interpret history as expressing God's will," as he put it decades later in "On My Religion" (263).

I doubt, however, that seeing everything as a gift of God is simply superfluous as a support for the rejection of meritarian perfectionism. It is not obvious that the merely negative consideration that one's acquisition of any perfection is never wholly one's own doing gets a strong grip on perfectionist thinking. For the perfectionist claims that Rawls most wishes to oppose are typically seen by perfectionists as grounded in the actual or possible *possession* of perfections, rather than in any *earning* of a reward by the mode of acquisition of the perfections. Seeing everything as a gift of God provides a positive motive of gratitude for giving back to God by giving to the community that God is establishing.

8. God and Revelation

The way in which Rawls speaks of God in his senior thesis gives no reason to doubt the accuracy of his recollection, in "On My Religion," that he was "a believing orthodox Episcopalian Christian" at the time he wrote the thesis (261). No doctrine of God is systematically developed in the thesis; but many fragments of a conception of God emerge in passing comments, and they are mostly quite orthodox

82. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice,* §§17 and 48, and p. 64.

from a traditional point of view. The doctrine of Creation is mentioned as having its source, as noted above, in the experience of conversion. It is explained, very briefly, as meaning "primarily . . . first, that man is dependent on God, and second, that everything is a gift of God" (242). Such creating surely requires an extremely powerful God, and Rawls in fact affirms divine omnipotence, in the biblical formulation "all things are possible with God" (252).[83] The orthodox affirmation that "God is . . . Three Persons in One, each equal with the other" is made in the course of discussing human community (206; see also 193). The linking claim that "God is communal," however, fits some traditions of Christian orthodoxy better than others.

A modernizing aspect of the conception of God that emerges in the senior thesis is the rejection of the doctrine of divine immutability, which, as Rawls suggests, has roots that are more philosophical than biblical (246). This is not a surprising position to take. The changelessness of God, though almost universally affirmed in medieval and early modern theology, was widely (but by no means universally) denied in twentieth-century theology. Rawls does not articulate any positive theory of God's relation to time and change.

More interesting, perhaps, is the question of the *neo*-orthodoxy of Rawls's conception of God. He shows little of Barth's zealous emphasis on the transcendence and "otherness" of God. On at least two distinctive points, however—the doctrine of election and the conception of God's self-revelation—Rawls's account of God shows the influence of neo-orthodox theologians—in particular, of Brunner.

(1) One of the aspects of a Protestant conception of God that Rawls discusses most extensively in his thesis is the doctrine of *election*—that is, the belief that God elects or chooses those who are the objects of God's redemptive activity. Rawls states that he accepts "the New

83. Mark 10:27; compare Luke 1:37; Genesis 18:14.

Testament concept of election . . . in its full sense." But he wants to "avoid . . . harsh predestinarian conclusions," which he associates with Augustine and Aquinas, but which certainly can be associated also with Luther and Calvin. This aspiration, to retain a doctrine of divine election but without a harsh doctrine of predestination, can be found in modern theology at least as early as the archetypal liberal theologian Schleiermacher, and hence is not distinctively neo-orthodox; but it was certainly shared by Barth and Brunner. The five-hundred-page chapter in which Barth tries to accomplish this ambition is one of the most excitingly innovative parts of his *Church Dogmatics.* But it is Brunner's two-page treatment that Rawls would have read, and Rawls has more to say about election than he would have found there.[84]

Rawls's first suggestion for avoiding the harsh conclusions is that the conception of God as changeless should be abandoned. Presumably his thought, in connecting this proposal to issues of predestination, is that if God's plans can change over the course of time, then God's election of persons can reflect changing circumstances and contingent choices of those persons. His main suggestion, however, is that a theology of election should reject "radical individualism" and the misunderstanding of election as intended "to save an isolated person here and there." Rawls's preferred alternative is that God's electing has a communal rather than an individualistic purpose; it is intended "to restore and to gather together a community of His created ones." "The elect are chosen to re-establish the community." Their own conversion is the first step in the re-establishment of community, which continues through their telling others the "good news." God's electing the apostle Paul, for example, means that "he is chosen

84. See Brunner, *Man in Revolt,* pp. 76–78; Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics,* vol. 2, part 2, trans. G. W. Bromiley et al. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957), pp. 3–506; first published in German in 1942.

to preach the Word; God will use him as a means for further election" (244–247).

How does this constitute an alternative to harsh predestinarian doctrines? Rawls does not address that question as clearly as one might wish, but I believe that in his account it is the *purpose* of God's electing that is communal rather than individualistic. He does not deny that persons are called individually, and at different times, into the community by conversion. His view differs from a predestinarian view of election, I take it, in that he sees God's election of a person not as choosing that person, rather than others, for eventual salvation, but rather as choosing that person for a role in the establishment of the community, for membership and service in it at a particular time.

It is hard to believe that these strategies are really sufficient for Rawls to avoid the harsh implications of more traditional doctrines of election. Given his argument that we are not in a position to claim merit or credit for any moral attributes we may have, it seems that the harshness, and indeed the unfairness, will remain in his theology unless he denies the doctrine of hell, which would exclude some individuals forever from membership in God's community. It is not the divine determinism, but the belief in hell or damnation, which is the main source of moral offensiveness in the doctrine of election, as was already clearly recognized by Schleiermacher.[85] Barth and Brunner did not reject the doctrine of hell as unequivocally as Schleiermacher, though I think it is fair to say that they invite their readers to *hope* for

85. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith,* pp. 536–560 (§§117–120) and pp. 720–722; and especially *Über die Lehre von der Erwählung,* in Schleiermacher, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe,* series I, vol. 10 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1990). Much of what Rawls affirms positively about election can already be found in Schleiermacher.

universal salvation.[86] Others were going farther in the 1930s. In a commentary cited (though not on this point) in Rawls's thesis, C. H. Dodd advocates an unequivocally universalist reading of the last part of chapter 11 of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans.[87] Rawls is perhaps not equivocal, but not fully explicit on the point either, in his senior thesis; but some statements in the thesis seem to indicate a belief that all people will eventually be saved. He says, for instance, that those who have already been elected and restored "are to gather together with [God's] aid *all* those who still remain behind, and are to help bring the *totality* of the creation before Him." In the end, "The *whole* creation will be bound together and *all* the creatures of God will kneel at His feet. This community joining *all* together under God is the goal towards which God moves His creation" (252; italics added).

(2) In the views that Rawls expresses in his senior thesis about how God can be known we find an emphasis on revelation, conceived as God's personal self-disclosure in communicative action, and a corresponding disparagement of "natural theology." These are typical neo-orthodox themes, though they appear, for the most part, in much less polemical contexts in Rawls's thesis than in the work of the leading neo-orthodox theologians. Rawls's conception of revelation manifests the personalism that animates the main arguments of his thesis, and in which he is particularly close to Brunner.

"It is doubtful," Rawls says, "whether natural theology can tell us

86. Barth, *Church Dogmatics,* vol. 2, part 2, e.g., pp. 477, 496–497, 506. Brunner is vague on the crucial point in *Man in Revolt,* pp. 470–477. He is not vague at all, but crisply and frankly inconsistent, in *The Christian Doctrine of the Church, Faith, and the Consummation* (the third volume of his *Dogmatics*), trans. David Cairns (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), pp. 415–424, which was written long after Rawls finished his senior thesis.

87. C. H. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1932), ad loc.

very much" (111). He may be making some allowance for skepticism about philosophical arguments for theism here and when he says such things as

> Reason cannot tell us whether God is Creator, Eternal, all-powerful and so forth. But He himself can tell us. . . . The nature of God, insofar as it is intelligible to us, is not discovered by playing with metaphysical categories, but is rather presented to us unmistakably in the experience of His Word. (242–243)

It seems fair to say that in youth, as later in life, Rawls did not wish to rest his most cherished convictions on metaphysical arguments.

Most often in his senior thesis, however, the disparagement of natural theology, and the insistence on revelation, are grounded in the personal character of the knowledge of God to which he aspires. "Personal relations proceed on the basis of mutual revelation. . . . Personal relations require this self-revelatory action, else no personal contact can be established" (117–118). This applies to God too. "Natural theology cannot tell us of God's person. His personality must be revealed by Him" (124). Rawls explains this point very vividly:

> Imagine the person who seeks to re-establish community and who receives no response from the "other." Suppose that throughout all our efforts the "other" remains silent and makes no answer, then what can we do? If the other person makes no disclosure on his own part, then our efforts are certain to fail. . . . Natural theology is helpless before the personality of God. Why? Because all knowledge of other persons is knowledge given to us by them. Personal knowledge is revealed knowledge. (224)

Rawls declares that in the experience of conversion "the Word of God breaks into the closedness of sin and bends back its walls." This expresses a dynamic view of God's Word. That word is not just a written text; it is also something preached by human beings who have al-

ready heard it. But more than that, the Word of God is a divine action revealing God to us, which can even constitute God's being knowably present to us at a particular time. As Rawls says in this context, "Revelation is God's action; it is His coming to us and speaking to us; it is His presence bursting into the aloneness of sin." Similarly, "it is the Word of God Himself speaking to us which destroys sin and which converts the inner spirit and immediately sets it open to and into community" (233, 248).

These statements express a characteristically neo-orthodox conception of revelation and God's Word. It offered the neo-orthodox theologians ways of avoiding "fundamentalist" biblical literalism, although Rawls does not appeal to it for that purpose. He seems to have met most of the main points of this view in Brunner, including the points that the Word of God is preached as well as written, that "God Himself actually speaks to *us,*" and that "Knowledge of a person is possible only through revelation, and he reveals himself through his word."[88] Rawls's formulations also have something in common with Barth's, although it seems unlikely that he had read Barth.[89]

In Barth and Brunner the doctrine of revelation has an extremely christocentric form. They both emphasize that Jesus Christ, in person, is the primary form of the Word of God. Rawls does affirm God's incarnation in Jesus as an important part of God's self-revelation, but he does not insist on its primacy. He can easily be read as assigning a fully coordinate role to God's presence with us as Holy Spirit. Because of the personal nature of revelation, Rawls says, "God Himself had to come in His own person." But he goes on to explain, "First He comes

88. Brunner, *Man in Revolt,* p. 67; *The Theology of Crisis,* p. 32. The latter passage is cited by Rawls (233).

89. See the now classic treatment in Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics,* vol. 1, part 1, trans. G. W. Bromiley, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), §§4 and 5; first published in German in 1932, and in English in 1936.

in His own person as Christ Jesus, converting many to faith. Then by His own presence as the Holy Spirit after the resurrection of His Son He elects apostles to spread the 'good news'" (124–125). Similarly, Rawls says that "the Gospels represent the Word; Christ is the Revelation of the Word, and the Cross is the symbol of the Word"—but he places the "climax" of the converting activity of the Word in the New Testament in the Acts of the Apostles, with no suggestion that Christ is the agent there (233–234). This is in keeping with the general lack of emphasis on christology in the senior thesis, and it is perhaps the least neo-orthodox feature of Rawls's treatment of revelation there.

One of the most intriguing things that Rawls says in the senior thesis about God is best read, I believe, as an attempt to link his polemic against "naturalism" with his conception of revelation. He claims that "the extended natural cosmos excludes . . . God, although it may use His name" (120). If the "extended natural cosmos" is the universe of all the things with which we are related, or try to be related, impersonally, the claim should mean that if we try to be related to something impersonally (for instance, by way of appetition for it) that thing must not be God, even if we call it God.

This is puzzling. It says more (and in a way, perhaps, less) than the claim that it is wrong, a sin, to try to be related impersonally to God. If someone treats you as if you were not a person, although you are in fact a (human) person, that does not keep you from being the one who is treated in that way. If it did, the treatment would not be so offensive to you. Similarly, when Rawls says that "one of the forms of sin . . . is to turn a personal relation into a natural relation, and *to do this misdeed in relation to God* is surely sin" (182; italics added), he seems to imply that it can after all be God whom one treats impersonally. It is not hard to see why Rawls would think it is a sin to treat God as a non-person, but why would he think it is simply impossible to do so?

There is an obvious analogy between Rawls's claim that "the extended natural cosmos" excludes God and Martin Buber's characterization of God as "the eternal Thou . . . the Thou that by its nature cannot become It"—a claim from which it seems to follow that God does not exist in the world of It.[90] Buber's claim is grounded in a theory of I-Thou and I-It relations that includes a richly and subtly developed epistemological and semantical framework. One key point for understanding his claim, I believe, is that he thinks that we cannot have experience *(Erfahrung)* of God, in what I take to be a Kantian sense. In the world of *Erfahrung,* so to speak, there is no God. A second key point is that Buber believes that we can nonetheless *encounter* God, in an I-Thou mode; such an encounter gives us a sort of cognitive access to God, and is in a broader sense an experience (an *Erlebnis* but not an *Erfahrung,* in Buber's usual terminology). Rawls had probably not read Buber, but Brunner certainly had; and though they do not seem to presuppose a Kantian framework in their discussions of revelation, they do both affirm something very close to the second Buberian point.

I take that as a clue to the motivation of Rawls's puzzling claim. Its intended point, I suggest, is epistemological rather than metaphysical. Rawls is motivated here by a view about revelation that he shares with Brunner. Rawls is prepared to grant that traditional arguments of natural theology "can tell us perhaps that [God] is intelligent, that He is powerful and that He is eternal." But if we have only such impersonal arguments, "God still remains the great unknown," because it is a divine *person* that Rawls really wants to know, and "natural theology is helpless before the personality of God." That is because "personal knowledge . . . comes about through communication in com-

90. Martin Buber, *I and Thou,* trans. Ronald Gregor Smith, 2nd ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), p. 75.

munity" (224). I take it that Rawls infers that God cannot be known to us as a person unless we are in community with God; and that in that sense we cannot find God as a person in the "extended natural cosmos."

Similar conclusions are suggested by things that Brunner says. He declares that "the content of the Christian conception of God . . . cannot be conceived as a rational content; it can only be believed as a revelation"; and similarly that "we cannot conceive the Living God; we can only perceive Him in His Word." He contrasts "the rational God . . . whom I construct for myself" with "the revealed God who speaks to me . . . this One who is the 'Thou' 'over against me.'" Further, he maintains that "only in my faith does God Himself speak to me," and "faith is real communion with the Creator"—that is, personal relationship with God.[91]

Even with this rationale, I think the claim that the extended natural cosmos *excludes* God should be regarded as a misstep on the part of Rawls. It is not absurd to suggest that cognitive access to *some* aspects of another person could be available only in a certain kind of personal relationship. For instance, it would not be absurd for Rawls to claim that some insights about God have their source in the sort of conversion experience that he describes, and cannot be fully appreciated by anyone who has not had such an experience. It seems much harder, however, to defend the supposition that a person of some kind could be recognized *at all* only in a certain kind of personal relationship.

Aspects of Rawls's own account of personal self-revelation do not support a strong exclusion of God from the realm of possible objects of appetition. As part of his argument, in Chapter Two, that it is a good thing rather than a bad thing that we have bodies, Rawls puts forward

91. Brunner, *Man in Revolt,* pp. 242–243, 103, 67, 494.

the thought that "we have bodies . . . as signs which make community possible." He explains that "personal relations of necessity [proceed] on the basis of mutual revelation," that a person "must reveal his feelings to us by means of sense-data," and that we use our bodies to produce the sense data by which we communicate (153). This is a sketch of a plausible account of how we manage to communicate with each other so that community is possible. But the indicated process of communication relies on recognition of sense data as caused by voluntary agents intending to communicate by causing them; and that recognition is a sort of knowledge of other persons that seems quite independent of whether our relation with them is a natural one or a broadly moral, personal one. On the whole I think that Rawls's account of personal relations, including relations with God, would be more coherent if he simply held that God is not an *appropriate* object of appetition, and did not add anything implying that God is not even a *possible* object of appetition.

This simplification would affect very few passages in the senior thesis, and would not affect its main aims and arguments, as I understand them. Buber would not (and doubtless should not) so lightly give up his claim that God cannot become an It, though it too seems problematic. That claim stands at the center of a whole theology for him. But the analogous claim did not have that role for Rawls; nor was he invested in a rich epistemological and semantical theory for personal relationships. His main investment in what is said about God in his senior thesis was in *ethical* aspects of the subject, which I believe would not be touched by the simplification I have suggested.

A concluding question about Rawls's conception of God in the senior thesis is to what extent it is repudiated in his later essay, "On My Religion." No theistic belief is unambiguously affirmed there, but neither are all forms of belief in God ruled out as live alternatives. Rawls

seems still very interested in "religious faith," broadly understood, but he pretty clearly no longer considers himself a Christian. That position presumably entails abandonment of christological doctrines and the doctrine of the Trinity. This short autobiographical paper manifests no positive abiding interest in the concept of revelation, though it clearly does not dismiss the idea of taking the existence of God on faith. The most telling silence in "On My Religion" may be that Rawls has nothing to say about the reality of a personal encounter with God in the conversion experience, which has such central importance in the senior thesis. Among the aspects of the concept of God that are not specifically Christian, the supremacy of God's will in history is perhaps the main one that is clearly implied in the senior thesis and rejected in "On My Religion." There is also a pretty strong hint that the older Rawls, unlike the undergraduate Rawls, shared Philip Leon's disapproval of glorifying God (264).

It is striking that several doctrines associated with Christianity that are repudiated in the later essay are already rejected or avoided in the senior thesis. This is clearly true about harsh doctrines of predestination; and, on what I think is the most plausible reading of the senior thesis, it is true also about the doctrine of hell. The older Rawls denounced these as beliefs that "depict God as a monster moved solely by God's own power and glory" (264). But whereas in his senior thesis he had treated similar objections to such beliefs as considerations to be taken into account in formulating Christian doctrines, in "On My Religion" Rawls treats them as objections to "main doctrines of Christianity" as such. Similarly, in "On My Religion" he says, "Christianity is a solitary religion: each is saved or damned individually, and we naturally focus on our own salvation to the point where nothing else might seem to matter" (265), whereas the undergraduate Rawls had envisaged a Christianity of which that would decidedly not be true. In these ways the later autobiographical piece seems to represent a

standpoint more external to Christianity, and a disengagement from a process of theological reinterpretation which (whether acknowledged or not) is a permanent enterprise of Christianity as a living religion.

I do not see in "On My Religion" a similar disengagement or externality in relation to generic theism as distinct from Christianity. The discussion of the similarity of God's will and reason to ours, and their relation to the truth of moral claims, in the last section of that essay is at least as thorough and careful as any discussion of God's nature in the senior thesis. Rawls does not appear to be engaged there in what he elsewhere calls "conjecture," arguing from premises that other people accept but he explicitly does not, in order to persuade them that they can rationally accept practical conclusions that he supports.[92] Rather, he seems clearly to be working out what he himself, if a theist, would say about God's practical rationality. His statement, "Yet God's reason, I believe, is the same as ours in that it recognizes the same inferences as valid and the same facts as true that we recognize as valid and true," could easily be read as implying that he still considers himself a theist. This statement should perhaps be seen as more ambiguous as to commitment, in the context of the essay as a whole, but it surely is not a product of disengagement from constructive theistic thinking.

92. Rawls, *The Law of Peoples,* pp. 155–156.