

For Ursula and Walter Seemann  
July 4, 1949

Prolegomena

The question about death and the question: which is your concept of God, seem legitimate questions. And the schools of philosophy have had no qualms in treating them as legitimate questions. But after Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and the two world wars, this attitude is not tenable.

The knowledge which is post-Christian, or post-Nietzschean, is distinguished from the thinking of the schoolmen of antiquity and of academic philosophy and theology. We are neither philosophers nor theologians, any longer, just because the premises of any thought, speech and conversation have changed. What has happened, has changed the naive situation of the Greek and the medieval mind into a crucial situation. We know, as crucial thinkers, that our powers to think, to speak and to build sciences, are acts of a life which enters us and leaves us, according to the degree that we are members of mankind. What does this mean? It means three things.

1. Nobody can think unless he has tasted den süessen Schrecken der Todlichkeit. "Das Trauma der Geburt ist dieser erste süsse Schmerz, der uns den Tod aussetzt."

2. Nobody can speak unless he has been spoken to. We have been called to us "ein Mal," before we ever are able to say: "I." And he who has called us by our name, whoever this may be, always stands in God's place for us. "Ist doch ein Vater stets ein Gott." (Goethe)

3. We must always have played before we become serious as all young animals play! Three foundations, then, precede all our powers to question, foundations which neither theology nor

philosophy admitted before Nietzsche, although Christianity revealed them long ago. Today, they are knowable:

1. We have experienced some degree of dying, before we can think.
2. We have experienced the power of some names spoken to us and over us before we can speak.
3. We have played and conversed with other human beings, before we can know serious laws of science or society.

Dying, being called, playing, precede necessarily all our conceptions. The premises of thought, therefore, cannot be treated as objects of thinking. Conceptions we may have of objects. But the processes which enable us to define or to conceive objects at all, are themselves not subject to definition or conception.

The whole secular and scientific thinking of the last three thousand years in the West has been either idealistic or materialistic. This pre-crucial thinking did not recognize that these three processes were experiences and not concepts. The result was that death, the name-calling power, and the playing "Thou," all three had either no place at all in the systems of science and philosophy, or that at best, death, God and the soul were after-thoughts which would be treated as appendices to the system of biology or logic or metaphysics. Religions had to keep these three processes alive as sacrifices, prayers and liturgies. The "thinking" was incapable of grasping them. Crucial thinking does grasp them, finally. The fundamental distinction between a process which dogmatically precedes mental activity, and a concept, is complete.

A process must be kept going, must perpetually continue while I think. A concept may be faced or dismissed at will whenever we

decide to think of it or to put it aside.

Crucial thinking recognizes that while we are thinking or speaking or building sciences, we remain in the fear of dying, we remain under the spell of having been called by name and we retain the faculty to alternate between play and seriousness.

Three existential processes permeate the person who really thinks, speaks, does research. If these three processes are denied by him as non-relevant or as irrational or as non-existent, the mental processes cease to be capable of truthfulness and fruitfulness. The concepts produced by people who deny the fear of death, the power of having been called by name and of playing, are either sterile or diabolical.

The three modern heirs of the three religions, of paganism, Judaism, and of ecclesiastical Christianity, id est, the possible existentialistic methods of the future, all three will be crucial because they will stress the perpetual continuation of these three experiences; dying, being called, playing, during all mental, social and scientific activity.

Now we are prepared to face the questions about Death and God. Neither death nor God are things. They go on while I am typing this. They are omnipresent:

Death,                      God,                      Revelation,  
are not concepts which we can define. There is no concept of God. He who tries to define God denies Him.

Death is the cause which makes us think.

God is He who makes us speak and who calls us by name.

These two experiences are universal. They compel us to distinguish between "world or nature," and God. Nature is that which finally

dies. God is he who calls into life. However, these two experiences that we are partly dead or dying, and partly God or speaking, are supplemented in our era by a third experience: we do not only know since two thousand years that we die and that God lives, but we know of a third fact: that we kill. Death has become visible as not only something awaiting us, but also as something done by us to ourselves. In the Cross, we experience that we have the divine power to kill or to call into life ourselves.

On this third experience depends the new thinking; which starts with the trinity of God, Man, World as three irreducible realities: God, Nature, Man are not reducible to either "God and Man," or "God and Nature," or "Man and Nature."

Man is through thinking capable of responding to his mortality. He is through speaking capable of calling God. Through the third experience that we either kill or vivify each other, he is forming out of all the separate individuals, One Great Makroanthropos, through all ages and spaces.

The Greeks distinguished mikrokosmos and makrokosmos since they did not yet know how to distinguish the three, God, Man, World. Their kosmos was divine, man was kosmic, the Gods human and cosmic.

Therefore we today may have to coin the new distinction between mikroanthropos, meaning the individual human being, and makroanthropos, meaning the one man whom God creates through all the times and spaces of history, and whom we cocreate, as his partners.

This is necessary because the theologians have dealt with God as with "something conceivable." But God is he who speaketh. Nobody knows him who has not spoken in the full sense of this word "speak."

Neither in talking; nor in thinking; nor debating nor discussing do we speak as God speaks: with creative power, with authority, with commitment, and in self-forgetfulness, regardless of the consequences. However, this alone is primary speech. We do not know God from nature or from facts but only after we have spoken.

Two qualities distinguish speech from thought and talk.

1. By speaking, we ourselves become the ones who have said it. And since we now are quoted as those who have said this, we receive the name of our own speech. We shed our first skin by speaking, the skin of the product of our environment, Jesus is the perfect man because he only survives as the one who spoke himself into being. All preconceptions about him were shed when he died. This is his resurrection.

2. The second quality of speech as against thought and talk is that it deals neither with words nor with concepts but with the third element of language which idealism and science has ignored; which, however, is in truth not the third but the first layer of all speech: speech names; thought only defines concepts; talk uses words. Concepts are used for things, idealism for the parts of the word. Words are used between people in play and entertainment. But names always deify or devilize.

I conceive of three cells, and by defining them to you, I make you understand them. But the cells themselves do not listen in to my definition. They do not understand our concepts. I talk to you about the weather. That is, I am using words but this small talk has no consequences. It is non-committal, is informal, and every word in such a conversation is replaceable by a synonym.

But in naming you, I do not talk to you about something, nor do I speak to you of something which is absent. No, I compel you to

be present. And instead of being an unhappy edge of a razor blade between your birth and your death you, under the impact of somebody calling you by name, gain time. To gain time, is the fruit of being named by love. To lose time is the result of being named by hate. Named speech widens and broadens the fleeting second to eternal everlasting presence. Names create men into the eternal presence of God. The power which has at every hour of history given the right name to those who have listened is not only omnipresent. Men themselves would not know what the present is unless they participated in this power's omnipresence by receiving a name of their own and accepting it as their real name, that is as the name they should realize against all preconceptions of the outer world which gives them wrong, abstract, classificatory names but not the one and only unique name of their biography.

The great loan of all the sciences from religion can be seen in the fact that they all must use the term "the present." In nature, no present! ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ There is no present as the natural scientist imagines it, as the result of the past and the condition of the future. The present always is a divine act founding this present state of affairs between past and future, between beginning and end, between life and death as being immortal because it has received its own name. That the mother as you told us, does to the embryo: making him immortal, this God does to the moment by christening it by name. "Renaissance," modern times, our era, present day medicine, biographical medicine, all have time, because they have received a name and now they share in God's omnipresence.

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