

Retrieving the Tradition

THE PERSONAL UNITY OF
GLORY AND POVERTY IN
FREEDOM AS LOVE*

FERDINAND ULRICH

“We are both at the same time . . . a serving and
being fruitful, power and impotence,
glory ‘through’ poverty!”



MAN'S SELF-ENCOUNTER THROUGH WORD AND LOVE
IN THE ACT OF NURTURING

The mystery of man and the necessity of his self-understanding meet concretely and historically in the two forms of word and love, in becoming oneself by receiving oneself. He who speaks presupposes the one who hears him in his word—this condition of presupposing the listening Thou does not aim at the Thou's disempowerment and impotence, but rather affirms the Thou in himself, in his empowerment. The lover indwells the beloved, letting the beloved be, and the lover is let be by the other. Thus, in order for the Thou truly to be a Thou, he must

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grow into his own being, and unfold himself out of the depths of his life-giving roots.

1. FREEDOM THROUGH THE GIVEN

The mystery of man's becoming himself and receiving himself is most clearly seen in the act of nurturing. In the beginning, parents communicate to their child, in word and through love, the life-giving power and the unveiling light of the revelatory word. Word and love are the way, the truth, and the light through which the child encounters himself, and undertakes his freedom as gift of the Freedom. The child enters into the word—which is granted to him from the Thou, from “without,” as it were—in the space of another's freedom. The child will never become himself if he were, so to speak, in a pure “abstract identity” with himself, or in an empty repetition of what has always already “happened,” or remaining in the undeveloped seed of his existence, desperately revolving around and grasping at every possibility, or remaining in the impotent abyss of his own alienated substance, which is free neither to risk itself and call out to the Thou, nor free to give itself to the other, because he wishes to preserve his own self-actualization.

The child will not grow to understand himself, if he himself were to retrieve his completed existence out of the depths of his own being, as if he could search for it under his own egoistic power. Man as child creatively matures by receiving being which is “outside of himself”; he descends into the enveloping space of love, and while on the path of “going outside of himself,” appropriates and returns to his own essence. Man gains himself only in surrendering himself to the liberating word of truth and the power of love which lets be. He receives himself where he is already known from the beginning. He knows himself when he has been lovingly cared for from the very beginning. He understands the order of himself and of the world through a guide who has already given him the entire world and the invigorating breath of the communal vis-à-vis. He grows to trust himself in his experience of fidelity, of the irreversible affirmation of his being.¹

1. Thus, Aquinas can say most profoundly: the child, after he has outgrown

Word and love are forms of the beginning, which lies “outside” of myself because it only becomes mine by way of self-emptying; of the beginning that always empowers and enables the child, and that the parents always newly make present to the child in generating and nurturing him; a beginning that, only through a *poverty* which does not cling to itself—cling to its being-given—unveils itself to the Thou and shares itself as gifted *wealth*. In other words: love and word make present to the child the mystery of being, which is, as Aquinas says, pure, simple, eternal fullness; the mystery of being is life-giving power that does not stand stubbornly in itself between the giver and the receiver, but on the contrary in its “non-subsistence” is revealed as the glory of the absolute power of the divine self-communication.²

2. THE PERSONAL UNITY OF GLORY AND POVERTY IN FREEDOM AS LOVE

Now, one could say: the root of the entire dilemma of man’s self-understanding lies before us: that having to encounter myself through a Thou places me in a fatal servitude to the ungraspable beginning of finite freedom; it means that I am “condemned” to seize myself from the other, that I must possess myself by anticipating my being loved.³ Why is it not possible for me to say

the corporeal womb, in the care of his parents, is always carried in the “*uterus spiritualis* of the family” (*ST* II-II, q. 10, a. 12); and the child achieves his independence in the world because it has been opened up for him by the I and the Thou; he gains his freedom in the womb of freedom. See also Adolph Portmann’s *Zoologie und das neue Bild vom Menschen* (Hamburg: Rohwohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 1956), esp. 49ff.

2. See Thomas Aquinas, *De Potentia Dei* 1.1; my *Homo Abyssus. Das Wagnis der Seinsfrage* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1961).

3. “A *being* only considers himself independent when he stands on his own feet; and he only stands on his feet when he owes his *existence* to himself. A man who lives by the grace of another regards himself as a dependent being. But I live completely by the grace of another if I owe him not only the maintenance of my life, but if he has moreover, *created* my life—if he is the *source* of my life. When it is not of my own creation, my life has necessarily a source of this kind outside of it. The *Creation* is therefore an idea very difficult to dislodge from popular consciousness” (Karl Marx, “Private Property and Communism,” in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. Martin Milligan [reprint, Mineola, NY: Dover, 2011]).

this Yes to myself, standing exclusively on my own ground, so to speak? Why is it denied to me to generate this word myself? Why can I not absorb the other—who limits and defines me completely—into myself, in order to place his actuality under my own power and strength, such that the being of the other would be completely covered over by my being? Why can I not eliminate this receiving—having as a presupposition for my being, or least make it so that I choose to “accept” it, as if it were a mere function of my actualization, that I have made possible? Why can I not, myself, be the ground of possibility for my free self-communication, such that it is possible for me, at any point, to retract it? If being belongs completely and entirely to me, why must I maintain all that I am and possess in this never-resolved difference of the beginning of my freedom? Who “needs” my poverty in order to be “able” to make me rich? Am “I” then still really intended? Why this “powerless” dependency? Why this handing myself over to the Thou and to the world? Is the fatal schizophrenia of human existence not therein revealed? What is it that disallows my discovering my beginning in myself—that is, why is it that precisely as I try to free myself, I am at the same time compelled to be servant of another, I am compelled into the necessity of receiving?

We are, as has been said, neither merely “receptive,” nor merely “spontaneous.” If man was a bare receiving, an empty, desolate poverty, or a powerless handing over of oneself to the other, in the sense that he could never be his own—if no original initiative for self-realization could develop in or belong to him—then he would always be entirely extraneous, determinable, impotent: a malleable material, a possibility that diffuses into the world and dissolves into the numinous power of the other. If man were, on the other hand, bare spontaneity—an act that only exists for itself—then he would be a mute monad that unfolds itself mechanically, and that, centered regressively on itself, requires the Thou in order to know and become itself. In truth, we are both at the same time: a silent receiving precisely because we are ontologically empowered by the word, and a creative acting because we are sustained by a liberating hearing; a serving and a being fruitful, power and impotence, glory “through” poverty!

Because man’s autonomy always takes a personal form, the encounter between the I and the Thou is concealed in the

unity of these two seemingly irreconcilable elements of freedom; this encounter demonstrates that which is constitutively and fundamentally inherent to all beings: that every thing is both a possible and an actual, a finite becoming; that every thing is both being and not-being. The mystery of the finite is the subject who becomes himself by being-with, the subject who is sustained by the wealth and poverty of his beginning, concretely experienced in the space of freedom that is the vis-à-vis of the I and the Thou. This ungraspable abyss of the beginning unfolds itself in philosophy as the real difference between being and material beings, between the plenitude of existence and the emptiness of possibility which enables because it receives, or better: as the difference between being and its worldly mediation and limitation in the diversity of beings, in which the created gift of the divine self-communication is finitized and illuminated precisely in its inviolable glory. The immeasurable power of the creative origin reveals itself in the particular poverty of limited being that is received. The gift of being thus stands in itself (“subsists”) only when it receives from the other—from form and matter—the ground which makes its worldly presence possible. The depth and radicality of finitization, in which being gives itself to beings, demonstrates the profound extent to which being freely releases itself, and shows the status of the potential and actual autonomy of finite beings, which are free. Thus one can say: as all of reality seeks its own perfection, it also thereby “wills” *God* himself. And vice versa: God wills the finite for its own sake because his will is absolute love that lets be, which, wherever and whenever it intends itself, comes to expression in what it has “become” as the other in an act of self-emptying and surrender.⁴

As men we are constantly tempted to rupture and destroy this whole⁵ personal dialectic of glory and poverty; indeed,

4. See *De Potentia Dei* 5.4: “God wills the created universe for its own sake, although he wills its existence for his own sake: these two are not incompatible with each other”; Nicholas of Cusa, *The Vision of God*, trans. Emma Gurney Salter (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1928), 32: “Thou, Lord, makest reply within my heart, saying: Be thou thine and I too will be thine. O Lord . . . Thou hast left me free to be mine own self, if I desire. Hence, if I be not mine own self, Thou art not mine.” Augustine also describes this truth with still other images: “God became man in order that man would know what it is to be human.”

5. The word here is *heile*, which carries the connotation not only of whole

through our disposition and our acts we have always already involved ourselves in this process of the dissolution and dissociation of power and service, which means that we have violated the principles of love. This inheritance belongs to us as much as giving and receiving does, as much as the rhythm of finite self-encounter—to which everything is attuned—is ours.

In fact, parents cannot infallibly communicate word and love so that the child becomes himself through the gift that has been “given” to him. The parents could be tempted either to withhold the life-giving gift of word and love from the child, or to dissolve themselves into the gift in a perverse selflessness. The child’s parents can either hand over the freeing wealth of self-communication to the one who receives, or they can make the receiving of the child into a mere function of their own self-centered power. If they were to treat the child in this way, then they would communicate that man—to whom the child is entrusted—does not represent the mystery of God’s creative self-communication in the world. In this case, the parents could not represent for the child being as love, glory “through” poverty!—

Translated by Rachel M. Coleman. □

FERDINAND ULRICH is emeritus professor of philosophy at the University of Regensburg.