



Action and Contemplation Jacques Maritain

I. Greek Philosophy

The debate between action and contemplation not only concerns each of us personally, but is also of vital importance to human culture and to the destiny of civilization. I hold it to be of special moment to this continent, as I shall try to suggest at the end of this chapter.

We know well enough how emphatic the East is about its calling to the contemplative life and how proud of it; while the West with no less pride,—a pride which is beginning to suffer much,—boasts that it has chosen action. Could this lead us to affirm without more ado that the East is contemplation and the West action? Such an affirmation would be all too simple. Things do not tell their secrets so easily. Occidental activism might be, in its misery and agony, a degenerated and pathetic form of what was once an incomparable sentiment of life and human values. The West, I believe, had once a habit of contemplation in harmony with the deepest postulations of spiritual reality.

In philosophical language the problem of action and contemplation is that of *transitive* (or *productive*) and *immanent* activity (immanent activity in its most typical and purest function).

Transitive activity is that which one being exercises upon another, the so-called patient, in order to act upon it, imparting to it movement or energy. This activity, which is quite visible, is characteristic of the world of bodies; through it all elements of material nature inter-communicate, and through it we act on matter, transforming it. It passes away in Time, and with Time. Not only is it transitory, it is transition. The Greeks were right in saying that in this activity, the action in which the agent and the patient intercommunicate is accomplished in the patient, *actio in passio*, and being common to both, makes the agent (notwithstanding its being as such the nobler of the two) dependent on the patient, in which alone it obtains perfection. The Agent is itself *in actu* and attains its perfection only by acting on another than itself, and in the instant of this action. Transitive action is a mendicant action, which achieves itself in another being, and is essentially in need of another being. On the other hand, while the agent's perfection is also, in fact, that of the patient, the agent as such does not seek the patient's good, but its own (this is a typical characteristic of purely transitive action). Hence its 'egotism'. People who exercise philanthropy as a transitive activity need the poor to help if they want to be helpful, sinners to preach to if they want to be preachers, victims whose wrongs they can redress. They need *patients*.

Immanent activity is of quite a different order. It is the characteristic activity of life and spirit. Here the agent has its own perfection in itself; it elevates itself in being. Immanent action is a self-perfecting quality. The acts of knowing and of loving are not only within the soul, they are for the soul an active superexistence, as it were, superior to the merely physical act of existence. Thus the soul, when it knows, becomes thereby something that

it is not, and when it loves, aspires toward what it is not, as to another self. This action, as such, is above time.

It speaks for Aristotle's greatness to have known and taught that immanent (or vital or interiorizing) action is nobler and more elevated than transitive (or non-vital or exteriorizing) action.

In their doctrine of immanent action, the Greeks held that the immanence of the intellectual act is, as such, more perfect than that of the act of will; that is why, according to a thesis which St. Thomas made classical, intelligence is nobler than will, from the sole point of view of the degrees of immanence and immateriality of the powers of the soul.

All this led the Greeks to a two-fold conclusion, which, in its first part, formulated a most valuable truth; and, in its second part, transformed that truth into a great error.

The great truth which the Greeks discovered (and which their philosophers conceptualized in very diverse spiritual ways) is the superiority of contemplation, as such, to action. As Aristotle puts it, life according to the intellect is better than a merely human life.

But the error follows. What did that assertion mean to them practically? It meant that mankind lives for the sake of a few intellectuals. There is a category of specialists,—the philosophers,—who lead a superhuman life; then in a lower category, destined to serve them, come those who lead the ordinary human life, the civil or political one; they in turn are served by those who lead a sub-human life, the life of work,—that is, the slaves. The high truth of the superiority of contemplative life was bound up with the contempt of work and the plague of slavery. Even the work of freemen, of the artist or the artisan, was scorned. Plutarch wrote: 'Who, having the choice, would not prefer enjoying the contemplation of Phidias' works, to being Phidias himself?' 'All artisans have a despicable occupation, because there can be nothing noble in a workshop,' said, 'the good Cicero.' And farther to the East, the Brahmin's contemplation reposes socially on the untouchables' misery; wisdom, on offence and humiliation.

II. Christianity

Christianity has transfigured everything.

What innovations did Christianity introduce on the subject with which we are dealing? I should say they are four-fold.

First, it teaches us that love is better than intelligence. St. Thomas admits, like Aristotle, that considering the degrees of immanence and immateriality of the powers of the soul in themselves, intelligence is nobler than will, but he adds that considering the *things* we know and love, these things exist in us by knowledge according to the mode of existence and the dignity of our own soul, but by love they attract us to them according to their own mode of existence and their own dignity, and therefore it must be said that to love things that are superior to man is better than to know them. It is better to love God than to know Him; it is also better to love our brethren, in whom the mystery of God's likeness is concealed, than to know them. And the love which is *Caritas* is, not in the moral order only, but in the ontological as well, that which is most excellent and most perfect in the human soul and in the Angel.

Second, Christianity has transfigured the notion of contemplation, and endowed it with a new meaning. Albert the Great sums it up in his admirable treatise *de Adhaerendo Deo*: 'The contemplation of the philosophers', he writes, 'is concerned with the perfection of the contemplator, and hence does not go farther than the intellect, so that their end is

intellectual knowledge. But the contemplation of the saints is concerned with the love of the one who is contemplated—of God. And this is why, not content with the intellect, with knowledge as its ultimate end, it attains the heart through love, *transit ad affectum per amorem.* And love indeed is its own instrument, love's dark fire is its light. *Quia ubi amor, ibi oculus.* This leads to consequences, which we shall presently see, and which make the word 'contemplation' rather unsatisfactory.

Third, Christianity has also transfigured the notion of action and has given it a new meaning. Christian wisdom has seen, better than the wisdom of philosophers, that the action which man exercises on matter or other men, though it is transitive, cannot be reduced to transitive action such as is found in the world of bodies. It is an essentially human activity. It has not only been thought and willed before being exercised,—being born in the heart before being made manifest in the external world; it not only necessarily proceeds from an immanent act, but, moreover, it goes beyond the work it serves, and by an instinct of communication which demands to be perfected in goodness, proceeds to the service of other men. You can give high wages to a workman for work manifestly useless,—for instance, the task, which used to be imposed on convicts, of digging holes and then filling them up,—and this workman will be driven to despair. It is essential to human work that it be useful to men.

As has often been remarked, Christ in assuming for Himself the work and condition of an artisan in a small village, rehabilitated labour, and manifested its natural dignity, a dignity which Antiquity had denied. The *hardship* of work is a consequence of the Fall and of the loss of privileges proper to the state of innocence, but not *work in itself*. Adam in the state of innocence worked—without any pain—and had the mission of cultivating and keeping the Garden.

Man's labour in its first and humblest stage is a co-operation with God the Creator, and Christianity's rehabilitation of labour in the moral order is bound up with revelation, in the dogmatic order, of creation *ex nihilo*. *Pater meus usque modo operatur, et ego operor*: My Father worketh hitherto and I work too. Here is the foundation of labour ethics, which the modern world is seeking and has not yet found. The work which Antiquity most despised, manual work, imposes the forms of reason on matter, and delivers man from the fatalities of material nature (provided however he does not turn his industry into an idol which enslaves him even more); thus, work has a value of natural redemption; it is like a remote prefiguration of the communications of love. Man is both *homo faber* and *homo sapiens*, and he is *homo faber* before being in truth and actually *homo sapiens* and in order to become the latter.

Fourth, and this is a consequence of the preceding considerations, another innovation which Christianity has introduced, relevant to our subject, is that contemplation (supernatural contemplation, which would be better called *entrance into the very states of God, of God Incarnate*) is not only the business of specialists or of the chosen few. This was an astounding revolution in the spiritual order. Greeks and Jews, masters and slaves, men and women, poor and rich (but the poor, first), souls who have known evil and souls (if there be such) who have not, whatever their condition, race and wounds,—all are called to the feast of divine Love and divine wisdom. That wisdom calls them all, it clamours in the public places and in the roadways. All, without exception, are called to perfection, which is the same as that of the Father who is in heaven; in a manner either close or distant, all are called to the contemplation of the saints, not the contemplation of the philosophers, but to loving and crucified contemplation. All without exception. The universality of such an

appeal is one of the essential features of Christianity's *catholicity*.

At the same time and symmetrically, all are bound by the law of work. There are no more privileged by pain and labour. Work is for everyone, as well as the sin of which everyone must be cured. If any will not work, neither shall he eat. It is St. Paul who said this, and the evolution of modern societies shows more clearly every day how universal that assertion is. I know well that some people who have adopted it as a motto, not knowing its author, perhaps, give it a wrong interpretation, believing that there is but one kind of work,—that which creates economic values. They fail to see the admirable analogical variety of the notion of work. According to the social conscience which the Christian leaven has awakened, no one can be dispensed from activities directed to the good of men, be it to clothe or feed their bodies, to teach them or guide them, to bring them to truth and beauty or delights of the spirit, to feed them with the words of God or, like those dedicated to contemplative life, to wear oneself out in praying for them. All those varied activities are fraternal, and communicate analogically in that notion of work which the Christian spirit has renewed.

I have just said that the notion of work is verified in a most refined way, even in those dedicated to the contemplative life. It is true that contemplation itself is in fact not work, not a thing of utility. It is a fruit. It is not ordinary leisure; it is a leisure coinciding with the very highest activity of the human substance. According to the profound views of St. Thomas Aquinas, following Aristotle, those who go beyond the socio-temporal life achieve in themselves the supra-social good to which the social tends as to a transcendent term, and by that very act are free from the law of labour. There remains no more for them but Thee and I, Him whom they love, and themselves.

But in virtue of that generosity which is inherent in immanent activity at its highest degrees, loving contemplation overflows as a protection and a benediction to society. And though not itself a useful service or a work, even in the widest meaning of the word, that which is beyond usefulness superabounds thus in a usefulness, in which the notion of work is still realized at the extreme limit of refinement.

Thus, it will be understood why I have said above that all activities, from manual labour to the gratuitously added utility of contemplative leisure, are fraternal activities, in which the notion of work can be found at very different degrees of analogy.

Christianity has not condemned slavery as a social and juridical form, save in its most extreme modes, which are absolutely incompatible with human dignity. It has done better by annihilating, from within, its functional necessity [[178]] in human conscience. It has evacuated that necessity from conscience, and is evacuating it progressively from existence (for ancient slavery is not the only form of servitude), and it will require the entire history of mankind to have completely finished with it. For Christian conscience, as I have just pointed out, there do not exist two categories in humanity, *homo faber* whose task is to work, and *homo sapiens* whose task is the contemplation of truth. The same man is both *faber* and *sapiens*, and wisdom calls us all to the freedom of the children of God.

III. Superabounding Contemplation

The contemplation of which I have been speaking is Christian contemplation,—what Albert the Great, in the text quoted above, called *contemplatio sanctorum*. The Christian doctors tell us that it is supernatural, that is to say, it is achieved by the gifts which Sanctifying Grace,—formal participation in us of divine nature,—brings to the soul; and not only by its

object, but in its mode as well, it goes beyond anything that the energies of human nature, left to themselves, can achieve.

It can be called Christian in a historical sense, since for nearly two thousand years Christian contemplators have made it manifest to us. It can be called Christian in a different sense, ontological or metaphysical, since it lives by the grace of Christ. In that sense it can even be found,—substantially the same, whatever the difference of mode, degree, purity, or human setting,—in eras or lands where Christianity is not professed. It is the supernatural contemplation of the Old Testament and the New, of Moses and St. Paul, such as is exercised by the living faith and supernatural gifts. The existence of these divine gifts is taught us by Christian revelation, but they are alive in all who have the grace of Christ, even when not belonging visibly to His Church (for instance, some of the Jewish Hassidim whose story was told by Martin Buber, or that great Mohammedan mystic Al Hallaj, whom Louis Massignon has studied).

At the same time, supernatural contemplation achieves and fulfils a natural aspiration to contemplation which is consubstantial to man, and to which the Sages of India and Greece bear witness. According to Albert the Great, this natural contemplation, as such, has its term in intellect and knowledge. No doubt, love can crown *gnosis*, but here it remains an effect; it does not constitute the proper end of the contemplative act itself, nor the proper mean of it.

It must be remarked that there are in the spirit many activities, discursive activity and activity of desire, which are neither repose nor contemplation.

But while being a labour, this labour of the intelligence and of the heart tends toward contemplation and prepares for it, and in this measure participates in the end to which it is directed. It follows that there is a vast region of the life of the spirit, where contemplation is prepared, even outlined, not being, for all that, disengaged from active life and laborious activity. In this wider sense, the philosopher and the poet can be said to be already contemplative on the plane of natural activities.

This should help us to resolve a rather difficult problem. In the order of the Kingdom of God and eternal life, many are surprised by the theological teaching that action is directed to contemplation. In the order of temporal life and terrestrial civilization, the philosopher has to acknowledge that same law of work being directed in the end to contemplation and to the activities of repose. But what activity of repose and what contemplation? The contemplation of the Saints is not a proper and direct end of the political life. It would be more than a paradox to give as a direct end to the life of men, as members of a terrestrial community and as part of the temporal universe of civilization, the transcendent and superterrestrial end which is their absolutely ultimate end as consorts with the Saints, and souls redeemed at a great price; in other words, to solve the question of the workmen's leisure by saying that work has for its end, on the ethico-social plane, mystical union, prelude to the ultimate end. And yet, even in the ethico-social order, work is not its own end; its end is rest. Is it then directed to leisure and holidays, understood as a mere cessation of work, a pleasure, or honest pastime, a family party, winter sports, or the movies? If so, it would then be directed to something less noble and less generous than itself. We are far from looking with scorn on rest and relaxation which recreates the worn out human substance. But that rest is but a preparation to a renewed labour, just as sleep prepares for the toils of the day.

In reality, human work, even on the plane of social terrestrial life, must be accomplished with a view to an active and self-sufficient rest, to a terminal activity of an immanent and spiritual order, already participating in some measure in contemplation's supertemporality

and generosity. For all that, such active rest is not yet the rest of contemplation properly speaking; it has not yet attained to contemplation. Let us say it is the active rest of the culture of the mind and the heart, the joy of knowing, the spiritual delectations which art and beauty offer us, the generous enthusiasm supplied by disinterested love, compassion and communion, zeal for justice, devotion to the commonwealth and to mankind. The very law of work to which every member of the commonwealth has to submit, demands that all should have access to that leisure. There is nothing here that is contemplation, properly speaking. But if in this kind of leisure, instead of shutting up human concerns in themselves, man remains open to what is higher than himself, and is borne by the natural movement which draws the human soul to the infinite, all this would be contemplation in an inchoate state or in preparation.

But enough of this. Let us ask St. Thomas and the theologians what they think of supernatural contemplation. In a famous passage, St. Thomas says first that, absolutely speaking and in itself, contemplative life is better than active life. This is a thesis characteristic of any conception of life worthy of the human person's dignity,—the fundamental thesis of the intrinsic superiority of contemplation. St. Thomas proves it by eight reasons drawn from Aristotle and illuminated by eight texts from Scripture. And there is, he says, a ninth reason, added by the Lord when He says: 'Mary has chosen the better part.'

After this, there is a second point of doctrine to be considered: contemplation, being the highest degree of the life of the soul, can not be an instrument of the moral virtues and the operations of active life, but the end to which those things have to be directed as means and dispositions.

A third point, made manifest by the example of Christian contemplatives and by the teaching of theologians, is that the contemplation of the Saints does not merely attain to the heart through love. Not being confined to the intellect, being the fruit of love in act through which faith becomes as it were a thing of experience, this contemplation also enters the sphere of action, in virtue of the generosity and abundance of love, which consists in giving oneself. Action then springs from the superabundance of contemplation, *ex superabundantia contemplationis*, be it by the very reason of the *nature* of the work it produces, (thus preaching things divine must overflow from a heart united to God or be vain,) or by reason of the *mode* of the production, which makes a work, whatever it is, an instrument employed by sovereign Love to touch and vivify the heart.

It is by virtue of such a superabundance, which comes from the supernatural ordination of human life to the fruition of God, that Christian wisdom, unlike that of the philosophers, is not merely speculative, but practical as well, and directive of human life, for this life is not regulated by human measures only, but by divine as well, and thus becomes the object of that very knowledge which contemplates God. More excellent than any purely intellectual wisdom, because it attains closer to God, being a wisdom of love and union, the act of the gift of wisdom is not a self-sufficing contemplation, but one which, as St. Paul puts it, walks toward them that are without, redeeming time.

When explaining the words of Jesus: 'Know ye not that I must be about my Father's business?' St. John of the Cross, that great doctor of contemplation, liked to recall Dionysius's sentence: the divinest of all things divine, is to cooperate with God in the salvation of souls; which means, St. John of the Cross tells us, 'that the supreme perfection of every creature, in its own hierarchy and degree, is to ascend and grow according to its talent and resources in the imitation of God; and it is most admirable and most divine to cooperate with Him in the conversion and salvation of souls. God's own works are

resplendent in that.’

We have arrived here at a fundamental truth: Christian philosophy is a philosophy of being; more than that, a philosophy of the superabundance of being; and in this it stands incomparably higher than other great philosophies of being, such as Hindu metaphysics, where being does not give being and can but absorb in itself—*maya* and soul itself. Christian philosophy, better than the Greek, has seen that it is natural that immanent activity should superabound, since it is super-existing. Purely transitive activity is egoistic, as I have said at the beginning of this chapter. Immanent activity is ‘generous’, because, striving to be achieved in love, it strives to achieve the good of other men, disinterestedly, gratuitously, as a gift. Christian theology is a theology of divine generosity, of that superabundance of divine being which is manifested in God Himself, as only revelation can tell us, in the plurality of Persons, and which is also manifested, as we could have discovered by reason alone, by the fact that God is Love, and that He is the Creator. And God, whose essence is his own beatitude and his own eternal contemplation, God who creates, gives, has never ceased to give, He gives Himself through Incarnation, He gives Himself through the Holy Ghost’s mission. It is not for Himself, St. Thomas says, it is for us that God has made everything to His glory. When contemplation superabounds in efficacious love and in action, it corresponds within us to that divine superabundance communicative of its own good.

IV. The Call to Contemplation

That is what philosophers can be taught about supernatural contemplation both by theology and by the experience of the Saints. Properly speaking, such a contemplation is a participation in the divine life and perfection itself,—an entrance, as I said above, into the very states of the Word Incarnate. It is that purely and simply terminal freedom of exaltation and of autonomy, mentioned in a preceding chapter.

But have I not said that Christianity’s great novelty is its universalism, which calls all men to what is most difficult, to perfect life, a life of union and contemplation? Let us consider this more closely. It was much discussed, some years ago, whether contemplative graces are exceptional not only *de facto* but also *de jure*, whether it is temerarious to desire or hope for them, or whether they are the normal flower within us of the living grace of virtues and gifts. This discussion, momentous to all who are anxious to know man, has been complicated by many extraneous considerations springing either from inadequate vocabulary, or practical preoccupations. I shall say a word about it before finishing.

The anti-mystical tendencies, which have developed since the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, were generated by an all too legitimate fear, that of shame and quietism; the wine of the Holy Ghost is apt to go to one’s head when mingled with the alcohols of imagination. Books of spirituality, not those only which make commonplace literature out of the Saints’ experiences, but even those of authentic spirituality, are apt, when falling into impatient and weak hands, to cause many a victim which psychiatry claims as its own. It is terrible to throw anything divine to men, who make use of everything to feed their chimeras.

And yet God, who is wise, has dared to do that terrible thing; and at what risk, when giving us His Truth. If books were judged by the bad uses man can put them to, what book has been more misused than the Bible? Let us live dangerously, says Nietzsche; that is a pleonasm. One is out of danger only when dead. To turn souls away from aspiring to the graces of contemplative union, to deprive them of the teaching and advices of a St. Theresa

or a St. John of the Cross, is to deprive them of the channels of life, to condemn them to a parching thirst. If anti-mystical tendencies were completely systematized, they would turn Christianity into a mere moral system, while it is, first of all, a theological communion.

And this is why in the discussion to which I referred, theologians are coming to an agreement (though with many differences of nuance) on the point that all souls are called, if not in a proximate manner, at least in a remote one, to mystical contemplation as being the normal blossoming of grace's virtues and gifts.

For if we define mystical life (or life according to the spirit) as a coming of the soul under the regimen in which the gifts of Grace, called in sacred terminology gifts of the Holy Ghost, predominate (so that henceforth the soul is docile to the spirit of God, who disappropriating it of itself, takes it into His own charge), then it is clear that every soul is called,—at least in a remote manner,—to mystical life *thus defined*. Why is that so? Because all are called to the perfection of love. And that perfection cannot be attained without the radical purifications and substantial remouldings which are the mystical life's sacrificial privilege. St. Thomas teaches us that the gifts of the Holy Ghost are necessary *to salvation*, because we are so foolish that we could not, on certain difficult occasions to which we are all exposed, make by ourselves the proper use of theological and moral virtues to avoid *mortal sins*; then it must be said with still more reason that we are too foolish and too miserable to make by ourselves the proper use of those virtues to *attain perfection*, and hence it is necessary for this aim that the gifts of the Holy Ghost should govern our life as directive habits.

We must now observe that among the inspiring gifts which Catholic theology has learned to enumerate from Isaiah, some, like those of Counsel, Force, Fear, mainly concern action, while others, like those of Intelligence and Wisdom, are mainly related to contemplation.

It follows that souls which have entered upon the ways of spiritual life will behave in very different manners, each according to its calling. Some will be favoured in a pre-eminent manner with the highest gifts, those of Wisdom and Intelligence; these souls will represent mystical life in its normal plenitude, and will have the grace of contemplation in its typical forms, be they arid or comforting. In the case of other souls it will be primarily the other gifts of inspired freedom; their life will be indeed a mystical and disappropriated life; but it will be such pre-eminently in relation to their activities and works, and they will not have the typical and normal forms of contemplation.

They will not be, for all that, deprived of contemplation, of participating and experiencing lovingly the divine states. For St. Thomas teaches us that all the gifts of the Holy Ghost are connected and therefore cannot be present in the soul without the gift of Wisdom; though, in the case we are dealing with, it will be exercised in a less apparent way, and in an atypical, attenuated, or discontinuous mode. The contemplation of the 'active' souls will be *masked* and inapparent, but they will have contemplative graces; perhaps they will be capable only of saying rosaries, and mental prayer will bring them only headache or sleep. Mysterious contemplation will not be in their way of praying but in the grace of their behaviour, in their sweet-minded hands, perhaps, or in their way of walking perhaps, or in their way of looking at a poor man or at suffering.

It should perhaps be added that contemplative life is superhuman, whereas the active life is connatural to man and better adapted to the equilibrium of his natural energies. It appears that the forms of contemplation to which souls faithful to grace will actually attain most often, will not be the typical one, where the supernatural sweeps away everything, at the risk of breaking everything, but rather the atypical and masked forms which I have

just mentioned, where the superhuman condescends in some measure to the human and consorts with it.

We see now with what nuances and distinctions we should understand the theological doctrine, which we have been reviewing, of every single soul being called to contemplative graces. Each is called, if only in a remote manner, to contemplation, *typical or atypical*, apparent or masked, which is the multiform exercise of the gift of Wisdom, free and unseizable, and transcending all our categories, and capable of all disguises, all surprises.

In this sense, if all this is borne in mind, the Thomist theses about contemplation,—its necessity for the perfection of Christian life and its intrinsic superiority over action,—appear in their manifest truth.

The doctrine I have stated summarily means that Christian contemplation springs forth from that Spirit which bloweth where it listeth, and one hears His voice and no one knows whence He comes or whither He goes. It means that Christian contemplation is not the affair of *specialists* or *technicians*. The active ways through which the soul disposes itself to it are not techniques, but only fallible preparations to receive a free gift, fallible preparations which this gift always transcends.

Natural spirituality has techniques which are well determined and are, moreover, good and useful. This apparatus of techniques strikes everybody who begins to study comparative Mysticism. Now, the most obvious difference between the Christian and the other mystics is the freedom of the former from any techniques, recipes or formulas. It is, essentially, not esoteric or *reserved to specialists*.

We meet here with two difficulties which I should like to mention, and which are due, the one to vocabulary, the other to the masters.

There is a difficulty which comes from vocabulary. It is that *words* are specialists. They cannot have the amplitude of transcendentals. They particularize what they denote, in virtue of their past, and of the associations, sometimes extremely heavy, which they drag along with them. That word ‘mystic,’ for instance, which I have used all through this essay because I had to, is not satisfactory. It evokes a procession of phenomena, ecstasies, and extraordinary gifts belonging, when they are genuine, to what theologians call *charisms* or gratuitous graces,—which has nothing to do with the essence of the mystical or disappropriated life, as we understand that word: since we have (following the theologians) defined mystical life by the dominating regimen of the Holy Ghost’s gifts,—the *habitus* of inspired freedom,—which are quite different from charisms. The word ‘contemplation’ is hardly better. I have already said it is quite unsatisfactory. It leads a good many people into error, making them believe that it pertains to some spectacular curiosity. It carries with it a Greek past, the Greek notion of the theoretical life. We have seen, at the beginning of this essay, with what care we ought to strip the great truths of Antiquity of the errors which grow parasitically on them. Shall we then try to find other words? That would be vain. The new words would soon become clichés as misleading as the old ones. We must accept the fact, and particularly in this matter, that words cannot relieve us of the effort of thinking.

Nor can the masters! This is the second difficulty I wish to note. The masters, too, are inevitably specialists, specialists of what they teach. St. John of the Cross is a specialist of contemplation and heroism. He teaches a common way, a way open to all (to ‘all those who have heard’ in a proximate manner the call of God); but he teaches this common way according to the purest and *most typical* paradigm of the states through which it leads. In brief, he speaks to all, to all those who have entered on the road, by addressing himself to

a few Carmelite nuns of the noblest trend. Through them, he speaks to all. This means that we who read him are expected to hear him according to a whole key-board of analogical values, to hear with *universal resonances*, and in a non-specialized sense, what he says as a specialist of genius. To understand him differently would be to betray him. Thus, for instance, concerning the nights and the passive purifications which he describes, one must grasp the fact that in other circumstances and in other states of life, these typical forms can be supplemented by other ordeals originating in events or in men, and which play an analogous purifying role. By pursuing this line of reflections one would see many things become more plain. One would also begin to see what is the role of a St. Thérèse of Lisieux teaching in truth the *same doctrine* as St. John of the Cross, and the same heroism, but in the simplicity, entirely denuded and *common*, of the ‘small way.’

V. Orient and Occident

To come back to where we started, to the debate of East and West, we see, if what we have said be true, that activism and pragmatism, the rejection of contemplative values, the dethronement of Wisdom, are the West’s greatest woe. It seems as if to-day the West sought a remedy in the frantic exaggeration of this evil. The attempts to create new civilizations which are taking form before our eyes,—where the civil community becomes the soul of a dynamism which is purely activistic, industrial and warlike, and mobilizes for that active end both science and thought,—do not make our prognostications optimistic. The West has here much to learn from the East and from its fidelity to the primacy of contemplative values.

But, at the same time, what I want to point out is that, while denouncing the errors and shortcomings of our unhappy West, the Christian feels for it a piety that is filial, and can plead its cause in the face of the East. For this activism and pragmatism are the catastrophe of a truly great thing which the spirit of separation from God has led astray. I mean the generosity, the propensity to give and communicate, the sense of ontological superabundance springing from Evangelical Love, and of holy contemplation superabounding in activity.

And the impassible contemplation which the East boasts of,—which proceeds from the energies of the soul striving toward liberation by techniques and formulas, by the athletic efforts of ascetics, and of active concentration,—manifests, on its part, in the very order of spiritual things, a pragmatism that is infinitely more subtle, but which no less withdraws from the testimony that God expects from mankind.

Let us remember the great words which St. Thomas wrote about the Incarnation, and which to my mind throw the deepest light upon those problems: ‘In the Mystery of Incarnation,’ he says, ‘the movement of *descent* of divine plenitude into the depths of human nature is more important than the movement of ascent of human nature towards God.’ This is a truth that holds good, not only for the Head but for the whole of the Body. It explains to us how supernatural contemplation, proceeding thus from the descent within us of divine plenitude, superabounds within us in love and activity.

We hold that the West will not surmount the crises in which it is engaged, unless it reconquers that vital truth, and understands that external activity must overflow from a superabundance of internal activity, by which man is united to truth and to the source of being. If the East, perhaps because its efforts toward contemplation aspired above all toward philosophical forms of contemplation, has given great importance to natural contemplation

and spirituality, even in things that belonged to the secular and temporal order; one might ask if in the West, by a sort of division of labour, spirituality and contemplation,—not philosophical but supernatural contemplation,—has not been too much the exclusive preoccupation of souls consecrated to God and to the things of His Kingdom; while the rest of mankind was abandoned to the law of immediate, practical success and the will to power. If a new age of Christian civilization should dawn, it is probable that the law of contemplation super-abounding in action would overflow in some way into the secular and temporal order. It will thus be an age of the sanctification of the profane.

As I have said at the beginning of this chapter, the debate between action and contemplation is particularly important to this continent. Is it not a universally repeated commonplace that America is the land par excellence of pragmatism and of the great undertakings of human activity? There is truth in this, as in most commonplaces. Whitman celebrates the pioneers in a manner which is certainly characteristic of the American soul. But, in my opinion, there are in America great reserves and possibilities for contemplation. The activism which is manifested here assumes in many cases the aspect of a remedy against despair. I think that this activism itself masks a certain hidden aspiration to contemplation. To my mind, if in American civilization certain elements are causing complaints or criticisms, those elements proceed definitely from a repression of the desire, natural in mankind, for the active repose of the soul breathing what is eternal. In many unhappy creatures, good but wrongly directed, nervous breakdown is the price of such repression. On the other hand, the tendency, natural in this country, to undertake great things, to have confidence, to be moved by large idealistic feelings, may be considered, without great risk of error, as disguising that desire and aspiration of which I spoke.

To wish paradise on earth is stark naïveté. But it is surely better than not to wish any paradise at all. To aspire to paradise is man's grandeur; and how should I aspire to paradise except by beginning to realize paradise here below? The question is to know what paradise is. Paradise consists, as St. Augustine says, in the joy of the Truth. Contemplation is paradise on earth, a crucified paradise.

The cult of action is not specifically American. It is a European idea, and idea of post-Renaissance and post-Reformation Europe. What may mislead us in this matter, so it seems to me, is that the New Continent, with terrible loyalty, has taken some of the Old World's ideas, transplanted in virgin soil, and carried them to their limits. When in America some few come to realize better the value of contemplative activity, its superiority and fecundity, I believe that the possibilities I have spoken of will manifest themselves, at least in a small way, but forcefully enough gradually to modify the general scheme of values. Then this country will give some of its generosity, good will, confidence in the future and courage, to things contemplative, to contemplation overflowing in action. And this is one of the reasons why even if a moment of general catastrophe should befall civilization, I would still not despair of civilization.

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