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The Reach of Experience: Sacramental Personhood and Worlds to Come

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ONE OF THE ENDURING LESSONS of the twentieth century's philosophical focus on language is that how a question is asked is at least as important as how it is answered, for the question carries with it assumptions about what can be known, what should be known, and what is the best approach to an answer. Very often the road to clear understanding requires a circling back to examine the prereflective assumptions implicit in the question that prompted and programmed inquiry, and a subsequent revision of the question.

This paper approaches the question of life after death from a perspective that differs somewhat from the more usual range of concerns that prompt the question. Those concerns are very familiar and very real. Life and love are values that we relish and whose loss is like a plunge into hopeless darkness. Death as a negative finality is the apotheosis of that loss—an affront to all we hold dear—and so we hope, wish, dream, and believe, in Whittier's words, "that life is ever lord of death and love can never lose its own" (Whittier 401). As long as human beings can care enough for life and love to be spiritually threatened and metaphysically insulted by their destruction, the question of life after death will stay alive and well.

But there's a problem with answers that spring from the deep pathos that occasion our question about the finality of death. Any set of beliefs that is dictated by emotional needs is questionable and at the very least in need of more credible foundations. I am not saying that emotions are devoid of cognitive significance, but they do not live and speak by themselves. They are rooted in structures of personal life and must be interpreted relative to the experiential matrices to which they belong. Kant said that philosophy must concern itself with the question "What can I hope for?" (Kant 635). When that question genuinely engages us in critical reflection, we move beyond a glorified reporting of "what I emotionally need to believe."

One final introductory observation. Given the universality of the condition of mortality and the intensity of passion that impending death generates—remember Samuel Johnson’s dictum, “Tell a man he’ll be hanged in a fortnight and it concentrates his mind wonderfully” (qtd. in Andrews 117)—it is remarkable that modern philosophy has paid so little attention to our question.¹ Perhaps the answer is to be found in Paul Tillich’s observation that the predominant forms of anxiety change in history, triggered by shifts in the foundational convictions of a civilization. In *The Courage to Be*, he argues that the fear of death and consequent need for personal immortality is more characteristic of the ancient world than the modern, in which the anxiety of meaninglessness and the need to reunite fact and value is experienced as the necessary task for restoring wholeness to experienced reality. While these forms of anxiety and strategies of redemption are not mutually exclusive, they are nevertheless differently nuanced configurations of experience that prompt distinct quests. This observation certainly squares with the role that existentialism, phenomenology, and personalism have played in the philosophy of the last two centuries, and with the earlier rationalist attempts to establish religious truth on reason alone.² Both have been attempts to get fact and value back together after their metaphysical rupture in Galileo, Descartes, and all philosophy that was cued to the mechanistic cosmology of modern science.

In what follows, I will attempt to show two things. First, that the question of life after death is grounded in the very nature of persons and does not arise in its definitive form as a consequence of the “absolute threat of nonbeing,” to use Tillich’s phrase (47), or from episodic experiences in which we come face to face with our own mortality. These experiences may occasion the question at the emotional and existential level, but they do not provide the configurations of experience that yield the most credible response to the question. For that we need a view of what we are as persons. I shall suggest a view that I call *sacramental personhood*.

Second, I will show that sacramental personhood yields some definite positive clues about the possibility of postmortem life by disclosing transcendent dimensions in current common experience. While these clues do not give a conclusive positive answer to the question, they show that the question is endemic to the human condition and is not something that we can expect to “get over when we grow up.” Indeed, I will argue that growing up as a person means growing more and more into the question of the ultimate horizons of our experience, growing more and more into the sacramental dimension of our own personhood.

Sacramental Personhood

My use of the concept of sacrament is not meant to smuggle into the discussion a host of sectarian ideas. Rather, I use it to signify a foundational paradigm of reality that bypasses the two major paradigms of the Western philosophical tradition—idealism and materialism. The inadequacy of those paradigms to yield a satisfactory account of persons has been shown often in the last two centuries, and it is not necessary to rehearse those demonstrations here. Suffice it to say that if one starts with materialism, as Hobbes did, or with idealism, as in Plato and Descartes, one has thereby already adopted a reductionist method since those positions require that every feature and type of personal experience must be explained as either matter or ideas. There is, of course, truth in both positions, but it is wrongly conceived if it excludes the truth of the other position. Personal reality cannot be adequately conceived by reductionist thinking.

Of course, phenomenological philosophy was developed precisely to overcome these reductionist traps, to advance our understanding of the human condition beyond the traditional paradigms. In agreement with the phenomenological strategy, I have argued elsewhere that a descriptive account of the major forms of human experience can be given in terms of our participation in “communities of significance” (akin to Royce’s communities of interpretation). With Heidegger we can acknowledge that persons are always already enworlded, that our life is always already being-in-the-world. A “world,” as opposed to an “environment,” has structure and meaning. It has significance for us, and we are moment by moment interpreting it and our life in it for its realizable significance. This is no single or simple task since our personal experience is multitextured and complex. My phenomenological claim is that our personal experience can be expressed in terms of five broad communities of significance, each of which can be subdivided into many more specific forms of experience. Since our purpose here is not to create an exhaustive catalogue of the forms of experience, but rather to conceive adequately the nature of persons, I will briefly characterize the five communities in which we live, move, and have our being and then show how the resultant sense of persons can be characterized as sacramental.

1. The bio-eco community. We live as embodied creatures in vital dependence on the natural order for the air we breathe, the water and food that nourish us, and on other living things like worms that aerate the soil and make the natural order habitable for us. Our genetic make-up has a long history that gives us kinship to a host of nonhuman forms of life, and it places

us in an evolutionary history that spans generations, millennia, and eons. We are endowed with amazingly complex natural equipment and are vitally connected to the entire web of life. We might call this simply the community of nature.

Our embodied condition is essential to our experience as persons. While idealism interprets the physical body as nonessential to personal life and even, with Plotinus, as an embarrassment to the higher life of the soul, we cannot agree with such a complete dismissal of physicality from personal life. Instead, we will claim that our physical bodies perform an essential personal function—namely, to supply us with a *locus of continuity* which is a *sine qua non* of personal life. We shall see that this locus of continuity is an essential part of the notion of sacramental personhood and a key guide to our thoughts about life after death.

2. The community of kinship and intimacy. Persons are born into families, raised within families or family substitutes, and as adults make their own families. The family, in addition to serving as an actual community within which we live in a distinct way, albeit one that changes through one's life cycle, also serves as a model for other relationships that become "like family": very close and enduring personal ties that enlarge our sphere of intimacy. Communities of kinship and intimacy are an essential part of the life of persons.

3. Communities of civility. This is the sociopolitical community broadly conceived, the community of all those with whom we must coexist within social patterns that are stable and trustworthy. Implicit in social life is a mutual agreement not to harm one another and, more positively, to have enough goodwill to respect and uphold the civil order. Relations within the civil community span a wide spectrum—from neighborliness to principled civility.

4. Communities of enterprise. These are communities that have a mission, like making money or promoting barbershop singing. The "work" of the world is largely done in enterprise communities, as is much avocational activity. The professions—all kinds of corporations, partnerships, and businesses—represent specific enterprises. For most of us, enterprise communities are the contexts in which we make a living. But other enterprise communities have missions that relate to recreation (e.g., hiking clubs), aesthetics (e.g., community choruses), health (e.g., fitness clubs), and any other desirable goal that we pursue in company with others.

The typical relation between members of an enterprise community is that of collegiality, but it need not be egalitarian. Differentiation of function occurs within enterprises of any complexity, such as lawyers and judges within the legal profession or ranks within the military. Those differentiations are

seen as essential to the enterprise and thus pose no threat to the collegiality that comes from common commitment to the enterprise. Paul's analogy of the body and its particular parts to the community and its members in 1 Corinthians is a remarkably apt exposition of the collegiality of enterprise communities.

5. Communities of spiritual quest. Typically this kind of community occurs within traditional religious communities, but I forego the use of the term "religious communities" to avoid the implication that I am speaking of believing a fixed set of doctrines. Rather, the essential feature of "spiritual quest" is the active wondering about the ultimate horizons of one's belonging. Does personal life transcend the bounds of finite time marked by birth and death? The question of personal transcendence is a universal feature of personal life, and however one seeks an answer to it is one's mode of participating in the community of spiritual quest. Regardless of whether or not one participates in an actual religious community, every person has a profound kinship with one of the basic concerns of those actual communities: the question of whether the temporal bounds of one's earthly life mark the ultimate bounds of one's spiritual life.

In summary then, persons are embodied beings ensconced in a complex web of biological life, who live within families and relationships of intimacy, who coexist with others in civil life, who expend their energies in various enterprises to meet essential needs and elective desires, and who wonder about their place in the ultimate scheme of things. Personal life is thus inherently multidimensional, with each community of significance affording forms of experience that contribute to the fullness of our personal lives.

There are two important corollaries to this multidimensionality. First, no community of significance can be judged to be subpersonal or irrelevant to understanding the nature of personal life. We indwell each of them as persons, and each of them makes an essential contribution to our full personhood, not merely to our existence as a functioning organism. Second, no community of significance stands alone, insulated from the others. What we experience in one arena is qualified by what we are in the others. Personal life is the ongoing task of composing ever fuller integrations and harmonizations of the communities of significance that our lives uniquely express, like musical notes that are combined in chords. The uniqueness of each person is thus seen to be grounded in the unique matrix of communities of significance in which we simultaneously compose and perform the music of our existence, harmonious or discordant or both.

Individual uniqueness is indelible in personal life but not inconsistent

with generic commonalities with other persons. Indeed, our very uniqueness is a function of connectedness and belonging. Without this there could be no communities of significance and no persons. This alone gives us reason to reject one of the ways that life after death is often affirmed. When we are said to have a “soul” that is inherently “immortal,” we conceptually endow ourselves with a core substance, an indestructible kernel of which we have no direct experience but which we nonetheless claim to be the subject of post-mortem experience. Whatever this kernel is, it is not “personal,” for it is not the I that now experiences, remembers, hopes, chooses, cherishes, and lives as a mindful person with others in communities of significance. At best it can be taken as shorthand affirmation that there is life after death, but when that shorthand is taken as an accurate description, we tend to override whatever personal ground there might be for belief in life after death by positing a metaphysical abstraction in place of the person.

The view of personal life that I have outlined is neither materialist nor idealist but rather something that might be called sacramental. Materialist views deny the soul and idealist views affirm the soul, and the resulting controversy is thus framed in terms that systematically obscure the personal ground of the issue. By moving to a different paradigm, sacramental reality, we may redefine the terms of the discussion. Sacrament is admittedly a loaded term, coming as it does from religious contexts. We will here take cues from its use in those contexts but translate them into a generic philosophical perspective based on the personal reality that is grounded in communities of significance.

The word “sacrament” comes from Latin *sacramentum*, an oath. In taking an oath a person posits him or herself in a vital and abiding relationship that becomes a defining theme of her existence. Martin Buber speaks of “sacramental existence” in the context of Hasidic piety, which is grounded in “the Covenant of the Absolute with the concrete” (Buber 166). For our purposes, I will take Buber’s “Absolute” to be represented by the endemic and indelible question of whether the “significance” of personal life extends beyond the death of the body. The Absolute is here redefined as the real presence of the question of intimations of transcendence in personal life, and we live in covenant with that question which can be ignored but cannot be erased.

In Christian contexts, “sacrament” is most often characterized as “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace” (Cross 1198). Leaving aside ecclesiastical concerns about particular sacraments and the whole realm of sacramental theology, we will take this characterization as a clue to a sacramental phenomenology, pointing to a reality in which outer and inner

are conjoined as a dynamic and nuanced whole and not divided into separate and competing metaphysical realms, mind and matter. The experience of persons is loaded with significance for and among persons, such that a person can be called a locus of significant experience. The “locus” here refers to our embodied condition that gives particularity and distinctness to each person, while “significance” is the range of meanings and values that are experienced within the several communities of significance and that we appropriate in the process of self-formation. Sacramental reality means that there is a primordial and indelible bond between our physical particularity—such as our being “this” singular member of the bio-eco community—and the meanings and values that we are thereby enabled to experience in the communities of kinship and intimacy, civility, enterprise, and spiritual quest. Sacramental, for our purposes, indicates the accrual of significance that occurs as we live out our lives within communities of significance, and that grows in openness to transcendent significance as the community of spiritual quest exerts its influence. This is as close as the philosophical perspective can come to the realm of the sacred, but it is close enough to keep us open to it in ways that do not prejudice our thought about it.

Sacramental Personhood and Worlds to Come

How does sacramental personhood help us to think about life after death? I suggest it does so in two ways. First, it clarifies the notion of “body,” enabling us to see embodiment as a personal fact rather than as an instance of an abstract, impersonal materiality. Our modified view of “body” will enable us to think differently about the consequences of the death of the physical body. Second, it points us to those dimensions of experience in this life that contain intimations of transcendence and thus disclose the similarities between personal continuity that is already experienced and personal continuity that is yet to be experienced.

We start with the incontrovertible fact that our bodies die. If physical embodiment is the *sine qua non* of personal life, then physical death is its absolute negation—end of story. But this line of thinking interprets “body” as a brute materialistic fact, overlooking its personal meaning as the *locus of experiential continuity*. Under conditions of mortality, embodiment is the precondition for all the ways we participate in the all the communities of significance in which we compose and enact our personal stories. Its personal significance, then, is that it is the precondition of personal life as we currently experience it.

As locus of experiential continuity, the body is enormously important to

our personhood. Much of our experience is directly dependent on the body and has the character of sense experience which simultaneously puts us in relation to a world of persons and things beyond us and awakens self-awareness. Further, sensory experiences become important metaphors for nonsensory experience, like keeping “in touch” and “seeing” as understanding. Even experiences whose primary significance is not physical—like listening to great music or hearing good or bad news—depend on the ability of the senses to take it in. Indeed, even the mystical experience of unity with God is reported by researchers called neurotheologians to be accompanied by distinct combinations of activity and inactivity in specific regions of the brain. As locus of experiential continuity, then, the body is a pervasive influence on our experience—either directly, as in basic sensory experience, or indirectly, as enabling or subtending experiences whose significance is not primarily somatic.

This pervasive influence of the body on experience leads some to assume that the body is the *cause* of experience, a claim that goes beyond what I think is a more accurate designation, the *locus* of experience. The claim of causality carries the implication that the body is the full and final explanation of experience—the classic materialist position. But personal experience is multifaceted, the simultaneous presence and influence of all of the communities of significance to each moment of personal life. The distinguishing mark of each community of significance bleeds over into all the others so that there is a kind of parity that they share in mutual influence that provides the rich palette of one’s personhood. Each community of significance is essential to full personhood, but no one of them is the foundation for all the others. Just as the body provides the *locus* of experiential continuity, a locus that qualifies and influences the other kinds of significance that characterize personhood, so each of the other communities of significance adds a distinctive feature that exerts a chronic influence on all the others. Because this issue of the status of the body for personal life is so crucial to our consideration of life after death, it is important to fill out our present claim: that each of the communities of significance has parity with all the others in the constitution of personal experience. To do that we need to see what the distinctive feature of each of the other communities of significance is and how each qualifies and influences our embodied condition.

It is in the community of kinship and intimacy that we learn that we are *connected* to other beings. Born into families, we continue that way throughout our entire lives. Bodies conceived as disconnected monads are not personal.

It is in communities of civility that we learn the *extent* of our connectedness to the whole human community. Embodiment in the civil community

requires *ethical* awareness, for the notion of general truths and principles that express universal rules and obligations are necessary to interpret and indwell a civil order. Personal life has an inherent impetus toward civility, which I would argue is the mother of all ethical virtues.

Communities of enterprise emphasize that life has a demand side as well as a supply side (gift side). We must labor to sustain our lives and improve our condition. The body is under necessity to provide for its needs, lest it die, and the psyche is under similar necessity to find enough meaning to sustain the will to life. Persons, then, are subject to the necessity of action; existence is, among other things, a *task* to be continually achieved.

The body, then, as the locus of experience, is qualified by the kinds of experience that occur in the other communities of significance. It is *connected* in families and close communities; it becomes *ethical* in civil communities; it responds to the *task* of participating in its sustenance in enterprise communities. We have not spoken yet of communities of spiritual quest but will focus on it below since it raises the question of whether personal experience stops with the death of the body. But thus far we can see that each community of significance showcases a feature of personal life that qualifies all the others and, in turn, is qualified by all the others. Embodiment may be *primus inter pares*, but it does not escape the status of parity with other communities of significance since it cannot escape living within those communities. We may and must look to the body for its wondrous contributions to our personhood, but not for a full and final explanation of personhood.

If we are looking for explanations, as we inevitably do, we must acknowledge that the body and its continuity calls for an explanation and cannot be taken as self-explanatory. Neither a full description of its vital physical processes, however exhaustive, nor a full accounting of their metaphorical extensions that give form and structure to our personal world, nor even the discovery of subtle organic markers that subtend even our most sublime experiences—none of this can be taken as a full explanation of personal life but only as a description of the marvelous workings of the body as the locus of personal experience. Santayana, whom I would call a sacramental naturalist, recognized this inability of bodily life to be its own explanation. When we recognize, he said, that we do not have the power or resources to sustain our own existence, to guarantee our own continuity from day to day and hour to hour, we recognize that “existence is a miracle, . . . a free gift from moment to moment.” The result is that “at once, by a mere act of self-examination and frankness, the spirit has come upon one of the most important and radical of religious perceptions. It has perceived that though it is living, it is powerless to

live, that though it may die, it is powerless to die; and that altogether at every instant and in every particular, it is in the hands of some alien and inscrutable power" (Edman 584). Even a naturalist can recognize that explanations take us into the domain of ontological mystery and that this domain is a feature of our personal existence here and now as a matter of lived experience, not an abstract topic for mere speculation. It is worth noting that this existential route to ontological awareness has played a very influential role in modern philosophy and theology, beginning in Descartes's *Meditations*, going through Schleiermacher's *The Christian Faith*, and predominating in the thought of such twentieth-century thinkers as Paul Tillich and Martin Heidegger.³

But still, the body does die, so our accustomed locus of experience ends. Life after death is, by definition, a kind of continuity or continuing, regardless of how discontinuous with mortal life such continuance may be. So two questions arise for our thinking: (1) Can there be personal continuity without some *locus* of continuity such as the body provides in mortal life? If not, then, (2) do we have any way at all to conceive of a *successor locus* of experiential continuity? The short answer to the first question is no. Persons are unique, and it is impossible to imagine the real existence of a unique being without a concept, however vague and implicit, of some definite modality of being, some particular means of sustaining continued existence. Any life that is without its own locus and mode of being is beyond what we can call personal and is, I confess, beyond my imagining. So we focus instead on the second question—does our present experience give us positive clues to thinking about a successor locus of continuity?

I believe that the notion of sacramental personhood provides those clues in two ways. First, it supplies a broad perspective of the process of personal development that can plausibly be seen to survive bodily death. Second, it exemplifies specific features of personal life that already embody a kind of transcendence. Let us look at both.

The broad perspective of sacramental personhood is that during the course of this life the function of the body as locus of experiential continuity is gradually but definitely shifted over to the personal identity that we develop over time, that our personhood accrues something like "critical mass" which we utilize to interpret, process, and incorporate subsequent experience. An active "I" emerges and takes charge in more and more of our development, and it is certainly conceivable and, I will argue, logically plausible that this "I" continues to relate within wider communities of significance that come into view when the limitations of embodied existence fall away.

It may be objected that we are talking about apples and oranges. A body

is physical, a personal identity is psychical, and one cannot perform the function of the other. I answer that one cannot *be* the other, but both can and do perform, albeit differently, the *same personal function*—namely, to serve as the locus of experiential continuity. This we know from personal experience this side of the grave. I cannot write a paper like this without a physical body and brain, but they do not illumine the sense of this paper, neither what it says nor its place in a wider community of interpretation that is shaped by the formative power of ideas and values. The most significant part of the experience of a conference like this occurs because of meanings that derive from our particular community of enterprise, our chosen work. To be sure, that significance is attended by our embodied existence and in a specific geographical location, but the primary experience of the conference, its significance for us, is a function of intellectual community.

It is true that in our *present* life the physical body is something like a linchpin that holds together the whole range of personal experience. When it is gone, our current experience is no longer held together, and so it stops. This is certainly true, but it does not answer our question; it decisively poses the question of a successor locus of continuity. We are not arguing for the continuation of life as held together in a bodily locus. We are suggesting that the breadth and depth of significance that accrues in the life of the person—that even now begins to serve as the locus of continuity of significance—achieves enough “personal” substance and definition to continue as a successor locus of experiential continuity. Just as a snowball accrues size by building on itself, so personal significance accrues richer levels of meaning by building on itself. As the dimensions of significance wax, the role of physicality wanes until it simply disappears at what we call death. At that point, I am suggesting, the accrued significance that characterizes personal life continues on like a plane that has achieved enough uplift under its wings to fly after its wheels are withdrawn from contact with the runway. R. B. Perry reports that William James developed this conviction in the last decade of his life.

As James grew older he came to *believe* in immortality. In 1904 he had acquired a feeling of its “probability.” Although he did not feel a “rational need” of it, he felt a growing “practical need.” What was this practical motive? In explaining why, he was now, late in life, acquiring the belief for the first time, he said, “because I am just getting fit to live.” . . . With his temperamental love of the living, his affectionate sympathies, and his glowing moral admirations, he had come more and more to feel that death was a wanton and unintelligible negation of goodness. (Fontinell 214)

We cannot, of course, give a “proof” of this claim, but a proof is not required. If our continued existence in this life from moment to moment requires that we acknowledge an ontological potency which we cannot explain, then surely we cannot hope to understand continued existence beyond this life without some similar ontological potency that sustains our capacity for personal experience and that remains mysterious to us, at least from our present perspective. We need not fear being faulted by the unreasonable criterion of not making the world to come more clear than the present world. We already have experiential evidence of a successor locus of continuity in the making as our personal experience comes to be influenced more by our personal identities than by generic physicality. This makes it at least plausible to believe that continuity of experience after physical death is as possible as the absolute cessation of experience.

To buttress the case for a successor locus of continuity, I now move to four specific observations about ordinary human experience. We begin by noting that the word “death” refers to experiences of termination but not experiences of absolute termination. The simple reason is that we have no experience of absolute termination. When death refers to someone other than oneself, it means only the cessation of physical life such that physical presence becomes impossible, as opposed to farewells which do not foreclose the possibility of future physical presence. Our experience of someone else’s death, then, is not the experience of their absolute termination of all experience. Our loss of the possibility of physical presence occasions the question of whether their experience continues in a nonphysical way. The claim of absolute termination of other lives goes beyond anything that our experience warrants.

But what of the experience of our own death? We know in advance that our death will be the event of the terminal loss of rootage in the bio-eco community. We also know, as Epicurus pointed out, that we will not experience that event in terms of other experience in which the body persists as our locus of continuity. Leaving aside that curious event of our physical death, we do have experience of mini-deaths in those irretrievable losses that occur as we grow through the life-cycle. Losses such as the loss of childhood imposed on us, as it were, by a kind of natural inevitability like physical death itself. We leave aside here other losses—like the loss of innocence, in which our own wills are complicit—and focus on only those losses which we suffer whether we will them or not. Our experience of these losses is more like a transition than a termination. Such mini-deaths as we all have suffered have led to wider arenas of life—fuller forms of significance that transcended our previous state. The most dramatic of these transitions—from fetal to natal life,

the experience of being born—is beyond the recall of most of us but sets a tone for our existence which Hannah Arendt speaks of as “natality” (Arendt 179). We recognize its truth in such stories as the one that claims that Adam said to Eve as they were leaving the Garden of Eden, “My dear, we live in a time of transition.” If our experience of such deaths (irretrievable losses) as we have known is the experience of transition, does not transition become a more probable interpretation of physical death than absolute termination? At the very least, since we have no experience of absolute termination in ourselves or in others, and we do have experience of significant transitions associated with mini-deaths we have suffered in our life stories, the burden of proof would seem to lie on the claim of absolute termination.

A second experiential argument for the plausibility of life after death focuses on the dual quality of self-awareness. I am referring to W. E. Hocking’s distinction between excursive and reflective consciousness (Hocking 44–59). Excursive self-awareness occurs when we experience ourselves engaged in particular projects which have a beginning and an end and which coordinate with other projects that also have a temporal structure. Particular enterprises may subserve larger enterprises, but it is appropriate to ask about any of them the question “am I on schedule, on course, on track?” Our personal life, from this point of view, is the combination of all our particular excursions, properly ordered and coordinated.

But that is not the whole story because we also experience ourselves as the agent of reflective consciousness, in which we see the temporal structure of excursive experience against a backdrop of something like Santayana’s ontological mystery. From this perspective we evaluate our various excursions and choose between alternate excursions (i.e., we inhabit a transcendent context that includes all our excursions—past, current, and future—but is not itself simply another, albeit more comprehensive, excursion). Hocking’s reflective consciousness corresponds to what I have characterized as the community of spiritual quest, in which something like transcendence-consciousness predominates, even if its presence is felt more as a question than an answer. The persistence of that question is a form of actual experience and thus a mode of being that is endemic to our present personal life and must be included in any account of who we are. Like the ontological mystery that is closer to us than any particular phenomenon that we can perceive, our reflective consciousness is a form of transcendence which we experience as a matter of course and take for granted. Neither is it comparable to any kind of transcendence that can be characterized as a spatial or temporal phenomenon, and so both

go largely unnoticed in the space-time order to which our bodies are bound and our minds habituated.

A third feature of personal experience is its promissory character. It is in the nature of relationships that they tend to grow; it is in the nature of growing relationships that they take on deeper and more determinate significance within the tapestry of connections that comprise our communities of significance. At any given time, we can name significant fulfillments already achieved in our personal stories, but even these hold the promise of yet unfolding future fulfillments. A couple deeply in love, celebrating their golden anniversary, even with the deep interweaving of their affections and lives of the past fifty years, is likely to feel that their love has a future that is only betokened by their past. The sacramental dimension, the accrual and promise of fuller experience, is the way of personal life. Its momentum typically increases as the remaining time of embodied life decreases. The logic of personal experience calls for continued development. This observation should be paired with our previous observation that even our experience of death, of irretrievable loss, is experienced as a transition to further experience. Many of our significant transitions are attended by the poignant experience of pain and loss, whose real significance, however, comes from love for and connectedness to the person or relationship whose loss we grieve but whose meaning for us is not exhausted in the form of communion that has now come to a close. My father's physical death occurred fifty-three years ago, but he has never been absent from me and, indeed, our relationship has grown in the intervening years. Loss is not without its promise and its real future—that is part of the promise of personal experience.

At this point we need to emphasize that the promissory character of significant experience is not a metaphysical inevitability, not an abstract truth about us that guarantees an afterlife. The logic of personal experience shows that it is possible to live in such a way that we never achieve the critical mass of personhood that can continue as part of ongoing communities of significance. Hocking suggests this when he says that we have “immortality” rather than “immortality.”

It may well be that the survival of death is not a foregone conclusion, as if each person were doomed to everlastingness. The soul is certainly not endowed, as Plato thought, with the fixed, substantial degreeless reality of the atom. It possesses, we think, not immortality but immortality. It depends upon itself what degree of realness it comes to possess. Immortality may be “put on”; one may also put on mortality. (154)

From our understanding of personal experience, the difference between immortality and mortality is the difference between a person who grows in constructive connectedness within and among the communities of significance and a person who lives in such way as to negate all constructive connectedness in his or her life experience. In short, we are speaking of the difference between a person who loves and is loved and a person who does not love. Love here is not merely or primarily a sentiment but a mode of life that participates constructively in communities of significance. Narcissism, self-absorption, prevents any significant personal self from emerging because it chooses to subvert all the potential significance of experience into the barrenness of virulent egoism.⁴ This kind of experience never accrues abiding significance but only produces negative consequences for others. A life of this sort is a wasted opportunity to become a person, and thus it becomes a kind of “waste product” that has no future in the personal world. Death is an end, but it is anticlimactic, for the real end was the forfeiture of love, a kind of subtle ongoing suicide that only mimics personal life but never allows it to become real. This line of thinking is consistent with our notion of what personhood is, and it immediately gets around the question of the fate of the wicked in the afterlife. They have no afterlife because they have no real personhood. Theologically we do not have to imagine a God who glories in eternal punishment, surely a small-minded projection of our emotional need for vengeance, but we can focus instead on an ultimate power that continually creates through the power of love and “lets go” whatever does not become real through love. Sacramental personhood suggests that love is the nature of the ontological mystery, the creative power that sustains personal becoming into ever richer and wider modes of personal life.

This observation about love, far from being an abstract generalization, can be illustrated by our final observation which focuses the personal meaning of memory—our way of bringing the past into the present and thereby contributing substantially to the significance of the present. This is another commonplace experience that we usually do not associate with the question of life after death, perhaps because we tend to want evidence of life after death in terms similar to the space-time character of present experience. (Certainly this hankering is behind much of the “psychical research” that looks into the authenticity of various alleged manifestations of “contact” with the “other side.”) But memory shows us that the past is present in our personal experience. The web of memories weaves our communities of significance. Without memory there would be no “significance” but only a disconnected sequence of atomistic stimulus-response events strung out as “one damn thing after another.” Locke was right in his strong connection between personal

identity and memory (bk. 2, ch. 27). For our purposes, all we need to note is that even now in our personal experience the past, though gone from us in its phenomenal actuality, is not dead but present with us in a living way. Memory here takes on a significance that goes beyond the mechanics of data-retrieval and all the neuroscientific theories that try to explain how our brains actually pull it off. On the personal level, memory holds us within the vital relationships that we have experienced in our communities of significance and thereby sustains us in our particular identities, even as they are progressing. Following up the theme of love as the power to sustain and develop our vital connections in communities of significance, we might say that the personal significance of memory is nothing other than the work of love. *Eros*, *philia*, and *agape* are all there, and the variations on those themes tell what is most important about us. To be a person at all, we experience the chronic resurrection of the past. What is significant for us, but gone, is not forgotten, and what is not forgotten is not dead but lives. To paraphrase Pogo, "We have met the resurrected one, and he is us." We are all living examples of life after death. Precisely how it happens now—and how it will continue to happen in the future, even after the death of our bodies—we cannot say. But that it *does* happen now is as evident as the patent testimony of our personal experience that our "shining present" is illuminated by the rich trajectories of our becoming. We are constituted as persons by the work of love in the continual overcoming of death. Personal experience, then, gives us abundant evidence that what is irretrievably lost in physical terms is alive and well in personal terms through our experience of memory—love's minion whose creative work we are drawn into as comakers of our personal selves and as beneficiaries of an ontological potency that we cannot explain but constantly experience.

This discussion of life after death has relied exclusively on the view of the person that I have called sacramental because persons are constituted by a manifold of living relations that are sustained and developed in our present experience in ways that suggest that a successor locus of continuity of personal experience is possible. After noting (a) that our actual experience of death in others and ourselves is not the experience of absolute cessation but is the experience of the question of personal transcendence and transition to richer modes of experience, we observed (b) that in our own experience the transcendent dimension is regularly present in the reflective self as the backdrop for all our time-bound excursive endeavors. We also observed (c) that the promissory character of personal experience demonstrates that our significant presents call for and are met with fulfillments whose specific shape we cannot know in advance, and (d) that personal memory shows us the commonplace actuality

of experiencing in life what in space-time terms is dead. I have appealed to no authority beyond ordinary human experience. There has been no discussion of heaven or hell as regions of a transcendent geography, as common personal experience gives us no grounds for projecting a cartography of the beyond save as metaphorical expressions of the qualitative character of survival experience. Even in the metaphorical realm, my view has eliminated hell without having to adopt universalism, thereby obviating a sterile theological debate. It is possible to subvert love thoroughly through self-absorption and thus forfeit one's personhood. Refusing to own any constructive relations within communities of significance is the same as refusing to become a self. Any form of survival that is intelligible and desirable requires the continued development of those connections—the enlargement of the communion in which sacramental persons, even now, live and grow. Our best clue to discerning what we shall be is to attend carefully to what we already are.

NOTES

1. For a fine bibliographical essay on the topic, see Paul Edwards, ed., *Immortality* (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 316–37. Two engaging works not included in Edwards essay are W. E. Hocking, *The Meaning of Immortality in Human Experience* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957) and Eugene Fontinell, *Self, God, and Immortality: A Jamesian Investigation* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1986).

2. See, for example, J. G. Fichte's "sermonic" presentation of Kant's anthropology in *The Vocation of Man* (New York: The Library of Liberal Arts, 1956), especially book three, "Faith."

3. In Meditation III Descartes argues that since his own thinking is not the cause of his existence he must attribute his existence to a transcendent power, God. Schleiermacher argues that the "feeling of absolute dependence" is a "universal element in life," and effectively replaces all the traditional "so-called proofs of the existence of God." *The Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1960), pp. 133–34. Tillich interpreted God ontologically as the "ground of being" while Heidegger interpreted the human condition as *Dasein*, "being-in-the-world."

4. For a fuller statement of this interpretation of evil, see Scott Peck, *People of the Lie: Encounter With Evil in Everyday Life* (New York: Simon, 1983).

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