

Religion and Culture by Paul Tillich: Lecture XXIV

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Transcribed by JJ Warren and Michaela Durst

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At the end of Thursday's lecture I spoke about three artistic functions, and I will go back to this because I think it's not only helpful to understand the different theories of art but also important for the valuation of a special work of art. These three functions were the cognitive, the anticipatory, and the expressive, and I will speak about the three of them in this order.

The cognitive function: If you understand "cognitive" in terms of what is usually called cognitive in the scientific realm and also in history and philosophy, and psychology and sociology, then of course the word cognitive shouldn't be used at all for the realm of art. If, however, the word cognitive is used in the sense of discovering a new dimension of reality and grasping it and taking it into our mind, then a cognitive element is present in every art. This can be proved directly in visual arts, where we have objects, even if they are non-representative—we have colors and forms, and these colors and forms are a definite subject-matter which have in themselves a representative character even if it is abstract and not naturalistic. And even sharper, we can find it in poetry and drama and novel, where we use words, and words also have always a denotative meaning: they denote some content, and this content appears to our minds, in the moment in which we hear these words.

In music, the situation seems to be more difficult, but even there we discover possibilities of self-revelation in reality through the different instruments, including the human voice, or as the old Pythagoreans called it, we discover the numbers which are the basis for musical reception and understanding. |

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In all these cases, it's *not* only a matter of emotion but it's also a matter of receiving a dimension of reality. This reception could be covered with the word "cognitive." But I am very liberal in this respect, as we have to be liberal with respect to language today, because it is so distorted that we have almost to save every word before we can use it, from these distortions. In any case, if you tell me I am used to using the word cognitive for scientific and quasi-scientific scholarly approaches, then we cannot use it for art—but if you say "cognitive" means discovery of reality in whatever dimension it may be, then the word can be used. So don't stick, in this respect, to the word cognitive; if you cannot liberate it from its scientific connotation, then it cannot be used. If you can, then I think we do good to use it for *all* ways in which realities, or their dimensions, are used. That is

the first point I want to make so that no criticism comes from a mere semantic problem, namely the word cognitive.

This element of grasping reality in artistic forms is expressed in a special type of art which we usually call naturalistic. Naturalistic means trying to give, in the artistic expression—be it by words, colors and lines, dance, music—something which is nearer to the ordinary encounter with reality in our daily life, or what some philosophers have called natural worldview.

Naturalism has a very interesting tension in itself. Take the naturalistic novels of the 19th century, people like Zola in France, or similar people following this school in presentday America. What do you find there? You find a description of realities, in nature and society and soul—soul especially in the 20th century psychological novel, for instance—which gives empirical reality. But it is not a scientific work; it is a work of art. [296] And by the work of art, if it is really a work of *art*—and there are great works of art in the naturalistic line—it becomes something else. This “something else” is the discovery of the artistic dimension, about which I will speak later.

The naturalistic art has the predominant emphasis on the cognitive element of art, on grasping reality, and fog forgets (this is the criticism which has often been made against it—and rightly) that the *artistic* form of grasping reality is not the ordinary form of scientific or daily-life approach but is another one, which is determined and should be determined by the artistic dimension. Now what this is I will discuss later when I come to artistic symbols.

The second function of art is the anticipatory one. This is the idealistic form, which has taken this element as the predominant one. What does that mean? The sharpest expression of this was given in the Neo-Kantian school of the 19th century, which is the classical school of bourgeois idealism and was predominant in all the Continental universities at least since the second half of the 19th century. In this school, the following construction was made. From Kant one learned that there is theoretical reason—describing the laws of nature; it has nothing to do with the other side: practical reason—describing the unconditional demand of the moral or, as he called it, the categorical imperative. Then there was a third, and this one was Kant’s critique of judgment, power of judgment, in which he deals with some realities in which the purely theoretical, namely the world as seen by Newton and Descartes, is reconciled with the ethical realm, namely man’s unconditional responsibility for his action under the categorical imperative. [The world was split in[to] [297] these two realms. Kant himself didn’t feel able to overcome definitively this fundamental split, which expresses our whole situation in industrial society—I will return to this. But he said there are at least possible ideas, postulates, which may indicate possible reconciliations. The one is the organic matter: in organisms, in nature, there is an element of meaning in spite of the fact that they also are subject to the laws of nature. We have that problem through the whole 19th and 20th centuries, and we have it today in biology as the fight between those who approach biology in terms of mechanical equations and those who approach it in terms of a gestalt biology and psychology—*Gestalt* = living structure, a living whole, but the word “gestalt” is usually in English also.

This is the one realm, in which mechanical necessity and ethical freedom and meaning are partly united. Kant didn’t say they *are*; his criticism was much too cautious to make a dogmatic statement about it, but he says they can be considered *as if* they were a reconciliation.

The other realm, in which he saw this reconciliation, was the artistic. In the artistic realm there is also empirical reality, experience of our world in all its finitude, which is

subjected to the laws of nature, which is used in order to express meaning. And that is what art does; therefore a work of art has the same character as a living being: in them, purpose is actualized (or as we would say today, better, meaning is actualized). It is the union of the theoretical and the practical.

Now this was the idea of the Neo-Kantian school, which derived from this its theories of art. These theories are thoroughly idealistic—also a word which needs different ways of salvation!—|one way is not enough, so distorted is it. But in the Neo-Kantian school [298] it can be used in the sense of anticipation of true essential reality—and “essence” is the right translation of the Platonic word “idea.” Ideas are essences; therefore idealism is the theory which believes that we are able to produce essential reality, reality as it essentially is and therefore ought to be. In art such a reality is anticipated; otherwise it can’t be found, because nature is subjected to the laws of nature, which are mechanical, and the moral imperative is in opposition to everything [that is] nature in man and outside of man, but reconciliation does exist only in art. I remember I myself still lived in the period in which Neo-Kantianism was still at its top in philosophy as well as theology, and I remember one sentence written by the Neo-Kantian Windelband, who wrote the still best history of philosophy, which I always recommend—thanks heaven it is translated!—it is the history of *problems* of philosophy, and not what nonsense this philosopher said against which another philosopher said something else. This kind of textbook history of philosophy is itself nonsense. But a real history of philosophy is to show the development of the problems, and that is what Windelband did and what all these Neo-Kantians were aware [of]—they did it in a wonderful way, mostly.—Now there I read the sentence: “to rest our head, burdened by problems, in the lap of art.” This was the idealistic expression of interpretation of art. It is rest because here the reconciliation is reached which is *not* reached in the theoretical realm and certainly not in the unconditional ethical demand, which is always in contradiction with our inclinations, with nature outside and inside [299] of us. But in art there is |anticipatory reconciliation. Now this is the reason for the idealistic art, and although for ecclesiastical reasons I have to fight against this art most vehemently, because they believe that this is religious art— which is not, as I will show later on—I must say there is *also truth* in this understanding of art. If you experience the infinite beauty of artistic expressions in the idealistic period—for instance the great painting of the early and high Renaissance—then you can say: here something is fulfilling of human potentialities by artistic anticipation which cannot be fulfilled in reality. It is anticipation. I just heard a few days ago again Mozart’s *Don Juan*, and here again I had the feeling it is dance in heaven, so to speak: the melodies are transcending the empirical possibilities of existence; it is a reality in these melodies which in its beauty and in its power of anticipating fulfilment is the rest of the soul—even the day before a lecture! Now this shows the truth of the idealistic interpretation of art: the element of anticipation. And this element is in all art; no naturalistic work of art is a work of art if there is not this element, which is usually called beauty. Now we must be very cautious today with the word beauty, and I realize that not only I myself but most people avoid it carefully, because the word is one of those which have been deteriorized to cheap beauty, to a beautified naturalism which is the worst distortion of what art really is. Nevertheless the word beauty—in Greek *kalos*, which is always identified with *agathos*, with good—this shows there is an inner relationship between the good and the beautiful, for Greek thinking—and they knew something about these things. Therefore what the Greeks called *kalos* is something which is forever valid, even if the word “beautiful” and “beauty” have been badly deteriorized. | [300]

This is the second function of art. Now I come to the third and fundamental, which is embracing and decisive, namely the expressive function. Art “expresses” reality. The word expression can be used in a very large metaphysical sense. If this is done, we can do what Spinoza did who said that the substance of reality is expressed in the modes. The substance—of course, for him, the divine ground of everything, which has several attributes; and then there are the modes: all the finite things in the world. In this philosophy, which theologians sometimes dismiss with the left hand with the word “pantheism” without giving a meaningful definition of this word!—then perhaps the left hand wouldn’t be enough!—in any case, in this great philosophy which Spinoza represents, we can say we have a system of expression, namely expressing the divine ground of [or] substance of reality in everything finite, and therefore everything finite—as already in Aristotle—is in a drive back towards the infinite ground, a drive which Spinoza calls the “intellectual love” which becomes actual only in man.

Now this doctrine of expression can be applied to art. It is a kind of ontological background of an understanding of this third function of art, namely to express reality.

What is expressed? Three things. First, objectively: the material of the finite, of the finite reality in time and space, which is used—in words or pictures or musical sounds or other expressions. Secondly, the expression of the encounter of him who creates, or in hearing and seeing recreates, the expression of subjectivity. And the third—and for this reason I brought Spinoza’s philosophy in—the expression of *ultimate* reality. And the way in which *ultimate* reality is expressed is the *style* of a work of art. I will come to this; style is of fundamental importance. The style of a work of art is an expression of the encounter of the artist with ultimate reality, even if he expresses ultimate reality in atheistic terms. [301]

Now in this sense we can say, in this third function—to express—we have reached, more than in the two others, the heart of the artistic function. Its greatness is its expressive power, and the basis of its expressive power is the encounter between the creative artist and the reality which he encounters.

This is the first consideration which I want to make. Now I come on this basis to the way in which the expression is done. This is *symbol*. I have already spoken last semester about religious symbols. We have to come back to them if we relate them to artistic ones. But I didn’t speak about artistic symbols and their relation to religious ones. That is the next thing we must do, especially if we agree that the expressive function of art is its basic function and its most characteristic and innermost function.

Let me say a little about symbols generally. There are, first, two groups of symbols, the one which should be called signs, but since we cannot do this—the linguistic development has ruined the word symbol as [it has] most other words, and we must walk all the time through this slum of a ruined language which we must move in, in modern times—for very different reasons, which we will explain later. Since this is so, we must speak of reflective symbols, psychological symbols, and, most important, of representative symbols. [302]

Reflective symbols are symbols used in our reflexive [*sic*] and dealing with empirical reality. This can be, in the technical realm—red or green light at the corner of the street; it can be in language— words which are so much defined that they have only one meaning; letters which we use in order to write words; mathematical signs, which are called “symbols” with a special emphasis, and often with a kind of mystical feeling, as if they represented more than their definition says: I myself felt so, very much, when I first learned at school about the root of minus one, which is of course an impossible and very mysterious thing! But it is nothing but the definition the mathematician gives to it; it is not a representative symbol for the mystical depth of reality, but is a reflective symbol

to calculating a higher mathematics.

Then the word is used very much for psychological symbols. I would also call them signs and not symbols, i.e. the contents of dreams, the contents of the unconscious which comes out in the associations of the room of the psychoanalyst. These are called symbols-of-the-unconscious. They use material of the conscious world, but they express something else than what these things mean, in the context of the consciousness. They mean relationships to parents, they mean feelings of hate, of despair, of fear, etc. They mean something which in their reality they don't mean at all, where only some slight connotations abuse [?] this character. They are signs for the state of the unconscious. But they do not represent anything else than the state of the unconscious. Therefore I would suggest— but hopelessly, and so I had better not do it!—that they shouldn't be called symbols either, they should be signs of the unconscious, and nothing else. |

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The third group are representative symbols. Here we come to the real realm of the symbolic. They can be divided into (1) linguistic symbols—words can be only signs, but as we shall see, in poetry they can become also symbols by a special process. Then (2) artistic symbols; (3) historical-political (or briefly, political) symbols; and (4) religious symbols. In these cases the symbols are not exchangeable signs, signs which in both cases, in the reflective and the psychological area, can be exchanged because the reality to which they point has nothing to do with the subject matter they use. The green color has nothing to do with right-of-way. The horse in a dream has nothing to do with a real horse. Therefore it can be exchanged for other psychological signs of the state of the unconscious.

Representative symbols, however, cannot be exchanged. Now this is clear first in language. If words were nothing but well defined mathematical signs, as some logical positivists want to make them into, then of course they would belong to signs of reflective symbols and not to representative symbols. But no word in the living language of man has this character. Every word has almost endless connotations which change in the period of history, in the individual, and even in the life of the individual in a special moment. These connotations are decisive. They make that even the most prosaic speech, for instance a lecture like this, does not move in signs only, but has also a symbolic quality in it: the words which you hear, produce in each of you connotations which are not in *my* mind, but which are decisive for the meaning *of* the words and of such a lecture. Sometimes one should be conscious of this, especially as a preacher, that it is not only the meaning the words have, but it is also their power coming out of the person of the minister or out of the connotations, |which influences the congregations. Then if they are very much influenced and impressed, and ask for a copy of the sermon, don't believe that this is the same thing, because the connotative power, not only of the words but also of the rhythm of the language, of the voice, of all these elements which belong to the language, come into it. And very often in the written or printed sermon, the symbolic power which was present when it was given, has vanished! This is only an example to show you the dialectical character of language, that it always unites meaning and power— as [does] all spiritual life, by the way.

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Then I come to a political—or if you want, the historical-political—symbols, mostly persons and outstanding events. They are subject-matter in themselves. They are empirical. And they could be photographed, psychographed, phonographed in every moment of their existence. But they wouldn't change the situation if they have become symbols. A figure like Lincoln in this country is an empirical figure, with whom all this could have been done. But he is much more than this. He is representative for one of the funda-

mental meanings of the existence of this country, and, I personally would feel, for the *best* meaning of this country. Now this is symbolic and goes far beyond what can be said empirically about it. Of course the empirical material is the presupposition—without his actually having lived and done this, in history, he never could have become a political symbol; but insofar as he *is* a symbol, he transcends his empirical reality by far.

And so it is also with special events. The battle between the Huns and the Franks, in the [Catalaunian fields—I think it was 411 or so—has been very often painted and described. And it was painted as a double battle, a battle on earth and a battle even in the realm of the air, where the spirits of the dead were continuing the fight. Now this is symbol, this means this was the decisive battle in which Western culture was saved for more than a thousand years. Therefore, far beyond the empirical events, this battle represents the existence of Western society. This is a political symbol. [305]

Now I don't need to go into this; you understand immediately that these representative symbols are not only signs; they participate in the power of that which they represent and which has happened.

The same is true of religious symbols, and at the time when we spoke about them I said that they are the *only* in which we can speak about that which is ultimate and transcends the material reality, the subject-matter which is used *in order* to symbolize the ultimate. All these symbols are taken from persons and events and qualities and acts which happen in time and space. But they all, if they are used to symbolize the ultimate, get a quite different meaning.

But they cannot be exchanged, because they express, in their very nature, in their double nature, pointing-beyond-itself—namely the relationship of a social group to the ultimate— which cannot be expressed in any other way.

These are the common characteristics of all symbols of the last type, the representative type, which are not signs but genuine symbols. To this realm belong the artistic symbols, and I will speak more about them next time.