

THE COURAGE TO BE: Chapter 6

COURAGE AND TRANSCENDENCE

[The earlier chapters of the book introduce key elements of his thought: For example, to fully grasp how crucial Tillich finds this concept of faith it's helpful to remember that elsewhere he has explained that we can only have this encounter, we can only really meet God, in the Present. This is because the past and the future do not 'exist'. The past has gone, the future is our projection, the present is the reality. In the present when we meet God we are transported to Eternity, because Eternity is always the real present. So this moment of encounter and true faith is also a participation in God's power of being and so participation in eternity.

Again, although not an *Existentialist* in the technical sense, he uses their terms often and deconstructs them. Also his association with the Critical Theorists leads him to draw heavily on concept of *Alienation*.

So, he talks of alienation as Anxiety, there being three types which are not pathological but simply the human condition. First, we are anxious about Death or fate because it speaks of the non-being of our very ontic self. Second, moral anxiety about Guilt and condemnation – do we have any worth? Third, and this is especially true of our era, spiritual anxiety about Meaningless and emptiness – doubt as to whether our life really means anything? These three all interrelate.

Human kind fear death as not being there, the danger of finite non-being. We can have this fear because we are aware that whilst alive we do have Being - we have an is-ness, so we fear an is-not-ness. We are limited by our finite lives. But God is much more than all this. God is the absolute negation of all this non-being, for God is not just a being (like us but supreme) but is beyond that as the very power of Being, that which allows all beings to be. As they are finite they fear death as not being, but they sense that there is a depth in all beings around them that is beyond just being in existence but is the very Ground of Being. So Tillich utilises the phrase 'the Ground of our Being' (from Eckhart). Beyond this he says, all our words about God are only symbolic for God is beyond finite words. So all theology and theological talk is limited to the symbolic.]

“Courage is the self-affirmation of being in spite of the fact of non-being.”

Affirming oneself either as part of the whole or in individual selfhood.

Courage takes on anxiety in its three forms:

1. Non-being experienced in the anxiety of fate and death
2. Non-being experienced in the anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness.
3. Non-being experienced in the anxiety of guilt and condemnation.

To have this courage requires rooting in power of being that is greater than the power of oneself & power of one's world. Religion is being grasped by power of being-itself.

Power of Being as source of Courage to be: mystical experience

If participation is dominant then relation to Being-itself is mystical, if individualisation is dominant then relation has personal character. If both poles are accepted and transcended the relation to being-itself has the character of Faith.

Mysticism: individual strives for participation in Ground of Being approaching identification/unity with it. (Hinduism: from world's perspective it appears as self-negating, but self-affirmation from ultimate's perspective) Non-being is then no threat because finite being is non-being. So death becomes negation of a negative. There is punishment through Karma but cannot be condemnation. Courage is taking non-being of the finite upon oneself to strive for ultimate being.

Divine-Human encounter: here is a more personal encounter/communion with the source of courage. It is the Protestant's person to person relationship with God. Luther says this happens *trotz*, 'in spite of' all challenges around. [He who would valiant be!] This depends on neither popes nor Councils. Unlike later Existentialism this is not individual courage rooted in oneself at all. You can be confident about your existence only after ceasing to base your confidence in yourself. So it is not threatened by the loss of one's world or loss of oneself.

Guilt and the Courage to accept acceptance.

This is key to Protestant courage. Luther's age was full of anxiety of guilt and condemnation so certainty of divine forgiveness gave them the courage to be. Luther said, 'he who is unjust is just' (i.e. who is unacceptable is accepted) It is not the Existentialist courage derived from self but derived from that which infinitely transcends oneself. Forgiveness is not experienced as abstract assertion but

fundamental in the experience of encounter with God. ('A wall to which I confess cannot forgive me') This acceptance also transcends medical healing for only Being-itself can overcome non-Being.

Fate and Courage to accept acceptance.

In West belief in immortality of soul has largely replaced Christian symbol of resurrection, but is a mixture of courage and escape – because it denies the reality of death by continuing the finite into the infinite which is illogical – i.e. we must own death as non-being. Socrates *did* own death as real non-being but, with all stoics, he believed we participate in both orders, the temporal and the eternal, whereas Christianity holds that we are estranged from our essential being – i.e. we are not free to realise our essential being but bound to contradict it. We believe we are not immortal but accepted nevertheless by God into communion with God – the ultimate encounter in which we must respond to God's acceptance by accepting it. cf.: Luther's non-being was experienced by him as condemnation (alienation), but his encounter with God brought certainty of transcendent being in which he now had communion and so shared in God's eternity.

Absolute Faith and the Courage to be.

There is faith in the Mystical Union and in Personal Encounter but neither constitutes faith per se, because Faith is the state of being grasped by the power of being-itself. It is the experience of this power. When we know ourselves absolutely transcended by the ultimate power of being-itself, and when we know that power has grasped us and accepted our finitude then both the mystical experience and the personal encounter become united in experience of faith. i.e. We do not experience salvation through faith, but salvation comes through faith *by grace*. It is not in our own gift!

So in the light of all this, Chapter 6 of *the Courage to Be* goes on now to ask: is there a courage which can conquer the anxiety of meaningless and doubt? – If life is as meaningless as death, if guilt as questionable as perfection, if being is no more meaningful as nonbeing, can Faith resist all this Meaninglessness? Or do we despair?

But perhaps even to face up to this despair, and to acknowledge the reality of these questions as the human condition is evidence itself of finding oneself on the border line of the courage to be? To deny the reality of the questions is just escapism from the human condition. But to accept this negative is an act of faith in the positive because this negative can only be perceived as the opposite of the positive (eternal being) which we must therefore have considered. The vitality which can stand its ground is what St Paul is talking about when using the symbolism of the 'armour of faith' – "with full exertion, stand your ground!" (Eph 6: 13 NJB) and perhaps it is that courage to face these consequences of being a finite human being that Jesus faces when he cries, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt 27: 46) Tillich writes, "To accept this power of acceptance consciously is the religious answer of absolute faith, of a faith which has been deprived by doubt of any concrete content, which nevertheless is faith and the source of the most paradoxical manifestation of the courage to be." It is a scepticism which is not found in the mystical experience. It also transcends the subject/object distancing of the person-to-person encounter of early Protestantism. And all is grace because it is God, the Ground and Power of Being-itself, which offers the self-affirmation that empowers our self-affirmation in the face of non-being. So every act of courage is a manifestation of the Ground of Being.

Theism transcended.

Everything he has said about God, apart from naming God as the Ground of Being, can only be symbolic language. [In his writing Tillich is concerned that modern people are so distanced from the words, stories and symbols that Christians use for their experiences that they just don't work any more for them. So he tells us, if a word like 'heaven' does not work for you any more because we don't believe in a god 'up there' then be careful not simply to jump to thinking of a god 'out there' in another realm, but go back to the experience of God and find other terms. On that basis he looks now at how our theology has got itself bogged down in ways of thinking that are not longer applicable to our times.] So:

The USA President will use the theistic phrase, 'God bless America' when he's trying to stress a particular mood, even if this idea of what God's about is bankrupt – so he jettisons that sort of mood inducing pseudo-god.

Next he looks at the idea of a person to person encounter with God. It can imply that God is a person like us but the encounter is clearly outside the Subject/Object relationship. It also implies that the two are independent of one another which is inadequate.

A third type of theism, says Tillich, is beloved of theologians ~ Theological Theism. This is the sort of understand of God which perceives God to be more related to the world than the second understanding of theism, but here is a being beside others – perhaps the most important part, but a part of the whole of existence and being. It might even talk of God as the Supreme Being. It might adopt Martin Buber's notion of relationship as an 'I-Thou' for our relation with God. But this sees God as either an object or a subject of a relationship. If God is the Subject of the relationship it deprives me of my subjectivity because he is all-powerful and all-knowing. To be made a mere object denies our freedom of intention and thus personhood and a God who does that to us, says Nietzsche, is dead or has to be killed. Atheism on this basis is justified. This leaves us with us becoming the subject and looking upon God as our object – the absurdity of which leads us to realise that God therefore cannot be a being alongside other beings, even if a supreme being. Therefore God cannot Exist because that would be to subject God to the realm of the finite as a being *within* beingness. So we must move on to realising that God is beyond all this – as Tillich says, God must be 'the Ground of *all* Being'. The God beyond 'God'. Tillich does however acknowledge that theology acts as a scaffolding to our experiences and our interpretations of them.

The God above God & the Courage to be.

Mysticism helps us to realise that God transcends our attempts to make God our object, which theology tries to do as soon as it pretends it's talk about God is more than merely symbolic or metaphorical. Mysticism helps us see that God is not a being alongside other beings too. In every divine-human encounter the God above 'God' is the hidden presence. There is therefore an illogicality of God as Subject/Object in an I/Thou relationship.

The Bible repeatedly makes it clear that acceptance by God is only effective if the

human being accepts that acceptance. It is totally dependent on grace and absolutely mutual ~ hence all the negotiation of the patriarchs with God. It acknowledges the paradox of prayer where we ‘speak’ to someone who cannot be spoken ‘to’ as if a ‘Thou’ when that Thou is nearer to the I than I is to itself. [cf. Romans 8:26, “we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.”]

So God is not ‘a part of’ and is not the ‘whole of’ (since that is merely pan-theism) but God is the ground of the whole. This acceptance of the God above the God of theism allows us not to lose our personhood in the mystic’s unification with the ground, as if God the One absorbs or swallows us up; whilst also guarding us from the loss of our world’s reality since it offers person-to-person individualisation in that participatory relationship with the Ground. It brings together the two aspects of how we relate to that Ground of all Being. God is what allows us to be a being while our being is expressed in existence in this finite world and confined to it, whereas the God above God is not in this world as object, subject, or being, but as the power of being, in which all things hold together.

The Church must therefore rise above its devotion to its concrete symbols, whilst still being allowed to use them when an absolutely relevant expression, or to jettison them if not. So for example, the symbol of the virgin birth if taken to symbolise 1. a God who comes in from another world or 2. a Jesus as a man who is not absolutely a man in the way we are, then it must be jettisoned.

So the Christian must live without the safety of words and concepts, cult or theological constructs, but must move in the depths of all of them [cf Bonhoeffer’s ‘Religionless Christianity’]. We must adore the God above God who is the power of being and in which all these things participate and of which they are fragmentary expressions. (and only this).

Tillich ends chapter 6, and so the book, with:

“The courage to be is rooted in the God who appears when God has disappeared in the anxiety of doubt.”

Pauck: Courage to be – part of larger world (societal); to stand along (to be self); to let self be upheld by unknown mystery. Laurie Green. 2021.