What, exactly, does Niebuhr mean by "the evil of nature," as distinct from "the evil in man" (*An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*: 219; cf. 228, where he speaks of "the conflicts of nature and sin"; also 230, where he says, "there are processes in nature which are in obvious conflict with the higher human purposes")?

I gather that he must mean essentially what is usually meant by "natural evil," as distinct from "moral evil," give or take on whether sin is, or is not, to be reckoned a mode of moral evil. But, then, if this is a correct interpretation, "the evil in nature" covers everything contrary to the good or frustrative of its realization that has a source in the freedom of creatures other than human beings, or other creatures similarly endowed with moral freedom. In other words, whereas good always means harmony—i.e., unity in diversity, and, in that sense, order—evil always involves conflict—i.e., disunity in diversity and, in that sense, disorder or anarchy. (Niebuhr nowhere seems to reckon with monotony or boredom, ennui or inspidity, as the opposite extreme of evil understood as conflict.) Such disorder, then, as results from the freedom of creatures other than human or morally free creatures is "the evil of nature."

Niebuhr is not at all explicit, however, in attributing freedom to nonhuman creatures. Speaking of "Hebrew spirituality," he says, "The existence of evil was, on the one hand, a mystery, and was, on the other hand (perhaps too unqualifiedly), attributed to human perversity. The myth of the fall makes the latter explanation too unqualifiedly in the sense that it derives all the inadequacies of nature from man's disobedience, a rather too sweeping acceptance of human responsibility for nature's ruthlessness and for the brevity and mortality of natural life" (27 f.). Significantly, the only option to explaining evil by human perversity is to accept it as a mystery—and that even though Niebuhr is well aware that human responsibility for evil cannot be reasonably taken to explain it.

But if this is a point at which Niebuhr's need for a metaphysics of "pervasive freedom" becomes only too clear, there seems little question that his thinking about evil, especially natural evil, converges closely toward that of just such a metaphysics.

Significantly, Niebuhr's insistence upon the distinction between finitude and sin does not keep him from explaining the "impossibility" of love in history by saying, "Men living in nature and in the body will never be capable of the sublimation of egoism and the attainment of the sacrificial passion, the complete disinteredness which the ethic of Jesus demands" (31; cf. also 37, where he speaks of the "uncompromising attitude" of Jesus' ethic "toward all the impulses of nature," even though "it never condemns natural impulse as inherently bad").

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