

Reflections on H. R. Niebuhr's "Life is Worth Living"

1. The Argument

1.1. There is an implicit faith given with life itself.

1.2. This faith underlies three main domains: knowledge, conduct, and belief.

1.3. The great skeptical questions are: (1) with respect to knowledge, Is there anything real outside our consciousness? (2) with respect to conduct, Is there any right, or any wrong? and (3) with respect to belief, Is there any cause or being finally worth living and dying for?

1.4. Our implicit faith simply as human beings, without which we cannot live, has always already answered these questions affirmatively. So long as we engage in life, we must live by faith in reality and make distinctions between what is real and what is only apparent, what is true and what is false. Similarly, so long as we live and act, we must live by faith in right and distinguish between what is only apparently right and what is really so, and between what is right and what is wrong. And so, too, we cannot live at all without faith that life is finally worth living and without distinguishing between causes or beings that are finally worth living and dying for and those that are not.

1.5. Even so, our implicit faith may be deceived in many ways, in that what we take to be real beyond our consciousness may be only appearance or fiction; what we take to be right or wrong may be only apparently and not really so; and what we take to be finally worth living and dying for may not really but only apparently have such worth.

1.6. And so it is that our explicit faith requires to be made critical and rational. Although reason can never take the place of faith, which can be given up only by giving up life itself, reason can and should criticize and improve faith. Progress, in other words, is not from faith to reason, but from an explicit faith that is inherited and uncritical to an explicit faith that is more rational because it is examined and critical.

2. Some Comments on the Argument

2.1. What Niebuhr calls "faith," in the sense of the basic faith implicitly given with life itself and without which we cannot live, seems to function in much the same way as what Maurice calls "reason" (allowing, in doing so, that it may be called by some

other name). Just as reason, in Maurice's sense, lays hold of what is real, right, and worthy of worship, so faith, in Niebuhr's sense, does the same, laying hold of the real, the right, and the finally trust-/loyalty-worthy.

2.2. When Niebuhr asks, "What cause or being justifies all the pain and effort of living, the carrying on the work of civilization, the continuance of the human species?" is he not asking, in effect, what cause or being is genuinely worshipful, worship being understood as unreserved trust and unqualified loyalty?

2.3. If Niebuhr is right that "mature faith" in matters of conduct can assert, "There is a right, even though all my standards [of right] are but poor and imperfect and unrighteous approximations of its content," then, presumably, "mature faith" in the two other matters of knowledge and belief (in Niebuhr's sense) could assert something similar. Thus in the matter of knowledge, mature faith could assert, "There is a real, even though all my standards [of the real] are but poor and imperfect and unrighteous approximations of its content." And in the matter of belief, it could assert, "There is a cause or being finally worth living and dying for, even though all my standards [of what is finally worthy in this sense] are but poor and imperfect and unrighteous approximations of its content." But, then, how would such a "mature faith" in matters of belief differ, if at all, from the belief of which Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes speaks, i.e., the belief of those who "come to believe even more than they believe the very foundations of their own conduct that the ultimate good desired is better reached by free trade in ideas—that the best test of truth is the power of the thought [not, as he misleadingly puts it, to get itself accepted, but to prove itself worthy of acceptance!] in the competition of the market, and that truth is the only ground upon which their wishes safely can be carried out"?

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