

To be human is not merely to live but to live understandingly, and that not merely on one level but on two. On the primary level of self-understanding and life-praxis, we live only by somehow understanding ourselves in the proximate and ultimate settings of our lives and by believing and acting, and so leading our lives, accordingly. Thus our questions on this level are all the vital questions of life itself—of how to live and to live well, and how to live better; and in answering them, as we perforce do, we necessarily make or imply certain claims for the validity of our answers. Ordinarily, we can make good on the promises to others implied by such claims simply by appealing, on the same primary level, to what we and they, as members of our particular socio-cultural group, agree in accepting as valid, in the sense of true, good, beautiful, and so on. But whenever appeals on this first level are, for whatever reasons, insufficient to redeem our promises, we have no alternative, if we are to validate our claims so as to remain in communication with others, except to shift to the secondary level of critical reflection and proper theory. There the questions we have to pursue are no longer the *vital* questions that we ask and answer on the primary level of self-understanding and life-praxis, although such questions do and must continue to orient our inquiries, but rather the corresponding *theoretical* questions about the meaning of our answers and about the validity of the claims that we make or imply in answering them as we do.

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To be human is not only to live, but also to understand one's life and, within limits, to be free to lead it and responsible for doing so. Of course, in understanding one's life, one understands indefinitely more than oneself—not only all the others, human and nonhuman, without which one could not live at all, but also the encompassing whole of reality of which both oneself and all others are parts. But thus to live understandingly, and so also freely and responsibly, is precisely to lead one's life according to certain norms or principles of validity, whether authenticity and sincerity, or truth, goodness, and beauty. This means that one's very life as a human being involves asking certain questions—whether the existential question about the authentic

understanding of oneself and others in relation to the whole, or hardly less vital questions about the true, the good, and the beautiful. It also means, however, that the whole of one's life-praxis, and so whatever one thinks, says, or does, in effect answers these same questions, thereby making or implying certain corresponding claims to validity.

Our essential human capacity thus to live understandingly, however, is typically exercised not merely on one level but on two. On the primary level of self-understanding and life-praxis, it is exercised by asking and answering our several vital questions and by making or implying claims to validity in answering them. On the secondary level of critical reflection and proper theory, it is exercised by critically interpreting our answers in relation to our questions and by critically validating the claims to validity that our answers make or imply.

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To be human is not only to exist together with others, both human and nonhuman, but also to understand oneself and reality generally and, within limits, to be responsible for them. At the root of this responsibility is the distinctive freedom that is ours in consequence of our capacity for understanding both ourselves and others and the encompassing whole of reality of which we are all parts. Unlike other animals whose overall course of life is largely determined by species-specific instincts, we are "instinct poor." Not only the details of our lives but even the overall pattern they must follow if they are to be authentically human remain undecided simply by our membership in the human species and are left to our own freedom and responsibility to decide. To be sure, the freedom of anyone of us as an individual is always, in a way, preempted by the decisions already made by those who have gone before us in the particular society and culture into which we are born or within which it is given to us to become human. But while none of us can be socialized and acculturated without internalizing some already decided understanding of human existence, the very process of internalizing it serves to develop our capacity for understanding and therefore, under certain circumstances, for questioning the validity of our cultural inheritance. Thus we acquire the ability to ask, among other questions, the existential question of how we are to understand ourselves and

others in relation to the encompassing whole if ours is to be an authentic human existence.

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To be human is not only to live, but to live understandingly—to understand one's life in its proximate and ultimate settings and, within limits, to be free to lead it and responsible for doing so. But our capacity thus to live understandingly is typically exercised not merely on one level but on two. It is exercised on the primary level of self-understanding and life-praxis, where it consists in asking and answering a number of vital questions that we must somehow ask and answer else we could not understand ourselves and lead our lives at all. But we can never answer these vital questions without making or implying certain claims to validity in doing so. Thus, for example, if we somehow answer our vital question about the reality of our life and its settings, we unavoidably make or imply a claim to truth.

Much of the time, no doubt, our truth claims, as well as our other validity claims, are not particularly problematic, and we may discharge the obligation we assume in making or implying them while still remaining on the primary level of self-understanding and life-praxis. But any time we cannot validate our claims on this primary level, we have no alternative, if we are not to break off communication altogether, but to move to the secondary level of critical reflection and proper theory. At that level, living understandingly consists, not in asking and answering our several vital questions, as we do on the primary level, but rather in critically reflecting on the answers we there give to them: first of all, by critically *interpreting* our answers; and then, secondly, by critically *validating* the claims to validity that we make or imply in giving them. In other words, our questions on this secondary level are not the *vital* questions we ask and answer on the primary level, but rather certain *theoretical* questions oriented by our vital questions, which ask about what our answers really *mean* and about whether the claims that we make or imply for them are really *valid*.

Now, supposing that what is properly meant by the term "study" is the process constituted by asking and seeking to answer some question in a more or less deliberate, methodical, and reasoned way, we may say that studies, properly so-called, can be constituted at both levels of living understandingly.

They can be constituted at the primary level by asking our vital questions more or less deliberately, methodically, and reasonedlly; and they can be constituted at the secondary level by asking our corresponding theoretical questions in the same more or less deliberate, methodical, and reasoned way.

This means that religious studies, as constituted by explicitly asking somehow about the ultimate meaning of our existence, is not to be confused with religious studies as one form of the academic study of religion distinct both from such other studies of religion as may very well be included in other fields in the humanities and in the social sciences and from another such form properly called "theological studies." Whereas religious studies in the first sense belongs on the *primary* level of living understandingly, of self-understanding and life-praxis, and is constituted by somehow explicitly asking and seeking to answer the most vital of our vital questions, i.e., our existential question, religious studies in the second sense belongs on the *secondary* level of critical reflection and proper theory and is constituted by asking and seeking to answer the corresponding theoretical questions about the meaning of our religious answers and about the validity of the claims we make or imply in answering them.

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We must always understand both our language and the reasoning of which it is the expression in relation to the larger reality of life to which they belong. The different uses of language, like the different kinds of argument, arise in function of the various situations and activities of human existence in the world. Thus science, for instance, has its origin in the everyday situation where one is suddenly surprised by a phenomenon that one's previous experience had not led one to expect. It is to deal with this life-situation and the question it poses that the whole enterprise of scientific explanation comes to be. Therefore, the logic of scientific language and reasoning, including the criteria or standards of judgment governing them, is the logic implicit in this special function. Insofar as any statement or argument enables us so to understand our experience as to predict particular future events, and thus avoid unpleasant and maybe even dangerous surprises, it to that extent fulfills its original human purpose and is scientifically valid.

In a parallel way, we may understand the logic of our moral language and reasoning. Here the underlying activity is our pursuit of our vital interests in a social context in which each of our fellows is similarly engaged. Since this multiple pursuit of vital interests creates a state of potential conflict and so poses questions as to how one is to act and/or what one is to do, moral reasoning emerges in order to cope with the situation and thereby facilitate our moral decisions. Its function, accordingly, is "to correlate our feelings and behaviour in such a way as to make the fulfilment of everyone's aims and desires as far as possible compatible" (Toulmin). This it seeks to do by one or the other of two kinds of argument—or, if you will, by argument on two different levels. In most cases, it simply refers the various possible courses of action to the moral rules or laws evolved by the relevant community for governing human behavior in the kind of situation in question. In these cases, the "right" thing to do is the thing sanctioned by the prescribed rules, and the valid moral argument is the one that establishes this conclusion. In other cases, however, where the prescribed rules or laws conflict with one another or do not apply to the situation or are themselves in need of rational justification, a different kind or level of argument becomes necessary. Its major premise is not any particular moral rule or law, but the ultimate moral principle implicit in the situation of human action as such—namely, that the "right" action or rule is the one that maximizes the realization of all the relevant interests while minimizing their frustration. The whole apparatus of our moral language arises so as to make possible argument of these two kinds or on these two levels. And, as in the case of science, the criteria of moral reasoning, like the norms of moral action itself, are wholly secular and autonomous, in the sense of being standards already implied in the activity and situation of human beings pursuing their vital interests with their fellows in a social context.

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We already have understanding before we ever seek it. The basic process of acculturation by which alone any of us ever becomes human is one and the same with the process by which we come to understand ourselves and our world in a certain way—namely, by internalizing the norms of truth, goodness, beauty, and so on objectified in the language and culture in which we are reared. *Normally, this also includes internalizing the religion, or the*

particular understanding of our basic faith, typical of this same cultural tradition, although we even more obviously internalize the stock of empirical knowledge and skills available to our society, or to our own social location within it.

But while we thus always already have some understanding both of the ultimate whole of reality revealed by our basic faith and of the natural and human world more fully disclosed through our particular experiences, it is also true that we do and must seek more understanding than we already have. We learn only too soon that much that *appears* to be the case is not really the case at all and that the same is true of much that is *said* to be the case by our fellows in society. Unexpected experiences force revisions in our stock of empirical knowledge and skills, and the need to bring our basic norms to bear in novel situations, or the realization that the norms themselves are more or less problematic and in need of justification, drives us to seek a still deeper understanding even of them.

It is in this eminently pragmatic context that all the forms of critical reflection and proper theory originate. Simply because of our nature and situation and human beings, we both can and must ask, What is really the case? in all the ways institutionalized in the university, in its professional schools, as well as its college and graduate school, and in their several fields, disciplines, specialties, and so on.

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To live the religious life at all is to anticipate having somehow to support the claim that one makes or implies in doing so. In many cases, no doubt, one can sufficiently support it by appealing immediately to accepted norms of appropriateness and credibility. But whenever such an immediate appeal is, for whatever reasons, insufficient, one's only recourse, if one is to validate one's claim, is to move from the primary level of one's religious life to the secondary level of critically reflecting on it. Only by asking in a more or less deliberate, methodical, and reasoned way whether what one thinks, says, and does is really credible as well as appropriate can one make good on one's claim.

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It is possible, naturally, that the need for theology's service may be less urgent in some situations than in others. As in the case of other speech acts, the validity claims expressed or implied by the act of witnessing on the primary level of life-praxis may not have become problematic, or not problematic enough, to require moving to the secondary level of critical reflection to validate them. In that event, the obligation assumed in making or implying them can be discharged immediately, on the same level as performing the act itself, simply by appealing to the standard praxis of ministry and what is taken to be normative witness or by invoking what are generally accepted as the deliverances of common human experience and reason. As long as these procedures suffice to answer such questions as may arise about whether witness is adequate to its content or fitting to its situation, theology as such may hardly seem necessary and may not be supposed to perform any essential service. But let the situation change enough so that questions persist even after following these procedures, and the need for critical reflection if the act of witnessing is still to be performed becomes only too apparent. At the same time, it becomes evident that the service of theology as alone able to provide such critical reflection is an essential service.

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To grow up in our society and culture is, in one form or another, to internalize its traditional religious beliefs, including, above all, the belief in God that is constitutive of the radically monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In the case of those of us who have been raised in church, synogogue, or mosque, this internalization is most likely to have taken the form of a more or less traditional belief in God, while in the case of others of us, this internalization may very well have taken the form of a negative rejection of traditional belief in God because of a positive acceptance of some more or less radically revisionary ultimate belief. But in either case, our continuation in the process of maturing involves being confronted with questions about the truth of our ultimate beliefs, religious or otherwise. Although none of us could live humanly at all without being socialized and acculturated, and thus internalizing in some form or other the ultimate beliefs of some human group, none of us can become a truly mature human being without critically appropriating our inheritance of beliefs once the

question of their truth is raised in our minds. To try to repress this question once it has arisen is to live dishonestly or insincerely, whatever our particular beliefs.

The question of truth is bound to arise, however, as soon as we recognize, as we must, that all our religious beliefs are controversial, and that this is so in several different respects, or at several different levels. But whatever the respect or level, there is nothing to be done by any of us who wish to become mature persons in our religious beliefs, once the question about their truth has arisen, than to try to find a reasonable answer to this question. This requires us to engage in "religious inquiry," by joining with any and all others who are similarly moved in a cooperative search for truth, in which the only constraint, just as in any other serious inquiry, is the constraint of the weightier evidence and the better argument. Such inquiry is likely to occupy us to some extent all our days, even if, as we may hope, it will not take too long to find sufficient reason either to reaffirm our inherited beliefs or else to affirm some alternative beliefs, so that we may identify ourselves religiously in something like the same way in which we grow up otherwise by identifying ourselves morally, politically, aesthetically, and so on.

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In the nature of the case, no authority, properly so-called, can be a sufficient authorization for the truth of the assertions derived from it or warranted by it. Unless the assertions made by the authority are themselves already authorized as true by some method other than an appeal to authority, no assertion derived from them or warranted by them can by that fact alone be an authorized assertion. This is not to deny, of course, that an assertion authorized by appeal to authority may very well be true. The point is simply that, if it is true, the fact that it is authorized by authority is not itself sufficient to make it so. Moreover, I am not in the least disputing that appeal to authority is a common and, as far as it goes, entirely legitimate method of fixing belief. But belief in an assertion is one thing, the truth of the assertion, something else; and this difference is such that logically and therefore necessarily no assertion that is believed on authority can be authorized by that fact alone as worthy of belief.