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The Ideal of Salvation on the Grounds of Pure Ethics

The following remarks touch upon the field of ethics in the strict sense to a very limited extent and rather tangentially, addressing the question of values – whether those of certain moral goals or the paths by which they are sought to be achieved. In principle, however, they do not aim to be either substantive or normative, limiting themselves to an analysis of a certain concept and a description of certain characteristic attitudes and experiences. If the ‘science of morality’ were not, so one-sidedly, concerned in practice with what is average, commonplace, universal, and most readily collective within the sphere of the phenomena it encompasses, it would be entirely appropriate to classify them as part of the science of morality. However, the concept under consideration, whilst having its place in ethics, cannot be regarded as commonplace, and the moral matters described are matters of life that are most emphatically individual in some of its manifestations – both higher and less easily grasped – so let us simply say that, on the one hand, this will be a contribution to the psychology of moral life, and on the other, to the analysis of moral concepts.

The concept under consideration will be that of ‘salvation’, albeit in only one of its possible forms.

The term ‘salvation’, when used without reservations or commentary, carries a connotation that is either explicitly religious or religious-metaphysical. In the Christian context, as we know, by virtue of centuries-old tradition, it evokes in the general public ideas that are so unspeculative

that they are almost mythological; however, there are also less common interpretations, whether among Christians or within other systems. There are people who experience their entire empirical existence as a form of semi-existence; they feel somewhat insubstantial, ephemeral, unreal within it; they yearn – as is often said in such cases – for the ‘realization of themselves’, an ontological fulfilment. And there are people who long for *nirvana*. Both groups will define the goal of their aspirations as salvation – a metaphysical salvation. We do not want to take this particular conception into account at all here. That it plays an enormous role in soteriological thought must be admitted without dispute; yet it is equally certain that this multifaceted, opaque, shifting concept of salvation takes other forms as well, independent of metaphysics: forms that are purely ethical. It was precisely in this ethical form that it appeared among the Greeks, in part even earlier than Christianity, within systems of practical philosophy that adhered most firmly and strictly to a positive foundation: not only in Stoicism, where a purely human yet ambitiously conceived purpose of life did, after all, invite justifications extending beyond the empirical, but also in the Epicurean ideal, conceived solely in earthly terms¹. And it is this concept of salvation – *soteria* or *salus* – in a sense where the ontological status of the human being is entirely irrelevant, that we wish to help elucidate through our analysis. However, even this limitation is not definitive. Even in this ethical variant, salvation is a heterogeneous concept, playing on at least two shades of meaning. For what man desires to be saved from is understood here twofold. On the one hand, it is misfortune, pain, torment, all forms of suffering – which is how the simplest-minded people tend to view ‘eternal salvation’; on the other hand, it is moral evil in the proper sense. In our consciousness, these two things, though so different, are often strangely intertwined. Yet in essence, they can and ought to be separated. For even if one were to believe optimistically that a life free from suffering is impossible without moral perfection, and that moral perfection necessarily entails a life free from suffering, these are, after all, two different goals, both of which may be conceived and proposed to the will separately. We shall make use of this opportunity and fulfil this duty by completely omitting the first, eudaimonic aspect and focusing exclusively on salvation in a strictly ethical sense: salvation from

¹ Given the date, I am not permitted to refer here to the words of Diogenes of Oenoanda, in which Epicurus’ teachings are described as *ta tes soterias phar-maka*. However, the idea – and, to some extent, the terminology – has been present in Epicureanism from the very beginning.

moral evil. Henceforth, therefore, the perspective taken will be, as in an axiology, free from hedonistic elements: any notion of happiness, bliss, pleasure, or well-being will be dismissed.

The second part of the argument, as mentioned in the introduction, will consist of a description of certain psychological facts. In the light of what we have said recently, its primary focus will be on that peculiar moral attitude – so different from those most commonly encountered – in which deliverance from moral evil comes to the fore as the primary goal. The soteriological attitude: that is what we shall call it. Its description and the analysis of the concept – two themes not entirely fused into one – are, however, conceived with the intention that one should explain and deepen the other; compositional clarity has been consciously sacrificed to the principle of gradually illuminating the subject from various angles and in various ways. In particular, the evaluative remarks that the argument will contain will find their place in it, not so much for the sake of evaluation as such, but as a starting point for a better final definition of the concept.

However, before going any further, we must take a step back for a moment and make some more general observations, which are necessary in order to place the issues discussed here within a broader context. Different people employ different frameworks for understanding moral facts; some are more inclined to use the concept of 'good' as a particular kind of value, whilst others use concepts such as 'moral law' or 'duty'. Meanwhile, the very act of thinking in so-called ethical terms is commonplace among people, and if we take the phrases 'moral good' and 'moral evil' in a broad sense – understanding them to also mean conformity or non-conformity with a norm, law, or duty – then it is reasonable to say that the vast majority of people in the world possess both concepts. Rare are those pessimists who would not also believe that, at least in part and provided certain conditions are met – conditions that may be quite difficult, but which can nevertheless be fulfilled – what they consider good is achievable, and what they consider evil – avoidable. Thus far, there is nothing peculiar about any of this. There are, however, many people who use moral judgement solely to turn praise or reprimand into a weapon in their struggles, to checkmate their competitors and opponents, to establish conditions within society that are advantageous to themselves, to impose obligations on others, and to bolster their own selfish claims. Among the vast mass of those who 'believe in good and evil', but are not always personally sensitive to them, only a certain portion – perhaps not the largest – possesses what might be called an ethical will: they seek to do good and avoid evil, even within themselves. Of these, however,

only a handful are inclined to make this the primary, or even merely an important, goal of their lives. Hence, this constitutes a distinct type or variety of human being, one worth singling out and reflecting upon. It would also be fitting to give it a name. In the absence of a better one, and drawing on a term known from economics, we shall – without insisting on it – refer to it for the time being as *homo ethicus*. This is not, of course, to be understood as a ‘moral man’ in contrast to an ‘immoral’ one, nor, even less so, as a ‘decent man’. The latter, in particular, although pursuing good in himself and in his actions, may not think of it *ante factum* at all, but only acknowledge it *ex post*, as and when necessary. *Homo ethicus*, on the other hand, is a person who cares deeply about morality and consciously strives towards it, precisely because that person does not feel entirely good about himself. This is the Stoic *prokopton*, though the emphasis is not on the progress actually made, but on the striving; an ‘aspirant’, so to speak, to morality. People like this are sometimes even subject to various accusations – in our view, unjustly; but even if one or other of these accusations were to stick, it is hard to deny such people a healthy inclination to take their own faith seriously and their own standards to heart. Therefore, in terms of the moral life of us, a humanity that is very lax in this respect, they do not, it seems, play a role that we would be justified in thinking of negatively.

It is only now that we can turn to the main subject. *Homo ethicus*, as we have said, strives to realize the good within himself and to avoid evil (or, of course, to rid himself of it once it has arisen – and it is the latter that will concern us). In strict terms, these two endeavours are directed towards a single ultimate goal, which can be defined as the greatest possible advantage of good over evil in life as a whole; of the two immediate goals (to realize good, to rid oneself of evil), neither is more important than the other for the achievement of the ultimate goal. However, one may conceive of these immediate goals and pursue them individually, which means that in one’s consciousness they may appear unbalanced, one very strong, the other barely perceptible. In fact, one usually predominates. The more common case, I suppose, is the predominance of concern for the good; to possess such or other virtues is the simplest ambition that drives the average person, sensitive to moral values, forward in his actions. Everyone would, in principle, wish to attain these virtues to the highest possible degree; yet everyone knows, and whether they like it or not must acknowledge, that the fullness of good is great, whilst one’s strength is limited; therefore, if one can come even a fraction closer to its full realization, becoming a slightly better person than one was when setting out on one’s path, that alone is con-

sidered a great victory. When the sixty-year-old Seneca began to sense an unspoken question from his friends – why, at such an advanced age and so close, no doubt, to the moment when he would have to leave this life, was he still striving so hard – he replied briefly: “To depart a better man”. “*Ut exeam melior*”: a powerful phrase, simple, yet of such poignant significance! And perhaps, to honour this man so burdened by sin, yet fighting so steadfastly for his soul to the very end – though primarily in connection with the programme defined by these words – it might not be out of place to divert a certain well-known, but in fact rarely used term from recent times from its original meaning, and to call the first of the two stances which the *homo ethicus* may adopt the melioristic stance.

The attitude of a meliorist² is marked by a high degree of positivity. To put it figuratively, one might say that, in two distinct ways, his conscious striving is a movement towards something rather than away from something, driven by attraction rather than repulsion. Firstly, it is a striving for something to be, rather than for it not to be; the conscious and subjective goal being pursued here is the existence of something – not non-existence, presence – not absence. Secondly, that for the meliorist, the image of the present state, the starting point, the entire constellation from which one wishes to depart, is outweighed by the image of the future state, the state one is moving towards; the consciousness here is dominated by a vision of the future, it is ‘prospective’. What, however, constitutes the most striking feature of the meliorist’s character – and one which, in a sense, encapsulates it – is his attitude towards evil, which is as cognitive as it is emotional. In principle, we can pass both a positive and a negative moral judgement on a given subject ‘directly’ in the sense that we do not derive it by reasoning from a judgement of the opposite sign. We judge courage to be a good thing not by first establishing that it is something ‘opposite’ (whatever we might mean by that) to the negatively valued cowardice, and hence concluding that courage is good. But cowardice too, if not *in abstracto*, then at least as a concrete, individual instance, we may judge as something bad, without thinking of it as the opposite of positively valued courage, but simply, ‘intuitively’.

² By ‘meliorist’ I simply mean a person who actually adopts a melioristic attitude – and likewise by ‘soteriologist’. I do not use these terms to refer to any particular psychological types in this field, although I do not deny their existence; these reflections are not intended to be typological. I fully accept the idea that a soteriological attitude and a meliorative attitude may be adopted alternately by the same person; I would merely argue that these are relatively stable attitudes and by no means merge into one another without strong resistance.

In practice, however, it appears that only some people are prepared to take advantage of this second option: owing to the natural and fundamental phenomenon in the realm of axiology that attention is directed primarily towards the positive pole of values, many tend to judge good directly as good, whilst for evil they seem to lack a 'sense', an intuitive faculty. The meliorist is exactly such a person. While paying attention to the good, having the good as his goal and striving towards it, he nevertheless finds that certain things within himself are an obstacle to this pursuit: the attainment of this or that value cannot be reconciled with their presence. Hence, naturally, he wishes to rid himself of them; and often invests all his passion in this endeavour. He knows them, almost solely from this perspective – as obstacles – and thus through a specific relationship between them and the good, and knows them as a result of his recognition of this specific relationship, that is, as a result of a process that is to some extent discursive. Hence, his emotional reaction to them is not particularly strong. The optimist does not feel an elementary dread of evil, the kind that comes from intuitive immediacy; he may even value what he considers to be evil, feel a certain fondness for it, and regret that the world is not organized in such a way that it can go hand in hand with unquestionable good. He is like a runner who, in order to reach the finish line, throws away everything that weighs him down, even though he knows there are treasures there. A classic illustration of this is his attitude towards sensuality. Sensuality is often mentioned among the major obstacles to reaching higher ethical levels; having experienced its influence first-hand, the meliorist regards it as something evil; yet this does not mean that he instinctively abhors it, but he may still admire its beauty and revere its charms. Yet he rejects this beauty and breaks free from its spell, for he wishes to reach a place which, as long as its power endures, will remain beyond his reach. Such would be the meliorist, and such would be his attitude.

We have already discussed the second attitude: it is the soteriological attitude, one that we are primarily concerned with. In a loose and broad sense, it is also positive: for just like the meliorist, so also the soteriologist strives for a positive, favourable balance in life when it comes to matters of value. But here the emphasis lies elsewhere: on the evil that is found within oneself, on its eradication, destruction, and uprooting. To characterize it, therefore, it is best to begin where we left off with the meliorist. Let us imagine a man who not only makes use of this ability to perceive concrete evil directly, but has an overwhelming inclination to do so: a man who is somehow particularly sensitive to it, and whose attention it attracts so persistently that the good – though ultimately still

determining his entire course – is, in his daily life, somehow pushed into the background of his consciousness. If he has moral aspirations, and this evil is his own, then this man will be a soteriologist. The soteriologist cannot grasp evil through his attitude towards good. It strikes him with its hideousness, it stings and blinds him; there are no means of escaping this image or softening it. Hence what was so alien to the meliorist: that characteristic sense of dread – not only in the face of one's own evil – which turns into some uncanny, despair-filled astonishment when it comes to the evil within oneself: 'Can I really be like this?' Now, evil (let it be sensuality once more, assuming that a given individual perceives it as a cardinal evil) is no longer an obstacle, no longer a burden: it is something man recoils from, a thing which, in its very content, in its very essence – regardless of whatever its consequences may be – is morally appalling. And consequently, the whole attitude takes on, at least at a first and superficial glance, certain features of negativity. For in both senses discussed here in connection with the meliorist, the soteriological pursuit is a movement away from something, not towards something, driven by repulsion rather than attraction. For one thing, there is no prospectivity here; consciousness is dominated not by an image of a future state, but by that which is now and from which one wishes to depart. The soteriologist is captivated by the sight of evil within himself; as long as it persists, it does not allow him to forget about it; unlike that runner who first seeks to reach his goal, and then, having encountered obstacles, overcomes them and makes a sacrifice, he is, in a sense, like a man who is covered in mud and filth and, having returned home, can literally think of nothing else, of no positive action, as long as this loathsome thing clings to him. This is not fascination, for in fascination the capacity to take countermeasures is lost; instead, it is the enslavement of attention.

Second, and as a consequence of the first: the goal that subjectively stands out here is no longer the presence of something, but its absence; not so much the acquisition of good as the discarding of evil, 'purification'. 'First let us wash away the dirt, then the rest.' Not 'to cultivate the good within oneself', but 'to remove one's shortcomings, blemishes and flaws' – this is a soteriological way of thinking.

On one very important point, however, this parallelism between the two attitudes – which has been valid thus far – is broken. The meliorist seeks less the attainment of total goodness within oneself – which practically no one can be expected to achieve – than, more modestly, its growth, advancement, and progress. This is understandable and natural: in the realm of positive values, even the smallest increment is worthwhile. However, anyone who wants to rid himself of evil as we

have presented it here – evil as an absolute, evil as a curse, a horror that corrupts the whole soul – will not find some minor reduction of it to be of any value: therefore, a ‘reduction of evil’ can by no means be defined as the goal of the soteriologist. In setting his goal, the soteriologist cannot avoid being a maximalist; he cannot help but seek to rid himself of evil entirely. And it is precisely this total, not partial, this complete ‘liberation from evil’ – to use the term classically applied here – that he terms salvation. An ‘absolute liberation from evil’: whether precise or imprecise, let us for now accept this formula as a definition; we shall see later what to make of it. And let us remember this: if salvation is defined in this way, one may approach it, distance oneself from it, find oneself closer to it or further from it, but partial attainment – having achieved some part of it, but not the whole – is not an option here; no partial attainment, *ex definitione*, is salvation; salvation must always be total.

That is more or less an overview of what can be said about both topics – the analysis of the concept and the description of the attitude – at first glance, as a sort of tentative assessment. One could go deeper; here, however, it would prove useful to introduce an element of judgement into the discussion, or more precisely: to take an interest in the judgements that might occur to someone when faced with the attitude described.

The soteriological stance is less common and – as is evident from my previous remarks – in a sense also somewhat less natural; consequently, it is more likely than the other to attract various criticisms. In particular, someone with a melioristic attitude, coupled with a touch of naivety, might easily latch onto the formula of ‘liberation from evil’ just mentioned and, taking it literally, use it to come up with a series of comparisons unfavourable to the soteriologist. Thus, above all, such a person will regard the positivity of his goal itself as his superiority: to wish to bring something into existence, and especially something that ought to exist – that is, he will say, clearly something more than when one wishes to prevent the existence of something. After this, however, he will no doubt wish to emphasize the ultimate and comprehensive nature of this goal. ‘What I, as a reformer, seek to achieve – that “good” – is precisely that, and that alone, which ought to be realized for its own sake; moreover, despite any reservations I may have regarding the achievements I personally expect, my aim is, in principle, absolute; it is the good in its fullness, and my contentment with my own modest, unremarkable progress is merely my reasonable self-criticism in judging my own capabilities. Your goal, on the other hand [‘you’ – meaning the soteriologist], is either merely instrumental, or must be regarded as partial. For according to your conviction, either the elimination of evil is a stage after which you

intend to proceed to the next stage, the pursuit of good, or it is not such a stage. If it is, then, yes, I can concede that as a human being you are all right. I will not argue with you about whether this stage is indeed necessary; if you are already so deeply mired in this apocalyptic 'evil' of yours that you cannot begin to do anything decent until you have dug yourself out of it, so be it. But then your salvation is, after all, only a means to an end, or, if you will, a preliminary, preparatory goal; and you, at best, are a decent candidate for a meliorist, and until you actually become one, you must acknowledge your inferiority to me. If, on the other hand, you do not treat your salvation as a stage, then your human substance is rather wretched. For then, by very definition, your goal becomes fragmentary, pitiful. It will be achieved when you rise from the realm of evil into a morally neutral realm, from sin into mediocrity; you must surely admit that this is rather insufficient! A complete goal would be to pass into the realm of good; by limiting yourself to mere liberation from evil, you give up what was essential; all you do is reach the threshold and stop. You are incomplete, or rather, nothing at all; this is not, as in my case, self-criticism, but a reprehensible lack of desire; in your very essence, you are a small-minded creature, devoid of aspiration. All this 'salvation' of yours is a programme for spiritual cripples".

That is how our critic, a somewhat naive moralist, might put it. We have generously bestowed upon him a lack of insight; nevertheless, we must deal with him somehow. That the soteriological attitude, viewed from a psychological perspective, contains some semblance or admixture of negativity is something we have emphasized ourselves; yet the rest of the remarks, particularly the very concept of salvation, miss the mark entirely. For when we use this word and reflect on its meaning, we all feel quite clearly, I think, that this is not something one speaks of 'merely' as an afterthought; that it is the ultimate goal, thoroughly positive in its very essence and, above all, imbued with a fullness against which scarcely any human goal would not appear meagre and faint. Such are the common intuitions, and this is how the soteriologist experiences it. For here is a paradox, which to mention at the outset of this discussion would be a premature complication, but which is fundamental to us at this point and determines everything: 'liberation from evil', by which we have provisionally defined salvation, presents itself to the soteriologist as the attainment, simultaneously with it and inseparable from it, of the very pinnacles of morality: perfection, holiness – everything that the most exalted moral ambition could dream of. But what does this inseparability entail? And how is it conceived by the soteriologist? This is what constitutes the conundrum and what now needs to be explained.

Of the two approaches that come to mind here, only one – the more difficult one – has the potential to reasonably satisfy us; however, it is worth mentioning the other, easier one, if only briefly, as it occurs to everyone and its unreliability needs to be demonstrated.

It would look as follows.

It has sometimes been argued in ethics that, unlike ordinary behaviour, every human act is either morally good or bad, and that there is no such concept as a morally neutral act; a thesis which – even if one were to define ‘act’ very narrowly – is manifestly false. However, a more cautious position is possible in this matter, one which, by being less exposed to criticism, one might defend: namely, that when a particular ‘area’ of conduct is subject to moral evaluation, then the above principle applies in that specific area. It is well known that people often find themselves in situations where, in the absence of a third alternative, they have to choose between telling the truth and thereby harming themselves, or lying and thereby gaining an advantage. According to an ethics that is strict on this point – applied in practice without enthusiasm, but widely propagated as a theory – a truthful statement in such a case would always merit a positive judgement, a false one always a negative one; whereas a neutral behaviour, such as silence, has no place here *ex hypothesi*. Therefore, evil may disappear from here, and thus, inevitably, good will emerge: whoever turns from falsehood to truth, in a single, indivisible act, is freed from the former and attains the latter; and whoever has undergone this change permanently, by virtue of the indivisible fact of that change, simultaneously ceases to be a liar – at least a liar of convenience – and to that extent also ‘evil’ and ‘immoral’, and becomes a truthful person – and to that extent enriched with a certain new morally positive trait. Under this thesis, the following example would be typical: in every morally assessed sphere, there would be no third alternative, and in each, moral progress would directly encompass both aspects. “Whoever has rid himself of moral evil has thereby attained moral good”: this statement would be generally true. Whoever, then, has rid himself of evil completely, that is to say, has attained salvation, has also attained good completely: and this would explain the positive, final, and complete nature of salvation as the goal of one’s endeavours.

Yet this entire interpretation falls short, and for the simplest of reasons: we have no right either to adopt the thesis put forward as our own or to attribute it to the soteriologist. To adopt it as our own – we cannot, for even in this moderate form we have given it, it remains at the very least dubious (anyone could see the artificiality with which we had to carve out and construct the above example, which was favourable to it);

it therefore cannot serve to explain the concept we are using: To attribute it to the soteriologist – we cannot, for soteriology is a spiritual attitude, not a theory, and no theoretical assumptions can form an indispensable part of it; it is true that, *ex post* and for the secondary intellectualization of experience, a soteriologist may frame it as we have explained here, but by no means must he. And so his understanding of salvation as that full, finite, complete, realization of which we are still speaking here also remains unexplained.

It seems that a meaningful interpretation must be sought elsewhere.

Namely, it is not true – or rather, it is only true in a somewhat unnatural meaning, which we must then ascribe to the word – that what we have accepted above is merely provisional and approximate: that salvation is complete liberation from evil and nothing more. ‘Complete liberation’, taken literally, can after all be understood as a momentary liberation, in which no evil is present in my actions, desires, or the motives governing me at that moment. Salvation is something far greater: it is the disappearance and end of the possibility of falling into evil at any time, a guarantee that one will never stray. To be truly able to think, “I am saved”, one would have to know not only that there is no evil within them today, but also that no evil will ever be able to take hold of them in the future.

This is no longer merely a present state, but – like predestination, like fate – a certain determination of what will be, right up to the moment when the very subject upon whom evil or good might be realized ceases to exist.

But with this understanding of salvation, something even more paradoxical than what we have recently stated here immediately becomes apparent: that, in fact, it is not salvation itself that is the most ambitious goal of all, but that the prior attainment of such a goal is one of its preconditions. For there is no salvation until a moral transformation has taken place, a transformation in human nature so profound that it may seem almost blasphemous to speak of it as a possibility.

To demonstrate this, however, we must return for a moment to our starting point. Namely, the *Homo ethicus* mentioned at the beginning, of whom both the soteriologist and the meliorist are variations, is not the sort of person who would simply wish to do good, for whom it would suffice that, by virtue of its consequences or its objective content – telling the truth, persevering in battle, a just judgement, an act of self-sacrifice – his actions would merit a positive moral assessment. When he begins to theorize, he will not accept – as is implied by certain positions in ethics – that if, for instance, a bandit, driven by envy towards his accomplices,

reports a crime about to be committed and thereby prevents that crime, then all is well within that situation. He does not wish to do good, but to be good; and to be good may mean many very 'internal' things, which it is not the place to mention here, but it certainly means wishing good – and for our further discussion, this good will suffice. Therefore, the soteriologist is not a person who simply wishes to rid himself of evil in his actions, but one who wishes to rid himself of ill will. 'To be free from evil' means for him 'not to want evil'; whereas 'to be liberated once and for all from the possibility of moral evil' means 'to become, once and for all and without any possibility of the opposite, impervious to evil will'. Once someone is liberated in this way, it means that we can now truly say of them: 'they will never desire evil in the future'. This is how the concept of salvation takes shape at this later stage; this amendment transforms it quite profoundly, but it should not, perhaps, present any difficulty.

Now, however, we come to a more complex matter; we will only be able to discuss it here in simplified and abbreviated terms. Speaking on our own behalf for the time being, without prejudging anything regarding soteriology, let us nevertheless express, without reservation, the following opinion: to will evil is in fact not merely to will harm, but also, when faced with a choice between two good things which are ends in themselves, to will the one that is less good, the 'lesser good'. If we assume this, we must also assume that the following will not be protected from desiring evil – that is, will not be "saved": – he who is threatened by a possibility of ever desiring it; and vice versa: the statement "I am saved" will also encompass the assertion: "it will never happen in the future that, of two goods, I will desire the lesser good". This must be taken strictly: it will never happen in the future that I shall be led, by any excess of any quality that renders an object truly desirable to me, to choose that object, if the alternative object proves to possess an extra measure of good, however slight. However, if – as the concept of salvation requires – it is to be true today that I will always choose the better of the two, if this is to occur each time in an infallibly predictable manner – then the only guarantee of such an infallibly predictable choice can be that I will choose it every time because it is better, that whenever there is a surplus of good, that will determine the choice. To put it in psychological terms: at every single moment in the future (as I may be faced with a choice at any moment!), my inclination towards the good will be stronger than any other inclination that might, at that very moment, draw me towards anything else. Using a term that is psychologically less unambiguous, yet conveys a greater sense of the gravity and magnitude of the matter at hand, this inclination is also sometimes termed 'love'. We shall therefore

say that, in order for me never to be threatened by evil intentions in the future, love of the good must reign within me from this day forward: ever-present, unshaken by anything, unchallenged, absolute.

This means, however, that already today I am capable of a certain kind of moral perfection. "A certain kind" only, of course, because perfection is potential and will only be actualized in specific future intentions; yet it is perfection, since I have sufficient predisposition for all those future good intentions: my whole "nature", as it were, is directed solely towards the good. It follows, therefore, that whoever is to be freed from the possibility of ever falling into evil – that is to say, whoever is to be saved – must, in this somewhat limited yet very strong sense, be morally perfect. The situation we have here is precisely the opposite of the one our naive moralist told us to accept: it is not salvation that constitutes a step in self-improvement and progress, but rather a certain form of perfection achieved beforehand that is the condition for salvation.³ The goal of the soteriologist, which encompasses this condition, is positive in the very sense that the other denied; by encompassing both potential perfection and its gradual realization throughout the rest of one's life, it is neither partial nor subservient, but as definitive and comprehensive as one could possibly imagine; it is fully ambitious, supreme.

And yet, if one takes this entire argument simply as a response to the objections levelled against the soteriologist, there is something else about this response that is fundamentally unsatisfactory. The critic of soteriology argued that the goal which the soteriologist sets for himself and which he subjectively holds in his consciousness is, for such and such reasons, meagre; and we, in our reply, stated that the goal towards which the soteriologist objectively strives is, in fact, not meagre. We accepted the thesis that desiring a lesser good is also an evil, and it binds us to all its further consequences, including the ultimate one: that perfec-

³ At least, that is how we must interpret the definition of salvation given here. One might, however, wonder whether the semantic intuitions associated with the term would not be better served by a slightly broader understanding of it, namely: salvation is the impossibility of falling into evil at any time in the future, together with the present state of affairs which guarantees this impossibility. An argument in favour of this concept is that the two do indeed form a whole, distinct in thought, but inseparable as the goal of our endeavours, and which also most often appears in the mind as this whole. Based on this understanding, potential moral perfection is no longer a condition of salvation, but a component. The matter is, in effect, a matter of wording; in the main argument, it was this approach that I adopted, as it seemed to me to lead to fewer complications in the formulation, whilst strongly emphasizing the central idea.

tion is the condition for salvation. And until the soteriologist accepts this thesis, any response will fall short of addressing the criticism: for it is he who must have perfection set as his goal, subjectively. In a sense, it is indeed difficult to see how he could reject this thesis, for it imposes itself on anyone who thinks in terms of the good (and he does so) and regards desires as one of the objects of ethical judgement (which may also reasonably be attributed to him). And yet there is a certain difficulty here. For isn't evil consisting in desiring not evil, but a lesser good, precisely that evil which is experienced directly and intuitively, and therefore shocking and terrible, to which the soteriologist is sensitive? After all, to experience it, we must take the concept of the good as our starting point, then compare two specific forms of good, and finally ascertain that the will is directed towards the lesser good: we thus recognize it, in the end, on the basis of rather complex relationships among several objects. However, this difficulty does not seem insurmountable. We need only to distinguish between two things: a justified conviction and an intuitive insight. Suppose that someone with remarkable artistic talent, instead of putting that talent to use, throws himself into accumulating material goods and thus wastes his talent; this pursuit of material wealth (which we assume is otherwise legitimate) can be regarded as evil only in the sense that it is a pursuit of a good immeasurably lesser than the other, and only on this basis can it be demonstrated as evil. But he who has succumbed to this weakness, if he possesses that particular disposition from which soteriology arises, will perceive it differently. To him, that pursuit of riches will seem, beyond all reason, to be an abominable evil in itself; moreover, those very riches – innocent in their essence – will cease to be a lesser good for him, and will themselves become an evil, a disgrace, a filth, a temptation from Satan. Such shifts in human conscience are quite common. Thus, the subjective aim of the soteriologist will also be as we have described it, and the soteriologist is defended. It is true that the price of this is another flaw which we now observe in him: a tendency to succumb to certain illusions. Leaving aside, however, the fact that these illusions may be morally salutary (whoever does not wish to fall into moral tepidity should rather exaggerate and magnify the good and evil from which they must choose, rather than weigh them up too pedantically), we have not, after all, said anywhere that the soteriologist must be without flaws.

Nor was it our intention – in any case, an intention that is relevant and important to the subject – to take a defensive stance here. Let us recall what we have already said and emphasized: all this deliberation over judgement and all this controversy with the *ad hoc* invented oppo-

nent was merely a device, a temporary measure, through which a deeper definition of salvation could be obtained. If this was achieved, then the main purpose has been accomplished. In addition, and as the opportunity arose, the psychological portrait of the attitude has been further enriched with a series of traits. As for whether the soteriologist or the meliorist is more in the right, whose way of seeing things is healthier, or whose tactics more effective – we do not wish to deliberate on these matters here, not on account of the indifference of the narrator, to whom the task of judging phenomena would be alien, but because, humanly speaking, both attitudes are justified, and because without one or the other one-sidedness represented by them, it is difficult to achieve that passion which, in the moral sphere as in any other, is alone capable of securing victory through human effort.

In conclusion, it is perhaps worthwhile to ask one more question explicitly, a question that has, in a sense, continued to loom through the literal text of our arguments: is salvation an attainable goal? Well, as long as one does not adopt the indeterministic position – with which, importantly and as a side effect worth emphasizing, the proposed definition is obviously incompatible – then, contrary to what the reader might expect at this point, no *a priori* reason for denying this attainability is apparent. The love of good is a real motive, and there is nothing to suggest that it will never be the consistently and invariably decisive motive in any human being. The probability of such a fantastic win in nature's lottery is, however, so remote that in practice we can only regard it as equal to zero. Moreover – and this is without reservation – even if someone does attain salvation, neither they nor anyone else can ever be certain that they have attained it: for we cannot foresee future desires, and that which – if there is such a thing – already determines them today is unknowable to us. The words 'I am saved' are words to which no one will ever have a right; and for this reason alone, it must be said that, in practical and everyday terms, salvation is not a real goal, but an ideal.

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