

July 16, 1949

Dear John,

The essay is finally ready for the professional typist. Prof. Morris approved with the exception of one sentence and one or two other words; he seemed pleased and even a little astonished. I wish it were entirely out of my hands and that the apartment was free of this small package of compressed struggles. Oh well, I have improved a little. Time was that I would have felt compelled to work on it as long as it was in my hands and the deadline was still ahead. I will tell you first what I have been doing and then what I have been thinking; my existence is still more vegetable than intellectula.

Papa, Mother, Alex and I drove up to Milton on Friday to spend the weekend with Aunt Priscilla in Milton. It is a beautiful house that she and my uncle built--I don't feel that death has moved in. The children are delightful. I think you will like John Sebastian best. He is gentle and moody and withdrawn, a little anxious and unhappy. On the way back, I was left in New York to make repairs in my essay and go to plays with Joy and see some friends. There is a possibility that Alex and I will go to hear Bach and Mozart in Tanglewood on Saturday and Sunday. Otherwise, I shall go home to prepare for two weeks of playing secretary to Papa. It will be good for me to have something to do outside of the home.

I lose so much time in boredom. What Kierkegaard had to say about the viciousness of that state speaks to my condition. It is ennui, the inertia into which I slip that seems to me more sinful and dissipating than any action which springs from choice or is at least performed with some feeling of direction. Ennui is withdrawal from life and choice and thought. I do not share your feeling that "every human action involves some quality of sin."

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Is it St. Paul that there is a comment on the damnation of those who are neither hot nor cold? I don't think I can adequately define sin. But the recipe certainly contains pride and self-sufficiency--the qualities which separate us from God and other individuals. I find myself only a little troubled ~~about~~ in deciding whether an action is good or bad--for myself that is, because one can't know for sure for other people. But specific actions seem much less crucial than relationships and the attitude in which life and people are met. That is very badly phrased, but I think you will understand what I am reaching for. The most dangerous people I have known were those who sneered and scoffed and depreciated the value of a person or aspiration. In school, there were teachers like Mr. Breininger who make me feel helpless and afraid to try. I can understand the sense of inadequacy which makes a person behave in that way, yet I think that that feeling of ~~inadequacy~~ may also be appraised morally as a lack of courage. So many people I know are afraid to say what they want in life. They are cynical and materialistic in their statements because simplicity and sincerity ^{are} not fashionable. I catch myself in the betrayal of my own hopes so often and when I hear someone else say the thing I would like to say I think to myself that if I were always near that person I might be able to have the courage of example. We are afraid to commit ourselves to the ~~the~~ pursuit of the good which we desire for fear of failure. In America, only success is dignified. Of course, this is not peculiarly an American vice, but victory and prosperity underline it.

I don't think that your analysis of human ideals and aspirations as "Imitations of Christ" is adequate. One can desire to be good and to know the good without feeling that imperfection, falling short

of divine consistency means that the effort has no significance. The individual's love of God (as well as his love for other individuals) causes him to transcend his own inadequacies, but that love must contain the humility which does not claim possession. Perhaps my argument is unnecessary. I agree with you that Jesus came not "to save the righteous but the poor in spirit--yet I would change it so that it would clearly say "self-righteous". ~~philosophy~~ Neither philosophy nor artistic achievements necessarily cut us off from God. We can desire Him without desiring to be Him. If the artist ~~the~~ tries to sustain himself only by his own creations he will fail. His creation is not even an imitation but rather an attempt to understand the nature of what has been created and what exists.

Life does not imply separation from God, separation sin, life sin. (I do not find myself at home in these logical formulas.) We are born as separate ~~and~~ individuals, separate from each other, and separate from God ~~yet~~ ^{live} yet not entirely so. We cannot ~~live~~ without other people or without God. Our love and understanding bridge the gap between the death of aloneness and the wholeness of ~~life~~ union with what is better and more complete than our separate selves. How can you phrase your ideas in Darwinian terms. Only the Pharisees frame their virtues with the sins of others. I cannot go on to answer the rest of your list of the things that exist by opposites. I do not believe that you believe that others must die if we are to live.

As to the problem of the goal of life. I do not know how to answer. I don't think I really understand your metaphor. It is beautiful and sad and completely contradictory with the Darwinian passage that precedes it. I do not think of life as a road; I do not think of it in terms of scenery. The people and my relationship to them often make me think of a stage yet the figure is

really satisfactory only for my more frivolous moods. To the extent that I think about goal and purpose in life within a framework of divine purpose I believe that it is time given to me to create something more complete than a separate ego. Hell is probably not a penal colony but a place in which one is entirely alone, locked and the key thrown away by the prisoner himself.

I listen to what you have to say for reasons a good deal more essential than politeness. When the ideas do not seem to ~~fit~~ correspond to my ideas of life and reality I struggle to compose my own ideas. If I were not challenged I would not do it--ennui, inertia. I know very much more clearly what I think when I glimpse what you think. Your philosophy is more logical and reasoned ~~by~~ than mine, but there are so many things in life that do not seem to correspond to conventional ideas of logic that I do not find it necessary to defer to your philosophy. At the same time I can think it important to know and to understand it as much as I can. As a matter of fact, many of the arguments in this letter probably do not need statement. Some of the superficial disagreements could probably be easily disentangled in conversation--so do not bother to answer arguments of which you think this is true. When your ideas seem to me to lead to nihilism or to a mood which would mean despair to me, I reserve judgment. The essential differences between people are much more real to me than they used to be. When one can accept the differences, one understands more of the richness and variety of life. It is also easier to accept and understand one's own role. Although I have said a good deal about choice and free will, I think that there is an aspect of the problem which I have not said much about and that here perhaps I come closer to your view. I think it is necessary to recognise the limitations

of freedom. I could not choose to be a poet. For many years I resisted the idea of teaching. Now I know that although there are other things that I ~~can/d/~~ could do that this ~~s/~~ is probably what I should do and that the other things I could do would only differ in detail from what I have chosen to do --or what has chosen me. It is a little like the freedom of the man pursued by the "Hound of Heaven".

Sunday

Alex decided against the Tanglewood expedition, so here I am trying to adjust ~~to~~ to the calm of Philadelphia. When I can keep my head above water as I can now, I take great delight in the pattern of life here--setting the table, moving about in the spaciousness to the accompaniment of the Mozart clarinet quintet.

Thankyou for the check. I have finished "La Cartreuse.." and will send it to you as soon as possible. The last part of it is not nearly so good as the first half or three-fourths, but as a whole it is an excellent novel; I hope you will not find it too alien in spirit.

You will be glad to know that Alex has been studying a road map and asking me whether Washington is difficult to drive through. He seems to be contemplating an expedition to Konnarock in the first part of August. I think he will be glad to ^{escape} ~~escape~~ though he has been quite selfless in doing the foolish odds and ends around here that must be done. There will be more of these in the next ~~couple of~~ couple of weeks since I will be working for Papa and Mother away part of the time.

Margaret