THE AMBIGUITY OF HUMAN AUTONOMY AND FREEDOM IN THE THOUGHT OF PAUL TILlich

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I

The recent death of Paul Tillich has not brought with it a diminution of interest in his thought. He is recognized as a leading figure in contemporary theology. It has been predicted that the influence of his thinking will increase rather than diminish. The current publication of his collected works in the German language\(^1\) is making many of his writings available that were formerly difficult to obtain. This in itself will stimulate scholarly interest, making it much easier to study his thought in depth and to give careful attention to the meaning of his concepts.

One of Tillich's major philosophical concepts is that of autonomy. It is fundamental to his idea of freedom. It furnishes, we believe, one of the major axes about which his thought revolves.

1. The Emergence of the Idea of Autonomy

Like other existentialists Paul Tillich acquired his passion for freedom and autonomy in reaction to what he regarded to be an overweening authority. In his autobiographical sketches\(^2\) he presents a vivid portrayal of the influences with which he broke. Born in the medieval town of StarzedeII, Tillich moved at the age of four to a somewhat larger town, Schönfliess-Neumark, which was also built on the medieval pattern. Existence in a small town, he says, gave to a child with some imaginative power the feeling of narrowness and restrictedness. Of this the surrounding town wall was a symbol. The town gave the impression of being a small, protected, self-contained world. This circumscribed existence in Schönfliess was interrupted from the time Tillich was eight years old by a yearly trip during the summer vacation to the Baltic Sea. This excursion was the great event of the year for him, an escape from the restricted horizon of the life of the townspeople. Another escape was afforded by several trips he made to the city of Berlin.\(^3\)

\(^1\) Paul Tillich, Gesammelte Werke (Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1959-). (Hereafter referred to as GW).


\(^3\) Kegley and Bretall, The Theology of Paul Tillich, p. 6.
A still deeper influence was the authoritarian structure of Prussian society. Officials, Tillich writes, were strictly subservient to their superiors and authoritarian towards their subordinates. This hierarchy centered in a remote and inaccessible officialdom in Berlin and finally in the Emperor. Permeating everything was the influence of the army, which inculcated its ideology into the people from their early childhood.4

Most penetrating and lasting, he says, was the impact of the authoritarian system on his personal life, especially on its religious and intellectual side. Both his father and his mother were strong personalities. He pictures his father as a kindly but stern and authoritarian personality, strong in his orthodox Lutheran convictions to the point that he would become irritated with those who differed with him. His mother came from the more democratic Rheinland, but she was deeply influenced by the rigid morals of Western Reformed Protestantism. Tillich felt that both of them exerted a restrictive pressure on him, both in his thought and in his action.5

Partly because of his father's connection with the church as a minister, Tillich identified the authority of his parents with the will of God.6 For this reason it was profoundly difficult for him to break with it. The attempt filled him with a deep sense of guilt.7

It was his father, Tillich says, who unwittingly provided him with the means of breaking with these restraints. In the tradition of classical orthodoxy his father loved philosophy and used it extensively. He could do this because he was convinced that there could be no conflict between a true philosophy and revealed truth. He entered with his son into long philosophical discussions. These, Tillich writes, belonged to the most happy moments in his positive relationship with his father. Nevertheless, it was through these discussions that Tillich's breakthrough to autonomy took place. "From an independent philosophical position a state of independence spread out into all directions, theoretically first, practically later."8

From the ages of fourteen to sixteen Tillich attended the humanistic gymnasium in Königsburg-Neumark. When his family moved to Berlin in 1900, he completed his studies at a humanistic gymnasium there. Education in the humanistic tradition stimulated in him a great enthusiasm for the language and literature of the Greeks.9 His liking for the Greek language was a vehicle, in turn, for his love of Greek culture and especially the early Greek philosophy. At the gymnasium he experienced the tension between humanistic education and the religious tradition which he encountered everywhere in history, art, and literature. He writes, "...in Europe the religious and humanistic traditions (of which the scientific world view is only a part) have been, ever since the Renaissance, in continuous tension. The German humanistic Gymnasium was one of the places in which this tension was most manifest."10

It was, therefore, from these two sources, the love of philosophical dis-

4 Ibid., p. 7.
5 Ibid., p. 8.
7 Kegley and Bretall, The Theology of Paul Tillich, p. 8.
8 Ibid.
10 Kegley and Bretall, The Theology of Paul Tillich, p. 9.