

Puritans, to Jonathan Edwards, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry Thoreau, Herman Melville, and Abraham Lincoln.

(Revised, October 26, 1959)

Notes

1. Beard and Beard, *The American Spirit*, New York, 1942, p. v.
2. Whitehead, "The Study of the Past—Its Uses and Its Dangers," in *Essays in Science and Philosophy*, p. 114.
3. Nevins, *Ordeal of the Union*, I, pp. 42-43.
4. *The Federalist*, #1.
5. Lord Charnwood, *Abraham Lincoln*, Pocket Books, 1948, pp. 31-32.
6. e.g., Francis Trollop, *Domestic Manners of the Americans*.
7. Nevins, *Ordeal*, I, p. 35.
8. Parker, "Experience as a Minister," in *Works*, Centenary Edition, vol. XIII, p. 335.
9. Finney, *Lectures in Systemic Theology*, Oberlin, 1847, p. 205
10. Curti, *Growth of American Thought*, p. 371.
11. Curti, *Growth of American Thought*, p. 372.
12. See Beard and Beard, *The American Spirit*, chap. vii, pp. 332 ff.
13. Quoted in Curti, *Growth of American Thought*, p. 371.
14. Curti, *Sermons*, p. 85.
15. See John Krout, *The Origins of Prohibition*.
16. See e.g., Tyler, *Freedom's Ferment*, p. 355.
17. See e.g., Symmes and Clement, *Rebel America*.
18. See Parker's "Experience as a Minister," in *Works*, Centenary Edition, vol. XIII, pp. 341-43.
19. Tillich, *The Christian Answer*, p. 3.
20. James Bryce, *The American Commonwealth*, II, p. 870.

Schindler's List: A Personal Kierkegaardian Reflection on the Nature of the Ethical

by John J. Davenport

*I could have got more out.
I could have got more. I don't know, if I just...
I could have got more. Itzhak
If I'd made more money,
Oh, I threw away so much money,
You have no idea!
If I just...I didn't do enough.
This car, Gert would have bought this car.
Why did I keep the car? Ten people, right there.
Ten people.
This pen, two people. This is gold: two more people.
He would have given me two for it...at least one.
He would have given me one more,
One more person. A person died for this.
I could have got one more person, and I didn't!*

Several years after first seeing Spielberg's movie, this final scene of *Schindler's List* still haunts me. Its power lies in this: Schindler's poignant remorse shows us the truth of our own relationship to moral responsibility. We encounter here in concrete terms what Kierkegaard meant by "the infinite requirement of the ethical."¹ In Schindler's extraordinary apotheosis of grief and self-clarity, we witness a man learning for the first time that our responsibility of neighbor-love is without any limits that could be specified in quantitative terms. This is not

to say that the agape expected from us is without any conceptual or emotional bounds at all, but that in reality we are *never* in a position to say that we have "done enough," that we have satisfied everything the Ethical demands. In these last moments, Schindler discovers what the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas has tried to teach us in different terms: namely, that our very identity as individuals depends on an original, pre-contractual, and inexhaustible responsibility for others. If we set out on this journey, we can never return to ourselves.²

It takes Schindler a long time to let himself realize that there is no way to contain or delimit the responsibility he has accepted for his neighbors: the Ethical in Kierkegaard's and Levinas's radical senses is overwhelming, and eventually it sweeps away all pretense that there can be any plan or method or measurable threshold for having *finished with it*, in order then to have "leisure time" left over for indulgence. At any given level of achievement, there is always "one more" that we could have saved if only we had had a little more resolve, or exercised a little more foresight, or cared a little less for our own ego. In the realm of responsibility, this marginal "one more" extends *indefinitely* out before us, forming a transcendent horizon of expectation, a never ending purpose, an overflowing fullness that, if we enter into it wholeheartedly or without reservation, must finally burst the bounds of our little life. And yet as Levinas has also urged, this *infinity* of the Ethical, beckoning from the Face of the Other—the "one more" who always remains—which takes us out of the narcissistic circle of an ego absorbed with itself and its objects, is not an oppression but *freedom*. The infinite significance of responsibility in moral devotion is the only reality that truly transfigures us, taking us out of our finitude and lifting us up to what is eternal.

This experience of the Ethical forces us to reconceive authenticity. We had perhaps thought that a serious commitment to our duties could raise us above the numb particularity of our animal existence, or bring us back to ourselves from out of the superficial details of consumption and ordinary affairs, without a transformation that is potentially *total*. We assumed that we could just do our nicely delimited part, participate for a few scheduled hours a day in the Ethical, and then return to our

customary identity. In this transaction with the ethical, we think: of course I'll *really* still be the businessman, counselor, student, teacher, worker, artist, or friend (etc.) that I know myself to be in everyday existence. We took for granted, in other words, that we could just dabble a little in the Ethical, just play the Good Samaritan now and then, without getting drawn into anything too serious that might alter our very sense of *who we are*, or that might (with a kind of uncanniness) leave us *almost unrecognizable* to ourselves, lost in an infinitely open horizon of others to whom we are related—even given over—in moral need. We need this illusion so badly, because the Ethical in its genuine infinity is terrifying—perhaps too terrifying to face fully without a gradual introduction, an apprenticeship—and yet this terror is the only passage to freedom.

It was this illusion of finite morality to which Schindler clung, and initially it allowed him to think that he could simply do some good turns without compromising his tightly held resolve to be an *aesthete* in precisely Kierkegaard's sense: a bourgeois living for his own profit and pleasure "without care" for the character which constitutes his inward being. And yet this defense-mechanism allowed him to make progress, to go a little ways into a dimension of spirit that was unfamiliar and forbidding. As the film portrays him, for a long time Schindler did not *identify* wholeheartedly with the altruistic motives rising within him; on the contrary, he was positively angry with himself for them, outwardly fearing that they exposed him to retribution from the Nazis, but inwardly fearing (perhaps like Nietzsche) that his pity for the Nazis' victims was *weakness*, that his horror at their shocking mistreatment might ultimately cost him his whole sense of who he was, or where he stood in the world. His fear of these new moral feelings was prescient: the spiritual child within sensed that these promptings would inevitably destroy his comfortable world of immature aestheticism. But he did not close his eyes to the atrocities: the moral meaning he encountered for the first time in them was too significant. Instead, drawing on the illusory ideal of a neatly limited ethical duty, he made a deal with himself, a compromise according to which he would help his Jewish workers and reduce his urgency over their suffering, but only because he de-

pended on them for profit in his business. In other words, he told himself that these newly discovered motivations and actions were simply the intentions and conduct of a businessman, and nothing more.

Perhaps we all initiate ourselves into the ethical this way: we include our moral feelings in a story about ourselves that we can accept. But once it is inside, the Ethical starts to change the narrative in terms of which we understand ourselves. Through such a bargain, Schindler kept the Ethical at arms length, warding off its potential to transform him inwardly, while nevertheless starting to act for the sake of the Ethical rather than for capitalist goals more and more often, and without clearly recognizing it. He did not *want* to recognize how deeply he was starting to care about others, or how deeply he was becoming involved in their fate. In the end, it was the gratitude of the very people he had saved that pierced his pretense. In the face of their honest and completely open thankfulness, he could no longer maintain the illusion that preserved his inner contradiction. For he sensed the irony and incongruity in this gratitude—outwardly he deserved it, but inwardly he knew instead that he was *guilty*. Not only could he have done so much *more*, but even worse: no precisely defined or circumscribed additional amount of sacrifice would have sufficed to discharge his responsibility. In short, he saw that the infinite was not in his debt, but *he in its*, that he was not a hero but a sinner and in need of a forgiveness which neither those he had helped nor those he had failed could ever provide, the dearth of which their grateful kindness only made all the more clear to him. Indeed, his inadequacy was so great that only an infinite forgiveness could ever answer it.

Perhaps this interpretation is colored by my Christian background. In any case, it is certainly a personal response to the movie's story—the response of a single individual. But there is no other authentic kind of response to such a film. For me, *Schindler's List* cuts through our common illusions to the real nature of the Ethical. To let the truth about moral responsibility touch us undiminished and without the disguises of ordinary life is to let something alien or Wholly Other penetrate us to our very core and implant there an inexhaustible and undying

unsatisfaction with how things are and with what we personally have done, an unquenchable sorrow for how far both the world, and we ourselves, fall short of the Good. We can call this existential restlessness or unquiet as a *tragic* sense of the world—as long as we are careful not to read anything melodramatic into this word “tragic,” e.g. thinking of ourselves as paladins of righteousness or suffering victims of cosmic unfairness. There is nothing *aesthetic* in this pure sense of tragedy: it refers instead to a purely moral emotion that can never be completely contented or “at home” in this life. Kant was therefore correct when he argued in the *Groundwork* that moral commitment has nothing to do with making its agent happy.³ On the contrary, allegiance to the Ethical is an existential sorrow that can find no consolation in any pretense of its own “tragic” beauty. A few authors have tried to give voice to this sorrow—perhaps Unamuno and Tolkien have come closest to it—but it contains something inexpressible, lying between indignation at evil and suffering, a feeling of helplessness to respond adequately to them, and yet a burning determination *to try* even when the fight seems virtually futile. Yet at the bottom of this tragic resolve and “infinite resignation,” as Kierkegaard called it in *Fear and Trembling*, lies a vast need for hope, a desire for a consolation that restores the possibility of the Good despite its human impossibility. The only consolation which could ever answer to this infinite need of the Ethical is an eschatological promise of final justice.

Something in us obscurely senses such dangers in the Ethical, which is why we shy away from it. We do not want to experience its infinite sorrow, nor to find ourselves so desperately in need of eschatological hope in the face of the inadequacies of human responses to evil. Something in us obscurely fears this final loss of self-control. And this is why Schindler shied away, and told himself “well, I’ll just do this one thing, and then my conscience will be assuaged, and things can go back to being just the way they were before, without the disturbance of guilt.” Almost desperate to hang onto the illusion that some compromise can be made with the Ethical—some bargain that will let us keep a little aesthetic space for ourselves untransformed by its touch—he kept telling himself, “just this one

thing more, and that will be it; they can't expect anything more than that from me!" But the Ethical always expects more. Though at first his interest in the Jews was primarily opportunistic, new possibilities of inward character were dawning in Schindler after he witnessed the slaughter of the Ghetto. Their potential proved too *tempting* for him (to the aesthete, as Kierkegaard says, the Ethical must first be experienced as a *temptation*): the experience of *caring* for others, however weak it was at first, held too much promise of meaning for him to simply turn his back on it, or refuse to take the next step. Thus by attrition and degrees, the Ethical wore away Schindler's defenses, stripped him of his cherished illusion of being "just a businessman," until at last he had to stand naked before it and *let it break him*, let it shatter the Schindler-who-was between the anvil of finitude and the hammer of infinite responsibility.

The Ethical, then, is not a list of household chores: it is a bottomless well, an adamant wall of unscalable height. To recognize it is to acknowledge the infinity of *being guilty*. As Kierkegaard notes, even not being the party responsible for a wrong on a given occasion or having done "what one could" in some incident still presupposes that one is *essentially* subject to the Ethical as a category, and therefore also inadequate:

*To him who is essentially innocent it can never occur to cast guilt away from him, for the innocent man [or "aesthete"] has nothing to do with the determinant we call guilt. Therefore when in a particular case he casts from him the blame and thinks he is without guilt, at that very instant he makes the concession that on the whole he is one who is essentially guilty, only possibly in this particular case not guilty....In everyday life the total guilt, as a thing which is generally presupposed, is gradually so taken for granted that it is forgotten. And yet it is this totality of guilt which makes it possible that in the particular instance one can be guilty or not guilty.*⁴

Against this stark claim, the usual slippery-slope objections will arise. It will doubtless be objected from many quarters that if agape or the duty of neighbor-love is as infinite as I have

described it, it has all sorts of absurd implications, such as that we should kill ourselves so that our organs could be used to save others, etc. For it will be protested, in the style of philosophers like Bernard Williams, that such an agapeistic ethic takes no account of the individual or her need to have a life, and makes her of no value in comparison to others, so that her need for happiness must again and again be sacrificed for theirs. But these are errors, confusions and analytic digressions. Such objections confuse the duty of agape with utilitarian optimization, or with a conception of benevolence as a comparison preferring the greater quantitative "good" of others to the lesser quantitative "good" of the individual. But the Kierkegaardian demand of agape is not "infinite" in any such mathematical sense: it is not a consequentialist calculation implying that our sacrifice should continue as long as it will help raise the average of human well-being, or even the concrete happiness of particular others. On the contrary, as Kierkegaard says, "The priority of the total guilt is not to be determined empirically, is no *summa summarum*; for no determination of totality ever results from numerical computation."⁵ The objections that Williams and others have raised against the quantitatively "endless" demands implicit in utilitarianism do not apply to the infinity of the Ethical, because the *transcendence* of its agapeistic demand only implies unsatisfiability by any concrete, finite list of acts performed. It does not rob us of the "right" to develop ourselves and pursue a life, but rather furnishes the only basis on which we can have such an authentic self-development, as opposed to a mere "career" defined in quantitative terms.

Nor should we say that the infinite responsibility placed on us by the duty of agape violates the "ought-implies-can" principle. For the way in which this duty always reaches beyond us is fully in accord with this Kantian principle: it is not the ridiculous or impossible, but always something that we in fact *could have* done which the Ethical makes conspicuous as unfulfilled. Schindler obviously could not singlehandedly defeat Hitler or unmake the slaughter of the Jewish ghetto, but these feats conceived in abstract speculation are not what the Ethical demanded of him either. They were not the cause of his anguish. Rather, the Ethical demanded only that he save

one more, which he certainly could have done—though it does not specify which one. It is precisely the apprehension of this possibility which transfixed Schindler in the final scene. The Ethical is so painful precisely because it does *not* demand something that we can dismiss as obviously impossible, but rather something concrete, the possibility of which we cannot in good faith deny—and yet it always points to a good that is both possible and yet *undone* by us. Here, the attempt to apply a slippery slope argument, or to insist that a duty to do *each* of these possible things would amount (through a calculus-limit) to a duty to bring about an impossible total good or utopian perfection is both a false inference and a subterfuge, an unfaithful escape. Schindler himself even tries this argument once in the movie when he asks in exasperation, "If he wants to kill everyone, what am I supposed to do? Hire them all?" But this argument provides no relief, because the indefinite succession of concrete tasks laid before us in the eternity of the Ethical is not subject to Newtonian "exhaustion" or Leibnizian limit-summation. Referring to an impossible totality like "them all" is merely an attempt in bad faith to avoid facing the real possibility of doing the next concrete but still unfulfilled act: in Schindler's case, saving "one more."

In other words, the Ethical never demands the *sum* or the *whole* of all possible good. It is not "perfectionist" in this false consequentialist sense. Yet the call of conscience also cannot be kept to any list, any specific set of particular goods, either. The Ethical is an existential infinity, lying between a mathematical totality that is impossible and any given set of particulars that are possible but individually inadequate for it. And in this paradox or ambiguity lies the great anxiety of the Ethical. I suspect that most of today's ethical theories, whatever their admitted value for the philosophical explanation of political authority and law, also function like Schindler's maneuvers to keep the Ethical at arm's length. An ulterior reason for the popularity of these theories is that they help shield us from the transforming impact of the Ethical in its real infinity by allowing us to keep its demands within neatly defined boundaries, leaving the rest to "supererogation."⁶ How many times do the ethics textbooks freshmen read today tell us that morality can-

not require us to be saints? Schindler learned better: there is no such thing as supererogation with respect to fulfilling the human good itself.⁷ We so desire an ethics that cannot *hurt us* that we are willing to put on blinders to avoid seeing the infinity of the Ethical itself. This is the dark secret of contemporary moral theory.

Thus the Ethical as I have described it does not abridge but fulfills individual autonomy; it does not destroy our "right" to have a life or pursue our good, but it demands an infinite transformation in how we define that life and that good. To explain this distinction a little further, let me refer to a contested biblical passage. When Jesus tells the rich man to give up *everything* to follow him, he is not saying that this man's property has a large exchange value that will be of so much worth to local charities that it should be traded in immediately, but rather that the rich man must no longer *define himself* in terms of his property—whether there is a lot of it, or very little. To be willing to give it all up would be to enter the infinity of the Ethical, to *resign* himself infinitely in Kierkegaard's sense. This does not mean that he will define himself essentially as owning *no property*, which would still be an aesthetic qualification—namely, asceticism or material abnegation. Rather, it means that the property's status becomes contingent or superficial relative to how he defines his identity. As with Job, who resigns himself to losing everything but gets it all back, if the "rich man" followed Jesus' command, he might even keep his property or some part of it, but it would then be accidental rather than essential to the self with which he identifies.

This is exactly what happened to Schindler. He had to "give up everything" in precisely this sense. While he spent more and more of his resources trying to buy off the Ethical, to save something of his old identity, its hold on him only grew stronger. When he finally submitted to its unassuageable sorrow, the inexhaustibility of its demand, he was shocked to discover that he would have given *anything he had*, his car, his pen, the shirt on his back, just to save *one more*—and knowing that even this would never be enough. And then it did not matter that he had in fact saved 1100 rather than 1101, or that as it happens he still had this particular car or pen or anything else,

for the person who existed only *via* his ownership of these things was gone, blown away by the infinity of the Ethical. King Lear had to lose everything and stand naked on the heath to realize that he had "taen too little care" of the suffering of wretches. But for Schindler "losing everything" occurred without in fact losing the car and pen: through them, he had the same revelation as King Lear. Then what he needed most was the solace of the very people he tried to help, and beyond them, a mercy equal to the infinity of the Ethical.

In this respect, Spielberg's film also allows the horror of the Holocaust, the inconceivability of its abomination, to become a metaphor for the infinity at stake in the Ethical. For Schindler's discovery that the Ethical is infinite takes place through his final recognition that the evil of the Holocaust is terrible beyond any measure, so appalling that nothing he could save for himself has *any weight* when balanced against saving even one more person from its abyss. Facing an evil of transcendent proportions, and seeing it finally in the infinity of its evil, Schindler realized the infinity of the good which opposes this evil, the illimitable extent of the duty to redeem the world from such evil. What a shattering epiphany this must be to anyone!—let alone to someone who had formerly been a well-contented aesthete living contentedly in the company of flattering associates. But we should not believe that we are better prepared for it. Against this shock, there are no degrees of preparation; indeed, thinking ourselves to be fine and upstanding individuals who already have some sense of the ethical will only increase our prostration, and the irony of our former pretensions, when we face the truth—the truth, of course, that we could have saved one more, and yet we didn't.

But unlike Schindler, our story is not finished. We still have a chance to act, to answer the evils and injustices of our times with the particular ways open to us. Perhaps as Levinas has suggested, it is this ethical challenge itself which makes us individual persons. If so, then it is worth the terror and the anguish to stand where Schindler stood, and invest everything—our very selves—in pursuit of the Good.

Notes

1. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, tr. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton University Press, 1941, pub. 1968), p.450.
2. See Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, tr. Alphonso Lingis (Duke University Press, 1969).
3. But this is *not* because morality consists just in a set of deontic restrictions on the ways we may legitimately pursue happiness for ourselves and others, as Kant apparently thought.
4. Kierkegaard, *Postscript*, p.471, my italics.
5. Kierkegaard, *ibid*.
6. This is the term in deontological ethical theory for actions that are good but beyond the call of duty, i.e., actions whose *omission* would not violate any moral precept or duty.
7. In this MacIntyre is absolutely right. Only he does not see that the "human good" is precisely *agape*, and that fulfilling this telos does not imply happiness. On the contrary, this is a good which *consists* in striving for it without in practice ever fulfilling it, and the striving, as I have said, involves an infinite kind of sorrow rather than happiness.