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Book Review: Being Human... Becoming Human

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that the identity statement expressed by (4) is necessarily false or is not warrantably assertable.

I am sympathetic to the view that we do not know very much about which are the essential human properties. I am even inclined to agree with Morris when he suggests (pp. 135-36) that it is methodologically permissible, and perhaps even obligatory, for Christian philosophers to use what faith teaches about the Incarnation as a control on their theorizing about human nature. But I do not believe that our knowledge of essential human properties is quite so meager as it would have to be in order to render the position Morris defends unproblematic, and so I think Leibniz's Law still spells trouble for the statement expressed by (4). It seems to me that we do know, on the basis of broadly scientific considerations, that being an organism is a property essential to each human. And it also seems to me that we know that God, being by nature Pure Spirit, has essentially the property of being a non-organism. Of course I could be wrong about one or both of these things. And I do not mean to assert that each human is exactly the same sort of organism whenever he or she exists; our present bodies may differ in biological detail from our glorified bodies after the General Resurrection. But I think I have the appearances with me in suggesting that the little we do know about human nature suffices to show that the two referring expressions in (4) do not pass the test for co-referentiality posed by the formulation of Leibniz's Law Morris has endorsed.

Though I found much to disagree with in *Understanding Identity Statements*, my criticisms are meant as a compliment to the book's power to provoke philosophical thought. It deals with important philosophical problems in a novel and stimulating way. It is written in a style which is clear, concise, and refreshingly free of superfluous technicalities. And it sets forth a theoretical position which merits careful consideration by all Christian philosophers.

Being Human...Becoming Human, by **Helmut Thielicke**. Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc. 475 pages. \$17.95.

Reviewed by T. WILLIAM HALL.

Upon reading Helmut Thielicke's *Being Human...Becoming Human* one is quickly reminded of Paul Tillich's *The Courage to Be*, Ernest Becker's *The Denial of Death*, and Soren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* in that all focus on the limits and possibilities of being human. They are similar, too, in that all draw upon depth psychologies, on philosophical insights, on literary images, and all deal with moral issues. Thielicke's book stands apart from the others in the explicit and constant use of classical Christian theology as his criterion of

adequacy.

At the beginning, this book is deceptive. The “who am I?” question, prominent since the existentialist era, and given pabulum nourishment in the hedonistic age of the 1960’s, is raised as if it were being discussed for the first time. It soon becomes clear, however, that the issue of identity is not a mere emotive cry of an adolescent adult but a probing into metaphysical roots of the self and into problems of epistemology and moral philosophy.

Thielicke, as if to clear away the debris of secular anthropologies, is convincing in his argument that there is no adequate objective (i.e. scientific) way to study the human. Even adding up all empirical aspects will not lead to an explanation of the human, he says. “People cannot be explained but only understood.” (17) In so far as scientists can know humanity, they must do so “as an object of faith...thus to use a theological category.” (385)

As a Christian anthropologist, the author seeks to analyze contemporary human problems such as identity, guilt, and freedom, finding modern sociological, psychological and anthropological theories helpful, if inadequate. They are inadequate primarily because they are unable to deal with the reality of transcendence—both self transcendence and a transcendent Other. (200)

Throughout the major portion of the book, the author examines issues related to becoming human such as autonomy and authority, the self and society, humanity and technology, sexuality, time, death and eternal life. These several hundred pages, however, do not provide a sustained argument for any theory of either being or becoming human. Rather these pages are a series of loosely connected essays which may be useful as a resource for any reader searching for a thorough discussion of problems related to an understanding of the human.

While Thielicke presents no definitive solution to the problem presented by the title of the book, Teilhard de Chardin appears to suggest to the author the most satisfactory clue. In Teilhard’s view, there is a self transcendent dimension within the human as well as the transcendent reality of God. With Teilhard, Thielicke can return to the sciences, but this return is to the kind of science “that does not stop at objectifiable details but thinks symbolically, and thus gives objects their meaning.” (450) Thus the author resonates with Teilhard for whom “a cosmic sense and a Christian sense are not two different things.” (452)

While Becker calls for an admission of the truth of the myth of the fall and the failure of any *causa sui* project, and Tillich sees human possibility through courage, and Kierkegaard presents the knight of faith as a model for a Christian person, this book provides no conclusive theories about the human. Thielicke’s work, as lengthy as it is, seems but a prologomena to some future Christian view of the human, using 475 pages to explore dozens of topics and the thought of nearly every major philosopher and theologian in the West as if dialogue might mysteriously reveal some truth about being and becoming human. But if

dialogue is his metaphor for authentic humanity, as argued by H. R. Niebuhr in *The Responsible Self*, then some defense of dialogue is called for.

While over all conclusions are few, the volume is chuck full of insights, primarily insights drawn from Christian theology. For example, in writing about history and meaning, he insists upon the need for transcendence to observe meaning. And "this presence of transcendence in history is Jesus Christ." (315) In so far as Christ is present at the center, "it is a higher center of perspective from which one can see both forward and backward." (316) This potential vision of past and future made possible by the transcendent Christ is strikingly similar to Richard Niebuhr's view of revelation in *The Meaning of Revelation*.

In writing about freedom and tradition, he suggests that either alone may be destructive. They may, however, exist in creative tension. In defending the latter he writes: "Freedom can conjure up total unfreedom by way of unrestricted misuse...It is of the very nature of human personhood and freedom that there can be no gift (Gabe) which is not also a task (Aufgabe), and only thus a gift." (243-4).

In his discussion of humanity and technology, the author points to persons who are both initiator and possible victim of the technological processes. The problem is thus not technology, but it is that of the human genius who has produced its powers for good and evil. With regard to the bomb, we have become a danger to ourselves. "Without God—which means without the final commitment that we have called the premise of trust and the basic condition of communication—everything is permissible". (Dostoevski) (298-9)

There are insights, too, in his discussion of human sexuality. The fact that humans are not determined in their sexual lives by instinct alone, and that there is a natural propensity toward sexual activity carries an impulse toward humanization. "To take up a phrase of Sartre's, and to modify its original thrust, we might say, with tongue in check, that we are 'condemned to freedom'." (199) He goes on to say that the transition from natural constraint to conscious and accountable actions is both a possibility and a necessity. And it is this self transcendence which is, according to Thieliicke, a potentiality present in the structure of the human.

Through these and other vignettes which might be reported, a common theme runs through the book: the sciences are not equipped to deal with transcendence. Only from a Christian view of humanity which understands transcendence as an essential dimension of and beyond the human can we have an adequate anthropology.