The Anthropology of Paul Tillich

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The reorientation of theology along what may be called 'realistic' lines which came shortly after World War I on Continental Europe, and a few years later in the United States, has come as a result of events which shook the world, but it is likewise greatly indebted to the influence of strong men. Paul Tillich came to the United States in 1933, after having participated actively in the process of theological levelling on the Continent. Between 1918 and 1933 Tillich was both a colleague and a critic of Karl Barth, as the latter led in the movement which shifted the total emphasis of Continental theology. The Crisis Theology shook the foundations of the liberalism which identified the Kingdom of God with human progress, eternity with time, God with resident forces of nature, and Revelation with the processes of human reason. It asserted again the reality of the divine transcendence, the sinfulness of man, the otherness of Revelation from reason and the dignity of Christ as Lord.

In the theology of the post-Crisis theological period, it has been Tillich who has pioneered in offering a re-evaluation of the doctrine of man—a doctrine which was sometimes lost in the shuffle in which Barth, Brunner and Gogarten were engaged. It must be remembered, of course, that Tillich worked closely with Reinhold Niebuhr, particularly in his early years in America. He is no doubt indebted to the doughty warrior from Missouri in the development of a newer and more realistic doctrine of man.

In his approach to the question of human nature, Tillich reminds us that man is not an easy creature to know. He does not detain himself long with the consideration of the origin of man's basic physical structure; it seems quite clear that he accepts the view that man's physical organism is the product of long eons of evolution, which history he is willing to leave

to the anthropologists. Says he, "Historical man is a descendant of beings who had no history." He does throw out one warning at this point: while the sciences may study man as they wish, they will not really know man through the means of an objective and detached study. A proper understanding of human nature will, he reminds us, come only to the one who recognizes that man's nature is constantly changing in the course of history; and hence that one may reach an inner understanding of human nature only as he studies man in terms of a self-identification with man's human and personal concerns. In the proper understanding of man, the philosophers and medical men must join with the theologian. 

It is almost correct to say that Tillich is more interested in an analysis of human existence than he is in the analysis of human nature. Actually he does at times reject belief in "an unchangeable structure called human nature." It may be said, that Tillich's analysis of human nature may be understood in terms of two elements, (1) the ontological problem; and (2) the existential predicament. It is to this two-fold study of the problem that we now turn.

Human Nature and the Ontological Problem

Tillich has sought to restore contact between contemporary theology and the classic tradition in Western philosophy in his deep concern with the question of being. At no point is his departure from the idealistic tradition of conventional theological liberalism more evident than here. And while he is frequently classified as an existentialist, he is nevertheless in radical disagreement with the Kantian dualism at the point of its rejection of ontology.

This article would run far beyond its length if it attempted to discuss Tillich's analysis of "reality as a whole." It is well to point out, that Tillich does feel that one part of the work of the philosopher is that of seeking "to maintain a detached objectivity toward being and its structures..." It goes without saying, that the theologian must pass rather quickly beyond this to the understanding of the existential in-

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2 Ibid., I, p. 167.
3 The Courage to Be, p. 72.
4 Systematic Theology, I, p. 166.
5 Ibid., I, p. 18.
6 Ibid., I, p. 22.
volvement of man. Tillich does, however, defend an ontological doctrine of man, in terms of the existence of something in man which may be isolated for the purposes of study. In other words, he makes a place for some objective or neutral structure in man which exists in tension with the existential factors which enter into his experience. But the 'self' is not such merely as a static entity; says Tillich, "Reason makes the self a self, namely, a centered structure..."^7

From much that Tillich has to say concerning man, one gathers that he believes that finite existence has meaning chiefly in its opposition to what may be called essential being. But he does discuss man's 'essential' being, at least for formal purposes. To him, 'essence' is to be defined in two ways: first as "the nature of a thing, or the quality in which a thing participates, or as a universal" and second, "as that thing from which being has 'fallen,' the true and undistorted nature of things..."^8 Man as he now exists is, of course, separated from his undistorted nature; at the same time, he does maintain (or retain) a relationship to the ontological structures of the universe. True, in the Fall (which Tillich interprets mythologically) man is held to have left his place of identity with "the creative ground of the divine life" in order to "stand upon" himself "to actualize what he essentially is..."^9 One asks, then, "Is man, in his state of severance from his essence beyond any effective contact with the world which ontology seeks to explore?"

Tillich's answer would be, No. Rather, at every point which is crucial for human existence, essential and existential factors exist in polarity. The essential elements enter into every one of the features of the existential predicament. They enter as well into the very structure of man's being, even though no entirely objective interpretation of human nature is possible.

To Tillich, philosophy is basically ontological; and theology cannot avoid the basic question of philosophy, since "God is the answer to the question implied in being."^10 More specifically, the question of ontology must always be, What is being itself? And applied to anthropology, it is raised in form, What is that which can be said to be in man, apart from

^7 Ibid. , I, p. 172.
^8 Ibid. , I, p. 203.
^9 Ibid. , I, p. 255.
^10 Ibid. , I, p. 163.
the group of human beings?
To answer this, one must refer to Tillich's four levels of ontological concepts,

(1) the basic ontological structure which is the implicit condition of the ontological question; (2) the elements which constitute the ontological structure; (3) the characteristics of being which are the conditions of existence; and (4) the categories of being and knowing. 11

It is the third and fourth levels which concern us here. Tillich rejects, of course, anything like Hegel's essentialism, and asserts that man's present (i.e., existential) situation is one of estrangement from his essential nature. 12 To exist is "to stand out"--and Tillich insists that human existence is not a mere standing-out of absolute non-being, but a standing-out of relative non-being, or of "mere potentiality." 13

But, we ask, what is the essential level which he attaches to man, the level which embraces "the characteristics of being which are the conditions of existence" at his finite level? It is difficult to discover his answer to this query. He asserts that Hegel's essentialism is an attempt to conceal man's true state. 14 He associates a true understanding of the 'essence of humanity' with his analysis of what he calls "the myth of the Fall," suggesting that man's ontological nature may be located by some process of demythologization of this 'myth.'

Now, Tillich holds that man "belongs" to infinity: proof of this is found, he thinks, in man's possession of freedom. "Man is free, in so far as he can receive unconditional moral and logical imperatives which indicate that he can transcend the conditions which determine every finite being." 15 In other words, man possesses the power of transcending his environment, not merely by virtue of being the highest finite level in the ontological structure, but because he himself "asks the ontological question, and in whose self-awareness the ontological answer can be found." 16

Thus, seen ontologically, man experiences himself as belonging to a world which he nevertheless transcends. He is an ego which has, through the exercise of freedom, developed

11 Ibid., I, p. 164.
12 Ibid., II, p. 25.
13 Ibid., II, p. 20.
14 Ibid., II, p. 25.
15 Ibid., II, p. 31.
16 Ibid., I, p. 168.
a self. The world is to him a correlative concept, for he has a world, and does not merely live in a world. His relation to the fourth level of ontology, namely to "the categories of being and knowing" is seen in these terms. He transcends his world by taking his place as its "perspective-center"; he expresses this transcendence by the employment of language, especially abstract language. In viewing his world, he is self-conscious of his ontic relation to it—that is, he sees himself as a part of it, and as one who can break out of the stimulus-response arc.

In summing up what Tillich finds of essential man through the process of ontological analysis, we must note that he contends that "the essential nature of man is present in all stages of his development." Expressed dogmatically, says he, it has been projected into the past "as a history before history," in which he "dreams" himself as existing in a state of "innocent" essential being. Here we find, of course, the radical difference between his theology and that of historic Christianity. He views man's unfallen state as a merely theoretical one, couched in terms of myth. Rather than seeing human nature, as it came from the Creative Hand, as perfect and bearing the essence of true humanity, he accepts evil as a consequence of actualized potentiality, as an essential concomitant of human-ness. Sin becomes thus an inevitable consequence of the actualization of finite freedom, while innocence is merely a state imagined as the result of a process of idealization. The account of the Fall becomes thus, not a record of something which occurred, but a symbolic gesture upon the part of man, signifying the tendency of 'dreaming innocence' to protect and preserve itself.

Human Nature and the Existential Predicament

It has been noted that at every point which is crucial for human existence, there are polarities between essential and existential elements. There is no 'orthodox' list of these polarities to be found in Tillich's writings, but five of them do appear regularly in his analysis of man's predicament as an

17 Ibid., I, p. 170.
18 Ibid., I, p. 164.
19 Ibid., II, p. 33.
20 Ibid., II, p. 35.
21 Page 20, this paper.
existing being. They are: The Infinite and finitude, Revelation and human reason, Redemption and human sinfulness, destiny and human freedom, and Courage (or self-affirmation) and anxiety.

In his relation to the Infinite, man exercises "infinite self-transcendence," so that although he is finite, "nothing finite can hold him." Man is never satisfied with his finiteness. The categories in terms of which he thinks evidence his finiteness--time, space, causality and substance. The very utilization of these bring him to a constant and poignant feeling of his finiteness and insecurity.

In his relation to the polarity of Revelation and human reason, Tillich holds that again man finds himself in tension. He begins his consideration of the question of Revelation with what he calls "pure phenomenology," that is, by attempting to describe meanings apart from the realities to which they refer. But such a critical phenomenology does not sustain itself long, for Revelation reveals the essentially mysterious, and this does not lose its mysteriousness by being made known. Thus, Revelation is seen by Tillich to be always "a subjective and an objective event in strict interdependence." Subjectively, it implies what he calls 'ecstasy,' by which he means, a state of mind "which is extraordinary in the sense that (it) transcends its ordinary situation." This connotes a situation in which the mind seeks to transcend the subject-object structure which is a factor in every knowing situation. Thus, in the 'ecstatic' situation, "Reason reaches its boundary line, is thrown back upon itself, and then is driven to its extreme situation." This leads to what Tillich calls 'ontological shock'; in it, the mysterium tremendum and the mysterium fascinans meet.

Revelation is thus received in an ecstatic state of mind--a state in which the rational structure of the mind is not destroyed, but merely for the moment set aside. Nothing is added to "the complex of knowledge which is determined by the subject-object structure of reason." Rather, Revelation adds 'dimension' to those aspects of our knowing which has to do with "our ultimate concern and to the mystery of being."
It is at this point that Tillich's divergence from the position of historic Christianity evidences itself most clearly. He rejects that which may properly be termed the propositional content of doctrine. To him, Revelation is "independent of what science and history say about the conditions in which it appears" and occurs at a different dimension of reality. Thus, reason "receives revelation in ecstasy and miracles" but cannot be expected to apply any of its ordinary norms (as employed for example in questions of scientific inquiry) to its content. Rather, says Tillich, reason must recognize that "the word as a medium of revelation is not information" and that "the 'Word of God' contains neither revealed commandments nor revealed doctrines."

Concerning the polarity involved in the relation between Redemption and human sinfulness, Tillich is unclear at the point of his understanding of the nature of sin. He sees the Fall as basically a situation in which the unindividuated passes to the individuated and the differentiated; and it is difficult to see how this differs from Creation. Thus, the actualization of finiteness leads to inevitable sinfulness. As the individual goes beyond 'innocence,' he enters inevitably "into the sphere of conflicts and of moral distinctions where one becomes sinful and guilty." Tillich's doctrine of Redemption is involved, and cannot be considered in detail here. It centers in his belief that those who participate in Christ come to share what he calls "the New Being." Such a sharing involves "The three-fold 're' namely, re-conciliation, re-union, re-surrection." Christ has manifested "a personal life which is subjected to all the consequences of existential estrangement but wherein estrangement is conquered in himself and a permanent unity is kept with God." For Tillich's understanding of precisely how men participate in Christ, and of precisely what this means to their

28 Ibid., I, p. 183.
29 Ibid., I, p. 118.
30 Ibid., I, pp. 124f.
31 Ibid., II, pp. 35ff.
34 Systematic Theology, II, p. 135.
personal lives, we must await Volume III of his *Systematic Theology*.

To Tillich, destiny and human freedom likewise stand in polarity. He sees freedom, not as a faculty of some aspect of human nature (e.g., the will); it is a quality "of man, that is, of that being who is not a thing but a complete self and a rational person." It occurs only "in polar interdependence with destiny" and enables men to exercise deliberation, decision and responsibility. He is not primarily interested in freedom as a metaphysical problem, however, but notes it as generating a more significant tension, that which rises out of the polarity of Courage (or self-affirmation) and anxiety.

It is at the point of this fifth polar structure that Tillich's indebtedness to the depth psychology becomes evident. He accepts the basic distinction between fear (as related to an identifiable object) and anxiety as a reaction to finitude. Thus anxiety is ontological so that "finite individualization produces a dynamic tension with finite participation; the break of their unity is a possibility." Anxiety is, in part, the result of existential estrangement, and is at this point closely tied in with the polarity of destiny and freedom. Anxiety is, basically, the by-product of creatureliness. It goes without saying, that Tillich here refers to what the German means by *Urangst*, and not to neurotic anxiety which may result from pathological inner conflicts. To him, *Urangst* springs from confrontation with the threat of nothingness. Tillich sees no adequate answer to anxiety, as he defines it, in psychotherapy. Cosmic anxiety cannot be overcome; it must be accepted and put to creative use, in terms of what Tillich calls Courage. He goes beyond the usual definition of this term (that is, "the power of the mind to overcome fear") and asserts that it must be understood ontologically in terms of a quality which can "conquer the anxiety of meaninglessness and doubt."

In connection with the discussion of Courage and anxiety, Tillich reveals his belief that the threat of nonbeing is a real

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36 Ibid., I, p. 182.  
37 Ibid., I, p. 185.  
38 Ibid., I, p. 191.  
39 Ibid., I, p. 199.  
40 Ibid., II, pp. 62f.  
41 Ibid., II, p. 173.  
42 The Courage to Be, p. 34.  
43 Ibid., p. 174.
threat, so that man may exclude himself, not only from relative (that is, finite) being, but from ultimate (or eternal) existence. Thus, his anxiety has a foundation in real fact. Tillich proposes, in place of a self-sufficient finitude, a Courage which will turn anxiety into positive and constructive purpose.

Courage, confronted by meaninglessness, calls for self-affirmation; insofar as man can meet this condition, he can rise above the uncreative forms of courage. Such self-affirmation comes "in spite of" nonbeing, and leads to the power-to-be. It involves risk, to be sure; but in self-affirmation, the individual so doing rises above the anxieties of destiny and of meaninglessness. This leads to confidence; and Tillich tries to equate this with justification as understood by Luther. This writer wonders, however, whether this equation is allowable, in terms of the historic understanding of the passage, "The just shall live by his faith."

From the foregoing it is evident that while there is much in Tillich's thought which one must appreciate, he is in major areas of his thought far from the positions considered to be essential by historic Christianity. He acknowledges the that of human sinfulness, but is inadequate in his exposition of the how. In his attitude toward Revelation, he seems to fail to give to fallen man an adequate beacon light out of the dark. He is acute in his analysis of natural man's response to his position as alienated from God, but does not, at least by the end of Volume II of his Systematic Theology, show us a coherent program for reconciliation. The connection between identification with "The New Being in Christ" and the empirical Courage are far from clear. It may be that the appearance of Volume III of his magnum opus will clarify some of these issues. It is unlikely that they can rectify the situation at many of the points at which he has already committed himself.

44 Ibid., p. 151.