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Tracy, GOD, ACTION AND EMBODIMENT

Erratum

bookreview

BOOK REVIEWS

God, Action, and Embodiment, by **Thomas F. Tracy**. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984. Pp. xix, 184. Paper. \$11.95.

Reviewed by JAMES A. KELLER, Wofford College.

This book is an analysis of the concept of agency as it occurs in our talk about humans and an application of the results to a philosophical discussion of the concept of God. As Tracy acknowledges, there are other ways to approach the concept of God, and he claims no unavoidable centrality for the way he has chosen (though this way would seem to be important for Christians, given the many things which are said about divine actions in their Scriptures and traditions). Tracy's aim, however, is not to construct a doctrine of God, for this would require drawing on particular claims about what God has done in history; rather, his "aim is to clarify underlying structures of thought, to make conceptual resources available for theological construction, and to sketch the central structures of one or more ways of putting these resources to work in conceiving of a God who acts" (p. xvii).

The first of the book's three parts deals with the language we use to characterize a person, typically by mentioning "character traits" such as 'wise,' 'loyal,' 'cruel,' and 'enthusiastic.' Tracy notes that such terms are used both to evaluate particular actions and to describe the character of the person who does the actions. The former is the basis for the latter, for a person is correctly described by one of these terms if the term identifies an enduring characteristic of his intentional actions. Moreover, Tracy takes having "a fairly rich selection" of such traits to be essential to personhood. Tracy's view of the logic of terms which designate traits of character has many similarities to Ryle's, but he clearly rejects philosophical behaviorism, toward which he finds Ryle ambiguous. The central point in Tracy's rejection is that the behaviorist cannot account for the distinction between intentional action and the other activities of the person's body; in his view, "descriptions of behavior as intentional action are not reducible to descriptions of behavior as mere happening" (p. 20)—or in other words, as a bodily movement in some context.

In Part II, Tracy's attention shifts to the question of the embodiedness of the agent. He examines Cartesian dualism and notes its advantages for theological construction, but he does not adopt it in his own approach because of certain well known difficulties. Instead he turns to a careful analysis of Strawson's argument against dualism in "Persons." He argues that at most Strawson shows

that a human person must be understood as a psychophysical unit and cannot be analyzed dualistically; but Strawson does not show that any subject of P-predicates (predicates which ascribe or imply states of consciousness) must be a psychophysical unit. And Strawson's argument does underline the importance of being able to identify unambiguously the subject of such predications. Tracy accepts Strawson's point that such an identification must be done in relation to the spatio-temporal world of physical objects, but he denies that the referent must therefore be a physical object. He suggests that God might be identified by means of a logically individuating description and/or as the agent of some actions which involve material objects. The latter suggestion raises two problems which Tracy discusses: we must (1) identify the actions and (2) make a network of theistic assumptions (e.g., monotheism) within which we can make identifying references to God as the agent of these actions.

Part III begins with Tracy's analysis of a human being as an agent organism (a body which is capable of intentional actions). Our basic actions are rooted in a structure of physiological processes inaccessible to direct regulation, but which establish stable structures of organic activity which permit a margin of intentional variation. The bodily basis of our actions also gives them their initial orientation (e.g., for air and food). We develop our identities as persons as we act to meet and move beyond the needs of bodily life. Our identity is how we do this—the continuities of intentional content, of character, and of how we integrate the elements in the motivational background of our actions. The agent is not an enduring subject, but a tightly woven continuity of activity. This chapter is one of the most original and suggestive in the book, though I think that it would be difficult to claim that all its conclusions arise simply from conceptual analysis; many passages seem more phenomenological.

Tracy then suggests two senses in which a human is embodied: being an organic unity and having the basic pattern of life as a given. He explores both in relation to the idea that God is embodied. But he thinks that the best suggestion for theological construction is that God is not embodied in either sense, but is the perfection of agency in three senses: God (1) is not limited by any given pattern of life, (2) is unlimited in ability to enact his life as a unified whole, and (3) has the widest possible scope of action. Though the implications of these three senses are not easy to specify with precision, Tracy develops an idea of God as agent which mediates between process and classical theism, though (as he admits) it probably will not satisfy advocates of either.

Tracy's work is notable for its care, thoroughness, balance, and fairness to differing views. The originality and cogency of some of his proposals make it a work of which philosophers of religion should take account. I find his analysis of human agents quite persuasive *as a conceptual analysis*; but as he admits, this is not conclusive (pp. 39-42). For scientific or metaphysical theories could

lead us to reject certain aspects of this analysis. (As he says, they may lead us to ignore or modify certain implications of our ordinary ways of speaking.) Since he wishes to limit his argument to conceptual analysis, I shall not raise objections from either of these two bases; I merely point out that they do provide possible grounds for criticizing and revising his conception of an agent.

Such considerations become even more pressing, however, when we look at Tracy's proposals regarding God as an agent. He uses some theological norms to evaluate the adequacy of various ways of conceiving of God as an agent, though he admits that this is problematic, for these norms themselves are matters of dispute. Moreover, when he extrapolates to the idea of the perfection of agency, he admits that God cannot be attributed any powers beyond what is possible. But advocates of various metaphysical positions would have different ideas of what is possible. Thomistic thinkers would insist that any composite not grounded in something simple is impossible, so they would find Tracy's God impossible as the metaphysical ultimate. And process thinkers would insist that any actual being must have some power of self-determination; so they would hold that it is not possible for God to have the power to determine all things if anything else is actual. (Tracy holds that any such limitation on God's power must be based on God's decision to limit himself.)

Moreover, process thinkers would probably press Tracy on the issue of whether it would be possible for there to be only one agent. Tracy discusses this matter briefly, pointing out that we humans do some actions which do not involve other agents (walking) and indeed that we do some actions whose conceptual analysis does not involve our bodies (mental arithmetic) though they may involve sub-intentional physiological processes. But Tracy does not show that we would do any actions (including mental actions) if we were not embodied and did not have other physical objects and other agents with which we might interact. More generally, he does not show that an entity could be an agent if there were nothing which was at least somewhat other than or independent of the entity. And it might be claimed that unless he shows this, he has not shown that a solitary nonembodied agent is possible; therefore he has not shown that it would be possible for God to exist as an agent without a created order.

Other questions arise when we consider the implications he draws from conceiving of God as possessing the perfections of agency. God can enact all the patterns of his life, Tracy tells us. Does this mean that he could choose not to be omniscient? (This, of course, is just a way of raising an old issue about what omnipotence includes.) Moreover, Tracy claims that God must be able to enact any of his basic actions. Let us grant this. Then the question arises whether any effects in creatures are basic actions for God. If they are not, then God's ability to do any basic action gives us no basis on which to draw any conclusions about what God can do in creatures. If they are, then we need some discussion of the

relation between basic actions done by God in a creature and the activities of the creature. This problem is particularly acute if God's basic actions include those movements of the bodies of humans which are part of the repertoire of basic actions for them, for Tracy himself says that no basic action can be the action of two agents (p. 82).

It is possible to distinguish the implications for the concept of God of Tracy's analysis of how we identify agents (in terms of patterns in their actions) and of his discussion of God as a nonembodied perfect agent. Although the former raises fewer problems than the latter, it is not without its problems. Tracy seems to conclude that we identify God as the agent of certain large-scale actions (e.g., delivering Israel from Egypt) without specifying the sub-actions by which this is accomplished (pp. 77-83). I think that this idea has merit as a statement of how many believers operate. And certainly it is not impossible to do this for human agents. (I might say that Eisenhower commanded the D-Day invasion without knowing in detail how he did it.) But if (as Tracy admits) one lacks any idea of possible sub-actions by which God does things, this approach becomes more problematic. And if (like Bultmann) one holds a scientific view which seems to render divine sub-actions impossible, then our inability to specify sub-actions might lead us to question whether there were any large-scale actions at all. Tracy is aware of this problem (cf. end of Part II) and says that specifying sub-actions is the task of particular theologies; but that seems to make the usefulness of his proposal heavily dependent on the theologian's ability to do this.

I raise these questions not to demean the book's value but to highlight it. Many of them concern issues beyond the scope of the book. It is because Tracy has done so well what he set out to do that his conclusions deserve to be brought into relation with other bases for constructing a doctrine of God. In my questions I have certainly not touched on all these other bases. And none of them are themselves beyond question. But Tracy's work deserves careful consideration by anyone who wishes to use the language of agency as one of the bases for his theological constructions.

Crisis in Consciousness: The Thought of Ernst Troeltsch, by **Robert J. Rubanowice**. Tallahassee: University Presses of Florida, 1983. Pp. xxiii, 177. \$20.

Reviewed by RUSSELL T. BLACKWOOD, Hamilton College.

This volume is more an excursion in intellectual history than it is a treatise in philosophy or theology. As such, it is a miniature encyclopaedia of the thought and work of an eminently important historicist. A generous Foreword by James