

HUMAN PERSONS AS SUBSTANTIAL ACHIEVERS

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1. *What Kind of an Entity is a Human Person?*

A debate is raging in our culture between two ways of understanding what it is to be a person. We are torn between understanding personhood in *metaphysical* terms, as a kind of entity, and understanding personhood as an *achievement*, a status which is attributed to something by virtue of that thing's activities and/or relationships. On the first view persons are what we *are*; on the second view persons are something which we must *become*. I shall term these two ways of thinking about human personhood the metaphysical theory and the achievement theory.

One might guess that in this dispute Christians would naturally opt for the metaphysical theory, while naturalists (those who think nature is all there is) would gravitate towards the achievement theory. Some would certainly argue this *should* be the case:

In the Christian theological tradition the concept *person* is unalterably and irreducibly metaphysical. That is to say, whether or not a given entity satisfies this concept is a matter wholly independent of anyone's beliefs, attitudes, prejudices, etc. So Christians have a special reason for resisting the claims, sometimes heard in contemporary moral debates, that *person* is 'an evaluative' rather than a metaphysical category — the implication being that an entity *X* is a person only if the rest of us (or, perhaps, those in charge or those in the know) consent to treat *X* in the special way associated with personhood.¹

And it is true that many naturalists do gravitate towards the achievement view, believing, in the words of Ashley Montague, that "humanity is an achievement, not an endowment."²

However, there are also naturalists who believe that human fetuses are persons long before birth. There are non-Christian philosophers who seriously debate whether or not future machines with artificial intelligence might be persons and who do not regard this question as equivalent to asking whether we wish to *decide* to regard these machines as persons.

And, on the other side, there are Christians who clearly are attracted to achievement type theories:

¹ Alfred J. Freddoso, "Human Nature, Potency, and Incarnation," *Faith and Philosophy* III, 1, (1986) p. 50.

² Letter to the editor, *New York Times*, March 9, 1967, p. 38, col. 6. Montague's perspective is carried through in a consistent, chilling manner by Michael Tooley in his famous "Abortion and Infanticide," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, II, 1 (1972). Tooley reasons that personhood is an achievement which requires that the individual have acquired "the concept of a self as a continuing subject of experience and other mental states, and believes that it is itself such a continuing entity." He goes on to claim that infants lack this achievement, that they are therefore not persons and that they do not possess "a serious right to life."

Modern thought latches onto self-awareness, freedom and — in a particular way — intersubjectivity as being characteristics of a personhood. We become persons in dealing with other persons, sharing a common language and experiencing a common history.³

The danger lurking in achievement theories are most evident with respect to their ethical implications. If someone is only a person by virtue of their capacity for making a contribution to society, then the status of the senile, the gravely retarded, the severely insane, not to mention the unborn, is questionable at best. This is so whether we regard the status as bestowed upon an individual by an arbitrary action (a person is whoever we decide to regard as a person) or as grounded in more or less objective criteria (a person is whoever can perform certain mental operations, or engage in certain kinds of meaningful relationships, etc.).

One might think that it is Christianity which is capable of “saving” achievement theories by providing them with an objective basis. Perhaps it is the relationship to God which makes us persons. It is because God regards us in a certain way, and acts towards us in certain ways that we are persons. D.M. Mackay, the distinguished British scientist of brain physiology and communication theory, answers the question “What is so special about man?” as follows:

The biblical answer is that what makes us special is the amazing fact that our Creator was prepared to do for us all that Christ did and suffered in his incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection. Our dignity has nothing to do with our occupying a geographical hub of the universe, or being the product of a special process, or being constructed of special materials, or being inexplicable at one or another scientific level.⁴

Mackay may well be right in his denials here, but wrong in his affirmation. It is puzzling to claim that the *only* thing which makes humans special is that God was concerned enough about us to become incarnate among us. If there were nothing special about humans, why *should* God become incarnate among us?

Let me pose an admittedly silly question to make my point clear. Would tomatoes be more significant than humans if God had chosen to become incarnate as a tomato rather than a human being? Perhaps you will object that God could not become incarnate as a tomato. I agree this is so, but *why* is it so? Surely, it is because humans possess certain characteristics which tomatoes lack.

What Mackay’s view ignores is that our special status as persons stems not only from the way in which God regards us, but from the way in which he created us. It is certainly true that the fact that God became incarnate, suffered and died, and rose again as a human person endows the human race with a special significance. But this significance, and the significance of God’s redemptive activities themselves, must be seen against the backdrop of the significance God gives to humans in his creative activity.

³ Gerald O’Collins, S.J., *What Are They Saying About Jesus?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), p. 8.

⁴ Donald M. Mackay, *Human Science and Human Dignity* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1979), pp. 114–115.

Protestants have been reluctant to endow humans with significant natural qualities at times, fearing with good reason that this might justify or serve as a pretext for human pride. It is certainly the case that human beings possess no good qualities *independently* of their relation to God. However, the most fundamental relation humans possess to God is that of creation, and God's creation is reality, not illusion. We do not exalt God by debasing his creation, just as — contrary to Marxist charges — we do not abase the creation by exalting God.

We should not be afraid, therefore, to think in metaphysical terms about human persons. Personhood is not simply a phase we go through, or an achievement which most of us manage to pull off. We *are* persons.

None of this implies that the concerns and emphases of the achievement theories are not legitimate. Our age does indeed feel the need to link personhood with self-awareness, freedom, and intersubjectivity. The challenge is to develop a metaphysical theory of the person which does justice to those concerns. Ultimately, I believe, a metaphysical theory of the self, far from being a barrier to this task, is essential if these concerns are to be met.

2. *The Human Sciences and the Nature of Persons*

The battle regarding the nature of persons can be clearly seen in the dispute over the fundamental character of the human sciences. Here I have in mind the clash between those empirical-minded thinkers who accept the "unity of science thesis," claiming that the human sciences must pattern themselves on the natural sciences, and those who argue that the uniqueness of their human subject matter requires the human sciences to employ distinctive methods and approaches. This difference runs very deep: as Charles Taylor claims, "the struggle between rival approaches in the science of man ... is no mere question of the relative efficacy of different methodologies, but is rather one facet of a clash of moral and spiritual outlooks."⁵

The empiricist perspective insists that the human sciences take an *objective* perspective on human behavior. Interpretation is to be eliminated or minimized. Theories are corroborated or disconfirmed on the basis of data; the ideal is brute or hard data, data which any fair-minded inquirers can recognize and agree upon. Not only is the data objective, but the operations performed on the data and inferences to be drawn from it are ideally just as objective, conforming to objective logical and mathematical norms.

With the help of such data and such operations on the data, the social sciences aim to develop theories to explain human behavior. Such theories consist of systematically related sets of "value-free" statements about empirical relationships. The ideal would be strict laws of human behavior; where strict laws cannot be had, probabilistic laws will do; where genuine laws cannot be found, law-like empirical generalizations will do. These empirical generalizations are to be used to predict and to explain human behavior, in a manner analogous to the natural sciences. Implicit in all this is

⁵ Charles Taylor, "The Concept of a Person," in *Human Agency and Language, Philosophical Papers*, Vol. I (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 114.

a particular type of metaphysical theory; a person is a substance on a par with other natural substances.

This whole picture of the human sciences has been sharply challenged by a tradition which runs at least from Dilthey through Collingwood and the Neo-Idealists, and through some of the phenomenologists, particularly Schutz. It is present in Gadamer and other "hermeneuticists." In the Anglo-Saxon world, it can be seen in the writings of such thinkers as Peter Winch. I shall call this the "interpretivist" view of the human sciences. According to the interpretivist, the human sciences are — and ought to be — fundamentally "hermeneutical." Observing and explaining human action is strongly analogous, not to the natural sciences, but to the interpretation of a literary text. Recognizing a human action involves understanding its meaning; explaining action is inseparable from understanding the reasons for an action.

Nor is this a value-free enterprise. Deciding whether a person's reasons are genuine reasons involves, among other things, reflecting on whether the reasons are good reasons. This is so because actions performed for good reasons in many circumstances require no further explanations, while manifestly inadequate reasons are suspected of being rationalizations.

In all of this there is interpretation, not in the sense of an operation performed on brute data, but in the sense that there is no escape from a world of essentially contestable "readings" of meanings and motives into a world of brute data. To the empiricist mind, this is an abandonment of science altogether, an escape into subjectivism. "Science" becomes hopelessly relativistic and culture-bound. To the interpretivist, this rejection of the world of brute data represents a recovery of our humanness, a "preserving of the personal."

Both the empiricist and the interpretivist perspectives reflect deep assumptions about the nature of human persons. The empiricist view is essentially "naturalistic." That is, human persons are viewed as objects in the natural world, not qualitatively different from other objects. They are what they are independently of the descriptions and theories we develop.

The interpretivist perspective is quite different. Human persons are "self-interpreting animals," to use Charles Taylor's phrase. Their being is constituted by culture, not nature; *nomos*, rather than *physis*. One could say that human persons are linguistically-constituted animals, because their being is itself "interpretation."

On this view we cannot think of human beings as "completed objects" existing independently of our concepts. An essential aspect of being a human person, for example, is the ability to feel emotions such as shame, guilt, or fear. Charles Taylor argues that such an emotion "incorporates a certain articulation of our situation."⁶ It is "to be aware of our situation as humiliating, or shameful, or outrageous, or dismaying, or exhilarating, or wonderful."⁷ Such an awareness is impossible without a language to mark out such a distinction:

⁶ "Self-Interpreting Animals," in *Ibid.*, p. 63.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

There is no human emotion which is not embodied in an interpretive language ... What a given human life is an interpretation of cannot exist uninterpreted; for human emotion is only what it is refracted as in human language.⁸

If I understand it, the argument is simply this: the ability to feel human type emotion is constitutive of human personhood; human type emotion is in turn constituted by engaging in linguistic activity. Hence human personhood is constituted by language.

Insofar as language is seen as a social phenomenon, then human personhood will also be essentially social. Insofar as human personhood is constituted by linguistic meaning, it cannot exist independently of language, and of the thinking which has language as its home.

From this perspective, it is a great mistake for the human sciences to model themselves on the natural sciences. Their "object" is not an object at all, but a "subject" whose "being" consists of articulating and questioning its being. This is a task in which there is no realm of brute data; the truth to be gained is not the truth of correspondence to already-given reality but a truth which is constitutive of the reality which it attempts to articulate.

3. *The Twin Evils of Reductionism and Relativism*

Both the empiricist and the interpretivist perspectives on the human sciences presupposes views of the person which are (or should be) unattractive to Christians. The empiricist perspective leads to a reductionism which obliterates the uniqueness of the person and undermines the relative freedom and autonomy which underlie moral responsibility. The interpretivist perspective, however, can lead to an historicist and relativist perspective which threatens to sever the human from the naturally created world altogether, making humans into totally autonomous, self-constituting beings. The former view leads to reductionism; the latter to self-deification. We shall see, however, that self-deification is a disguised element in empiricist reductionism, while reductionism is a disguised element in the self-deification of the interpretivist view. Thus each evil, in true dialectical fashion, creates or presupposes a contrary evil.

This reductionism of the empiricist view is most clearly seen in the methods of behaviorism. The behaviorist attempted to limit the human sciences to concepts definable solely in observational terms, and to explain all human behavior by empirical generalizations employing only such concepts. It is hardly surprising that research conducted on these lines implied that human behavior could be explained by the same principles which could allegedly explain the behavior of rats, and that both rats and humans were seen as products of their environment, with no autonomy or moral responsibility.

There is, however, a latent form of self-deification in this reductionism. In seeing other human beings as mere *objects*, the reductionist still sees himself as a godlike *subject*. People sometimes naively say "How wonderful it would have been to live in the old days when people had servants." In saying this they always think of themselves as one of those who *had*

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

servants, rather than as a servant. In the same way, when we think of people as natural objects, we implicitly imagine ourselves as godlike observers and social engineers. We are always the observer, rather than the one observed.

The recent demise of behaviorism might make it appear that the situation has radically changed. Certainly there are changes; psychology has become cognitivized. However, the basic reductionism remains. The model for the human person becomes the machine, rather than the rat. Persons are still fundamentally *objects*.

This reductionism is accompanied by self-deification as well, insofar as the essence of the human is seen not merely in terms of the "hardware," the brain, but the "software," which is essentially a mathematical abstraction. Such a "computational" theory of mind could be viewed as a contemporary version of what Maritain has termed "angelism," since it abstracts from the concreteness of embodied, historical existence.

And once more there is a strong tendency for the theorist to unconsciously identify with the godlike engineer, who understands and can perhaps learn to redesign the "program," rather than with the "machine" being analyzed and explained. Reductionism and self-deification can be combined, so long as we conveniently forget that the theories must apply to the theorist as well as the object of theory.

The interpretivist perspective appears — and is — more promising to a Christian. Unfortunately this view of the human sciences is often rooted in an achievement theory of personhood. The person is not seen as a thing-like Cartesian natural object because the person is not seen as a real object at all. Rather personhood is a cultural construction. Being a person is like being a magnet. "A piece of iron gets magnetised and so *becomes* a magnet; later it may get demagnetised and *stops* being a magnet though it is still the same piece of iron."⁹ Only in this case the characteristics which make some individuals persons and constitute their being as persons are not so objective as in the case of the magnet. The characteristics are not features of nature, which we may represent adequately or inadequately in language, but characteristics which are constituted by language.

It is the popularity of this kind of perspective which is illustrated in the historicist and relativistic view of the hermeneuticists and deconstructionists. This kind of view leads to suspicion of any talk of human nature as such, and it is equally suspicious of any generalizations or theorizing about human behavior which cuts across cultures.

Peter Winch's famous essay on "Understanding a Primitive Society,"¹⁰ is an excellent illustration. Though I am not sure that this is Winch's intention, this article is usually read as an argument that there are no universal criteria of rationality whereby the practices and beliefs of a culture, like the African Azande people, who practice witchcraft and consult oracles, can be judged reasonable or unreasonable. Criteria of rationality are internal to a culture

⁹ G.E.M. Anscombe, "Murder and the Morality of Euthanasia," in *Euthanasia and Clinical Practice* (London: The Linacre Centre, 1982), p. 28. Anscombe goes on to give a stinging rejection of this view of personhood.

¹⁰ *American Philosophical Quarterly* 1 (1964), 307–324.

and accompanying language, and a practice can only be judged reasonable or unreasonable in terms of those standards.

The major thrust of such a view is self-deificatory because it implies that humans are autonomous, self-creating beings. They are not that as individuals, perhaps, since the kind of view associated with the early Sartre has little plausibility. Humans constitute themselves socially. As the early Marx says, "man (in the sense of social man) becomes the supreme being for man."

Once more, however, as was the case with reductionism, self-deification brings with it the contrary evil as a suppressed element. Reductionism lurks within this autonomous self-creation in two ways.

First, the emperor has no clothes. Human beings have a godlike power to create themselves from an essentially plastic raw material, but the creation lacks substantiality. We sense the ephemeral character of our achievement. To say that humans are beings who are responsible, who can be addressed, who can feel shame, guilt, have a sense of honor, etc., means little if there are no universal, objective standards of responsibility, no genuinely shameful conditions, or guilty actions. If all of this is simply culture, understood in the relativistic and historicist sense, then human life does not possess the depth and meaning which we demand it to have and believe it to have when we are truly engaged in living.

Secondly, since the autonomy is only collective, the individual is still threatened by reductionism. If the individual person is solely a product of linguistic community, how can the individual critically transcend that community? Individual freedom and responsibility seem just as threatened as was the case with the empiricist view.

A dim sense of this threat no doubt underlies the radical individualism which is so strong in American society, and which seems to flourish in "third-force psychologies" which emphasize self and self-fulfilment. But however popular the self may be, and however widespread narcissism may be, such developments have little theoretical support. They owe much more to the kind of wish-fulfillment Freud thought underlay religion than any serious intellectual discoveries.

4. Persons as Qualitatively Different Substances

How can we avoid the twin evils of reductionism and self-deification? We need an understanding of personhood which will do justice to our uniquely personal qualities, but still see human persons as substantial parts of the created, natural order.

I think the most promising route is to unabashedly and unashamedly return to the view that persons are substances, but to see them as substances of a qualitatively different nature than other natural objects, and to rethink the concept of substance itself in a dynamic fashion, following the lead of the neo-Thomists. This recommendation goes against the grain of much contemporary thought, which follows Heidegger in seeing the whole category of substance as inappropriate to understand a human being. From this Heideggerian view, human being cannot be understood merely as a "thing" in the world; it is not a thing at all, but existence, that "opening" in

being which makes it possible for the "world," a meaningful set of possibilities, to be. Personhood is activity, not substance.

I find this Heideggerian claim unpersuasive. To say that a person is a substance is not necessarily to interpret the personal in sub-personal terms. A person can be an *object* without being a *mere* object. The nature of personal substance can be understood by focusing on personal being itself, especially in the context of a creational theistic metaphysics. It may be difficult to do this; hence the popularity of the empiricist variety of reductionism. But there is no reason we cannot reinterpret the category of substance to reflect the unique features of personal being, rather than using the category to subvert those features.

How is this to be done? Fundamentally, I think the answer lies in seeing the unique features of personhood as *capacities* which are essential to personhood. However, an individual who is a member of a species of persons, such as human beings, is still a person even if the person has not actualized those capacities. In fact, one should say that an individual human being is a person even if he or she *cannot* actualize those capacities. We must distinguish between *being* a person and *functioning* as a person.

If we ask what a person is, we must include in our account those capacities which are essential to personhood as a category, those capacities normally possessed by members of a species of persons. First and foremost among these is the power to conceive possibilities. The medievals were on the right track in defining a person as "an individual substance of a rational nature." However, it is a mistake to think of this capacity as an isolated characteristic. The achievement theories of the self have rightly taught us to understand rationality in terms of reflection and self-consciousness, and to see these qualities as bound up with the ability to speak a language. Speaking a language in turn is linked to the capacity to relate to other persons.

With the power to conceive possibilities, humans are no longer prisoners of sense and imaging. They direct their lives towards complex states of affairs which they may fear, hope for, believe in, wish for, will with all their might. They may fear that their child will be kidnapped, hope that their marriage will be happy, believe that God loves them, wish that they will inherit money, will that they will not give in to torture. Their lives consist heavily of those distinctively personal activities which Russell described as involving "propositional attitudes."

In such a world of possibility, deliberation and free choice become paramount. The achievement theorists are right to stress the unfinished, open-ended character of personal being. What they fail to see is that the genuine freedom which is required for this can only be possessed by a substantial agent. A cultural construction cannot possess this autonomy.

It is not difficult to see why this is so. Neither determinism nor indeterminism seem to be compatible with genuine moral freedom. An uncaused, random act seems to be a contradiction in terms, since we only regard an action as a genuine action if it is produced by a personal agent. So if I am to be responsible for an action, I must originate it in some way. However, if the action is causally determined by psychological or physiological events, then even though I am the cause of the action, it is hard to see why I should be

held responsible. I could not have done otherwise. So it seems that I am in trouble whether the action is caused or uncaused.

The only solution to this dilemma is, I believe, the one which was clearly delineated by Thomas Reid and ably defended recently by Roderick Chisholm.¹¹ My action must be determined by me, but not by any event or set of events occurring in me. This entails that I am a substantial agent, not reducible to a set of events. It further requires that we accept the notion that besides causation of events by events there is another mode of causation, called by Chisholm immanent causation or agency causation, in which an agent directly causes certain events to happen.

Many philosophers today are very sceptical of such a doctrine, preferring to reduce agency causation to a species of event causation. To a theist, however, agency causation is nothing bizarre, and, if anything, a better case can be made for reducing event causation to agency causation than the other way around.

None of this means that actions are done arbitrarily by agents. Agents often perform actions for reasons and we can speak in one intelligible sense of those reasons as causes, since they are linked in an intelligible way to action. If we wish to speak of reasons as causes, we must be careful, however, for they are not *determining* causes of free action.

Hence, we see that though freedom is essential to personhood, personhood cannot consist in pure freedom. A person must be something, and must in fact be a certain kind of something, which it is difficult for the atheistic philosopher to make sense of. Hence, a metaphysical account of persons is ultimately crucial to preserve human uniqueness. Persons do have the dignity of shaping their own being within limits, of altering their characters. It is in this sense that a person is a being who is capable of being addressed, whose being requires him to continually question the meaning of his own being.

Although Nietzsche is an odd source for a Christian philosopher to appeal to, the Nietzschean dictum to "become what you are" expresses this truth about personhood in a powerful if somewhat paradoxical manner. A person is someone whose being involves becoming. To be a person is to be faced with questions as to what I can and should become. Nevertheless, I must in some sense *be* a person; otherwise, I could not choose to become anything at all. Human persons are profoundly historical creatures, but they could not be historical if they were not substances which endured over time.

A person who develops the capacity to choose, to reflect, and to relate is therefore becoming what he or she already is, essentially. A person is a being who has these capacities and characteristically actualizes them, though a person who fails to realize such capacities remains a person.

¹¹ "Human Freedom and the Self," in *Free Will*, edited by Gary Watson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 24 - 35.

5. *A Theistic Account of Substances: Kierkegaard's Analysis of Personal Being*

By distinguishing between being a person and actualizing those capacities essential to personhood, the characteristic existentialist emphasis on persons as something one must become can be incorporated without threatening the moral status of those humans who have little or no hope of becoming what one might call flourishing persons. Kierkegaard as an excellent illustration. Through his pseudonym Johannes Climacus Kierkegaard notes that "every human being is a bit of a subject, in a sense." It is precisely this fact that leads to the exasperating neglect of the basic human task, for "to strive to become what one already is: who would take the pains to waste his time on such a task?"¹²

Kierkegaard is here often taken to be defending an achievement theory. Certainly he is calling attention to the fact what he calls an *existing* human being is something one must become. Most people do not choose to become who they become responsibly and authentically. They are content to drift with the crowd and be like "the others." Or else they choose on impulse, living for the moment and possibly changing at any moment.

Kierkegaard charges such people with having failed to become a self. Yet when we reflect on his view here, we can see that it is not a simple achievement theory. The self they have failed to become is the self which they *are*. This is not merely idle talk on Kierkegaard's part, for he makes his charge as an accusation. In a sense the failure to become a responsible chooser is itself a choice; otherwise the individual could not be held responsible.

Certainly there is a tremendous difference between what we might call the minimal self, who is "a bit of a subject" and the maximal self, who lives responsibly before God. But it is important to see that even in Kierkegaard's view personhood is a category of being, not just becoming. It is because persons are beings with certain qualities that they are beings whose identity can be defined through their choices.

The ontological roots of personhood are clearly illustrated in two important passages in Kierkegaard's literature. The first is again from Johannes Climacus. In the *Philosophical Fragments*, Climacus discusses the nature of specifically historical existence. All of nature exists contingently; it has "come into existence."¹³ Historical existence in the stricter sense involves a "coming into existence within a coming into existence."¹⁴ What he means is made clear in the passage itself. "The coming into existence which in this sphere (the historical) is identical with the coming into existence of nature is a possibility, a possibility which for nature is its whole reality."¹⁵ Human being is (or, better, involves) possibility. However, it is not pure possibility, but a set of possibilities rooted in an actuality. The actuality of human persons, understood as natural beings, includes possibilities which uniquely

¹² *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. by David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941) p. 116.

¹³ *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. by David Swenson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), p. 93.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

define persons and make possible the process of free becoming, a second “coming into existence.” But this second process of coming into existence takes place within a context of a reality which has already come into existence, and which points back “ultimately to a freely effecting cause.”¹⁶ The power of human persons to be “relatively freely effecting causes” is grounded in the power of an “absolutely freely effecting cause.”¹⁷ The substantiality of the historical self is here tied to its ontological status as a created object.

The second important Kierkegaardian passage which bears on this crucial issue is the important section at the beginning of *The Sickness Unto Death*. Here a human being is defined as “a self,” and a self is defined as a “relation that relates itself to itself.”¹⁸ It is tempting to conclude from this that Kierkegaard is an achievement theorist who identifies being a personal self with the activity of self-consciously relating to oneself.

That in a sense is correct. But Kierkegaard’s pseudonym Anti-Climacus immediately goes on to qualify this view in a manner consistent with the passage just discussed in the *Fragments*. A relation that relates itself to itself, he notes, is one of two types. It must “either have established itself or have been established by another.”¹⁹ The human self is the latter kind of relation, “a derived, established relation, a relation that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another.”²⁰

Is this not the achievement theory in a relational form again, with God as the ultimate relater? Perhaps, but the relation cannot be merely that of the self knowing God, or even being known and loved by God. Rather it must be a relation that involves creation, as the passage from the *Fragments* also makes clear. Creation, as Kierkegaard himself insists, is not a relation in which God creates something which is nothing, but something which is a genuine something.²¹

The doctrine of creation is crucial here. Creation makes it possible for Kierkegaard to see persons as *beings* who are called to achieve. Without creation one would have only an achievement theory, which would amount to a rebellious expression of human autonomy. With creation, one can recognize human nature and human personhood as substantial realities. However, as E.L. Mascall has clearly explained, the whole notion of substance is radically transformed in the context of a Christian metaphysics of creation. A natural substance is not an independent closed reality, but a dependent, *open* reality, constantly receiving its character as a gift from God.²²

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

¹⁸ *The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. by Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 13.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 13–14.

²¹ *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 220. Also see in Kierkegaard’s *Papirer* VII 1 A 181 (#1251 in the English edition of *Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers*, trans. by Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1970).

²² See E.L. Mascall, *The Importance of Being Human* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), esp. pp. 54 - 62.

Once it is recognized that one's ultimate status as a person depends upon what God's creative intention is, whether one becomes this or not — the errors of reductionism, relativism, and self-deification can be avoided. God has made us to be comers; hence that is what we *are*, even if, paradoxically, we fail to become. The *uniqueness* of the human person is grounded in the uniqueness of what God *intends* persons to become. The status of persons as persons does not depend on their achievements, however, but on their status as God's *creatures*.

If this is Kierkegaard's view, then it makes sense to regard not only those inauthentic existers who have chosen not to choose as persons, but to extend the concept to infants, to the senile, and to the severely retarded as well. These latter are even more deserving than the former, since the failure to fully actualize the possibilities definitive of personhood is not something they can be blamed for, something it is natural to do in the case of the inauthentic self. As human beings, those individuals who cannot actualize their personal qualities fully are also persons. Some of their personal possibilities are blocked, temporarily or in some cases for the whole of their earthly existence. However, we cannot believe that those possibilities, grounded as they are in God's creative power, are blocked for eternity.

What we must do then is to understand our being as persons as grounded in God's constant creative purposes. There are certain capacities people *have* as people, even when empirically they seem to *lack* those capacities.

Think, for example, of a blind person, who lacks the ability to see. If an operation gives this person sight, in *one* sense he or she has been given a capacity previously lacking. But in another sense they have actualized a capacity which properly belongs to them *qua* human beings. Humans, unlike trees, for example, are the kind of being who see when their sense organs are functioning properly in those circumstances in which they were created to function. *Essentially*, they have the capacity to see, a capacity which has been blocked because of accidental or contingent circumstances. Sometimes those circumstances are remediable through modern medicine; perhaps this will be true of more cases in the future. In some cases only a miracle, or the miracle of the resurrection itself, can allow the person to exercise those capacities. But the person's status as a possessor of the capacities remain secure, for it is rooted in God's creative intentions, not in what it is empirically evident the person is capable of.

6. *Substantial Achievers and the Human Sciences*

We earlier looked at the conflict between empiricists and interpretivists in the human sciences, and found that a distinctive idea of human personhood underlay each. One saw human persons as mere objects in nature; the other saw persons as pure cultural activity. The one led to reductionism; the other to relativism. I have tried to sketch out a view of human personhood which is distinctively Christian and which does justice to the valid insights of each theory. What would the human sciences be like if they presupposed this view of the human person? I would like to make a few suggestive remarks about this in conclusion.

The first thing to be said is that the human sciences would on this view be pluralistic. Human beings are solidly part of nature, and there is therefore nothing illegitimate in attempting to understand the natural conditions which make possible (or in some cases block) the functioning of human persons, and in attempting to understand how persons carry on their personal activities as natural beings. So human science modeled on natural science is legitimate and has its place.

Nonetheless, insofar as humans are unique creatures, it is reasonable to think that they should be studied in unique ways. That humans have the power to consciously reflect on themselves and their world, that they become what they are as part of a community of persons, and that they have the power to choose responsibly — these truths imply many things for the human sciences. Human actions are not just bodily movements, but meaningful purposive actions; this means they cannot be *observed* simply as bodily movements. As meaningful action, human behavior is not explained solely or even mainly in terms of empirical laws, but by understanding the beliefs and motives of the people being studied. Since human beings are not mere objects, but reflective subjects, it makes sense to view them as potentially cooperative helpers, not simply “subjects” (really *objects*). Certainly, the human sciences must drop once and for all the myth that human beings can be studied in a philosophical vacuum, with science being divorced from all world-view assumptions, and bereft of religious and moral assumptions.

There is reason to hope, however, that such a humanized science would still be science. After all, what is being studied is solidly rooted in nature as God’s creation. God’s purposes may provide us with constants, universals with which to work which are truly cross-cultural without being relativistic. We want to describe humans as they really are and not merely to invent them.

This does not mean that reflection on the human condition cannot alter that condition. That is part of coming to understand a creature whose essence is not totally fixed but includes genuine possibilities. Still, we have reason to hope that humans are created by God with certain basic needs, and that they are given distinctive abilities as they seek to define themselves. All humans need to eat and sleep. All humans want to know about themselves and their world. All humans need to be with other humans in mutually loving relations. All humans need to know and love God and experience his love. The incredible diversity of human life as we define ourselves must be seen against the backdrop of those aspects of ourselves we, as individuals or as a community, have *not* created.