

BEESON DIVINITY SCHOOL: SAMFORD UNIVERSITY

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE HUMAN?
DIVIDED DESIRES OR DIVINE DISCOURSE?

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INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to be human? A clue to the answer lies in the asking of the question, for this act presupposes both a [human] subject and object in a dialectic of self-transcendence. As Jenson observes, “in asking this question, we somehow take up a vantage outside ourselves to make ourselves our own objects, get beyond ourselves to look back at ourselves.”¹ The mystery of human existence is “that I am the subject of the object I am and the object of the subject I am.”² But what do I see when I look at myself? At others? At God? On my own, this self-transcendence leaves me at the mercy of my own divided desires – searching for definition. But with God, I receive my true humanity in the midst of divine discourse – finding significance in God’s recognition that I am a true human being. The failures of the former approach highlight the successes of the latter.

DIVIDED DESIRES

What do I see when I look at myself? One driven by desire. Based upon human behavior, Freud rightly notes that the primary human desire is for happiness, which involves the avoidance of the pain and the pursuit of pleasure.³ However, I quickly discover that my own body, the external world, and human relationships oppose my pleasure-drive.⁴ These oppositions help me to distinguish myself from that which is not me. I am not the ground which hurts when I fall upon it.

¹ Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology Volume 2: The Works of God* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), 64.

² Jenson, *Systematic Theology Volume 2*, 64.

³ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. Joan Riviere (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, 2010), 27.

⁴ Freud, 28.

I am not my parents who fail to provide me with food the moment I desire it. I am not the external frustration and pain which I encounter. I am the one with the frustrated desires.

Despite the necessity of unfulfilled desires for human development in Freud's framework, he recognized the ineluctable tensions which human beings experience as the result of two competing drives: Eros and Death.⁵ The former is synonymous with *libido*, the desire for objects for the sake of preservation; while the latter leads to guilt when internalized, and aggression towards others.⁶

What do I see when I look at others? Ones who both inform and frustrate my desires. On one hand, this is necessary and beneficial for development. As a child, I learn to desire to eat and speak like my parents. However, as Girard observes, when these imitative or mimetic desires are frustrated, they lead to rivalries.⁷ When I desire something my neighbor possesses, and my neighbor prevents me from obtaining it, my desire for the object increases. Yet so does my neighbor's desire, which produces tension between us. Therefore, imitation distinguishes human desires from animal instincts for natural needs, yet simultaneously causes the conflicts of human existence. Mimetic desire "is responsible for the best and the worst in us, for what lowers us below the animal level as well as what elevates us above it."⁸

Without a *telos* to distinguish between right and wrong desires, I can only take cues from my neighbor and hope for a relative peace. Soon, "choice itself becomes the only thing that is inherently good," as "all desires, good and bad, melt into the one overriding imperative to

⁵ Freud, 103.

⁶ Freud, 94-103.

⁷ René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, trans. James G. Williams (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001), 8-13.

⁸ Girard, 16.

consume.”⁹ When desire is turned in on itself, the pursuit of things (and not even the things themselves!) becomes my temporary respite from the restlessness of my existence. Since I cannot define myself, I go shopping instead.¹⁰ And yet, I cannot shop forever.

What do I see when I look at God? If human self-transcendence in search of definition is an enclosed circle, the most I will ever see is a personified, projected “god” who is the opposite of my weaknesses and the abstracted absolute of my strengths. Why bother positing such a “God”? Because I live my life as a narrative awaiting a conclusion – death – which, although it grants meaning to the plot, prevents me, its main actor, from ascertaining its final significance! As Jenson dryly observes, “if the conclusion of our play, hidden as we play our temporal stories in the impenetrable future of death, is nevertheless already enacted, then it can only be enacted in something like the mind of an author, standing above the play and holding what in the play are past and future in a superior present, in the ‘all-at-once-now’ of eternity.”¹¹ And so I trade places with the indefinable God of past theological formulations, defining him against the contours of my own mysterious existence, which I expect him to justify and underwrite.¹² Yet if I worship a mere projection, I am left on my own.

What does it mean to be human? To be at the mercy of our own divided, conflicted, and frustrated desires. Barth best describes the failures of self-definition: “the enterprise of setting up the ‘No-God’ (to justify our existence) is avenged by its success. [...] Our conduct becomes governed precisely by what we desire. By a strict inevitability we reach the goal we have set before

⁹ William T. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 13.

¹⁰ Cavanaugh, 34-5.

¹¹ Robert W. Jenson, *A Religion Against Itself* (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1967), 18.

¹² Eberhard Jüngel, “On Becoming Truly Human,” in *Theological Essays II*, ed. J.B. Webster, trans. Arnold Neufeld-Fast and J.B. Webster (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 223.

us. [...] And now there is no higher power to protect [humans] from what they have set on high.”¹³ My idols (whether myself, my neighbor, or my “God”) exhaust and finally crush me. The attempt to establish my own identity isolates me from myself, whom I do not know; my neighbor, whom I love to hate; my “God,” whom I project; and God, whom I ignore.

DIVINE DISCOURSE

Who am I? What do I see when I look at God? To solve the enigma of my own existence, I must reverse the latter question and expand the former. As Barth rightly inveighs, God “is not the personified but the personifying person – the person on the basis of whose prior existence alone we can speak (hypothetically) of other persons different from Him.”¹⁴ Therefore, humans “ought not to be independently what they are in dependence upon God.”¹⁵ And because of this, I cannot define myself on my own, but merely describe the characteristics and tensions of my life. My self-transcendence has value only when it transcends the self in the context of a divine discourse. As Jüngel claims, “it is only as the human ‘I’ is addressed in such a way that it is simultaneously claimed by something outside itself, that one is really speaking about the human ‘I’ as such.”¹⁶ I am told who I am by God, and thereby enabled to exist in proper relationship to God, to others, and to myself – the very relations that I jeopardize in self-definition.¹⁷

Barth rightly insists that true humanity – true human personality – is only found in one place: the encounter between God and humanity. Therefore, on his own, “man is not a person, but

¹³ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns, 6th ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 51.

¹⁴ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1936-77; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010), II/1: 285. Henceforth all references to the *Dogmatics* will be in the following form: “CD I/1, 1.”

¹⁵ Barth, *Romans*, 247.

¹⁶ Jüngel, 220.

¹⁷ Jüngel, 221.

becomes one on the basis that he is loved by God and can love God in return.”¹⁸ In Jenson’s terms, humans are unique in that God relates to us as “his conversational counterpart,”¹⁹ and this divine address to us “is the Son, who is the human person Jesus of Nazareth.”²⁰ Therefore, as Barth puts it, “the ontological determination of humanity is grounded in the fact that one man among all others is the man Jesus.”²¹ To be human is to be with God in the person of Christ.²²

If true, the grounding of humanity in divine discourse is a profound liberation, for “our acts [and our desires] cannot determine our being. Only the one who determines being and non-being determines our being.”²³ And the Incarnation decisively reassures us that God recognizes us as human beings. Indeed, “the truly human person is the person who is definitively recognized by God, and in that way one who cannot be discredited by anything or anyone, not even by him- or herself.”²⁴ Once I see that the real God has, in Christ, broken through the veneer of my projected “God” to secure my humanity, I no longer have to drive myself mad trying to secure my humanity. I am freed to worship the true God, enabled to respond to his address in prayer and worship.²⁵

I am also liberated to relate to my neighbor, not in conflict as a model/rival, but in love as a fellow human. This is the ineluctable result of God’s incarnational address in Jesus Christ, for “to receive myself from God and be directed toward him is therefore to receive myself from and be directed toward a fellow human. And it is to receive myself from and be directed toward a

¹⁸ CD II/1, 284.

¹⁹ Jenson, *Systematic Theology Volume 2*, 95.

²⁰ Jenson, *Systematic Theology Volume 2*, 73.

²¹ CD III/2, 132.

²² CD III/2, 135.

²³ Jüngel, 236.

²⁴ Jüngel, 239.

²⁵ Jenson, *Systematic Theology Volume 2*, 58-9.

human person who precisely to be himself brings others with him.”²⁶ Because he provides the *telos* by which human desires are evaluated, Christ, who exists completely for God and for others, calls and enables me to reorient my desires toward human flourishing, “the end of human life, which is participation in the life of God.”²⁷ I can now recognize the dignity of each fellow human, not as a means to my distorted ends, but as one whom God loves, one for whom Christ died.

As Luther concluded, “as Christians we do not live in ourselves but in Christ and the neighbor. [...] As Christians, we live in Christ through faith and in the neighbor through love. Through faith we are caught up beyond ourselves into God. Likewise, through love we descend beneath ourselves through love to serve our neighbor.”²⁸ This is self-transcendence as it was meant to be. Divine discourse encompasses God, the self, and the other, grounding both anthropology and ethics.

CONCLUSION

What does it mean to be human? On my own, I am unable to answer the question. In my efforts to secure my own existence, I can only describe my incoherent estate at the mercy of my divided and frustrated desires. I am a mystery to myself, I love to hate my neighbor, and I project a “God” to comfort myself in light of death. Yet with God, I am enabled to receive my humanity in the midst of divine discourse, and to respond to his address to me in Christ through prayer, worship, and love of neighbor.

²⁶ Jensen, *Systematic Theology Volume 2*, 73.

²⁷ Cavanaugh, viii.

²⁸ Martin Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian,” in *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, eds. Timothy F. Lull and William R. Russell, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2012), 423.