ECLECTICISM AND LOOSE COHERENCE: A RISK WORTH TAKING

by Mary Gerhart

The Human Factor: Evolution, Culture, and Religion. By PHILIP HEFNER. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993. xvii, 297 pages, $18.00 (paper).

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Frequent references have been made for several years to Philip Hefner's felicitous definition, "Human beings are created co-creators," in formal and informal conversations. The references have been accompanied by the question, "When will his book be published?" Such references will not cease now that *The Human Factor* has appeared. Those already using his definition can now see just how the creator of the term uses it himself.

Hefner suggests a model for his construction of the book with a homespun story in the preface. His grandmother never used recipes when she cooked, but after she died, a recipe for cherry soup was found in her handwriting that ended with the laconic comment, "This is a joke." Another of her recipes concludes, "This may work out." Hefner draws an analogy between her recipes, with her advice on variations and substitute ingredients, and his own style of doing theology: both her and his work are written "out of the context of discovery rather than from the context of justification" (p. xiii). He writes, "Just as borscht has to emerge from what our ingenuity can put together new each time we go to the fridge—it cannot be made from the succulent leftovers we remember from the last month—so, too, our theology takes shape from the interaction of tradition with the present situation" (p. xiv). Creative cooking and creative theology are high-risk activities for all except the expert. With respect to *The Human Factor,* eclecticism and tentativeness constitute two of the

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strengths of the completed project. Whatever difficulty the reader experiences in restating the intricacies of the argument—like trying to imitate a major chef—the risk is worthwhile.

Some readers will have difficulty assigning this book a genre. *The Human Factor* has much in common with a scientific research proposal and purports to emphasize discovery rather than justification. But as a serious work of constructive theology, its express lack of philosophical justification is offset by its correlation of evolutionary theory and doctrinal theology. In scientific inquiry, data provide some kind of control for the inquiry in the sense that the data are a continuing point of return. In theological inquiry, philosophical reflection provides some control for making and extending claims about what is the case. Creativity is rarely set against justification in the contemporary bidisciplinary area of science and religion because the field is defined almost exclusively by issues in theoretical physics that find support in the data from experiment and observation.[1] It is difficult to imagine doing science and religion without engaging philosophy of both science and religion (that is, theology). I find the book to be "creative" less in the experimental sense than in its use of evolutionary theory. Moreover, its diffuse character is shored up by structural features to make it systematic after all. Beginning with chapter 2, the theory of the "created cocreator" is formally defined by major and auxiliary hypotheses, and analyzed sequentially, so that it is possible for the reader to take bearings *ad libitum* from sites at any point. These hypotheses have another effect: they remind the reader occasionally of the propositional style of two of this century's most influential philosophers—Charles Sanders Peirce and Ludwig Wittgenstein. These comparisons suggest the immensely positive potential of the book as well as the difficulties arising from its eclectic character.

The book is unusual and challenging in the way it attempts to meet central exigencies in both science and theology. Formally, Hefner wishes to "make sense of traditional Christian faith in the context of the welter of contemporary knowledge and experience" (p. xiii). In this sense, *The Human Factor* is "theological anthropology in the light of natural sciences" (p. xiii). Hefner uses the theory of DNA, for example, to throw light on the composition of the human being as a "confluence of two streams of information, genetic and cultural" and religion to throw light on the way myth and ritual function analogically as necessary "packets of information" (p. 146). He gives the term *information* a thick interpretation: "that which bears messages that have consequences" (p. 146) in terms of both biological and cultural processes. By means of the

conjunction of their genetic and their cultural constitution, human beings are "designated rememberer[s]" (p. 29).

Hefner's position on what we know by means of the natural sciences gains currency by contrast with that of the Nobel Prize-winning physicist Steven Weinberg. Hefner agrees with Weinberg that the role of human beings in the universe is made up as they "go along" and that this way of participating is "more noble than if we were just playing a part that had been laid out for us in advance" (p. 3). But whereas Weinberg in theory limits creativity to human beings "making up the stories of their lives and their significance" as they go along, Hefner argues that we construct interpretations not only of meanings of the human venture, but "also those that give meaning to the world around us" as well (p. 158). In Hefner's view, physics as well as life is interpreted. In both physics and life as objects of inquiry, reflection on universals and purposes is just as possible and necessary as reflection on specifics. This kind of reflection—namely, thought about goals and criteria, in addition to imaginative possibilities—is the implicitly theological contribution to responsible thinking about the present and the future. Hefner thematizes this reflection as explicitly theological by applying it to selected New Testament passages and central Christian doctrines.

One of the most novel parts of Hefner's argument both corrects and illuminates traditional beliefs in God. Hefner disavows that the book is on God in the sense that it does not assume any one particular "detailed philosophically elaborated concept of God." Instead, he will "clarify what difference belief in God makes" (p. 59). Some readers may think Hefner either too modest in claiming that he does not have "some rigorously formed concept that really applies to God" or negligent in refraining from formulating one. But if his intention not to focus on God is clear, is it possible to discover what kind of God Hefner assumes? He writes, "It would be impossible to account for the inherent worthwhileness of the natural processes apart from the affirmation of ultimacy that is grounded in God or in the equivalent of God." Hefner credits Schubert Ogden for that formulation and further identifies his own position as teleonomic: "It would make no sense to speak of meaning and purpose attaching to the natural processes, nor to speak of these purposes teleonomically, apart from the grounding that the belief finds in ultimacy or God" (p. 59). Here, Hefner struggles to tread a narrow line between claiming too little for his concept of God and stating enough so that the reader has enough to go on; he does so by providing a field of related meanings so as to define the term by association. He constructs, in William James's sense, a "loose coherence" between what

is suggested by the concept "human beings are God's created co-creators" and what else we know or believe to be the case.

This loose coherence is all the more attractive in that it is accompanied by Hefner's attention to the genre of myth *as myth.* Because he respects the goals and limitations of myth, Hefner escapes the Gnostic tendency of many scientists and theologians to claim knowledge, in ways in which it is unknowable, about the origin of the universe. Forswearing Gnosticism leaves Hefner free to elaborate constructively the role of religion correlative with the evolution of human beings in society. In this role, myths and rituals are crucial supplements to the physico-biogenetic evolutionary information systems—which, in Hefner's view, were not sufficient for the survival of the increasingly complex and, compared with other mammals, fragile human being. He astutely notices two characteristics of the genre of myth—its direct language and its being underdetermined by the data it encompasses. Hefner thinks that these characteristics made myth ideally suited for the task of bringing human beings into the new possibility of social relationships wherein the tendencies to tribal dominance were mitigated in favor of a crafting of an ideal of global peace and morality.

I will leave the intricacies of Hefner's hypotheses to other reviewers in order to highlight what I have found to be some of the book's most important resources. With respect to the freedom versus determinedness dispute, Hefner suggests that human freedom is experienced as both determined and essential. It is appropriate to speak of human freedom as determined by relationships—realized and potential—with the universe and with other human beings in history. At the same time, human freedom is essential in the sense that human beings are cocreators—that is, in some real sense human beings determine both those relationships and the way we understand them, thus making something new out of what has been and is the case. Human freedom is essential because what we call God (or the ultimate meaning of universe) is interdependent with human beings in the becoming of the universe. Hefner holds that the "direction Godward leads us reflexively to nature" (p. 60). If the genetic and the cultural are separated, the project we call human being would not have been nor would be viable.

On the subject of technology, Hefner calls for a "reorganization of consciousness." One of his memorable turns of phrase is the following: "Humans do not use technology; we are technology, in the same sense that we not only use our hands and eyes, but we are our eyes and hands" (p. 155). So, for Hefner, eyes and hands are neither

good nor evil in and of themselves, but rather in what results from us though them.

Hefner thinks of the notion of created cocreator as reflected in the history of the human species. He writes that the notion is "not only a theory" and sets as the project of the book to show "how it evolved in nature" (p. 183). Here is Hefner at his best. Historians of religion have often used evolutionary theory to explain away religion or to replace primitive religious practices with scientific rationality. In his revised use of evolutionary theory, Hefner holds that the "mythopoetic requirements of the human central nervous system required the development of morality, religion, and mythology" (p. 185) and describes the results of this development in what is known—again, with rough coherence—in anthropology. Particularly insightful is his inclusion of a rough chronology of the emergence of anatomically modern human beings in the period 200,000-50,000 B.C.E. and the significance of the appearance of art in Africa, figurines, and cave paintings in the period 38,000-11,000 B.C.E. Hefner's description of the location of some of the cave paintings dramatizes their use in religious rituals and imparts a vivid vicarious sense of what it might have been like to have been an initiate in a world experienced immediately as religious.

Whereas traditional theological apologetics often contrasted altruism and Christian love, Hefner sees them as intimately related in the process of evolution. He defines the "total complex" as the love of God for us and our love for God and neighbor. In that complex, altruism and love of God are reciprocal capacities of each other—both referring to a capacity of human beings for going beyond self-interest and "vested" interest of any group, be it nation, race, gender, or creed. He understands altruism and Christian love together as opposed to the hedonic tradition, which he describes as a "skin-surface" enterprise (p. 192). When Paul spoke about the goal of Christian love—in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free person, male nor female—he could be understood as referring to the phenomenon of a "transkin altruism" that became explicit in the human project with the advent of Christianity. Why is the reality of this phenomenon not sufficiently accounted for by altruism alone? According to Hefner, one reason is that past success is no predictor of future performance. In other words, altruism is a capacity which developed at a certain time and place. It is a fragile phenomenon that does not explain itself or have the resources to continue indefinitely.

One of the ways of assessing the fruits of Hefner's concept of created cocreator is to read in its light some central passages from the Judaic and Christian scriptures. Indeed, Hefner himself provides

us with just such interpretations. He finds in Jeremiah's plea, that God replace his heart of stone with a heart of flesh, an early instance of a shift from values which emphasized physical domination, war, and autonomy, to values which emphasize spiritual ascension, sensitivity, and relationality. This insight in Jeremiah is expanded in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount where it takes all the prevailing previous (previous in the sense of being at a lower stage of evolution) norms for survival and counters them with a new goal for a new kind of human being.

I conclude with two further questions (and a druther that some editor would have been more vigilant in excising repetition in the book). One might ask whether Hefner has not after all worked out of a context of justification more so than he acknowledges. Regardless, does not his position in the debate with Weinberg oblige him to give more attention to justification than he may wish or be able to do in this book? My question is not so much a criticism as it is an expectation that another work may be needed to integrate Hefner's insights within the larger understanding that the world is as it is claimed to be in this book.

One might also ask if Hefner's analysis is not too complacent in limiting itself to considering human beings only as Earth dwellers. Knowing the risk of having all human beings on the planet Earth in the face of the possible destruction of the biosphere (for example, by collision with an asteroid or other cataclysmic event), should theological reflection not also begin to prepare for the possibility of human beings dwelling elsewhere in the solar system as well?

But these are further questions. In itself, *The Human Factor* is a remarkable contribution to the ongoing conversation between science and religion and promises to generate even better dialogue. Moreover, it is accessible to many different audiences.

The proof is in the reading!

NOTE

1. See Gerald Holton's related criticism that "private science" (S_1) is excluded from "public science" (S_2), in *Thematic Origins of Scientific Thought: Kepler to Einstein* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1973), 19–24.