

Don Browning's Christian Humanism

with Don Browning, "Reviving Christian Humanism: Science and Religion"; Terry D. Cooper, "Psychology, Religion, and Critical Hermeneutics: Don Browning as a 'Horizon Analyst'"; Wesley J. Wildman, "The Artful Humanism of Don Browning"; Don S. Browning and John Witte, Jr., "Christianity's Mixed Contributions to Children's Rights"; and Don S. Browning, "A Natural Law Theory of Marriage"

PSYCHOLOGY, RELIGION, AND CRITICAL HERMENEUTICS: DON BROWNING AS "HORIZON ANALYST"

by Terry D. Cooper

Abstract. Don Browning's career involved a deep exploration into the frequently hidden philosophical assumptions buried in various forms of psychotherapeutic healing. These healing methodologies were based on metaphors and metaphysical assumptions about both the meaning of human fulfillment and the ultimate context of our lives. All too easily, psychological theories put forward philosophical anthropologies while claiming to be operating within a modest, empirical approach. Browning does not fault or criticize these psychotherapeutic enterprises for making such claims because he thinks these claims are implicit in *all* discussions of psychological health. But he does fault these methodologies for not being more forthcoming about their shift from a narrow empirical investigation to a broad-ranging philosophical and even quasireligious orientation. Browning can be described as a "horizon analyst" who constantly pulled back the curtains and helped us see the deeper symbols, images, and metaphysical assumptions behind our psychological investigations.

Keywords: critical hermeneutics; distancing; Erik Erikson; ethical assumptions of psychologists; evolutionary psychology; Sigmund Freud; Hans Georg Gadamer; horizon; instincts; motivation; Reinhold Niebuhr; ontological assumptions; philosophical anthropology; psychoanalysis; Paul Ricoeur; Carl Rogers; David Tracy

By nearly anyone's standard, Don Browning was an enormously eclectic and interdisciplinary thinker. He began his career in religion and psychological studies, a position from which he and Peter Homans, at the University

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of Chicago, probably staffed most of the psychology and religion Ph.D. programs in the United States. He gradually came to see the significance of ethics and became an important ethicist, particularly in connection to the social sciences. As far back as 1976, in his *The Moral Context of Pastoral Care*, he alerted psychotherapists to the often neglected role of ethics in their work. It should be pointed out that this invitation to look at underlying ethical considerations in psychotherapy preceded by 20 years William J. Doherty's (1996) influential work, *Soul Searching: Why Psychotherapy Must Promote Moral Responsibility*. Browning steadily maintained an interest in the science and religion discussion, an interest that eventually led to his invitation to give the John Templeton lectures on Science and Religion at Boston University in the Fall of 2008 (Browning 2010). In his own methodological work, he became a very solid scholar in the continental philosophical traditions of phenomenology and hermeneutics. He brought a philosophical sophistication to pastoral theology and practical theology not shared by many (Browning 1991). He began a huge project at University of Chicago dealing with families, culture, and religion, a project that brought him into contact with a wide variety of social scientists and ethicists around the world. And, this involvement in culture and family studies helped generate a deep interest in law and religion, an interest shared by his legal colleague and friend from Emory University, John Witte. When I worked with Browning on my sabbatical in 2002, he had an appointment in Emory's Law School. This multifaceted involvement in so many areas represents quite an accomplishment for one lifetime.

I call Browning a "horizon analyst" because I believe this is what he does best—articulating the background philosophical assumptions with which the social sciences operate. This is the abiding theme that runs from his first book, *Atonement and Psychotherapy* in 1966, to his last publication of the Templeton Lectures, *Reviving Christian Humanism* (2010). With the image of a "horizon analyst" in mind, I would like to suggest some particular themes, which I think represent some of the best fruit of Browning's labor. The purpose of these comments will be to render an appreciative grasp of Browning's contribution to the psychology and religion dialogue. While no thinker is an infallible guide and one can surely find aspects of any thinker's thought to which one might object, Browning's work provides a very helpful conceptual map for approaching psychology. For, it is my own belief that when all is said and done, while Browning's interdisciplinary work will be recognized in a variety of areas; he will be remembered first and foremost for his investigation into the underlying metaphysical assumptions of psychological theory. Part of this belief grows out of having worked with Browning very closely as I helped him coauthor the 2004 revision of what I still consider to be his most outstanding work, *Religious Thought and the Modern Psychologies*, originally published

in 1987. Just as Reinhold Niebuhr (1964) masterfully exposed the image of human nature operating in political thought, so Browning exposes the assumptions about the human condition, the normative images of health, the sense of moral obligation, and the possibilities of transcendence in psychological thought. Psychology works on the basis of an inherited pool of religiocultural images of what it means to be human. Browning's work can be seen as a long, persistent attempt to pull back the curtain and expose these assumptions before comparing them with alternative frameworks. Put another way, Browning wants to push the discussion back to the level of philosophical anthropology. The metaphors and images lurking beneath psychological approaches must be made explicit and critically examined. Browning opposes the claim that these empirical approaches are void of such assumptions. He never tires of questioning the mantra of empirical psychologists who often say: "We are scientists who simply operate on empirical grounds without a need for an underlying philosophical framework. We are modest empiricists who merely report the facts of life. While religion may need 'faith,' we have completely eradicated such a need and work strictly on the basis of science." Consistently and insightfully, Browning rejects this empiricist claim while simultaneously respecting empirical contributions to a larger understanding of the world.

PSYCHOLOGY AND THE ULTIMATE CONTEXT OF OUR LIVES

Browning approaches psychology as an interpretive enterprise and not simply as a descriptive science. In doing this, Browning navigates well between scientific foundationalism and radical relativism. In other words, in his critical hermeneutical methodology, he is able to appreciate the significance of psychology's empirical evidence without falling prey to an Enlightenment view of "objective" reason. He respects science but not scientism. For Browning, we can never empty ourselves of our orienting assumptions and what Hans-Georg Gadamer frequently called the "effective histories" we have inherited. In fact, such a self-emptying process would render understanding impossible. We are firmly embedded in a tradition of interpretation. Our thinking process is never completely "pure" in an unmediated fashion. Experience is not that "raw." Instead, it is culturally influenced, which means that it is shaped by language and social matrix. To rid ourselves of this context is to rid ourselves of our humanity. Reason never stands so autonomously from culture that it bears no marks of its historical location. So, the idea of an abstract, asocial, and apolitical rationality is not realistic.

However, if a return to an Enlightenment view of pure reason is one danger, radical relativism is certainly the other. While total objectivity is not possible, Paul Ricoeur's (1981) notion of "distanciation" is not only

possible, but very necessary. Browning uses Ricoeur's idea of distanciation, as the place in which a self-critique can be aided by science. Without this submoment of distanciation, interpretation collapses into relativism. Put another way, Browning believes the incommensurability argument has been exaggerated. This is a view that insists that our epistemological starting points and interpretations are so different that there is little hope of any sort of public discussion. We are simply arguing "past" each other. While Browning acknowledges that we will never find a completely neutral bar of reason uninfluenced by cultural factors, it is quite unnecessary to, therefore, retire from any possibility of public discussion. This is where he is at odds with many of his postliberal friends who believe such a public discussion is impossible. Again, while he appreciates the postliberal emphasis that all perspectives begin in "faith" assumptions, Browning does not believe that they have to simply remain there. There is a place for self-critique and appeal to a general, shared understanding. Browning accepts this apologetic task and believes that any perspective will quickly become sectarian without it. Our epistemologies are not so vastly different that we cannot reason together.

Browning's use of science as a submoment within a larger interpretation of the human condition positions his perspective as a *critical* hermeneutical approach rather than simply a hermeneutical one. We eliminate this submoment of distanciation at our own peril. A "pure" phenomenology seeks to understand the uninfluenced ego. Again, it is a form of positivism that wants to make the untainted ego, the foundation of all thought. Yet, for Browning, the ego is embedded in language, tradition, and symbols. We cannot start from scratch with a disembodied consciousness. Even before we begin this phenomenological description, we have already been influenced by the narratives surrounding us. Also, *our practical interests* will enter into this understanding from the very beginning. We move from practice to theory and then back to practice. And this critical moment of reflection allows science to play its key role in our understanding. Our epistemology can grant priority to understanding rather than to explanation and *still have a self-critical moment in the larger process of interpretation*. We do not have to choose between an uncritical embeddedness in tradition and the pretensions of foundationalist science.

Unlike many postliberal approaches, Browning believes that humanity possesses a readiness to hear the revelatory significance of the classics in our religious and cultural histories. These classics are both personal and public. Religious classics are also cultural classics. Following David Tracy (1981, 1987), Browning believes that the significance of the classics are potentially available to all people searching for meaning and truth. Here Browning's protestant liberalism emerges in contrast to neoorthodoxy: reason is not so distorted or "fallen" that it is unable to recognize something of revelatory

significance. These religious classics invite us into a dialogue. In fact, they command our attention. They insist on being heard. Yet, these classics never simply overwhelm us with a prepackaged interpretation that eliminates the experience we bring to them. Neither science nor holy scripture is written on a "blank slate." This is not the way understanding happens, and religious understanding is no exception. For Browning, divine revelation does not come with its own epistemological verification. Kerygmatic theology often argues that any notion that God's revelation, the highest court of appeal, would need to be brought before the standards of human rationality is a very wrong methodological turn (Placher 1989). In fact, for much of kerygmatic theology, if we do not assume the inherent validity of God's revelatory word, we will spend our lives pointlessly wrestling with methodological concerns and never get to actual theology. Apologetic theology places entirely too much significance on human rationality. Browning, as well as the school he represented for half a decade (The University of Chicago), tends to balk at any notion that revelation is so self-authenticating that it does not need additional public discussion.

Yet Browning's critical hermeneutical perspective attempts to walk a fine line between kerygmatic and apologetic theology. He clearly accepts that all perspectives begin in faith. He is not trying to do a constructive theology from the ground up, as if we begin with empty heads and no assumptions. Yet, he also believes there is an important place for evidence, and particularly, scientific evidence, within the larger interpretive process. Scientism denies its need for faith-assumptions; fideism denies the need for scientific evidence; Browning is in the middle between these two extremes. We must look backward (toward our orienting assumptions of tradition) before we can look forward. Yet, we need to move forward, and in the process, allow science to help correct and guide us with its empirical findings. We must critique science when its pretensions suggest that it is all we need; yet, we must also *allow ourselves to be critiqued* by science, particularly when it offers data to help refine our understanding of the human condition. Does science offer us total objectivity? No. But does it allow an important step of self-critique and distancing? Yes. While our reason is never a disembodied rationality that bears no marks of self-interest, it can nevertheless be employed to help us evaluate validity claims. Put directly, *there can be a modernist submoment even within a postmodern interpretation*. Distancing is not inherently alienating as some postliberals claim.

Psychology, therefore, can be broadened into an interpretive discipline while at the same time having critical components of scientific scrutiny. Further, these critical investigations can help revise our interpretive assumptions. Our understanding of the concrete process of psychotherapeutic empathy, for instance, can aid in our understanding of divine empathy. This argument in favor of a parallel between divine and human empathy,

which Browning first made in 1966, can now also include the findings of social neuroscience, attachment theory, and the clinical work of Heinz Kohut, among others. In other words, theology can learn from the concrete contributions of the human sciences. There are some continuities between human experience and the experience of the divine. Grace can, therefore, be seen as a process that fulfills and completes nature rather than utterly contradicting it.

BETWEEN BIOLOGY AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

In his approach to psychological theories, Browning has also worked hard to navigate between biological and social constructionist paradigms. Browning has consistently attempted to bring our instinctuality and culture into a fruitful discussion. He is not seduced by *either* a radical social constructionism that practically eliminates biology *or* a biological orientation that leaves little room for culture's influence. While he refuses to embrace a biological or social determinism, Browning's perspective carefully weaves together the strong influences of both biology and culture in his estimation of the human condition.

For instance, Browning persuasively points out how Freud lifted his two-instinct theory (*eros* and *thanatos*) into a metaphysical realm by assuming that *all* life can be placed into these competing camps. Freud's final position, which is not far from Zoroastrianism, pointed beyond the meager realm of the human psyche and described a cosmic dualism. While Freud would be the first to insist that his was not a religious or even quasireligious perspective, he nevertheless embraced a naturalistic ontology that moved beyond psychology into an all-inclusive framework. For Freud, this conflict exists as long as life itself goes on.

Browning also argued that humanistic psychologists such as Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, and humanistic psychology eliminate the double-instinct theory and collapse all life into a master move—the actualizing tendency (Browning and Cooper 2004). In their worldview, only one instinct is prominent—the natural urge toward growth and fulfillment. Yet, Browning makes two philosophical insights into the humanistic psychologies that simply cannot be ignored. First, in order for humanistic psychology to be accurate, there must be a preestablished harmony that allows all people to self-actualize simultaneously. In other words, the humanistic psychologists do not address the issue of how one person's self-actualization might interfere with another's. What happens when an individual's self-fulfillment collides with his or her partner's? With the children? With friends? With the needs of the community? For Browning, the humanistic psychologies make ethical decision making look a little too easy. In fact, they tend to dismiss the task of ethical decision making, as they assume that our drive toward growth comes readymade with a

biologically unfolding ethical guideline. *Perhaps no one has pointed out better than Browning that the humanistic psychologies are based on as much of an instinct model as Freud's theory.* Many do not associate the word "instinct" with the humanistic framework, but it is clearly there. It is a singularly directed, natural force toward growth and development. And this force for growth naturally tells us what we "should" do. Yet Browning is critical of this monomotivational approach for two reasons: (1) it does not take into consideration competing impulses that also coexist within each person, and (2) it does not offer any guidance for deciding what to do if one's own self-actualization conflicts with those of others.

In his attempt to reconcile the roles of instincts and culture, Browning is able to incorporate insights from perspectives as radically different as Skinnerian behaviorism and evolutionary psychology. While Browning would certainly *not* agree with radical behaviorism, that we have no instincts, he would nevertheless suggest that we need to pay attention to the manner in which Skinner describes our environmental conditioning. Again, while this conditioning hardly tells the whole story, it nevertheless sheds light on our story. Similarly, while Browning balks at any evolutionary psychology that advocates a biological determinism, he nevertheless believes evolutionary psychologists regularly point out important empirical findings about the nature of our instinctual tendencies such as kin altruism and survival. Cultural symbols and institutions can build upon these natural inclinations. Browning, as we have seen, dug out "evolutionary psychology" tendencies in the thought of an unlikely candidate—Thomas Aquinas. These natural tendencies are not enough in themselves. They need the added reinforcement of cultural support. But nature certainly makes its contribution to culture. *Culture can build upon, direct, and complete our instinctual tendencies.* Culture can take a natural instinct such as genetic kinship and add an expanded ethic to it. Again, culture need not contradict our instincts; it simply needs to lead them. Reason is necessary to deliberate precisely because we have so many instincts. Blindly following these instincts (Rousseau) or trying to smash them (Hobbes) is not necessary. We are ambivalent and ambiguous carriers of a multitude of instinctual patterns. Browning is suspicious of any master motive that renders the remainder of our instincts quiet or nonexistent. We are stuck with a variety of tendencies, and ethical decision making is precisely about coordinating them along with the needs of others.

So again, Browning, following both William James and Niebuhr, consistently argues for a plurality of instincts within each of us (Browning 1980). We are not simply divided between two instincts (Freud), nor are we singularly driven by a single instinct (Rogers and Maslow) that comes equipped with an ethical direction. Instead, a plurality of instincts bargain for our attention. Our reason is capable of awakening one instinct to modify another. It is not the job of reason to redeem our instincts,

as Freud thought. And it is not the job of reason to simply follow our instinct, as Rogers believed. Instead, a variety of instinctual tendencies need to be considered. And, we will have the always-challenging struggle to decide what is the ethical thing to do amidst competing instincts. Thus, we have to consider both the choir of tendencies within us as well as the tendencies and needs of those around us. This is a strenuous and difficult decision.

FINITUDE AND EXISTENTIAL ANXIETY

Browning borrows from the Kierkegaardian-Niebuhrian tradition to make another criticism of humanistic psychology that can also be applied to other perspectives. Browning argues that Rogers and his associates do not account for the problem of ontological anxiety, the anxiety that is not completely reducible to interpersonal factors. For Rogers, anxiety is a “fall out” of relational disturbance. In other words, anxiety is caused by the emergence of incongruence. Incongruence involves presenting a false self because we feel that being genuine would bring judgment and even alienation. Hence, we act in less-than-genuine ways and feel a discrepancy between our honest feelings and the “self” we present. This internal, dichotomous state leads us toward self-estrangement with its preoccupying anxiety. Our buried “genuine self” puts pressure on our false self-presentations as it threatens to come forth. Hence, we feel anxious.

While Browning readily agrees that this is indeed a source of anxiety, he does not believe this portrait of anxiety tells the whole story. We also carry within us ontological anxiety, a pervasive sense of insecurity that is simply part of our being. We are both biological creatures and self-transcending creatures. We can step outside ourselves and review our lives, our decisions, our vulnerabilities, and our ultimate death. This condition itself produces anxiety. This is not a condition that can be psychologically “fixed.” As Niebuhr said so often, it does not have a specific psychological cause. Its source cannot be tracked down and eliminated. This is why psychotherapy cannot eliminate it. In fact, given the fact that ontological anxiety is the forerunner (not the cause) of excessive self-regard and preoccupation, one could say theologically that psychology cannot eliminate sin. The possibility of anxious, inordinate self-regard is built into the very conditions of human existence. Yet, paradoxically, this excessive self-regard is not necessitated by our human condition. We are not biologically hard-wired to sin. Yet, inevitably, this is the direction the human condition moves. Out of our own anxiety, we reach out for forms of security that are not possible. Total security and finitude are incompatible, yet we nevertheless reach beyond the bounds of our finitude and try to establish a place of infinite safety. While some aspects of our anxiety can be quieted through the process of psychotherapy, there is an ever-present possibility of the postanalyzed

or “therapized” self to engage in anxiously excessive self-regard. We never get “beyond” this possibility. It stays with us even if we have received the very best fruits of psychotherapeutic healing. As long as we are breathing, we are tempted.

THE NONROMANTIC DIMENSION OF BROWNING’S APPROACH

There is a consistent *nonromantic element* in Browning’s thought. All notions of a “blossoming” self, a “hidden” self, a “buried” self, or a “naturally developing self” are strongly critiqued. Browning is much more impressed with James’s hard-won definition of self that comes primarily from ethical decision making. One’s sense of self is much more negotiated rather than “discovered.” No form of biological unfolding, automatic self-creativity, or “given” self can take away the difficult task of ethical decisions. We do not simply discover our “true self” and then wait for this discovery to provide us with a secret form of wisdom.

I have sometimes wondered if Browning’s nonromantic view might have been slightly different if he had spent more time actually doing clinical work. In other words, does a “faith” in the naturally evolving “discovered self” emerge more easily as one watches the process from the vantage point of a close and personal encounter in psychotherapy? Does clinical work itself provide an avenue for understanding and appreciating this deep inclination toward growth and health? Some clinicians claim an access to the inner world of their clients or patients that is not readily available to academics whose vantage point is less empathic. As a religiously informed social scientist at the University of Chicago, a person whose bread and butter has been tied up with critiques of various perspectives, Browning is hardly going to be one who becomes intoxicated with a new method of healing. He is far too sober for that. This is in no way to indicate that Browning was not warm, personable, and very concerned with the experiential and affective dimensions of life. But, he was perennially interested in how other departments and academic voices around a university might evaluate what a psychotherapy or religious claim is asserting. How will this provocative and inviting theory look in the daylight of hard public scrutiny? That has been his concern. Clearly, this stance has kept Browning from “going off the deep end” with any new trend. And, this has surely been one of his most valuable services to ministry. His critical thinking skills are very sharp; his vision into the underworld of assumptions is highly developed; and his suspicions of only seeing one side of the picture push him toward balance. He is interdisciplinary, learns from everyone, and writes in a very nuanced fashion. His multidisciplinary proclivities can sometimes make his writing very complicated. It is full of the kind of qualifiers that attest to his attempt to be fair-minded and consider as many perspectives as he can. Yet he does not immerse himself in the subjectivity of patients in the way an empathically attuned psychotherapist does. Someone

like Rogers or Kohut would insist that it is in the process of doing the deep work of empathic immersion into another's subjectivity that we discover an emerging healthy direction that wants to come forth. While Browning is not dismissive of this inclination toward growth, he simply believes that we have other inclinations as well. Rather than listening for a naturally emerging direction of an "authentic self," Browning was more concerned with the negotiated direction, which results from a host of competing instincts and potential directions as they deliberate over moral goods.

THE CENTRALITY OF ETHICAL ASSUMPTIONS IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

Browning does not think psychotherapists should start thinking about ethics as an "add on" to what they are already doing. Instead, he believes, they are *already operating* on the basis of implicit ethical principles buried in their visions of human flourishing. Browning places ethics right at the center of psychotherapeutic theory. We cannot work with people without an image of health and human flourishing and that image always contains ethical principles of obligation. All psychotherapies have hidden beliefs about how we "ought" to live, what we "should" do with our lives, and how we relate to others. A huge mistake of some forms of psychotherapy, for Browning, is the assumption that if we can simply be in touch with an inner principle of growth, our ethics will come naturally. A psychotherapist might tell us that we need to get away from all "should" statements, but at least indirectly, this very statement involves a "should." While guilt-ridden, tyrannical consciences have created many problems for which psychotherapy can surely help, the answer is not to create an amoral atmosphere in which ethical issues are not considered. Further, such an amoral atmosphere is not even possible. There is always a cluster of value-assumptions and tacit ethical notions floating in *any* therapist's office. It is impossible to function without some sort of guiding assumptions. Thus, claims to complete value neutrality are impossible. A huge value assumption about the importance of self-understanding is clearly being made in every therapeutic interaction.

There are premoral goods that we each seek, such as health, comfort, and job fulfillment. But for Browning, it is important to stress that these are *premoral* rather than moral issues. The healthy, wealthy, or skillful person is not necessarily a *moral* person. Moral goods have the additional task of deliberating and reconciling these premoral goods *both within the person and between persons*. Moral thinking, then, involves both an internal process of choice and an interpersonal process of coordinating those choices with the needs of others. For Browning, psychotherapy has all too frequently confused and conflated premoral goods with moral goods. In other words, therapists have moved too rapidly from the healthy person to the morally ideal person. This premature movement has been largely facilitated by the huge assumption that health automatically comes equipped with its own

natural moral striving. But for Browning, a lack of internal conflict (which is characteristic of mental health) does not automatically guarantee good ethical choices. Psychological health is an important premoral good, but it does not eliminate the further task of ethical deliberation. Both physical and psychological health can contribute to the moral good, but they do not automatically bring it about. An absence of internal conflict does not necessarily provide us with dependable ethical decisions. Moral thinking will build upon and attempt to fulfill our strivings for premoral goods. It will be a referee between competing goods, as we negotiate our own needs with those of others.

Perhaps I need to state Browning's attitude toward psychotherapy even more boldly: Browning recognizes and affirms the significance and importance of psychotherapeutic healing. He even believes it can help us clarify and better grasp the process of divine healing. He is protherapy. Yet, he is critical of any form of therapy that neglects or ignores the further process of ethical deliberation. More importantly, he is critical of any method of psychotherapy which assumes that a healthy personality will automatically, naturally, and biologically choose the right course of action. So again, in Browning's career, he did not simply turn from psychology to ethics; instead, he realized that psychology was already making ethical assumptions that are needed to be made explicit and invited into a more deliberate discussion.

CONCLUSION

In many respects, Browning's investigation into the philosophical assumptions embedded in various psychological theories, and particularly perspectives in psychotherapy, continued a rich tradition represented well by Paul Tillich. From his early involvement in the New York Psychology Group (1941–1945) until his death in 1965, Tillich both listened carefully to psychotherapists and nudged them to recognize the deeper ontological assumptions inherent in their work. Browning, who was briefly on the same faculty with Tillich at the University of Chicago, continued this valuable tradition. Browning did not chastise the psychological theories for operating on the basis of these larger metaphysical claims; instead, he simply wanted them to acknowledge when they had moved beyond modest empirical investigations toward larger claims about the larger human condition. We are always working on the basis of a philosophical anthropology, which in turn makes assumptions about the meaning and fulfillment of human existence. Browning's perpetual problem with some psychological approaches is that they want to do their philosophical and quasireligious thinking while wearing the hat of pure scientist. Browning's call to the psychological sciences is to be more explicit and forthright about the philosophical matrix that guides one's work.

If one is looking for a pastoral theology perspective, which simply highlights recent discoveries in the helping professions and makes them available for religious professionals, then Don Browning's work is probably not the best place to look. On the other hand, if one is looking for a critical investigation into the assumptive worlds of various helping strategies, an investigation that encourages a public discussion and comparison of human possibilities, ethics, and the ultimate context of our lives, then Don Browning is a comprehensive and insightful guide.

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