

Reviews

So Human an Animal: How We Are Shaped by Surroundings and Events. By RENÉ DUBOS. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968. 267 pages. \$6.95.

This is an interesting and important result of Professor Dubos's perceptive scientific reasoning and imaginative humanistic concern. Quite correctly, he emphasizes how our scientific knowledge and understanding of the material world around us are far ahead of our knowledge and understanding of ourselves. Admittedly, it is difficult to study ourselves objectively; we are far too biased in our own favor. Yet we must try. Perhaps it is along the path of such an attempt that the full religious significance of science may emerge. For our religion is what we believe, and we believe on the basis of what we think we know. Significantly, however, we usually act on the basis of our beliefs.

After a charming, personalized foreword, expressing "the faith that it is possible to deal scientifically with the living experience of man," Dubos delves into "The Unbelievable Future," with recognition of pessimism but turning toward a new optimism. He then turns backward and considers human history, going on to deal with biological remembrances of things past. The chapter on living experience considers how firmly bound we are to our earth, how individuality arises, and how tenuous is our freedom. In the pursuit of significance, Dubos wisely describes how our physical surroundings, especially our buildings, shape us, and he indicates that we may be outgrowing the "Growth Myth." The concluding chapter treats the emerging science of humanity in which we may find how important it is to woo our earth. There are good references and an index.

Here is a significant expression of the new humanism to which George Sarton (1884-1956) devoted his life. Dubos can well continue Sarton's effort of bridging the gap between the sciences and the humanities, and this book indicates the skill with which he might proceed.

I have only one minor criticism, but it may have importance. In common with many philosophical writers, especially the English and German ones, Dubos usually refers to the human race in the form of the masculine singular "man." With over half of humanity being female, it might be wiser to talk simply of "people" when referring to humanity as a whole. Note that this gives quite a different intuitive response from "man." The latter inevitably conjures a single male, usually old, while "people" suggests the amorphous crowd of human beings, male, female, young, and old, which is really what we mean when we refer to the human race.

Altogether, Dubos has written an important essay based on a brilliant lifetime endeavor in the life sciences, and colored with a charming French sensitivity. The personal sketches in the volume are often moving, as when he relates his experiences in our Northwest. His emphasis on the uniqueness of individuals has been stressed before, by Roger Williams, for example, but not with the sympathetic regard which is part of Dubos's personality. He clearly shows how we can get out of the confusion of our lives trapped "in the midst

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of noise, dirt, ugliness, and absurdity," by developing the humanness which makes us so unique an animal species—the humanness which on the basis of our beliefs can become a pervading religion.

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On Death and Dying. By ELISABETH KÜBLER-ROSS. New York: Macmillan Co., 1969. 260 pages. \$6.95.

This book grew out of the experiences of the author, a psychiatrist, in seminars with dying patients. The subtitle is "What the Dying Have to Teach Doctors, Nurses, Clergy and Their Own Families." The seminars were held at the Billings Hospital of the University of Chicago.

Without doubt this book represents an important step forward in an unknown and often dreaded territory. The writer suggests that, in the present time, we have become the victims of a development in our society in which death is surrounded by all kinds of taboos, in contrast with more "healthy" societies. She remembers her youth in Switzerland where death was more accepted. The book is—and one can sympathize here with the author—colored by a certain nostalgia for the past.

Conducting hundreds of interviews with terminally ill patients, Dr. Ross concludes that the usual attitude of doctors toward the problems of the dying patient is wrong. The consequence of this attitude is that the patient is left alone too much. When we consciously seek contact with the patient, we discover that he, in most cases, is developing a certain acceptance of death. Ross differentiates five stages in the process: denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Acceptance, however, is mostly not final; it remains combined with hope.

The book gives more a description than an explanation of the process. Ross herself suggests that the best explanation is to be found along psychoanalytic lines. I have the impression that this explanation must take into account more factors than the author does. She accentuates the fear of death, which undoubtedly is a potent factor in our lives. But sometimes we also see a longing for death, even in patients, who at the same time are anxious. Fantasies of a reunion with a loved one are woven.

Furthermore, I believe that, in the interviews with patients, regression and transference play a greater role than the author makes clear. For a training in dealing with dying patients these are important viewpoints. However, the book contains a number of interviews which make it one of the most important *documents humains* in modern psychological literature. It is an extraordinary book, written by an extraordinary person.

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