

The Human Predicament and the Transcendent

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There are two main barriers to Christian faith set up by our twentieth-century secularised culture. The first is the conviction that faith is irrelevant to the real problems of the twentieth century. The second is our inability to accept the reality of a being with powers that transcend our own. These two barriers are very different, the first being very concrete, the second very abstract. Yet they are connected by the Christian belief that we—the citizens of the twentieth century, and the rest of humanity too—are caught in a predicament which only one with powers that transcend our own can overcome.

In this article I want to do two things. I want to give an account of the predicament in which we are caught that will show both that there really is one, and also that it is a predicament that human powers alone are insufficient to overcome. I also want to present an argument to show that at least one notion of a transcendental power (and being) answers to something real and cannot be dismissed as mythical, symbolic or 'religious'.

The predicament in which we are caught is our inability to create the kind of community that we cannot but desire. To give a better idea of the nature of this community the lack of which constitutes the essence of our predicament, I will give two examples of attempts to achieve it and try to show why they fail.

The first is a political one. It concerns the lack of community between those who have not yet been 'developed' by the influence of European science and technology.

According to Unesco's figures, in 1982, 528 million people lived on less than 100 dollars each. During the same year 15 million children died from starvation. Nearly all of these very poor people and dead children belonged to the 'Third World' or the 'South' of the South/North divide. That is to say, they came from the 'undeveloped' parts of the world. So the Unesco figures, and others like them, support the view that the gap between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' is in fact continuing to widen. And this in spite of technological progress and aid-programmes. Again, this occurs in spite of widespread awareness of the fact.

From what I have already said it seems clear that the problem is not one of a sheer lack of resources, or even of the inability of technology to

cope with the difficulty of distribution. The problem is fundamentally a political one, and that not in some intractable sense of the term but in the sense that it concerns the making of a common decision. In short, the problem exists because a common will to solve it does not exist, at least among those people who are in a position to do something about it. And this means that the people who could do something about it do not want to enough.

Put like that what I am saying seems too simple to be true. But I do not think it is. If I consider South Africa as an example of this widening gap between the 'haves' and 'have-nots', and my own position in it, I think I can see the issues more clearly. I certainly would not want to say that I have no will to close the gap between, in this case, black and white, the gap in power, opportunity, money—in short, development. I could fairly say that I want very much for it to be closed. Its existence causes suffering of extraordinary kinds and causes me moral trouble too. And yet if the strength of my will to change it were to be tested in some way I doubt if it would come out very high. If, for instance, I had to decide what proportion of my income I would be prepared to contribute towards closing the gap, I know it would not be very large. I know that is partly because of uncertainty as to whether my sacrifice would really help. For a change of this kind to occur a common will at least of those in a certain position in society (say, in South Africa, white voters) is required. And my willingness to make my own sacrifice could be quite reasonably reckoned to be dependent on how sure I was that everyone else would make theirs. And if I was sure? Well, believing that our common sacrifice would be effective in closing the gap, let us assume more or less permanently, would certainly remove one obstacle to my making my own. But the assurance of a common will to achieve the objective would fortify me in a way far beyond simply encouraging the belief that our scheme would work. It would inspire me, literally, to be unselfish. It would affect not only my action but my will; it would change the quality of my desire to end injustice. And it would do this simply by the revelation of that quality of will in others. That then is what has got to happen, whether in my own case, or in that of the 'haves' in the world-wide situation. We have to change the quality of our desire for justice. And that, it is not too difficult to see, is not such a simple thing. In fact, if my own case can be taken as typical, it can only be brought about by an encounter with that very quality in another, or in an overwhelming number of others. In fact this doesn't happen. And it doesn't happen because a real desire for justice doesn't exist, in anyone, let alone in large numbers—or it doesn't exist enough.

To reduce a political problem to the problem of the lack of a certain attitude in individuals might seem to be a mistake. In this case I do not think it is. The problem we are considering, though presented in a

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twentieth-century example, is not merely a twentieth-century problem. Economic and political injustice is as old and as widespread as humanity. But seen in the light of twentieth-century European culture, with all its colossal power of control, it reveals its paradoxical, indeed mysterious, character more clearly than ever before. We have, it seems, the means to solve the problem; yet we do not. This problem is not political in the narrow sense, a problem solely of a particular political situation in a particular place. It is universal to all political situations. And as such it must derive from what is common to all societies. And what is that but human nature, the nature each of us shares with every other human individual?

To throw more light on the nature of the community we lack I want to give another example, a sexual one. It will bring out the universality of the problem better and also give a better indication of why true human community is beyond the scope of human power to achieve.

Think of an ordinary man's desire for love. He wants to be loved for his own sake. Such a desire goes beyond the desire to be needed, which is to be loved for the sake of another. He may of course want to be needed as well. But his desire for love goes beyond that. He wants to be loved freely and not simply from a psychic compulsion.

In a sexual relationship the man's desire to be loved for his own sake exists side by side with his attempts to love the woman for hers. It is in fact antipathetic to such attempts. The stronger is his need to be loved for his own sake, the more difficult is it for him to love her for hers. In fact what he needs in order to be able to love her truly for her own sake is that she love him truly for his. But she, of course, is in the same situation as he is, with the same imperious need to be unselfishly loved. And it is only his unselfish love that can empower her to love unselfishly in return. The couple thus seems to be trapped, without hope of ever enjoying a genuinely mutual love of each other.

The situation as I have sketched it might seem a trifle unreal. The couple, after all, is depicted as isolated from all external influences. Nevertheless I do think that the essential form of what I have described does correspond to very general experience. On the one hand the compulsive need for love proves to be the very thing that prevents one from being loved. The terror of being smothered in possessive love inhibits others from giving one their love. They too, after all, have the normal self-centred desire to be loved. On the other hand the fear that one is not genuinely loved for one's own sake intensifies and makes more compulsive one's desire to be loved in that way and one loses the freedom to give genuine love at all. The result, as Sartre has pointed out in such masterly fashion, is the endless conflict, the dialectic of mastery and slavery, that forms the essential plot of so many films and novels and plays. The general form of this predicament is that in order to be capable

of giving genuine love we need to receive it. Being loved empowers us to love—yet everyone is in the same boat, unable to give unless they receive. The world of interpersonal relationships appears to be a closed circle, with no exit.

I hope that this second example of a failure in human community has brought out more clearly how universal and how genuinely intractable the problem of achieving human community is. The sexual and the political examples parallel each other. Whether one is speaking of the desire for justice or the capacity to offer genuine love, the predicament that persons are in is basically the same. And so is the solution to the predicament. It is this that our sexual example shows most clearly.

Clearly what is required in that case is someone who is able to love unselfishly without being unselfishly loved. It is only the assurance of being genuinely loved that can enable the lover to respond in the same way. The vicious circle can only be broken by a lover who does not need to be loved in order to love, a sort of unmoved mover of the emotional universe. Putting it like that indicates the true scope of the problem. Many theorists would question whether love of such a kind is even possible. And surely even if it does exist, it exists only in a mixed state, mingled with all sorts of other attitudes. If one really presses the conception of a lover who does not need to be loved in order to love, does one end up with something quite beyond human experience? I think one does. But it is precisely because it indicates the need for something that would appear to be beyond human experience that the sexual example is so important. It would seem to be the case that there, more than in the political sphere, one actually experiences the need for a power that transcends one's own. In fact I believe (though there is not space here to present in full the grounds for my belief) that genuine personal community, whether political or sexual or of whatever kind, is always the creation of power that transcends our own, is in fact the creation of a strictly transcendent being. But it is important to grasp that all forms of the problem of creating genuine human community, in whatever sphere it manifests itself, involve deep-seated dynamisms of the human heart. The solution is in no sense technological. And the understanding of its necessity is not provided by any science.

I would like my two examples, the political and the sexual, to serve as illustrations of a desire for a certain form of human community that is in fact universal to human kind. They are also intended to show that it is in fact this desire for community with other persons that is the fundamental cause of the human predicament. If what the examples depict is accurate, then we are in the position of being possessed by a desire that is fundamental to our nature but which our own powers are insufficient to satisfy. Hence the need, if the predicament is to be

overcome, of a different, a transcendent, power such as Christian faith attributes to God.

The notion of power (and a being) that transcends our own is fundamentally foreign to European culture in its present state of development. But it is essential, in my opinion, both for a full understanding of the human predicament and for making sense of Christian faith.

There are at least two reasons why our culture finds it difficult to cope with the idea of a being with powers that transcend those of humanity. The first is the myth of our (at least potential) omnipotence. If anything is logically possible we are, in principle, with our science and technology able to do it. The second is our mechanistic world-view. There is only one kind of power and we already know what it is. To suggest the possibility of a radically different kind would be to threaten the fundamental homogeneity of a secularised view of the world.

What I have already said serves to suggest that both these contemporary intuitions are mistaken. The intractability of the problem of human community in all its forms gives the lie to our omnipotence. And the mechanist view of the world seems unable to cope adequately with the understanding of persons. In fact, it is precisely in connection with us that it breaks down.

Perhaps the quickest way of indicating how our whole 'scientific' world-view is unable to make a proper place for human reality is to point to our dual role in the actual practice of science itself. We are the subjects as well as the objects of science. By this I mean that however many sciences there are or ever could be, none of them give or could give an account of human beings precisely as scientists. The methods of science are intrinsically prior to all actual science. Whatever objects we study, ourselves included (as in psychology and sociology), we study them according to methods that we ourselves have produced, evaluated and justified. Thus in this sense we exceed the grasp of any and all the sciences and so transcend any world that they can properly comprehend. This might appear a rather subtle and ultra-theoretical point but it is so important in my opinion that I must develop it more fully. It is a bit like the tip of an iceberg nine-tenths of which are below the surface. It is in fact a sign of transcendence that is undeniable because it is the transcendence not, in the first instance, of God but of ourselves.

Like the transcendence of God, this transcendence of ours is something that our contemporary scientific culture is quite insensitive to. Other cultures, those of the undeveloped parts of the world like Africa, are not, but they can be dismissed as 'primitive'. Yet the transcendence in question is not something exotic or extraordinary; it is in fact a central element in the dominant view of human nature in the history of European philosophy. And as such it is closely bound up with the

development of science and technology. In the tradition of European thought it is usually connected with the idea that the distinguishing feature of humanity is our reason or rationality. Terms like 'reason' and 'rationality' mean very different things to different people. But no-one will deny their connection with science. I want now to bring out their connection with our transcendence as human persons of the whole world that science is capable of knowing and technology of controlling.

To give you an idea of the connection between the transcendent and being rational, let me tell you the following story. Hellenic are playing Kaizer Chiefs (these are two South African football teams). Teenage Diadla gets the ball on the right wing and sends in a cross. Ace Ntsolengoe accelerates up the midfield just in time to meet the ball outside the penalty area and gets in a blazing volley. The ball curves low across the area, eludes the outstretched fingers of the Hellenic goalie and enters the net just inside the right-hand upright. A goal!

This is a brief description of the event such as might be given in a newspaper report. Typically newspaper reports on soccer matches also try to explain how or why it was that goals came to be scored. And clearly other explanations of the same event could be given as well. A purely physical one, for instance. This would be in terms of the trajectory of the winger's cross, the acceleration of Ntsolengoe, the point of impact and impact velocity of foot and ball, the coefficient of friction between ball and foot, the angle of the shot, the ball's weight, the elasticity of the goalie's muscles, the length of his arms. One could also give a chemical account of the same event, in terms of the blood sugar in Ntsolengoe's veins, the composition of the ball, the condition of the goalie's legs and lungs. A psychological account, in terms of the motivation of the players, the effect of the coaches' pep-talk the previous evening, the importance of the game, and even certain details of the goalie's private life, could also be given. And a sociological account bringing in the history of the rivalry between the two teams, the social pressures on teams in the championship, the peculiar factors obtaining when a predominantly black team plays one that is mainly white in an apartheid society.... It is quite clear that each of the sciences could give its own description and explanation of the event under discussion. Of course, the different explanations are not mutually exclusive. They each add something to our understanding of the event. But no matter how many explanations of the scientific type were given, they would be unable together to constitute a full or sufficient explanation of the scoring of the goal. No explanation of this event that left out a mention of the rules of football, according to which a team can only win a match if it has put the ball between the goalposts of its opponents at least once, would explain why, after leaving Mtsolengoe's boot, the ball travelled towards the Hellenic goal instead of away from it. In short, however long

the list of causes, immediate and remote, of the goal, the list could not be complete unless it included the rules of football. It should, however, be obvious that the rules of football are a cause of the goal in a radically different sense from those described by the sciences. They only act as causes insofar as they are part of the mind and will of a player who understands them and plays according to them. To mark this radical difference they are usually called 'reasons' rather than causes. But whatever we call them, because they are a crucial part of a person's thinking, choosing and acting they are effective in getting things done in the real world, the world that science also tries to describe and explain.

The moral of this parable is that human actions transcend any conceivable scientific explanation, that is explanation in terms of causes, and therefore that they transcend any conceivable system of such causes. Which is to say, they are free.

The most common signs of such freedom in our everyday lives are our capacity to know the truth and our sense of responsibility. In everyday life we take both for granted. We would in fact be stupid not to. Total scepticism about our ability to know the truth about things is a self-refuting attitude, as Aristotle showed when he got the sceptic to speak: even the sceptic meant his claim 'There's no such thing as truth' to be taken as true. And there is something similarly indubitable about our sense of being ultimately responsible for certain of our actions, namely those we have deliberately decided on. However much we believed in determinism of some kind or other, we would still retain this sense of responsibility for those acts we had deliberately decided on.

There are two things I want to draw attention to in the making of a judgment. The first is that judgment always involves a reason, even if it is not explicitly adverted to. If you were asked afterwards 'Why do you think that?' you could give a reason, even if only an obviously bad one. It would always make sense for someone to ask you 'Why?'. The second point is that in making a judgment I become present to myself and act on myself in a rather peculiar and radical way. It is my idea that I am judging, and my own experience that provides the evidence for my judgment's truth. The content of the idea and the judgment are the same; all that is added is the affirmation. In making a judgment of truth I assess my own beliefs against a criterion that I impose. In doing so I take up a point of view that is beyond my whole system of beliefs in order to survey them and assess the coherence of the belief I am assessing with the system as a whole. This capacity to objectify and critically assess one's own beliefs is often called the ability to abstract. In any case it is an example of one's capacity for self-determination, one's transcendence of the influence of any outside causes whatsoever.

So it can be seen how our capacity for logic (our demand for reasons for belief) and our freedom are closely connected in the making of a

judgment. The same is true in the making of a deliberate decision. Here it is our desires that we have to consider rather than our beliefs. In making a decision we have to choose between a variety of different and often competing desires. This choice of what desire to act upon is called consent. By consenting to this or that desire I allow it to determine how I shall act. Of course, my desires and my consent only exist in a context of beliefs. I consent to a desire for some or other reason, because I believe such and such to be the case, such and such a state of affairs will make me most happy. Consent is not the same as having a reason but it always takes place for a reason. Once again, it can be seen that in consenting to this or that desire that I happen to have, I act upon myself. I have the capacity to create an internal division in myself and let the one side act on the other. This is an inadequate way of putting it since it is not a part of me that acts on another part but my whole self that acts on myself. I as consenting act upon myself as desiring; the actual consent or object of the desire and the consent is the same. A consented-to desire is simply more my own, more me, than one that has not been consented to. Here the way in which, by consenting to my desires, I bring myself to act is especially clear. I am free in a very complete and comprehensive sense. And at the heart of my freedom is my capacity for logic, my acting for a reason.

It is because judgments and decisions are both things that we do for a reason that they cannot possibly be the result of external causes acting upon us, but instead are examples of our freedom. The reason why no non-rational or external cause of a scientific kind can cause my grasp of a logical relationship between beliefs, whereby one of them could serve as the reason for the other being true, or the reason why I should decide on one thing rather than another, is that the act of grasping can only properly be described in logical terms and not in psychological or physical ones. Psychological and physical explanations of my judgments and decisions will of necessity always leave out that I am doing what I do for a reason, that is because I have grasped a logical connection between one belief and another. Because physical and psychological events cannot be described in logical terms they cannot be sufficient causes of events that can only be properly so described.

I can make this tricky point clearer with an example (for which I am indebted to C.S. Lewis—see chapter 2 of *Miracles*). Two people, A and B, have the same belief, namely that the black dog in the corner house is dangerous. A believes this because he has noticed that whenever the dog is taken for a walk it is muzzled. B believes it because he was bitten by a black dog in childhood and ever since has been afraid of black dogs. Let us suppose that both men are equally committed to their beliefs. A, however, believes what he does for a reason. He believes that the dog is dangerous because he believes that dogs wear muzzles to stop them biting

and the black dog wears a muzzle. His belief about muzzles provides a logical link with his belief about the black dog. Because he understands this link and believes what he does because of it his belief is reasonable. It has been caused by his grasp of the logical link. And this is just as true even if the black dog wears a muzzle not to stop him biting but because he has to keep his mouth shut to allow an ulcer in his mouth to heal. In the case of B, however, a psychological account of the causes of his belief is sufficient. He has no reason for belief since his belief is the result merely of association of ideas and is as such devoid of a logical connection to another belief that could act as its foundation.

It is thus because persons have the capacity to believe or decide things for reasons that their judgments and decisions transcend any conceivable system of external causes of the kind discovered by the sciences. In fact the law of non-contradiction that is the foundation of logic is simply an abstract formulation of the normal demand for coherence of belief and consistency of action that is characteristic of persons. And this lack of contradiction in oneself, in one's own belief and decision systems—even the natural dynamism that produces the demand for such a lack of contradiction, is what is meant by being free.

I have been trying to show the connection between rationality and transcendence by showing because persons are able to act for reasons they are free, free from external causality, free from physical and psychological causes that the sciences are able to discover. By saying that we are free in that sense, I do not of course mean that in human persons the laws of physics and biology cease to hold. Nor are we free from the law of gravity or the second law of thermodynamics. But I do mean that our behaviour cannot be fully accounted for by the laws of physics and biology or even by any conceivable set of the sciences. Sometimes, it is true, in special cases we lose this freedom—as in cases of brain damage or mutant births or even under the influence of certain kinds of drugs. In those cases purely scientific explanations of our behaviour are often sufficient. But that is precisely because those capacities that define us as persons have been either destroyed or rendered inoperative. The best way, of course, to make a person's behaviour completely explainable by the sciences is to kill him.

I have discussed this transcendent dimension of human life in some depth because if one is not able to make sense of this then I do not think one can possibly make any sense of the sort of transcendence that Christians attribute to God. It is not just that God is more transcendent than we are; there is an intrinsic connection between his transcendence and ours.

The foundation for grasping the transcendence of God is our experience of our own freedom. As we have seen, human beings are free in the sense that they have the capacity to perform acts that cannot be

accounted for by appealing to any causes that science can discover. Now, what goes for the acts must also go for the capacity. If our acts free from determination by external causes then so is our capacity to perform them. What I mean is that there are two things in question, our actual performance of free acts and our having the sort of nature that enables us to do so. In the case of the acts, it is clear that if they are free then they have not been produced by external causes. But the same must be true of my nature, of me. And this is not so easy to see. In the case of my acts, if they were not produced by external causes I can always say that they were produced by me. But I cannot say that in the case of my human nature, since that just is me and it is nonsense to think of me, literally, producing myself. Hence if my nature shares in the property of my acts (which it must since it is simply the capacity for producing precisely such acts) it, like them, cannot be the product of any conceivable set of external causes of the sort that science is able to discover. Hence it must have been produced by something that transcends the whole realm that science is able to know. And since it produces me, it must transcend human nature as well. And this is the sort of transcendence that Christians attribute to God.

Just as, in the case of my acts, I did not wish to imply that the laws of science break down in me but merely that they are insufficient to account for them, so, in the case of my human nature, I am not suggesting that it does not come into being in continuity with the rest of the physical universe or that the theory of biological evolution is false. The evolutionary process is certainly necessary to bring human nature into being. But it is not sufficient. If what I have said is true then the evolutionary process is only the external manifestation of a power that, because it is capable of bringing freedom into being, transcends anything that human science can discover.

In this way, so it seems to me, the transcendence of God is connected to our own, as the cause of our freedom. The foundation for a grasp of both is our experience of freedom. But it is precisely the awareness of our freedom as human persons that the scientific myth obliterates. In spite of our confident project of control we fail to recognise our true freedom and its consequences. Our minds seem trapped in the fundamental contradictions of this myth. The irony of this is that science itself is one of the clearest manifestations of our transcendence, as the subjects who produce science, not merely as one among its many objects. To discover signs of transcendence we must learn to look inwards at ourselves rather than outwards at the world the light of science is able to illuminate.

It must not be thought that, having provided grounds for believing in the reality of a transcendent cause of human nature, I imagine myself to have provided positive knowledge of God. I do not. All I would contend is that if we take our experience of freedom seriously it will disclose a dimension of our own being that opens out or points beyond itself, a

dimension that itself lies beyond the reach of scientific understanding. This is indeed a revelation that there is 'something more' than our culture is accustomed to allow. But it does not give us any insight into the nature or the significance of that 'something more'. And, of course, it does not provide us with an answer to the human predicament. It does, however, have a certain significance in this regard. As we have seen, the project of bringing about human community seemed to be beyond our human powers to fulfil. It appeared to require the influence of one whose capacity for love did not depend on being loved, and who in that respect transcended human nature. We now have a reason to believe that a transcendent cause of human nature actually exists. It is thus not inconceivable that the necessary conditions for bringing about human community also subsist in this transcendent being.

Of course, there still remains the question whether the (real) creator of freedom is capable of being the (desired) creator of true human community, of whether our Creator can also be our Saviour. I think there are good reasons for believing that our Creator can. But that would require another article.

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Arms and the Man

Nicholas Humphrey

An address given at the festival 'A World in Peril', organized by Professions for World Disarmament and held in London, at Southwark Cathedral, on 25 October 1986.

Some years ago there was a competition in the *New Statesman* magazine to produce the most startling newspaper headline anyone could think of. Among the winning entries, as I remember, was this: 'ARCHDUKE FERDINAND STILL ALIVE. FIRST WORLD WAR A MISTAKE'.

A *mistake*, a war in which 20 million people died? It seems of course preposterous: a bad—if clever—joke. And yet historians now almost universally agree that the First World War *was* a mistake. Not in the sense implied by that headline, that it was fought for the *wrong reasons*. No, a mistake in the sense—perhaps even more depressing—that there were *no* reasons for war at all: *except, that is, for the drive to war itself.*