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## **Book Reviews**

### ***Theologies of the Body: Human and Christian***

by

**Benedict Ashley, O.P.**

Pope John XXIII Medical-Moral Research and Education Center,  
Braintree, MA, 1995

Father Benedict Ashley, O.P., has been a significant figure on the Catholic philosophical and theological scene for over forty years. A convert from Marxism when he was at the University of Chicago in the forties, Fr. Ashley joined the Dominicans and became a prestigious representative of the "River Forest School of Thomism", that branch of Thomistic philosophy which emphasized the importance of philosophy of nature and of positively engaging contemporary science. Readers of this journal will be familiar with Ashley's able defenses of controversial positions of the Church in medical ethics and moral theology. This second edition of *Theologies of the Body* (first published in 1985) provides a welcome opportunity to recognize one of the truly significant milestones for recent Catholic philosophy and theology.

The book is divided into four parts, fourteen chapters in all. Part I treats science, the body, Humanist world-views, and Marxism. Here Ashley explains well the essentials of what contemporary science informs us of ourselves: we are bodily beings, not pure consciousnesses which have bodies. We are distinct in that we are self-reflective and communicate by language, a communication system which can be indefinitely developed (marking true language off from types of communication which other animals can perform), and create and hand on culture. Ashley traces the development of the Humanist worldview from 1700 to the present, including Newton, Darwin, Einstein, Kant,

Hegel, Marx, Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and others. Humanism's strength is that it develops a view of the human person as a bodily, historical, and creative being. Its weakness is that it finds it exceedingly difficult to relate facts and values. He also makes it clear that to dialogue effectively with Humanist worldviews one must be conversant with contemporary empirical science.

Part II treats Christian theologies of the body, tracing the history of Biblical, and then, in the Christian era, Platonic and Aristotelian-inspired theologies of the body. It includes a clear and insightful account of Christian philosophy from the Church fathers up through the Counter-reformation, followed by a treatment of Christian responses to Humanism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Ashley clearly sides with the Aristotelian view of the human person, and shows that many misunderstandings of Christianity arise from the inadvertent distortions of its doctrines by Platonizing theologians.

The Historical Parts I and II show that, "Christian theology to date has failed to rethink the Christian world-view in terms of God's revelation of Himself through modern science, while Humanism has used modern science as an effective apologetic for its claim that we human beings must ourselves give meaning to a cosmos which is in itself meaningless." (253) Parts III and IV present Ashley's positive resolution of the problems raised by the confrontation of Christian thought with Humanism and contemporary science. Roughly, Part III is the philosophical reply and Part IV the theological reply.

Part III is entitled "A Radical Process Interpretation of Science." Ashley examines the Evolutionary theory, rejecting the idea that evolution by natural selection is a total explanation of life, consciousness and human understanding. However, Ashley argues that, properly understood, evolutionary theory is compatible with the Christian notion of a Creative and Provident God. Moreover, Ashley defends evolutionary theory against conservative philosophers who argue that it violates the principle that the effect cannot be greater than the cause. Ashley's answer is that there can be more intelligibility in the sequence of events than in any single cause, so that the effect can transcend individual causes. Ashley also provides a sound argument against reductionism, that is, the view that everything can be completely explained, eventually, by reference to elementary particles and their chance interactions. Living organisms, and especially

humans, cannot be completely explained in that way, since their constituent parts have real relations to other parts of the organism, which define what they are rather than simply modify them.

The Whiteheadian or Process Philosophers' view that the basic natural units are events is incoherent; instead, the primary natural units (substances) include animal and plant organisms, molecules and atoms, and inanimate homogenous solids of indefinite dimensions. He also defends as still accurate the Aristotelian distinction between primary matter and substantial form, as well as real teleology among non-knowing as well as knowing beings. "For example, the normal action of the human heart is teleological because it follows a regular pattern and is functional for the health of the organism; while the effect of a coronary thrombosis is to impede this function, and is considered an 'accident', although its causes can often be discovered." (287)

Ashley ably defends, within the updated context of modern science, the Thomistic position on what a human person is. On the one hand, a human person is a living body, a particular kind of organism, an animal. This is shown by the fact that some actions human persons perform are bodily actions. For example, sensation is an essentially bodily action (here Ashley rejects the Platonist and Cartesian view of sensation): "On the contrary, it is necessary to admit that seeing is the act of the eye itself, not in isolation, but as the organ of the unified animal body whose function is to see just as the function of the stomach is to digest." (323) On the other hand, human persons perform actions which transcend time and space. By understanding, human beings grasp the essential features of things, and in judging that something is so, they reflect on their act of knowing so as to be aware of their own awareness. These acts of understanding, and total self-reflection cannot be performed with a bodily organ. Ashley concludes that the human soul is the unifying form (substantial form) of the human organism, but it is naturally immortal.

The Humanist awareness of the historicity of human existence has the result that uniform laws of nature, as Galileo and Newton conceived them, "are secondary to the historical evolution of the universe out of which human intelligent freedom has emerged." (345) Contrary to Humanism, however, this historicity does not entail ethical relativism. Amidst the dynamism of human cultures human beings share the same nature, by which they are teleologically inclined toward

fundamental goods. "Therefore we must commit ourselves to the ultimate goal (*telos*) of human life which consists in satisfying these basic needs and helping others to do the same for themselves in a consistent and unified manner." (364)

In Part IV Ashley develops the principles of Moral Theology, a Christology, and an Eschatology. He takes account of and responds to the main competing contemporary views, including those on Biblical criticism. In a section entitled, "Does the Christian god exist?", Ashley compares the Kantian view of proofs of God's existence with the Thomist view: "Thus the difference between these two positions is not a question of their logical consistency, nor of fact, but of *epistemological standards*. Our choice, therefore, has to be between Aquinas' Aristotelian epistemology in which all knowledge is empirically derived, and Kant's epistemology in which a Platonic element (of course considerably modified), namely, the *a priori* categories derived from pure reason, still survives." (644) Here Ashley indicates his reason for not taking "the transcendental turn," as did Rahner and some other Catholic theologians.

At the beginning of the book Ashley raises the question, "Can we create ourselves?" Humanists and Marxists believe that we can, with the aid of modern science. Ashley shows (in Part IV) that the Christian answer also is yes, but that human creativity is a *stewardship* of God's gifts. In this way also ethics is based on human nature, on the insight that our creativity is not autonomous but a stewardship.

Christianity is thoroughly incarnational, and therefore matter and the historical order are important constituents in the Kingdom of God, centered in Jesus Christ, both God and man, a kingdom God has planned and invited us to enter. "Entering into this Trinitarian Community, created persons will find that there will unfold for them an unending abyss of new wonders. Yet the history of the world will also remain forever preserved in the risen bodies of human beings, and in the transformed universe through which they will know themselves in eternal dialogue with one another in the Spirit, together with the Son before the Father, who will be 'all in all'." (682)

This is an extremely significant work for both philosophy and theology. It is not a mere rehash of Thomistic philosophy and theology, although it is a faithful development along those lines. It contains many original advances. for its scope, its awareness of contemporary

knowledge in both the natural and social sciences, its careful and precise argumentation, it is indeed comparable to St. *Thomas's Summa Theologiae*.

- Patrick Lee  
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of Steubenville

### *Core Readings in Medical Ethics*

**Patrick Guinan, M.D. and Ted Jagielo, M.D., Editors**

Knights of Columbus Press, Chicago, Illinois, 175 pages, 1996

This book was compiled as a project of the Catholic Physicians' Guild of Chicago. It is intended as part of the Guild's outreach to the medical students of the six medical schools of Chicago. Since there are very few medical schools in the country which have an introductory course in bioethics which partakes of the Christian-Hippocratic tradition, this book can be an invaluable asset in establishing dialogue between students and practitioners.

The book contains fifteen articles which are aimed at covering the gamut of philosophical and clinical issues in medical ethics. Much of the material is drawn from articles previously printed in *The Linacre Quarterly*. The introductory papers are aimed at an indoctrination in the theological and philosophical background of medical practice. Pope John Paul II's allocution to the International Congress of Catholic Physicians establishes the tone of basic human rights and service. Father Stanley Jaki's erudite and comprehensive consideration of the *Purpose of Healing*, first delivered at the 1992 Annual Convention as its keynote address is augmented by an original article on the *Physician as Teacher and Prophet* by Rev. Jerome Listecky, Moral Theologian from the Archdiocesan Major Seminary, who serves as the chaplain of the Chicago Guild.

There are three organizational statements in the book: the statement on *Sex Education* from the National Federation of Catholic Physicians' Guilds, a pastoral statement on *Condom Distribution* by the New York Bishops and a statement on the *Ethics of Gene Therapy* by the Catholic Union of Great Britain. The NFCPG statement has