

Niebuhr argues that "man can transcend himself sufficiently to know that an ultimate word may be spoken against him; but he cannot himself speak that word" (*NDM*, 2:25 f.). "Man transcends himself sufficiently to know that he cannot be the centre of his own existence and that his nation, culture or civilization cannot be the end of history. This is the 'natural' ground for revelation. But he does not transcend himself in such a way as to be able to state the end of existence, except as, by faith, he apprehends the voice of God who speaks to him and 'against' him" (26, n. 13).

But, surely, being able, or not able, to *speak*, or to *state*, the end of existence is not the question. The question is being able, or not able, to make pursuit of the end, once spoken, or stated, the abiding objective of human endeavor, individual as well as collective. If this isn't the clear implication of what Niebuhr himself says elsewhere—notably, in discussing the distinction between "the self in action" and "the self in contemplation" (espec. 2:108, which, curiously, is not even mentioned in the Index!)—then I have quite failed to grasp his meaning.

By the way, Niebuhr clearly implies that "the self in contemplation" not only *can* see, but also actually *does* see, "the requirements of its essential being," to which its actions as "the self in action" are to conform. But, then, how could the self possibly fail to have the ability also to "speak," or to "state," the truth about its existence, "seeing" in the relevant sense and "speaking," or stating," the truth obviously being interdependent aspects of one and the same thing, the second, or some equivalent thereof, being the only behavioral evidence anyone could possibly have of the first?

6 July 2009