

On the Levels of Awareness

Man is the being who (1) feels; (2) thinks (or believes): and (3) thinks that he thinks (or believes that he believes). (2) is what may be called "existential understanding" which as such is constitutive of the very being of man, who is precisely the being who understands himself and therewith understands reality itself. This existential understanding may be either authentic or inauthentic--but in either case it involves an understanding of self, others, and the whole. Inauthentic understanding is an understanding which in one way or another qualifies the sola in sola gratia, i.e., treats self and/or others as significant or of worth independently of the relation to the whole which alone endows them with worth. Even so, inauthentic understanding is understanding of self, others, and the whole, however distorted or perverted, or, as it were, eccentric it may be. Since existential understanding is identical with the human mode of being--is the distinctively human way of existing--it is instantiated somehow in every distinctively human act, either as authentic or inauthentic; and this choice is the ever-present decision, the truly eschatological decision, at stake in every moment of human existence. Although it is not itself feeling, but understanding, it is the level of understanding closest to feeling and is the proximate relation of man to the concrete: it is, one may say, man's way--as man, that is as the being who thinks as well as feels --of being concrete. But if, as seems reasonable, "human consciousness is essentially linguistic," i.e., man precisely at level (2), at the level of existential understanding. . . .

"The doctrine of degrees of consciousness" (BH, 213),