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Richard Skinner

The Creation of Meaning

Two years ago a couple of friends became parents for only five minutes: their baby died virtually at birth. It is the sort of occurrence which evokes the response, amongst many others, 'What is the point? Just what *is* the point of that?' It appears to be utterly meaningless. It is when something apparently so meaningless occurs that we are made aware just how important meaning and purpose are to us. Mankind is a meaning-seeking species. I wish to look at the search for meaning in the light of a particular view of mankind, the view which regards man as co-creator with God. To call man co-creator with God is not to suggest that he has the ability literally to create, say, matter or energy from nothing; that indeed appears to be God's prerogative. But man does have to respond to creativity, and in responding he actually participates in that creativity and completes it. The fullness of God's creativity remains unrealised until acknowledgement and response come from man.

This response can often be below the threshold of awareness. In fact, simply perceiving something requires a form of creativity, in that the brain has to take all the information from the senses and construct a coherent image for our subjective inner world which, we assume, corresponds to the objective outer world. The brain is not merely a passive recipient but an active organiser of sense data, and this ceaseless activity occurs automatically without our being conscious of it except in special circumstances such as being faced with an optical illusion. Then we become more aware of trying to create a coherent, stable image out of the visual information we are receiving. But normally the creativity of ordinary perception takes place unconsciously. And this is one level of responsive creativity which helps complete the original creativity of God.

But there is another, higher level of responsive creativity. This is the willed, conscious response to what is perceived or experienced, and it is vital for the completion of God's original and originating activity. The absence of a conscious response from man leaves God's creativity in a state of limbo, somehow more than merely latent, but not fully actualised. To try to make this obscurity marginally less obscure, an analogy is in order. Con-

sider the activity of a human-being who is generally regarded as creative—a poet. It is clear that his creativity is inseparably linked with communication. In the first instance, communication takes place between the poet and himself. This is inevitable, for as the act of writing proceeds (and in this I include all the pre-writing struggle and deliberation), understanding will develop in the poet of matters he did not previously realise he knew. This slowly developing understanding is integral to the act of creativity; what the poem does to the poet himself and how he responds, and how the response influences and shapes the still inchoate poem, constitute the creative act. The poet's response to his own creativity is part of that creativity. And what happens when someone else reads this poem, becoming involved in the communication? Further creativity results, since the reader cannot help but respond; even indifference is a response. And response implies creativity, since the reader must acknowledge the words, take them, and make sense from them. He cannot know whether the sense he makes is what the poet intended; in fact, he cannot even be sure that the poet intended there to be any sense at all. But whether he finds sense or no sense, the reader creates a response to the poem which is not mere passivity.

So what do we have? We have a sequence of poet-poem-reader-response. It is this sequence which must be considered the true unit of creativity, and the poet's original act of creativity remains incomplete in the absence of reader and response. Or, rather, once there is a reader and therefore a response, the unit of creativity can no longer be confined to poet-poem. Now that's all very well, but how does it apply to God and man as co-creators? What I am suggesting is that in the same way that poem-poet-reader-response should be considered the true unit of creativity with regard to a poem, so God-creation-man-response should be considered the true unit with regard to creation as a whole. Once there is a part of creation capable of conscious response, namely man (and, for all we know, other elements of creation too), then that conscious part of creation and its response enter into the creative unit. This does not take away the primacy of God's creativity, but it acknowledges that man creates anew in his response, and his re-creation is an integral part of God's creativity. Without man's response, creation is only latent; it is there, but not fully realised.

What consequences follow from the notion that man is co-creator with God? I think the most important is the realisation

that we are responsible for attributing meaning to what we see about us and what happens to us. That is to say, it is inappropriate to assume that meaning is inherent in some thing or some occurrence, and all we have to do is dig deep enough to find it. On the contrary, the only meaning we can ever know arises solely in our response to what is or what occurs. Our response is the meaning. It might be objected that God has invested meaning in things and events, and it *is* up to us to discover what that meaning is. It certainly may be that God intends to communicate some meaning in a given thing or event, but that does not remove from man the responsibility for creating the meaning himself. Like the reader of the poem who can never be sure that the meaning he attributes to it is that intended by the poet, man can never be sure that the meaning he attributes to a thing or event is that intended by God. He *has* to create his own meaning. Belief that that meaning corresponds to the meaning God intended is an act of faith, as indeed is the underlying presupposition that God intended there to be meaning in the first place.

So in summary, I am suggesting that to ask, 'What is the point; what is the meaning?' is to ask the wrong question. The secret of understanding is not to seek right answers, but seek right questions. And the right question is not, 'What is the point?' but, 'What point, what meaning, do I create and attribute to this thing or event?' Do not seek meaning in the thing or the event itself, but respond, and let the response be the meaning. Mankind is the creator of the meaning he seeks.

But that's not quite satisfactory, and the unsatisfactory nature of it lies not in the somewhat tortuous logic, but in the fact that emotionally or spiritually or existentially it doesn't quite ring true; almost, but not quite. For a start, I am uncomfortable with the notion that I create the meaning of things and events which I experience. However much I may argue along those lines, I nevertheless go around with the feeling that there is a meaning, however dimly I might apprehend it, which is God-given and independent of me. And if there weren't that meaning, or if that meaning were unattainable, then no matter how hard I might work at creating my own meaning, it would be tainted with futility, a nasty suspicion of living in an illusion. Perhaps I'm saying that I don't really fancy taking the risk of accepting full responsibility for my life and the meaning it may or may not possess, and would prefer to have it all sorted out for me.

The other unsatisfactory aspect of the ideas expressed above is this: it's all very well claiming that meaning is what you attri-

bute to events, but what happens in the actual, concrete situation of being faced with someone in grave distress? To someone going through an experience of gratuitous nastiness, do you say, 'Never mind, old son. There is no meaning to what is happening until you yourself create that meaning.'? Were someone to try that on me, my response would be a very blunt one. No, obviously one wouldn't be so crass—I trust. But should one, dare one, even *think* that that person has to create his own meaning to account for or somehow redeem the nastiness happening to him? Of course, when we come across someone who says of a nasty occurrence, 'well, I reckon it wasn't all bad, because such-and-such came out of it,' then we can rightly respond, 'Good for you, glad to hear that something constructive emerged.' But that 'something constructive' cannot be the ultimate meaning of the event; a spin-off, a bonus maybe, but not the meaning. The technology which led to space probes had, as a spin-off, non-stick frying pans, but one would have to be an idiot to claim that non-stick frying-pans were the true meaning of space probes. So I can accept that meaning attributed to a nasty event by the person involved is indeed a bonus, but I cannot bring myself to impose on other people's experiences the view that meaning is ultimately determined by their response. It denies the reality of the suffering and it denies the *experienced* fact of meaninglessness as something destructive. From the Christian viewpoint, it looks suspiciously as though it denies the possibility of God breaking through into the individual's personal history—the possibility of the source of meaning confronting the individual in the midst of meaninglessness.

In conclusion, then, a part of me argues that meaning is not inherent in a thing or event, but is bestowed by the individual, whilst another part of me says, 'Yes, well, but that's not quite how I experience it, at least, not all the time.' There is a perpetual tension between the role of God and the role of man in the working-out of existence.