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## *Something Representing Nothing*

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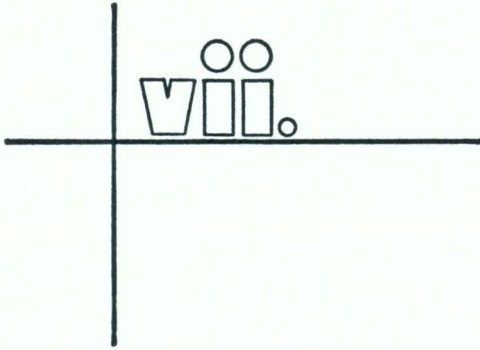
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## Something Representing Nothing

*An Introduction to Hominology*, by Theodore C. Kahn, Ph.D., Sc.D.,  
Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas, Pub., 1969. 365 pp.

Among those who adopt the generalist perspective, problems of professional identity can become acute. Those who look to *Hominology* for a solution, however, are in for a disappointment unless they heed the warning symbolized on the dust cover of Theodore C. Kahn's new book.

The figure one finds there is an ancient Mayan representation of zero—"Something representing nothing." Although the notion of nothingness is likely to be disconcerting for those accustomed to accenting the positive and eliminating the negative, the author offers solace in attempting to construct some much needed bridges across the behavioral and social sciences.

In designating *Hominology* as a nondisciplinary effort, Professor Kahn seeks to straddle a landscape which has traditionally provided poor footing: "A study of total Man." Past failures in this direction are attributed to the inability of interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary approaches to escape the confines of disciplinary boundaries. To say that *Hominology* is nondisciplinary is to equate it with zero; its intended role is to facilitate the kind of neutrality one needs in order to pursue an integrated understanding of man.

An advantage of Kahn's presentation is that it is fast paced enough to retain student interest. Biological, social scientific, and philosophical issues are woven in and out of various discussions, and some classroom techniques are described which should be very helpful in creating more imaginative interactions. One device he has used with his own student is the "hominologram"—either a histogram or a

linegraph which students construct as mirrors or how they regard themselves and others. The content of the hominologram reflects for example, the extent to which attitudes in life areas such as religion, ethics, and politics are shaped by various "Criteria of Reality." The author provides six criteria, which other writers have called "ways of knowing." These are Authoritarianism, Intuitionism, Rationalism, Empiricism, Pragmatism, and Verbal Structure. The principal values of the hominologram are to stimulate discussion and to further inquiry. It is not presented as a reliable instrument for quantification.

The reader is told that *Hominology* represents a new approach to the study of Man, but there is some difficulty in discovering what this might be. If anything, some of the ideas presented are a bit old fashioned. For example: "Theory and hypothesis are often interchanged in general use. Both denote an inference from data and both are used to explain abstract principles that lie behind observed phenomena." Many scientists and philosophers would insist that this is only half the story, and not even the most important half at that. What is far more significant is the realization that what is a datum is largely determined by one's theoretical framework and the nature of the assumptions operative during observation. The notion that scientists are primarily involved in data collection and interpretation tends to obscure rather than clarify Man's behavior. Nothing is more abstract than a fact, nor less defensible in an analysis of organism-environment processes.

Although Professor Kahn's book represents the kind of effort which should be made in behavioral studies, there is a likelihood that he has fallen victim to some of the same disciplinarian tendencies he decries. In fact, he seems to rely rather heavily upon psychoanalytic notions of innate strivings and, in particular, he engages in some very courageous extrapolations from sources such as *The Territorial Imperative* and *The Naked Ape*. For this reviewer, it requires a supreme effort to assume with Kahn that, since species such as tigers or wolves are too dangerous to each other to engage in intraspecies killing, lest they become extinct, the solution for Man's warlike behavior is for nations to arm to the teeth. ". . . the total and complete eradication of the human species puts an entirely different complexion on any warlike actions . . . The problem . . . is not how to bring about disarmament but, rather, how to create an armament that would insure the total destruction of the world and all that is in it. Unfortunately, we have not reached that point yet. Our armaments are still too safe."

Earlier in his book, Kahn recommends Dedication as the highest of man's moral values. The others are Graces, Virtues, and Duties. "Dedication," he says, "at most can be permitted; it cannot be demanded." This further implies, as he points out, the involvement

of a large number of "degrees of freedom," or lack of compulsions in behavior. It is a peculiar strain of reasoning that can untangle this knot! If it is "armament at an unprecedented scale [which will] bring us the much hoped for universal peace on earth, "it is hard to imagine how countervailing paranoias will ever permit realization of man's higher potentials. At most, Dedications under such conditions are mere shams, and "peace" becomes a parasite that consumes human becoming.

Although Kahn's "solution" for Man's warring tendency constitutes only a small part of his book, it nevertheless represents a fatal flaw running throughout. If man is seen as inherently aggressive, and as under the sway of some sort of phylogenetic mandate to defend his territory, then his only hope may in fact lie in a nuclear standoff. If, however, one adopts the view that humanness arises in part from a capacity to handle problems symbolically and to substitute imagination and reason for actual confrontation and coercion, there is no justification for such harsh conclusions concerning the prerequisites for survival. Nature's key to survival lies in flexibility and a willingness on the part of the life forms both to play and to be played upon by currents of force and change. Intelligence is associated with plasticity, not rigidity. If peace is to be had only at the price of petrification, this constitutes either a gross contradiction or a firm denial that evolution has been in the best interests of anyone.

Dick R. Williams

