

# The Path of Humanism

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TAVENER



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Set in 11 on 12 point Baskerville

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## CHAPTER 1

### THE DEFENCE OF HUMANITY

Placed on this isthmus of a middle state,  
A Being darkly wise, and rudely great:  
With too much knowledge for the Sceptic side,  
With too much weakness for the Stoic's pride,  
He hangs between; in doubt to act, or rest;  
In doubt to deem himself a God, or Beast;  
In doubt his Mind or Body to prefer;  
Born but to die, and reas'ning but to err;  
Alike in ignorance, his reason such,  
Whether he thinks too little, or too much:  
Chaos of Thought and Passion, all confused;  
Still by himself abused, or disabused;  
Created half to rise, and half to fall;  
Great Lord of all things, yet a prey to all;  
Sole judge of Truth, in endless Error hurled;  
The glory, jest, and riddle of the world!

*Alexander Pope*

Be not thine own worm. *George Herbert*

Humanity's greatest asset is man himself.

*Anatole France*

(1)

HUMANISM is the direction taken by serious thought when it asserts that mankind has a natural disposition and capacity for good. It is seen in its most distinctive form when it comes in conflict with some mode of thought which requires the self-defamation of man. This requirement of self-defamation has obtained a place in orthodox Christian tradition, and is especially insisted upon in the 'evangelistic' presentation, which, for many generations, has had a dominant influence on the popular conception of religion in this country.\* In these circumstances, humanism seems, on first impression, to be a denial of religion.

But there is something wrong here. The opposition is unreal. Humanism, of some sort, has always been an important element in religious development; and for it to be said by either party that they are alien to one another is a terrible falsification.

On the one side, it is necessary only to refer to the foundation of religious teaching in this part of the world — the Bible. In the Old Testament the root of the matter is in the prophets, and there we find it proclaimed with the most imperative emphasis that every worship of God is void if there is not justice in society; and the very eloquence of the appeals bears witness to the underlying assumption that men can be expected to have a natural sense of justice and a capacity to act upon it. In the New Testament the hero of the Gospel sets out the qualifications for salvation in the simple but comprehensive terms of love for God and for one's neighbour, the second being stressed as much as the

\* The author was writing in Scotland.—*Ed.*

first. These are the obligations of the Christian life, which a man is assumed to be able to perform, and is expected to carry out. On being challenged to say who is 'my neighbour', Jesus tells the wonderful parable of the Good Samaritan, the point of which is that one's 'neighbour' is not necessarily next door, or of one's own creed or kin, but is any man in need of love and service; humanity is the neighbour, and the capacity to respond to this is not dependent upon belonging to the right religion. In his tussles with the orthodox, Jesus more than once insists, with great daring, that simple humane feeling can over-ride the letter of the law. Similar assertions that religion is impossible without a humanist impulse are to be found in the Epistles, together with appeals to standards of natural moral feeling. This is not to say that there is nothing else in the Bible, but to insist that creditable views of human nature do play an essential part in Biblical religion.

Conversely it should be obvious that some of the positions adopted by anti-religious humanism are quite inadequate and insecure. It is idle to pretend that all religious questions can be put aside as though they had never been asked and all poetical or mystical apprehensions of truth be dismissed as a pile of sentimental rubbish. It is fantastic to suppose that these things, and the religious consciousness which they imply, are somehow foreign to humanity. Any mode of thought which seriously seeks to vindicate human nature must pay sympathetic attention to men's spiritual sensitivities.

(2)

UNFORTUNATELY the humanist element has become detached from religion and diverted into secular forms of expression – not, however, so much by deliberate choice of the opponents of religion as through the tactics adopted by religion's spokesmen and defenders. Supernaturalist irrationalism and sectarian narrowing of religious significances and interests have left no room for the broad humanism of the Christian vision. This rejected humanism has then become 'alien' to religion in much the same way that suppressed moral sensibilities may become 'alien' to a man's worldly day-to-day personality, and assume the voice of an external accuser or judge.

Historically, it is necessary only to recall how the humanism of the Renaissance failed to supply the needed reform-movement in our religion. Instead, a fanatical Bibliolatry took the centre of the stage, and the 'Reformers' merely gave another twist to medieval thinking, and ushered in a new phase of mental slavery. It is customary, indeed, to associate rugged independence of mind and character with the Protestant faith. But when one has browsed among old evangelical books, and especially the pamphlets and pictures prepared for popular consumption, the idea of a people mentally and spiritually emancipated is exposed as a gross falsification. Through some fifteen generations, indeed, there has been a wilful and dedicated sabotage of the human intelligence in the name of Christian truth, and this time-lag has still to be made up. The protesters against 'rationalist' broadcasts seem genuinely to believe that they are basing

themselves on views which are accepted unanimously and without question by all Christians. More liberal churchmen seem noticeably slow and reluctant to dissociate themselves from this widespread denial of natural ethics.

In more intellectual circles, the sad succession of steps towards a total withdrawal of religion from the scene of rationality can clearly be seen. After the first collisions with Darwin, Marx, Frazer and Freud, religious leaders seemed to give up the task of making Christianity rationally credible, and to confess instead to the charge of irrationality. The rationalistic, liberal idea of Jesus was the first casualty. Schweitzer's *Quest of the Historical Jesus* came to be widely accepted among theologians as proof that the idea of Jesus as a wise religious teacher was a naive misreading of the Gospels, that the figure of Jesus belonged so completely to his own age as to be incomprehensible in any other, and that his ideas could not be assimilated at all into a modern world of thought. The rationalised, humanised, moralised idea of the hero of the Gospels had been almost the only thing salvaged from the decline of Christian belief during the nineteenth century, and it was in a mad way appropriate that this should be the first point to be surrendered. The next step was when Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy* became the rage of the divinity schools. This was readily taken up as establishing that the essential core of religious experience consisted in a specific psychological element, critically separate from all other procedures of the mind, an unreasoning emotion of mysterious dread. Professor Otto himself did not much care for the strong light thrown on this part of his teaching: but his disclaimers

were little noticed. Lastly the Barthians, in a sweeping gesture of abdication, asserted that man, as man, could have no access to God at all, that all that was natural in religion was worthless, and that for all forms of reason there could only be, from the religious point of view, contempt. Christianity was denuded of all argumentative resistance, and rested its case inanely on 'affirmations', in which it was increasingly difficult to find either content or basis. 'Positivism has had the popularity it has enjoyed, not because of the quality of its arguments, but because of the feeling that those who resisted them had to maintain nothing worth defending.' (Alistair MacIntyre, in *The Listener*, September 1956.)

We should therefore see humanism as partly the creation of official Christian preaching, a reaction to obscurantist theology. An ideology which explicitly declares against reason, nature, and human standards is making a gap for others to occupy and these others are inevitably the 'heresies' of rationalism, naturalism and humanism. Indeed, not only is humanism a theoretical consequence of rejecting the orthodox position; it is also the practical consequence of accepting it. The extreme statement of the orthodox position is so abstract and disengaged that it becomes irrelevant to the actual business of living. The practical tasks of life have to be carried out with similar conscientiousness by evangelicals and non-evangelicals alike. All the main groups of Christians, with whatever degree of hopelessness they regard the sinful condition of mankind, allow that laws must be made and enforced and the general business of society be carried on, that these things can be done either better or worse, and should

for preference be done as well as possible. In this connection the doctrine of the utter depravity of human nature becomes irrelevant, and everyone has to recognise the existence of an untheological sort of goodness – the development of care and thoughtfulness on the basis of human rights and duties. In this sense we all have to be humanists.

The situation is such that we are obliged to produce a humanism of some sort, good or bad, ignorant or informed, conscious or unconscious, blundering or clear-sighted. Already our society is deeply secularised; religious sanctions are not genuinely sought on any major question, and religious ideas appear to have fallen into a vestigial condition. It is true the churches remain standing at our street corners in various stages of dignity or shabbiness, the majestically robed ecclesiastics appear before us on ceremonial occasions, and vast talk goes forward: but the people no longer take directives from the churches on broad issues of moral and social conduct. Religion, as we have known it in the past, has caved in. It has been displaced, and the motives and standards of present society are disconnected from it and must be assumed to be of another kind.

Of what other kind these motives and standards may be is a matter about which nobody can be certain at this juncture. There is the vague assumption that efficient expediency is the obvious commonsense standard by which to organise ourselves. Efficiency is good, as we ought to know. But on reflection it is difficult to see how this, applied as the sole dominant principle, would differ from trying to reproduce the sub-human civilisations of the ant and the bee. We

have had a rough-and-ready foretaste of irreligious and dehumanised efficiency in the totalitarian regimes. But we know, without having to be told, that consistent pursuit of efficiency, if thoroughly undertaken, will have to be much more cold-blooded than they have been, in spite of the monumental cruelties they have inflicted.

So, in an age apparently committed to the rejection of former religious ideas and dangerously toying with conscienceless efficiency, the idea of humanism might very well be of the first importance. It is not, indeed, a single body of formulated doctrine: it appears, rather, as a comprehensive movement, a general orientation, broadly inclusive of varied shades of thought. But, if its name means anything, it surely must be the opposite of that brutalisation which threatens a civilisation that has lost its customary spiritual bulwarks. Concerned, as it might be expected to be, with humane principles and values, we can hope that it would protect mankind from vulgar greed, anarchic power-seeking, and the more debasing aspects of utilitarianism. While rejecting the theology of past centuries, it may yet be in the best position for conserving the essential moral discernments which are the bequest of the older movements of thought, thereby becoming the true inheritor and continuer of the past. Real continuity, apart from mere talk of it, may well be in the hands of the humanists.

(3)

BUT we still have not reached an adequate statement of what a humanist is. Although the humanist 'tone'

is fairly easily recognised, it is quite another thing to give a firm definition. Certainly it is easy to say that the thought of the humanist is centred upon man: but this of itself does not at once distinguish it from every other outlook; rather it suggests how closely humanism is intermingled with very many types of thought.

We can attempt a delineation from the psychological aspect, starting with people's reactions to the more unappetising aspects of humanity. However often we cry out, 'Thank God I am a human being', it is inevitable also that there should be moments of doubt and revulsion, and good that we should take them seriously. The men and achievements towards whom the mind of the educated person turns in support of his pride in humanity constitute a highly selective part of the evidence, and would have little significance to a random assemblage of people. Many have found that, for them, human existence meant nothing more than being trapped in an inescapable yet pointless ordeal. The reflective man, too, has often found his own species oppressively inglorious, and has sometimes systematically developed this point of view. The young and innocent, as they first learn some of the truths about man, his acts and sufferings, have often to cope with an onset of nausea. Many of the facts of life are a heavy blow to their decent expectation: man's squalid ancestry, the crimes and follies of his history, his death-doom, the chronic perversities of his sexuality, the obscenity of his diseases, his shameless cruelty, his wilful stupidity – all these marks of humanity, recognisable in ourselves as in others, deliver a profound shock. Later, we shall have to ask what it is in us which suffers this shock. Our present concern is with the ways in



which man may react to the shock. Three of these deserve consideration.

The first reaction is that by which the individual more or less consciously protects himself by a defensive insulation of his emotions and hardening of his sensitivity. Most people do this more or less, since nobody could cope with the sufferings to which he would be exposed by a sensitivity entirely open to full perception of evil. But the direction of this reaction is along the road to cynicism and indifference. It is characteristic of the 'man-of-the-world', and his style of life. This is the man who, knowing the world, does not take it too seriously, fearing the deep waters into which this would lead him. Good-natured levity, a dash of fatalism, and a knowing shrewdness take him along sufficiently for his purposes. He is mostly a very decent fellow, usually a reliable citizen, with often an amiability and generosity for which a limited circle of friends are grateful. There is, however, an element of failure, an inherent capitulation, an absence of that humane militancy which our situation requires. Behind the bonhomie there is basic pessimism.

The second type, the orthodox doctrine of redemption, also professes to take the world as it finds it; and its so-called realism insists upon a still more drastic pessimism. The condition of man, according to the evangelicals, is evil by the fiat of Almighty God. 'If you say, "But how could God be holy and continue to create us inevitably foredoomed to be sinners?" the answer can only be that that is what He does.'\* In this blank-wall style of statement we have an assertion of total despair of human nature and thereby of all

\* Edwin Lewis. *Christian Manifesto*

mankind. The degradation of man is the first theological fact, and to evade despair is the worst of errors. Nothing is left but to look for the event, impossible to define, which has nothing human in it, and is 'beyond space and time'. The darkness of the world is no inconvenience to evangelical thought: quite the reverse; the darker the night, the clearer the lightning flash! The more degraded humanity is made to feel, the more surely men will clutch at a prospect, however irrational, of some desirable state beyond humanity. Even if that ultimately desirable state will never be attained by men, the general degradation of mankind will, by contrast, make all the more outstanding the glory of God's untouchable holiness — with which, in one part of his divided soul, the evangelical pietist unconsciously identifies himself. The resultant world view is a very peculiar one. Man was without any positive significance, and all his efforts were in vain and ridiculous, until God 'entered into history' — time, till then, with all which it implies and contains, all experience, progress and existence, having been a godless *faux pas*. And, after God's 'entrance into history', the general framework of historical human life has remained equally insignificant, except for the presence of a minority of unspecified minuteness, which divine grace has chosen for salvation in a future life under conditions entirely different from those of this world. Here and now there is nothing which men can do, in a rational and practical way, to amend the evils of their condition.

The third sort of reaction to the world's offence is different both from the cynical and the evangelical. The deep uneasinesses provoked by the crimes, follies

and sufferings of mankind are neither shrugged off cynically nor built into a pretentious system of pessimism. Without being explained away, they are accepted as a stimulus to understanding and action. They are assessed at their own level, without metaphysics, as things to 'put right'. They are viewed by the light of hope, and of a feeling that we are meant to do something about all this: and, in that light, we see much that can be done. In comparison with the cynical view, this is religious: in comparison with the evangelical, it is humanist.

What are its grounds?

Original sin can be put aside as a doctrine of confusion, in that what is called original sin is not sin in our origins at all. In our origins, much that we call now wickedness was then actual virtue. It is virtue when an animal rushes in unreflective rage against an intruder which threatens its family; and so it was, to go no further back than mesolithic times, when a man of those days, hearing an unexpected noise, had an instant impulse to kill: that was the right way, and woe to the unwary. But nowadays that kind of impulse is anti-social, stupid and wicked: the original virtue has changed into current wickedness. Thus sin is not original but emergent, and our ideas of sin are the reflection of a progressive morality. Our nature is subject to the manifold stress of change. The fact that man is acutely aware of his shortcomings, often to the extent of guilt-feeling, is a sign of the tension set up in an evolutionary being, part of whose destiny is to repeal his past. Nor is this destiny limited as to the future, as though a date had been set for the achievement of final perfection, failing which, our race would be con-

demned for not attaining its appointed goal. In fact, there is astoundingly little that can be said about man's future. Futurity is one of those notions with which, in a vague but convincing way, man assures himself that he has scope for activity, with no certain limit to his objectives.

The real significance of the doctrine of original sin lies in its implication of *perpetual* sin – the idea that man has no natural capacity for betterment, and will never be able to do well. This is the view which the humanist rejects.

(4)

Not only does the humanist reject the reactionary closure against the future which the doctrine of original sin implies: he also points to our knowledge of the present as being against it. Our knowledge includes the records of heroes, saints and geniuses of all the cultures of the world. Their number is uncountable. And that these names of light are not freak individuals or a minority without significance is shown by their popular impact; even if they were martyred they have attained a high position in the history of proud nations and permeated the traditions of mankind. That they are not unconnected with the spirit of the common man is testified by daily acts of quiet and anonymous self-sacrifice and the endless tale of ordinary heroism. It seems as if every emergency finds its hero. But apart from heroism, the very fabric of our complex society rests at bottom on the commonplace and reliable goodwill of all, of which we do not think much till the pathological exception brings it into prominence.

What then can be the meaning of the total depravity of man in such an actual context as this?

When the humanist looks to history for confirmation of his belief, he is as conscious as anyone that it has a streak of frightfulness. Quite recent horrors have been adduced as evidence that there is no movement forward, and that there is no rational hope for advance. But the bare fact that we understand one another when we speak of history's frightfulness shows that our ethical feeling has not gone to sleep. And who shall say how effective the impulse is to repudiate and grapple with the wrongs of our times? We are too close to the subject to take an impartial view of ourselves which would avoid both self-accusation and complacency. At least the world is more full of righteous indignation than it was in past ages. Blake said that the voice of honest indignation was the voice of God. If some indignation is less than honest, this is still hypocrisy's admission that indignation against wrongs is an acknowledged power in the world of to-day.

There can be no doubt that the main course of history has been progressive – in spite of the shocks and horrors of history. This is not intended to justify the horrors of history, nor to urge us to reconcile ourselves to them, but to point out that progress does take place in spite of them. The horrors do not constitute the main course of history, but are parasitic upon it. There is a variety and spontaneity in the human world (for which we should be grateful), with consequent possibilities of accidental conflict and disturbance, and round these there sometimes gather pathological and violent stupidities. Such events can throw a harsh light on our behaviour, and in that way may be said to

contribute to the rugged and awful business of human progress. I would not say, 'God sends them for our instruction'. But there is instruction in them.

(5)

LET us return to the point at which we spoke of the shock produced by learning the more unappetising facts of life. Concerning this, we should ask what it is that is so shocked. It must be, surely, our innocence. 'Innocence' may be too much associated with childish ignorance to be quite the best word: but it points in the right direction. That which suffers shock is our native disposition to good, and the expectations arising from it. Human nature, confronted by evils, and even itself productive of them, is at the same time antagonised by them. This reaction has somehow become part of human nature. Its significance is obvious. Evil could never have been diagnosed as evil if man were not good. Where all is evil, there is no knowledge of evil. Evil appears as such only because of the emergence of good. That emergent good is man. Those who content themselves with lamentations over evil can easily obscure the fact that the perception of evil in the world is proof of the will to good in ourselves.

On this point, we have been in danger of constantly repeating ourselves. That is all one can do in pointing to the self-evident. What we call evil is that to which we find ourselves saying, 'These things should not be'. The challenge comes back, 'Who are you to judge so?'. And the answer is the same as that to the riddle of the Sphinx, 'A man'. With this correct answer, according

to the legend, the sphinx and its deadly menace disappeared.

A humanist, then, is one who, knowing evils, and in spite of them, thinks constructively and hopefully of mankind. He holds that men and women should be encouraged to bestir themselves, not knowing how much good can be achieved until it is wholeheartedly attempted. He puts aside alike the doom-mythologies of the evangelicals and the depressive negations of the cynics, repudiating them as misinterpretations of the human situation and obstacles to the proper work and interests of mankind. Though a philosophy of the worst may be possible, he claims that a philosophy of the best is equally possible and more purposeful, and is certain that no philosophy can be adequate that does not take knowledge of the best as well as the worst. He understands man as an existence in time, and as the most evolutionary of creatures, before whom are great moral tasks and possibilities.

(6)

THUS humanism is found to be a form of faith, and perhaps its simplest description would be that it is 'faith in man'.

To this an objection is made on grounds of religion that it is both futile and impious to summon anyone to such a faith as that. Faith, it is said, cannot be mere self-confidence (especially not when the self has such defects as we have already acknowledged), but must reach out, beyond ourselves, as an affirmation of the soul, towards the proper object of faith. God comes in answer to a need, because the soul is in quest

of true goodness; and the soul's quest of true goodness arises from the very fact that man's own goodness is so fallible and insufficient.

But this distinction between faith in God and faith in man is difficult to sustain in view of the striking way in which, in actual experience, beliefs about God have been intermingled with beliefs about man. The images of the gods of the Maori have exactly the same complex pattern of tattooing as do the living men – as though men and gods carry the same brand-mark. The divine image seems, indeed, to be just the god-form of man. William Blake's illustrations to the Book of Job quite openly and significantly make the form of God and of Job identical: the one is above in heaven, and the other down on earth, and that is the only difference. It is a familiar fact of religious history that theology in its various stages reflects social practice, and the personification of God follows simply and directly the idea of human dignity and power current at the time. What a people believes about God is a reflection of what it believes about itself. It is an instinctual behaviour – which can be a vehicle of wisdom.

On this ground it might be said that, even if no theology could be objectively true, yet some theologies might be of incalculable subjective value. If man gives certain ideas of himself a transcendental dignity, his efforts and habit will be persuaded towards that goal. A great deal, involving man's evolution and security, hangs upon his living up to – or down to – his cosmological self-portrait, which hitherto has been expressed in the medium of his theologies. In view of past experience, we contemplate with dread the possibility of a society no longer having any sense of

the divine, any acknowledgement of the inexpressibles of wonder, mystery and beauty – with nothing beyond the commonplace and the calculable to which the human spirit might reach.

Admittedly there is a touch of pragmatism in these views. But it would be a pity if they were thrust aside as no better than the manipulation of illusions. The case that there is a more-than-human Will in the universe is surely unanswerable – as even the Positivists have allowed. That Will is, in its essence, unknown, unfathomable. Insofar, however, as man participates through his own will in the universal Will, then and to that extent he has contact and connection with that Will. This practical acquaintance with the universal Will must have some consequences in the human consciousness. And this awareness, drawing forth notions of the cosmical process in which man knows himself to be some sort of participator, excites the representation of deity to human thought.

These representations, differing enormously, are the best we can manage in successive times and circumstances. They are built up as poetic, symbolical, imaginative and mystical perceptions and creations. None of the theologies thus built up can be objectively correct. They may all be quite wildly inadequate and erroneous. Complete truth of these dimensions would be beyond the scope and capacity of the human mind – probably more than we could bear.

In this situation, if man puts himself, as he surely does, into his theologies, are we to dismiss the process as a trick of self-flattery? Is it no more than human conceit, determined to idolise its reflection in the mirror? There is always, indeed, the unattractive

possibility of elevating human greed, cruelty and spleen to divine honour and power. Some representations of deity have in fact been of this sort – and not all of them outside Christianity!

But this is not the whole picture. The impulse to recognise something human in the divine is not always simply the deification of human nature as it is. On the contrary, the elevation of the concept of man on to a transcendent scale brings most often the reverse of complacency and self-congratulation. Signs of unlikeness become increasingly evident in the self-portrait, and tensions are set up between the human original and its reflection. The image becomes superhuman not only in scale but in quality.

A god-like reflection of oneself is flattering in as much as it carries some sort of encouraging promise, a beckoning forward to some destiny of rewarding achievement, but, at the same time, our manhood is made uneasy, abashed, as contrast with the ideal image reveals its shortcomings and weakness. In spite of the flattering promise, the presence of the glory forces the human confession, 'Unclean, unclean'. And even in moments of triumph, when stupendous efforts have been rewarded with success, the paradoxical chant goes up, '*Non nobis* – not ours the glory'.

The portrait of himself in a divine aura, which has this double effect of encouragement and abasement, is mankind's projection of a premonition. It contains a dialectic tension between self-condemnation and self-confidence, and is an augury of our developing powers of self-transformation.

## CHAPTER 2

## THE HUMANIST STORY

The Lord made man from the beginning, and left him in the hand of his own counsel.

*Ecclesiasticus*

My friend Seneca does, indeed, acknowledge that God has given him life, but that to live well in his own; Cicero likewise says, 'We truly glory in our virtue, which would not be if it was given us of God and not by ourselves'.

*Montaigne*

We carry with us the wonders we seek without us: we are that bold and adventurous piece of Nature, which he that studies wisely learns.

*Sir Thomas Browne*

(1)

HUMANISM begins at any point where anybody protests that mankind is capable of good. The word comes in historically to describe the new activity of intelligence at the time of the Renaissance in Italy in the fifteenth century. In that juncture men became aware of themselves as looking through a dark tunnel to a light

at the other end. The dark tunnel was the collapse of Rome, the Barbarian chaos, the Dark Ages, feudalism and the medieval church. The light they thought they saw at the other end was the generous sanity, the philosophy and the innocent health of the classical world. Botticelli painted the situation as he saw it in his 'The Birth of Venus' (c. 1485). Venus (neoplatonic love, not the voluptuary) is shown being wafted from over the sea to the Italian coast and about to be welcomed with a robe of honour by the city of Florence. It is one of the most historically significant of paintings. The figure of Venus was copied almost line for line from a Graeco-Roman statue which Botticelli had seen in the Medici Palace grounds and which went back to an original by Pheidias. Nobody has made a figure like that for more than a millennium. Thus the antique world was being reborn. The wise humanity which this pre-Christian world was thought to possess was being invoked to aid and rectify the thought of a world whose motivation had its roots in the horror of Hell. This invocation was 'Humanism'.

The humanist temper of the Renaissance came of a scholarly, artistic and scientific activity centred, as we might expect, in areas of a new economic prosperity. The change in the quality of learning is detected in its first signs as beginning in Italy in the later fourteenth century. The change was a movement in some degree away from the scholasticism which had characterised the intellectual life of the Middle Ages. Scholasticism had been the principle of subjecting all learning and intelligence to the dogmas of the church, and the change was towards a learning freed from that subjection. It freshly sought an unhindered contact with

classical thought, and included also a tentative movement towards naturalism. The first emancipation was not psychologically easy, as can be seen in Petrarch's confessed doubts of his own new interests and tastes. The cloistered thought and moated feudalism of Christendom was being breached.

There is some doubt and disagreement on the exact meaning of the term 'humanism' in relation to the Renaissance. The classical Greek genius for which the Renaissance men were so enthusiastic was in fact but an instant's flash in time and less emancipated than commonly supposed. Greek thought and life at the zenith of its genius was invoked with prehistoric rituals which we would not hesitate to describe as superstition. The proud words in exposition of the social good sense of Athens spoken by Pericles, which some take to be the pure spirit of the Hellenic message, were spoken at a national funeral during a war in which his whole policy of enlightenment was discredited. If we are to put our finger on the point where the indubitable and enduring humanist message of Greece is given we must look at her art. The art of Greece was all about the gods, and here they are always human.

The gods of other people were, as in Mesopotamia, super-natural monstrosities, or, as with the Egyptians, animated totems, and a cryptic corpse-figure, suggesting the later crucifixion-god. It was the Greeks who humanised religion by depicting the gods as vital and beautiful, greatly and splendidly human.

Erasmus, the churchman who was one of the bright luminaries in the humanist galaxy, was a Christian as well as a humanist, and he probably laid the track for

that 'unclean spirit of theological modernism' which is the bugbear of fundamentalist obscurantism.

Erasmus's sense of the Christian message was a continuation of antique philosophy. He leaned on its moral challenge to mankind, and saw the work of religion rather as an influence and an education than an atoning salvation. He accepted Christ as a spiritual representative and leader of humanity, and, in one emphasis after another, showed his antipathy to supernaturalist machinery, and his assumption that man had capacities worthy of development. An important feature of the outlook of Erasmus was that he did not join the Protestant reformers, though he sympathised with the critical side of their witness against the old church. He sought reform rather than fragmentation. Though he was as anxious as Luther to displace ignorance and superstition, he did not think that fanatical disruption would effect this, and one can sympathise with those doubts. A Protestant historian's remark, relative to Erasmus, though crabbed and unctuous is nevertheless illuminating: 'While the reformers employed the word of God and strove after the salvation of the soul, the humanists employed wit and sarcasm, and sought the temporal well-being of man'.

A quality of the change to humanism can be felt with a sufficient distinctiveness by a comparison of the late medieval Dante and a man of the high Renaissance, Shakespeare. Neither contradicts the other, and for all we know positively to the contrary, Shakespeare's theology might have been the same as that of Dante. The emotional texture of the tragic and historical plays is much the same as the *Commedia*, and we might have

said that these plays were a picture of purgatory were it not for the fact that the scene is entirely shifted and its world has become wholly this world. With Dante nothing revolves round the central beatific vision and all the structure and all the movement point towards that all-consuming mystery. But Shakespeare's central hub is within the man, and the great themes are of human regality and baseness, of loyalty and treachery. 'To thine own self be true.' The stupendous and awful vistas of a Christian hereafter are referred to only in the vaguest terms and in the confines of human experience the appeal is to stoic virtue. 'We must endure our going hence as our coming hither: ripeness is all.'

## (2)

HAVING identified to this degree the movement in our own culture which came to be called 'Humanism', we should now attempt to sketch the outlines of the same disposition of intelligence as it can be seen working in the wider range of human development.

From our evidences we can take it that for a vast time, say three hundred centuries, reaching back obscurely to the Neanderthal burials and the cave-drawings, man's thought was dominated by supernatural and magical presentations of his world. If anything like a race memory is a fact (and the weightiest authorities among psychologists assume it) then there must be an enormous psychic deposit in us which is unconsciously supernaturalist and magical in its leanings. Unreason has a very long start on reason.

In process of time, however, when the many regional

cults, most of them derived from fertility ideas, had thrown up a huge and unmanageable proliferation of gods, demons and mythological entities of every kind, the moment seemed to come at last for a purgative reorganisation, and this can be seen to have taken place in various parts of the world in the period 700 to 400 BC. It is a very remarkable time-section.

In Persia, during these centuries, Zoroastrianism demoted the whole disorderly tribe of gods to inferior positions as angels, demons and the like, and set up instead the idea of two universal principles, creation and destruction, darkness and light, good and evil. The opposition of these two transcendental forces accounted for the tension of all existence. It was a cosmical struggle in which every individual was called to participate on the side either of good or evil. Extraordinary emphasis was placed upon this account of the situation and it produced a fanatical insistence on the cosmic primacy of ethics. Persian influence was very strong in the ancient Middle East though its moral aspect tends to be eclipsed by its more picturesque resurrectionist and millennial ideas.

A movement in China contemporary with Zoroastrianism in Persia, more urbane and less supernaturalist, bore the name of its founder, Confucius. Like Erasmus in the West, the Confucians were men of learning who professed to work within the traditional orthodoxy of their nation. They were believers in 'Heaven', and piously conceded its transcendent though impersonal rule; but their occupation was with mankind and morality. The official anthropological view was that man was by nature good. The contrary view, that he was naturally bad, was the heretical view, this



being the reverse, it will be noticed, of the Christian state of affairs on this question. Mencius, a man of formidable intelligence and great simplicity, upheld the doctrine of man's essential goodness. 'Let a man stand fast in his nobler part, and the meaner part will be powerless.' The great thing about man was that he was educable; all agreed on that. The dissenting view also came to that conclusion. For while it could not be said that man was essentially good because of the anarchy of his passions, which amounted to incipient madness, there was also his intelligence which had contrary possibilities. Under the proper disciplines of education, men, through their intelligence, could be brought to good. This is reminiscent of the Roman Catholic version of the fall: in this view man fell by his passions, his will, and not by his intelligence, and, this being the unfallen part, it is on this side that man is capable of instruction and some natural good. The Confucians had a character and objective which could be shortly expressed in the very words descriptive of Erasmus in the *Cambridge Modern History*: 'In all his work his aim was essentially educational. He was an ardent and indefatigable student. But through all his labours there ran the purpose of a practical moralist, who hoped to leave human society better than he found it'.

The same period saw the development of the Sankya philosophies in India, one form of which is found in the Buddhist religion. There scarcely could be more emphatic rejection of supernaturalism (Reincarnation and Karma being accepted, of course, as nothing but the grim fate-principles of the natural world). The conceptions of a cosmical divine Self and the human

self are both alike denied, as unreal fancies: the natural world is without any substantiality or permanence. The teaching of how to live became the only actuality pressed upon the attention of the devotee. The moral law seems to be the only reality and the object of it is to transcend at last the illusion of self-existence.

In the Hebrew religion the line of the prophets from the time of Amos showed a corresponding centralisation on ethics, in this case associated with a vigorous and exclusive monotheism. With a passionate rejection of polytheism and all its symptoms and accessories, this extraordinary succession of teachers tried to fix the ideas of their people on the unutterably holy Lord of righteousness who would not be mocked for ever by a slack and conscienceless nation. According to their teaching, sometimes uttered with a brutal starkness, this God rejected with disgust all forms of worship except that of social justice and fair-dealing between man and man. Followers of Bible teaching have on the whole chosen not to understand the prophetic rejection of cult-worship, but a great deal of its brusque humanism comes out in the New Testament and, through it, has left some mark on most of the successive Bible-religions.

The same strong urge towards the clearing away of the confusion of polytheism is seen at work in the Ionian philosophers who tried various guesses at a monistic principle. Some of these were an interesting mixture of mysticism and materialism. Eventually the leaders of thought in Greece, deserting the myths, came to find the moral question the central one. From the moral standpoint of humanity the gods themselves come to be judged. With the Socratic discussion of

justice and the teachings of the Stoics and Epicureans we pass out of the first revolutionary period in which a humanistic motivation began to emerge.

This first stage is marked by the movement from polytheism to monotheism or monism, and a shift of interest from mythology to morality, from the cultus to criticism, from ritual to righteousness. It shows the initial steps in rationalism and naturalism, and some first thoughts on how man's fate comes from his own nature and how some mastery over this is possible of attainment.

(3)

THIS ancient awakening of enlightenment, with its widespread correspondence through the world, passed its influences through more than one channel into the Western stream.

Among these influences probably too little credit has been given to Stoicism. In innumerable ways it is intermingled with our culture, and largely unobserved for the very reason that its influence is so pervasive and so near the foundations.

Stoicism, in Gilbert Murray's opinion, was 'the greatest system of organised thought which the mind of man had built up for itself in the Graeco-Roman world'. In its teaching were the ideas of Nature as a universal process, evolution begun, terminated and recommenced in fire in vast cycles of time, natural law and human law producing the concept of the unity of mankind with principles of order in the universe, and men to be thought of as citizens of the world. The animation of the cosmical process was by an inherent

reason, an active and creative rationality. A man's duty was to accept his place in the order of nature within the dispensation of universal reason. The teaching resulted in disciplines and duty to which were brought endurance and integrity. In the last resort, if understanding halted and hesitated before the enigma of life, then 'in the level voice of Marcus Aurelius' there was the advice, 'If all is random be not thyself part of that random' – a very near anticipation of the existentialist humanist of our own time.

Stoicism might be said to have been the beginning of humanism in our Western tradition for it was the first coherent body of teaching that was rational and naturalistic, radical and humane. It was consciously detached from the salvation-cults and from supernaturalist Platonism, and fostered the most strenuous and practical appreciation of man's duty and ability. Introduced into Rome about 100 BC it influenced Roman civilisation with mingled success in the direction of humane legislation.

If we say that Stoicism may be regarded as a beginning of humanism it will serve to clarify the point that humanism is not by any means necessarily atheist. Amongst the Stoics there were curious elements both of mysticism and materialism, inherited, in all likelihood, from the ancient Ionian thinkers. But, far from atheism, a devout view of providence was increasingly prominent. And it so happens that the first compact logical statements for the existence of God were set out by these teachers. These statements became the models on which the proofs (those of the cosmological sort) produced by Christendom were fashioned.

Christians of the early church were familiar with

Stoic doctrines. The New Testament carries strong marks of Stoic influence in its ethical outlook. Some fathers and apologists of the church were trained Stoics, or admitted their indebtedness. Both Tertullian, the father of Western orthodox theology, and Origen, the great theologian of the east, were so indebted. Stoic ideas reappeared controversially when Pelagius, resisting Augustine's degradation of the human status, resorted to them to maintain man's natural moral ability apart from supernatural grace. CCJ Webb in *A History of Philosophy* fancies that educated Christians to-day owe more to Stoicism than would be convenient to acknowledge.

The humanist witness in Stoicism is that salvation is in great part in the hands of men themselves. 'From first to last, its message is addressed to the individual, bidding him stand, free from all conventional ties, foursquare in his own strength against all the winds that blow'.\*

(4)

WE referred to the Renaissance when we were inquiring into the origin of the name 'humanist'. To mention all the factors which went to make the Renaissance humanist would be far beyond the compass of our effort here.

The Renaissance was on the whole a failure so far as regards any humanist influence on religion. But we should not ignore the one religious line in which this influence did have some effect. This was an impulse of criticism and piety which moved in flight before

\* *The Legacy of the Ancient World*, WG de Burgh, p. 6, Sec. 4

persecution through Europe from West to East. The Socinians, as they came to be called, declined to think of a historical man as the second person in the godhead, and denied several of the crucial supernaturalist claims of the church. The name (changing to Unitarian in some countries and periods) came from the Sozzini, Lelio and his nephew Fausto, who were active in the second half of the sixteenth century. 'In Socinianism the influence of humanism was all controlling. It was in fact the earliest organised expression of the humanist spirit in religion. Its principles were largely of humanistic rather than Protestant origin. Fundamental in its teaching was the moral ability of man'.\* Socinianism did not, in its inception, propose a humanist judgement on all the main doctrines of Christendom, but it did take the first steps on a road leading logically in that direction.

One thing which it gave to the history and tradition of the West was the doctrine of toleration. This doctrine was developed by John Locke (who had affiliations with Socinian teaching) into the liberal theory of the state, and through the libertarian revolutions of America and Europe it became one of the main pillars of modern democracy.

(5)

WE have now come to the eighteenth century, or, more inclusively, the period from 1648-1800. The quickening genius of the time showed itself impressively in several places, in the Cambridge Platonists, the deists of Britain and France, the German 'Illuminati', and the

\* AC McGiffert: *Protestant Thought before Kant*

French encyclopaedists and materialists. The thought of the period was stimulated by scientific advance, it witnessed the onset of the industrial revolution, and towards the end of the century became involved in the political upheavals of America and France.

If we cautiously were to seek out one word which might serve as a clue to all these various phases of thought it probably would turn out to be the word *naturalism*. We use this term to denote any pursuit of wisdom (including religious wisdom) which seeks its ends and finds its satisfactions with deliberate disregard of all authority based on special revelation.

The weakness of special revelations is that there are too many of them. It is all very well for a shut-off tribe or isolated society to be completely credulous about its own special revelation, since it knows of no other: but if it ceases to be cut off and makes the acquaintance of other gods and revelations then comes the testing time. Which of the revelations are to be accepted as genuinely supernatural and authoritative? How is one to judge between them? Or does it transpire that none of them can have any final authority at all, since each is challenged by another authority of exactly equal weight? If one is going to assess their qualifications by one's own intelligence then it is one's intelligence that becomes the authority and no longer the revelation.

A time of exploration, discovery and opening up of the world is bound to raise such questions. The periods of the Renaissance and the industrial revolution were certainly such times. Special revelations were glibly written off as false when they came from Mecca or Benares, but this sooner or later suggested the question

whether they were any more adequate if they came from Constantinople or, again, from Rome, from Geneva, or from Canterbury. If the one should be queried, why not the other? We would be compelled to query some, since such violent contradictions could not all be believed at the same time. By this simple process the authority of revelation came to be undermined, and serious men had to think religiously without it. It was a stage towards adulthood, and this rejection of arbitrary incoherence inevitably necessitated acceptance of the exercise of reason.

Naturalism and rationalism remain to this day an outrage to all sectarians. For any priesthood it is the prime heresy to try to found religion on human experience unaided by the explicit deliverances of special revelation. Every vested interest is felt to be imperilled by the principle. An obedient piety, ready on critical issues to accept the blindest irrationality, would have to be surrendered. In the refusing of that surrender, and in the demanding of it, we have one of the dividing lines between anti-humanism and humanism.

What naturalism asserts is variously conceived. Diderot can give its negative standpoint: 'You must be mad if you think that there is anything in the universe, above or below, which can add to or take from the laws of nature'. Its positive aspect is seen in the total comprehensiveness of Spinoza. He equated God and nature. The same thing which was scientifically thought of as nature was religiously thought of as God. The neat logicality of Spinoza's philosophical discourse was but the exterior form of a deep mystical apprehension – what he called 'the intellectual love of God'.

This was love by knowledge – ‘The more we know things the more we know God’. His all-comprehending naturalism fed a serene and constant piety. It profoundly inspired the enlightenment in Germany, but did not prevent the orthodox, in their horror of naturalism, from unanimously charging him with atheism.

The general character of the thought of this time had remarkably passed away from, and left behind, the sin-doomed thoughts of previous generations. Most thinkers (Pascal, in the earlier part of the period, being an outstanding exception), had confidence in this world and in human history. It is sometimes said that this eighteenth century burst of illumination was a further wave of the Renaissance itself. In that case it is worth noting a difference. The humanism of the Renaissance looked backwards and formed the desire for little more than the recreation of some echoing air of antiquity; but the humanism of the eighteenth century had the spirit to look forward with an intuition of development-possibilities, and anticipating creative transformations. That mankind had a future, as well as a past, was really the great discovery of this time.

The thinker chiefly associated with this discovery is Gottfried Herder (1744-1803). It was Herder who set up the idea of humanity – ‘A word’, says Max Muller, ‘which never passed the lips of Socrates, or Plato, or Aristotle’. Herder proclaims ‘Man has no nobler word for his destiny than himself’. The meaning here is that no more can be said about the ideal object of man’s life than that it should become increasingly human, that there is no grander enterprise than that man

should continuously draw forth more and more of the implications and significance of his being human.

The true definition of man, in his view, did not centre on man as a rational creature, a political animal, or on any such features previously selected to characterise him. The thing, according to Herder, that separated mankind from every other natural creature was that he was historical. All other aspects of humanity were subsidiary to, and included in, this attribute. The chief thing about man was that he had a story, that he was continuing in it, and that he was conscious of it. He was undergoing change and development, and had a future before him. He was emergent. What marked him off from all other creatures was that he was aware of this. This made him a historical being, conscious of a changing line of life, and in some degree the fashioner of its course. It is noteworthy that the evolutionary humanist, Sir Julian Huxley, today distinguishes man in almost the same terms.

Herder in some noble and grave words sounds the clear humanist note. Speaking on ‘The character of the race’ this theologian and eminent Christian preacher says, ‘It is inherited, however, only as a natural disposition: actually it must be cultivated. We do not bring it with us ready-made; but it must be the goal of our endeavour in the world, the sum of all our efforts, our whole value. For we do not know of men possessing the character of angels; and if the daimon\* that rules us is not a human daimon, we become the tormentors of mankind. That which is divine in our race is, thus, education for the state of manhood. All great and good men, lawgivers, inventors, philosophers,

\* *ie*, spirit or genius

poets, artists; every noble-minded man, in his own station, in the education of his children, in the observance of his duties, by his example, his work and his teaching, has collaborated towards that end. The human status is the treasure and product of all our endeavours, as it were the whole of our racial life. Education for it is a work that must be continued without ceasing, or we shall sink back, higher and lower classes alike, to bestiality and brutality'. (*Letters on the Advancement of Humanity*, 1790).

It will be seen that the humanist idea, here making its appearance in explicit terms, is not compounded of a naive optimism and a blind trust in automatic progress, but is a deeply felt apprehension of the actualities of our situation, carrying with it a warning sense of dangers close at hand.

A more particularised view of progress was set forth at almost the same time by Condorcet in 1793. He was one of the artistocrats who conscientiously went over to the revolution in France. He became a member of the legislative assembly, and one of its secretaries. It was he who drafted the letter to the heads of the powers warning them to respect the revolution and not to think of intervention.

He was one of the first to demand a republic when the king escaped detention and took to flight. But when the question of the trial of the king was raised he opposed the project of a political trial by the convention instead of by a court of justice. In the sequel he raised his voice against the king's execution.

By such course he fell out of favour and, in times of increasing fury and danger, found himself at last outlawed. Friends persuaded a Madame Vernet to offer

him refuge in her house. When he saw the wave of terror rising he realised that sooner or later he must be discovered, and he wished to depart. 'I am outlawed', he said, 'and if, Madam, I am discovered here you will meet the same terrible end as myself; I must not stay'. But his hostess was as remarkable a woman as he was a man, and memorably replied: 'The Convention may have the right to outlaw you, but it has not the power to outlaw humanity; you shall stay'.

His benefactress had a watch mounted so that he might not, out of concern for her safety, go from her house to his death. Thus, as a prisoner of that sort, and to divert his mind from this uneasy obligation, he put himself to the writing of *An Historical View of the Progress of the Human Mind* (*Esquisse d'un Tableau Historique de l'Esprit Humain*). It was this book, so produced, that first enunciated in concrete terms the idea of the past and future progress of mankind. Soon afterwards the author evaded Madame Vernet's vigilance and took himself off. He was some nights in woods and quarries, but eventually emerged in a pitiable condition, was recognised and dragged off, limping, to the nearest prison. He was flung into a cell, and when morning came he was found lying dead in precisely the position he had fallen.

So, so far from the shocks of history being a surprise to the preachers of progress, it was from the midst of one of these very shocks that the idea was born. It is often suggested that the idea of progress was a complacent, fair-weather doctrine thrown up in a time of security and rising prosperity. In fact it came out of one of the most savage and alarming phases of Western society, and in the writing of a man who had only the

leisure of one knowing himself to be swiftly approaching the guillotine.

Condorcet's delineation of the great epochs of history and pre-history has remained serviceable through the development of the later historical sciences. It is when he comes to consider the future that our curiosity is aroused. His principle here is to infer from the way things have gone in the past how in general they are likely to go in the future. He thinks of the immediately coming epoch, and guesses that its features will be (a) the slow destruction of inequality between nations, (b) the steady disappearance of inequality between classes, and (c) the improvement of individuals according to the indefinite perfectibility of the human race itself, intellectually, morally and physically.

The inequality he speaks of is not the natural differences of individuals or peoples, but the inequality of rights, the evil principle of subjection of one class or nation to another. What he means by perfectibility is made as clear as it can be; it is that improvement to which at present we can see no end. That improvement is not inevitable, since a great deal depends on chance circumstances, opportunity, resolution and so on. Retrograde influences are always at work, and institutions with vested interests are always tending to corrupt and obstruct.

(6)

THE way the humanist impulse of this period swept into the common experience of mankind was by its political expression in the rights of man movement. This culminated amongst a breakaway people, in New

England, in the Declaration of Rights. This declaration, made in the summer of 1776, is one of the really epochal revolutions in the world's social history. In the same year that Watt sold his first steam-engine, presaging the gigantic powers on which men were to lay their hands, the Declaration of Rights proclaimed the sovereignty of mankind. Henceforth the people, 'under God', were to be the sole source of right. This question of the origin of rights had, from the beginning of human communities, been the prime issue in the ordering of society. For more than six thousand years, in a general reckoning, rights had meant privileges derived by a favoured class from one or another kind of supernatural patronage. This enormous tradition was now broken, though to say that nothing like it had ever appeared before would overlook the strong claims of the Graeco-Roman civilisation, with its influential Stoic view of natural law and world citizenship, to be its predecessor. Indeed something like the language of the Stoics is to be found in the Declaration of Independence.

The new American Union declares it is entitled to independence by 'the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God', and because 'we hold these Truths to be self-evident, that men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness . . . To secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among men deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed . . . That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these Ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or abolish it'.

So was justified the break with Britain, and here was the repudiation of the divine right of all kings. Here were the bold words and the vast assumptions which were to bring the liberal idea to action, and introduce the democratic ideal to the Western world. Thus was ushered in the humanist age in politics and society. The proclamation that rights are inherent simply in humanity, under a religious sanction that is natural and universal, constituted a novelty and a genuine revolution. The shock of it is still resounding, its force only partly assimilated, and its novelty still resisted in an unrelenting struggle by huge vested interests today. Often we are made to wonder whether this liberal humanist project is as realistic as the world requires, and whether it is perhaps but a transient episode in the story of man. We have failed and missed the mark often and grievously enough for these to be genuine doubts. But when we look at what might be claimed to be more 'realistic' – Catholic Spain, Portugal and Italy; Soviet Russia, Hungary and the Balkans; the Nazi blood-thought, and racialism in South Africa and wherever else it appears – when we think of these alternatives we may be forgiven if we think that this project of humanitarian democracy, in spite of all its difficulties, blunders and hypocrisy, is the hope of the world, the one effort of which, when the reckoning is made for our time, humanity need not be ashamed. Maybe we shall not escape judgment and perhaps condemnation, but only by the standards of our own human faith.

In the first half of the nineteenth century there were two humanist thinkers who were to make and leave decisive marks on their time – Robert Owen and Auguste Conte.

Owen (1771-1858) was a bold, shrewd and imaginative man. By industry and astuteness he rose to become a big capitalist of the industrial revolution, and then, when fully in control of his mills, showed himself resolved on being a progressive employer in a most emphatic way. His many enterprises of benevolence and welfare, which by no means interfered with profit, made his New Lanark mills a visiting-place for admirers from many parts of the world. His was a real attempt to understand, master and humanise the new industrial forces of the time. In the previous generation these forces had filled Blake with premonitory fears. Owen was utterly against the doctrines of Adam Smith which complacently left it to the self-regard of the individual to produce the good of society. In fact his great perception on which so much of his teaching and practice turned was that of the fallacy of individualism. Humanity was a collective product. A man was what society made him. A bad society made bad specimens of humanity, a good society, good. This indeed was the point at which the essential socialist idea emerged with force and clarity. Something of this idea of the social causation of the individual may have come to Owen from the French encyclopaedists, and may in turn have been handed on through him to Karl Marx. It was this perception that affected Owen's feelings on religion. In his autobiography he says:

It was with the greatest reluctance, and after long contests in my mind, that I was compelled to abandon my first and deep-rooted impressions in favour of Christianity. But being obliged to give up my faith in this sect, I was at the same time compelled to reject all others, for I had discovered that all had been based



on the same imagination, 'that each one formed his own qualities – determined his own thoughts, will and action – and was responsible for them to God and his fellow-men'. My own reflections compelled me to come to very different conclusions. My reason taught me that I could not have made one of my own qualities – that they were forced upon me by Nature; that my language, religion, and habits were forced upon me by Society, that I was entirely the child of Nature and Society; that Nature gave the qualities, and Society directed them. Thus was I forced, through seeing the error of their foundation, to abandon all belief in every religion which had been taught to man. But my religious feelings were immediately replaced by the spirit of universal charity – not for a sect or party, or for a country or a colour, but for the human race, and with a real and ardent desire to do them good.

Owen's remarkable good nature and tolerant spirit is shown in that while he openly preached these things, and entered into many kinds of agitation distasteful to the officers of the established religion, he applied no pressure on his employees, and in fact kept on the payroll of the firm a Gaelic-speaking minister who might preach to his highland workpeople.

At the core of it all Owen was a practical moralist. A weekly paper of his which ran for no less than twelve years was called *A New Moral World*. This was his interest, and this was part of the vision of the first British socialist. There was no doubt with him that socialisation was moralisation; and the idea that socialism is no more – or not significantly any more – than a new economic organisation of the state is a fall-away from his vision. In our time a great part of the characteristically modern advances in the body politic,

here and elsewhere, can be described as socialist, and many are left in some astonishment at the scale of unsolved problems remaining. The international conduct of states, including socialist ones, is no better than formerly, and might be said to be much worse. The maltreatment of subject nations has largely passed out of capitalist hands, and is now heavily applied by the so-called communist. Acts of violence, juvenile and adult, do not seem to have any relation to economic insecurity and discontent. And, sometimes very alarmingly, the corporate intelligence of the nation does not seem to match up to its technical powers. It is easy to see that, in general, people of modern societies need more moral leadership and honest instruction than they have been in fact given or offered. Owen made some naive miscalculations on what people were ready for, how much could be done, and in what time. All the same it might well have been to the advantage of societies at large if the most progressive nations had applied themselves more energetically to the Owenite objective – a new moral world. In fact the insurgent movements of progress adopted too quickly the assumption that the social revolution was only about higher wages, the easement of work and the increasing pleasurable of leisure. Too often the advancement of popular causes has settled into the manipulation of group-fears-and-greeds instead of fostering new forms of social responsibility.

(8)

AUGUSTE COMTE (1798-1857), the French contemporary of Robert Owen, was more of a savant, and certainly

less of a socialist. But he had the same urgent feeling that a new general philosophy was needed to give man something of a common mind and moral purpose. The founder of positivism advocated no less – and, interestingly, no more – than a union of Europe from Italy westwards on the basis of a republic with a single culture inspired by modern intelligence. He was indeed the originator of the concept of ‘the West’ which comes up so often in the discussion of contemporary tensions. He pointed to the ruinous condition of the West’s ideology, with religion against religion, and philosophy bogged down in remote discussion, and no sign of agreement or headway. He argued that there was no hope of finding unity and common purpose on these lines; the one oasis on which one could perceive an actual unity in process of formation was in that of science. Science really was universally cohesive because it was the observation of the self-consistent facts of the natural world. Here was the level where the most widespread agreement did and would continue to occur. Science had a future, and could be relied upon, for the very reason that it was able to cast out its own errors. It always must, because it was science, grow in compass and integrity. In spite of the dead weight of vested interests and the obstinacy of obsolete loyalties, science was in fact steadily undermining prejudice and quietly displacing religion and philosophy. Science was the new force, and men would come to trust it as formerly they had trusted the myths of religion.

So then the new beliefs were to be based upon purely scientific truth. That was to be the foundation of knowledge. But the life of man in community involved

more than knowledge; the emotional life needed direction also. ‘The intellect should always be the servant of the heart and never its slave.’ The feeling and behaviour-impulses of the heart demanded a central object, something capable of being loved, but something more than any individual, a centre of devotion and an authority over the emotions. And with this in mind it seemed as plain as could be to Comte that, as science was inevitably the standard of truth for the modern age, so was humanity the proper and natural object of devotion and service.

The systematising and exposition of the Religion of Humanity\* became a vast work of straightforward conviction and enthusiasm to which Comte brought a full mind and wide-ranging thoughtfulness, with results some of which, even by the standard of today, are perceptive and striking. Some of the prominent elements of our contemporary thought – the veneration for science, the scepticism of systematic philosophy, the notion of a science of sociology, the elevation of humanity, the idea of ‘the West’ – stand out conspicuously. Perhaps the most unexpected feature is that, in a time of revolutionary disturbance, his plans for the future are tinged throughout with what we would take today to be a reactionary cast of thought. His advices include a glib defence of capitalism, and an unrealistic recommendation of dictatorship.

Comte was not, strictly speaking, an atheist, and was not at all a materialist. Like some before him, he did not deny the existence of God, but considered the

\* The religion of humanity was a phrase first used by Thomas Paine (1778); he meant by it simply the practice of humane consideration and conduct.

fact to be of no practical importance in human life. The idea of God was concerned with cause, and he insisted that men should give up inquiring after ultimate causes, because these were beyond the reach of human intelligence, and should rather concentrate on understanding laws. The idea of God was the idea of creative will and that idea he accepted as a sound hypothesis. He was ready to say that all existences were manifestations of will (as his contemporary Schopenhauer also said) but their manifestation only was before us, and the will beyond our speculative research. He regarded atheism as the most obtuse form of theological speculation; 'The production of the order of Nature is more compatible with the hypothesis of an intelligent Will than with that of blind mechanism'.

The appearance of materialism he regarded as a misfortune. This was only due to the accident that the physical sciences were the ones which had made the greatest, because the easiest, advances. In fact there is an evident temper of mysticism in this evangelist of positivism. He believes in spiritual being; he believes in the spiritual being of humanity. He is clear on the point that the spirit of humanity is a reality greater than the sum of its parts. One feels that here, with such transcendental notions, we are beginning to retrace a path of theological imagery. This conviction that the united spirit of the human group is more than the sum of its component individuals is a leading thought, of admittedly Comtist origin, in the distinguished school of anthropology associated today with the name of Emile Durkheim.

Positivism had a strong influence on many conti-

mental thinkers in the later part of the nineteenth century. Its general line was to reject all metaphysical pursuits and to try to produce a scientific climate for philosophy. Some of the most distinguished writers in Britain were radicals consciously under this influence: JS Mill, GH Lewes, George Eliot, Julia Wedgwood, Harriet Martineau, Frederic Harrison, John Morley, Herbert Spencer, John M Robertson. In 1914 we find HG Wells offering some critical comment on Spencer and Comte, 'these modern idols'. The name was inherited, though in a changed context, by a recent school of critical philosophers known as logical positivists.

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THOUGH positivism was undoubtedly in the ascendant there were some of humanist temperament who were not satisfied with the Comtist system. The ethical movement came into existence in America in 1876, and in Britain twenty years later, to meet this dissatisfaction. Comtist positivism was felt to be over ambitious in adjudicating and pronouncing upon too many questions, and, besides that, some of his lines of thought were considered to be not progressive at all but the reverse. The main concern of the ethical movement is given in its title. The moral faculties are taken to be paramount, autonomous, universal and sufficient; supernatural sanctions are set aside as not relevant; and social causes are proclaimed to be sufficient to redeem the world. Meetings together as congregations for mutual encouragement and the projection of social and political influence are promoted.

An exposition of ethical society ideas published in 1911 admits that some members of the movement have no inclination to surrender the word God and its cognates to the supernaturalists, and propose to retain it to apply to the ethical ideal. This is allowed as an indifferent matter of terminology. And it is suggested that this indifference is more radical than atheism, for the atheist, by implication, seems to allow that if supernatural theism were true it would have to be accepted as the foundation of ethical thought, whereas the indifferentism of the ethical society maintains that ethical duty would remain the same whether supernaturalist theism were true or untrue.

This view, that neither theism nor atheism, whatever may be said for either, can have any real effect upon our ethical judgements, would seem to be the typical common attitude (almost the basic axiom) of modern intelligence towards these questions.

### CHAPTER 3

#### THE TRIPLE FOUNDATION

It would be useful at this stage to try to draw out and put in summary form the main principles that emerge from the story of humanism.

We may begin negatively with resentment against authoritarian dogma. This from the beginning of humanism is always its inciting impulse. We might stretch our imagination so far as to suppose that there could be some authoritarian dogma which might recommend itself as reasonable, humane and progressive. A thoroughly benevolent authoritarianism would, in theory, never be felt as irksome. But experience is against this. Authority, though put in power to promote some body of excellent ideas, will sooner or later identify the supreme good with, simply, its own preservation. It will become possessive and oppressive and exert its power in defiance of reason, humanity and progress. If it remains unbending for too long, then it will be broken, and probably much else with it. An alternative is the stagnation and collapse of the whole society infected by it.

Authoritarian dogma is eventually challenged by a lively society because it is divorced from reason, restricts the formation of judgment, encourages archaic superstition and blocks the way to free enquiry. It is

always present at least as a latent tendency. Just now it is rampant in some Catholic and Communist countries. In Great Britain, under the influence of a continuing liberal tradition, it is in a very mild phase, and is sometimes referred to as 'the establishment'. Some seem anxious to say that it does not exist, but courtiers, churchmen and the highest executives take very seriously the business of keeping conservative opinion in a prevailing position. In ordinary times the establishment is inconspicuous and diffuse, but on occasions of national crisis it suddenly materialises and its anxious face is to be seen quite plainly, and its signatures appear on instruments of state.

The cruelty of a ruling bigotry was dragged out for public exposure by Voltaire, who single-handed embroiled himself in fierce contentions on behalf of certain victims of religious tyranny. The most famous case was that of Calas, a Protestant of Toulouse. In 1762 one of his sons had committed suicide, and inflamed rumour had charged the father with having murdered the lad to prevent him carrying out his supposed purpose of becoming a Catholic. The magistrates, with Catholic opinion behind them, supported the accusation against the innocent man. He was then broken on the wheel and burnt alive in an iron chair. A number of such savage injustices (only about two hundred years old!) are remembered only because they came to the notice of Voltaire and because he flung his energies into great agitations for vindication. 'He resolved never to rest until he had not only obtained reparation for these particular acts of injustice, but had rooted out for ever from men's

minds the superstitious bigotry which made them possible.'\*

Voltaire customarily attached to his letters the epigraph *Ecrazez l'Infame* ('crush the villain'). What was precisely meant by *l'infame* is not explained. In its context it does not need to be. This, which sounds as though it might be some haunting unclean succubus, refers inclusively to any and every kind of privileged orthodoxy that not only bullies but corrupts.

The difference between modern totalitarian inhumanities and the old cruelties of traditional bigotry, is that the modern are much more efficient and the degree of popular support correspondingly more ominous. It rather suggests that if mankind is to find its way through our period and preserve its humanity it will have to find how to lay aside some of its docility (even Pascal thought the world suffered from too much of it), and reassert some of the humane and intellectual insurgence of the eighteenth and nineteenth century men.

We turn from the insurgent protest to consider some constructive alternative to the thing condemned. Several principles are emergent in the humanist resistance, each one, as first seen, stigmatised as heresy: naturalism, rationalism, the authority of experience and science, the concepts of evolution and historicity, human progress and perfectibility, the rights of man, the claims to liberty and equality, the pursuit of happiness, and the principles of toleration and universalism. These seem to be inextricably locked together, as a single world-view, as one whole mentality. However, for convenience's sake, we will tentatively

\* GL Strachey: *French Literature*

group them under three heads – Reason, Progress and Equality, and set them up as the tripod of humanism.

(a) *Reason*

THE idea of reason presupposes a development of self-consciousness of some depth. It requires that savagery should have been left behind, and that self-consciousness should have evolved the ability to put ideas into some order. Reason, uniquely found in man, is the deliberate cultivation of that ability as a technique of awareness. It is not a separate faculty but a general disposition of proved usefulness, to try to see clear ideas in properly related series rather than put up with a continuous muddle of impressions.

This explains at once the rationalist antagonism to miracle and the supernatural. For miracle introduces a disorderly element, a confusion of causes, into the area where order is looked for as the main theme – man's view of the natural world. As soon as men wish to make a business of getting an ordered view of the world, and their relation to it, it is important above all that the world should not be confused and sidetracked, at frequent stages, by a factor avowedly incalculable and irregular. So long as strange and disconcerting claims and interdicts continue to be issued from the side of miracle and revelation we are bound to find the anti-supernaturalist temperament re-asserting itself over and over again. What this asserts is not that everything is explicable, but that there is enough that is genuinely inexplicable without the uncontrolled invention of arbitrary mysteries.

Reason came to assume its modern measure of authority by an interesting series of steps. It rises into

prominence first as one of the chief factors in the decline and disappearance of scholasticism. Aquinas held that the dogmas of the Church would always be confirmed by reason, and this had been the grand assumption of scholasticism during its three centuries. But at the end of the twelfth century Duns Scotus ventilated the upsetting idea that reason and dogma did in fact part company on certain issues. The consequence for him was that when this divergence took place it was reason that must be put aside so that dogma might prevail. But Roger Bacon, at about the same time, seeing the same tendency for rational and revealed doctrines to become divorced, drew the opposite conclusion that reason must correct dogma where necessary and assume the higher authority.

We find that in this way the monks prepared the way for a complete elevation of reason. And this was to be celebrated half a century later by Petrarch, 'the first humanist'. He extols reason after the Stoic fashion and proclaims the guidance of reason to be the supreme mark of humanity. 'When you can find a man so governed by Reason that all his conduct is regulated by her, all his appetites subjected to her alone; a man who has mastered every motion of his spirit by Reason's curb that he knows it is she alone who distinguishes him from the savagery of the brute, and that it is only by submission to her guidance that he deserves the name of man at all – when you have found such a man, then you may say that you have some true and faithful idea of what the definition of man is.' (*The Secret*, 1350).

Apart from a small movement of rationalist Christians far to the left, and overwhelmed by the main turbu-

lence of the Reformation, the rationalist idea was submerged till the seventeenth century. This century opened with the burning of Giordano Bruno, whose rationalist speculations went far wide of what the Italian church allowed. He declared, for instance, what Kant later accepted as a matter of course, that innumerable other worlds beside our own were inhabited by intelligent beings. This rationalistic metaphysics was brought to its highest pitch by Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz. Their early contemporary was Francis Bacon who looked for the Kingdom of Man, *Regnum Hominis*, and gave to the principle of reason those observational, experimental and analytical features which we associate with scientific investigation. And these methods have now had the result that science, in its inquiries into the facts of the universe, is obliged to work in regional areas of knowledge, some of them profoundly separated, others overlapping. Instead of the great, and still impressive, rationalist systems of metaphysics we are left with only the highly general (but very significant) working assumption; that there is a rational connection of some sort between all things. We are thus brought to the cautious position that though we are not able to put everything in our experience into rational form yet nothing should be accepted that is clean contrary to reason.

Admittedly, human experience has been, and is, full of mystical creations and intuitive values, and we would be inflicting a deformity on ourselves if reason required their prohibition. There is no sign that in order to be scientific we are required to abandon art, nor can reason demand a cessation from those divinations and

decisions which spring from what we call the religious consciousness. True, the religious consciousness stands in need of education as much as any other part of human consciousness; indeed, we have astonishingly definite records of its progress from age to age. Religion appears to have made its own discoveries and to be advancing towards new statements of its awareness. And we get a false impression when we witness collisions between religion and science in which science is equipped with its latest and most informed results while religion takes its stand on archaic thought of the first christian centuries or earlier.

It is a sad thing that in this part of the world we think that a mutual repulsion between science and religion is typical. It is not always so, however. When an eminent scientist some years ago was writing a book on *What is Life?* he found that in the end it was necessary to turn to a religious philosophy to attempt some ultimate statement. It was to Indian religious thought that he turned in fact.

The religions that are emphatic on orthodoxy and the sectarian view are not typical; most religions are able to set their imaginative concepts side by side with a rational conception of the universe without embarrassment or friction. The intuitive sense of things is well able to produce great religious ideas without insisting that they are special revelations of infallible and final definition. Movements such as Stoicism, Pantheism, Immanentism, Deism, and the like are forms of theism which do not look for miraculous communications on arbitrary occasions. A non-theistic mystical religion is so wholly naturalistic that it is in fact a 'religion of nature'. This took a fine literary turn with Richard

Jefferies, Edward Carpenter, John Burroughs and others.

It is unlikely, when it comes down to it, that reason will be regarded by anybody as the sole and single method for finding the truth. 'The truth' is built up for each individual from several levels of profitable understanding. It has to be 'suitable' in various ways. It has to compare favourably with previous knowledge, it should stand up to tests, it is expected to enlighten one's own self-interpretation, and to release one's springs of action. In general it should add to the coherency of experience. Truth is hard to discuss in terms of where we get it, but much more easy in terms of what it does for us or what we do with it. As for reason, it should not be thought to curb or frustrate any of these enterprises but rather to provide a highway of good sense for them all.

Reason is commonly thought of as critical and disruptive. The point of it, as it comes into contact with popular thought, is just that. It bites into and takes to pieces the gratifying, lazy and dangerous myths. The system of logic itself is really a huge warning in detail about the easy frequency of fallacies. In a sense it is a negative labour. But it is the negativism of the sea wall against the floods.

Reason is the antidote to chaos. In society the feeding of belligerent manias with all sorts of exciting confusions and inconsistencies has constantly to be offset, more or less successfully, by the painstaking provisioning of the garrisons of reason.

Civilisation is the work of reason, and it is hard to think of a bigger concept than civilisation. Social continuity is made possible and progressive by the

inherited tasks of applied reason. Science is built up from generation to generation on calmly observed, well-checked and publicly transmitted truths of the nature of '2 and 2 make 4'. And it is science which makes civilisation not only possible and progressive, but inevitably international. Sometimes during crises and war it is the only international feature of modern societies.

In personal life it is reason that offers the final curative and stabilising treatment. It is the way by which we manage to cease to do violence to our emotions. By bringing them before our understanding, by throwing a dispassionate light upon them, and setting them in their perspectives, we approach the ordeal of the one true conversion. The evangelistic conversions are for the most part substitutes for it and the avoidance of it. If one can manage to bring objectivity to one's feelings it becomes a great assuager of distress. In this is whatever power for good is possessed by modern psychiatry.

But the main relevance of reason lies in the fact that there is so much in us that is irrational. Often man is described as a rational animal. This can be misleading unless it is understood that man is rational in the sense that he has rationality in addition to his instincts, and it is this addition that establishes his uniqueness amongst the animals. He is not altogether rational any more than a motor car is altogether the steering wheel. Man can be as instinctive as the blindest of animals, and if it were not for his rational ability his instincts could be more disorderly and stupid than those of other animals. The instincts have not lost their power, but their authority is displaced by



the emergence of reason. Man has passed the point when his instincts can do everything for him. The way forward is by reason and any choice on the question has gone.

Periodically we encounter an impatience with our duties and daily obligations to reason. The time is proclaimed to have come for a libidinous emancipation – the ‘mindlessness’ of DH Lawrence, or the ‘thinking with the blood’ of the Nazis. And we have perennially with us the fiction that some special revelations make reason contemptible. This appeal can be found attractive, but a fair warning should be attached to it: the only defence against nonsense is reason, and if you brush reason aside for the sake of some irrationality of your own, you will be unable to invoke it later when you wish to protect yourself from the nonsense of somebody else.

In religion there is a general persuasion that the devout disposition is most in character when it expresses itself in effusive emotion. This should be qualified. The way of emotional excitement increasingly arouses distrust. The more one emphasises ecstatic enthusiasm the more one risks confusing a dangerous mania with religion, and excusing it because of its sincerity. But surely we have learnt that sincerity is not enough, and should be seen to be not enough. St. Paul is found cautioning his fellows on this and declares that for his part he would ‘pray with the understanding also’. There can be no better worship of the creator of an intelligible world than to know and think about it with care.

(b) *Progress*

The idea of progress, in its full sense, is a comparatively recent idea. That is to say it is not at all characteristic of ancient and is absent from medieval thought. However it is not as recent as suggested in the phrase ‘the nineteenth-century doctrine of progress’, but really belongs to the century before. It is repeatedly suggested that belief in progress arose out of nothing more than the generally optimistic feelings of the nineteenth century, and has broken down and become discarded in face of the grim and unexpected course of history since then. This is not such an obvious account of things as it is given out to be, and the evidence for it seems to be very shaky. The outstanding leaders of nineteenth-century thought, eg Carlyle, Ruskin, Arnold, Morris, were far from optimists. Each of these was in fact full of the most ominous doubts and suspicions about the period. And much the same impression is given by most other eminent Victorians. The exceptions, of course, are to be found amongst the remarkable engineers and scientists of the period. The engineers and scientists were certainly persuaded that their trades would increase in prestige and power. And in that they were of course quite right.

The adjectives cast against the idea of progress by those who wish to resist it also include ‘optimistic’ and ‘automatic’. These terms are as much open to doubt as ‘nineteenth-century’.

Optimistic? All belief in general progress is, we can take it, optimistic. The belief is that the future will be an improvement on the past. Optimism, we may suppose, is to take a hopeful view of the future, even in advance of the evidence. It was the evidence

that piled up in the nineteenth century; the substantive hopeful view was the result of eighteenth-century discernment. Brilliant as was the view of human progress of the 1790's, it was the evidence of evolution elaborated a century later that gave it the substantiality of an accepted background. The idea that progress is merely a subjective faith against which evidence has been accumulating has got the situation the wrong way round. It was evidence that overcame prior convictions and pushed conventional dogmatism into retreat. And now we have to envisage a time, looking back, when life appeared on this planet for the first time in the form of a green scum on the fringes of the waters. That might be a thousand million years ago. Everything has happened between that time and this. And what is it that has happened? It takes a lifetime of study to appreciate even one part of that multiform dynamism to which these aeons witness. Life has never ceased from pushing forward through astonishing developments to more and more advanced forms. Of that thousand million years only the last half million show evidence of human evolution. The actual history of man can be said to start with the neolithic revolution only 8,000 years ago. Political life (as opposed to tribalism) was first manifested in a couple of regions about 5,000 years ago and the elements of man's modern intellectual equipment begin to appear only 400 years ago in Europe. Mechanised industrial society had its beginnings in Britain no later than 1750, and its impact is still not complete on a world dimension.

Draw a line as on a graph through the vastly deep past, through history, and through the present, and

where does that line point? It would need the most implausible ingenuity and contortion to try to show that the development process had in our time come to a dead stop. That is the one impossible contention.

While we speak of the idea of progress as modern we should not overlook an astonishing element in ancient biblical ideas. The bible-thinkers from the eighth century BC were intensely occupied with attempts to read their history. As a battle-ground for the imperial politics and strategy of the Middle East the nation was constantly under life-and-death strain. We know that there were other peoples of the Middle East at the same time who disappeared from the scene, who were broken and wiped out from memory by absorption or obliteration. The Hebrew people, on the other hand, developed an extraordinary survival spirit which was somehow related to their interpretation of misfortune and disaster. The doctrine emerged that they were a nation of destiny. If they were conscious of and faithful to that destiny, the covenant between God and themselves, then an inexpressibly wonderful culmination would burst upon them and the world in the future. If they were not faithful then the will of God would crash through and leave them wrecked and cast off. Mixed with wild and blood-curdling fantasies there was an impressively simple and consistent moral feeling.

This God, then, who was the creator, the holy and the righteous one, was above all the lord of history. It was a religion of happenings, of a going forward or extinction. In a naive, pre-scientific mythological way these preachers felt the force of the idea of progress. It was a unique phenomenon. Never has the sense of

marching history been expressed with such intense subjectivity. This vital germ of an immense idea has lain in the dark of men's minds to come forth in this later age impregnated with new knowledge.

So far as the Bible is concerned the thing that gives a strange poignancy to the prophetic idea is the rejection of it in the late book of Ecclesiastes. History simply goes round and round; there is nothing new; as things have been so they will go on being over and over again. Perhaps he was stating the stoic idea of the eternal return.

But this dissenting attitude was pushed aside in the New Testament. The conviction and expectation of a divine climax of history reasserted itself. The only people Jesus could not tolerate were those who had made their peace with things as they are. The troubled sinners were more attractive because at least they were moved by discontent and a wistful desire for transformation.

The sceptical questions proffered in the gospel story have echoes in our time. When, where, will the climax come, and by what standards are we to judge its approach?

Of course it is quite impossible even to attempt to say when and where a climax should be expected. The thought of some final denouement of all history is a picturesque but illogical expression of the forward feeling implanted in humanity and characteristic of an evolutionary creature. To think progressively is to imagine there is an ultimate goal, but futurity is inconceivably immense and the possibilities are far too wide and complex for any envisaging of the final transformation. It is enough to know there is an im-

mediate future into which we are called with good hope to project our good will.

And by what standards? By man's development of his own nature, by discovering what that is, and by excluding nothing that aids, and by discarding all that hinders, his becoming more human. By the increase of social sanity and, involved in that, the increase of personal reality.

As to whether progress is automatic: a completely automatic progress could not be human progress, since human qualities are typically exercised in making personal decisions on issues which are genuinely in doubt, and so give scope for our capacities for reflection and imagination on the one side and our aptitude for stupid and malignant blunders on the other. Progress may be 'inevitable', in the sense that stagnation is obviously impossible; whatever point has been reached, the alternatives are still to collapse or advance. Often 'automatic' may simply express some sort of general assumption that there is a power behind man stronger than his unassisted determination to do his best. The momentum to develop from his ape-like ancestors was not, after all, invented or put into operation by man. That progressive movement, of which nature itself is the source, might surely be conceived as continuing to operate at the human level also. In view of such simple observations it is a plausible notion that something more than man's own decisions and devices is contributing a propulsive action. It does not mean actual automatism but it does suggest that there is more assurance in progress than the surface of events might indicate.

Such, then, is the dynamic view of man. The

idea of progress displaces the orthodox Christian interpretation of the early chapters of Genesis. The dynamic view of man revokes both the notion that man was created perfect as the image of God, and the doctrine of his fall into a permanent state of sin-guilt. The idea of a descent from a perfect beginning into a developing corruption is one of the dead myths. It could have survived only if the right moment had been seized to turn it completely upside down.

(c) *Equality*

The principle of equality has come to have about it a kind of inevitability. This does not prevent it from being met with astonishment, alarm and scorn. The impulse to contest it is common. For all sorts of classes it has the menace of Jacobinism in it. And certainly this rough disturbance is one of its live capabilities.

Nevertheless it is misunderstood more than it need be. Its first general meaning is simply that there should not be subject classes, nations or races. This probably was the whole of its initial meaning. The citizen's equality between individual and individual, the 'one man one vote' practice, which so infuriated Carlyle, was a corollary that quickly followed on.

The equality of mankind in its basic creaturely character is well spoken to by Shylock. It is spoken in a rage and has a sinister conclusion, but it is a fair catalogue of the elements which make humanity common, showing it to be the same in its nakedness throughout the world; 'I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same

diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us do we not bleed, if you tickle us do we not laugh? If you poison us do we not die?'

Very well, our basic needs and demands on life are the same. The arguments to show why any human beings should be empowered to deny the fundamental needs and claims to others are very rarely displayed for cool examination and, indeed, could not survive it. The phenomenon of super-rights being claimed by a master folk while legal inferiority is imposed on others usually has an economic basis. By the chances of history, by the growth of custom and by greed and fear, the need for subjection is built into an economy and society. Official explanations in trying to avoid these harsh simplicities usually make nonsense. It is clear that none of the things said officially about white and coloured relations in South Africa is true except that it is a benefit to have helots.

It is sometimes taken to be a contribution to this discussion to remark that one cannot think people are equal because when you come to look at it, they are not the same. But surely it never could have been seriously suggested that they are the same. They are equal only in their common humanity, and it is this that is the mighty preponderant fact. If societies are to be just, then all men must have equal access to their justice.

A difficulty is sometimes raised against the proposal of equality by saying that it is in opposition to the idea of liberty. One must consider that this is probably not altogether untrue. The steam-roller of equality, enforcing some complacent or bigoted average, can,

with little misdirection, bear down upon individual genius and suffocate it. This may happen more than we know. At the same time I reflect that this age of the so-called mass-man is more encouraging to scientific invention and more tolerant of artistic experiment than any before it. One would not think so from many things that are said, but that is how it has turned out, and this is something considerable to say on behalf of our time.

But genius is in a very special category, and the ideas of equality and freedom have to be weighed in their broad sociological intention. The demand for equality involves the claim to liberty. To revoke the suppression of classes and individuals is to emancipate. There would be no call for freedom if there were not first an equality-consciousness to require it. And this is how, historically and psychologically, the idea of freedom is reached.

Of course in a developed society there is a host of legal provisions which puts everybody under the same compulsions and which some might say is a massive way of preventing a man doing what he likes. But it is a part of collective common sense to lay it down that a man has not the liberty to defy traffic regulations in any way he chooses. Such provisions are to the end that traffic may flow as freely as possible. It is the object of all traffic to flow as freely as possible; that is its liberty and that is secured by the obedience of all parties. A thing is free when it is able to function according to its true nature without frustration, and the full development of the free individual needs a full society at his back with defensive, disciplinary and creative influences. Organisation is thus not the

enemy of freedom but its aid, although, of course, mal-organisation, like bogus freedom, can be the enemy of everything.

The man who said, 'I buy with my rates and taxes civilisation', was a great sage. Nothing is more precious, and a man needs civilisation as a fish needs water.

But there is an issue in freedom that seems to have its own peculiar level. This is freedom of conscience, the right of a man to be true to himself and his convictions and opinions without persecution. We have been through a period when some states have turned themselves into inflated managerial colossi, which have spurned individual freedom and made a cult of intolerance. It is the big wars that have fathered this kind of ferocious monster-state psychology. We have endured torrents of self-justifying propaganda, and have been half persuaded to overlook the intolerance and persecution manias as somehow excused in some kind of emergency phase. All that is open to the most serious doubt. Stalinism, Hitlerism and McCarthyism are all now arraigned as sources of weakness rather than strength in the histories of their countries. Intolerance cannot proceed without excess. It becomes a psychosis and incalculably damaging and expensive.

Freedom for individual conviction and expression is crucial for the advance of societies. The character of this question is indicated by its history which has taken place largely in the context of religion. The Roman emperors, after persecuting the Christians, took them under their patronage and ordered (311 AD) permission 'freely to profess their private opinions, and to assemble in their conventicles without fear of molestation, pro-

vided always that they preserve a due respect for the established laws and government'. A century later, when the Christians were in the ascendant, heresy was made a crime, and remained so for much more than a thousand years. Most often it was held to be the foulest of all crimes, and was treated with special vindictiveness by courts and authorities specially devised to see that none escaped.

At the beginning of our time the claim for freedom was asserted by protestants, puritans and dissenters. These pleas for freedom involved in due course the more general issue of toleration. The enunciation of this principle is associated with the Italian rationalists and the Polish socinians. It was resisted by the protestant reformers at first, and contested, with various degrees of severity by established churches. Everyone has the urge to resent interference with his own ideas. It is a thought not much further on that one should claim the same right for others as one expects for oneself.

Toleration, as a social principle, is a very severe exercise until, by practice, it can be taken for granted. A few years ago the then Archbishop of Canterbury declared that toleration was a Christian doctrine and had been so for the last four hundred years. Certainly it is four hundred years since it was proposed by the Socinians, but the period in which it has been accepted in these parts has been very much shorter. Some minority interests have not conceded the principle at all; and some individuals are quite startled when they discover that certain opinions that displease them cannot be suppressed by order.

One more aspect of the theme of equality is the ideal

of the solidarity of mankind. Common rights and interests suggest a common cause. Mankind cannot for long avoid the admission that it has no choice but to learn to stand together. The great religions have taught brotherly love in the simple trust that love ought to subsist between human beings without distinction since they were all children of the one Father. This proposition of faith has drawn from Christianity its magnificent works of service and radiant compassion. What was preached from grace will now have to be embraced as inevitable.

Of course there is an air of remoteness about this objective of world-wide brotherly love, but present understanding is beginning to get so far as to see the scale of the danger of animosities. It is also coming home to us that the world's future can be endangered by the privations of great populations, by, indeed, the juxtaposition of fortunate and unfortunate peoples.

There is evidence of an increasingly effective desire that, as far as can be, the laws and fortunes of peoples throughout the world should be drawn towards the substance as well as the form of equality. We cannot, it is true, love all mankind in the common meaning of the word love, but there are now international instruments through which men can concern and occupy themselves to secure that all people shall share together, and know that they share together, the benefits of justice and the basic necessities of a human existence.

## CHAPTER 4

## THE BROKEN STAIRWAY

Behold a stairway set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven, and behold angels of God ascending and descending upon it. *Genesis*

(1)

*Huxley and the Discrediting of the Religion of Nature*

I also know that the pulse which is heard through time and space beats to some other rhythm than human justice. *Rebecca West*

Man has henceforth this cause of pride: that he has bethought himself of justice in a universe without justice, and has put justice there.

*Jean Lahor*

SO FAR the humanism which we have noticed as developing in the West, while it made vast changes in the estimate of man, his nature, function and fate, had left the idea of God in its traditional place, as the ultimate cause of the creation of the world and all the power, reason and sanctity in it. True, the idea had become divested of much of its dogmatic embellishments and precision; but the idea of God and his providence remained, and on that idea many of the

questions and mysteries of life were confidently reposed. Humanism was the assertion of human status and not the denial of God's.

We now come to a change. In this region of thought, in the second half of the nineteenth century, there erupted a turmoil of incoherent denials and assertions. Probably they all could be shown to be old thoughts anticipated long previously, but they now returned with an entirely new vigour. There had been personal atheisms and scepticisms and non-theistic moralities of most sorts before this, but in this period, with the widening area of literacy, these controversies burst upon the attention and interests of people of all stations of life, and left ineradicable marks and influences.

We are now to speak of those doctrines which today hinge upon the idea of man's cosmical solitariness and the sense of his alienation without a god. We shall fix on TH Huxley's *Romanes Lecture* (1893) as the point of departure for the movement towards these doctrines. We shall understand Huxley to have had the effect, whether intentional or not, of seeming to put a certain kind of world-view beyond the bounds of reason. This world-view was the religious conception of the universe as an harmonious whole within which everything which existed and happened was a manifestation of the power, reason and transcendental wonder of its creator God: and from this God of nature, man, as part of the creation, derived his place and function. From the moment that this view of the world was considered to have broken down, the way was opened to secularist humanism on the one hand, and a revival of purely irrational supernaturalism on the other. Natural religion no longer seemed to offer a middle way.

We have to recollect that it was upon natural religion that the more durable structures of religion had always ultimately rested – in biblical religion, in the ‘perennial philosophy’ of antiquity (particularly in its stoic form), in Roman Catholic theory, in the general ground of liberal religion and all natural piety. The universe, in this view, was one in which man’s imagination could move throughout with a humble sense of gratefulness and wherever, from height to depth, his thought might lodge could make reverent salutation. Spinoza (1632-1677), at the highest peak of rationalism, had presented the whole of nature as the realm of divine activity. All being was a continuous whole, attributable in all its parts to God, in which man has his place as a finite creature who had nothing to fear from reality in spite of its mysteries, and could rationally formulate the character of its principles as neatly and consistently as Euclid. The truth about Spinoza is that he was a mystic who, in the fashion of the day, set forth his intuitions and vision in the coolest terms of logic he could put his hands to.

Herder, whom we have mentioned as one of the originating thinkers of the enlightenment, was a student of Spinoza, and passed on his enthusiasm to his friend Goethe. This became a deep influence on Goethe, who spoke his indebtedness to Spinoza: ‘He taught me, not that God existed, but that existence was God’. God was now, in this train of thinking, no longer a supernatural God in the sense of being over against nature: but the process of nature itself was altogether the activity of God. Here, then, was the fulness of naturalism, the divine always in the immanent mode. (‘Immanence’ was a word produced by Herder).

Nature was ‘the flowing garment of the living God’. In Spinoza, Herder and Goethe this was felt to be an original and heretical description of the situation, yet in fact it was but a newly emergent phase of a great tradition, broken in olden times by the darker forms of Christian supernaturalistic dualism. The biblical thought had been, ‘Speak to the earth and it will instruct you, and the fish of the sea for they will inform you. For which of them all knows not that this is the Almighty’s way, in whose hand is the spirit of every living thing, and the whole life of man?’ (Job 12:9). The same feeling for God’s universal immanence and providence is, of course, in the Sermon on the Mount, and, in the *Oxyrhynchus Papyrus*, Jesus, after these many centuries, seems to quote Job: ‘Ye ask who are those that draw us to the Kingdom, if the Kingdom is of Heaven? The birds of the air, and all the beasts that are under the earth or upon the earth, and the fish of the sea – these are they which draw you. And the Kingdom of Heaven is within you; and whosoever shall know himself shall find it. Strive therefore to know yourselves, and ye shall become aware that ye are the sons of the Almighty Father. And ye shall know that ye are in the realm of God, and that ye are that realm’. The apostles, too, assumed their God to be an omnipresent and omniprovident power in whom we live and move and have our existence. (Acts 17:25).

In spite of dark ages and their melodramatic notions, this sense of natural religion was not completely lost but continually recurred. For instance, Vincent of Beauvais, about 1250, showed an awakening mind amongst the schoolmen when he wrote in his *Speculum*



*Magnum*: 'How great is even the humblest beauty of this world! I am moved with spiritual sweetness towards the Creator and Ruler of this world, when I behold the magnitude and beauty and permanence of his creation.' But it is in the middle of the seventeenth century that the vision really comes back. In 1666 we are given the account of the conversion of Brother Lawrence at the age of eighteen: 'In winter, seeing a tree stripped of its leaves, and considering that within a little time, the leaves would be renewed, and after that the flowers and fruit appear, he received a high view of the providence and power of God, which has never since been effaced from his soul'. Brother Lawrence was a quietist; the same vision is in the Cambridge Platonists: 'For a man cannot open his eyes, or lend his ear, but everything will declare more or less of God' (Benjamin Whichcote 1609-1683.) It is also in the metaphysical poets: 'All objects are in God Eternal, which we, by perfecting our faculties, are able to enjoy. The whole world ministers to you as the theatre of your love. We must love all created things infinitely, but in God, and for God, and God in them, his excellencies being manifested in them'. (Traherne 1636-1674.) It is the ground of the deistical criticisms of Christian dogmas and is respected by the defenders of Christianity, whose argument 'will undeniably show that the system of religion . . . is not a subject for ridicule, unless that of Nature be so too' (Bishop Butler, *The Analogy of Religion*, 1736.) We need not speak here of that celebration of the divine presence in nature, which is so much the substance of the English lake poets -

'Tis the sublime of man,  
Our noontide majesty, to know ourselves  
Parts and proportions of one wondrous whole.  
This fraternises man, this constitutes  
Our charities and bearings. But 'tis God  
Diffused through all, that doth make all one whole.'  
(Coleridge, '*Religious Musings*')

Without illustrations we cannot, unfortunately, exemplify the wonderful succession of English landscape painters, beginning in the middle of the eighteenth century, who spoke, through their deep and affectionate devotion to the natural scene, the same message as the lake poets.

Even while the Huxleyan type of secularism was establishing its dominance over the popular mind, this sense of relationship of man-to-God-through-nature continued to show considerable persistence and surviving power, and is still discernible in our times. AN Whitehead put the matter by conjoining the naturalist view with the central doctrine of Christianity: 'The world lives by its incarnation of God in itself. Apart from the actual world with its creativity, there would be no rational explanation of the ideal vision which constitutes God' (*Religion in the Making*, 1926). Eddington (*The Nature of the Physical World*, 1928) and Jeans (*The Mysterious Universe*, 1930) attained some prominence by their restatement of the conviction that the rationality of the universe was a divine rationality. But their arguments quickly fell among controversialists. Ten years later a severe logician, Professor Susan Stebbing, put their opinions under analysis and left them, it appeared, with little credit. Their views

seemed soon to pass into a modified oblivion, the limbo of discarded fashions. Advances in astronomy itself may largely account for the ease with which the writings of Eddington and Jeans came to be outdated. But still, in 1950, a professor of astronomy could write that to him 'The Heavens are telling the Glory of God'.\*

It may well be that in any case this serene view of the human situation was bound to be shaken in the course of the events of the twentieth century. Yet (as we have seen) it was by TH Huxley, just before that century opened, that the change was announced and made articulate, and his personality and views are still relevant to an understanding of the resultant situation. Huxley was an enigmatical man, not by way of reticence, but rather because of the excess and variety of his statements. He produced, perhaps, more novel generalisations on major and minor questions than could easily be digested on the instant by any generation. I find the phenomenon similar, if this may be said, to that of the apostle Paul. Both were aggressive thinkers, themselves in the throes of development, in a disturbed and creative age, and each tumbled their thrusting discernments and intuitions almost pell-mell on audiences that could only pick up something less than what was poured upon them. And the result was that what they did pick up was liable to be held the wrong way round!

As one of the progressive giants of the late Victorian period, Huxley is a strange mixture. He ridiculed as unscientific the positivism that was in high repute among the intelligentsia of his time. He despised the naturalist romanticism of the Rousseauites, reprehended

\* WM Smart: *The Origin of the Earth*

Henry George's land-reform ideas, recoiled from all utopian hopes, preferred Calvinists to humanitarians, and had no time for socialists. He actively opposed the Roman Catholic educational system and all denominational teaching in schools; furiously and skillfully controverted the theological and biblical ideas of his time, and yet could say: 'I think it would be not only unjust, but almost impertinent, to refuse the name of science to the *Summa* of St Thomas or the *Institutes* of Calvin'. Whilst claiming to have invented the word 'agnostic' he also pointed out that he took it from the Scottish philosopher, William Hamilton. He adulated the method of science, while saying he was not a materialist. He rejected the idea of creation, yet seemed to express agreement with Paley's doctrine on teleology, and while he, more than any other single person, shattered the world-view of Goethe, yet he troubled himself to make a moving translation of that thinker's poetic essay *Nature*.

In his exposition of the evolutionism of Darwin and Wallace, Huxley, amongst other things, committed himself to two simple and sweeping propositions — that man was in a continuous connection with the natural world, and that man, in his humanity, was at war with the cosmos. After a great deal of confusion and recrimination that has followed, what needs to be said surely is that Huxley did not propound these two ideas in a negative spirit, as a deliberate paradox, but held them independently as powerful persuasions in different fields of thought. On the one hand all his propaganda for evolution was aimed at the conclusion that man was *biologically* at one with nature, and on the other his *Romanes Lecture* meant to show that

man was *ethically* different from natural processes and animal behaviour. Both are correct. But the misfortune is that Huxley never managed to bring them together. And it becomes nothing less than amazing that he also chose to say that evolution was consonant with the idea of design throughout all nature, and yet was incapable of bringing these several ideas some philosophic coherence.

In effect Huxley called the attention of modern men to three striking features of the human situation: (1) man is evolutionarily part of the stream of all life; (2) man's nature is in ethical contrast with the rest of biological nature (which is only to say that his ethical nature is the mark of his species as other various qualities are the marks of other species); (3) all nature, together, has a singleness of process or design. These are the three concepts out of which, when freshly thought on, much might have come. But Huxley lacked the philosophic ability to reconcile them himself, and the impact of his personality made the task more difficult for others.

'We can never have too many Huxleys', said a contemporary obituary notice. A recent study of him ends, however, 'It would undoubtedly have been better and happier for mankind if he had never been born'. One reproach that has been made against him is that he elevated science into a new ruling cult, with so exaggerated an authority as to make it usurping and intolerant, and that, because of this, we have suffered from its dominance over the general mind ever since to some extent.

It is also objected against him that he used this new scientific authority with the unhappiest social results.

He had described all nature as 'a gladiatorial show', had maintained that man had survived in that struggle and had come out on top, and thereby this 'Darwin's bulldog', as he called himself, had given cosmical justification for the rapacious industrialism and capitalist anarchy of the Victorian age. That line of thinking has been carried through into recent times when we find an author of the eminence of Oswald Spengler beginning a book of his with the declamation: 'Man is a beast of prey'. Several attempts have been undertaken to show that a 'gladiatorial show' is a grossly inaccurate description of nature, both Darwin and Wallace have been quoted by Chalmers Mitchell, the biographer of Huxley, against that view, and *Mutual Aid* was written by Kropotkin to show the weight of evidence against it.

We are in the midst of the confusion of mismanaged truths. One of these truths, or more correctly, half-truths, seared itself through the rough experiences of following years into a deep-set conviction of the tragic situation of man. Huxley's *Romanes Lecture* was delivered in the last years of his life and with the paralysing authority of the new science which, through the active and critical years, he chiefly had reared. With doubtful analogies and incautious suggestions (how did such as he come to suggest that the tiger stood on the ancestral line of man?) he set before his generation the frightful dualism between man and the cosmos, which the lecturer now represented as evil.

Few people nowadays trouble themselves to recall TH Huxley. Yet he stands there, near the threshold of 1900, the first high priest of the scientific age, the *psychopompos* of the modern man, who shuts the gateway

to open horizons, and ushers us to the low door of a claustrophobic corridor in which nothing but the violence of frustration can be taken to be intelligible.

With him the gracious and buoyant messages of the Renaissance are finally cut off. The great separation of man from his universe is about to be effected, and the line is laid to the cataleptic myths of alienation and anguish.

(2) *Existentialism and the Tragic Predicament*

We are awake as nothing else in creation is awake.

*Macneile Dixon*

L'Homme seul dans l'univers n'est pas fini.

*de l'Isle Adam*

EXISTENTIALISM, amongst the philosophies of today, is the most characteristic of our times. This age is not one willing to produce a system. The prevailing tendencies aim at breaking down, repudiating or forgetting systems. One would have to admit – a very serious admission indeed – that in this region of the world, apart from the surviving philosophy of Thomas Aquinas amongst the Catholics, and some dialectical materialism among the communists, there is no widely held total world view to be met with. One can only suppose and hope that this contemporary situation is temporary, and that our period is one in which a breaking down is in some way necessary in preparation for a new constructive effort. Art and literature, in which the same thing has been happening, can scarcely break down any further, and if there is some new movement it must be in the direction of integration. Of the breaking-down process, the phase that must claim our attention closest is certainly the existentialist.

The core of existentialism is the impulse to abandon the attempt to give a rationalist and objective account of the universe, and, instead, to get inside the subjective human situation and to express it in its active and emotional stresses. The real predicament is emphasised – what it feels like to live and die as a human being, and what are the realities in which manhood itself is plunged – instead of a logically smooth system in the comprehensive manner typified by Hegel. The balanced, coherent structures of high rationalism are suspected of leaving out the real man at the centre – ‘The man of flesh and blood’ as Unamuno constantly refers to him. A developing prejudice amongst philosophers themselves has been against abstract thought. During the last century it came to be argued that that was not how actual thought proceeded in actual experience. Thought is about something, and it is about a thing that engages one’s interest, a thing about which one has some feeling. The ‘feeling-interest’ experience tended to be regarded as the authentic part of the business of truth. And eventually the existentialists asserted that real experience of the actual human being is jangled, off-balance and precipitous, an unsettled and unsettling cataract of diverse and contradictory disclosures, and therefore one should not hesitate to express the truths of the human situation in paradoxes and incoherencies and allow chasms of irrational and opposed affirmations.

The absurd cannot be brought into a rational system; by definition it is excluded. But the absurd is part of life. So in any true account of life the presence of the absurd must be allowed to manifest itself. Our custom has been to allow for the presence of the absurd when

it is funny. We often write to reproduce a nonsense element which we prize as 'humour'. But the absurd is often very far from funny. Existentialist thought, then, often gives the impression not only of irrationality, but of a sinister irrationality.

There are two main streams of existentialist thought, the one theological and the other humanist.

Existentialism in its theological mode is very self-consciously traced to Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) an eccentric Danish protestant writer. His wide reputation was propagated during the middle thirties. On the Catholic line it is to be found in Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1937) a heroic Spanish philosopher whose existentialist teachings were frowned upon as heresy by his church. Heidegger, Jaspers and Gabriel Marcel are said to belong to the Kierkegaard lineage, but their derivation and development are mixed with other influences. With the Lutheran Kierkegaard and the 'crisis' theologians of recent years in mind we can shortly state their view of the predicament of man. Man has sufficient awareness of deity only to know that God is beyond all human approach and to realise that his own condition is hopeless. The truth in man can only be expressed in terms of suffering and anguish at this realisation. And that becomes the total upshot of the Christian message. If any man has self-confidence, let it be cast down, and let none hope for anything of God, for man has no claims on God whatsoever. This pessimism is unavoidable for the reason that while God is absolutely transcendent, man is utterly corrupt in mind and will; thus God is abolished from the human world and man from God's. The human predicament

is that of being in a moral and spiritual blind alley from which no escape is rationally conceivable.

Here a situation is revealed to us about which nothing can be done. To see this is to see all. One would have wished to hear what follows upon this. But nothing does – except of course more volumes of ponderous disquisition on the same theme. Nothing is expected from us except the confession of our fallen, forlorn, alienated and impotent condition. The 'act of faith' which one might excusably suppose to be a human gesture turns out to be the implanting of 'grace-to-have-faith' by an act of God which occurs quite by caprice and independently of any co-operation, or even acceptance, on a man's part.

If a thorough-going nihilism could be said to have any foundations, it would be found in this case to have something to do with what is called 'The Word of God'. The word of God is in certain special tracts of Bible literature, but their standing is very obscure. We are told that man can understand nothing whatever of God, and cannot, for that reason, assess whether a revelation is genuine or not. How then can scripture come to have the force of a revelation upon us? Because we are told so by certain individuals such as Karl Barth. Somehow we are induced to overlook the fact that he also is mere man, corrupt in mind and will, and cut off also from all knowledge of God; by his own showing totally incapacitated from making any affirmations about God, or his commands, or his revelations, at all. Indeed we should have to search far to find any other religious teaching of any kind which to such an extent rested on the personal dogmatism of the individual theologian.

This, which in other quarters would be regarded as a huge confidence trick, was protected and hemmed around by an impenetrable wall of blank irrationalism. Barth himself showed an angry horror of the least possibility of the intrusion of reason. His sense of his own predicament was that if the least particle of rational argument were to be given rights in either exposition or criticism, then a whole landslide would follow and engulf his entire myth-system. Thus natural theology, the rational statement of grounds for religion which has been the sober characteristic of British theologians, was ruled out and, in customary courtesy, branded as sin.

The alienation of the theological existentialist comes of his being confronted by an unapproachable deity; that of the humanist existentialist is in there being no deity either approachable or not. The former preach anguish because God exists, and the latter preach the same because he does not. So far as anguish is concerned they have that common ground. Both propose to shatter our liberal, idealist, rational defences, and to break us down through a course of disillusionment spiced with derision. But there is an eventually constructive motive in the humanist undertaking which differentiates it positively and decisively from the theological.

The ancestry of the thought of Jean-Paul Sartre, the most philosophical of this group, is traced to the 'new' philosophy in Germany associated with Husserl. But that derivation would tie existentialism to an academic issue, which is a quite inadequate way of describing what is involved. The concern of the existentialists is with a type of 'life-situation' first brought to light by

Schopenhauer. It was he who made the initial shift in philosophy from urbane rationalism to tragic voluntarism. By tragic voluntarism we refer to his discernment that all living things exist by the exertion of will, that the will in full action in the individual always exceeds its possible satisfactions, and that this must always result in frustration and ultimate denial and defeat. Nietzsche also belongs to this succession; as also a less familiar writer, whose importance and influence has nowadays been lost to view, Eduard von Hartmann, whose three-volume work of genius, *The Philosophy of the Unconscious*, was published in 1869 when he was aged twenty-seven. It is on that line that a great deal that is characteristic of modern thought in dynamic psychology as well as the existentialist outlook – what we might call the more intelligent and constructive irrationalism – has developed.

We find then that the humanist existentialist is not crushed by the transcendence of God, but feels himself exposed to the empty abyss of the universe – empty, that is, of all human response or meaning. Man, as Huxley forewarned us, is, in his moral and human quality, unique and solitary in a non-moral inhuman cosmos. If he is to be himself in his human ethical purposes he must be so in defiance of the whole drift of the natural order. So, as if man was a freak of nature, the matter is presented.

The views we have been describing had all been formulated before this century opened. We need therefore also to ask how this kind of thought came to be thrust into prominence as a characteristic post-war phenomenon. How did it become typical of a period and acquire its wide and deep emotional

relevance? Here a little retrospect of recent times must be made.

When the twentieth century opened there could seldom previously have been so much hopeful and helpful good will at work in our society. A powerful minority of people of all classes were committed to confident hopes for the unbounded improvement and rapid transformation of human conditions and humanity itself. Societies, movements and parties were gathering their strength to prove the reality of these promises, with their drastic solutions of old problems and openings into new worlds. It is true that some of the sentimental expressions of a liberal euphoria may have shown too much insubstantial and complacent amiability. But it would be far from the truth to say that 'optimistic belief in automatic progress' was wholly characteristic of the period: on the contrary, a groundswell of grim and troubled foreboding was always near the surface. Aesthetic movements, such as the English school of pre-Raphaelite painters, represented a flight from contemporary realities into imaginary worlds of romanticised medievalism or mythological antiquity. The prophetic line which brought Victorian thought into the twentieth century, Carlyle, Ruskin, Morris, were men of strong humanist sensibility, who knew that the world was moving, but saw the movement as going to the devil. The disgust and hatred at the way the world was going produced a strain of nihilism in Carlyle, melancholia in Ruskin, and a destructive urge in the craftsman Morris. Succeeding humanists, such as Brailsford, Hobson and Lowes Dickinson, pointed to the forces of violent anarchy that society might be preparing to unleash

upon itself. Norman Angell's famous book *The Great Illusion* gave warning of how disastrous and unjustifiable a modern war would turn out to be. Some of the sociological novels of the time struck a note of pessimism more actualistic and convincing than anything produced by evangelical rhetoric. HG Wells has often been referred to as vaguely typical of the prevalent utopian optimism, but when the body of his work is recalled and considered it must be seen at once how wide of the mark this notion is.\*

None of this is meant to suggest that, when the 1914 war came, it did not inflict a deep and permanent wound. To anticipate it was one thing, to experience it another. It was not the coming of the war that struck the blow, but the slow development of the struggle into a pointless, mechanical and filthy massacre of the young men of Europe, day after day, through months and years. A show-down with Germany had long been thought of, but the ordinary intelligence had not been prepared for the entry of a death-will on this scale and of this tenacity. It had got out of hand. When the living and the scarcely-living staggered out of the calamities of those four years it was brought home to all that we belonged to a world that had either lost its bearings or perhaps never had any. This was the newly-perceived fact.

It is this feeling of the loss of bearings that explains the importance of the League of Nations and the new Russia, the one to the liberal constitutional mind, and the other to the radical and insurgent temperament.

\* HG Wells, *The Time Machine* (1898); Jack London, *The Iron Heel* (1907); Anatole France, *Penguin Island* (1912); See also HG Wells, *The Sleeper Awakes* (1898), an anticipation of Orwell's 1984

The League of Nations not only recovered hopes for people of goodwill but suggested a great good coming out of evil. For others, bolshevik Russia held out the great consolation that over the horizon there was a mighty state emerging from tyranny, dedicated to the creation of an honest, just, and realistically based democratic society. These were the massive consolations for the hideous ruin of the 1914 war. If these off-sets to disaster were struck away, one might very well ask whether anything would be left to hope for.

What in fact did happen was that the economics of western society began to rot from the inside. This depression, as it was fairly called, produced Hitler and the men whom he made the instruments of his policy, Chamberlain, Mussolini and Daladier. This policy succeeded in breaking up the League of Nations and driving Russia into isolation. Through these years of the depression the wars flourished. The Chinese, Abyssinian and Spanish wars were all motivated the same way, and ran the same course, with the western democracies assisting and excusing their own enemies in a lunacy of cynicism.

But it was at this juncture that a thing of significance happened. While the great majority of people, though sick of the treacheries and conspiracies of high policy, were bewildered and inactive, a minority of outspoken protestors became more and more conspicuous, until an international body of opinion sprang up and became the first movement of our century to create a popular fighting force to withstand in the battlefield both the violence and the weakness of contemporary policies. A wide front, called the popular front, was formed to defy the resurgent barbarism. It included

people from all parties, from titled conservatives, on one wing, to proletarian communists on the other. Its background was literate, having the Left Book Club behind it, and a great number of young authors and professional men and women among its adherents. The phrase 'being committed' originated here. Legions composed of men from all countries appeared on the battlefields of Spain, the appointed standing-ground, with the cry, 'They shall not pass'. This was a generation of young people who had found their own war.

Through 1936 and 1937 a strange air of nobility and resolute activity came over peoples of goodwill. But thereafter the story took another wrong turning. One of the co-defenders of the parliamentary republic of Spain (though unofficially) was Russia; and Russia's part was disillusioning in more than one way. She was half-hearted and hesitant in the pursuit of victory, but active in the jealous hunting out of 'Trotskyists' and other heretics in the very midst of desperate and chancy campaigns. Many sympathisers with Russia had their first close view of a strangely left-handed friend. Close on the heels of such unpleasantly instructive experience there followed defeat. 'They' *did* pass. And the lost cause in Spain passed almost indistinguishably into the 'phoney' war with Hitler.

But there was still more to be endured. When the 'phoney' war changed into war in earnest, France instantly fell; but she was not only defeated—she produced a collaborationist government which went beyond surrender, and waged war against its own citizens on behalf of the invader. The occupation and collaboration in France was the lowest point of degradation, the completed dishonour of the West, the worst



hour in twentieth-century Europe. And out of that was born 'the resistance', the last hope of honour, the irreducible core of manhood. These are the facts which explain why a tragic philosophy is peculiarly suitable to this generation, and why in particular it comes to us with a French aura.

For it was in France that the heroism of Spain was born again. But whereas in Spain the legionnaires had hope, this heroism had to dispense with that. Optimistic illusions had all become threadbare. In France everything had gone wrong. Everything was in chaos, everything was poisoned – except the lone individual of the resistance, captured, perhaps betrayed, struggling without aid or comfort or comradeship to maintain his or her integrity under interrogational torture, and facing a secret death and an unknown grave. The point had been reached where honour would be surrendered no further. It was at the end of a dark path where there was a post, with bullet marks and bloody rags upon it, and about it instruments of torture, with no record for the liberators to find of the full extent to which they had been used.

Somebody has described existentialism as the view of life which a man can take on awakening from a particularly vivid vision of his own grave, on which there is no inscription. The thought of the finality of death recurs over and over again in existentialist writing. Everything a man has or can be must be decided in a desperately short time. 'Life is a birth astride a grave'. The truth in the heart is tested by the knowledge of the fatal transience. Virtue can expect no reward in the last resort but death. It was seen, truly or falsely – but with grim experience behind

the seeing – that in the last judgement neither God nor cosmos, nor history, nor even the people were on the side of right. If that is where one's resolution is to take one, then one must be prepared to be alone – or nearly so:

Defenceless under the night  
Our world in stupor lies;  
Yet, dotted everywhere,  
Ironic points of light  
Flash out wherever the Just  
Exchange their messages:  
May I, composed like them  
Of Eros and of dust,  
Beleaguered by the same  
Negation and despair,  
Show an affirming flame.\*

War-time France was the fitting cradle for a philosophy of desperation, and after the war it seemed natural to look to France for leadership. Thus in May 1945 a London critic was writing: 'The freemasonry of the intellect is at work and a new humanism is being born. For what our world now needs is a positive and adult humanism. America could give it, but she is too money-bound and machine-dry. Russia lacks the sentiment of individual liberty. England is too bureaucratized. But France has known the tyrant, and been set free before the knowledge destroyed her. France alone is capable of a new proclamation to the world of old truths, that life is meant to be lived and that liberty is its natural temperature, that brains are meant to be used and beauty to be worshipped, and

\* WH Auden, at commencement of war, 1939

that human beings (the only animals who can laugh) are intended to be happy'.\*

These words of good perception (though perhaps not precisely prophetic of the tone of the humanism to come) prepare us for the prominence of such Gallic names as Sartre, Camus, Malraux, Giraudoux, Anouilh, Cocteau amongst those who have made the attempt to cut down the understanding of the human outlook to its essential quick.

It is on the stage and in the novel that this modern attitude has presented itself to the public. Particularly in the sphere of the theatre it has brought an invigorating sense of new discernments and deliverances. Numerous plays have gone back to ancient plots for the setting of their themes, seeking to state afresh, as it were, the questions that have always stared Sphinx-like into our faces. *The Tree* by Giraudoux gives a symbolic interpretation of the human condition. The tree is the tree in the Garden of Eden. It grows by being nourished by the secret thoughts of Adam. The secret thoughts are of discontent – discontent with animal innocence and idyllic obedience to the Lord of Paradise. Adam must not eat of the tree, for indeed it is the tree of his own rebellion, and not of God's planting. So, by searching thoughts of doubt and enquiry man becomes divorced from the divine will, the will that would have only the naive, immature, cloistered, untested, unadventurous virtue of content. Man breaks free at last, to become outcast and degraded. But in that degradation there is a strenuousness, the nobility of man who wills to be man in his own right, whatever the price, instead of a kept thing,

\* Cyril Connolly: *Horizon*, May 1945

even though the keeper be God. His fallen nature, if that is what it is, is his greatness.

The novel *The Plague* by Albert Camus brings home the existentialist idea of man's relation with man. In the plague-ridden city the doctor goes from one case to another, but the plague, in spite of his devotion and his medical organisation, gains space. Prayers are said in the cathedral, some take to fear or to hysterical dancing, but the weary doctor plods on his rounds treating the sick with what science he knows. Challenged on the futility of his efforts, he makes his confession of faith – that man has duties to man without reference to anything else whatever.

In the *Antigone* of Anouilh this witness to duty is focussed at its very sharpest, and stripped down to its irrational and intransigent core. Antigone, as in the antique plot, summons all her courage and resolves to perform the indispensable rites of piety by burying her slain brother, though this is prohibited for political reasons. It is forbidden by the new dictator as a penal example to other enemies of the city. Nobody approves of Antigone's resolve, and her dearest friends quail before it. But in her extreme isolation there is yet more to bear than the mere fear-courage tension. In an interview he not only shows her his grave sense of worldly responsibility, but, in a critical moment of secret disclosure, he tells her that there is doubt as to whose body it is that lies unburied; in the confusion of the battlefield there was no certainty whether this was the brother or some other. The prohibition is simply an instructive warning to the masses to keep them in awe; the thing itself is of no importance and not worth her sacrifice. Thus everything conspires to

confuse her, to show her that the project is unreasonable, and to weaken her will. Yet she enacts the part she has chosen. Her act, fatal to herself, becomes her absolutely free choice. It is unfortified by any calculations, rationalisation, applause, promise or reward. The will to act rightly is pure and unmixed. The only things that are certain are her original impulse to duty, and that she must die if she acts. Such is the human predicament. You know what you must do; in the last resort it is outside reason, and beyond it is only death.

'Of what fever was Antigone plagued?' asks the commentator in the play. She is found to be living at the very centre of the self-determining, self-transcending, inviolable will, which somehow visits humanity and becomes its remorseless possession.

That is the deliverance of existentialist humanism. When man is reduced through terrible events and cruel successions of disappointment he may indeed be broken and ruined. But that is not all that may happen. On the other hand there may be brought forth, out of the depths, the true essence of humanity, the will to right and that alone, the unmixed unconditional imperative brought forth as gold tried by fire, as from the tree cut down to its living roots.

All the leisureliness, tranquil confidence and lecture-room hopefulness has gone from the older ethicism. What has been learnt is a kind of despair. All the rationalised explanations of the human situation, along with the evangelical reassurances, are rejected as void. Reality is not a rational order, but disjointed through and through with absurdities and ambiguities. The ideas of loyalty, love, truth, justice and conscientious

endeavour are, all of them, nowhere to be discerned, except where man and woman, despite the most authoritative discouragement, bring them into being. 'Man has henceforth this cause of pride: that he has bethought himself of justice in a universe without justice, and has put justice there.' Man is an ephemeral creature; his very experience of selfhood is largely an illusion, and the tomb is his conclusion. Yet there is a truth by which he must act. This energetic and even frantic self-dependence sets before us the twin truths of despair and nobility. Man, like other creatures each in its own kind, has to be himself and bear his own truths. And being, unlike the other animals, a self-conscious creature, it is out of an agony of self-awareness that he must wrest his standards. To be aware is to partake of a suffering peculiar to man. Were there some echo in the cosmos, some all-knowing divine one who bore in his being an explanation, there would be some comfort in the ordeal of being human. But there is no echo, no explanation and no comfort.

And yet it is not an apathetic nihilism that we are brought to think of. Sartre, writing of authors (in whom there is always some insuppressible appetite for immortality) concludes: 'Immortality is a dreadful alibi . . . . It is not by chasing after immortality that we will make ourselves eternal; we will not make ourselves absolute by reflecting in our works desiccated principles which are sufficiently empty and negative to pass from one century to another, but by fighting passionately in our time, by loving it passionately, and by consenting to perish entirely with it'.

An outstanding author amongst the existentialists –

indeed an outstanding man of our time altogether – is André Malraux. In him we have one of the few men of genius who are at the same time men of action and men of thought. He involved himself in all the desperate fighting fronts of our time, in China, Spain and France, has written philosophical novels about these scenes of violence, heroism and death, and in his later work has turned to massive and penetrative works on art. One may wonder what connection there may be between a taste for violent and deadly episodes in fights for freedom and philosophy of art. But one might also ask why we should think that they ought to be separate. Malraux is much concerned with the need for the transcendence of individuality and its pettiness. He liked the Chinese for their lack of individualism. He seems to doubt the reality of the self – as David Hume, and more recently the behaviourists, and Hindus and Buddhists before them all. In any case, the individual self certainly could have no reality if it were entirely quiescent and static. Anything positive about it must be found in action. A man is what he does. Well, what does he do? Does he only serve himself? If so, he is withdrawing into a vacuum. There must be action, and action must be out-going. Action is not for profit but for value. Value does not come of calculation; it is adventure, spontaneous and gratuitous, defiant of prudence and limitation. This is why Malraux's early stories are about heroism and about death. In what context is this behaviour called for? To no end, for no futurity or eternity, and only in the context of the present. Life is always a fact of the present. Nothing of spiritual significance can be postponed.

The message is, we take it, first to acknowledge our littleness, and then to transcend it. 'It is difficult to be a man', he reflects, but some help is possible, and it comes 'by enriching one's fellowship with other men . . . . The individual stands in opposition to society, but he is nevertheless nourished by it. It is less important to know what differentiates him than what nourishes him'. The work of art has something to do with this nourishment. Art is the insurgent effort of the earnest imagination to set up types of nobility and truth in thought and visual images. These in their turn become centres of power and sources of influence, and through the generations these symbols become a spiritual context for human endeavour. Though they are but projections from man's self, they are able to echo back again a continuing inspiration as though they were independent foci of stimulus. It is art that gives man the style of immortality, of the supernatural, of self-transcendence. 'The great fact is not that we have been flung between the profusion of earth and the galaxy of heaven, but that in this prison we have been able to make images sufficiently powerful to deny our nothingness.'\*

Thus in Malraux we detect the influence of powerful reconstructive elements. Is he not beginning to recreate in a subjective region what had been rejected as objective verities?

The theological and the humanist existentialists have much in common in technique. Both are rhetorical, irrational and tormented, and full of the tragic deprivations of justice, order, consolation and commonsense. The theologians of crisis, however, display a rhetoric

\* *The Walnut Trees of Altenburg*

that is empty of all constructive meaning or help. The humanist existentialists, in spite of all their air of desperation, are full of stimulation, challenge, and the evocation of nobility. May not their historical function be the discovery of new ground, realistically discerned, for the development of new greatness in idea and endeavour?

## CHAPTER 5

## HUMANIST THEOLOGY

Remove God from the universe, and you may very well remove a faculty from the human soul.

*J Middleton Murry*

God in us, in me.  
So without us, without me,  
Where would God be?

*Rainer Maria Rilke*

(1)

TAKING existentialism to be the latest distinct form of humanism, we note its two-directional ambivalence. On the one hand, by finding significance only in the unsupported and independent good will of men and women it reduces human problems to their unassailable and enduring essentials. But, at the same time, if the least attempt at a wide rationalism is connected with it, it soon appears no more than a provisional gambit. In this light it is not enduring. Refusing to possess itself of any body of doctrine, and vaunting itself on the great number of natural questions it contemptuously rejects, it shows that kind of instability that must,

in the nature of things, invite ultimate rectification. Besides, the humanist existentialists themselves – Sartre most positively – openly avow that they are thinking only in and for their own time, that their positions are temporary, and another time must be expected to produce another type of thinking, a different background philosophy.

In particular we are bound to recognise that these thinkers have been overworking the themes of anguish, irrationalism and incoherence. This stress has probably been of service, in that it has thrown out a challenge to shallow complacency. But one cannot always, throughout a lifetime, be in a state of unremitting anguish, unreason and incoherence. It is not in the human character to regard self-possessed rationality as ridiculous, or to reject all attempts at coherence as vain and futile.

After all, one of the existentialist facts of life is our appetite for coherence. It is in us to want to make sense of things, and put them in their relations as far as possible. This appetite cannot be ignored. It is the core of rationality. Even if we cannot be wholly rational it is beyond doubt that rationality is an important part of our life. It is, for one thing, the ground of civil justice, and the indispensable canon for the whole edifice of scientific knowledge. It certainly would be an odd event if men could produce arguments to show that reason is a form of stupidity. Man, it used to be said, is a rational animal; this means, not that man throughout his nature is rational, but that man alone amongst the animals has reason as one of his specific features. Conceptual thought is solely human. Man shares many of his instincts with other

animals, but the instinct for rationality is one that is peculiar to him.

It is because man is not wholly rational that rationality is so important. His humanity is at stake in whether he can maintain and develop his rationality. He does not possess reason as a separate ready-made faculty. It is an evolutionary feature and is, in the last issue, a product of his own care and labour and conscience. It is important because the building of reason is his defence, as far as it will go, against the disorder of the emotions. A habit and behaviour of purely emotional impulse would have made the achievement of civilisation impossible, and there would have been no paper or printing at the disposal of our existentialists either humanist or theological. It is only by the cool, objective observation of fact, and acceptance of the disciplines of logic, that anything constructive in the world of man has come about. Abandon reason, and, if consistent in your rejection, you sentence mankind to take the road back to animality. This is why many of the arguments against rationality are not only irresponsible, but in the long run dangerous. One would have thought that we and the existentialists had seen enough of irrationalism in theory and practice (in Germany for instance) for any defence of reason to be superfluous.

It is significant to note how Martin Buber refers to some of the writing of Sartre (whom most accept as the philosopher *par excellence* of existentialism); he calls it 'demagogic'. That is a grave charge against a philosopher. It is, in effect, the same charge that is made by AJ Ayer in his review of Sartre's main philosophical work when it was first published in 1945:

'This metaphysical pessimism, which is well in the existentialist tradition, is no doubt appropriate to our times, but I do not think it is logically well founded'. In other words this means 'I do not think this is true, but it is probably what people want to hear just now'. The demagogic device is present: it is playing to the gallery – however magnificently; and reason is displaced for motives which, once allowed, mean that truth takes a subordinate position.

The existentialists press upon us the need of *angst* (a Danish word for extreme anxiety, distress or anguish) as a condition of a proper awareness of the human situation. This, as far as we understand it, is not regarded as a phase, but as a permanent condition of understanding. What is called for is an extraordinary effort to achieve what most of us think sensible to avoid – to see life through the anguish of the knowledge of death. To the psychologist anxiety is the sign that the individual is being disturbed by a deep-seated obsession which may be an infantile relic, and most probably will be quite unrealistic. The anxiety obsession deprives the individual of his balance and efficiency and puts him in bad relations with others, and altogether one cannot take this condition to be a reliable indicator of wisdom and truth.

(2)

So, then, without claiming that we can compose an entirely coherent view of the world or reduce all its ambiguities to simple order, and without saying that we can escape anxiety altogether, but at the same time rejecting the insistence on permanent incoherence and

anxiety as a contemporary exaggeration, we ought to set out what we can appreciate as factors in a world-view, being ready to accept existentialism as a stimulus to seeing some of our questions more urgently and candidly than formerly, but not as a ban upon the quest for coherence. What follows can, no doubt, be labelled as a version of the traditional cosmological argument in theology. Its method is that of rational inference and natural human feeling. In its first outlines, it is of vast antiquity; it is constantly recurrent and never wholly obsolete, though in recent times it has been discountenanced by the evangelical distaste for natural religion.

Our first question, which is not always seen to be the first, nor evaluated at its crucial importance, is the question of whether the totality of the universe in which we find ourselves is or is not, in the widest sense, a unity. A very great deal follows from the initial perception that this is so.

In logic it can be shown that any alternative idea to unity is implausible: our minds cannot accept the idea of a universe which contains logical contradictions. But much more than abstract logic is involved. The earliest Greek thinkers guessed the answer as a kind of necessity of the perceptive imagination. The Hebrews through their history grew into the conviction of experience. The mystics have found it the most impressive deliverance of their intuitions. And in our own days 'the uniformity of nature' is one of the ruling ideas in science.

The unanimity is almost complete. But, as though to show us the weight of general agreement, there is an occasional minority vote. We do not put on that

side the dualism and polytheism, for they usually reveal an underlying tendency to monism; but we do think for instance of William James, who has some tentative doubt of it.

Here we will draw our conclusion from the verdict of science, finding that it gives confirmation from contemporary authority to that which has been traditionally authoritative, viz, philosophy and religion.

But if the whole natural order is one, which is what most people accept without examining their conviction, we ought to be able to give some account of how we view its general character. Persuaded that there is one world process, what is its nature?

As to its basis, we expect solidity in foundations, but this is not what we come upon. The analysis of matter has reached the point where we are confronted with a basic insubstantiality. This applies to all forms of matter. What is astonishing to us is not only the uncanny suspension and rotation of worlds and island universes in space (to lie on one's back at night, to look into the open sky and to visualise that one is hanging face downwards over space, can suddenly strike one with a kind of panic, the horror of vacuity, the recoil from the silent space that filled Pascal with fear) – but that the very stuff of the rocks on which we build and walk is also shown to us by our physicists as having an unlooked-for insubstantiality.

'At bottom nature consists of processes, not things',\* and all materials are but more or less stable precipitations of universal energy.

When we think of energy we naturally inquire as to its source. The ancient doctrine of creation, adopted by

\* JBS Haldane

the Christian thinkers, was that creation was 'out of nothing'. We have been reintroduced to the idea by some authorities today with the additional notion that this creation out of nothing is continuously happening – that atoms of a basic element are appearing everlastingly in space out of nothing.

The constituent parts of atoms, according to our modern instructors, are points of energy which are related to one another in different elements in various mathematical patterns appropriate to each. Points of energy then are our ultimate, they are distributed throughout the universe in a variety of built-up forms, and beyond them there is the 'nothing' out of which they are said to come.

Is the universe, as thus described, an observed fact, or is it an astonishing product of human invention? For my part I would neutrally observe either as a possibility, if it were not for the evidence of successful prediction. An understanding that is confirmed by its predictions is not to be put aside. The prediction of stellar movements on the one hand and the manipulation of nuclear fission on the other prove that it is not an unreal fantasy.

We can now state our first position: the world process is a unitary manifestation of energy.

The universe cannot be a manifestation of energy only. Energy only would be chaos only, and that is not what we have before us. If it were a chaos nothing at all would be before us, for we ourselves should not exist. Our existence is an outcome of the most delicate adjustments of countless inter-related factors. If the universal energy were not in the mode of ordered manifestation it would not manifest anything coherent.



The laws of nature are indeed what first comes home to the mind of a scientific inquirer. When we say laws in this context we mean nothing but observed regularity. We mean that we have seen such and such happen over and over again so distinctly that we have come to depend on it. That such and such has been known to happen without any known exception persuades us to think that it must happen, and therefore we call it a law. We develop the notion of 'the law of cause and effect'.

Law is a good word to use in this connection, but it can be misunderstood. We may not think of the laws of nature as we do of the laws we make in human society. We know the reasons for the laws we make, but we do not know the reasons for natural laws. We can only see that they are as they are and accept them. We sometimes find ourselves assuming that natural laws are as they are because they could not be different. But this would pretend to a knowledge of the logic which the laws of nature obey. We possess no such knowledge. We cannot expound why they must be this way. If it comes to that, it is quite incomprehensible to us that anything at all should exist. And by the same admission we cannot say why anything should exist in this way, in the form that we see and not in another.

We are impressed by the constancy of nature, by the invariableness of the succession of certain events. We are aware of a universal process, and for convenience sake, indeed out of sheer necessity, we isolate a number of observable regularities and call them laws. By this constancy, by this dependable regularity and discerned order we find that some part of nature becomes

intelligible, and to some degree manageable. Our ordered thought and the external order of natural law are brought to chime in together, and thereby we have some sense of what appears to us as the rationality of the universe. How far we can rely on our rationality going parallel with the apparent rationality of the universe we cannot say. It is often borne in upon us that our intelligence takes us no further than the surface of things.

Our next observation is that the laws of the universal process do not produce a uniformity but an infinite variety. We know that existence can only be established by distinctions, and that is what we find our universe engaged upon. The laws of nature are such that they are able to produce, by intricate permutations and the most subtle adjustments, an apparently inexhaustible variety of existences. The variety of form and coloration in living things is much greater than would be necessitated merely by utility and mechanism. There is such a profusion of variety that one must assume that variation takes place for its own sake, or, rather, variety is the essential characteristic of creation. Nothing is so impressive as the 'interest' the cosmos shows in creativity. Creativity could not be present without variation, and this is, in fact, the first and emphatic communication of the universe to the human observer.

Now this result implies an unresting activity. It is not at any point a static universe. The law that exhibits all laws in action is the law of change. No form is eternal. Everything is changing according to its mode. It is a *behaving* universe of which we have to think; it is conducting itself in its own way. It is

eventful, and the succession of events gives us the idea of time passing. The idea of time is, of course, the idea of events going in a one-way direction. There is no jumping to and fro mixing up effects and causes in disorder. The idea of time, of one-way eventfulness, is the idea of progressing eventfulness, of development.

The universal process through change exhibits in the living world of earth the phenomena which we have come to call evolution. In this area, where our interests are totally engaged, we have to envisage a progressive drive, a *nisus*, an enterprising pushfulness towards more and more developed forms of existence. It is sometimes said that evolution proceeds by the activity of natural selection operating on chance variations. But when the process is steadfastly regarded this description is seen to be inadequate. The substantial and really active factor – the nature of life itself – is left out of this description. I take the impression that nobody nowadays finds the description adequate. All that the doctrine of natural selection tells us is that unsuccessful types are killed off. The prior question, however, is how to speak of the motive power of success. No amount of elimination of the unfit could produce one fit specimen if something more basic than mere elimination were not at work. In describing this more substantial agent of change it was sometimes said, when we were more confident of our scientific formulations, that life was always seeking a more perfect adaptation to environment. But this is an insufficient statement also for the reason that life has achieved this over and over again yet still presses into new insecurities and fresh problems for itself at other levels. The ants date from the eocene period

and are found in all regions of the world except the polar regions. They have prospered through many millions of years in almost every kind of climate. Compared with mankind their prestige as a successful life-form is much the greater and far more senior. It is manifestly incorrect to speak of life as though a perfect mechanical adaptation could complete the life-motive. Life seems to have achieved this kind of economic completion long ago and perhaps many times over. Indeed life in evolution, through the ages, escapes over and over again out of blind alleys of mechanical completion, evades being trapped in any perfected specialisation, avoids stagnation and has no form of definable finality. It does not seem that any definition of life or any formula for its course and nature will ever be found. It is of its own nature, not translatable into scientific or any other terms, and the whole of creation must be taken in the end as being for its own sake.

An aspect of the problem of living things which has been brought into popular controversies is their mental side. Consciousness and self-consciousness have always been felt to propose a problem of the most searching importance, though much of the discussion has been of doubtful help, and sometimes it has put us completely on the wrong track. The problem of the psychic element in life has been brought into prominence by the work of different kinds of materialistic teachers. In many instances they were especially interested in combating the view that thought is introduced from another alien world of being. This assumed that thought and matter were absolutely foreign to one another, that the world of thought or spirit was the

only real one, and that the world of matter was inferior, degenerate, second class or unreal. This kind of idea is traceable back through Christian, Platonic and Orphic teachings. We cannot be surprised that it should sooner or later run into criticism. The materialists set about standing this picture of things upside down. Matter was to be the only reality. They proposed to represent mind as an unreal and irrelevant appendage. This reversal of things entailed the producing of propositions which were to belittle the status of mind to something like zero. Thought is an illusion; consciousness has no originating function; mind does not exist – all such propositions were put forward with different degrees of subtlety and seriousness. The upshot of the whole affair is that the materialists were as much off-balance as the idealists, and together they were tearing the subject to shreds.

In actuality the subject cannot be broken down at all. The idea that mind and matter are alien and opposed essences inconceivably conjoined and co-operating is a defiance of their self-evident unity and sets up quite artificial problems. The fastening of our attention on one or another aspect of this unity has given rise to the division of the subject, and has deceived us into thinking reality is divided also.

It might have been better if both sides to the idealist-materialist discussion could have set off from the observation that matter is not only capable of living, but also capable of thought. The thing which stares us in the face is that matter can think. This is the fact that has to be explored. And, as we begin to explore this, we should soon see that matter is capable of various modes of thinking, all of which escape our

comprehension. To take examples: we know well enough now that unconscious thought (paradoxical as it sounds) is at least as weighty as conscious and self-conscious thought. This applies in our present knowledge of individual human experience. But, in addition to that, both Jung and Freud assume the existence of an ancestral psychic continuum which they call the racial unconscious. From this we can pass to mention instinct in animals. We try hard to believe that there must be a kind of chemistry to explain this, as though it were imperative above all things to avoid any acceptance of psychic activity. It shows how materialist our modes of thought have become, and how difficult it has become for us to conceive of any kind of psychic activity except our own.

The inadequacy of our conventional ideas is exposed when we come to inspect the social behaviour of the nest and hive insects. We have to say that intelligence of some sort is seen to be at work very far down the ranks of living species. Of what sort this intelligence is it is impossible to say. It is not the same as ours. When we look at the social insects we are made aware of very intricate and efficient purposive action, with calculated division of labour and much foresight involved, and yet we cannot suppose that this intelligence is present in any individual member of the community. What is the source of this directed and organised intelligence? We are confident that no individual has sufficient mentality to direct this activity or even to know self-consciously what it is itself doing. The intelligence is present but not as the possession of individuals. We have to think that the intelligence and design is pervasive without

individual locality – the hive in general is intelligent, so to speak. The pervasiveness of intelligence without locality is something with which our thought has difficulty in coping. We are so used to supposing that a mind is confined to a brain\* that we find it hard to think of purposive design without a localised origin.

What is called the balance of nature may be thought of in this connection. Instances of the balance of nature are of this kind: when the lions of the Kruger National Park were considered too numerous many were killed off, with the result that a rise in their birth-rate followed, and when there is an influx of voles the short-eared owl, which preys upon them, increases the clutches of its eggs from the normal 4-6 to 10 or so. We have to conceive of the designed behaviour of various species as being quite beyond the determination of any member of them. And sometimes we may wonder whether the whole of nature's ordinances and processes may not have to be viewed as something of that order.

As to whether it has a purpose we cannot say. We are not in a position to perceive a total purpose in the total cosmos. Where we observe purposes in nature we are in the proper position for observers to be, namely outside the observed events. In the case of the universe as a whole we are inside. If it is possible to *feel* with the universe, we, as part of it, might be able to do that; but as for examining it from the outside, we are permanently incompetent to do so. We know why the moth lays its eggs on a parti-

\* The one clear thing which 'psychic phenomena' have demonstrated is that this is not entirely so. A session with a competent clairvoyant will amply show that private knowledge can 'leak away' from one mind to another without any mechanical communication.

cular plant, although the moth does not. Although it is the actor, we the observers understand its behaviour better than it does itself. If we were to ask whether the whole universe is purposive we could never provide the answer because we are actors within it, and not external examiners. The limitation of our knowledge about the purpose of the universe and our place in it (if there is a purpose in it) is an absolute limitation, that is, it is a limitation we can never hope to overcome. We may be acting in an ignorance analogous to the ignorance of the moth.

Yet it would not be surprising if we found in man, side by side with an ignorance comparable with that of the moth, a constructive activity based on a faith comparable with the over-all wisdom implicit in the instinct of the moth.

Yet nothing is more urgent than that we should be able to place ourselves. That could be said to be the objective of all philosophies, all religions and moralities. It does not matter what the teaching is; it is expected in the end to show us where we are, what we are to participate in, how we should feel about our situation, and how we should behave in the light of it.

The serious person is aware in his nature of being called upon to react to his universe in the ways of knowledge, feeling and morality. Nothing that is achieved in any of these departments is ever adequate. In all science, art and ethics we have the same experience of the impression of reaching out into the unknown. All three phases of human nature show in their different ways creative force. The inclusively dynamic factor, however, is morality. How striking a thing it is that a biologist like Sir Julian Huxley should so consistently

place the evolutionary character of man as now being in his morality. He never seems to lose an opportunity of forwarding the conclusion that the whole drive of evolution in that sphere of the universe open to our scientific knowledge is now centred on man, and, in man, the growing-point is morality.

The existentialists must be given credit for having set before us a moral imperative as the irreducible meaning of the human situation. They stressed the urgency of this, by showing that this is the indispensable remainder, even when one has dispensed with any moral atmosphere in the cosmical environment.

But what we have always known, and should not be embarrassed to recollect, is that the cosmos, and not we ourselves, has produced us, and brought us to this view of ourselves as moral creatures by which we produced our fall. James Martineau, one of the most honoured of Unitarian teachers, saw this situation in the light of a great good sense. He saw that it obviously was man's business to be moral, and also that his ethical destiny could be appreciated and essayed without any theistic reference. So far as that went, he could be said to be humanist. But what he further observed was that man, being above all a moral creature, threw light, to some extent, on the creation itself. Darwin had called man 'the apex of creation'. What kind of a creation, it could fairly be asked, was it that had a moral creature as its apex? When we speak here of a moral creature we are certainly not speaking of a morally perfect creature, but of one in which there is a growing consciousness of the issues of good and evil. In this sense there is some place in the cosmos for morality. 'We are capable of wisdom, and are

part of the world; therefore the world is wise.' So far as that part of the universe that is open to our knowledge is concerned, the whole process of creation and evolution has, so to speak, pointed to mankind as a vehicle of a certain kind of goodness. To that degree at least we are at liberty to say that the cosmos has morality as one of its attributes or features. How big a feature? we may ask. We are in no position to say. Does it matter how big? and, in any case, does not the answer to that depend, to an incalculable extent, on man's own endeavour?

(3)

CASTING our minds back over what we have been trying to set out in order, we see we have confronted ourselves with a unitary cosmos, everywhere going by law in a creational process, visibly purposive in parts and manifesting psychic powers.

Of this totality of dynamic existence we would have to say, if we wanted one word for it and lacking any other, that it is altogether a manifestation of will. Inasmuch as this will is universal, supremely powerful, and, from the human point of view, transcendent and wonderful we have to ascribe to it an absolutely unique status. For this status the traditional word (with our eye particularly on the use of it by Aquinas) is God. The full height and depth of this power nobody presumes to know and, surely, it is for ever beyond human knowledge; therefore it is mysterious. And so much of what is visible of its works fills us with wonder and admiration; therefore it displays both miracle

and glory. Anything that shows forth these features convincingly and authentically we call divine.

If we are speaking of the will of God, then, we may ask, what is its will? It is what it discloses itself as being in the beginning and always – the will to existence. 'The Fountain of Existence' is the phrase in the Westminster Confession, the will-to-be, fundamental alike in Genesis and in Schopenhauer. Primarily and ultimately God is the creator of all things; creativity is his first and last attribute.

If, again, we are asked for the whereabouts of this will – its centre, whether it is 'above', 'beyond' or 'behind' – we have to say that the will is understood as a spirit, that is, a pervasive activator. The analogy is the life of an animal body. The organic, or organising, spirit is not at any one point, but at all points, present everywhere as the active reason for the process – the *logos*.

The will, then, is in us also. In an especial way we are partakers of the divine nature, because man has so much of creatorship in him also. His feeling towards works of art and technology is reminiscent of the unresting aboriginal divine impulse. But if man is a co-worker with God it would be meaningless unless there were some independence in the human manifestations.

As for man's knowledge of God, so many aspects of the thought of God come by inferential reasoning. But the clinching conviction must, we imagine, always be by intuition. Ultimately God is not an object for investigation for the very reason that we are part of his will; we view him as it were, from within; and even so far as we ourselves are concerned there is

a curious infelicity about all attempts to transform our sense of inwardness into perceptual knowledge of our own nature. The real context of understanding then, between man and God, so far as there is one, is not of knowledge. It is indeed spiritual and a matter of faith. Not the faith, miscalled so, which purports to give us a series of 'Articles of Faith' in due and convenient system, but the faith reminiscent of the instinctive dutifulness of any creature of the animal kingdom.\* This is a faith of no precise intellectual content, but a dynamic trust, blind in a sense, but powerful enough to release our activities for forward venturing. To be sure that some thing has a meaning is not always the same thing as knowing what that meaning is. This is our constant attitude to the things of nature: we see many phases of biological activity which we cannot at the moment explain, but that makes no difference to our conviction that they all have their reasons. As to the total process of nature, we are inside it and cannot be its objective examiners, but it communicates to us subjectively what in the animals is called instinct and in us has come to be called faith.

## (4)

WE HAVE not produced here the idea of the personal paternal God 'above' who shows his indulgent love and care for individual men and women by evident acts of providential intervention. This is the anthropomorphic God of traditional liberal Christianity. We

\* 'Meeting with God is not for man in order that he may concern himself with God, but in order that he may confirm his sense of meaning in the world.'—Martin Buber: *I and Thou*

are no longer able to construct such an image. It is an image of ourselves. It is our own self-regarding egos sentimentalised and blown up to impossible transcendental dimensions. Certainly a humanist can be expected to believe in a God, but not that one, not the man-form, however spiritualised, in the heavens. The place for man-forms is the earth. If God had been a perfect man himself there would have been no need for him to create an imperfect race of men. If God is nothing but an infinitely superior human character then he is not God. God is not *like* anything except himself.

The service that the Barthian witness may be said to have done is a painful surgical one, from which, however, we should hope to recuperate and benefit. It has removed from us the fantasy of sentimentalised anthropomorphism on which our fathers leant. It is strange that liberal Christianity, which was in many ways the most realistic of current theologies, should still retain so weak and inauspicious a concept of Deity. It was bound to disappear from the convictions of thinking men with the onset of the social cataclysms of the twentieth century.

And now the choice is between the Calvinistic almighty sovereign, alien and adverse to nature, reason and humanity, who, over and above the pathos of a hopeless world for which he refuses all responsibility pronounces a sinister word of doom to follow mankind into the next world of eternity, and, on the other hand, the God whose will is creation, in whom is seen one thing, one infinite thing, the miracle of existence.

It is this God who is the worshipful one. It is before his majesty and power that every knee must bow. But

is he good? He is good because he is the author of all being. If that is evil then our God would not be good. But good is an aspect of creativity, which is why the creator would have goodness also in us. And for the same reason prayer becomes, as it is not on other lines, a reality and a practical act, for it becomes part of the creation of good.

With anthropomorphism thus abandoned, it may be objected that we are left with a God who is so lacking in human features as to be without significance for man. But here there is a very wise tradition, conspicuous in the Christian religion, and prominent also in other religions, particularly the Indian. It is the doctrine of incarnation. 'If we want to know what God looks like' the exposition begins, and then we are told to look at some human figure – in our own tradition, Jesus. But when we look at him what *do* we see? We do not see God – nobody ever can do that – we see recognisable man. That is, if we want to see what God looks like, we shall only see him so far as we begin to look at mankind in its real genius and true character, bearing, as it is seen to do in the image of Christ, some charismatic quality. This is the significant vehicle of deity for us. Humanist theology has always been implicit in the Christian religion.

I do not know if it will be said we have left aside the problem of evil from our discussion. If it were not that evil confronts us as a problem, there would have been no occasion for this sort of discussion at all. And the problem of evil is not created by evil but by good. The emergent will-to-good in mankind designates as evil those things it finds antagonistic to itself. These things so declared evil are various in different periods of

history and different parts of the world; they change and undergo their own evolution in response to changing situations. The dialectic of good and evil is a typically human manifestation, and the great revelations of truth and good come from within the experience.

To have a moral consciousness is to experience a tension. In one way or another the tension has always been between the man and that which transcends him. Formerly the transcendent was clearly identified with the glory and righteousness of God, and the tension was between the natural and the supernatural. Even if this sense of the divine challenge has departed from the convictions of men and women the feeling of polarity is still present – that is, it is present where there is in any measure a serious consideration of life. The sense of one's own inadequacy in comparison with legitimate expectations, the guilt-feeling of one who is torn between promise and performance, between the latent and the realised – from these experiences, sometimes in anguish, come the idea of conscience and the sense of sin.

These are the symptoms of a tension that may not be avoided if the true nature and place of man are to be accepted. If the purpose of humanism were to abolish tension, to finish with any notion of a transcendent challenge, and to advocate a way of life in which all profound disturbances of the spirit could be dismissed as merely pathological, then it certainly would be out of accord with what actually is in man. As an example, in Marxism the idea of the transcendent occurs in the form of the process of history. The demands of 'history' upon the individual, the obligations under which whole

peoples and generations are laid by it – these are the transcendent factor in life and the tension and conscience of humanity, all flowing from a concept in which, it is claimed, there is nothing of the supernatural. And again, in more general terms, the master idea of science, which came to supremacy at the time when religion declined, has provided us with Huxley's view of mankind pulled between a dark past and a future full of ennobling hope. An evolutionary creature of this kind must indeed bear the strains of eternal tensions. With the ancestry such as man has, it would be strange if he had nothing in him like a sense of original sin. But this sense would not be active without also the premonition of great moral events to come.

One of the ultimate questions, if not *the* ultimate question, is why humanity should exist at all. Our answer here is that mankind exists because it is necessary to God. It was necessary for the creator of all to create us too. Of course man is dependent for his existence on his creator; nevertheless God has need of man, and his need is that man should be characteristically man, and, learning more and more what there is in his nature, learn also how to become more human. Thereby man is and does what God could not be or do without him. Man is the human aspect of God, God manifested in the role and under the circumstances which distinguish human life from the rest of existence.

The fallacy has been to think we need other worlds in which to attain our proper knowledge of God. It is an ingrained escapism. We have to acknowledge and accept our ignorance of all other possible worlds, and to appreciate this one always more perceptively, hoping ever to extend its dimensions of meaning.



That all things should be mine  
This makes His bounty most divine.  
But that they all more rich should be,  
And far more brightly shine  
As used by me!  
It ravishes my soul to see the end  
to which this work so wonderful doth tend.\*

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\* Thomas Traherne: *Amendment*