

BLACKFRIARS

VOL. XXIV

MARCH 1943

No. 276

THE PROBLEM TO-DAY

PHILOSOPHERS, ancient as well as modern, Eastern as well as Western, have always been primarily concerned with the relation of the One and the Many. They have approached it from many angles and have treated it under different titles; Act and Potency, Form and Matter, Substance and Accidents, these fall within the perennial philosophy, but there are many other approaches. They are looking for the meaning of things; the meaning is one, the things are many. Even if the philosopher decides that there is no meaning and all is continuous, unrelated change, he has found a single frame, the One, for his whole experience of the Many. How can both have reality, the one being embracing all things? If the one being is the reality, then is not the multiplicity around us only apparent? If the things we look upon, daily astonished at their variety, are real, then is not the One into which we try to fit them merely a convenient fiction to satisfy the hunger of the enquiring mind?

Curiously, although philosophers have given themselves to this problem with a constant zeal, they have seldom found a stabilised view that could show them the One and the Many locked in an enduring embrace. They have swayed between the two poles, either seeing all in terms of the unique One, or seeing the One in terms of the All. The Atomists found nothing but multiplicity, the lowest possible unit, undistinguished, containing nothing but its one homogeneous self; for Zeno and Parmenides, all that they could see or know was contained in the unique being of which they were themselves only expressions. Even Plato became so enamoured of unity that the variety of the world around him appeared only as fleeting shadows, never to be possessed as real treasure. Who can balance between these attractive depths?

The same problem has reached an acute form in the concrete relations between men in the world of to-day. The situation among the men who make up modern 'civilised' society is merely an application of the same tension in the philosophic mind between the One and the Many. The unnumbered host of men jostling each other in their effort to keep alive, like the millions of molecules in a cloud

of gas, has a reality not in itself, but in each individual human being. Take each man, separate him from his fellows, set him at variance with all others, and there you have complete multiplicity, which in other words is called anarchy. At the opposite pole, individual men are gathered into massive groups, as state, nation or race, which alone have meaning and reality. But in the concrete we cannot discover a single whole, sufficiently massive to absorb all men, into which every individual can be poured without distinction. Without a world-state, we think, the anarchy of large groups of men will be even more pernicious than that of individuals, because their conflicts are greater. So we are looking for the One in human affairs as we contemplate the desperate enmities of the many.

Mr. Gerald Heard has recently contributed some penetrating analysis of the modern dilemma in his *Man the Master*. His main assumption of an essential evolutionary process in man and society is wholly unacceptable to a Catholic; but this error has not confused his judgment when he discovers in dictatorship the same spirit as in modern democracy, only in a further stage of development. 'The dictatorships are simply the rapid ripening of the fruit of government of which democracy is only the flower.' For as the process of articulation, or rather decomposition, continues, and the groups of men become split up into many opposing unities, there comes a point when isolation spells insecurity and the individual takes refuge in 'paternal provision.' The people 'see that economic security could be given and, for that, they are ready to pay the price of psychological liberty and economic independence.' Hence a modern democracy, if it is to remain a great power, cannot continue to separate its component parts from each other, but must change into some form of tyranny. Furthermore, 'whether we are a democracy trying to achieve material comfort for all our fellow constituents, or whether we are a dictatorship trying to win material victory for our state, we are united in a common, basic faith, the faith that the only means which work are material and the only goal attainable is also material. The world . . . is reality and the way to master that reality is through physical force. All else is illusion; of that all statesmen, whether democratic or dictatorial, are convinced' (p. 31).

Mr. Heard's diagnosis therefore shows that the conflict between unities, the individual unities of democracy and the collectivised unities of totalitarianism, is not so fundamental as it seems. And his contention is daily proving itself in the clamour for material security for all in terms of bureaucracy and the loss of responsible independence. The transition that so many people demand, from the Many

to the One, from the individual self-supporting man or family to the security-providing State, is in fact only a numerical change in the composition of the units. No true attempt is made to combine the Many in the One, without loss of either; no one seriously suggests that either democracy or dictatorship offers a way for all mankind to be as one, while the lesser groups, races, nations, families, individuals, remain complete and unassailed. There is no real dialectic from democracy to dictatorship in the modern states because they are based on the same sort of unities.

This point of view may, however, be subject to easy generalisation. If the position were so simple, it would mean that neither side in the present conflict could command the allegiance of a truly Christian man. For if to fight for democracy were to fight for a body of men who sought only material security, and that by means of a gradual process of separation and anarchy, there would be no justice in the war. But however materialistic the outlook of the statesmen—and Mr. Heard surely exaggerates—one system will provide opportunity for worshipping God while the other attacks all religion. In Spain, unfortunate circumstances placed the Church on the side of dictatorship and totalitarianism, as had happened before in Italy. The outlook of the Fascist or Nazi being ultimately only material and inseparable from the State, he cannot permit the spiritual forces to have their proper effect. But in fact and illogically he had, in Italy and Spain, to allow the power of the Church to be exercised according to its nature, whereas his opponents would have done their best to stamp out religion. So, too, modern democracy, in spite of itself, finds itself championing Christian freedom of spirit, even indeed supporting with the sword the primacy of the spiritual.

Yet Mr. Heard's analysis is a warning against undue optimism in planning the post-war world. Christianity will be *used* as long as it helps the war effort. Democracy itself disintegrates, and the leader of democracy looks for something to cement society into some semblance of a whole; as an alternative to totalitarianism he finds the power of Christianity and tries to use it for his own ends. A zealous and enthusiastic group of Christians in a state provides the statesman with a serious temptation. Therefore even in the event of a complete victory for the 'democracies,' the future remains dark. Christian influence will no longer need to be counted and the world will endeavour to return to those 'democratic' ideals which are in fact the principles of disintegration and conflict among the parts. That means further wars and misery. If we are concerned to re-establish the same type of unity, which stands in self-conscious opposition to all other unities, we are fighting in vain. Yet we regard

it as democratic to encourage class-consciousness in the different strata of society, sex-consciousness in such things as feminism, occupation-consciousness in such organisations as trade unions. These unities, if thus emphasised, are not different in nature from those based on nation- or race-consciousness.

The future holds few brilliant hopes, except in such negative things as the untold relief of the cessation of hostilities. For there is no sign of a general recognition of our fundamental need, that of the Catholic—i.e. the universal—religion which will embrace all lesser units in a higher unity transcending all temporal or natural differences, annulling their disruptive tendencies, and welding them into a whole without destroying them. The Many-in-the-One which the philosopher seeks is provided in the concrete for the human millions by means of the *unum* of the universal religion. An English Catholic is no less an Englishman, the French a Frenchman, the German a German, but they all three share a basic form, a common life which, if they are true to their Catholicism, overpowers any natural or artificial antipathy. This community of men is clearly in a completely different order from any Federalism we hear spoken of to-day.

Mr. Heard is surely wrong in praising self-consciousness as a great step forward in human evolution, requiring only to be co-ordinated with the subconscious. He identifies consciousness with self-consciousness, whereas the latter is essentially bound up with the materialist, separatist attitude which makes the worker conscious that he is a worker, the Italian that he is an Italian, the woman that she is not a man. When a man becomes conscious of himself that he is not as other men, his separation from a full life in society has already taken place. But when he is conscious of a high ideal shared with his fellows, an ideal that is not bound up with a human unity, then he is led to contribute his own unique talents and character to a common effort, to a common life shared not only with his family, his fellow-workers, his fatherland, but with all men in the order of charity. That order admits of degrees of intensity, of interest and sympathy, for a Norwegian is not so concerned with the natives of Uganda as he is with his own family or his fellow Norsemen; but it admits of no separatism or opposition. To the Christian is always said: 'Know thyself'; but that is a self-consciousness which emerges from a consciousness of the One, contrasted with his own duplicity. The order of charity begins with God and descends to self. That is the secret for bringing the millions of selves within the bond of the One.

The social-political problem will therefore remain as acute at the end of the war, and golden dreams are out of place. No Leagues

or Federations abroad, no Beveridge Plans or Home Rule at home, will bring peace or security any closer, unless such policies are inspired by a Catholic faith and charity, a religion which is not an instrument for the policies and parties of the nations.

But what hope is there that victorious statesmen will recognise the true nature of religion when one who can analyse the nature of modern democracy and Fascism like Mr. Heard fails so lamentably to understand Christianity? For him the Christian offers no unity, but on the contrary an essential duality, splitting society right across :

The theory of Christendom . . . Here we have the frank confession of there being two lives, a higher and a lower. The lower is the life of the actual world. The higher is the life lived and restricted in expectation of another life and world after death. This is not a valid alternative and contrast. There are not two worlds. That mistake springs from the lack of epistemology and the resultant rudimentary cosmology which limited the Hebrew—and through it—the Catholic mind. For this inadequate picture of the Seen, Christianity slavishly adopted' (*Man the Master*, p. 41).

There can be little hope of any settled agreement among men so long as they thus reject with such stupidity the One of Catholicism. We can, however, hardly blame their blindness while Catholics themselves are more keen to show the variety of the Many than the cohesion of the One. The problem is great: Catholics, perhaps unconsciously, hold an important key to its solution.

The Editor regrets that Fr. Victor White's second article on 'Thomism and Affective Knowledge' has been unavoidably delayed. It is hoped that it will appear in the near future.
