

## MAN'S ENCOUNTER WITH HIMSELF

Our insight into the paradoxical nature of the human situation and the awareness of the polarity of man's being has not been transmitted through rigorous philosophical reflection but has been nurtured by the mystic, religious and poetic traditions of all times. It is therefore all the more necessary to detect and recognize the religious and mystic accents of recent philosophic thought in their philosophical camouflage, and try to see how philosophic reflections on man's pre-philosophic awareness of himself in his archaic experience can significantly contribute to build an authentic image of him. An alleged incident in the life of the great Persian poet and mystic, Shaikh Fariduddin Attar, will illustrate better what we mean than any philosophical sophistication. Once taken captive by a soldier of the Tartar hordes which sacked Nishapur, he refused to let his life be redeemed by the offer of a substantial sum as he considered himself worth much more. However he later urged on his captor to accept as lowly a price as a bundle of grass since he deemed himself not worth even that much. The consequence can easily be imagined. The authenticity of this story, like that of all beautiful stories which make history meaningful, is now disputed. Its meta-historical relevance remains unchallenged nevertheless. What is really intended to be conveyed by weaving an imaginary anecdote round the life of a great Sufi is probably the paradoxicality of

man's existence alluded to in the Quran: "Verily we created man in the most excellent stature and then reduced him to the lowest of the low" (Quran XCV). Consequently man moves between two infinities, the infinite which makes him swing to dizzy heights and the infinite which allows him to sink to frightening depths. In other words he can rise so high as to assimilate the attributes of the divine and fall so low as to forfeit his human identity.

Man experiences himself at different levels. His image of himself then changes with the shifting situations of his history and the shifting moods of his own psychological situation. As a consequence the question: "what is man?", cannot be expected to elicit an answer which is settled once for all. If in one perspective man seems to be of no account and the Psalmist's words: "What is man, that thou art mindful of him?" ring true, in another perspective man seems to mark the limit, and the words of the Muslim Sufi Bayazid: "Praise be to me, how great is my glory", seem to be truly overpowering. No wonder then that in religious consciousness he appears to share in the modal characteristics of momentariness and temporality with all creation on the one hand; on the other he is expected to rise from the dust and ashes of existence to the glory of a new being. Now in his experience of being-in-the-world he is so much aware of his existence as a presence here and now that he is mostly oblivious to the inevitability of his liquidation, apparent or real, in his encounter with death. But man's encounter with other men reveals a dimension which is not found at any other level of existence. Here again we are confronted with two aspects: on the one hand he finds himself in a windowless monad, alone and friendless, confined in the privacy of his world; on the other he finds himself involved with others in love and sympathy and can seek the meaning of his life in communication with others as well as in artistic creativeness and scientific achievement. It is with reference to his existential privacy that an infinite divides one man from another. And this primitive loneliness conceals within itself the urge to transcend itself in friendship and love but the deeper one loves the greater is one's awareness that loneliness in its ultimacy cannot be transcended in any form of intimacy, all appearances to the contrary notwithstanding. Real fellowship can only develop with the recognition of one's right

to be lonely and does not call for its renunciation. Loneliness cannot be shared, otherwise fellowship will lose its authenticity. It would, then, be an attempt to escape from oneself by disowning one's identity. Some traditional interpretations of the mystic experience of unity are easily exposed to this charge.

Now man has appeared in his deficiency and incompleteness rather than in his fullness. Theological and philosophical theories also have shifted their accent from time to time. Philosophers like Kant emphasized human dignity but this dignity, Kant thought, does not fall to man in his individual capacity but as a representative of humanity. Man, he said, is unclean enough but as a representative of humanity he deserves our respect. Whilst religious thinkers like Pascal have found in man's misery his greatness, scientific theories have often alluded to him as a 'cosmic orphan.' The old vision of man on earth as a forced exile temporarily alienated from God only to be eventually reconciled to him is replaced by that of man who finds himself 'thrown' in this world with his consciousness ridden by death and given to dread and anguish. In a significant passage the Quran refers to man as the bearer of a 'trust' which was offered to creation as a whole, but while heaven and earth declined the responsibility it was man who boldly accepted it, regardless of the consequences. "Lo! We offered the trust unto the heavens and the earth and the hills but they shrank from bearing it, being scared. And man assumed it. Lo! He hath been cruel unto himself, blessedly ignorant (of the consequences)." (33:72).

A medieval Muslim mystic, Mahmood Shabistari, thought that the question which can be pertinently asked about man was not what he is but 'who' he is, and Heidegger in our day has been led to the same question through the interpretation of pre-Socratic Greek thought. Interested as they are in seeking the authentic identity of Man, they discover in his "who-ness" the peculiar accent of his being. But when we look closer we find a world of difference behind the philosophical motivation of Mahmood and Heidegger. Whilst Heidegger is interested in man's being in time, in his historicity and 'questionability' the Sufi thinker is concerned with man's *qua* being, not in his being in the world,

<sup>1</sup> Max Scheler, *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos*, Darmstadt, 1928, p. 48.

not his being there in history, but in his being *sans* world and *sans* history. But even Heidegger's approach has a deep theological accent of which it can never rid itself. With man's being always tuned to the world in dread and given to cares, it has all the characteristics of a fallen existence; it is at the same time involved in a desperate attempt to regain its authenticity. While it may seem anachronistic today to think of the mystic vision of man as a transmigrant wayfarer who moves to higher planes, or as an image of God, or His viceregent, who has alienated himself from his origins, our understanding of man in his earth-rootedness (*Dasein*) is greatly helped by our ever remaining alert to religious and mystic awareness.

Man's being in the world has been the subject of discussion in two most fruitful ways, one is the existentialist approach and the other is that of philosophical anthropology which received its initial impetus from Max Scheler. There is now no question of man as the incarnation of logos or of his substantial identity with Brahman but of man with all his limitations and privation. What counts is only his Promethean posture of defiance and the fact that, in spite of all his 'incompleteness' and apparent insignificance, he is big enough to reject what is offered to him.

What is man then? It is, according to Max Scheler, his capacity to say 'No' to life; it is in his power to deny what is offered to him by nature that man's unique status in the world is determined. Man frees himself from the pressures of life. Whilst the animal is lost in his world 'ecstatically,' man can comprehend (*erfassen*) these objects without the limitations which the functional unity of vital drives and sense organs imposes on him. He has an openness to the world (*Welt-offen*) which the animal cannot have. Agreeing with Nietzsche, Scheler says that man is the animal who can make promises. Man is a being who can transcend himself and the world and as such he is capable of irony and humour and has the ability to go beyond himself. To be man is then to confront the world as given here and now in its immediate presence with a radical 'No'. Man is the being who can suppress his own instinctive drives and, in contrast to the animals who always say 'Yes' to Reality, he is the one who can say 'No' to life, the eternal protestant against the given reality. It is he who does not accept what is given in his world environ-

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ment but frustrates instinctive pressure by affirming himself through negation and privation.

Another remarkable contribution to philosophical anthropology is made by Plessner.<sup>2</sup> He sees man's uniqueness in his "eccentricity." He is not, like the animals, held fast within the self-evidencing nature of his existence but is outside of himself, is aware of himself as a spatially-distanced being. Of this his whole cultural life is an expression. As modern philosophical anthropology steers clear of any metaphysical assumptions, man as a bodily something has received special accent. Plessner distinguishes between body as an object (*Körper*), as a thing among things, and body as lived as a centre of experience. My relation to my own body as lived cannot be the same as my relation to other objects. With writers like Plessner, man has not a body but is a body, though their position is carefully guarded against any materialistic interpretation. Body which is 'I' is not an object but a part of my encounter with myself. It is the character of being outside oneself that distinguishes man from animals. Physical characteristics have only an empirical value in the anthropological perspective of Plessner. Man is not inextricably bound with any specific form and, following the plaenotologist Dacque's suggestion, one can well imagine man in forms different from those with which we are familiar. Animals, the biologist Von Üxull thought, are confined to a world which is peculiar to their species and do not respond at all to the stimuli which are not relevant to their world (*Umwelt*). A spider is alert to the slightest noise relevant to its world but remains indifferent to the deafening noises which may take place round and about.

Some critics of Von Üxull's teaching have found in man the capacity to go beyond his biological barriers but still there is no denying the fact that man, though he has the capacity to transcend his native constraints, may remain confined within his world in such a way as to be irresponsive to the world at large. Alexis Carrell made the significant remark that a physicist, a mystic and a lover have different worlds to deal with and may not respond to what passes in worlds other than theirs.

<sup>2</sup> H. Pleassner, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch*, Berlin, 1965, p. 127.

Once we leave the categorical framework of philosophical anthropology as well as the philosophically oriented biology and consider the image of man as it has appeared on the philosophical horizon in the wake of Heidegger's philosophizing, the whole atmosphere undergoes a radical change. Now man is understood through his '*Stimmung*,' his affective 'tuning' or his moods. The basic mood for the early Heidegger was dread and the world was given to dread or anxiety. But if we do not confine ourselves to dread and allow to more positive moods an equal status the world will assume a totally different colouring. In spite of all that can be said against making dread the basic modality of human existence it will always retain its primacy. It is not man's exposure to the concrete situations of life which brings about dread but it is the consciousness of his finitude, his being, here and now, without any orientation, which creates what Leibniz called *inquiétude puissante*. However suspect a one-sided emphasis on dread may appear to be, it gives, in fact, a much more faithful picture of *la condition humaine* than the so-called positive moods and sentiments. It is liable to lead to a mystic feeling of man's rootlessness and homelessness, the feeling of being not at home in the world. But his feeling of homelessness is not the last word because it is on the basis of this feeling that man is led to transcend himself in culture. Culture is not a reaction against biological deficiency or incompleteness (*Feblen*) or a defence mechanism (Freud), but a positive response to one's own condition, the human situation. In art and religion a characteristically human response comes into play. Longing (*Sehnsucht*), as a constituent of being-in-the-world, is sadly missing in the existentialist understanding of the human situation. Longing is oriented towards future. Man longs to have what is not given and what may not be given at all. Even if it is given it may not be given in its fullness. Longing as such should be distinguished from desires. Desires may be satisfied; longing is never fulfilled and in its seeming fulfilment the element of inadequacy remains a disturbing factor. It may or may not have any definite object. But even if it has a definite object it cannot be a fully defined object. Man feels restlessness without knowing why; he suffers from no apparent cause. Some of the best poetry inspired by longing has an elegiac note. Blending with memory it may

provoke an experience in which past is lived as future. We long to re-live an experience which has irrevocably receded into the past but which we wish to project into the future. It may appear on a sudden as a pervasive feeling which overpowers one with so irresistible a force that one is tempted to see in man more than a citizen of this world, and his *inquiétude* as intimation of the beyond. Every achievement looks small, every fulfilment incomplete, and when his disquiet is translated into secular terms man's privilege seems to reside in his imperfection and in his being an unfinished product. Now our longing may develop a religious accent and may turn into the expectation of some charismatic figure who would redeem the world of its evil. The transcendental dimension of longing finds expression in man's unconquerable tendency "to pine for what is not" and to be agitated by "divine discontent." It does not respect the possibilities available to man, but looks to the impossible. "What will the next step of my longing be," asks Ghalib, an Urdu poet, "when the wilderness of possibilities turns out to be just a foot-print on the way?" Goethe has shown in his beautiful poem "*Consolation in Tears*" that, dissatisfied as he is with what is given, man tries to soar to the stars, and realizing how futile it is to seek what lies beyond one's reach, he finds consolation in tears. But, be it noted, for Goethe these are not "idle tears" but the expression of man's unconquerable thirst to overcome the limitation of his finitude. Empirical unavailability makes no difference to the existential urge. The great mystic poet of the Persian language, Jalauddin Rumi, refers to this when he says: "He said: what you are searching for cannot be found." I said: "what can not be found is precisely what I long for."

Man's range of activity varies infinitely. He can be characterized in diametrically opposed terms. It is the ability to use language and, with language, his ability to use symbols that is characteristic of man, as Cassirer has maintained. No less significant is his silence, the ability to convey what is not conveyable through language. It is silence which speaks through a smile as cryptic and as meaningful as that of the Buddha. This kind of silence is to be distinguished from mere cessation of speech, as well as from one's inability to find the right word. It is again silence which does not suffer any break but is really quickened

with meaning when it takes the form of seemingly irrelevant questions and answers in Zen Buddhist experience. This communicative silence marks a limiting experience which cannot be given in any logical judgements but which conveys its meaning through participation.

Words have a different function to fulfil at different levels of human experience. Whilst they subserve practical interests at the ordinary level and operate in a frame of reference which is practically fixed, they change their reference with the shifting situation of scientific thought at the scientific level. In poetry and religion it is not only the written word but its sound that has a relevance of its own and the frame of reference is not established once for all but remains loaded with different possibilities of meaning or 'revelation.' Man is distinguished by language no doubt, yet he is no less distinguished when he stands speechless, when he knows what he has to say but cannot say what he knows. He communicates, perhaps more effectively, not through verbal symbolism but through art, through colour and sounds, through gestures and movements. In art, what is said is not as important as what is not said, but intimated. In deep human experiences such as love, unintelligible whispers are more meaningful than the words duly pronounced and words which do not apparently make much sense carry a world of meaning. Persons engaged in intimate conversation suddenly fall into silence to participate in depth and the more they find themselves alienated the more 'communicative' they become. And in man's address to God in prayer, words may break down, and the closer he feels to the eternal mystery, the more his own words will appear to him as betrayal of his ultimate privacy. On the one side man is then distinguished by his ability to speak, on the other by his resistance to speaking when words do not convey his intentions and his sentiments, when he finds his experiences overflowing the boundaries of possible communication. But culture rests on communicability, whether this communicability is made effective through words or through other possible media. Communicability however must be conscious of its own limit and philosophy must be carried by this consciousness of 'limit'. It is not necessary to think of human limitation only in relation to transcendence. This is apparent at every level of cultural and



scientific activity, though this may appear sharpest when we dare to transcend all possible experience. One talks even now of a cultural or a historical threshold. Is it not a fact that man responds only to what passes current or what is relevant to his surrounding world, remaining 'blind' to what has no relation to his milieu or to the historical situation in which he finds himself?

Thus man's reflection in religion, art, scientific achievements and in everyday experience of fulfilment and frustration does not allow us to identify him in any uniformly describable features. Man is not a fixed animal (*festgestelltes Tier*), as Nietzsche said, but appears in all his elusiveness and unpredictability. Man has a history which animals other than man do not have. His being-in-the-world is his involvement in history, though history may not exhaust his "future." Man's history is not a recapitulation of what has been, but a creative process which always makes room for untold possibilities. With his past projected towards an open future his history makes no allowance for re-emergence and recurrence.

What is he then? Man in his pure subjectivity and aloofness, in his absolute I-am-ness, is as baffling a mystery as God in his primal I-am-ness, without any reference to creation. It is here that one can explain with Karl Jaspers: "I am not what I know and I know not what I am."<sup>3</sup> Whilst he appears a stranger to himself in silent self-contemplation and does not know what he is in himself in his ultimate mystery, his phenomenal station can only be understood in his historicity. It is in history that man transcends the confines of his privacy and his every action assumes super-individual relevance. With his involvement in history man exposes himself to a great risk. His 'engagement' in history is apt to bring about his estrangement from his metaphysical springs. But all that is significant in man and all that is human in him may have no relevance for history. Let us not be so carried away by the epic dimension of history as to look down upon the little joys and sorrows, loves and frustrations with which human life is woven and which are all enacted on the margin of history. Many a flower blushes unseen, making the

<sup>3</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Die Geistige Situation der Gegenwart*, Berlin, 1965, p. 163.

atmosphere redolent with its fragrance but leaving no trace behind. A person's life may become eventful by the impact of another person and yet remain completely indifferent to the 'events' which make history eventful.

It is on the platform of history, nevertheless, that we know how man really 'behaves.' On the one hand he seems to impart meaning to history by transforming Nature and by founding civilizations; on the other there seems to lurk in him a self-destructive tendency which is ever prepared to bring to nought his work and achievement. States which he has founded, and which claim to embody the will of the people, develop a will of their own which runs counter to that of the people they are supposed to represent. Democracy degenerates into dictatorship, even if it is not that of one individual it is certainly of a clique or of a most vocal minority. The individuals who control the State are so much swayed by passions in the hour of decision that they give the impression that they are "tricked" by a higher agency, call it what you will, to sub-serve interests other than the ones they were originally supposed to pursue. Man seems only to play a "role" assigned to him. In his encounter with himself in history, man may not recognize his own reflection and many a time he may appear to have forfeited his moral identity. Morality is 'vetoed' at every step. And no wonder if what happened in history appears "revolting" to moral consciousness. Man is pitted against man and the oppressed and the oppressors constantly shift their role. Brute force, though seemingly tempered at times, still holds sway at the historical level. Whether human history is moving towards a better world order or coming to a close is a question which still hangs in the balance. It is at such a time as ours, when there seems to be as much sense as nonsense in history, that religious consciousness seeks to find meaning in history beyond history.

The in-itself of history, however—its inner meaning and direction as a whole, if it has any—must ever remain hidden. History is the limit beyond which we cannot go and behind which we cannot see. But whether history must come to a close, and "lapse" as envisaged in religion, or proceed uninterrupted, the 'future' of man's history remains an open question.