

4. Can Philosophy restore the image?

a) Modern Philosophy cannot, because these new ideologies have Absolutes, and modern Philosophy is *relative*. The coldness of Philosophy face to face with the enthusiasm invoked by pseudo-religions is impotent.

Historically this is true:

- a) Stoicism could not overcome the fire of Christianity.
- b) Julian the Apostate, tried in vain to overcome Christianity by turning from Socrates to Diogenes, because he thought the latter better rivalled the heroism of martyrs.

Scholastic Philosophy can meet it partially:

- a) Because it believes that Philosophy is not a spectator of reality, but its creator. History is made by wills rather than by material determinants.
- b) Because it humbly confesses it does not know all. Calling itself the handmaid of Theology it leads to Redemption and the Cross which alone can restore the Divine Image.

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MAN'S IMAGE OF MAN
(*Annual Association Address*)

I

IN responding to your kind invitation I have felt that you would bear with me if I took the occasion to submit to you the gist of a study which I began some fifteen years ago. It is unfinished, and I do not know whether I would have been granted the insight to finish it, even if the war had not forced me to lay it aside.

I had begun in the Nineteen Twenties, remembering the world I had known before 1914, to feel a foreboding that our measures of reconstruction and recovery were failing, and that somehow there was lacking the vital energy to restore and maintain our way of life. The great institutions of the Western World were still there, outwardly as impressive as ever. But they did not work as they had once worked. They no longer produced the same sense of security and of confidence, but rather a feeling of frustration and defeat. I had begun to feel, as Gilson has put it, "by a sort of immediate and personal experience," that during the years I had followed public affairs "western culture was steadily following its process of dissolution." The more I looked, the more I learned that what I had begun to see so dimly and so belatedly had been seen long before by those who were more sensitive and were wiser.

II

Most of us have, I think, taken it easily for granted that an age of progress was brought to an end by the great war which began in 1914, and we have then attributed to the war itself, as if it were an accidental and extraneous piece of very bad luck, the disorder of this age. Surely, that is only the appearance of things. Surely the truth is that our western civilization was already sick when the war of 1914 broke out, and it is to this sickness, immensely aggravated by the war, that we must attribute the failure of the peace and of the post-war reconstruction.

The symptoms of that sickness have been most visible not only in the ensuing catastrophe of revolutionary war but in the wide-spread sense of personal disorientation which preceded it. Men were increasingly uneasy, unsettled, and unhappy in the years before the great catastrophe of our age.

The moralist may describe this inner disorder as vice and sin. The statesman may describe it as discontent and lawlessness. The physician may describe it as a maladjustment

disclosed by such symptoms as confusion, anxiety, depression, frustration, inferiority, persecution, aimlessness and weariness. The theologian may describe it as godlessness. They are, I believe, talking about the same thing. They are talking about the modern men who have failed to understand and to live in the order, to which man as he is really constituted, belongs. The modern man is a sick man because—misconceiving the nature of man—he has allowed himself to become the kind of man who cannot be happy, who cannot operate the institutions of the Western World, who cannot find security and serenity in the universe.

For the paramount characteristic of the modern man is that he rejects the classic and traditional conception of human nature, which is, as Plato says, that the soul leads the affections, and as St. Thomas Aquinas says, that the human person exercises "a royal and politic sovereignty" over the desires. The modern view of human nature has been that reason is not the representative within us of the universal order,—and therefore the ruler of our appetites,—but that reason is the instrument of our appetites—that, as Mr. Bernard Shaw has put it, "it is only by accurate reasoning that we can calculate our actions so as to do what we intend to do—that is to fulfill our will."

This conception of human nature—one in which desire is sovereign and reason is the instrument for serving and satisfying desire—this conception has become increasingly the accepted image of man in the modern world. It is upon this image of man that our secular education has been based, and our social philosophy, and our personal codes. Our world today is in the hands of masses of people who are formed in this image and regard it as indubitably the true and scientifically correct conception of human nature. Yet the cultural tradition and the great central institutions of the Western World come down to us from men who would have regarded what is now the fashionable image of man as the image of an uncivilized barbarian.

This modern man, as he is turned out by our secular schools and as he is shaped by the prevailing popular culture, is a being whose desires are limited, not by his reason which represents the universal order of things, but only by the difficulty of getting more and more satisfaction. The desires of the modern man are, as respects his own inner measures of control, illimitable desires. It follows that the desires of the modern man can never be satisfied, and it is the anguish of unlimited and therefore insatiable desire which is the characteristic misery of our age.

For the unending pursuit of the ever-fleeting object of desire means not only that a man must surely fail; it means also—and this is much worse than failure—that his whole effort must seem to him futile. Yet in our age—because we have accepted the secular image of man—our social criterion of progress has been that we must encourage and incite ourselves to be forever unsatisfied, to think nothing is enough, and thus to seek the satisfaction of insatiable needs.

Thus we have made social problems insoluble. For while we talk of a standard of life, in fact we have no standard of life except that each man shall desire more than he has thus far obtained. Under Nineteenth Century capitalism, the ideal of the successful man was the interminable acquisition of wealth and power. Under Twentieth Century social democracy, the ideal is the same, except that more persons are involved in the interminable acquisition of wealth and power. In neither social philosophy is there any measure of or any means of putting a limit upon, what men shall desire and then seek to acquire.

It is precisely here, I believe, that the peculiar social problem of the Western World has been generated. For at bottom the social problem is not that of satisfying men's objective needs: modern technology is able to do that. The social problem of the modern world arises not out of the objective difficulty of providing an adequate material existence but out of men's subjective expectations, which be-

cause they are unlimited and insatiable, cause violence, inequality, hatred and frustration.

Though we like to tell ourselves that our purpose is to solve the social problem by ministering to men's needs, in practice we have a conception of human nature, and derived from it an educational system and a commercial and political propaganda, which treat all needs as unlimited. No income can therefore be sufficient to satisfy men's needs. For the appetite merely grows from feeding it. No standard of living is a standard. For there is always a more luxurious standard. No prosperity is rich enough. For the statistical curves on the charts might always go higher still. No nation can be big enough and no state can be powerful enough. For, until someone has conquered the whole world, it is always possible to be bigger and greater than you are.

Thus, there can never be contentment and peace of mind for modern men because their desires are irrational and therefore always expanding and forever unsatisfied. Their insatiable desires are an unending torture, like that which the gods inflicted on Sisyphus, in which they hunger though they eat, thirst though they drink, feel they are naked though they are clothed, long for love and cannot consummate it, seek and never find, achieve and always fail. This is the bitter core of the unhappiness of the modern man. He is an unhappy man, and therefore a dangerous man, because he could not ever be satisfied. His true nature, which is to find peace in the rational measure of things, has been deformed by desire that knows no limit and can find no rest.

III

This, I believe, is what we have to understand if we are to understand the discontent which is shaking the world. Men cannot remain civilized when they have rejected the culture of their civilization: that is to say when they no longer think of themselves and their place in the universe, when they no longer discipline themselves and their chil-

dren, in the tradition which comes to them from the prophets and the saints and the teachers and the philosophers and the discoverers who raised western men out of barbarism. The secular man—the man who obeys his impulses and knows no reason that transcends his wishes—this secular man, now dominant in the world, has for his chief article of faith an ideal of secular progress which is totally alienated from and profoundly opposed to the real character of the human person.

He supposes himself to be a bundle of desires which can be satisfied by becoming richer, more powerful, more famous, more glamorous, more irresistible. For in the secular tradition men are not taught to think that the disciplining of their desires to a rational measure is indispensable if they are ever to be truly satisfied. Thus the modern conception of progress is self-defeating. For it is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the economy of human existence: the secular theory of progress is an effort to balance the supply of satisfactions and the demand for them by expanding the demand faster than the supply can be increased. And since demand comes from our appetites, which grow by what they feed upon, whereas supply can be increased only by work and sacrifice, a philosophy which fails to insist upon the limitation of desire must make men forever unhappy—forever incapable of being satisfied and therefore forever seeking the unattainable.

IV

We frequently fall into error and folly, says Dr. Johnson, “not because the true principles of action are not known but because, for a time, they are not remembered.” The true principle of action, long known but in our century not remembered, is that man is so constituted that his greatest need is not the satisfaction of his desires but that his reason shall impose law and order upon his desires. This is the truth about man without which—had it not been discovered, had it not been revealed—our barbarian ancestors could not

have bred more or less civilized descendants. Without the discovery of the truth about the nature of man, the barbarian would not have wished, nor would he have had any idea of how, to raise himself out of barbarism. And, as we can see by looking at the world about us, as soon as men lose hold of this truth, seeing no compelling reason why they should restrain their appetities, they quickly become barbarians again.

V

The ideal which arises out of the classical image of man is not progress, which merely seeks to multiply the supply of satisfactions, but the good life.

To pursue the good life, as described for example by Aristotle, is to cultivate not some but all the human dispositions by limiting each to a Golden Mean: thus the demand for satisfactions, the promptings of appetite, the pressure of ambition, though recognized as natural and normal, are never unlimited. They are disciplined to the reality of things, and having been made moderate, they are not inherently and forever doomed to disappointment and frustration.

As perfected in the religious tradition of the west the good life is an imitation of God—that is to say the cultivation of the reason, which is an imitation of His omniscience, and of the only true freedom—the freedom to follow the dictates of reason—which is an intimation of His omnipotence.

Men who live in this tradition are capable of brotherhood in a civilized society. They can prefer to do unto others what they would have others do unto them. For men who choose to be ruled by reason are bound together as equals—equals not in the vulgar sense that they have identical or even comparable gifts and talents—but because they seek to reason and to obey reason.

This common potentiality gives them the right to hope that they can discover justice, that they can agree upon what is right. Their common freedom to follow reason by

mastering their desires gives them the common hope that they can make and maintain a civilized order.

Thus we see that the Golden Rule in social relations will work only among men who practice the Golden Mean in their personal conduct. Without these two elemental laws of human existence—that of the Golden Mean and that of the Golden Rule—the good society is impossible. The secular conception of man rejects the Golden Mean and has therefore made unworkable, even though lip-service is still given to it, the Golden Rule. For where there is no limitation upon desire—no willingness to accept the discipline which the Golden Mean requires—then the relations of men with one another must become an interminable struggle for domination and survival.

VI

When aggregations of men are “emancipated”—that was how they described it—when they no longer feel themselves bound by the elemental laws of their own nature, they do not in fact feel that they are freemen. For they are oppressed by inner confusion and the anxieties of insecurity. Far from entering into a joyous sense of freedom, they feel themselves at war with one another, and indeed at war within themselves.

That is why, as modern men cast off the bonds of tradition, they were not imbued with the spirit of confident enterprise and exhilarating adventure: the completely secularized modern man has disclosed his true condition within himself by joining in the search for protection and stability, seeking security from the state as he has lost his self-confidence and his self-reliance.

For at bottom the personal life of a man will be a disordered life if he has no rational command over his desires. In this disorder the sources of man’s confidence in himself, and with it his peace of mind and his resolution, are impaired. The modern secular way of life is not suited to the real nature of men. For it withholds from them that

discipline of their own impulses which is indispensable to their health and their happiness. Because they are deprived of a rational measure upon their desires, they do not conserve their energy but spend it upon unattainable and unsatisfying ends.

Disordered men cannot face life confidently: their impulse must, therefore, be to escape from the pressure of their own insatiable appetites, and from the endless conflicts with other men who also are driven by insatiable appetites. For disordered men there is at last no solace except in a flight from reality. Lacking confidence in themselves they cannot seek refuge in themselves, achieving peace in solitude and meditation. They seek refuge among the masses of their fellow beings, becoming anonymous, faceless, and no longer persons, in some one of those mass movements which are so characteristic of our times.

Actuated by their own inner disorder, driven by fear, inspired by fantasies of hope, these masses in movement cannot constitute a society. They are a horde, as Toynbee has put it, arising within our civilization rather than invading it from without. They are a horde of beings without autonomy, of individuals uprooted and so isolated and disordered that they surrender their judgment and their freedom to the master of the horde. Thus out of the chaos to which the evolution of secular individualism leads, there is born the formless mysticism of an irrational collectivism. The dissolution of western society ends—as we have seen it demonstrated in the lands where it is totally advanced—in an organized barbarism which makes the lives of all who fall within its power “poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”

The outcome proves that above all the other necessities of human nature, above the satisfaction of any other need, above hunger, love, pleasure, fame—even life itself—what a man most needs is the conviction that he is contained within the discipline of an ordered existence. Man can bear anything except a sense of his own utter demoralization. As long as he has the support of a discipline, which

is rational and transcends his immediate promptings, he will endure discomfort, pain, and danger. That is why men with faith can face martyrdom while men without it feel stricken when they are not invited to dinner.

VII

This neglected truth about the nature of man is at the core of the great central tradition of the Western World. In this tradition, man does not fulfill his destiny except as he is ruled by the reason within him which transcends that, which is only animal, because it is attached to that, which is universal. The tradition is a hard one to live by, and few succeed, and none altogether. But hard as it is, the rule of life it imposes is not an unworldly counsel of perfection. It is the truth about the only way in which men can be happy. That there is so little happiness among men shows only how hard it is for most men to do the hard things that alone can make them happy.

Yet we need not doubt that men will, indeed that men must, rediscover and return to the great tradition in which our civilization was made. We know that the truth will prevail, and we may be sure that it will prevail because, men being what they are, they have within themselves, in the very structure of their own beings, the authentic means and the imperative need to find the indispensable truth. Were this not the fact, they would never have found it.

And so, though we live in a time of trouble in which much, perhaps most of what we cherish, might be destroyed, nevertheless we may be sure that men can, that men must, and that therefore men will, recreate that which matters in that which has perished. For the roots of the good society are not in charters and in buildings but in the men who made them, and, more exactly, in that part of the nature of the human person where resides his reason and his freedom to follow his reason. This part of man is indestructible. For in all men who are born it is reborn.