

3. Human Nature and Human History

The more remote his ancestors, the more modern man conceives himself to differ <sup>f</sup> from them. No doubt this fact owes much to evolutionary and progressist propaganda, but it also is founded in modern man's experience, in his study of other men, and in his <sup>r</sup> moral aspirations.

For modern man has made his own modern world. It emerged from a feudal background with medi<sup>a</sup>eval beginnings of commerce and finance. It passed through periods of exploration, conquest,

colonization. It has ~~been~~ culminated in applied science, technology, industry, and a population explosion. It has witnessed the emergence of the European nations, their long and sustained political development, their economic interdependence, their alliances, their wars, their recent insertion within a larger, global context. It has been carried forward from medieval Latin through Renaissance classicism to the development of the modern languages and the creation of modern literatures and art forms. It has found its substance in the working out of modern mathematics, of modern natural and human science, of modern philosophies, of modern religious and historical thought. Where the world of the classicist was inherited, where life was somehow lived in emulation with the ancients, modern man in naming himself modern has consciously been going his own way and thereby inscribing deeply in his own experience the fact that the shape and texture of man's world is the product of man's own efforts, his lucky hits, his mistakes and blunders.

Besides making his own, modern man has investigated the 'worlds' of other places and times. For the classicist, ancient Greece and Rome were islands of light in a vast sea of darkness. But to modern man voyages of discovery brought back word of other lands, other peoples, other languages, cultures, religions. Archeology dug up ancient cities and deciphered ancient writings. Geology, biology, ethnology placed the races of men in <sup>a basic</sup> evolutionary perspective that is constantly being completed by genetic studies of every aspect of human development. If the classicist proclaimed that human nature was always the same and if he attributed to his ideals a normative quality that accounted the rest of men barbarians, modern man

finds in his rich acquaintance with human diversity and change only a confirmation of the view that, as he has made his own world, so other peoples however unwittingly have made theirs.

But freedom and responsibility are components in human living. In the measure that modern man is proud of his creation, the modern world, and no less in the measure that he is ashamed of it, he relates his freedom and his responsibility not only to his personal acts but also to the larger movements of community and history over which, he feels, man should somehow learn to exercise guidance and control. This conviction, it would seem, is the mainspring of modern humanism in its many forms. It accounts for the power of the old liberal idea of progress, of the Marxist's dialectical materialism, of the existentialist's tragic posture, of the resonance that amplifies and propagates the appeal of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. If for the classicist the past embodied ideals to be emulated and even perhaps at ~~some~~ times equalled, for modern man the past is an object of intense study not without the hope that one may roughly discern in its slow but relentless upthrust the greater shapes of the future.

~~Still one may ask what is this world that changes with changes of common meanings, that man bring about, that they would control with full freedom and responsibility. Distinguish then, 'world' and 'worlds.' The world is the totality of objects; it is unique; it contains all that ever was or is or will be, we intend it with our questions and heuristic concepts; but we do not know it. On the other hand, a world is a totality of objects to be reached from some determinate standpoint, and there are as many such worlds as there are standpoints.~~

Modern experience, then, modern study, and modern aspiration reveal an awareness of historicity. We have considered the fact and now we must go on to its possibility. If the classicist is correct in maintaining that human nature is always the same, how can modern man differ significantly from the men of other places and times? The answer involves a series of steps and it will set them clearly apart if we number them.

First, human nature is the same whether one is awake or asleep, but almost all that is significant in human living occurs inasmuch as men are awake, inasmuch as they are experiencing, inquiring, understanding, judging, deliberating, deciding, doing, inasmuch in brief as human living is informed by meaning.

Secondly, there is the <sup>further</sup> point that human community is a matter of common meaning, that it exists, develops, intensifies in the measure that many share a common field of experience, understand their experience in a similar or complementary fashion, agree in their judgements on things, persons, policies, courses of action, and make common commitments of fidelity to one another, of loyalty to their nation, state, or super-state, of faith in the destiny of man and the providence of God.

Inversely, as community intensifies in the measure that meaning is common, so it ~~disintegrates~~ disintegrates as meaning ceases to be common. Remove the common field of experience and people get out of touch. Remove common ways of understanding and there arise misunderstanding, suspicion, distrust, mutual incomprehension. Let judgements diverge and too soon an easy tolerance gives way to surprise, to ridicule, to consternation, to anger. Loosen the bonds of fidelity, loyalty, faith, and community weakens to give ever freer ~~and~~ play to ~~individualism and~~ ~~group bias~~ to the bias of factions and the aimless drifting of the whole.

Thirdly, as the biography of the individual sets forth the acts of his waking life, his acts informed by meaning, so the history of the community is an account of its meaningful performance. Such common meaning, embodied in human performance, may remain more or less fixed for centuries, as among primitives, or in stagnant civilizations, or because fixity is ~~esteemed~~ esteemed some necessary consequent of truth and value as in classicism. But it is no less true that common meaning may be on the move. Older views are questioned, challenged, circumvented, supplanted. Change that begins sporadically in isolated pockets becomes more widespread and more frequent. A cult of modernity ceases to be a fad to become a watchword, a rule, a principle. Insensibly the fabric of ~~the~~ institutions is changed, the meaning of roles is altered, scales of values are modified, <sup>and</sup> the world is given a new aspect that fascinates the young and frightens the old.

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Fourthly, ~~changes in common meaning occur on three different levels~~

Fourthly, the world that is changed by changes of meaning is of course ~~the world as such~~ <sup>not</sup> the world of immediacy but the world mediated by meaning. In the child, hearing and speech, when they first develop, are directed <sup>perhaps mainly</sup> to present objects, and so initially meaning <sup>would proceed from</sup> is confined to a world of immediacy, to a world no bigger than the nursery and, seemingly, no better known because it is not only experienced but also meant. But as the command and use of language increase, there comes about a reversal of roles. For words denote not only what is present but also what is absent, not only what is near but also what is far, not only the past but also the future, not only the experienced but also the merely imagined, not only the factual but also the possible, the ideal, the normative. So we come to live, not as the infant in a world of immediate experience, but in a far vaster world that is brought to us through the memories of other men, through the common sense of the community, through the pages of literature, through the labours of scholars, through the investigation of scientists, through the experience of saints, through the meditations of philosophers and theologians.

This larger world, mediated through meaning, does not lie within anyone's immediate experience. It is not even the sum or integral of the totality of all worlds of immediate experience. For meaning does not merely repeat but goes beyond experiencing. What is meant not only is sensed or felt but also somehow understood and, <sup>com</sup> only, also affirmed. This addition of understanding and judgement makes possible the larger world mediated by meaning, gives it its structure and unity, arranges it in an orderly whole of ~~its~~ <sup>its</sup> almost endless differences,

partly known and familiar, partly ~~in~~ a surrounding penumbra of things we know about but have never examined or explored, partly ~~in~~ an unmeasured region of what we do not know at all. To this larger world we refer when we speak of the real world, and in it we live out our lives -- insecurely, for we know that meaning is insecure ~~is~~ since besides truth there is error, besides fact there is fiction, besides honesty there is deceit, besides philosophy there is myth.

Fifthly, changes in the world ~~are~~ mediated by meaning are of three quite different kinds. Nature is mediated but not modified by meaning. Physics, chemistry, biology are known through acts of meaning, but the incompleteness of these sciences and any errors they include do not affect nature.

However, besides the world we know about, there is also the world that <sup>as well</sup> we make. This making, to a notable extent <sup>t</sup>, is a matter of intending and meaning. We imagine, we plan, we investigate possibilities, we weigh pro's and con's, we decide, we enter into contracts, we have countless orders given<sup>t</sup> and ~~executed~~ executed. From the beginning to the end of the process, we are engaged in acts of meaning; and without them the process would not occur or its end <sup>be</sup> achieved. So the pioneers on this continent found shore and heartland, mountains and plains, but they covered it with cities, laced it with roads, exploited it with industries, till the world man has made stands between us and a prior world of nature. Yet the whole of this added, man-made, artificial world is the cumulative ~~product~~ <sup>product</sup> product now of coherent and now of chaotic acts of meaning.

Man's making is not restricted to the transformation of nature. There is also the transformation of man himself. It is most conspicuous, perhaps, in the educational process, in the ~~base~~ difference between the child beginning kindergarten and the doctoral candidate writing his dissertation. But the difference produced by the education of individuals is only a recapitulation of the longer process of the education of mankind, of the evolution of social institutions and the development of cultures. Religions and art-forms, languages and literatures, sciences, philosophies, the writing of history, all had their rude beginnings, slowly developed, reached a peak, perhaps went into decline and later had a rebirth in another milieu. And what is true of cultural achievements also, though less conspicuously, is true of social institutions. The family, the state, the law, the economy, the technology are not fixed and immutable entities. They adapt to changing circumstances; they can be reconceived in the light of new ideas; they can be subjected to revolutionary change. Moreover, such change is in its essence a change of meaning -- a change of idea or concept, a change of judgement or evaluation, a change of the request or the command. The state can be changed by re-writing its constitution. More subtly but no less effectively it can be changed by re-interpreting the constitution or, again, by working on men's minds and hearts to change the objects that command their respect, hold their allegiance, fire their loyalty. What is true of the state is true of all community for, as we have said, community is a matter of a common field of experience, a common mode of ~~understanding~~ understanding, a common measure of judgement, and a common consent. Such community is the possibility, the source, the ground of common meaning; and it is this common meaning that is

revealed in family and polity, in legal and economic systems, in language and literature, art and religion, morals and education, philosophy, science, and the writing of history.

Sixthly, there is a notable difference between the transformation of nature and the transformation of man. Both indeed are initiated by acts of meaning. Both involve an expenditure of material energy. But the transformation of nature is a palpable change that puts nature at man's disposal. The transformation of man, on the other hand, ends where it begins, in habits and acts of meaning. Energy is expended in the use of communication media. But the transformation itself, as it originates, so also it terminates in habits and acts of attending, understanding, judging, valuing, choosing, doing.

On the level, then, of personal, social, cultural development, meaning approximates to a closed system. Knowing men is knowing what they feel, think, know, choose, do. One's choices occur in a context of others' choices, to lead them, or to follow, or to defy and conflict. One's doing occurs in an institutional framework that men have conceived, chosen, <sup>brought about,</sup> ~~experienced,~~ developed.

*from this viewpoint* Because of this closed system, because acts of meaning are both origin and end, stimulus and response, subjective act and objective term, human development can be as enormous as the differences between primitive and contemporary man. At the same time, widespread short-term <sup>changes</sup> ~~differences~~ are apt to be slight. To be communicable a difference has to lie within the resources of expression of contemporary common meaning. To be understood it must not go beyond the average man's capacity for learning. To be accepted it has to fit in with current needs, desires, tastes, tendencies, structures.

Finally, there is the distinction between human nature and human history. To know human nature is to know the propositions that are ~~not~~ true of all men at all places and times. To advert to man's historicity is to advert to the fact that knowledge of man's ~~not~~ nature is a set of abstract generalities, that there is much more to be known that is true only of particular men, particular places, particular times, that ~~was~~ what is significant in human living is to be found only potentially in human nature, and that it resides actually in human history.

~~Plato and Aristotle, in their effort5 effort to disengage science from mere common sense, exaggerated the differ~~

Plato and Aristotle were quite right in desiring to distinguish science from common sense and to disengage and liberate the former from the <sup>usual</sup> omniscient claims of the latter. But they were unfortunate in their over-statement that science was concerned with the necessary, the universal, the eternal, for more than anything <sup>else</sup> that opinion delayed the development and the acceptance of a historical view of man and ~~the~~ of the full flowering of historical studies.

Within the <sup>eventual</sup> Aristotelian context man was apprehended in terms of human nature, of its constitutive components, and of the ends and especially the norms of human action. So man was a rational animal, composed of body and immortal soul, endowed with vital, sensitive, and intellectual powers, in need of habits and able to acquire them, subject to a natural law which, in accord with accidental changes of circumstance, was to be supplemented by positive laws enacted by duly constituted authority. This extremely summary outline could be filled in at considerable length in many different directions, and it would be difficult to withhold one's praise of the broad

experience, acute observation, shrewd reflection, and sane judgement that went into the construction of its many parts. It would remain, however, that within the Aristotelian context the study of man was more a past achievement than an on-going process, that it centred on the natural and the normative, that it regarded the historical as the field of contingency and accident where science, theory, wisdom had to yield place to opinion, practice, and prudence.

Modern studies, in contrast, consider not man but men. They are specialized and so they are equipped to take into account all available data on all men of all times and places. They are empirical and so they seek to discover, not necessary connections, but verifiable possibilities. There are those, of course, that conceive human science on the analogy of natural science, and their investigations cannot get beyond knowledge of human nature. But there is no lack of practitioners and theorists aware of the component of meaning in human living and of the fact that all meaning has its origins, its development, its interconnections, in brief its history.

The extent, to which such studies have penetrated Catholic theology, is evident to anyone glancing through the bibliographies of Biblica, of Altaner's Patrologie, of the Bulletin de théologie ancienne et médiévale, and of Ephemerides theologicae Lovanienses. But it is the fact that such studies lie outside the Aristotelian context that confronts contemporary theology with the Herculean task of developing a new context.