

ROOT OF MAN : A NOTE

I

The view developed here is contingent upon the acceptance of a particular concept of man, namely as a conscious or, if one likes to be more meticulous, a living and conscious creature. If this notion of man is challenged or rejected, the present thesis would lose its credibility. But it must be confessed that in what follows nothing is said in defence of the alleged concept of man. In other words, the thesis propoed here assumes, rather uncritically, that the element of life and that of consciousness constitute the crucial characteristics of any being who should be regarded as a human being.

Again, to make another confession, this essay may appear to tackle a rather serious question in a somewhat sketchy and unexciting manner. And for that matter the arguments broached in the sequel might appear not so intricate as is usually expected in the philosophical arena. But still, I believe that there is a sense, as it may be clear when we shall go through the arguments themselves, in which they can be called *philosophical*.

It might be agreed that man is a temporal being and hence possesses what may be called a 'history' which, in all likelihood has some bearing upon his nature and existence. If so, then it might be useful to conjecture about the 'root' of our being. This obviously would not explain why at all we *are*, but might

shed some light on why we are *what we are*. It may be pretty clear that to think of the 'root' of man is not to enquire about the origin of the universe, but rather to speculate on the nature of the 'elements', within the universe, which the human species could be traced to.

Clearly we – the existing men – cannot literally re-live the process through which we have become what we now are. But the trouble is that it is we – the existing men – who are to explain the nature of this process, if any such attempt is to be made at all. One way out may be suggested: we may try to understand *hypothetically* the nature of the said process by reflecting on states and processes *we* undergo. We may, that is, try to develop an idea, in consonance with the nature of our present being and existence, of what could be the most plausible account of the said process. We may, thus, attempt *a* rational re-construction of this process. This task we undertake in this essay.

One point of caution may be made before proceeding further. As is already hinted at, the basis of our account would be mainly *conceptual*. By this we mean that it is primarily certain *conceptual* constraints that have led us to believe in the position that we shall try to develop and defend in the sequel, and hence the viability of our view must be judged purely by conceptual considerations. Being primarily based on *conceptual* arguments, our account would contain no or little 'factual data' often adduced in explaining the being of man. Not that these factual details are unimportant, but, as it should be clear, such factual details would not be of any real relevance with regard to *our* arguments.

II

Now to the arguments. We may begin with an important cue from modern science. Modern science teaches us that a *tangible*

entity is *either* living *or* non-living. Taken this *either-or* in its exclusive sense which it clearly betrays, the immediate conclusion follows that a tangible entity which is *utterly* life-less in the sense that it does not contain even any embryo of life, can *in no way* grow into a living one. The acceptance of this would evidently make it difficult to maintain that primordially there were *only* life-less entities – if and once it is admitted that at present there are *living* entities. If this be the case, it would be more reasonable to hold that it is *only* that *kind* of entities endowed with some *potency* of life which through stages and suitable conditions have grown as fullfledged *living* members of the earth. It might be argued that the circumstances of the most primitive earth were such that it was impossible altogether that *life* should be present in any of the-then entities. Such an argument would lose its force if and once the distinction between '*potential* living entities' and '*living* entities' is well taken. The acceptance of this distinction would weaken the necessity of tracing existing living entities to *living* entities. It is often pointed out that an entity exhibiting no sign of life may, under suitable conditions, develop into a living one. But the fun is that facts of this kind really betray the legitimacy of drawing the distinction of '*potential* living entities' and '*living* entities'. This is because it appears unintelligible to hold that an entity which carries even no germ of life and which cannot possibly get any such germ from outside, can develop into a living entity. The point needs elaboration.

To say that life originated from or (as Darwin would like to put it) 'was first breathed'¹ into the purely physical entities would be to say either (1) that life was eventually put into the physical entities *from outside*, or (2) that the purely physical entities *themselves* eventually gave rise to life. Now each of these

alternatives on analysis would seem to contradict the very statement that it purports to establish, namely, that primordially there were *only* non-living physical entities (from which living entities did emerge). But this original assertion, as I understand, could be made intelligible only in terms of any of the two aforesaid interpretations, consequently the very assertion should be suspect.

It is evident that the first alternative tacitly leaves room for the existence of living entities, when it admits of an 'outside domain' from which, as it holds, life entered into the life-less entities. This 'outside domain', then, must have contained life in some form or other, for otherwise how from this domain *life* could at all enter the life-less? Thus, the first alternative fails to establish or contradicts the original assertion that primordially there were *only* life-less physical entities.

The second alternative needs a bit more analysis. If self could arise from *within* the self-less physical entities, we can legitimately ask whether the alleged physical entities did already contain an inner drive to evolve life. If the answer is, Yes, the alleged physical entities could no longer be regarded as purely physical.² If, on the other hand, the answer is, No, then the said drive must have to come from somewhere *else*, and in that case the independent existence of 'living domain' would be implied. The second alternative, too, thus fails to establish or contradicts the original assertion that primordially there were *only* life-less physical entities. To telescope the whole point: to explain the nature of life in exclusively material terms would ultimately imply either that a living organism is not alive, or that a purely material entity is not purely physical, none of which is clearly acceptable. This seems to be the ground or at least one major ground why life cannot be explained in material terms alone. As Charon puts the point: "... life is never a mere extension

of matter : it is always something different...an object is never 'half-alive'; it is either not alive (that is to say, matter pure and simple) or it is alive : there are no intermediate stages".³ Those who argue that there were primordially *only* physical entities out of which living entities *incidentally* emerged, inescapably face the rather insuperable difficulty of bridging the gap between life and matter. I must confess that I for myself am yet to get an *exact* idea of the alleged kind of 'incidental transition' from matter to life. Some have tried to settle the issue by introducing a 'missing link'⁴ type of entities, but do not, as far as I know, offer the exact nature of these entities. Some other have proffered a 'somehow' explanation – a notion which, I must confess again, escapes my comprehension when I try to unpack it in exact terms. These views appear unsatisfactory mainly on the ground that they fail to *specify* the character of the alleged transition phase. And one may observe here that to acknowledge this difficulty is not to imply a need for *anyhow* overcoming it.

In view of the above considerations, it seems reasonable to conclude that the existence of the human species—admittedly a *living* one—is to be traced at least to that kind of entities which intrinsically contained some 'seed of life' however latent. Now let us see whether anything more may be required to account for the existence of the phenomena of man.

III

Here also we may take a cue from science. Modern science tells us that in regard to a living entity there is a sense in which it may be said that *it changes itself*, that it is able to change itself to an extent *by itself*. This is another way of saying that, while, a non-living entity is entirely devoid of any capacity, lying within itself, to change itself, a living entity possesses such

an *inner force*. Not that a living entity is immune from external influences; but its changes may not be invariably accounted for *exclusively* in terms of these external forces: its changes may well be due, at least occasionally and partly, to what we have called its *inner force*.

Certain living entities appear to possess something more. While some living entities bring changes of themselves automatically or instinctively, i.e., in full accordance with the drifts of their organism, certain other living entities own and exert a sort of non-instinctive potency in bringing changes of themselves. The latter ones thus are not totally vulnerable to the demands of their instincts or the drifts of their organism. These entities in this sense may be said to enjoy a sort of freedom – the freedom due to their release from the bondage of instincts. This release from instincts is possible with them as they are endowed with what is usually called *potency to reflect* or *consciousness*. In virtue of this reflective potency, any such entity ceases to be a helpless victim of its biological nature, but is able to *deal with* its instincts; does not just naturally grow, but grows with a *sense* of growth and to that extent with a sort of perspective of its own. All this is possible because of, and in that way this possibility is expressive of, its *reflective* potency. If, then, entities of this kind – the conscious entities – are admitted to exist now, it would clearly be difficult to account for their existence, unless the rudiment of consciousness be admitted to have been there in certain primordial living entities. Almost the identical types of difficulties that we have noted to arise in connection with tracing life to purely non-living physical entities, would also arise if attempt be made to trace *consciousness* to *utterly* non-conscious living entities.

Now if we grant that man *is* a living *and* conscious being and if our arguments are so far all right, then the following conclu-

sion seems inevitable : *human* existence is due to those kinds of entities that owned a rudiment of life *and* consciousness. This, if accepted, betrays a very important point about man, namely, that man's reflective potency is *original* with him. The same point may be put in a slightly different manner; the time-honoured view about man that he is a rational animal may be taken to characterise the most *fundamental* nature of the human species.

It may be important to emphasise in this connection that *life endowed with consciousness* becomes a *process* in a distinctive manner – with no *final* horizon. On the one hand, the cells divide, and this act of division is ceaseless; every cell doubles itself and goes on doubling itself; and this act of multiplication of the cells not merely increases the number of the cells but brings some general change in the *structure* of the cellular species. The element of consciousness, on the other hand, in its course of development, brings some fundamental change in the very *nature* of the entities which contain it potentially. In this way the development of the living *and* conscious entities signifies a double-dimensional process – quantitative as well as qualitative. And through such a two-dimensional developing process, we suggest, man has come into existence out of certain potentially living *and* conscious entities.

IV

By way of making some concluding remarks, we may give an idea of what our thesis does *not* imply. It is commonly accepted that the present earth is inhabited by, *broadly speaking*, three distinct *kinds* of being : purely inanimate ones (material objects); the living but not conscious ones (non-human animals), and the living and conscious ones (human-beings). *If* this view is accepted, then two philosophical views become almost immedia-

tely doubtful. The first one is what is known as *hylozoism* which holds that all matter is animate. But this view would clearly come in conflict with the view that there are purely material objects. The second view is known as *hylismoism* which acknowledges consciousness in all sorts of beings. According to this view, consciousness does not emerge out of inanimate matter but is contained in any phenomenon and has always been present in nature. It is, as the view contends, 'sleeping' in the rock, water and the earth, is gradually awakening in trees and animals, and finally 'opens its eyes' in man. Only one portion, taken in isolation, of this view seems acceptable, namely, that consciousness does not emerge out of inanimate matter. But surely merely animate entities, as we have tried to show, cannot be said to give birth to conscious beings. Hence, consciousness cannot be said to be present in any form within those objects (trees and animals) that *are merely* living creatures. And for that matter, again, consciousness cannot be said to lie in any form within those objects (rocks, etc.,) that *are* life-less entities.*

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NOTES

1. Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*, Cambridge, Mass. 1976, p. 484.
 2. Dobzhansky once terms 'the emergence of life from non-living matter' as an example of 'evolutionary transcendence', (See T. Dobzhansky, *The Biology of Ultimate Concern*, New American Library, New York, 1967.) By 'transcendence' Dobzhansky means surpassing or going beyond the limits of previous organisation. It is, however, not clear from his argument whether such 'surpassing' allows the presence of life, in the form of rudiment, in the 'previous organisation'. But since 'living' and 'non-living' differ *in kind*, it is hard to see how life could emerge in any way whatsoever from something that *in no form* carries within itself the rudiment of life.
 3. Jean E. Charon; *Man in Search of Himself* (trans. F. E. Anderson) George Allen and Union Ltd., London, 1967, p. 187.
 4. Though in point of fact the case of 'missing link' is put forward, as far as I know, in connection with explaining the transition from living entities to conscious entities, it would not be, I believe, quite out of place to refer to it in the present context since the pertinence of the 'missing link' type of argument remains virtually the same in either case.
- * An earlier version of this article was read in the Friday Seminar, Calcutta. I am grateful to its member for their comments and suggestions.

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