Knowledge and KNOWLEDGE

by

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Man is born with a thirst for knowledge of one kind or another. And in the sphere of science and technology with which the Western world is now so preoccupied each generation adds to the mass of accumulated data, which thus mounts in geometrical progression, doubling every fourteen years or so. Now, because in that sphere there is a need for a particular kind of precision, there has been a tendency to look on the form of logic which says that "A is not both A and not-A" and that "A is either B or not-B" as the highest form of thinking for all sorts of purposes, though it often leads to what are in fact correlatives being envisaged as antagonistic opposites. Indeed it is inadequate for *many* scientific purposes as, for example, when the dual wave and particle aspects of the electron are being considered, moreover ecologists are obliged in some degree to share the view that "the universe is a system in which every element, being correlative to every other, at once presupposes, and is presupposed by every other."

One example of this type of logic is that we talk about man as an animal and suppose that he cannot also be not-an-animal, and we are fortified in this view by a widely held view of the origin of life and of consciousness.

In a famous lecture in 1874 Tyndall asserted that "in matter lies the promise and potency of every form and quality of life." And, whereas Plotinus had held on metaphysical grounds that "the idea that elements devoid of intelligence should produce intelligence is most irrational," Bertrand Russell assures us that "man's origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and beliefs are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms." And, whereas Pasteur's experiments were at one time thought to have established the dictum *omne vivum ex vivo*, today we are told that over some thousands of millions of years the blind working of physical forces has accidentally led from atoms to molecules, from molecules to living cells and so to man, to his consciousness and reason. Presumably the vast time interval makes the theory sound more rationally acceptable. But we are also told that, apart from an infinitesimal element of indeterminacy, our thoughts, feelings and actions are all determined by inherited, ultra-microscopic, physicochemical genes or by the interaction between the organism and environmental forces equally physico-chemical in origin.

All this does not prevent those who hold such views from behaving as if they believed their thoughts and actions to be determined by their own free-will; often, indeed, they say that by conscious use of the resources of science man can indefinitely perfect—by what standards?—both man himself and his circumstances!

Let us remind ourselves that scientific observation does not see the world as it is in itself; there is always an element of the subjective and anthropomorphic, always a chasm between language and reality. The popular illusion that physics has now understood and explained the real nature of the world, of the whole of manifestation, is by no means always shared by the physicists. "Leaving out," said Eddington, "all aesthetic, ethical or spiritual aspects of our environment, we are faced with qualities such as massiveness, substantiality, extension, duration, which are supposed to belong to the domain of physics. In a sense they do belong; but physics is not in a position to handle them directly. The essence of their nature is inscrutable; we may use mental pictures to aid calculations, but no image in the mind can be a replica of what is not in the mind. And so in its actual procedure physics studies not these inscrutable qualities but pointer readings which we can observe. The readings, it is true reflect the fluctuations of the world-qualities: but our exact knowledge is of the readings, not of the qualities. The former have as much resemblance to the latter as a telephone number has to a subscriber."

Of course man is an animal and as such motivated by an animal will to live and to breed in the fierce competitive struggle common to all forms of life. Moreover, as a social animal he is also conditioned by the will of the group to survive and prosper in competition with other groups; this implies that conformity to the law or needs of the group must be enforced and any non-conformity dangerous to the group must be punished. Marxist societies, which feel them-selves to be surrounded by hostile communities, have dealt ruthlessly with any deviation and only effectively conditioned individuals are allowed to remain long in close contact with ideologies they regard as poisonous; in Western democracies this consequence of man's status as a social animal tends to be slurred over, often sentimentally.

What has almost vanished today in Europe and America is the idea formerly current that besides the ordinary particulate and accumulating knowledge in which, through our schooling, we are all in some degree partakers, there is also another kind of knowledge, a knowledge imparticulate and incommensurable with our ordinary knowledge. Of this knowledge there could be no quantitative accumulation as in the case of technical and scientific data; it was held indeed to be indescribable and in a sense incommunicable since it was associated with a different state of being characteristic of sages, seers and saints. Traces of this idea can be seen in the distinction made by the Greeks between *noesis* and *dianoia* and in the mediaeval scholastic use of the term "intellect." Implicit in it is the idea that man is not only an animal but also not-an-animal.

Heraclitus pointed out that the end of strife—of the contraries—would mean the destruction of the universe but that men "fail to grasp that what is at variance agrees

with itself in an attunement of opposite tensions as in the bow or the lyre." With striking unanimity all the great religious traditions indicate that on the scale of a man there is, at any rate in certain cases, a possibility of transcending duality—or the contraries—in this life and coming to a new, super-human state of being and a new kind of knowledge and that this possibility implies also a destruction. If, as has been said, this new kind of knowledge is indescribable, its nature has none the less been indicated through the use of paradox and symbols and its quality has been described as Bliss.

As animal, man is at least in large measure conditioned by his environment, and, if the environment is chaotic and full of contradictions, its chaos will be reflected in him. It is the claim of the great traditions that they have provided an environment, supernatural in origin, which is a reflection of objective truth and thus free from inner contradictions and full of symbolisms. Such an environment they would claim to be a prerequisite for any supernatural change in man giving access to this second kind of knowledge.

Admittedly, once influences supernatural or divine in origin or inspiration become embedded in forms those forms come under the laws of decay and mortality imposed by devouring time on all forms and organisms, and it is all too easy to point out evidences of this in traditional forms known to us. Indeed, a "materialistic" modern outlook could not otherwise have gained such a fascinated acceptance. There has been a degree of failure on the part of Christian leaders to offer a picture of man and the world in their total setting adequate to satisfy intellectual needs, and in the resulting void man—ordinary "animal" man—has been enthroned in the place of God, and religion has often evaporated into morality and humanitarianism. The very idea, characteristic of traditional esotericism, of a possibility of deliverance "here and now" into a different knowledge and being has all but vanished.

The Great Traditions

But the great traditions have not wholly fallen under the law of decay. In all of them seers, prophets, sages and saints have actualised this different knowledge and being and have thus represented fresh influxes of divine influence to revivify the traditions from which they sprang. And, if the popular tales of their lives are often richly embellished with miraculous manifestations, this is at least in part a symbolical or poetic expression of the fact that they were themselves a miracle. Whereas we are conditioned by, or slaves to, a thousand influences from our passions and our environment, they are delivered from such slavery into a new, supernatural kind of knowledge and that service which is perfect freedom, and it is not surprising if such freedom has at times found expression in ways highly shocking to formalist "doctors of the law" of their tradition.

One side effect of the feeling of an intellectual void in our society has been the growth of interest in and study of those Oriental doctrines and disciplines which

are said to lead to new knowledge and a different state of being. The trouble is that such studies are almost inevitably limited to certain fragments divorced from the total traditional framework which should normally condition the whole psychic background. In a Hindu world, for instance, the whole of life is interwoven with traditional art, myth and ritual rich in symbolism capable of conveying aspects of truth which books and mental studies cannot impart, and the direct personal help and guidance of a Hindu master presupposes all these elements having played their part. It is not the thinking mind which balances the body, which falls in love or discriminates between "me" and "other-than-me," nor is it by a mental process that such "horizontal" discrimination can be transcended through qualitative discrimination between different levels of manifestation. Nor is it by will power that the axe of discrimination can be wielded.

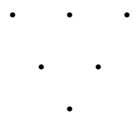
Anyone who seeks to find his way to this second kind of knowledge must get free from three knots in the bonds which bind him. The first knot is that, whether we admit it or not, we very often identify "me" with the body. The second is that we are under the domination of desires which we also identify with "me"; and it should be noted that the *apatheia* spoken of by Christian Fathers means, not "apathy" but an active control which liberates from this domination. Thirdly; we identify the workings of the mind with "me"—and this knot is by far the most difficult to unravel. What am I if not my mind? The answer can really only be discovered through experience and one difficulty is that "I" cannot loose these knots; it requires the power of "other-than-I" and the further question arises: who is this "other-than-I"? And it is precisely the traditional forms, rites and symbolisms, which we are inclined to discount as mere exoteric formalism, that can help us to answer this question.

We are apt to envisage the process of coming to a new kind of knowledge as the acquiring of new powers and increased efficiency. It is true that in the preparatory process there must be a change in our centre of gravity, a reduction of inner chaos and a new harmony in our ideas which may incidentally yield such results and also enlarge our field of vision, but to come to such knowledge means much more than this; it involves something exceedingly painful to "me"—extinction of the ego and of the sense of separateness. In the deepest sense there is nothing to be acquired.

Some people who hear of these possibilities doubt if they really exist. On the basis of the modern quantitative and egalitarian outlook they ask why, if they exist, they seem to be so very rarely actualised. One doesn't meet such men, they say. Let us recall the story of how a sage who saw the infant prince Gautama fore-told that he would be either a Buddha or else a world-conqueror. Even among those who feel a call to seek such knowledge through appropriate means potential world-conquerors are rare indeed! Some are easily bewildered and led astray, many are relatively feeble. "Knock and it shall be opened to you," said Christ, but he added that the way to Life is narrow and found by few. To knock successfully at the door leading to the second kind of knowledge involves finding the right door at which to knock and then knocking both

with great persistence and with that skill in action which is one of the definitions of Yoga; nor must we leave out of account what is called in religious terms Divine Grace.

All this sounds very discouraging of any aspirations to such knowledge since it is obvious that of the few who set out on a path to it very *many* are likely to fail to reach the objective. But in any of the more ordinary ventures of life the really bold and determined are not easily put off by accounts of tremendous obstacles. A Hindu considering the difficulties might well say that of course many lives are needed for reaching such an objective, but Christianity and Islam do not envisage the idea of palingenesis; each tradition has its own perspective and here more emphasis is placed on the posthumous rewards of true believers. We who live with only the ordinary kind of knowledge and with all sorts of illusions about "me" cannot know about death, or about the fate of a traveller on the road to the other kind of knowledge, what is only within the ken of that knowledge; we have to go largely by faith. And all the traditions say that perseverance in a true path always brings rich rewards for those whose qualities call them to such a path.



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