

## THE REDISCOVERY OF THE PERSON

Philosophers may appear to deal in abstractions and to live in ivory towers but their ideas seldom remain uninfluential on the course of human history. In the event of the French Revolution we see in an exemplary way the mutation of intellectual views into principles of social transformation and directives for revolutionary action. Other factors contributed to its explosion but what gave them structure and thrust is the conjunction of ideas regarding man and society disseminated by the unorthodox thinkers of the XVIIth and XVIIIth centuries.

### 1. From the Hierarchical to the Equalitarian Society :

What the French Revolution meant to accomplish was not a mere political change but a radical transmutation of the social system. Ancient society was hierarchical and aristocratic; the new society would be equalitarian and democratic; it would be a triumph of the atomic Individual, of the particular citizen, in the liberty, equality and fraternity of a self-ruling People.

In order to bring into focus the difference between the hierarchical and the equalitarian society, I shall summarize two paragraphs of Alexis de Tocqueville in Chapter II of his *Democracy in America*. He speaks there of the social system of the aristocratic nations of old Europe but we may listen to his description with the model of the Hindu society of castes in our mind.

“ Among aristocratic nations, as families remain for centuries in the same condition, often on the same spot, all generations become as it were contemporaneous. A man almost always knows his forefathers, and respects them; he thinks he already sees his remote descendants, and he loves them. He willingly imposes duties on himself towards the former and the latter ( . . . . ) Aristocratic institutions have moreover, the effect of closely binding every man to several of his fellow-citizens ( . . . . . ) As all the citizens occupy fixed positions, one above the other, the result is that each of them always sees a man above himself, whose patronage is necessary to him, and below himself another man,

whose co-operation he may claim. Men ( . . . . ) are, therefore, ( . . . . ) closely attached to something placed out of their own sphere, and they are often disposed to forget themselves. It is true that ( . . . . ) the notion of human fellowship is faint, and that men seldom think of sacrificing themselves for mankind; but they often sacrifice themselves for other men. In democratic ages, on the contrary, when the duties of each individual to the race are much more clear, devoted service to any one man becomes more rare; the bond of human affection is extended, but it is relaxed.

“ Amongst democratic nations new families are constantly springing up, others are constantly falling away, and all that remain change their condition; the woof of time is every instant broken, and the track of generations effaced ( . . . . ) The interest of man is confined to those in close propinquity to himself ( . . . . ) Aristocracy had made a chain of all the members of the community, from the peasant to the king; democracy breaks that chain, and severs every link of it. As social conditions become more equal, ( . . . . ) men owe nothing to any man, they expect nothing from any man; they acquire the habit of always considering themselves as standing alone, and they are apt to imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands. Thus not only does democracy make every man forget his ancestors, but it hides his descendants, and separates his contemporaries from him; it throws him back for ever upon himself alone, and threatens in the end to confine him entirely within the solitude of his own heart.”

Tocqueville's description thus shows the profound gap that separates the ancient societies from the societies of the modern Western type. The first were based on the natural order of things and had evolved their structures after the manifested data of life. In them the persons were, as soon as born, caught in a network of relations which immediately gave substance and reality to their natural sociality. They were distinct, singular, as Aquinas emphasised, but as essentially related. They pertained to the group before discovering their autonomy and through the group this very autonomy was shaped and their personality moulded on a pattern of participation and co-adjuvancy. The groups themselves were hierarchised into an overall structure of mutual

dependence and collaboration sanctioned more or less strictly by religion. The social held primacy over the political. The state was an important but secondary formation which found its rationality in its conformity with the exigencies of the naturally hierarchical society. Through this society it was connected with something universal and religious, the conception of a cosmic order antecedent to any ordering of man's fabrication. In short, hierarchy integrated the ancient societies of men by reference to their universal values. Such societies could, of course, become rigid and their organisations oppressive but at their best they offered individuals the proper scope for exchange, co-operation and mutuality which are demands of the essential relatedness of human persons.

As against those societies which based themselves on the given sociality of human nature, the equalitarian societies were born from a desire to be "rational" by breaking away from nature in order to set up an autonomous human order. Drawing their inspiration from Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau and other philosophers of the so-called Enlightenment, their creators started with the postulate that men are by nature isolated individuals and that the problem of making them live together lies exclusively within the competence of reason. Nature provides only the basic equality of those individuals and its absolute demand is the equalitarian principle which directly negates the old hierarchies.

This equalitarian principle is not simply equivalent to the moral principle of equality so strongly inculcated by Christianity. The latter affirms that all men, even the least, are equal in nature, dignity, inviolability and natural rights; it does not deny their concrete inequalities, their complex relatedness, their mutual complementarity; it does not affirm their basic identity. The equalitarian principle, on the contrary, posits this basic identity of all men whom it conceives as pre-social atoms to be socialised by the Social Contract which is the work not of nature but of reason.

The chief consequence of the equalitarian principle is to deny the legitimacy of the intermediary group-structures which ramified society and to set up the democratic state directly over against the multitude of individuals. The state is supposed to result from the compact of their many wills. It can begin a new by

means of a constitution approved by a popular referendum or by elected representatives of the people. Once set up, it organises society through structures which too are, ideally at least, determined and controlled by the will of individuals manifested by vote. The power of such a state tends to become ubiquitous since it is no longer mediated and possibly counterchecked by hierarchical intermediaries independent of itself. The political threatens to devour the social.

The creation of democratic societies secured many positive results. It did away with the worst excesses of inequality. It proclaimed solemnly the Fundamental Rights of Man which became the norm of the codes of law elaborated for their furtherance. And its offspring, the modern state, has been an apt instrument of modernisation made possible by the progress of industry and technology.

However, the unmediated polarity of the isolated individuals and the Leviathan state has remained to a large extent unreconciled. Hegel's attempt in his *Philosophy of Right* to reconcile freedom and authority ended in his glorification of the Prussian state. He conceived that law is rational as the deepest expression of man's freedom but also that it is prescribed in opposition to the individual's freedom. He belonged to the voluntaristic tradition begun from Duns Scotus and Ockham and his paradox is that law is "Liberty" because it is "Will", command, but it is only the positive will of the state. In line with the philosophers of the Enlightenment, he persisted at looking at society in exclusively political terms. He disregarded with contempt the unwritten customs and mores of peoples. For him as for Hobbes or Rousseau the conscious individual is abruptly called to recognize in the State his higher self, and in the State's command the expression of his own will and freedom.

Hegel's posterity branched off into a "right" and a "left", which respectively accepted only either the positivistic or the rationalistic ("critical") aspect of his doctrine. Marx believed in the natural perfection of the individual so much that he dreamed of ultimately abolishing all class-distinctions and even the state. But his economic interpretation of history persuaded him that his dream could only be realised by violent revolution, abolition of private property, economic collectivisation and political dicta-

torship of the proletariat. The rightist current produced another kind of dictatorship, that of the fascist totalitarian state.

Against this background of the modern age in the West, we may consider briefly the parallel evolution in India. We shall have to distinguish here the speculations of the philosophers and the concrete reality of man and society. The ideal man of the philosophers is not the empirical member of society but the renouncer (*sannyāsīn*) who prepares for liberation (*mokṣa*) and has already isolated himself from the secular bonds and concerns of society. In this renouncer they value essentially the radically free spirit (*puruṣa* or *ātman*) or even, if they are Buddhists, the pure freedom which substitutes for *ātman*. The empirical man is only a name-form (*nāma-rūpa*), fictitious and evanescent, and for most of them society deserves no abiding interest.

This society, however, continues its course and bears within itself a certain conception of man. It is a hierarchical society, a society of castes and sub-castes. Castes are permanent groups which are at once specialized, hierarchised and separated (in matters of marriage, food and physical contact) in relation to each other. The common basis of these three features is the opposition of pure and impure which is part of the religious outlook. This opposition is of its nature hierarchical and implies separation in customs and life and specialisation in occupations. Thus the foundation of the caste system is not power, economic or political, which may be important in practice but is distinct from, and subordinate to, the hierarchy. According to L. Dumont, the relation between hierarchy and power is as follows. Hierarchy culminates in the Brahman; it is the Brahman who consecrates the power of the Kṣatriya, which otherwise depends entirely on force. While the Brahman is spiritually supreme, he is materially dependent; the gifts made to Brahmans transform material goods into spiritual values. Whilst the Kṣatriya is materially the master, he is spiritually subordinate. A similar relation distinguishes the two superior ends of man in society, *dharma* (action conforming to) universal order, and *artha* (action conforming to) utilitarian interest. These two are hierarchised in such a way that *artha* is legitimate only within the limits set by *dharma*. Thus hierarchy is the integrating concept of the whole society. It never attaches itself to power as such, but always to religious functions and

dignities from which power may then derive or by which it may be sanctioned. Hierarchy integrates the Hindu society to its universal values which are religious because religion is the form that the universally true assumes in this society.

Within this caste society, persons are being focussed on the three values or constellations of values, *artha*, *kāma* ( bonds of sexual and family affection ) and *dharma*. These form the realm of activity ( *pravṛtti* ), of actions and results ( *karman* and *phala* ), which is governed by the law of *karman*. The maintenance of *dharma* tends to make this society extremely conservative, the ideal being to preserve the hierarchy of the castes and the distinction of each caste and sub-caste duties. The unity of this complex society arises from the fixed complementarity of its constituent groups which is expressed in the *ajāmāni* system of dominant and dominated castes. The caste system is essentially social, not political, so that the Hindu society has been able to preserve itself almost untouched by political upheavals till recent times.

Such a society does not itself favour the singularity and the autonomy of human persons but rather their relatedness and their religious rootedness in universal values. The call of freedom comes from outside the society, from the renouncers who propose spiritual emancipation ( *mokṣa* ) through *nivṛtti* ( abstinence from activity ) but it reaches all the groups and polarises them on an end which is beyond and apparently opposed to the aims of society. It is the great merit of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* to have discovered a reconciliation of the demands of the hierarchical society with the call of the renouncers. Its rule of *niṣkāma karma* ( disinterested action ) introduces renunciation within activity itself and thus redeems activity dedicated to the welfare and maintenance of the caste society.

Traditional India encounters the modern ideas almost as soon as they become active in the West but its confrontation with them is much less immediately radical and metamorphosing. For almost the whole of the XIXth century the changes advocated are mainly partial reforms, corrections of excesses, whereas the structure itself of the society of castes is seldom if ever put into question. Liberal individualism, democratic nationalism, positivism, socialism are catching the minds of intellectuals but they hardly become

aims of systematic pursuit and points of political programs before the turn of the century. And when they begin to dominate and finally triumph they do so only on the political level, and this level has not succeeded in swallowing the social level. The Constitution of Independent India may abolish the legality of the caste system but the latter remains the organisation of society as such; the Constitution may be secular but religion continues to permeate the lives of families and most individuals. The way that has been found to take in the new while retaining the old passes through the federalism of the state, a secularism not opposed to but benevolent towards religions, the recognition of linguistic boundaries, a communalism and a casteism officially denied but often upheld in practice, a planned and partly socialized economy respectful of petty mercantilism and private capitalism, and in general a healthy sense of pluralism. More than compromise or synthesis, there is duplication and conjunction and the overall change is evolutionary rather than revolutionary.

Without denying the validity of many possible complaints, I venture to say that contemporary India accepts a conception of man which is congenial to the development of persons. This conception is made of various elements : the old hierarchical casteic conception of society, which provides the roots and ligaments that prevent Indian citizens from ever being isolated individuals; the modern conception, which sanctions the basic rights and freedoms of each man and abolishes excessive privileges or disabilities; the philosophy of Neo-Hinduism, which mingles the lofty transcendentalism of the Upaniṣads with the humanism of the Sermon on the Mount and the self-sufficiency of Hinduism with the universal openness of religious and cultural pluralism. The conjunction of these three has opened India to all the chief dimensions of the human person.

On the contrary, with regard to divine personality we suffer in India at least from a linguistic embarrassment. We here speak of 'personal' and 'impersonal' as if they were synonyms with 'saguṇa' and 'nirguṇa'. Thus we fail to recognize the personality of the *nirguṇa Brahman* and the parallel *nirguṇatva* (simplicity befitting the Absolute) of the personal God of Christianity and of most Western conceptions. In this we follow the guidance offered by the great translators of Sanskrit works during the late XIXth

century. But we can trace their understanding of the term 'person' to the trend of rationalistic individualism studied earlier and, more precisely, to F. H. Jacobi, the philosopher of faith as the sense of reality. Jacobi appears to be the first in the whole Western tradition to have considered that 'person' necessarily implied limitation and relational dependance so that it could not be applied to God except anthropomorphically. A small number of Protestant thinkers, chiefly Germans, accepted his ruling and we have inherited their usage. But we must be aware at least that it is contrary to the larger tradition of European and Christian thought and idiom within which the term 'person' received its original denotation.

## 2. **The Redintegration of the Person :**

Passing now to our own century, we may on a broad estimation say that it is marked with a renovated sense of the person and a will to promote its welfare.

This redintegration of the person is, first of all, observable in the sciences of life or of man. In biology, for instance, J. S. Haldane holds that physiological events should no longer be interpreted in terms of lower levels of physico-chemical laws but from higher standpoint of consciousness. At the same time, we should cease to consider consciousness or personality as a mere parallel of the organism and to suppose that man as a person is anything different from his organism perceived and understood more fully. The advance in the social sciences has revealed anew the social dimension of human personality. It has shown it as a datum both of nature and of nurture of culture. The new-born infant is received and cradled by a network of social relationships, thanks to which he can emerge as a self and unfold his particular potentialities into realisations which in turn affect society. In psychology, we have attained to the notion of personality as a dynamic unity of traits or as a body-mind complex of dispositions. Even extreme behaviourists would not deny this position taken by James, Dewey, Haldane, Mead, etc. Psychology further acknowledges the inequalities between persons and, in view of measuring them, resorts to various types of data obtainable from life-situations ( L ), objective tests ( T ), questionnaires ( Q ), population sampling ( P-technique ), etc. The structure which is thus being measured is



a complex typical pattern of traits, dispositions, needs, interests and values which are in dynamic relationship to each other and to the environment in a given situation. The psycho-analytical approach has destroyed the Cartesian domination of consciousness and mapped out the various levels, conscious and subconscious, of the mind. The perceptual-motivational research has demonstrated that the configuration of personality does not result from mere conditioning by stimuli but from the need-system which motivates the organism. As to the origin of the religious sentiment, it is less and less attributed to sex instinct or to the so-called religious instinct but it is found, by Selbie for instance, in the fact that many primitive motives work in such a way that they attract a person closer to the religious interpretation of the Universe. Thus religion is seen as a product of persons' rational reflection as much as the sciences. Psychology, in order to isolate and measure the various traits and factors of personality, had initially to take man to pieces but, beyond that analytic procedure, there has now emerged a dynamic concept of the self, a new holistic picture of personality.

In philosophy, there is a similar convergence towards a holistic, anti-Cartesian understanding of personality. Husserl opens up the *Cogito* by placing intentionality at the centre of his doctrine. Bergson dynamises completely the conception of man and relates him more satisfactorily both to matter and to the living and personal God of open religion and mysticism. Blondel centres on the question of man's destiny his great book on *Action* and his later trilogy on *Thought, Being and Beings*, and *Action*, which together form the most comprehensive and, perhaps, most impressive system of this century. Lavelle develops his dialectics of participation by which man discovers himself as sustained by the personal Absolute and constantly dependent on this Source but as a free being entrusted with the choice of his own destiny. The Neo-Thomists restore the personalism of St. Thomas and find in it valuable directions to guide them in their encounter with science and technology, social development, international relations, violence, dictatorship, etc. Existentialists, without denying the experience of the *Cogito*, explore, often with rewarding results, the complementary experiences either of anxiety (Heidegger) or of hope and commitment (Marcel) or of pure (contingency and absurdity (Sartre). More recently, the structuralists have drawn

our attention to the *a priori* but external systems of relations which pertain to language, symbols and culture, thus anteceding each man and conditioning his social personalization.

In order to illustrate more vividly the trend which I have just outlined, I shall now report briefly on three thinkers, Max Scheler, Emmanuel Mounier, and P. F. Strawson.

Scheler, the most illustrious of Husserl's disciples, is the phenomenologist of sympathy and of the polar sentiments of love and hatred. His central view may be expressed as follows : Love can explain all things ( i.e., God and the universe ) because it is directed to the person which is the supreme and synthetic value. Love is manifested as the aspiration towards values. But values are realised by the person, which synthesises them and transcends each of them as well as their sum. We love a person not simply as a totality of values but as something more and unique, an "unaccountable Plus" (*unbegründliche Plus*), says Scheler. He calls it "the concrete ( or vital ) unity of our being in all its activities" (*die konkrete Seinseinheit von Acten*). The whole person is committed in each act and varies in each act without exhausting its being in any one of them. The person is necessarily individual and thus unique in the sense of unrepeatable. To talk of a general person or, in Kant's way, of "consciousness in general" is nonsense. The person is doubly autonomous, firstly, through personal insight into good and evil and, secondly, through personal volition concerning the good or the evil as concretely given. Due to this autonomy and transcendence, the person is never part of a world but always its correlate. However, the essence of the human person is found in the fact that his whole spiritual being and activity is rooted both in individual reality and in membership in a community. Man enjoys an elemental and irreducible religious experience : the divine element belongs to the primitive givenness of his consciousness. God is subsistent Being, Consciousness, Power, Holiness, Infinity. Thus He is personal, the person of persons. The reproach of anthropomorphism against attribution of personality to the Absolute is misdirected because it is not true that God is conceived according to man's image but rather that the only notion of man which makes sense is "theomorphic."

Mounier (1905–1950) was not only a professor of philosophy but the founder of the Paris review *Esprit*, a leading periodical which has remained in the van of progressive thought as the organ of a movement also called *Esprit*. This movement tries to achieve a peaceful revolution which will be personalistic and communitarian. Mounier's *A Personalist Manifesto* delineates the features of such a revolution in the various spheres of private life and education, economy and politics, international and intercultural relationships. These features are commanded by his conception of the human person which he sets forth in contrast with the Cartesian and Sub-Cartesian conceptions.

Against dualism, he proclaims that “*I exist subjectively, I exist bodily* are one and the same experience.” “Man is a body in the same degree that he is a spirit, wholly body and wholly spirit.” But against materialism, he asserts that although man is a natural being, he transcends nature. “The singularity of man is his dual capacity for breaking with nature. He alone knows the universe that enfolds him, and he alone transforms it.” Against liberal individualism, he upholds communication as a primordial requirement of personality. “Individualism is a system of morals, feelings, ideas and institutions in which individuals are organized by their mutual isolation and defence.” “Man in the abstract, unattached to any natural community, the sovereign lord of a liberty unlimited, and undirected; turning towards others with a primary mistrust, calculation and self-vindication; institutions restricted to the assurance that these egoisms should not encroach upon one another, or to their betterment as a purely profitmaking association—such is the rule of civilization now breaking up before our eyes. It is the very antithesis of personalism.” “In its inner experience the person is a presence directed towards the world and other persons. It is thus communicable by its nature.” “One might almost say that I have no existence, save in so far as I exist for others, and that to be is in the final analysis to love.” Self-recollection is the complementary opposite of communication. Persons must be assured privacy for self-withdrawal and concentration. “Discretion and reserve are the homage that the person renders to the sense of an infinite life within.” And this leads to a “surpassing of the self”, a self surrenders to the transcendent

divine. "Personalists, however, cannot willingly surrender the person to anything impersonal. (On the contrary they finally) deduce all values from the unique appeal of the one supreme Person."<sup>1</sup>

P. F. Strawson published in 1959 *Individuals, An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics*. "Descriptive metaphysics," he explained, "is cotent to decribe the actual structure of our thought about the world, revisionary metaphysics is concerned to produce a better structure. . . Boardly (speaking), Descartes, Leibniz, Berkeley are revisionary, Aristotle and Kant descriptive." The first part of this *Essay* aims at establishing the central position which material bodies and persons occupy in our conceptual scheme as it is. At the outset, he puts two questions : ( 1 ) why are states of consciousness ascribed to anything at all ? and ( 2 ) why are they ascribed to the very same thing as certain corporeal characteristics, a certain physical situation, etc. ? His answer, on p. 98, is that states of consciousness could not be ascribed at all, unless they were ascribed to the same things as certain corporeal characteristics, etc. And what he means by the concept of a person is precisely the concept of a type of entity such that *both* of those distinct predicates are equally applicable to a single individual of that single type. He maintains that the concept of a person is primitive, i.e., it is the ultimate subject of this twofold attribution and is not analyzable into more ultimate subjects, such as body and soul, or reducible to the Humean fiction. Thus Strawson restores in his own way the holistic character of 'person' and bars the way to any dualism or scepticism in this matter. This vindication of the primitiveness of the concept of person permits me to speak of a rediscovery of the person even in the uncongenial atmosphere of contemporary British philosophy.

### Conclusion :

Our survey of the troubled history of the notion of person may have revealed several things : the centrality and the primitiveness of this notion; the difficulty of defining it correctly, i.e., of providing for it a well-conducted piece of descriptive rather than revisionary metaphysics; the need for considering not only the pronouncements

1. All Mounier quotations are taken from his *Personalism* transl. by P. Mairet, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952.

of philosophers in this matter but also the views implicit in the ways of life and the institutions of the different peoples and cultural areas; the active role played by the several competing conceptions of the person in the transformation and revolutions of mankind, including India, especially during the last two hundred years; the difference between individualism and personalism and the lag between many of our conceptions, institutions and ways of behaviour and what appears to be the richest and most adequate conception of person and personalism.

Surely in this matter more than in any other one the wish is true that we should not only *explain* but *transform* and that theory should usher in *praxis*.

Jnana Deepa,  
Poona-14.

R. V. De Smet

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