

# ADAPTATION TO THE COSMOS

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IT is a well-known fact that life is a constant process of adjustment of the organism to its environment. Death is the cessation of such adjustment. In the case of human beings this process is exceedingly complicated, and we are obliged to take into account not merely adjustment to the obvious material and social elements by which we are surrounded, but also what Dr. Crichton Miller calls "adjustment to the Infinite." In other words, we must consider the religious or other philosophy by which we are actuated. Many of the neurotic troubles which are dealt with by psychotherapists are found on examination to originate in some failure in this particular adjustment, or in other words the individual is psychically ill, and perhaps also organically so, because he has not succeeded in adapting himself to the cosmos which we suppose to exist beyond phenomena. It is the adaptation to the cosmos which I propose to consider in this paper.

It is often said that the times in which we live are characterized by a diminution of religious feeling; but, however that may be, it can hardly be doubted that the output of books dealing directly or indirectly with religious philosophy is greater than at any previous period of the world's history. The subject is one which has a fascination for many men who are well acquainted with the most modern scientific ideas. In this connection one need only give as examples Sir Oliver Lodge, Professor Eddington and Mr. H. G. Wells. It may therefore be of some interest if one who has had no serious training in philosophy or metaphysics attempts to indicate the general direction in which the plain man seems to be led at present by modern thought, more especially by recent progress in the sciences of biology and psychology.

The conception of the "struggle for existence" in the animal kingdom (and of course also in the vegetable kingdom, though this does not at present concern us) has been made familiar by the works of Charles Darwin and more recent writers. It dates from a much earlier period, but it is only of late that it has proved so fruitful of results, not only in connection with physical evolution, but also in connection with mental evolution, including the evolution of religious ideas.

Every animal has in the course of its history developed and handed down those tendencies to reaction which we call instincts, and each of these instincts is useful to the individual either for self-preservation or for the preservation of his species; or, if not at present useful, it has been of use at some previous stage. Human beings have furthermore developed the powers of reasoning and imagination, and it is largely through such aids that they have acquired their preeminence over other members of the animal kingdom. These activities are the foundations of science. Imagination has, however, brought with it its own Nemesis. Its primary end is to enable us to deal more efficiently with reality, the ordinary phenomena of everyday life which we recognize as being real because they are adequately corroborated by the experiences of our fellow-men; but it illustrates what Vaihinger calls "the preponderance of means over end", and it urges us to consider questions which are far beyond everyday life. Thus it makes us try to understand the scheme of government of the universe, and to picture the state of affairs in some future life. These may be, as Vaihinger says, "senseless questions", but they obtrude themselves on us all the same, and it tends to make us unhappy if we cannot arrive at a satisfactory solution of such problems.

Whatever solution we may adopt cannot be adequately corroborated, and can be but a fantasy. I use this word in no depreciatory sense, but merely only to denote an idea which cannot be checked by the evidence of our senses or by our reasoning powers. Of course endless efforts have been made to check or corroborate such ideas—often with satisfaction to those immediately concerned. Thus some people think they have obtained through their senses evidence of the existence of human beings in some future life. And, as regards the use of reasoning powers as a check, one need only mention the innumerable theological arguments brought forward by learned men, as for instance those concerning the *aseity* of God, the *filioque* clause, and the question of immanence versus transcendence. But, as indicated above, all such ideas are incapable of proof or disproof. They act in essential independence of evidence and reason, and are strictly speaking fantasies.

These systems of philosophical or metaphysical or religious thought are of the most varied description. There is the purely materialistic conception that the universe is merely a fortuitous concourse of atoms. There are the various polytheistic systems, including the various forms of animism, and then, from the idea that there is one god who takes precedence of other gods (henotheism) man has passed on to the idea that there is only one God

(monotheism). We may feel sure that all these systems (like instincts) are or have been of biological utility, although in many cases a system may be handed down by social tradition to an individual who finds that it is of little or no use to him personally. But there cannot be any doubt as to their general biological utility. Thus Lucretius gained intellectual satisfaction from the atomic theory of Epicurus, and spiritual satisfaction from the view that the gods do not interfere in human affairs, while, on the other hand, many a pious soul has been comforted by the belief that "underneath are the everlasting arms." Those are examples of usefulness which must tend to the preservation of the individual. As regards usefulness to the race, it is only necessary to point to the Moslem religion which has been of distinct value in the preservation of the brown races of man. In fact, all systems of religious philosophy have or have had a certain survival value. On the other hand, an individual may suffer greatly through his efforts to adopt a system which does not suit his intellectual or emotional constitution, and he runs the risk of a neurosis which may cause serious functional or organic irregularities.

There is, however, one comfort for the plain man who feels troubled by the welter of philosophical or metaphysical or religious suggestions which are pressed upon his notice. He finds that no system has ever been put forward by any thinker which has not been strongly criticised by some other equally competent thinker. In fact, the greatest pleasure of a philosopher seems often to be that of demolishing the structure set up by some other philosopher. The various philosophical and metaphysical and religious theories cancel each other out. A plain man may thus find the outlook simplified for him, in that he may with a clear conscience adopt any system of thought which he finds suitable for his psychological constitution. He may even adopt different systems on different occasions, and automatically keep them in logic-tight compartments of his mind. Thus he may at one time accept determinism as his philosophy, and at another time libertarianism, in the comfortable assurance that centuries of discussion by most learned men have not yet proved either theory to be true or false.

To us inhabitants of the western world (and also to the Moslems) the most attractive of these various systems is some kind of monotheism, and we have for the most part included in our philosophies the conception that the great Architect and Ruler of the universe is some sort of personal or supra-personal being, with whom we as individuals can by our efforts come into some sort of personal communion. Most of us would hardly admit the applicability of

the word "religion" to any system which excludes the idea of such personal communion. We should be inclined to say that the essence of religion is a desire to be in right relation to the power manifesting itself in the universe, and we should denote that power by the time-honoured word "God." It must, however, be borne in mind that some modern thinkers hesitate to use the word "God", and prefer to use some vaguer term such as "life-force" or "world-soul" or "nature"; but all these terms seem to denote essentially one and the same thing, viz. some inscrutable first cause which we are compelled by the constitution of our minds to postulate, partly in order to satisfy our idea of causation, and partly to comfort ourselves amidst the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. This comfort may take many different forms: thus it may supply an additional satisfaction of the yearning for love, help, governance, justice and harmony, or it may appeal to the gregarious instinct. There is no special religious sentiment—all the sentiments of religion (as Pierre Janet says) are but the ordinary sentiments of humanity directed towards religion. In fact religious behaviour seems but a special case of social behaviour.

Religion, moreover, always gives a chance of "flight from reality." This flight from reality is a very common phenomenon, and is one of the reasons why many of us indulge in day-dreams, or read fiction, or go to the cinema or the theatre. It is also probably a main reason for the adoption of a religious attitude, as may be seen most clearly in the extremer forms of religious fantasy which are grouped under the term "mysticism", and which in certain cases are so abnormal that they must be called pathological. Whatever may be the nature of the transcendental ideas which are thus embraced, they are in their essence attempts on the part of the individual to adapt himself to the cosmos. They may in many cases be said to be mental anti-toxins developed by the mind to counteract our mental toxins.

There are sturdy and consistent rationalists who assert that they find no use in any kind of religion, and that it is morally wrong to accept any doctrines which are not adequately attested by the evidence of our senses. But these individuals seem to be a very small minority. It is likely that their irreligion would prove a broken reed in times of suffering, and that the process of biological evolution would tend to eliminate them as being less fitted to survive in the struggle for existence. Few of us can live satisfactorily on rationalism alone. In a few more millenniums mankind may have approached the rationalist ideal, but the time is not yet.

It was mentioned above that endless attempts have been made

to check or corroborate religious fantasies by the evidence of our senses or by our reasoning powers. Such attempts bring us, of course, into the realm of science, as they are the methodical investigation by human reason of the facts of human experience. Consequently scientific or quasi-scientific theories, such as the Mosaic cosmogony, have frequently become bound up with religious dogmas. The records of historical facts—or fictions—such as miracles have similarly become involved with dogmas. But modern thought has more and more emancipated itself from dogma, and now deals with all these questions on scientific lines. It considers only the observational or historical evidence which it finds available, and tries to build up, as far as possible dispassionately, the most probable theories to account for the evidence. Whenever science has effectively occupied any position, religion, if previously in conflict, retires from that position, and does its best to adapt itself to the findings of science. There is in fact, as one so often hears, no real conflict between religion and science.

In regard to ethics the state of affairs is somewhat different, in that we are still under the influence of two different systems. We have on the one hand what may be called transcendental ethics, which are based on the supposed desires or intention of a Supreme Being. Thus we may say that it is our duty to love our fellowmen because we are all children of one God, or that it is wrong to commit suicide because each of us is as it were a soldier appointed by God to a particular post, and it is wrong to leave that post without permission. We have also, on the other hand, what may be called the humanistic ethics which aim at the happiness of all sentient creatures in this world, and disregard transcendental considerations. There has often been conflict between the two systems, and that conflict still persists. It is, for instance, acute at the present time in regard to certain aspects of the population problem. The transcendental system has been of great value in the past, and has been a basis of a vast number of meritorious actions, although it has also been the cause of many inhuman actions. But it has always been under the influence of the humanistic system, and it has now to a large extent been displaced by the latter. Thus in the discussion of a bill in parliament, however ethical its purpose may be, we seldom find any appeal to transcendental considerations, and there is a general tendency to look with suspicion on suggestions made by theologians in their capacity of theologians. There are, in fact, many signs that the conflict referred to above will in time be ended by the supersession of the transcendental system by the humanistic.

In considering the attitude which we ought to adopt towards religious fantasies, the first point to be made is that one ought to show the greatest tolerance towards those which have been adopted by other people. It is important not to disturb their ideas without good reason. The cruelty of such disturbance has been abundantly illustrated of late in Russia, where efforts have been made to abolish religion on the ground that it is merely "dope." Religious beliefs usually make the individual happier, and lead him to act more kindly in his dealings with others. But if, as sometimes happens, they make the individual unhappy, or lead to anti-social conduct, it is right to combat them. The principle is a sound one under which religious subjects are as a rule excluded from conversation, but this principle should not be pushed too far, as the discussion of such subjects may often be helpful. Moreover, a very large amount of propagandist work is always being done by believers of various types, and it can hardly be right that those who happen to hold other views should not be allowed freedom in expressing them. Even free-thinkers should be permitted to bring forward their criticisms, provided they do so with due regard for the feelings of others. It is probable that many a free-thinker, who has felt that he is regarded as a religious outcast by those around him, has experienced a glow of satisfaction at discovering from conversation or from literature that there are many other free-thinkers in the world besides himself.

The second point is:—What ought to be one's attitude towards one's own religious fantasies? I suggest that each individual is justified in claiming for himself the fullest freedom without being unduly influenced by the views of others. He must, of course, if he is intellectually honest, accept all the verdicts of science in so far as they appear to him to have been adequately established, and it is hardly possible to exaggerate the importance of thus facing and accepting the realities of life. In these matters he must in a vast number of cases base his acceptance on what has been said or written by scientific authorities. Where these authorities differ, he will have to choose between them as best he can, or else hold his mind in suspense. But there are many questions which are generally recognized as being beyond the realm of science, as for instance those of human survival and of the government of the universe by some higher power. As to these questions the individual should allow himself the fullest freedom. There is no sort of coercive evidence to show that the dogmas of any religion or religious philosophy are true, so that in these matters each individual must work out his own salvation. He will, of course,

receive a large number of suggestions, most of them nebulous and some of them contradictory, and it is unlikely that he will think out for himself any entirely new idea. What he can do and ought to do is to accept, or at least to entertain favourably, any set of ideas which he may find to be of assistance in carrying out the principles of humanistic ethics, that is to say, in increasing the sum of happiness for himself and for others. It may, for instance, help him to think that he is an agent in some vast beneficent scheme leading to some far-off divine event, or to base his philosophy (as does Dr. J. A. Hadfield) on a "cosmic mind", or to think that he is in personal relation with some higher Power to whom he can appeal for assistance and guidance. Any such helpful ideas should be willingly entertained, and if constantly entertained they are likely through the process of auto-suggestion to become for that individual the equivalent of truths. In the absence of effective counter-suggestion, they become beliefs.

There are a certain number of people to whom, as far as one can judge, transcendental ideas are of no importance. If a man is fully and happily occupied, if he is reasonably satisfying his instincts, more especially his altruistic instincts, he may feel no need to consider anything beyond what we generally call reality. If so, who can blame him for not adopting any religion? But these people seem to be a small proportion of the total human population, and in almost every normal individual there is deeply implanted in what Jung calls the "racial unconscious" a strong religious impulse which reveals itself, if not under ordinary circumstances, at any rate in times of danger or suffering. It is therefore important to help the individual to find an outlet for this impulse, and the main function—at any rate from a personal point of view—of all the organized religions is to give this help. This is one of the reasons which justify certain agnostics in saying that a child ought to be taught the religion of the country in which he is born. In all probability he will sooner or later be impelled by his innate constitution to adopt some more or less definite attitude towards the cosmos, and therefore to assist him in his choice he ought to be taught in general terms what some of the most eminent thinkers have said or written on the subject. It is *a priori* probable that the religion of his own country will suit him better than any other; but in the case of an adolescent whose critical faculties seem likely to develop to a high degree, I would suggest that he be given opportunities of gaining some knowledge of what has been said by great thinkers who stand outside the present organized religions, such as Plotinus and Spinoza. It might also be well for him to watch some

of the efforts made by some of our very modern writers, as for instance H. G. Wells, C.E.M. Joad and Gustave Geley, to reconcile the religious sentiment with the latest advances of science. It is certainly dangerous to discourage the intelligent adolescent from making enquiries, and to try to coerce him along any particular line of thought. The dangers of such discouragement and coercion are well illustrated in Sir Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son*.

There are, of course, many people who would condemn as foolish or even wicked the somewhat Laodicean attitude recommended above, and who assert that their own is the one and only "true" religion. And there are a still larger number who yearn to go beyond such scientific conceptions as fantasy-building, auto-suggestion and the struggle for existence. They may welcome, for instance, Dr. Alexander's conception of an "emergent evolution" through which human beings are advancing to a plane higher than the intellectual plane, and are approaching what he calls "deity." Or they may welcome Prof. Thouless's argument that the genuine satisfactoriness of the religious solution is an indication that its object, God, is not merely a fantasy creation of the worshipping mind. Or they may say that religious phenomena are "supernatural" or "divine", and as such not suitable for discussion. Or again, that they point to the only "reality". But such arguments go beyond the realm of science, and cannot be checked in any effective way by such faculties as we at present possess. They therefore come into the category of religious fantasies, and should be recognized and entertained as such by those who find them helpful in their mundane careers. It is, as Dr. R. G. Gordon says in his *Personality*, important that we should "gain that organization of sentiment and belief with relation to the universe which alone permits the personality to be efficient, complete and content"; and it seems clear that in our present stage of evolution the great majority of us can gain that organization only by means of such fantasies. They are a very important instrument which is used (generally unconsciously) in the struggle for existence.

This paper is liable to be criticised by believers for its incredulity and by agnostics for its credulity. All that can be claimed for it is, that it is an attempt to sum up without bias the position which seems now to be occupied by a large number of average educated men, and which is likely to be adopted by a still larger number of such men in future.

Once upon a time there was a community of children living in a house surrounded by a mysterious region to which they had no access. They devoted nearly all their time to making themselves

and each other as comfortable as possible inside the house. But most of them at times engaged in speculation as to what was going on outside. Some of these enquirers gave up the quest as hopeless, and tried to pay no more attention to it. Some of them imagined terrible events which might happen to them after they were obliged to leave the house. Some of them told themselves and each other of some vague beneficent Power which, in spite of their own painful experiences, was governing all things to some good purpose.

Were not these last children the happiest and wisest in the community? Were they not the most successful in self-adaptation to their cosmos?