MODERN ESAUS

[**Dr. Alexander F. Skutch** is a naturalist with a reverence for life, an independent thinker who refuses to accept unchallenged the philosophic shibboleths of many of his *confrères*. Several of his thoughtful essays have appeared in our pages. He challenges here the materialistic assumptions which ignore all evidence but that of the senses and which have not even logic to commend them. Accepting these assumptions, the man of today not only denies his human dignity but recklessly barters away the mutually helpful sympathy with the other parts of the "transcendent Unity" which should be his.—ED.]

Then Jacob gave Esau bread and a pottage of lentiles; and he did eat and drink, and rose up, and went his way: thus Esau despised his birthright. (*Genesis*, 25 : 34.)

Scientists and those philosophers who follow the "naturalistic" tradition attempt to explain the universe on the basis of sensuous experience alone. The examination of the world by means of the senses leads finally to the notion that all bodies are composed of minute particles called atoms, although these atoms have never been directly seen, heard, or felt. Because their existence was postulated solely to explain certain empirical data, it was unnecessary to attribute to them qualities other than those required to account for such phenomena. Thus the initial assumptions of science and the "positive" philosophy built upon them rule out the possibility of ideal or spiritual qualities in the basic stuff of the cosmos. This dismissal of non-sensuous attributes is a necessary outcome of the decision to explain the universe wholly on the basis of the information conveyed to us by our sensory organs; but the choice of these particular features of experience is itself somewhat arbitrary. It lightly dismisses other elements in our total experience that are no less real to us.

The "naturalists" claim a continuity in their tradition which they sometimes deny to the idealistic or religious interpretation of the world. They overlook the fact that the atom of Democritus and Leucippus differs from the atom as at present conceived, as much as the Jehovah of the Old Testament from the Brahman of the Vedanta. Indeed, the two kinds of atoms have nothing in common except the name. If the indivisible atom of Democritus has extension it would seem to have structure; yet we cannot conceive of a structured body unless it is made up of parts, which is contrary to the hypothesis. If it is divisible, then we either fall into an infinite regress or end up with an extended, indivisible particle, which, although smaller than the atom, confronts us with those very baffling aspects that we tried to

avoid by postulating its divisibility. The modern atom is said to be composed, among other things, of electrons, which combine the attributes of a particle and a wave. This hybrid entity quite baffles our conception.

Starting with these inconceivable ultimate particles, the scientist attempts to build up conceptually the complex world of everyday experience. He finds it impossible to explain all the manifold properties of molecules from the electrical properties of their constituent atoms. He cannot tell us how life arose from inorganic matter. He is equally at a loss to explain how consciousness in its varied aspects is engendered by the observable chemical and structural characteristics of living bodies. Still, he assumes that life and spirit are created solely by the aggregation and interplay of the ultimate particles whose properties he initially postulated merely to explain certain physical observations.

At no step in his conceptual synthesis was it permissible for him to ascribe to his constituent materials qualities which he did not originally attribute to them in order to explain those electrical, chemical and mechanical phenomena which led him to infer their existence. To have endowed these fundamental building materials with additional attributes at some point in his argument would have made him unfaithful to his initial assumptions and logically inconsistent. Thus the current scientific interpretation of the universe has the virtue of consistency but explains little except the electrical, chemical and mechanical phenomena that it was invented to elucidate. It is an excellent example of a clever *ad hoc* explanation.

The naturalistic philosopher cannot, without making himself absurd, deny the existence of certain subjective facts—of consciousness, with its modifications of will, purpose, joy, love and the like. Since these are not admitted to exist as properties of the materials assumed to be the original and only building-blocks of the universe, he is forced to regard them as accidents—transient, inexplicable derivatives of the primitive world-stuff rather than essential constituents of the universe. There is logically no other course open to him without a radical revision of his initial postulates.

As a consequence of this unsatisfactory interpretation of the cosmos, the naturalistic philosopher cries out that man, with all his sensibilities, hopes and ideals, is alone in a terrifyingly vast and appallingly indifferent universe, to which his purposes are utterly foreign, from which his aspirations can receive no support. A system of explanation which pretends to be rational and consistent concludes by admitting an effect—the hopes and aspirations of man—which was not even by implication present in the cause—electrical vibrations. Either an effect is implicitly present in its causal antecedents, or some wholly new creation has at some point surreptitiously intruded into the formative process.

A cause inadequate to its effect is at best one of several contributing factors.

In order to explain the characteristics of space and the outlines of things, the geometer selects certain simple elements, such as the point and the line, and makes a few basic assumptions concerning their nature. With his initial definitions and axioms he is amazingly successful in understanding the properties of plane surfaces and the shapes of regular solids, but he can tell us nothing of their mass, their colours, or their manifold other properties. If on the strength of his success in explaining the forms of things he were to declare roundly that their masses and colours were wholly a result of their geometric properties, although admitting that the present imperfect state of geometry prevents his presenting detailed proof of this assertion, he would be in precisely the same position as the scientist or the philosopher who proclaims that all our mental experiences are functions of the material composition of our bodies.

We should not hesitate to laugh out of court the geometer who made so extravagant a claim; yet half the world solemnly accepts the corresponding boast of the scientists and the naturalistic philosophers. Our thinking is immature until we realize that we shall get out of any system of explanation only constructs pertinent to the same order of being as the elements which we admitted as the foundation of this system, and shall never be able to account for facts of a radically distinct category. All our systems of explanation are perhaps more successful in revealing the nature and limitations of human thought than the character of ultimate reality.

The fundamental error in the scientific-naturalistic explanation of the world is prejudice in the selection of its data. The primary fact of experience is not a material external world but consciousness itself. Leaving aside the testimony of purely Idealistic systems, we may recall that Descartes, a Dualist, admitted the existence of matter on faith—he was certain that God was too good consistently to deceive men by means of their senses; and Santayana, a Materialist, reached the conviction that matter exists through "animal faith."

When we examine consciousness attentively, we find that it contains modifications of two sorts, some of which appear to be present in it immediately, so that it is impossible for us to exclude them, while others seem to reach it through the mediation of certain external organs; these we can shut out with greater or less ease.

The immediate modifications of consciousness seem to be more essentially parts of its being, for they persist through all the changes in our external conditions. Chief among these are will or purpose, which is the very pressure of life itself, and that which for want of a better term, we may call the mystic impulse, the

yearning for identification with a comprehensive whole. This impulse is often obscured by the passions engendered in the mind by the struggle to preserve separate bodily existence in a competitive world—by anger, hate, envy and avarice—but it seems always to lurk in the depths of the spirit, and to become manifest when these violent emotions are quiescent.

The organs of sense appear to have developed in accordance with the rule of parsimony, which governs adaptive evolution, and to be on the whole not much more ample in range or acute in distinguishing details than they need be in order to guide their possessors along the treacherous path of life. Our whole sensory equipment reveals to us only a small fraction of the many classes of vibrations to which our bodies are exposed. Certain kinds of radiation penetrate us through and through without causing the least sensation.

In view of this economy in the organization of our sensory equipment, it is not surprising that we possess no special organs to convey to us that of which we are immediately aware. Their presence would result in a duplication of function inconsistent with the whole scheme of organization of our sensory system. What need have we of special organs to reveal to us those aspects of reality which are presented directly to the mind because they are also fundamental constituents of our own inmost being?

Thus, when we decide to build our system of nature solely upon an empirical foundation, *i.e.*, upon the evidence of our five special senses, we make an arbitrary selection among the whole content of consciousness. Nay more, we give preference to those forms of awareness that are most likely to lead us astray. For a smattering of anatomy and physiology makes it clear that the signals which reach the eyes, the ears and other sense-organs are received by an elaborate apparatus which must radically transform them in transmittal to the brain. There is no reason to postulate close resemblance between a modification of consciousness and the corresponding event in the external world.

Our senses, then, report to us a few special facets of a bewilderingly complex world, and do this with a degree of transformation or distortion that we are unable to assess. Is it likely that they will provide us with a truer or more adequate representation of the nature of reality than the intimations which the mind receives immediately, with no elaborate cellular structures separating it from their source?

As Eddington proposed, let us admit the equal significance of all the contents of consciousness, which are the only possible foundation for any view of the universe, whether Materialist or Idealist. No other course seems likely to yield reliable results. When we give due attention to all the facts of experience, we find, among others, purpose. The human mind has no more constant

attribute. Whence comes this pervasive purpose? Is it conceivable that it could be engendered by the chance concatenation of vibrating particles, themselves wholly devoid of purpose?

If we claim that the purposiveness indubitably present in the human mind is something wholly absent from the surrounding world, we violate that principle of continuity upon which the naturalistic tradition so strongly insists. We must either assign to the mind an origin distinct from that of the natural world, or admit in the effect something utterly foreign to the cause. Some of us are so strongly attached to the principle of continuity that we wish to apply it more consistently than the Materialists. To us it seems evident that the purposiveness that inspires our lives is only a particular expression of the purposiveness pervading the universe.

The same conclusion is forced upon us by another line of thought. Let us suppose that a man intends to write a book and, having meagre means, has to produce the food he will need while engaged in literary composition. He digs a plot of ground and sows the seeds. These are purposeful occupations, in the narrow sense that he deliberately performs an operation while visualizing the desired result. The germination of the seeds and the growth of the plants are not purposeful in the same sense; they are processes independent of the man's volition and apparently involve no deliberate intention on the part of the vegetables. Harvesting the produce, cooking and eating the food, are also purposeful activities in the narrow sense, although the last may be a purely instinctive act. But the digestion of the food and all the subsequent complex metabolic processes are carried on independently of the man's volition and in a manner he can scarcely conceive. Writing the book is again a purposeful activity, although all the original thoughts it contains come into the author's mind quite spontaneously and are practically independent of his volition. If we define a purposeful act as one whose final product we have in view, how could the creation of an original thought be purposeful? In so far as it is novel, we cannot foresee what it will be.

In the whole enterprise which engages our author, certain activities are carried out in obedience to his conscious will and with definite ends in mind. Certain others are independent of his will and not purposeful in the narrow sense: these include all his truly novel inspirations, to say nothing of the growth of the vegetables, the rainfall, the sunshine and other natural factors upon which this growth depends. All the coarser operations would commonly be called purposeful; none of the subtler and more delicate processes are purposeful in the conventional meaning of the word. The distinction between purposeful and non-purposeful activities may be superficially useful; but if we maintain that it is funda-

mental, we break up all of our larger enterprises in such a fashion that the parts are individually futile. Purposeful actions can be performed only with the co-operation of non-purposeful processes, and by this division life is shattered into segments individually ineffectual and meaningless.

The only escape from this theoretically untenable and practically disastrous fragmentation of life is to recognize a purpose pervading the whole continuum of which our conscious lives are a minute portion, and of which our more definite purposes are particular instances. We might look upon our more sharply defined purposes as crystals immersed in a solution of universal purposiveness. The vital purposes of the lower animals and vegetables would appear to be less clearly outlined crystals of the same salt. These crystals, great and small, could not be supported save in an ambient permeated with purpose.

Today on every side we hear the cries, now wistful, now despairing, now boastful or exultant: "Man stands alone!" "Vain is our hunger for cosmic support." "Humanity is the only branch of the animal kingdom with a future, all the others are evolutionary blind alleys." "Nothing non-human is worthy of our worship." This view of the universe and our place in it is the offspring of a pathetic blindness wedded to a colossal egotism. It is the result of refusing to admit as valid the testimony of any part of our total experience that does not seem compatible with principles of explanation deliberately selected to clarify only a particular segment of that experience.

It is an outcome of stubbornly refusing to see the deep resemblances between ourselves and the creatures of other kinds that surround us, or of stupidly believing that to recognize such similarities is to degrade ourselves. It is a result of looking only outward and rejecting the testimony within us, of childishly assuming that five special senses can reveal the whole of reality to our groping minds. Those cries of terror and distress are not the lamentations of men who have resolutely examined every avenue open to them before admitting that they can go no farther; they are the frightened cries of straying children who feel themselves irremediably cut off from home because the first street they happened to enter turned out to be a *cul-de-sac*.

Why, then, do we cling so stubbornly to a view of the world obviously constructed without full regard to the total testimony of our experience, a view that does so much violence to our nature? Is it not merely because this view is intimately associated with a science and technology which give us wealth, power and creature comforts, albeit at the price of an intellectual disorientation that threatens to wreck the whole vast structure which they have so laboriously reared? Are we not modern Esaus, deliberately sell-

ing our spiritual birthright to these clever Materialistic Jacobs in return for a bowl of pottage?

I have been thus severe with the Materialistic interpretation of the universe because at present it is the more aggressively dogmatic, and has such disastrous practical consequences. But pure Idealism is equally unsatisfactory. Each of these systems of explanation begins by concentrating upon one part of our whole experience, then finds itself unable to present a generally acceptable account of the other part. In the present state of our knowledge, the modest thinker will be a Dualist, even if a Dualistic philosophy is somewhat of a patchwork, like a house built half of stone and half of wood. Certainly we should all prefer to dwell in a conceptual edifice solidly constructed in a single piece, like a building of reinforced concrete, proof against the earthquakes of doubt and the gnawing termites of criticism.

But until the Materialist can tell us, far more convincingly than he has hitherto done, how life and, above all, mind are generated from the vibrations of electrons and atoms; or until the Idealist can account more cogently for the existence of a common external world, neither side in the perennial philosophic debate can claim to have established its point. If forced by the intensification of hostilities to abandon my neutrality and declare myself roundly for one party or the other, I should cast my lot with the Idealists—although I should not feel quite comfortable with them—because mind is known to me as an immediate datum, while I postulate the existence of matter merely upon animal faith, or something very like it. And if it is argued against me that mind, as I have direct intuition of it, is a puny thing to be assigned a status symmetric with that of the ponderous material universe, I reply that, whatever the universe may be in itself, as known to me it can never exceed the capacity of the knowing mind. The mind is equal in stature to everything it knows.

But Dualism, although attractive to some of us because of its rugged honesty, is at best a half-way house on the long road to ultimate wisdom. If we admit that mind is aware of material things, yet shares no common property with them, we must postulate some form of parallelism or a pre-established harmony, or divine intervention in every instance of cognition of the external world, no less than every time our volition results in changes therein. This seems an unnecessarily ponderous machinery of explanation, and apparently has few adherents at the present day. If, however, we concede that mind and matter interact directly, we must also allow that they possess properties in common; for entities which share not a single attribute cannot possibly influence each other. If mind and matter interact, they must both be manifestations or derivatives of some ultimate reality whose nature still baffles our understanding. A Dualistic interpretation of the experienced world points unmistakably to a transcendent Unity.

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