

ALEXANDER F. SKUTCH Organs of the Universe

[Our old and esteemed friend, Dr. Alexander F. Skutch, is profoundly versed in both philosophy and biology. His biological image for the spiritual relation between the self and the Universe is suggestive and wise. In the *Gītā* the Universal Form of Kṛṣṇa is described as having eyes, ears, mouths in all directions; on Dr. Skutch's view *we* are some of the organs of the Universe.—ED.]

EACH OF US is a unique being, an individual not quite like any other who ever lived. Most of us cling passionately to everything that expresses our individuality: our name and form; our opinions; our ideals and aspirations; our memories, in which the continuity of our conscious lives is preserved; even those external possessions which most bear the imprint of our personality. Although there are, no doubt, certain aspects of ourselves that we desire to change for the better, there is much, including the most essential part, that we wish to preserve; for to alter ourselves wholly would be to destroy ourselves.

We do well to cling to our individuality. It is the product of an immensely long and difficult evolution. To create an animal with sensory organs like ours, capable of reporting so large a segment of the surrounding world to a mind that eagerly receives this information, classifies it, treasures it, and stubbornly endeavours to fathom its deeper meaning, was a triumph of the evolutionary process. An eagerly receptive human being is a centre at which the Universe is concentrated and valued. By the multiplication of such centres the Universe is immeasurably enriched.

A number of religions and philosophies have approved and encouraged this natural desire to preserve and perfect our individuality or selfhood. This is eminently true of Christianity, which promises to the righteous soul, purified of all defects and distressing memories, endless blissful existence in sight of God. Jainism teaches that the individual soul or *jīva*, when cleansed of the *karmic* deposits that obscure its splendid innate powers, will preserve its self-identity for ever, enjoying infinite knowledge, perfect bliss, and boundless power. Similarly, the Viśiṣṭādvaita philosophy of Rāmānuja affirms that the worthy purified soul will dwell everlastingly, as an individual, in God.

Among Western philosophers, Leibniz employed his great intellect to develop a world-view that affirms the absolute indestructibility of the individual soul, yet conforms to the laws of nature as understood in his day. There is a remarkable similarity between the monads of the German philosopher and the *jīvas* of the Jains. Both are indestructible; both contain within themselves, potentially, all that they can know. In the case of

the *jīvas*, this innate knowledge becomes explicit in the measure that the obscuring *karmic* dust is dissipated; in the monads, the same result is achieved by the illumination of darkness.

Although certain religions and philosophies affirm the value of selfhood and encourage the hope that it can be preserved everlastingly, others take an exactly opposite view. Not to cherish and perfect our individuality but to annul or destroy it, as by merging ourselves without a remainder in the universal, the Absolute, or perhaps the Void, is for them the proper aim of human life and the only road to liberation from the pains and tribulations which now beset us. Notable among these religions and philosophies is the Advaita Vedānta of Śaṅkara, which teaches that individuality is an illusion, for the *ātman* or self of the apparent individual is no different from the *Ātman* or Self of the Universe. The person who, through philosophic study or yogic discipline, succeeds in dispelling the mist of ignorance and recognizing his own true nature, becomes inseparably one with the *Ātman* or absolute *Brahman*. He participates in the divine attributes of *sat*, *cit*, *ānanda*—universal existence, consciousness, perfect bliss—but not as an individual; for his illusory self vanishes in the universal Self like a drop of rain in the ocean. Similarly, Buddhism is a discipline for the dissipation of the illusion of individuality, with all the suffering that accompanies it. Aldous Huxley's erudite book, *The Perennial Philosophy*, advocates the loss of self in the Divine Ground.

These religions and philosophies of regress, as they may be called, run counter to the whole course of evolution on this planet, and perhaps in the universe at large. Evolution, as Herbert Spencer demonstrated in great detail, is a progress from the diffuse to the definite, from the homogeneous to the heterogeneous, from the universal to the particular. Through this process there arose, in the course of geologic ages, self-conscious individuals capable of knowing and appreciating the world in which they dwell—individuals whose selfhood is precious not only to themselves but likewise to others who surround them. By the presence of these individuals capable of living joyously and appreciatively, the value of the Universe seems to be vastly enhanced—indeed, without sentient beings capable of some measure of happiness and appreciation, the Universe, for all its vastitude, would appear to have no value at all. But, say religions of the type of the Advaita Vedānta and Buddhism, this individuality is a tragic illusion, the source of all our woes, and we should bend all our efforts to destroying it. For them, evolution, resulting in the genesis of individuals conscious of themselves and of their distinctness from the rest of creation, was a blunder of cosmic magnitude, whose evil consequences can be overcome only by the heroic efforts of an elect few. One who sees

edented level, endowing him with attributes unmatched by any other living thing. This union of the general and the particular gives to human life its outstanding significance. We can as little afford to lose sight of the one as of the other.

Our uniqueness and distinctness from the rest of creation, no less than our absolute dependence on universal forces and processes for the maintenance of our individual lives, are stubborn facts which impress themselves the more strongly on our minds the more we study science and philosophy. Yet, in consequence of faulty education or the influence of religious dogmas, we sometimes forget or depreciate one side or the other of our dual status, with lamentable results to ourselves and the beings that surround us. Forgetfulness of our universality and the manifold bonds that join us not only to the whole living world but to the wider Universe confines our outlook, narrows our sympathy, and insulates our spirit from those cosmic currents that give to individuality its highest significance. Failure to appreciate and cultivate our individuality deprives the Universe of the most precious contribution that each of us can make to it: a unique centre of awareness, knowing and responding to the cosmos in a distinctive manner and thereby contributing to its total diversity and perfection. "The stage which most embraces the infinity of nature is the most individual," wrote the German philosopher Heinrich Steffens long ago.

The foundation of a fruitful spiritual life is the simultaneous awareness of our individuality and our universality, of our uniqueness no less than of our sameness with the whole of being. This is a difficult position to preserve; it is fatally easy so to fix our gaze on either side of this duality that we lose sight of the other side. We need a symbol to help us keep firmly in mind our relationship to the Universe as a whole. The most adequate symbol that occurs to me is an organ of a living body. Such an organ — an eye, for example — is composed of the same substance as the rest of the body, nourished by the same food, dependent on the same vital processes for its maintenance. Detached from its body, it has neither life nor worth. Yet in it the cells of the body have acquired novel qualities and a unique configuration, which fit it for the discharge of a special function, on which its peculiar contribution to the living body depends. The value of an eye would certainly not be increased if it became skin and flesh like the rest of the face in which it is set.

As an organ to a living body, so is a human being, at his best, to the Universe. He is composed of the universal substance and kept alive by universal forces, which in him acquire a special configuration and operate in distinctive ways, thereby enabling him to make a unique contribution to the universal life. To view oneself as an organ of the Universe is to

the matter in this light may well doubt that beyond the world of appearances lies a good or blessed Being, the source or eternal ground of this sad illusory world, by union with whom (or which) we achieve salvation. For could a perfect timeless Being make such a hideous mistake?

Religious philosophies of the opposite type might be called religions of progress, because they try to carry forward to higher levels the main line of evolutionary advance on this planet up to the present era. Whether our individuality, or any part of it, does or can persist after the dissolution of our organic bodies is an open question. Objective science affords no proof of it. Yet the fact that in striving in this direction we are in the line of evolutionary advance should give us hope.

Which of these two types of religious doctrines, that which encourages progress toward an ever higher level of individuality or that which advocates regress to the undifferentiated primal ground of being, teaches the more valuable lesson? Which gives the truer picture of our status and functioning in this perplexing world? Is it better to cherish and enhance our individuality, or to strive with all our might to submerge it in the Absolute or the universal?

I believe that the doctrines of both types point to valuable truths, but that either taken alone may develop a dangerously one-sided attitude; so that each needs to be tempered and complemented by the other. Our expanding scientific knowledge of the cosmos affirms with ever-increasing force the presence of the universal in our individual selves. Our bodies are composed of the same elements that spectroscopic analysis detects in the most distant stars. We live and act by means of the same energy that courses through the Universe, keeping the planets in motion, causing the winds to blow and bring the life-giving showers, enabling plants to grow, fishes to swim, and birds to fly. We belong to the great kingdom of living things, composed of cells and protoplasm like the rest of them, depending on the same sun to support our vital activities, the wide-spread biological processes of metabolism, respiration, growth, and movement. To many, man's mental life appears unique; but the more attentively we study other animals, the more deeply we trace its roots in the animal kingdom. If we possessed instruments for the detection of spirit as sensitive as those which scientists use for measuring physical quantities, we should doubtless find that feeling is as widely diffused through the Universe as matter.

Although we are composed of universal elements, in us they acquire a unique configuration. All evolutionary advance consists in the arrangement of wide-spread, ancient elements in new patterns, more coherent in themselves, better adjusted to the surrounding world. In man, a recent arrival on this planet, the pattern of organization has attained an unprec-

see in a most illuminating perspective one's relation not only to the Whole but likewise to each of the other organs — the other individual beings — which surround him.

As organs of the Universe, what are our proper functions? Just as each organ of a healthy body exercises its peculiar power for the maintenance of the life on which its own life depends, so the person who views himself as an organ of the Universe will co-operate with his fellow organs in preserving the world in which he lives. The duty of *lokasamgraha* or world-maintenance, which Krishna enjoined upon Arjuna, includes, as we see today, not only the cultivation of a healthy social order but likewise the preservation of the beauty and productivity of the earth, upon which the prosperity of every society ultimately depends. The wide-spread forgetfulness of our organic relation to the natural world threatens to plunge it — and ourselves — into irretrievable disaster.

Although the primary or basic function of organs is to preserve the organism of which they are parts, they may also enhance the value of its life. This is especially true of such organs as eyes, ears, and other sensory receptors, without which our human lives would hardly be worth living. One who regards himself as an organ of the Universe will wish not only to do whatever he can to preserve in a flourishing state that small part of it subject to his influence, but moreover to make some positive contribution to the value of the whole. To accomplish this, he will view himself as an organ whereby the Universe knows and appreciates itself. Through his senses it perceives the beauty that it has created; it may well be that only by means of individualized organs can the Universe bring to fruition potentialities that have for ages been latent in it.

By viewing ourselves in organic relationship to the whole of which we are parts, we steep our individuality in universality and give to our lives, which to many of our contemporaries seem petty and insignificant, a meaning and importance that ennobles them. Moreover, we impart to the whole Universe, so far as it is known to us, a significance which certain recent thinkers have failed to detect in it. That which, by being known and appreciated, increases the value of a conscious life, can never be held to exist vainly or barrenly. Even if, apart from mankind, the Universe were totally devoid of purpose and significance, by responding to its sublimity and loving all the beauty that it contains we would infuse significance into the Whole. Every individual who, by simultaneously cultivating his individuality and his universality, makes himself a focal point in the cosmos enriches it by his presence. His universality gives meaning to his individual life; his individuality enhances the significance of the Universe.