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TIME, PROGRESS, AND ETERNITY

"THE unfortunate modern philosopher," said the late Archbishop William Temple, "can never for a moment ignore the problem of Time or Process."¹ Alas, he who is unfortunate enough to turn to the modern philosophers is scarcely encouraged to entertain any firm hopes of ever arriving at a generally acceptable solution of this inevitable problem, such are the mutual antagonisms and contradictions, such the labyrinthine discursions and speculations with which he is confronted. Yet the theologian too, no less than the philosopher, should accept the challenge of this problem, for it is one which bears a vital relationship to Christian theology, and the elucidation of which may provide a valuable clue to the meaning of life here and hereafter.

I

Time is conceived of in three respects: as past, as present, and as future. Of these three, the past is irretrievable and no longer existent, and the future is inscrutable and not yet existent. Both past and future are immaterial concepts, and both must be regarded as unreal, though not because they are immaterial. A virtue such as courage is immaterial, but none the less real, and its effect on human character can be observed. But neither past time nor future time is ever a present reality. The past was once present, but when it was so it was not past, but present. The future will become present, but when it becomes so it will no longer be future, but present. It will remain to be seen in what sense, if any, the present may be said to be real.

To speak of time past and future is a convenience of expression, an *usus loquendi*; it is a necessary and natural mode of thought, necessitated by a factor which is common at least to all mundane existence, namely, the phenomenon of *change*. If everyone and everything remained exactly the same always, that is, if there were no such thing as change in our world and experience, not only would it not be necessary to speak of past and future, but the very idea of past and future, indeed of time itself, would be inconceivable to the human mind—if one dares to assume that under such conditions mind could possibly have a place.

¹ *Nature, Man and God* (London, 1935), p. 96.

For in such static, unvarying circumstances no events or processes would take place: there would be no progress and no regress; no births, no deaths; no growings, no dwindlings; no victories, no defeats; no risings, no fallings; no thoughts, no words, no deeds; no variety of feeling and emotion; not even any breathings in or any breathings out; nothing to look back upon, and nothing to look forward to—a blank, insensible, motionless, inanimate existence—eternal lifelessness.

Now this, of course, would be a *materialistic* timelessness, and nothing more futile and meaningless than such a state of existence could be imagined. As we shall see later, it is something very far removed from *spiritual* timelessness, which is the medium of eternal life.

Any occurrence, then, or change with respect to the existence of any object must immediately constitute the existence of that object as timeful, because there must then be a time before and a time after the event in the experience of that object took place. Were there no change, either within or around, there would be no time before and no time after, no past and no future. Thus it must readily be recognised that it is the phenomenon of *change* that produces the concept of time; and it must be allowed as axiomatic that that which is changeless must also be timeless, and that which is changeful must also be timeful.

But what of time present? The present is fundamentally a relative concept, dependent upon its associations with the past and the future. That is to say, the present is essentially timeful. Nor is it remarkable that in the minds of most people the present should seem to possess more reality than either the past or the future, although it is no less unreal and illusory than they. Despite the fact that it may be defined as now existent, in the ultimate analysis it can never be demonstrated or isolated. It is a point in time, not unlike the geometrical point in space, which has no dimension. It is always fleeting, never static. The present is the dimensionless point at which the future is constantly and inexorably becoming past. There is never even a momentary lull or cessation in the sequence and flow of time—never a pause during which one can say, “Behold the present! This was future, and will anon be past: examine it while it is present!” As an illustration of sorts, we may liken time to an express train in perpetual motion, and seemingly of interminable length, which flashes past as we stand at a point of observation

beside the railway track. We may be looking for a friend who is leaning out of one of the windows, and on seeing him we may cry, "Here he comes!" and "There he goes!"—but we cannot say, "Here he is!" for even as we say it he has come and gone, and our statement is falsified. So, too, the present never lingers and cannot be measured. Time may not be isolated, arrested, or grasped.

I am aware that excellent men disapprove of this method of analysing time. They maintain that such abstractions are void of significance, inasmuch as it is not possible for anything to happen in a mathematical point of time which has no length or duration. And yet this is not strictly the case, for time is essentially composed of points of time—not disconnected points, but successive points, a continuous series. Any event must have its commencement and its conclusion at certain definite points in the time-series. Thus a race is timed from the moment when the starting-gun is fired to the moment when the tape is broken by the winner. The stop-watch indicates two separate points of time; but the significance of these two points is not in their separation, but in their connection: they are both points in one continuous temporal line of succession, the one earlier and the other later, and through reference to them we are enabled to measure the length of time which has elapsed between the limits which they demarcate. Time, which is history, is never a blur, but always pointed, eventful.

It is the intangibility of this moment of the present which, for practical purposes, has given rise to a certain conceptual modification which is commonly termed the "specious present". "What I find in consciousness," says Professor Royce, "is that a succession, such as a rhythm of drum-beats, a musical phrase, a verse of poetry, comes to me as one present whole, present in the sense that I know it all at once." In the units combining to form this series there are, of course, different temporal elements of before and after. It is thus a "serial whole, *within* which there are observed temporal differences of former and latter".¹ Professor A. E. Taylor defines the "specious present" as "essentially a simultaneously presented *succession*, i.e., a transition from before to after". (The contradiction in terms will not pass unobserved, but it seems to be unavoidable in any attempt to describe what is meant by the "specious present".)

¹ *The World and the Individual* (London, 1904), vol. ii, p. 122.

This succession in the so-called "specious present" is the content of what he speaks of, more felicitously, as the "focus of consciousness"; and "now" is accordingly defined as what is actually focal.¹ "The present," avers Dr. William Temple, "is so much of the empirical process as is immediately apprehended. This is far more than the passing sense-impression of the moment. It is all which is apprehended as continuous with that impression."² And elsewhere he says: "The retentive and interpretative activities of mind are involved in every apprehension whatsoever. The proportions of sense-perception, memory, interpretation, explanation, may be indefinitely varied. All our apprehensions are associated with sense-perception, and none are limited to it."³

Now, this view of the "specious present" is undoubtedly correct. It is not merely and simply a succession which is somehow perceived by the senses as possessing a unity of some sort or other; it is a succession the components of which are correlated and interpreted by the *mind* so that they assume specific meaning for the percipient. It is here that the factors of *process* and *education* enter and play a vital part. The process is that of transmitting the impressions from the sensory organs to the brain, where co-ordination of the stimuli received takes place. Education, which is the retention and application of the lessons of former training or experience, provides one with the faculty of *educing* the significance of that which is apprehended. Thus a line of Hebrew characters might be full of significance to the Hebrew scholar because their sequence is such as to form the successive words of a logical statement, and as such the whole idea conveyed, as well perhaps as the letters forming the words and their sounds, would be "present" in his mind; but to one who was unfamiliar with Hebrew words and characters they would only form a disjointed and meaningless jumble of cyphers. Hence the phenomenon of the "specious present" is produced as a result of the activities of mind and memory in co-ordinating the various objects that are perceived by the senses. And such a co-ordination, such a "focus" of the mind, is necessary if life with its many relationships is to hold any meaning at all for us. Indeed, in focusing one's mind upon the present, it would seem that it is often needed to exercise a certain amount of anti-

¹ *Elements of Metaphysics*, 6th ed. (London, 1921), p. 245.

² *Op. cit.*, p. 203.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

pation with regard to the immediate future, as well as memory with regard to the past, in order that the import of successive sense-perceptions may not be missed. The ability to interpret a portion of time, or rather of the chain of events which are the source of the idea of time, of cause and effect, of impulse and motive, is thus essential if we are to be rational beings. As it is, our focus of consciousness can only concentrate on what is comparatively a very minute sequence of the time-series; for the rest, we have to delegate to memory, which is at best a very unreliable servant, the task of guarding as well as possible the lessons of the past. This consideration alone should act as a reminder of the frailty and limitation of man.

II

Time, then, may be considered as a useful and necessary convention, occasioned by the ever-changing history, affairs, and relationships of this world and the individuals upon it. And it is because time cannot be dissociated from change and succession, whether as regards state or position or appearance or thought, that we are compelled to think of time as passing, and never as stationary. Time, unreal though in the ultimate analysis it may be, is always slipping by. Now, it is this procession of time that has invited some to believe also in a progression of time—a progression to the goal of eternity. Evolutionists and other utopianists, who preach the perfectibility of man, fall within the category of those who hold this belief. Herbert Spencer postulated progress as a necessity and the ultimate perfection of man as a certainty. On the side of pure philosophy, Professor McTaggart, in our day, has propounded the theory that the consecutive stages of the time sequence are progressively advancing towards the consummation of the eternal reality.¹ This, he asserts, is the decisive question, “whether there is any law according to which states in time, as we pass from earlier states to later, tend to become more adequate or less adequate representations of the timeless reality”. What does determine the order of events in time? “I believe myself,” he replies, “that there is good reason to hold that the order is determined by the adequacy with which the states represent the eternal reality, so that those states come next together which

¹ Essay on “The Relation of Time and Eternity” in *Philosophical Studies*, ed. S. V. Keeling (London, 1934), pp. 132–155.

only vary infinitesimally in the degree of their adequacy, and that the whole of the time-series shows a steady process of change of adequacy." Thus, by this theory, any stage in the time-series that is still future must be regarded as a "less inadequate representation of the timeless reality of existence than our present stage"; and "the timeless reality itself—the Eternal—may itself be considered as the last stage in a series, of which the other stages are those which we perceive as a time-series—those stages nearest to the timeless reality being those which we perceive as the later stages in time. When, therefore, we are looking at things as in time—as we must look at them—we must conceive the Eternal as the final stage in the time-process. We must conceive it as being in the future, and as being the end of the future. Time runs up to Eternity, and ceases in Eternity".

Professor McTaggart justly regards as a "cheerful theory" one like this which postulates that, "whatever the state of the universe now, it would inevitably improve, and the state of each conscious individual in it would inevitably improve, until they reached a final state of perfect goodness, or at least of very great goodness". A theory of this nature would give, he maintains, "as much as any belief can give, consolation and encouragement in the evils of the present".

And yet Professor McTaggart makes the extremely frank and generous admission that "no empirical evidence which we could reach would afford even the slightest presumption in favour of such a vast conclusion". He bases his hope that "good will predominate over evil more in the future than it has in the past, or than it does in the present", upon the hypothesis that time is unreal, and that the desirable goodness which is characteristic of the timeless reality is veiled from us by this very illusion of time. It is here alone that he sees "a chance of a happy solution in the relation of Time to Eternity". Indeed, we are informed that it was this very hope which sustained him on his last bed. "After a short but painful illness," writes Dr. C. D. Broad, "borne with admirable courage and patience, he died on 18th January, 1925, in a nursing home in London at the age of 58; passing, as he firmly believed, to the next stage in the long but finite journey from the illusion of time to the reality of eternal life."¹

¹Introduction to McTaggart's *Some Dogmas of Religion*, new ed. (London, 1930), pp. xxv f.

But this is clearly a very insecure and problematical basis for optimism, let alone faith. A philosophical fancy confessedly unsupported by any empirical and circumstantial evidence or demonstration, no matter how attractive the entertainment of it may be, cannot be regarded with serenity as a substantial encouragement in the belief that mankind is steadily advancing towards the goal of the good state; and it can scarcely be of more than very minor value in helping us to face and overcome the evils, whether real or imagined, of our own experience at this present stage in the time-series.

We may inquire, too, whether we may justifiably consider time as running up to eternity. The finite cannot ever attain to the infinite, or even come near to doing so. In mathematics two numbers that by comparison with each other are very great and very small, say one million and one millionth, are equally insignificant in comparison with infinity.¹ Nothing is either greater or smaller, nearer or further, in comparison with infinity. Can time, then, whether regarded as real or as unreal, ever be nearer to or further from eternity, or can the different representations of the time-series ever be more adequate or less adequate representations of the full and infinite adequacy of eternity?

To this it may be replied that in our own experience and according to our own judgment certain states of existence must be acknowledged to be better and happier than certain other states of existence. Thus a world of peace and plenty is undeniably better and more desirable than a world of war and famine. And this we readily grant. But once again it is a case of greater and smaller in comparison with infinity. It is like being given a bucketful of water in place of a thimbleful, when what one desires is the whole ocean. Even if a world of peace and plenty were somehow realised, it would still be very far removed from the unrestricted perfection of eternity. For one thing, the greatest of all mundane disabilities, death, would continue to put a term to all human life, so that hearts would still be broken over the loss of loved ones, and grand schemes and ambitions frustrated by this final enemy; to say nothing about accident, sickness, disease, and crime, which commonly accompany the insecure life of mankind.

Certainly the present chaotic state of the world can never

¹ Cf. E. A. Litton, *Introduction to Dogmatic Theology*, 3rd ed. (London, 1912), para. 21, p. 76.

be described as progressive, but rather as alarmingly retrogressive. Never before in this planet's varied annals have bloodshed and misery and savage cruelty been so universally rife. A comparing of present with past history provides us with no ground for optimism; and we cannot avoid the conclusion that human nature is unimproved to-day, that it is still greedy, bestial, unscrupulous, and self-seeking. And if there is no change in the heart of mankind, we are by no means nearer the utopia of our aspirations.

The two world conflicts of this generation should be sufficient to demonstrate to the thinking man that the doctrine of the inevitability of human progress is a heretical myth and a dangerous deceit. At the very least he who still persists in being a visionary utopianist must confess that belief in a steadily maintained and ever mounting progress is no longer reasonable. The present-day optimist cannot evade the fact that on the chart of the world's well-being there are alarming slumps and declines, which indicate very serious setbacks, of which the most recent are also the most serious and alarming. And who can say but that another such cataclysmic retrogression as the one from which we are just endeavouring to recover—alas, a by no means impossible contingency—will mean the final stifling of all optimism, if not the destruction of all civilisation, with an attendant inability ever to make a recovery?

III

It is necessary that we should not fail to recognise the fact that it is the theory of Evolution, with its doctrine evolutionary progress, which, more than any other factor, has been responsible for the popular notions of the steady and inevitable improvement of the world in which we live. The struggle for existence and survival, the reaching out for goals hitherto unattained, the ambitious impulse of the life-substance in the organism—these, we were told, were the factors that contributed to the gradual forward and upward march of life from the humblest beginnings to the most glorious ends. Man being the supreme achievement of the great onward drive of Evolution, a philosophy was engendered which at root and professedly was an essentially humanistic philosophy, and which might be epitomised in the Swinburnian line, "Glory to Man in the highest! for Man is the master of things."¹

¹ "Hymn of Man" (*Songs before Sunrise*).

In their massive Bible of Biology¹ those mongers of popular Evolution, Messrs. H. G. Wells, Julian Huxley, and G. P. Wells, preconise Evolution as "the incontrovertible fact", "the fact of facts", and the "central fact", and categorise all critics of this "hated fact" as "dishonest Creationists, narrow fanatics, and muddle-headed people". Such intolerant bluster fails pitifully to enhance their plea for the evolutionary view. The possibility that some Supreme Being might have had some interest and participation in the affairs of our world, whether in the creation or the preservation of life, is ruled out by them as beneath contempt.

It is soon seen to what grotesquely unscientific extremes these scientists are driven in order to maintain their contention. That they may give an explanation of the origin of life which is in accordance with their own fancies, they are compelled to postulate the spontaneous generation of life from previously lifeless matter, and through this absurd indiscretion they render themselves ludicrous in the eyes of all thinking persons.

For them to put forward such a suggestion is to indulge in the very antithesis of the true scientific principle and to be guilty of obscurantism of the worst type. Pasteur's famous experiments, by which the once prevalent theory of spontaneous generation was finally exploded, they dare not pass over, though it is an uncomfortably large and bitter pill for them to swallow. Actually, having swallowed it, such is their embarrassment that they regurgitate it before it has begun to take effect, and put it away on the shelf once more. "Pasteur", they say, "with a combination of rigorous experiment and patient perseverance, finally clinched the matter and proved that all visible things, *at any rate in the conditions which now obtain in nature*, arise only from others of the same sort. . . . We can say now with an entirely reasonable confidence that all life *which exists today* has sprung direct from pre-existing life." The subtle and not altogether honourable manner in which the way is prepared for the thrusting of their warped propaganda upon the gullible public is to be observed in the insinuation into an otherwise unexceptionable context of those phrases which I have emphasised. They are now ready to follow up at the commencement of the next paragraph with a quite unblushing "of course",

¹ *The Science of Life* (London, 1931).

and to continue by saying that it is "reasonable"—*reasonable!* O shameful jesuitry!—to believe that originally life was spontaneously generated. "But, of course,"—these are their words—"this *apparent impossibility* of spontaneous generation applies only to the world as we know it today. At some time in the remote past, when the earth was hotter and its air and crust differed, physically and chemically, from their present state, *it seems reasonable to believe that life must have originated in a simple form from lifeless matter*"¹. And herein they have scaled the supreme height of unreason.

We are thus asked to accept as reasonable the doctrine that life commenced in this unique manner, and that all subsequent life has developed from this primordial germ-plasm. The old saying wisely instructs us that the strength of a chain is its weakest link: how utterly undependable, then, how unsubstantial must the evolutionary chain be, which is in the unhappy state of being no proper chain at all because its links are "missing"! Yet, if Evolution is true, there should be no links missing at all; every joint in the whole series should be demonstrable. For we have, supposedly, the beginning and the end of the chain, the earliest and the latest stages, the unicellular organism and the human organism: hence, obviously, it should be possible to follow up and trace through every intermediate stage from beginning to end. And by this one test alone Evolution should stand or fall: it falls. To take but one portion of this hypothetical catena, we have the ape and we have man: it should be easily possible, if the evolutionary hypothesis is correct, to select for exhibition a number of apes to demonstrate the progression from apedom to humandom. Thus one should not be surprised to find an ape at that stage where he is performing his first acts of worship, another coming to a tailor to be measured for his first suit of clothes, and another playing Bach on the violin! But one would be surprised, not to say alarmed, at making such a discovery: it is unthinkable; yet it should not be, if Evolution is true.

The truth is that apes will be apes, no matter how much some people would like to see them becoming something else. As Pasteur proved, "all visible things arise only from others of the same sort" (the very admission, already quoted, of the Wells—Huxley—Wells trio). As the Bible asserts, all living

¹ *The Science of Life* (London, 1931), pp. 267 f.

things reproduce "after their kind". As the modern science of Genetics shews, there are definite fixed laws which govern all heredity. The careful researches in this science have conclusively proved that the only factors that enter into and influence the machinery of heredity are factors which are already present in the genetical make-up of the parental organisms, and that thus every character of the offspring is inherited directly from the parents, even though in various points of appearance the offspring may be quite unlike its parents (such a phenomenon being caused by the association or otherwise of recessive and dominant genes). The bells of Genetics are tolling the death-knell of Evolution. Darwinism has been buried long since. Would that people were sufficiently clear-headed to recognise this fact!

IV

It is extremely instructive to observe the very considerable, indeed incapacitating, modifications that have been imposed within the past thirty years upon the preaching of evolutionary progress. The grand confidence in the necessary and inevitable advance to perfection has gone for good. This is shewn clearly enough in recent books by Huxley and Wells.¹ For them now "Evolutionary Progress" is no longer an inevitability and no more than a desirable possibility, and a very problematical possibility at that. Dr. Huxley informs us of "the restricted nature of biological progress", and, moreover, that such "progress is not compulsory and universal". Indeed, we are told that "evolution may involve downward or lateral trends, in the shape of degeneration or of certain forms of specialization, and may also leave certain types stable". Thus the tapeworm is "a degenerate blind alley" and the jellyfish is "a specialization of a primitive type long left behind by more successful forms of life".

For many it must be somewhat disconcerting that Evolution should have been so thoughtless as to maintain in their thriving millions the many earlier, inferior, and less complex forms of life. In the very nature of things one would have expected that, as the more advanced organisms came into existence and conquered new heights of dignity, so the previous types, being

¹ Cf. Huxley's *Evolution—The Modern Synthesis* (London, 1942), especially the chapter on "Evolutionary Progress", from which the ensuing quotations are taken; also Wells's *The Fate of Homo Sapiens* (London, 1939).

outmoded and having served their purpose, would be discarded and annihilated. One would reasonably have expected this to be a normal process of Evolution. But it is not so: degenerate, useless, and harmful forms of life continue to propagate their species with impunity, and there appears to be as much teeming vitality in the blind alleys and side streets as anywhere else. Dr. Huxley dismisses this objection as "fallacious", but in doing so he himself is guilty of embracing what he should have seen to be a very obvious fallacy. This objection is, he avers, "on a par with saying that the invention of the automobile does not represent an advance, because horse-drawn vehicles remain more convenient for certain purposes, or pack animals for certain localities". The true analogy along these lines can only be seen in the development of the automobile over a period of years, say, from 1910 to 1940. The 1910 model, though such a wonder in its day, has long since been relegated to the scrap-heap, and during each successive year, as new improvements have been introduced, so all previous models have become out of date and have gone out of production. This is real evolutionary progress as seen in the mechanical world. But there is no parallel in the biological realm. To be entirely consistent in his argument, Dr. Huxley would have to maintain that the automobile engine has been evolved from the horse, or whatever animal it may be that provides the motive power of an animal-drawn vehicle. Such a contention, however, would be evident to all as an absurdity. But we have said enough to indicate that the accusation of employing a fallacious argument must after all be lodged at Dr. Huxley's door.

Dr. Huxley confesses now that he sees Evolution as a "series of blind alleys", of which some are extremely short, others are longer, having, according to his computation, "run for tens of millions of years before coming up against their terminal blank wall", while others again are still longer, namely, "the lines that have in the past led to the development of the major phyla and their highest representatives". With respect to these last, "their course is to be reckoned not in tens but in hundreds of millions of years. But all in the long run have terminated blindly". What an unhappy frustration after so protracted an effort!

Where, then, is evolutionary progress to be sought and discovered? "Only along one single line. . . .", Dr. Huxley

informs us, "—the line of man". We are further told that "one of the concomitants of organic progress has been the progressive cutting down of the possible modes of further progress, until now, after a thousand or fifteen hundred million years of evolution, progress hangs on but a single thread. That thread is the human germ plasm". And who is to say whether this solitary final thread may not snap also? What possible guarantee have we that this is not Evolution's ultimate joke or failure or blind alley? These questions are all the more pertinent when we receive the further instruction from Dr. Huxley to the effect that any purpose manifested in Evolution is "only an apparent purpose", and is "just as much a product of blind forces as is the falling of a stone to earth or the ebb and flow of the tides". "But", we are reassured, "if we cannot discover a purpose in evolution, we can discern a direction—the line of evolutionary progress. And this past direction can serve as a guide for formulating our purpose for the future". This, however, is but cold comfort when we consider that, according to our instructor, in every case but one the line of evolutionary progress has led blindly up to a "terminal blank wall"! In the end Dr. Huxley has perforce to admit that future progress is neither certain nor inevitable, and that any possibility of it rests entirely in the hands of man himself. If this is really the case, God help mankind! But, alas, on no conditions will Dr. Huxley allow the existence of such a helper, and so we must seek what grains of consolation we may at Dr. Huxley's own feet!

As for Mr. H. G. Wells, "no English writer of our day," I quote the words of Mr. Gwilym O. Griffith, "has done more to captivate the mind of the masses with dreams of scientific progress and the complete resourcefulness and self-sufficiency of man".¹ Yet now Mr. H. G. Wells is trudging down the shadowy road of disillusionment.² Mr. Griffith tells the tale effectively:

"It is significant," he writes, "that the crisis of the Second World War found Mr. Wells in a chastened mood, and the brave new gospel of 'first and last things' and 'men like gods' deflated beyond recognition. Precisely at the time when, presumably, the public nourished upon his prophesyings of human progress had need of cordial refreshment, Mr. Wells discovered

¹ *Interpreters of Man* (London, 1943), p. 168.

² This was written, of course, some time before Mr. Wells died (see p. 2).

that his reserves of optimism were exhausted. . . . The Being of the Species with his hands reaching among the stars had shrunk back into our humble friend *Homo sapiens*, who began in a cave and may end in an air-raid shelter. After all, was he not a biological accident who stumbled upon an evolutionary extra which raised him a perilous few inches above all other ruling animals?

“And what if he, too, will blunder into a final and dismal decadence?”

There is no reason whatever to believe that the order of nature has any greater bias in favour of man than it had in favour of the ichthyosaur or the pterodactyl. In spite of all my disposition to a brave-looking optimism, I perceive that now the universe is bored with him, is turning a hard face to him, and I see him being carried less and less intelligently and more and more rapidly . . . along the stream of fate to degradation, suffering and death.¹

“The only slender hope, as Mr. Wells sees it, lies in the ‘wilful and strenuous adaptation by re-education of our species now—forthwith’. Mankind must take itself in hand, become ‘renascent’, or perish. And so the ebullient cheerfulness of the former days has given place to Mr. Wells’s very worst bedside manner. Poor *Homo sapiens*, having been told that the universe is bored with him, and that he is being carried more and more rapidly toward ‘degradation, suffering, and death’, is exhorted, as Mrs. Dombey was exhorted, to ‘make an effort’ and achieve a mental and moral renaissance ‘now—forthwith’. Otherwise, he who began as a biological accident must know himself as a biological catastrophe, the earth for his grave and his hands already groping in the dust.”²

V

But there is still another class of person, beside the philosopher and the evolutionist, who has believed that things are destined steadily to improve, until ultimately an age of peace and blessedness is ushered in. I refer here to those religious people who entertain the idea that the kingdom of God as proclaimed by Christ is something which in the divine purpose is ordained to spread far and wide until it has covered and conquered the whole earth. A review of the two millennia of Christendom and its achievements cannot be very reassuring to those who cherish this notion. But, anyway, it is a mistake to think that such a

¹ *The Fate of Homo Sapiens*, p. 312.

² *Op. cit.*, pp. 177 f.

triumphant earthly conquest by His kingdom was ever taught by Christ. He certainly said that the gospel of the kingdom was to be preached throughout all the world for a witness to all nations, and that then the end would come. It is sufficiently clear from this passage that once the kingdom message (message of hope to those that receive it and warning to those that reject it) had been proclaimed throughout the whole world, then would come the *end*—the end of the world about which His disciples had inquired, and to which inquiry this was His answer—and not the beginning of a new era of bliss and perfection upon earth. New Testament eschatology points plainly to a catastrophic consummation of the history of this world. In point of fact, Christ and His Apostles have given adequate warning that in the “last days” we are to look for anything but improvement in the state of mankind. They foretold rather that things would deteriorate and go from bad to worse, and their far from optimistic expectations for the future are fully borne out by the subsequent history of mankind and the universal condition of affairs today. Christ Himself predicted wars and rumours of wars, tribulation, mourning, distress and perplexity, and circumstances in which men’s hearts would fail them for fear. Paul foresaw perilous times in which men would be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, without natural affection, truce-breakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, traitors, headstrong, puffed up, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God, ever learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth. Evil men and impostors, he said, would wax worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived. Peter, too, presaged that false prophets would arise, who privily would introduce damnable heresies, and that many would follow their lascivious ways, and also that in the last days scoffers would come, walking after their own lusts. We might notice also Christ’s parables of the wheat and the tares and of the dragnet which indicate clearly that even in the organised church good and bad will persist until the end of the world, when at last the great separation will be made.¹

If such were the forebodings in the Apostolic age, with how much greater trepidation ought we today to look forward into the future, especially as the substantiation of these forebodings

¹ Matt. xxiv; Luke xxi; 2 Tim. iii; 2 Pet. ii. iii; Matt. xiii.

rears itself [before us on every side! This is certainly a pessimistic view of things, but it must be admitted that it is a pessimism which is vindicated by the trend of events. The security of the Victorian age, which was capped by such amazing advances in scientific research and mechanical invention, very easily established in the hearts of men the utopian delusion of the universal progress of mankind, as of the irresistible forward surge of a mighty tide. But the calamities of our present generation have pricked that pictured bubble. We are confronted with the stark truth that the world is not improving. We are forced sadly to admit that the marvellous discoveries of our day have done more to destroy man's soul and body than to save them. We see our poor world writhing in a state of unprecedented chaos, and its inhabitants being slaughtered, mutilated, and orphaned by the perverted devices of man's own genius.

VI

But, despite these unmistakable indications that as a whole the level of human optimism has fallen very drastically, the desire and yearning for that certain better state still persists in the human heart as strongly as ever. "Man," as Charnock has said, "hath a boundless appetite after some sovereign good"; he "desires a stable good".¹ And this longing is characteristic of every human heart, just as it also surpasses in intensity every other desire and ambition of mankind.

Now, this universal aspiration has to be taken into account; it cannot be dismissed as unimportant. This desire, this very idea of perfection, whence does it come? It is the question which Augustine asked, and which very many before and after him have asked: "Is not the blessed life that which all desire, so that there is absolutely none that does not desire it? Where have they known it, that they should so desire it? where seen it, that they so love it?"² Where, indeed! Is it (as Augustine tentatively suggests) a recollection of some former happy state of existence, that is, of the original blessedness of our first parents? Is it not a possibility that there still persists in the human breast a nostalgic reminiscence of that former favoured condition in which man was originally created, and which was ignominiously forfeited as the result of the fall?

¹ "Discourse upon the Existence of God" (*Existence and Attributes of God*).

² *Confessions* x. 20.

And yet this desire for something better and fuller is not merely a reaching out after a *material* good, remembered from the past or hoped for in the future. Material blessing alone can never satisfy the human soul. Man at the fall lost not only happiness with respect to his material circumstances, but also and especially fellowship with God, which is spiritual happiness. Man has eaten of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and his conscience now accuses him of the imperfection of his nature, convincing him that there is no perfection within him that he should desire it. Nor is this yearning after perfection something which is induced as the result of his observation of the wonders and the orderliness of the natural world which surrounds him; for the goodness after which the heart of man grasps is not primarily concerned with the beauties and marvels of nature. Rather he feels after a perfection whose characteristics are essentially moral and spiritual, and which is neither within nor around him, but above and beyond him.

The evolutionist who would have us believe that life sprang in the first place from inanimate matter is thereby ascribing a supremacy in the realm of existence to lifeless mass, for that which is prior must also be superior to that which is subsequent and of which it is the cause. But it is obvious to all that that which has life is immensely superior to that which is lifeless. Mass is stolid, passive, unproductive; life is vital, dynamic, creative. Life itself is *immaterial*, because it is spiritual. A living body is very different from a dead body, but the difference is not a material one, nor is it measurable in physical quantities. We have already seen how inconceivably futile a materialistic timelessness would be; it would represent the medium of eternal lifelessness; whereas what man's heart desires is eternal life, which means spiritual perfection and completeness. The materialistic is quantitative, but the spiritual is infinite; the materialistic is impersonal, but the spiritual is personal; the materialistic is subordinate, but the spiritual is supreme.

The downfall of man was procured by sin, and the wages of sin is death. Of all mundane events, death is the most timeful and the most feared, because it is terminal, it destroys life. All human life is mortal, and therefore starkly timeful. Berdyaev speaks of the "malady of time". "Time which is torn apart into past, present and future is," he says, "time which is diseased, and it does an injury to human existence. Death is connected

with the disease of time. Time invariably leads on to death, it is a mortal disease."¹

Time is, in fact, the mirror of mortality; it reflects the unsatisfied craving of the heart of man. The unflagging passage of time is a constant reminder to us of our human instability. To be in time means that one is always in a state of transition, and never by any means in a state of full and final realisation. There is frustration in time. As Berdyaev says again, "The present which cannot be seized because it falls between the past and the future, annihilates the past in order to be itself annihilated by the future".² And this frustration of time is simply the mirror of human frustration. To be in time is to be straitened and tantalised. Time hems us in with the incompleteness of "no longer" and "not yet". The best of the past is no longer; the best of the future is not yet; and the best of the present is passing. And all is terminated by death. How true a reflection of the sighing, the frustration, the troubled heart-sickness of man!

Time gives expression to human restlessness: restlessness in the pursuit of rest. Nor can there be any satisfaction, any cessation from longing, any fulness of understanding for mortal man whose focus of consciousness is so minute and fragmentary. The narrows of human frailty necessarily shut out the ocean of complete perfection. Man can interpret, and even that most inadequately, a small segment of the time-series, and correlate it with other significant sequences which are stored in the mind. But how puny it all is when compared with the infinite vastness of the whole! Little wonder, then, that the finite consciousness is one of craving and dissatisfaction. There can never be any full meaning to life and history, never any true understanding of the world process, except through an infinite consciousness which embraces in its focus all things simultaneously and without any sequence, that is, timelessly; and such an infinite consciousness can belong only to an Infinite Personal Being, that is, to God.

And the eternal life and spiritual perfection for which the human heart yearns can only be found in God; that blessed state which man desires can be realised alone in the timelessness of God's presence. For what is this life and this perfection, if not

¹ *Slavery and Freedom* (London, 1943), p. 258.

² *Ibid.*

the life and perfection of God, who is Himself essential Being and pure Spirit? How can it be otherwise, seeing that this spiritual perfection is not to be discovered within the heart of mortal man, nor to be observed in the external and surrounding phenomena which are perceptible to his senses? God Himself alone is eternal supreme infinite Personality, and satisfaction and rest are to be experienced in Him only. "This is the blessed life," says Augustine, "to rejoice to Thee, of Thee, for Thee; this it is, and there is no other",¹ and again, "When I shall with my whole self cleave to Thee, I shall nowhere have sorrow or labour, and my life shall wholly live, as wholly full of Thee".² "God is the chief good," wrote saintly Richard Baxter: "He that taketh anything else for his happiness, is out of the way the first step."³

How truly, too, has that same holy man asserted that "there is far more procured by Christ, than was lost by Adam".⁴ Not by struggling to regain the bliss of some former privileged estate, nor by vainly clutching at that utopia which is hopelessly out of reach, but simply and only in and by Christ is true, unfettered, eternal blessedness to be had. It is not we who are to prepare a place for ourselves or for posterity or for Him, but *He* who, supremely triumphant, has gone to prepare a place for us. *We of ourselves* have no hope of ever reaching this place: it is entirely above and beyond us. The restrictions of time, and our very bodies, being material and finite, are an insuperable hindrance in such a quest after that which is spiritual and infinite. There is a gateway and a road that leads up to the perfection of this place that Christ has gone to prepare. The gateway is the new birth: just as the gateway to this earthly life is physical birth through a human parent, so the gateway to eternal life is spiritual birth through the love of the Heavenly Father, manifested in His Son Jesus Christ. "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life." The road is the road of spiritual progress, that is to say, progress which results from the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart and not from the work of man. This is the only true way of progress, which alone leads up to the complete satisfaction of the desire of the human breast for spiritual happiness and perfection. "The path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect

¹ *Confessions* x. 22.

² *Confessions* x. 28.

³ *The Saint's Everlasting Rest*, ch. iii, § 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, ch. iv, § 3.

day." We, who are born again, are to "grow up into Christ in all things", "unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ", until one day, that "perfect day", He "will present us faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy".

This is the perfection which patriarchs, apostles, and saints have desired with a single mind. They longed for "a better state, that is a heavenly". They looked "not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal". They eagerly expected "a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens". Ours likewise, who are redeemed and regenerated, is a spiritual inheritance, not an earthly one. We are not to look for heaven upon earth, nor for earthly delights in heaven. Nor are our aspirations to be centred upon some transient millennial kingdom, but rather upon our eternal and heavenly reign with Christ which will be unspoilt by the limitations of the material and the disabilities of time, frustration, and death.

Meanwhile our mortal minds can exercise only a minute focus of consciousness; we can understand practically nothing of anything; we are unsatisfied through our very incompleteness. But He who is infinite and beyond time has a focus of consciousness which is unlimited and embraces all—all time and all the significance of all history. "Eternity," as Aquinas has said, "is nothing else but God Himself. . . . His eternity includes all times; not as if He Himself were altered through present, past, and future."¹ He perceives all things simultaneously; there is nothing hid from Him; He knows the end from the beginning; and with Him there is no sequence and no frailty, no before and no after, but all is complete and full with Him who is "All and in all." Thus the Divine existence and the Divine comprehension are perfect, lacking nothing; and ours will be, too, when at last we are one with our glorified Saviour. There, and there only, is the ultimate and the absolute Reality. "Now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known."

Spiritual perfection, then, is to be identified with God and achieved in Christ. And absolute reality can only exist timelessly, for that which exists in time has no experience of complete and

¹ *Summa Theologica*, Q. x, Art. 2.

comprehensive reality: it is crippled by the meagreness of its focus of consciousness; it is always hemmed in and jostled by the past and the future, always clamped in the vice-like jaws of "no longer" and "not yet". Such existence is incomplete, partial, and full of sighs. No, never can our goal be any mundane state of blessedness, but the completeness of the heavenly glory, where everything, and in particular our exalted Redeemer, is absolutely real and absolutely significant, and our enjoyment of Him unimpaired for ever. "As God is," says Stephen Charnock, "so will the eternity of him be, without succession, without division. The fulness of joy will be always present; without past to be thought of with regret for being gone; without future to be expected with tormenting desires. When we enjoy God, we enjoy him in his eternity without any flux; an entire possession of all together, without the passing away of pleasures that may be wished to return, or expectation of future joys which might be desired to hasten. Time is fluid, but eternity is stable; and after many ages, the joys will be as savoury and satisfying, as if they had been but that moment first tasted by our hungry appetites."¹

The death of the body is, for the believer, merely an event in time; nor is it an event to be feared and dreaded, for by it the frailty and imperfection of our humanity will be entirely dissolved for ever; and it will be followed by the next, the ultimate event of time, namely, the resurrection of the flesh, when the morning of eternity shall dawn, and we shall rise with glorified bodies, to live for ever with our Saviour, never to be separated from the perfection of His lovely presence. With what joy, then, and with what happy anticipation ought the redeemed heart to echo the glad song of the Psalmist: "As for me, I will behold Thy face in righteousness: I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with Thy likeness." Verily, verily, that will be "a morning without clouds"!

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¹ Op. cit., "Discourse upon the Eternity of God".