

WILLIAM AINSLIE MEMORIAL LECTURE

# THE HUMAN SITUATION

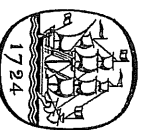
*Delivered by*

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Professor of Divinity in the University of Edinburgh  
Chaplain to the King in Scotland

*at St. Martin-in-the-Fields*

*on 6th June, 1950, at 7 p.m.*



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*First published 1930*

### THE WILLIAM AINSLIE MEMORIAL LECTURE

This lectureship was founded in 1944 in commemoration of WILLIAM HUME AINSLIE, who was born in 1883 and died on June 4th 1943. He was the second son of John Ainslie of St. Lawrence House, Haddington, Scotland. He came to London as a boy and was for many years manservant to Bishop Winnington Ingram at Fulham Palace. It was while working at the Cavendish Club in Piccadilly that he met the Rev. H. R. L. Sheppard, and when Dick Sheppard was appointed Vicar of St. Martin-in-the-Fields in 1914, Ainslie accompanied him as valet. Later in the same year he joined up for military service and became verger of St. Martin's after the 1914-18 war. On each Armistice Day in the years between the two world wars Ainslie carried the Processional Cross at the Service held at the Cenotaph in Whitehall.

During his twenty-eight years' service at St. Martin's William Ainslie became known to thousands of people who attended the church. He served three vicars with unflinching loyalty and devotion and was the trusted friend of several generations of Assistant Curates and church officers. His whole life was dedicated to the work of St. Martin's and he died while on duty in the church during the 1939-45 war after many anxious days and nights of guarding the building during air attacks.

#### *William Ainslie Lecturers*

- 1944 Archbishop William Temple.
- 1945 Lord Eustace Percy.
- 1946 Professor C. H. Dodd.
- 1947 Dr. Neville Gorton, Bishop of Coventry.
- 1948 E. H. Burgmann, M.A., Th.D., Bishop of Goulburn,  
New South Wales.
- 1949 J. S. Whale, M.A., D.D., Head Master of Mill Hill  
School.

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The expression which I have set down as the title of my lecture has lately been very much on people's lips. More than ten years ago it formed the title of a series of Gifford Lectures which has continued to be widely read; since then it has been much in vogue among those influenced by French "existentialism"; while the discussions aroused by the successful release of intra-atomic energy have bidden fair to make it part of current speech. It is, of course, no more than a slight variant of a number of expressions, well known to our fathers and grandfathers, that said exactly the same thing. And what it says is plain enough: by the human situation is meant the common background of all human action, the fundamental frame of circumstance which confronts humanity as a whole in setting about the conduct of its life on earth.

It is indeed a most encouraging thing that we should find ourselves thrown back in this way upon the ultimate issue. Until recently the tendency of most fine writing in our midst was to fight shy of this issue, to move within certain conventional limits upon a restricted stage; or when our attention was invited to the final predicament in which we all stand, this was usually made tolerable for us by one or other trick of romantic screening. When the history of modern thought and literature comes to be written in a more objective way than is now possible, it will surely be found to contain much that is of lasting value as well as of great beauty, but I think it very likely also that our descendants will see in it a rather pathetic train of attempts to evade the final issue

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through the fond harbouring of a succession of characteristic illusions—first the rationalist illusions of the late seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, and then the somewhat different illusions of the Romantic period.

Now there is a change, and in this one respect at least I cannot doubt that it is a change for the better. Take the novel as an example. Nobody to-day can write novels as good as the nineteenth-century ones, or that can compare with them in fertility of invention, in imaginative reconstruction, in tenderness, in humour, in ease and flexibility of style. Yet one has the feeling that only by remaining within the comfortable limits of nineteenth-century humanism were these giants of the past, Dickens and Thackeray and Charlotte Brontë and the rest, able to achieve the results they did; and when others, beginning perhaps with George Eliot, began to venture beyond these limits and to raise deeper questions, they grew confused and lost much of the former grace. The best novels of to-day are very different, and though I cannot relish them like the others, I am nevertheless often exhilarated in reading them by the feeling that they represent an attempt, of however groping a kind, to view the ultimate issue without blinkers. Moreover, what is true of our novels is true of much else that is being served up for our consideration, and not least of many recent broadcast talks; making me feel with my friend, the late Neville Talbot, that "When the bottom questions stir, the hunt is up for the Gospel."<sup>1</sup>

But though I thus regard it as matter for encouragement that our fundamental human predicament should again be the object of attention in quarters where it was formerly neglected, I must protest against the way in which the discussion of it is often approached. I am constantly being presented

<sup>1</sup> See F. H. Brabant, *Neville Talbot: a Memoir*, p. 141.

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with a picture of the human race awaking to consciousness on this planet and finding itself surrounded by a complex system of objects which pursue their own course with unrelenting regularity and in complete indifference to human welfare. I am told that man has gradually learned to understand the nature of this system and of the course which it blindly follows, so that he can now often predict how it is going to behave at future times; but that while this knowledge enables him to arrange things a little more comfortably for himself, and to avert or postpone certain future discomforts, it at the same time enables him to realize all the more clearly the hopelessness of evading final disaster and total extinction. And very often that is all that I am told. It is suggested to me that that is, in a nutshell, the whole truth of the situation in which the human race stands, and in which I as a member of it have to act.

Well, it is certainly a part of the truth, and it is good to know that it is now once again recognized as such. It is even good, after the evasions and illusions of an earlier period, to find it plainly stated by one writer that "we men are but little lumps of mud and water"; by another that "man is a temporary chemical episode in the life of one of the meaner planets"; or by still a third that "all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noon-day brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins." I suspect that some of these utterances are designed to shock me, but how can they shock one who has in his mind such older words as that "all flesh is as grass and all the glory of man as the flower of grass", that "the world passeth away, and the glory thereof", and that "all the host of heaven shall

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be dissolved, and the heavens shall be rolled together as a scroll?"

The difference is, of course, that while the modern utterances are put forward as a description of our total situation, to the older ones this was added: "But the word of the Lord endureth for ever." Yet I think it important to notice that this was no afterthought or late addition but rather the foundation of the whole. The picture of the human race awaking to consciousness on this planet and finding itself confronted only with an environing system of nature that had no relevance to its own interests is, of course, an entirely fanciful one. Not thus did the race come to its first awareness, and not thus has any human individual come to his. The farther back we penetrate towards anything that can be called primitive, the clearer does it become that early man conceived himself to be confronted with a situation of a quite different kind. He found himself living in a society of which gods and men and what we call nature were all, in different ways, integral parts; and it was his ineluctable relationship with this single total environment that determined for him his human situation and was the source of all the claims he made and the counter-claims with which he had to reckon. His life was utterly social, yet he knew nothing of a merely human society based on contract or utility, but only of a society that was divine as well as human and whose relation to the world of nature he thought he understood. But indeed so much of one piece was this total situation for him that he had no concept corresponding at all to what we call nature. Recently a Semitic scholar began his book by asking himself what was the Hebrew word for nature. He quoted the definition of the word given in the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary*, and then wrote: "The only way to render this idea into Hebrew

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would be to say simply 'God'.<sup>1</sup> The same was true of all ancient peoples. It was the Greek scientists who invented the concept of nature, and it was one of the earliest of them, Heraclitus, who invented the concept of environment, when he spoke of τὸ περιέχον ἡμᾶς—"that which surrounds us".<sup>2</sup> But for all except one school of these scientists nature was still animistically conceived, and still included gods and men as well as all other creatures. Almost every Greek thinker wrote a book entitled *Concerning Nature*, and it would appear that these all dealt, among other things, with the problems both of theology and of politics.<sup>3</sup> Hardly was there real atheism in ancient Greece. The nearest approach to it was in the one school which I have excepted, that of the Atomists, whose teaching is best known to us from Lucretius' epic bearing that same title. Lucretius does not doubt that gods exist, but he believes they have no important bearing on our human situation, since they keep severely to themselves, passing their time in a self-contained tranquillity in the empty spaces between the worlds—perhaps

Far in the faint sidereal interval  
Between the Lyre and Swan<sup>4</sup>—

and interfering neither for good nor for ill with the life of man. On the other hand these Atomists taught that nothing exists but material particles and (otherwise) empty space, so that gods no less than men are mere accidental collocations of atoms, making it very difficult to understand how they can have the immortality which Epicurus and Lucretius ascribed to them.

<sup>1</sup> H. Wheeler Robinson, *Inspiration and Revelation in the Old Testament* (1946), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Diels, *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, p. 64.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Ernest Barker, *Greek Political Theory: Plato and His Predecessors*, p. 51.

<sup>4</sup> J. W. Mackail, *On the Death of Arnold Toynbee*.

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Two thousand years had to pass before this purely materialist and sensationalist philosophy, first conceived in the fifth century before Christ, was finally simplified through the elimination of this last shred of theologic belief, so yielding the picture of the human situation now so often presented to us. Moreover such a picture is as late an emergent in the life-history of the individual as it has been in the history of the race. Not in such utter nakedness does any child begin its conscious life; that nakedness, where it exists, being the result of a much later process of stripping. Most of us, I think, would have to say Amen to at least the first lines of Wordsworth's ode:

There was a time when meadow, grove and stream,

The earth, and every common sight

To me did seem

Apparell'd in celestial light.

The human situation in which we first remember finding ourselves was no mere fortuitous and soulless concourse of atoms, but a situation rich in beauty as in promise, warm in human interest, and at the same time most solemn in its demands.

All this, I suppose, will not only be readily admitted but may be discounted as too obvious to merit further attention. Yet I doubt whether we have yet rid our minds completely of the attempts of eighteenth-century rationalism to represent mankind's spiritual outlook as something foisted on to a more primitive "state of nature"—even if we now smile at the idea that it was but the result of "a politick trick to awe the credulous vulgar". M. Sartre, for example, is still found insisting that "man begins by being nothing" or by merely "existing, encountering himself, rising into view in the world".

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and only later acquires any definable character or the beginnings of a human nature.<sup>1</sup> If, however, we are right in rejecting such a view, it must follow that, instead of the spiritual outlook on life having to begin its argument from the *tabula rasa* of a prior naturalist or humanist outlook, it is in fact all the other way about. I did not start from a situation in which I knew myself alone with my own private hopes and fears in an environing universe that bore no relation to them. If I have ever been in that situation, it was as the result of an elaborate sophistication which had to be defended as such. It would therefore be an entirely artificial exercise on my part, were I to begin my proof of what I believe from a prior position of unbelief, trying to find room for God within a situation, or by the enlargement of a situation, in which He did not yet exist. It is on the denial, not on the affirmation, that the burden of proof reposes, both for our race as a whole and for every individual within it.

No doubt there will be many among our scientific naturalists ready enough to take up that burden, and on those terms. It is therefore important to consider the lines which their proof is likely to follow. It is admitted that when, before scientific enquiry begins, I look out upon the world about me, it presents itself to me as something very different from what scientific naturalism holds it really to be. When I look at the setting sun, the impression it makes on me is single, but also very complex. It is likely to include the judgements that the sun is large and round and red and very bright; but also the judgements that it is beautiful, sublime and awe-inspiring; and further the judgements that it is a great work of God, and a gift graciously designed by Him for the benefit, not only of myself, but of the whole human race, and indeed

<sup>1</sup> *L'Existentialisme est un Humanisme*, p. 21 f.

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of all that has life and breath. All these judgements are for me, as they, or something very like them, have been for all mankind, indissolubly united in the wholeness of a single concrete experience. When I turn natural scientist, what I do is to abstract from this wholeness those judgements which predicate of the sun characters which can be measured in quantitative terms and recorded by pointer readings, and to develop these judgements, by more particularized attention and by the artificial creation of experimental conditions, to the temporary exclusion of the others. Needless to say, such a process of abstraction is entirely legitimate, being indispensable necessary for the admirable purposes which natural science has at heart. But, like so many other justifiable and necessary things, it has its manifest and very great dangers, and notably the danger to which the late Professor Whitehead directed our attention when he remarked that a man may know all about the laws of light and yet, perhaps just because he has learned so much about them, miss the radiance of the sunset and the glory of the morning sky. What scientific naturalism has done is to succumb to these dangers. For scientific naturalism is the doctrine that those elements of my total experience of the sun which science abstracts from it are the only elements yielding true knowledge of the sun's nature; or, more generally, that my total human situation is constituted by what science can tell me about that situation.

You will remember that one of the earliest of the world's scientists, Anaxagoras, found himself in serious trouble because he said that the sun was only a mass of blazing metal no larger than the Peloponnese. That greatly shocked the good Athenians, who had him up for impiety; and though the eloquence of Pericles secured his acquittal, he was forced

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to retire from Athens as science's first martyr. It is very significant that a century later the great Plato is still found protesting against the impiety of Anaxagoras' conclusion.<sup>1</sup> One is reminded of Blake's couplet:

If the Sun and Moon should doubt,  
They'd immediately go out.<sup>2</sup>

But the incident excellently illustrates the complex nature of the issue as between natural piety, scientific discovery, and naturalist philosophy. As a scientist Anaxagoras was more nearly right about the sun than anybody had ever been before, but the Athenians felt that what he affirmed could not be the whole truth about it, and therefore they were led to doubt the truth even of his scientific affirmation. The Athenians, including Plato in his own different way, believed the sun to be itself a god. Christianity has destroyed that belief, correcting it into the very different affirmation that the sun is God's gift and the work of His hands; not itself divine but, as it were, sacramental of the divine presence. Thus the scientific and the Christian affirmations, instead of conflicting as did the scientific and pagan ones, mutually help one another's case; but Christian piety is as opposed as was pagan piety to the naturalistic affirmation that Anaxagoras and his kind were telling us all there was to know about the sun.

Christianity, then, has taught us to regard as inanimate objects a great many things which the Greeks, including Plato and Aristotle, regarded as living subjects (*ψα*). Yet our human situation is far from being exhaustively constituted by our relation to this inanimate environment, since it is determined no less by our relations with one another. It is

<sup>1</sup> *Laws*, X, 886, 889.

<sup>2</sup> *Auguries of Innocence*.

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not only with objects that I have to reckon every moment of every day, but also with other subjects. These two components of my situation are indeed most closely interconnected. My apprehension of the world of nature is from the beginning a *shared* apprehension, and it is difficult to believe that it could ever have had place at all except in this shared form—or that, if I were the only percipient, I could successfully distinguish this public world from the private world of my dreams; while conversely there is not one of my relations with other *persons* that is not somehow concerned with our common relation to the world of *things*. Nevertheless Christianity has made this distinction between persons and things—between the world of subjects and the world of objects—quite fundamental. On the other hand scientific naturalism, in order to make good its case, could not rest content with naturalizing our experience of objects but has sought also to naturalize our relations with our human environment. Man, it says, is part of nature, and that is the whole truth about him; or rather it is the whole truth apart from one strange fact, namely, that he *thinks* himself to be something more. You will remember the famous account which, according to Plato, Socrates gave to his friends, as he sat in prison awaiting his death, of his own experience with a book of that same Anaxagoras:

"He seemed to me to be exactly like a man who should begin by saying that Socrates does all he does by mind, but who, when he went on to assign a cause for each of my actions, should say, first, that I am sitting here now because my body is composed of bones and muscles, and that the bones are hard and divided by joints, while the muscles can be tightened and relaxed and, together with the flesh and the skin which contains it, cover the bones; and that therefore when the bones are raised in their

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sockets by the contraction or relaxation of the muscles, I am now able to bend my limbs—and that *that* is the cause of my sitting here all huddled up. And in the same way he would explain why I am talking to you: he would speak of voice and air and hearing and a myriad other causes of the same sort, and would quite forget to mention the real cause, which is that, since the Athenians thought it right to condemn me, I have thought it right and just to sit here and bow to their sentence. For, by the dog of Egypt, I am inclined to think that these muscles and bones of mine would long ago have been in Megara or Boeotia, prompted by their own opinion of what is best, if I had not thought it better and nobler to submit to any penalty the state inflicts, rather than run away."<sup>1</sup>

Clearly Socrates' resistance of this attempt of a behaviourist psychology to assign only natural causes for his actions, making him thereby merely a part of nature, sprang from his awareness, shared with our race as a whole, of another and quite different context to which his actions were related. He knew that, whatever his involvement in the kingdom of nature, he was claimed also by what Kant was long afterwards to call "a kingdom of ends". He knew, in however limited and pre-Christian a way, that the situation in which he had to act was a much richer and more complex one than the naturalists pretended.

We see, then, that the naturalist view of our human situation is reached by abstracting from the singleness of our experience of it those aspects which are measurable in the quantitative terms which science is equipped to handle, and that in order to complete its case, it has had to apply this process of abstraction no less to our social experience than to our experience of the external world. What is thus amenable to scientific computation, and can accordingly be

<sup>1</sup> *Phaedo*, 98-99.

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checked by instruments, it holds to be real, while the rest is merely a construction of our own minds. For example, the necessity of which Socrates was aware to do the juster and nobler thing was not really what he supposed it to be, an obligation laid upon him by the objective spiritual nature of reality, but only a consequence of his own adopted preferences. A naturalistic view of reality is thus bound to result in a merely humanistic view of morality. Bertrand Russell begins one of his books by saying: "Man is a part of Nature, not something contrasted with Nature. His thoughts and his bodily movements follow the same laws that describe the motions of stars and atoms", and then proceeds to affirm that "what we think good, what we should like, has no bearing whatever upon what is", and that "we are ourselves the ultimate and irrefutable arbiters of value . . . it is we who create value, and our desires which confer value"<sup>1</sup>—or, in other words, that what made Socrates's action just and noble was the fact that he wanted to act in that way.

But of course it is not only our moral values that are thus forced to retreat from their traditional status in reality to a merely subjective status in the mind of man. The line cannot be drawn thus simply between "the starry heavens alone" and "the moral law within". Our judgements of beauty, the aesthetic values, must obviously share the same fate; and even our judgements of light and colour, of taste and of smell. Thus naturalism is bound to draw its line very low down indeed, between the so-called primary qualities of matter which science can express in terms of quantity and those secondary qualities which it cannot. When I perceive the noon-day sun as a round white object, I am told that the roundness is really there, independently of my perceiving it,

<sup>1</sup> *What I Believe*, pp. 9, 22, 24 f.

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whereas the whiteness is there only for my perceiving mind. The real world, said Lucretius long ago, consists only of an infinite number of atoms "bereft of colour, sundered altogether from warmth and cold, and fiery heat, and carried along barren of sound and devoid of taste, nor do they give off any scent of their own";<sup>1</sup> and modern naturalism has not greatly varied the picture.

It is well known, however, that this sharp dichotomy has been found exceedingly difficult to maintain. Bishop Berkeley's idealism is no doubt vulnerable enough, but he has never been successfully answered from the naturalist point of view. If light and colour are only in my sense and mind, so also, it would seem, are form and size and weight. The view that all reality is spiritual should have no difficulty in maintaining itself against the view that all reality is corporeal. However difficult it may be to believe that what we call matter either is made of mind or is a construct of mind (that is, that its *esse* is either *percipere* or *percipi*), it is much more difficult to believe that what we call mind is made of matter or that nature, as Bertrand Russell holds, "has produced our desires, our hopes and fears, in accordance with laws which the *physicist* is beginning to discover".<sup>2</sup> Those who wish to describe in purely naturalist terms the reality which confronts us and determines our human situation, must do one of two things; they must believe either that thinking is a purely physical process or else that, on the occasion of certain physical changes, it suddenly springs into being out of nothing. The former hypothesis, however, seems to me only a meaningless collocation of words, while the latter requires a degree of cre-

<sup>1</sup> *De rerum natura*, II, lines 842 ff.

<sup>2</sup> *What I Believe*, p. 23. Italics mine.

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dulity which I am not able to achieve—a *creatio ex nihilo* being a difficult enough conception even when we believe in a Creator, but surely an impossible one when we do not. Hence it is not at all surprising that when the choice has lain only between a consistently spiritualist view and a consistently materialist one, not only the prevailing or Platonist tradition in the pre-Christian West, but also the Eastern world should have embraced the former. No aspect of our modern Western culture is so foreign to the Indian mind as our materialism. To the Hindu it seems obvious that the more material anything is, the more is it illusory. From all this it appears that the simplification of the human situation which the naturalists desire to foist upon us, does not rest on any kind of logical evidence. Undoubtedly the preoccupation of the West with natural science and technology have had much to do with inclining our minds in its direction, but, in the very nature of the case, there is nothing in the empirical observations of science itself that can provide it with any support.

The Christian view, on the other hand, demands no such difficult process of reduction. It neither reduces the spiritual to the corporeal nor yet the corporeal to the spiritual. It regards the world of nature neither as unreal nor as itself spiritual, but as a real world created by the Spirit who is over all. Its independent reality as over against man, its essential otherness, what the Germans call its *Dinglichkeit* or thinghood, its unconcerned uniformity, its very neutrality to human interests, contribute a quite necessary element to the human situation in the Christian understanding of it. As one writer puts it, "Nature and character are not two separable facts. There is no such thing as character in men apart from nature in objects. For character forms itself upon the re-

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liabilities of the world."<sup>1</sup> Yet, as we have seen, it is more than doubtful whether this natural otherness of the world could be apprehended by us apart from the spiritual otherness of our fellow men. "The objectivity of nature", says the same writer, "is its community."<sup>2</sup> The most inexorable counter-claims with which I shall have to reckon in my life to-day will not really come to me from the world of objects as such, but from the circumstance that I have to share a single world of objects with other subjects. That is why Martin Buber has said, in often-quoted words, that "All real life is meeting" and that "others are the real world".<sup>3</sup> After all, external nature is at worst indifferent to my designs, readily permitting me to use it, and to exploit it, for my own comfort for at least a little while. But I must not use or exploit my fellow men. And there's the rub.

Why must I not do this? Nature obviously does not forbid me to do this too, and were I to regard my neighbour merely as part of nature, there would be no reason why I should not treat him as nature treats her own. But, as Huxley told us half a century ago, "the imitation of the cosmic process by man is inconsistent with the first principles of ethics."<sup>4</sup> Whence then does this prohibition arise, this obligation to do unto others as I would have others do unto me—instead of paying them back in their own coin or in a worse? The Christian answer is that it is an obligation laid on me by God, which means that it comes to me from the very heart and fountain of reality. Ancient paganism also understood this in its own fashion, as witness (to take only one example) Sophocles' lines about "the unwritten laws of the gods",<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> W. E. Hocking, *The Meaning of God in Human Experience*, p. 190.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 288 f.

<sup>3</sup> *Evolution and Ethics* (1893).

<sup>4</sup> *Antigone*, lines 454 f.

<sup>5</sup> *I and Thou*.

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"those laws ordained on high, born of ethereal heaven, of which Olympus alone is father, neither did mortal nature beget them, nor shall oblivion ever put them to sleep".<sup>1</sup>

Is other explanation possible? The few naturalists of that pagan world were fain to find some other and lit upon the idea that all the obligations of which I am aware derive merely from my own desire for happiness and are binding only because, or only in so far as, the acceptance of them actually does promote my happiness. So said Epicurus and Lucretius in defiance of the accepted beliefs of their day and place. Our modern naturalists, in attempting to escape the pressure of Christian belief, have again and again been forced to resort to this same hedonistic hypothesis, but have also put forward some new ones of their own. A favourite at present is the hypothesis that my sense of responsibility towards my neighbour is derivative from my desire *that the human race should survive as long as possible*. In a recent broadcast talk, for example, Dr. Alexander Comfort, offered the following explanation:

"Humanism does not formulate ten commandments. It formulates one only. Man's survival depends on the outcome of his struggle with a morally neutral universe, and on the maintenance of responsibility between men. Do nothing which increases the difficulties which any individual has to face, and leave nothing undone which diminishes them. . . . Humanity asserts life and living as a positive value in its obstinate struggle to stay alive, to defeat the threats which exist for it in its own fragility and in the disinterestedness of the universe. And the logical outcome, as well as the prerequisite of this impulse towards life, is the impulse to love."<sup>2</sup>

Until I examine it closely, this may sound like a successful

<sup>1</sup> *Oedipus Rex*, lines 865 ff.

<sup>2</sup> See *The Listener*, 21 July 1949.

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naturalization of my duty to my neighbour, making it an instrument of that very struggle for existence which nature itself everywhere displays. But I must ask, why should I interest myself in the survival of *all men*, and not only of myself? And why should I desire the continued existence of the race after my own little day has passed? These are questions to which naturalism cannot possibly provide an answer. Does Dr. Comfort really think that he could have refuted Heinrich Himmler by appealing to the necessities imposed upon us by the struggle for existence?

Even if he could have done so—even if he could have made Himmler see that his own selfish interest, and the selfish interest of his *Herrnvolk*, would be best conserved by forgetting all about *Lebensraum* and the rest and making common cause with humanity as a whole—he would not yet have begun to explain the sense of obligation which I actually possess. In thinking so to explain it, he would be guilty of what the logicians call the fallacy of pseudo-identification. The reason why I believe that the *Herrnvolk* should not have killed off the Jews is not that it would itself have fared better, or lived longer, by letting them also live. To reduce the Christian law of love to a necessity imposed upon us by the desire for survival is to cut its very nerve, to destroy its very essence, to corrupt my disinterested obedience to it by the offer of mercenary considerations, so robbing it of all beauty, sublimity and authority.

What then is the true human situation in which I know myself at this moment to stand? It is constituted by the fact that a claim is being made upon me to which I must give precedence over all considerations of my own survival or the survival of the whole human race. I know that there are things which I am called upon to die rather than do; and

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I know that there are things which the race must die rather than do; so that it is relevant to quote:

I could not love thee, dear, so much  
Lov'd I not honour more.<sup>1</sup>

This knowledge is often a serious embarrassment to me, since it would often be convenient to my desires to believe that continued life and happiness is indeed the highest good; and I fear that I often act in its despite. But I cannot rid myself of it, and I know that to try to do so would be wicked. When I am honest with myself, I know that I know *this* more certainly than I know anything I have learned from natural science, indubitable as much of that also seems to me to be. I know that the love of my neighbour which is demanded of me is something which transcends all calculations of advantage, the "hedonic calculus" or any other. It is a love in- separably bound up with the knowledge that my neighbour and I are alike children of the God who created us in love, that we are alike sinners in His sight, and that for love of us both Christ died. That is the context in which the knowledge first came to me, and it is the context in which it first came to our modern Western world as a whole. Dr. Comfort is indeed careful to remind us that the sense of responsibility towards our neighbours "is older even than the Christian tradition".<sup>2</sup> Yes indeed, as I too have been at pains to remind you; but first, it was linked even then with some sort of belief in God or the transcendent; and second, as the manner of that belief changed, so the sense of responsibility suffered transmutation also. The love which Dr. Comfort and I know to be demanded of us to-day is not the same as that of which Sophocles and Plato were aware.

<sup>1</sup> Lovelace, *To Lucasta, on Going to the Wars*.

<sup>2</sup> Loc. cit.

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It is, however, when I turn to tougher-minded and more consistent naturalists than Dr. Comfort that the precise *locus* of disagreement becomes clarified and, as it were, pinpointed. There is much that they say with which I must agree. I must agree with Bertrand Russell that, if there be no divine sanction for our standards of good and ill, they can only be a matter of individual preference—"what we should like"—or only a matter of "whether they tend to realize ends that we desire; I say ends that we desire, not ends that we ought to desire."<sup>1</sup> Similarly we find a Christian like Berdyaev agreeing with an atheistic existentialist like M. Sartre. "Where there is no God", writes the former, "there is no man";<sup>2</sup> and again, "Man without God is no longer man."<sup>3</sup> "There is no human nature", writes the latter, "because there is no God to have a conception of it."<sup>4</sup> Indeed, M. Sartre, extreme as he is, or rather just because he is extreme, speaks to my condition much more nearly than those who try to let me down gently. He quotes with approval Dostoevsky's saying that "if God did not exist, all would be permitted", and declares it to be the very basis of his position. God does not exist, he says, and therefore all is indeed permitted. He adds, "The existentialist finds it very troublesome (*gênant*) that God does not exist, because with Him disappears all possibility of finding values in an intelligible world; nor can there be any *a priori* good, because there is no infinite and perfect consciousness to think it; nor is it anywhere written that the good exists, that we ought to be honest and ought not to tell lies; for we are precisely on a plane where nothing exists but men."<sup>5</sup> To the objection that the standards of

<sup>1</sup> *What I Believe*, p. 37. The italics are Russell's own.

<sup>2</sup> *The End of Our Time*, English translation, p. 80.

<sup>4</sup> *L'Existentialisme est un Humanisme*, p. 22.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.  
<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35 f.

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conduct which he recognizes cannot be taken seriously, since he makes them for himself, M. Sartre replies, "I am very much vexed (*fâché*) that it should be so, but if I have suppressed God the Father, there must be somebody to invent values."<sup>1</sup>

Such statements make the alternatives before us very clear, and make it clear also that the choice between them rests on something more deeply seated than the pressure of scientific evidence. How comes M. Sartre to be so sure that no God exists? How comes he by the knowledge of that "universal negative"? Because there is no God he says, there is no human nature, no unconditional obligation, no ends that we ought to desire. Why does he not rather say that because there is human nature and unconditional obligation and ends that we ought to desire, therefore there is a God? Logically, the latter is the stronger argument of the two, since even in the absence of more direct grounds for believing in God, it is difficult to see how we could reach such a certain assurance of His non-existence as to overturn our familiar assurance that there is such a thing as human nature, and that we ought to be honest and ought not to tell lies. In common reason, it is surely more certain that we ought to be honest than that God does not exist; and if so, Francis Bacon was apparently not far wrong in claiming that the natural light of reason is sufficient to "convince atheism", though not to "inform religion".<sup>2</sup> Let M. Sartre take comfort; there is no logical need for him to be *géné* or *fâché*.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>2</sup> *Of the Advancement of Learning*, Book II.

<sup>3</sup> M. Sartre's epistemology, as set out in the seven hundred pages of *L'Être et le néant*, is indeed very different from Bertrand Russell's. For the dualist realism of the latter it substitutes a phenomenological monism. It reduces existence to a series of appearances, and denies that there is any other universe than that of

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The rejection of the Christian understanding of the human situation in favour of the naturalistic picture of it is thus determined, not by anything that science has discovered or could possibly discover, nor indeed by any mere process of reasoning, but by some preference in which the emotions as well as the intellect are concerned and which is seldom brought to the light of full self-consciousness. For the naturalist, as for us all, everything ultimately turns on the response, not of his mind alone, but of his whole manhood, to the challenging fact of Christ.

Nothing else that we know is so centrally constitutive of our human situation as this: that "the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth, and we beheld his glory. . . ."<sup>1</sup> Even the atheist will be found implicitly acknowledging the advent of Christ as part of the situation with which he has to deal. He cannot establish his own case, he cannot come forward with his own neat little picture of the human situation, until he has found some way of silencing

human subjectivity. For Russell, on the other hand, there is a real world which stands over against our human subjectivity with its desires and its ideals, and the two must be kept very strictly apart. Hence he explained in an early essay ("The Essence of Religion", *Hibbert Journal*, 1912) that if we are to have any religion it must consist of two separate worships—the worship of the real order which is recognized to be without value, and the worship of our values which are recognized to be purely subjective. "The two worships subsist side by side without any dogma: the one involving the goodness but not the existence of its object, the other involving the existence but not the goodness of its object." This is exactly the dualism between *physis* and *nomos* which was defended by the Sophists in ancient Greece, and against which Plato argues so eloquently. But the ethical consequences of the two positions seem exactly the same. If only M. Sartre makes man the creator of his own nature, both make him the creator of his own standards. "We must remind man", says the one, "that there is no legislator but himself" (*L'Existentialisme*, p. 93). "There is no outside standard", says the other, "to show that our valuation is wrong. We ourselves are the ultimate and irrefutable arbiters of value" (*What I Believe*, p. 24).

<sup>1</sup> John i. 14.

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the challenge which Christ presents to the world. The test case for his naturalism is whether he can naturalize Christ. In saying this I do not mean only that, since our naturalists belong to a culture whose tradition is Christian, their case must necessarily take the form of dissent from that tradition. That is true of any innovator who seeks to remove the landmarks which his fathers have set; but so many of our familiar landmarks have lately been disturbed that the way of the dissenter is no longer very thorny. What has here chiefly to be reckoned with, however, is not the Christian cultural tradition but the fact of Christ Himself, the fact that One came into our troubled world being what Christ was, and saying and doing what He did. I wonder if there is one of the naturalists from whom I have quoted who does not know, as he reads the Gospels, that there is something there with which, before proceeding further, he has somehow to make his peace. At all events, the rest of us know this very clearly. Certainly I know that if ever I want to persuade myself that, as part of nature, I am free to follow my own desire, being restrained only by considerations of prudence, then I had better keep the Gospels, and the whole Bible, well out of sight, since the reading of them could bring me nothing but the most acute form of discomfort with which I have ever been visited. And I think you know this too.

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# WILLIAM AINSLIE

## MEMORIAL LECTURE

1950

The common background of all human action, the fundamental frame of circumstances which confronts humanity as a whole in setting about the conduct of its life on earth is an issue which has until recently been avoided by the vast majority. Now, the release of atomic energy at such influences as existentialism have done much to force "the human situation" into being a matter of general and urgent discussion. Encouraged by the fact that we should find ourselves thrown back in this way upon the ultimate issue, Professor Bailie, who is Professor of Divinity in the University of Edinburgh and Chaplain to the King in Scotland, has made it the subject of the Ainslie Memorial Lecture for 1950.

Professor Bailie shows that, although the present-day view of man in the universe tends to neglect the spiritual side, in early times there was no distinction made between God and Nature. Two thousand years had to pass before the purely materialistic and sensationist philosophy first conceived in the fifth century before Christ, was finally simplified through the elimination of the last shred of theological belief, yielding the picture of the human situation now so often presented to us. The arguments of scientific naturalism are then examined and Professor Bailie points to the difficulty of reconciling a view of the universe consisting only of what is scientifically demonstrable with ideas of beauty and morality. He shows that the Christian view presents no such difficulty, for it neither reduces the spiritual to the corporeal nor the corporeal to the spiritual. Finally, the lecture ends with an attempt to assess the true human situation—"It is constituted by the fact that man is being made upon me to which I must give precedence over all

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