

The Quintessential Nought¹

by

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You must not call anything void, without saying what the thing in question is void of.
Hermes.

When you hear me talk about the Void (śunyata), do not fall into the idea of vacuity.
Hui-nêng, the Sixth Patriarch (of Chinese Zen Buddhism).

This world, with all its stars, elements, and creatures, is come out of the invisible world; it has not the smallest thing or the smallest quality of anything but what is come forth from thence.
William Law.

*Any man that but man is
With nothing shall be pleas'd,
till he be eas'd With being nothing.*
Shakespeare (Richard II V.v.).

SINCE man, and man alone, is born with free will, this means that man, and man uniquely of all creatures, has the freedom to choose. Now choice is a matter of discernment and decision between options and priorities. And as discernment is an affair of the intelligence, it follows that there is no freedom without the proper use of the intellectual faculties. Man uses his intelligence to discern the options, and he applies his will to concentrate its energies towards those ends which his intelligence or discrimination has led him to believe have the priorities. Therefore, if we look at the world about us—this passive substance that has no free will of its own—if we look at the environment we have molded to our wishes, then we have, both a tableau of the options we have chosen through our volitional liberty, and at the same time a gauge or measure of the type of intelligence that ordered those choices. And it goes without saying that these principles hold for assessing the content of every civilization past and present the world has known, along with the particular vision that produced them.

¹ This paper is a response to a request from Harvard University's 300th graduated class, 35th Reunion, for contributions to a symposium on "Freedom in all its facets". From among seven topics proposed, the one chosen here is called "FREEDOM AT THE CROSSROADS: Panels on the Interrelationships of Energy & Environment; Economics & the Sea Around Us and the Soil Beneath."

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Ancient man by the lights of modern man was a creature virtually without freedom: he lived hedged in with superstitions from the cradle to the grave—an abject thing of fear and brutish appetites. The reader must bear with a few examples of this official scientific view so that he can see we exaggerate nothing. Thus, a scholar proclaimed to be a practicing “specialist” in Shintô can write of the early Japanese: “Life itself was but a succession of immediate needs like the desire to eat, for example, and reproduce. Ancient Shintô when reduced to its primordial elements presents a rather desolate picture by comparison with mystical thought.”²

“The most primitive peoples are not conscious of the Laws of Nature or Cosmic Order, i.e., they are not aware of the fact that Nature is not a chaos but a Cosmos,” writes another “specialist” on Shintô. “Consequently they believe that daily occurrences are due to the caprice of deities. The Bechuanas of South Africa, for instance, cannot recognize Cosmic Order and do not believe that the sun sets, but that he dies every day. Certain tribes of Australia believe that the sun kills the moon every month. The Basutos believe that the moon is clever enough to escape the sun’s chase when she is reduced to a mere thread and gradually recovers her former shape...

The ancient Egyptians believed that Osiris, the sun, is killed by the demon of darkness in the evening every day, and as the new sun, Horus, he is reborn and rises the next morning.”³

According to J. G. Frazer, “At a certain stage of development men seem to have imagined that the means of averting... calamity were in their own hands, and that they could hasten or retard the flight of the seasons by magic art. Accordingly they performed ceremonies and recited spells to make the rain to fall, the sun to shine, animals to multiply, and the fruits of the earth to grow. In the course of time the slow advance of knowledge, which has dispelled so many cherished illusions, convinced at least the more thoughtful... that some deeper cause, some mightier power, was at work behind the shifting scenes of nature. They now pictured to themselves the growth and decay of vegetation, the birth and death of living creatures, as effects of the waxing or waning strength of divine beings, of gods and goddesses, who were born and died, who married and begot children, on the pattern of human life.

Thus the old magical theory of the seasons was displaced, or rather supplemented, by a religious theory... The combination is familiar in history. Indeed, few religions have ever succeeded in wholly extricating themselves from the old trammels of magic. The inconsistency

² Arimasa Mori: “Le Shinto”, *Encyclopédie des Mystiques Orientales*, M.-M. Davy, Paris, 1975.

³ Genchi Kato: *A Study of Shinto*, Tokyo, 1926, and London, 1971, pp. 120-121. For a different interpretation of Osiris, see our “The Dragon that Swallowed St. George”, to be published in *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Summer, 1976.

of acting on two opposite principles, however it may vex the soul of the philosopher, rarely troubles the common man.”⁴ Frazer tells us that this inconsistency is particularly patent with Orientals, and he cites an unnamed authority on the East to the effect that “The Oriental mind is free from the trammels of logic. It is a literal fact that the Oriental mind can accept and believe two opposite things at the same time... We find astronomers who can predict eclipses, and yet who believe that eclipses are caused by a dragon swallowing the sun... To the Oriental mind, a thing must be incredible to command a ready belief.”

This predisposition for the irrational was not lost on the French social anthropologist Marcel Mauss, who wrote in his *A General Theory of Magic*:⁵ “In magic and religion the individual does not reason, or if he does his reasoning is unconscious.”

When the first-century B.C.E. Greek historian Diodorus Siculus records (i.14.2) how the Egyptian corn-reapers followed an ancient custom of beating their breasts and lamenting over the first sheaf cut, all the while calling upon Isis, Frazer remarks that “similar plaintive strains were chanted by corn-reapers in Phoenicia and other parts of Western Asia. Probably all these doleful ditties [*sic*] were lamentations for the corn-god killed by the sickles of the reapers. In Egypt the slain deity was Osiris.”⁶

The *Kogoshûi* or *Gleanings from Ancient Stories* written by Imbeno-Hironari in 807 C.E., tells that when the Japanese peasants “acted against the will of Mitoshi-no-Kami, the Deity of Rice Crops, clouds of locusts were, as a divine curse, sent by the wrathful Deity to destroy the young rice plants in the rice fields of the offenders.”⁷ The farmers to propitiate this deity put up magic fetishes in phallic form. “Such phallic emblems were worshipped generally in ancient times,” comments the Shintô “authority” Genchi Kato, “and even now in secluded parts of the land this practice is credulously continued. The country folk have been very serious in believing in the spells of phallic fetishes, which oftentimes are closely connected with agricultural Shintô rites performed in Shintô shrines.”⁸

Mircea Eliade nevertheless points out the assimilation of the sexual act to agricultural work in many cultures. “The majority of collective orgies find a ritual justification in fostering the forces of vegetation: they take place at certain critical periods of the year, e.g., when the seeds sprout or the harvests ripen, and always have a hierogamy as their mythical model. Such, for example, is the orgy practiced by the Ewe tribe (West Africa) at the time when the barley begins to sprout; the orgy is legitimized by a hierogamy (young girls are offered to the python god). We

⁴ *Adonis Attis Osiris*, London, 1907, pp. 3-4.

⁵ First published in the *Année Sociologique* in 1902..

⁶ Op. cit. p. 296

⁷ Kato, op. cit. p. 39.

⁸ Ibid., p. 30.

find this same legitimization among the Oraons; their orgy takes place in May, at the time of the union of the sun god with the earth goddess. All these orgiastic excesses find their justification, in one way or another, in a cosmic or biocosmic act: regeneration of the year, critical period of the harvest, and so forth.” The same author alludes to the Roman Floralia and Lupercalia; “the liberties permitted throughout India on the occasion of the Holi festival; the licentiousness which was the rule in central and northern Europe at the time of the harvest festival and against which the ecclesiastical authorities struggled so unavailingly⁹—all these manifestations also had a super-human prototype and tended to institute universal fertility and abundance.”¹⁰

Deities were furthermore propitiated by human sacrifices, of which we can cite one rather original example: “According to Jean Crasset, a Catholic missionary and an eye-witness of feudal Japan, it was then widely in vogue that some number of samurai or retainers of daimyô or feudal lords killed themselves beneath the foundation stones of the walls of a castle and thus they became of their own free will hitobashira or human pillars—human sacrifices to the demons of the site—and at the same time new guardian spirits of the castle.”¹¹

As this is not an anthropological paper, we will limit ourselves to saying that ancient man is regarded by his modern countertype as being overawed by natural forces and the elements which escaped his understanding and control, and which accordingly he tried to placate through a series of rites ranging from the quaintly absurd to the downright abominable, as in orgies and human sacrifices.

All this bears closer examination. Allowing a latitude for abuses which occur with civilizations of any kind in differing degrees, we shall nevertheless discover that it was these earlier peoples alone who had a truly “scientific” understanding of ecology.

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In his *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, Philostratus tells how the Greek Neo-Pythagorean sage (first century C.E.) during his travels in India discoursed with some brāhmins on the nature of the universe. When Apollonius asked them of what they thought the cosmos was composed, they answered: “‘Of elements.’ ‘Are there not then four?’ he asked. ‘Not four,’ said Iarchas, ‘but five.’ ‘And how can there be a fifth,’ said Apollonius, ‘alongside of water and air and earth and fire?’ ‘There is the ether,’ replied the other, ‘which we must regard as the stuff of which gods are made; for just as all mortal creatures inhale the air, so do immortal and divine natures inhale the ether.’”¹²

⁹ “Cf., for example, the Council of Auxerre in 590.”

¹⁰ *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, New York, 1954, and Princeton, 1971, pp. 26-7.

¹¹ Kato, op. cit., p. 105.

¹² Bk. III. ch. 34; tr. F. C. Conybeare, London, and Cambridge, Mass., 1912, 1948.

Now Apollonius with his Pythagorean background knew very well about the fifth element, but he wished to elicit spontaneously from the brāhmins their knowledge concerning this Quintessential Matter—which in India goes by the name *Ākāśa*.

This postulate of the Ether and its four derivative elements—Fire, Air, Water, and Earth—figures in Graeco-Alexandrian cosmogony and in Islamic and mediaeval Christian Hermetism, with the equivalent doctrine to be found in India and the Far East. Since element means “first principle,” it would be more accurate to speak of the one Element, Ether, and its four derivative *properties* of Fire, Air, Water, and Earth. This is another way of saying that on our plane of existence, Ether is the only Substance that is “relatively absolute”—to borrow an expression from Frithjof Schuon.

The highest differentiation that can be given to the Absolute itself, the Supreme Principle or Ultimate Reality, is found in the Vedantin ternary *Sat-Chit-Ānanda*: Absolute Being-Knowledge-Bliss. It is through the activation of what the Hindus call *Māyā*, namely, the energizing force of attraction latent in principial Substance, that there operates a subject-object polarization or refraction on the hitherto undifferentiated Spiritual Essence, thus provoking an emanation through descending spheres of manifestation—Archetypal or Noumenal, then Animic, with finally that terminal coagulation which forms our physical universe—without this however essentially altering the primal nature of Substance; for otherwise there would be a total discontinuity between one plane of existence and another, and hence no creation possible.

As our present concern is with the spatiotemporal world, it is the Substance as Ether which interests us, this being the closest approximation to the Universal Substance to be found on our level of reality. Various Western traditions—Platonic, Hermetic, Kabbalistic—refer to it as the World Soul (*Anima Mundi*) or Primary Matter (*Materia Prima*); being *in potentia*, it is the Void or Chaos that both precedes and informs Cosmos (the orderly universe).

Through continuity with principial Substance, this Ether still bears within itself the essential components of the ternary referred to above, namely, Being-Knowledge-Bliss, but now transposed on a more relative plane into what could with some oversimplification be termed the elements energy-consciousness-beauty. Schuon in his brilliant article “*Ātmā-Māyā*”¹³ demonstrates how *Māyā* in our material world operates within the Substance, Ether, by way of radiation or energy in dynamic mode, and reverberation or formation in static mode, to project the space-time plane of reflection or Image which we experience as the phenomenal universe.

Modern physics likewise posits the two poles of matter and energy, the substratum of matter being for it pure energy; but it completely misses the third and all-essential pole, this Deiform Matter which is our Ether, the subtle prototype and immediate source of all that there is in our world of Light and Sound, of Life, Consciousness, Intelligence, Love, Beneficence and

¹³ *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Summer 1973.

Beatitude. And let this Ether not be confused with the common ether postulated by physics, which understands here nothing more than a medium for propagating electromagnetic waves.

It is the Virgin Simplicity that espouses all forms while being in itself formless; for this reason the alchemists invested it with lavish nomenclature like Hyle, Sperm, Seed, Minera, Abyss, Azoth, Theriac, Dew, Mist, Celestial Slime, Virgin Water, Catholic Magnesia, Seminal Viscosity, Primordial Chaos, Argent Vive, Bird of Hermes, Venomous Dragon, Green Lion, and so forth—"a Substance most vile and precious." Or to cite the great twelfth-century Arab mystical poet Ibn al-Fārid, it is "A fluidity that is not water, a limpidity that is not air; a light without fire, and a spirit without body..."¹⁴

In their mediaeval sense the created elements were considered as four immediate principles underlying matter and whose conjunctions determined the equilibrium of the outward world, much in the way that the four humors were held to determine a man's character or constitution. For the purposes of this exposition, however, it will suffice to regard them simply as the gross quaternary of physical realities which we know as fire, air, water, and earth. And it will even be convenient to envisage them reduced still further into their components of energy-atmosphere-moisture-land.

* * *

Depending on where one lives, there may or may not be an apparent fuel problem, but the point is: the energy experts insist that an irreversible shortage of those combustibles running the gears of our technology is in sight, and that the issue is not just a chimera.

Again, depending on the region one inhabits, there may or may not appear to be an abundance of clean air, but the authorities in this domain are insistent that as things are going, a saturation point of atmospheric pollutants could menace heavily populated areas by the end of our century.

Following the same order of ideas, there is also a water problem—if we are to believe the hydrologists, the oceanographers, and the meteorological experts. Not that from time immemorial there have not been arid zones on the earth, with man having to capture moisture through ingenious irrigational devices, but simply that a number of surfaces classically relied upon for an abundance of water are all at once delivering polluted water, or no more water at all.

Finally, the expression "last wilderness" is of a sudden cropping up in a world hitherto known for its vast and relatively unexplored spaces that until very recently were so taken for granted: whether by "land" one understands natural resources, real estate, wildlife, forestry, agriculture, virgin nature or what not, the limits to what can be exploited are becoming ever more

¹⁴ *Al-Khamriyya* ("The Ode to Wine"), based on tr. by Emile Dermenghem: *L'Eloge du Vin*, Paris, 1931, verse 22.

evident. The demographers turn to the agronomists to feed a world population increasing exponentially; the agronomists reply that “miracle” grains, fertilizers, and insecticides have been pushed just about to the peaks of present scientific competence, and that even with optimum climatic conditions one can at most anticipate a holding action.

The observation which interposes itself here is that the four created elements of earth, water, air, and fire—all seemingly so inexhaustible—are in reality finite, limited, and vulnerably corruptible. If they are not “perishable,” this is owing entirely to their subsistence from the Quintessential Element, which itself being inaccessible to the investigational techniques of analytical science, is written off its books. And yet if one takes as a quaternary the four extended arms of a cross, there has to be an unextended and “invisible” point as Center from which the rest emanates. Or as well say there is no center, since it is merely a hypothetical “point,” having no dimensions by which it can be measured. Regarding this the *Tao Te Ching* declares:

Thirty spokes unite in one nave.

And because of the part where nothing exists we have the use of a carriage wheel.

Clay is molded into vessels,

And because of the space where nothing exists we are able to use them as vessels.

Doors and windows are cut out in the walls of a house,

And because they are empty spaces, we are able to use them.

Therefore, on the one hand we have the benefit of existence, and on the other, we make use of non-existence.¹⁵

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In the perspective of Taoism and other Far Eastern religions of shamanistic origin, Man is regarded as the Mediator between Heaven and Earth. This is to say that as the unique creature in the entire physical universe who possesses free will and full intelligence, and situated as he alone is on the threshold of two immensities—the Inner World and the Outer, the Invisible and the Visible, it is incumbent on him to see to the well ordering of the world and the harmony of existence. Who or what else is there that can possibly replace him in this respect? Buddhism likewise enjoins on Man a reverential attitude towards all creation. In Hinduism the rules for Man’s conduct along the same lines are detailed fully in the *Dharmaśāstra*. The Jews find this in their *Torah*, and the Christians, who are taught that Man is made “in the image of God,” have the duty to proclaim: “Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.” Islam (submission to the Divine Will) teaches through the Qur’ān that Man is Vicegerant on Earth (*khalīfah fi ’l-ard*) and hence responsible to God for the custody of creation. “The universe is a great man,” say the Sufis, “and man is a little universe.” Johannes Scotus Erigena echoes the same doctrine—which is also Platonic, Hermetic, and Kabbalistic—in declaring:

¹⁵ Ch. XI, tr. Ch’u Ta-Kao, the Buddhist Lodge, London, 1937.

Man is the microcosm in the strictest sense of the word. He is the summary of all existence. There is no creature that is not recapitulated in man. There is nothing in the universe lower than body or higher than soul.¹⁶

The alchemists—who no more passed their time in fabricating common gold than the karate expert passes his in smashing boards and bricks—considered Man as True King, who helped all Nature to breathe.

A Balinese once told this writer: “Our island belongs to the gods, who have simply put us here as caretakers.” No Balinese at that time, when the island’s traditions were still shielded under a perceptive Dutch policy of *laissez faire*, had any problem about “solutions” for the world’s “ills!”

It was a very sacred wilderness, kept virgin for countless millennia, that the Europeans wrested by force from its American Indian custodians. Believing most staunchly in the four elements only, these Westerners closed the door to the Invisible and proceeded to exploit the virgin matter at hand in a way that dumbfounded the aborigines, whose traditions forbade them even to cut a tree or open the earth or kill an animal without offering a prayer.

The expedient attitude for the white man was, of course, to regard the red man as a mere “savage” who must consequently give way before MANIFEST DESTINY.

At one of the All Indian Days festivals in Sheridan, Wyoming, the Protestant minister conducting interdenominational services asked in astonishment to a remark this author had made: “But do the Indians have a philosophy?”

“When we worship the buffalo or the eagle,” a Crow Indian told us, “it is not to the animal or the bird as such that our prayer is addressed, but to the Great Spirit who reveals Himself through the animal or bird.”

* * *

We are beginning now to see that ancient man in his rituals and offerings and prayers was obeying some force higher than pure superstition. He was in fact functioning as Mediator between different levels of cosmic reality, aiding in the regeneration of the elements through keeping a communication open between this world and the Next, thus maintaining a cyclical flow between the Invisible and the visible—an out-breathing and an in-breathing—so that the world of the four elements was continuously being rejuvenated from the inexhaustible Ether, which could be called the Virgin Mother of differentiated matter and form.

The paleontologists will argue that the earth was here eons before the arrival of man, who is a relatively recent comer on the world scene; to this we can only reply that Man—entire and

¹⁶ *De Divisione Naturae.*

complete and in full possession of his highest faculties, which belong to him eternally as Logos—was here from the day that Chaos became Cosmos, and that it is neither in our competence nor our concern to determine “when” this day befell.

Nor must it for a moment be imagined that early man was a Nature worshipper; he worshipped God, and respected Nature as God’s paradigm: “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handiwork” (Psalm 19:1). Thus on the one hand he acted in conformity with the dictates of natural law, and on the other he observed Nature as a theophany capable of showing him the way back to God. The Oriental astronomers maligned by Frazer earlier in this article will appear less credulous and split-brained if we realize that they were complete men capable of simultaneously envisaging superimposed levels of reality: thus on the physical plane they possessed the mathematical skills necessary for predicting solar eclipses, which did not preclude their understanding that the event on the cosmological plane signifies the passage between two cycles of existence which is marked by a momentary rupture of equilibrium and a temporal discontinuity—a transition effected in “obscurity.”¹⁷ Finally, on the metacosmic plane, where the Sun and Moon symbolize respectively Spirit and Soul, these Orientals understood that the Soul in her spiritual quest has to “enter the dragon”—the astronomical term for the moon’s ascending and descending nodes as it crosses the ecliptic—and be swallowed by the Sun, as it awesomely appears to the Soul when she abandons her former light and plunges into the Void: this is the “Dark Night” or “Descent into Hell” that has to be traversed before her spiritual rebirth and awakening.

Also, it was advisedly we said above that early man worshipped God; for whatever the plurality of gods in his pantheon, he always posited the existence of a Supreme Being: “God is He whose Name must not even be pronounced”—to cite an Akka (Pygmy) chief.¹⁸

Lastly, if a “scientific” motivation can now be detected in the rituals and offerings and prayers of former men, this is not to imply that their Sacrifice carried with it a calculating mentality. Rather did it come naturally, spontaneously, and “existentially” to those who performed it, being simply in the nature of things to do so.

* * *

Man upon dying returns to the Invisible from whence he came. “Our little life,” as Shakespeare’s Prospero says in *The Tempest*, “Is rounded with a sleep.” And yet so preoccupied is mankind today with the manipulation and exploitation of the created elements that he scarce at all reflects

¹⁷ People who scoff at the Africans and Balinese for beating on drums and kettles to scare away the dragon that is swallowing the Sun are themselves capable of making any amount of rumpus on New Year’s Eve, quite unaware that in doing so they are simply perpetuating ancient ceremonies for driving out the old Year and bringing in the new. On this, see Eliade’s *Myth of the Eternal Return*, ch. 2.

¹⁸ R. P. Trilles: *L’Ame du Pygmée d’Afrique*, Paris, 1945, p. 91.

on their exquisite fragility and instability—unless an earthquake, flood, tornado, or volcano strikes. Of the omnipresent all-pervading Ether, what is the proportion of its coagulations in relation to the entire expanse of our solar system? The answer: a fiery orb visually the size of an ember, floating in a void that is incommensurately vast (it takes the Sun at a velocity of 135 miles per second 220 million years to complete one revolution in our Galaxy) and trailing in orbit a few specks of dust, among which, our Earth, with a volume less than a millionth of the Sun's (the Moon's trajectory around the Earth would easily fit inside the Sun). And of our globe's total volume it is this diaphanous pellicle the biosphere, hardly eight miles thick, which harbors the only physical life known in our whole planetary cosmos.

These analogies from the outer universe are simply intended to focus attention on the quasi-absolute prevalence of the “empty spaces” over the “filled” ones, or of the Invisible over the visible, the Ether over its manifestations. With man as the median measure, similar observations can be drawn from the microcosmic realms—the atom itself being little more than an empty space whose contours are delineated by subatomic particles. Nicholas of Cusa brings home the relativity of all finite measurement with the following demonstration:

There can be nothing greater in existence than the simple, absolute maximum... It is above all that we can conceive, for its nature excludes degrees of “more” and “less”.... Being all that it can be, it is, for one and the same reason, as great as it can be and as small as it can be. By definition the minimum is that which cannot be less than it is; and since that is also true of the maximum, it is evident that the minimum is identified with the maximum.¹⁹

A comparable image repeatedly appears in the Vedānta:

In this abode of Brahma (*Brahma-pura*) [namely, the vital center of the being, hence of Man, with Brahma being the Divine Principle] there is a small lotus [identified by Sankarāchārya with the heart], a place in which is a small cavity occupied by Ether (*Ākāśa*); we must seek That which is in this place, and we shall know It...

This Ātmā [the Supreme Self], which dwells in the heart, is smaller than a grain of rice, smaller than a grain of barley, smaller than a grain of mustard, smaller than a grain of millet; this Ātmā, which dwells in the heart, is also greater than the earth, greater than the atmosphere, greater than the sky, greater than all the worlds together.²⁰

Or as Kabīr succinctly puts it:

¹⁹ *De Docta Ignorantia*, I iv; tr. Fr. Germain Heron, London, 1954.

²⁰ *Chāndogya Upanishad*, VIII. i. 1, and III. xiv. 3; in *Man and His Becoming According to the Vedānta*, by René Guénon, tr. Richard C. Nicholson, London (Luzac), 1945, pp. 40-41.

All know that the drop merges into the ocean but few know that the ocean merges into the drop.²¹

No less vast than the spatial imponderables are the temporal ones; on the unseizability of time a brief citation from Hermes will suffice:

The past time has departed, so that it no longer is; and the future is not in existence, in that it has not yet arrived. And even the present is not..., in that it does not abide. For seeing that the present does not stand fast, and does not abide even for an instant, how can it be said to be “present,” when it cannot stand fast for one moment?²²

* * *

The “Ether in the heart” that the Upanishad mentions just above is represented in Hermetism by a five-petaled rose (for the “fifth” element) at the center of a cross, whose arms delineate the four primary elements (this brings us back to the quaternary with its “dimensionless” or “invisible” Center), and which is of course also a symbol of man. Dante refers to this rose or “point” as “the spirit of life, which dwells in the most secret chamber of the heart” (*Vita Nuova*, 2).²³ The mystery or paradox about man’s incapacity to seize upon more than an infinitesimal fraction of the immensities of time and space is that within himself he is capable of containing them all—entire and whole and perfect. “The kingdom of God is within you,” as the Gospel proclaims (Luke 17:21), while it “cometh not with observation” (ibid. 20), that is to say, through outward investigation. Dante again speaks of this “point” within, being “where every *where* and every *when* is focused—*dove s’appunta ogni ubi ed ogni quando*” (Paradiso, XXIX.12).

It is by transposition, correspondence, and analogy that the Upanishad can speak by turns of the Transcendent Divinity or the Absolute (*Brahma*), the Immanent Self or true “I” (*Ātmā*), and the more relativized Ether (*Ākāśa*) as all “dwelling in the heart”; and the statement about this *Ātmā* being “smaller than a grain of mustard” finds its equivalent teaching unmistakably in the Gospel parable of the mustard seed:

The kingdom of heaven is like to a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and sowed in his field: Which indeed is the least of all seeds: but when it is grown, it is the greatest among herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof.²⁴

To get to the ecological crux of this paper, Man through his primordial birthright as Mediator or Pontifex belongs to an “ecosystem” that is total, one which traverses all levels of

²¹ Cited by Sri Ramana Maharshi: *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi, Tiruvannamalai*, 1955, p. 81.

²² *Stobaei*, Excerpt X. 3; Walter Scott: *Hermetica*, Oxford, 1924-1936.

²³ See René Guénon: “L’ether dans le coeur”, *Etudes Traditionnelles*, Paris, Avril-Mai 1949.

²⁴ Matthew 13:31-32.

reality and has its unitive repercussions in every sphere, from the supraformal archetypal worlds on down, to the outermost fringes of created matter. Any malfunctioning or loss of union on Man's part thus entails a lesser or greater rupture of our world's equilibrium with respect to the higher planes—themselves incorruptible.

For reasons at once spiritual, cosmological, and historical,²⁵ the progressive evolution of humanity since recorded times is a varying succession of such ruptures—compensated by partial restorations—on an ever increasing scale, with our present modern civilization approaching the terminal point in the process.

* * *

Modern civilization is unique in the history of world societies as being the first one to regard the physical universe as a closed system, sufficient unto itself, without reference to Ultimate Principles, or even having any belief that such a thing as Ultimate Principles exist. The world, it says, began with the expansion and subsequent coagulation of gases, and on such a note will it end.

When their vinestock is reaching depletion, the French vine-growers have a special way of trimming it called “*taille à la ruine*—pruning for ruin,” which gives the roots a final spurt of energy producing a lavish harvest before the plants wither away to be re-placed by new ones.

In much the same manner today on our battered old earth, humankind through the collaboration of modern science with its resultant technology is marshalling all those resources hitherto latent in the biosphere to produce this fantastic harvest which is our present-day civilization—the likes of which has never been seen before and will never be seen again. The collusion of science here is doubly indispensable: first, because although its domain is that of gases and figures and the manipulation of compounds, people have somehow come to believe it has authority to pontificate about Final Ends; and since it has nothing to say about Angels and Dominions and Ultimate Realities, therefore in the eyes of its votaries the Invisible does not exist. This effectively sunders the four elements from their source, the Ether, and “liberates” our world to live off its own tremendous reserves of capital with a clean conscience. Secondly, by eliminating the higher, namely, everything to do with the spiritual dimension, science frees man—by definition a “perfectionist”—to apply his best energies to the pursuit of the lower,

²⁵ These reasons cannot be expounded here, but for the reader interested, the spiritual causes are cogently given in Schuon's *Light on the Ancient Worlds* (tr. Lord Northbourne, London, Perennial Books, 1965; new edition, World Wisdom, 2006) the cosmological causes, in Guénon's *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*, tr. Lord Northbourne, London (Luzac), 1953; and the historical, in *The Encounter of Man and Nature*, by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, London (George Allen and Unwin), 1968.

namely, that ingenious manipulation of physical substances that goes by the term applied science, or technology.²⁶

The dichotomy in perspectives between the ancient and the new is well expressed by the eighteenth-century French Benedictine and Hermetist, Dom Antoine Joseph Pernety: “Common chemistry is the art of destroying the compounds which nature has formed, while Hermetic chemistry is the art of working with nature to perfect them.”²⁷ Ananda Coomaraswamy puts it more bluntly, in saying that “modern civilization, by its divorce from any principle, can be likened to a headless corpse of which the last motions are convulsive and insignificant.”²⁸

And this technology which is devouring the four elements with no way of replenishing them, depends for its very survival on an ever-expanding economy—even if it has to expand “right out into galactic space.” The contamination is now world-wide, since the “under-developed nations” (a term of reproach for those countries living off their interest still, rather than their capital) are faced with economic strangulation unless they in turn industrialize—nations whose resources were at any event already being pillaged by a European colonial policy operating under the banner of “the white man’s burden.” Hermes long ago foresaw the pattern, in speaking about “this being that is going to look with audacious gaze upon the beauteous mysteries of nature”:

Will not men put forth audacious hands against the elements? They will dig up roots of plants, and investigate the properties of stones [the origin of modern chemistry]. They will dissect the lower animals,—yes, and one another also,—seeking to find out how they have come to be alive, and what manner of thing is hidden within [the origin of modern medicine].... They will cut down the woods of their native land, and sail across the sea to seek what lies beyond it [the origin of colonialism]. They will dig mines, and search into the uttermost darkness of the depths of the earth [the origin of petrochemical and nuclear technology]. And all this might be borne, but they will do yet more: they will press on to the world above.... Are they then to meet with no impediment?²⁹

Men who in former times normally never opened the earth without a prayer, now readily exploit those caverns already disemboweled by their rapacity, as depots for their lethal nuclear wastes. Seyyed Hossein Nasr underscores the strange paradox “that everywhere throughout the world while man considered himself as an exile on earth he lived at peace with nature as if it

²⁶ For a devastating dissection of the mentality in command here, see Philip Sherrard’s “Modern Science and the Dehumanization of Man”, *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Spring 1976.

²⁷ *Etudes Traditionnelles*, 1969, p. 235.

²⁸ *Am I My Brother’s Keeper?*, New York (John Day), 1947, p. 1.

²⁹ *Op. cit.*, Excerpt XXIII. 45.

were his permanent home and that when he began to consider himself as a purely earthly creature and the earth as his final abode he set out to destroy this home with unprecedented ferocity.”³⁰

People will protest that many leading authorities today in governmental, scientific, industrial, medical, and environmental posts are deeply concerned about these problems and fully committed to imposing whatever measures may prove necessary for restoring a viable equilibrium in the biosphere. But this is to miss the point. For these authorities are not about to turn apostate against the basic dogmas on which our present civilization is founded, namely, evolutionism, progress-ism, scientism—”articles of faith” without which it could not long endure. While any amount of thought is being expended on “energy programs,” there is no thought at all about structuring them with a view to “phasing out” our over-extended need for power; just the contrary: Draconian measures will be legislated if necessary, precisely to ensure that our technological “necessities” will continue to be provided with the colossal quantities of force needed to maintain the propulsion until Kingdom Come³¹, even if the skies are darkened and the rivers dried up to do so. But of course they are convinced science is going to win, since the opposite for them would be “unthinkable.”

For it was proposed at the beginning of this article that every outward society but mirrors the vision of those who created it, and the vision of man today is a “one-world syndrome”—a closed system having no communication with other worlds or higher orders of reality. The fact that Nature is closed off to its revivifying Ether simply reflects a corresponding atrophy already ingrained in the intellectual substance of modern man that not only furthers his dissociation from the Invisible but promotes the conviction of being “master of his own destiny” without *resource* to any *causa causans* transcending himself. In brief, just as humanity physically is appropriating to itself the vast reserves of the four elements with no realistic grasp on the modalities of replenishment, so is humanity spiritually and intellectually exhausting the last reserves of its ancient cultural heritages without the slightest scientific—let alone metaphysical—understanding of the imperatives concerning regeneration. Of what use, may it be asked, are the codes established by all the great religions East and West in regard to Last Ends—when it comes to our present hedonistic world, fixed as it is on itself as its only end? The desecration of the Liturgy by the neopagan Church in Rome is only the latest secular triumph in the long series of ruptures with the Invisible. Of religion little remains but ethics and morality, which themselves deprived of their sufficient reason are in turn reduced to the level of a sterile opportunism for sheerly materialistic and social ends. Shakespeare foretold the pattern, where Hamlet chides his mother:

³⁰ *Islamic Science—An Illustrated Study*, London (World of Islam Festival Publishing Company), 1976, p. 234.

³¹ A factor people seem to overlook in the process is that massive amounts of energy are required to produce it in massive amounts. Everything, in other terms, continues to get “bigger” without for that getting “better”.

For in the fatness of these pury times Virtue itself of vice must pardon beg.³²

Man, then, can legislate until doomsday a host of bills on land, water, air, and energy improvement, yet any solutions short of a fundamental reversal in perspectives and a spiritual awakening or intellectual renewal will amount to no more than “lifting himself by his own bootstraps” and “putting poultices on cancers.”

* * *

There is nonetheless one circumstantial truth not yet mentioned that modifies if not mitigates all the foregoing arguments, and which is that the ultimate seed of dissolution is already potentially contained in the Ether itself, which on its plane shares a certain contingency with everything else of a created nature. It is a little like the Serpent in the Garden, and has to do with the properties inherent in *Māyā*, as explained earlier.

Thus it is possible to speak of a “conspiracy” in the cosmological order, or a progressive “hardening” of those “arteries” through which the Ether is transmitted to our world. These things can only be alluded to in passing, but Guénon has amply demonstrated in *The Reign of Quantity* how a cycle of existence is predominantly qualitative at its commencement and quantitative at its finish, with “matter” becoming more “opaque” as the cycle advances, and existence less receptive to influences of a higher or spiritual order. And when matter has passed beyond the peak of its quantitative “hardness”—which corresponds to our present cosmic moment—there is again, a “receptivity,” but this time inversely, to influences of a lower or infra-psychic source and structure, as is easily discernible today for those who have eyes to see. Relativism, psychologism, subcultures, and surrogate religions³³ are just some of the symptoms.

Parallel with this process goes a steady decline in the qualitative level of humanity, whose massive overpopulation is a quantitative “sign of the times.” Hence it is taught in Hinduism, as in all the major religions, that mankind in the *Krita-Yuga*—which relates to the “Golden Age” of Western traditions—was without blemish, upright, brāhminical or high caste by nature, otherworldly, and in-corruptible; whereas in our present *Kali-Yuga* or “Iron Age,” man becomes degenerate, vicious, predominantly low caste, and corrupted—a prey to disease and impurity of every kind, with his vision fixed on the things of this life only.

Therefore, if this be the case, could it not be claimed that modern man is absolved, in some degree at least, from any responsibility for the present state of affairs? There are two replies here, and they go counter to one another. First, man is always responsible for the choices he makes, in

³² Commenting a court case on pornographic license, the editor of a prominent U.S. magazine recently said: “In a free society nobody should be the judge.” By this pat remark he would abolish in nine words the indispensable human freedom of the right to judge.

³³ See for a smattering on this, *Cults of Unreason*, by Dr. Christopher Evans, London (Harrap), 1973.

keeping with the Gospel words: “Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!” (Matthew 18:7). Secondly, what truly Twentieth-Century Man is not going to stand up to the world as it is with the triumphant boast that it is of his own making? How many men are prepared to see their precious civilization disappear overnight? How many would want to exchange it for any other that has ever been or could ever be—excepting one which is the extension and magnification of ours to the nth degree? This is the evolutionist view of things, a society in continuous progress that has somehow freed itself from the cosmic cycles and pulsations of the universe which destroyed all those previous civilizations attached to a God whom our Science is finally outwitting.

Freedom after all is the subject matter of this paper, even though the only “freedom” society offers man today is, in Coomaraswamy’s words, the liberty to be one’s own worst self, in contradistinction to the ritual checks and balances that served in traditional societies to curb man’s passional nature with an end towards liberating his higher or real self from the vicissitudes of existence.³⁴ If now we scorn the observances of our forebears as outmoded superstitions irrelevant for these times, it is in that same spirit of contempt that children have for parents and youth has for age—a scorn for a past that is the sole heritage we possess.

That nature, which contemns its origin,
Cannot be border’d certain in itself.
Shakespeare (*King Lear* IV.ii).

What we are speaking about is the prevailing mentality, since it goes without saying that there are still people in both the West and the East who do not see things at all in these terms; and the reflective reader may just be wondering how much real freedom to shape his environment he does in fact retain. For the world as it stands is on a collision course with Eternity, and no human artifice is adequate to alter this direction. Only an intervention from Heaven or some “natural” cataclysm short of earthly annihilation will serve to change this course—man’s nuclear sophistication notwithstanding. The most convenient expedient, doubtless, is to wait things out in the expectation that we will somehow bumble through, as we always have in the past (forgetting that our earth is strewn with extinct civilizations, many of which have left not even a visible trace). But wishful thinking of this kind betokens rather an abnegation of will than an exercise in the freedom to choose. And the reality is in any case

³⁴ Coomaraswamy has developed these ideas in an unpublished essay, “The Bugbear of Democracy, Freedom and Equality”, which is to be published in a forthcoming number of *Studies in Comparative Religion*. (Books), 1964, p. 74.

otherwise: “If it can be said that man collectively shrinks back more and more from the Truth, it can also be said that on all sides the Truth is closing in more and more upon man.”³⁵

Since Reality englobes illusion, which is no more than a shadow on its face, communication with the Invisible will again be established; but when this happens, our little moment in the cycle of cosmic time will have seen its day.

To recapitulate: our ancient traditions—that heritage which some despise and others relegate to the domain of fancy, folklore, and “myth”—were so many means of keeping in contact with the Invisible, a series of adaptations to the Quintessential Nought, the wellspring of all earthly good. Every “normal” civilization in its entire legitimate extension was but the exteriorization of the inner vision of its saints and sages. For the Invisible—far from being a private and mystically “incommunicable” matter—is the archetypal matrix of those outward arts, philosophies, and sciences which have given us the glories of our past civilizations, even if they can no longer be found today except in museums and deluxe heritage publications, or preserved as “national monuments” for tourist attraction.

If we particularly singled out the early Japanese at the beginning of this article as the target of attack by their modernized countrymen, this is because the Shintô religion in reality affords an unusually striking example of a high degree of harmony achieved between Man and Nature with its repercussions continuing through subsequent Buddhist forms right up to present times. There is an almost “uncanny” penetration of the Invisible in everything from flower arrangement to martial arts, from the tea ceremony to the forging of samurai swords.

The reader who asks, what is there in this for me? can at least be assured that the doors to the Invisible are still accessible to those who know where to seek, and that finding comes by seeking: “Seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.” What if we are exiles on an earth where options are fast running out? We can still say with Shakespeare’s Coriolanus when banished from his beloved Rome: “Thus I turn my back: There is a world elsewhere.”

And since there is no Freedom without Truth, the whole essential is to “know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”

(Original editorial inclusion that followed the essay:)

The worldly man’s yearning for God is momentary. It lasts as long as a drop of water on a red-hot frying-pan.

Sri Ramakrishna.

³⁵ Martin Lings: *Ancient Beliefs and Modern Superstitions*, London (Perennial Books), 1965, p. 74.