

SCIENCE AND THE SELF

by James E. Huchingson

Historians are often reluctant to accept the idea that history periodically repeats itself. They see history not as a rotating hoop but as a linear vector, hopefully an ascending one. Yet anyone who is concerned with the history of ideas experiences an odd sense of déjà vu when he surveys the current global predicament. The similarities between our own times and those of some sixteen hundred years ago are disconcerting. In the fourth century the foundations of Roman civilization quaked under onslaughts from without and feeble leadership from within.

In those times a number of religious and quasi-religious systems competed for the spiritual and intellectual allegiance of the empire's citizens. Augustine was one such citizen. His autobiography, the *Confessions*, is an account of his attempts to select and synthesize from among those systems available just the ones that would provide the most complete and satisfying self-understanding. Augustine's personal quest ended successfully, as did the larger quest of the culture.

We know that a world view consisting of Christianity articulated in terms of Greek philosophy and in league with Roman law emerged as the prevailing cognitive system of a new era called the medieval world. This new synthesis of ideas and authorities was worked out in the arena of social and political strife, the accidents of history, and the precise creedal formulation of the great theological debater and councils of those early centuries.

It is both fashionable and perilous to push the parallels between the Romans of the fourth century and the entire earth of the late twentieth century. No one can deny that the cultural contexts of the two eras differ significantly and that the problems of the modern world are unique to its condition. Yet, when we consider the existential urgency and anxiety felt by contemporaries of the Hellenistic Roman world and compare them with the uncertainty and dread of the fu-

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ture we often experience, we can almost conclude that the two human experiences are identical despite the cultural differences. They were urgently seeking a scheme of knowledge that could assure personal and corporate meaning, significance, and survival in a civilization that could no longer provide any of those things. They were seeking a base of superior grounding, a system of principles, or a world view upon which to construct a stable culture in a desperate and perplexing predicament. We empathize with Augustine, as well we should; his search is our own.

Mircea Eliade refers to the object of this common quest as the *axis mundi* or "world center" around which cultural construction occurs.¹ In the third century it was called a quest for gnosis, or "saving knowledge." In the history of Christian thought, gnosticism is a defamatory term referring to the heretical movement which denied the goodness of creation and promoted an extreme program of escapism. But, as Paul Tillich notes, gnosis may be used legitimately as the positive kind of knowledge that results in a personal or existential response to the question of human finitude and possible nonbeing.² Gnosis is knowledge of participation as opposed to neutral or objective knowledge. The latter may have no real effect on the concerns of the knower as a self. We are using gnosis in the Tillichian sense.

This comparison of historical epochs suggests that our task involves the creation of a synthesis appropriate to our times. This synthesis may be termed a gnostic system in that it is intended to offer a vector of action that will include a concerned subjective response or motivation pursued under the conviction that a viable human future is possible. The emphasis falls on the task of assuring the future by creating a total response in the present. We might refer to our creative efforts as *prognosis*. The ancient gnostics of the Hellenistic world sought to use their occultic and religious systems to escape the crumbling world by passing into a transcendent and mystical realm of eternity. They deserted the future and were rightly condemned by those who affirmed the worth and goodness of this worldly creation. Any prognostic synthesis confesses that the future is indeed worthy of our committed efforts and that it matters to work and build the earth.

There are many who feel that the fruits of contemporary science in league with the wisdom and insight of religion offer promising sources for a solution. Two dangers are readily apparent in such a project. One is the tendency to collapse one perspective into the other through a very subtle one-way translation of concepts. The second danger involves the conspicuous drift away from sympathetic encounter between the two perspectives and toward hostile confronta-

tion carried on across two sides of the aisle. Because these dangers are so much with us, I want to focus not on the carpentry of a final integrated scheme but rather on several important engineering principles or working concepts involved in the construction.

THE AUTHORITY OF SELF-EXPERIENCE

The first of these principles is that any prognostic synthesis must include personal experience as one of its irreducible components. This conclusion is drawn from observation about the meaning of religion in our culture at the present time. In my experience with what appears to be a wide range of undergraduate perspectives in the religious studies program of a large urban university, I have been impressed with the prevalence of a broadly based but unarticulated religious quest. Many students identify themselves only in passing with the established traditional institutions. Perhaps this is one reason why their quest is unarticulated. Attention is often directed exclusively toward these institutions as indicators of religion and spirituality. The evidence distilled from these sources indicates a falling off in religious concern detectable in declining membership and support for the churches. But the evidence cannot be interpreted as a general distinterest in religion. It simply suggests that orthodox theological systems are no longer the only repositories of transcendent claim and motivation.³ The churches remain an important expression of religious standpoints for a significant portion of the populace, and there are concerted movements toward renewal, relevance, and spiritual reawakening within them. There are, however, strong competitive theologies which must be considered.

I have in mind here several kinds of religious phenomena, both countercultural and established. These include the approach of such writers as Sam Keen, Michael Novak, and Theodore Roszak and their promotion of a "dionysian carnality," dance, the telling of stories. The rapid growth of Eastern and meditative movements bespeaks a shifting epicenter of religious involvement in the West. Finally, there are the various particularistic and liberation theologies, each with its singular focus on self-understanding as the true measure of man and woman, black and white, Greek and Jew.

These examples suggest that the religious quest may be defined in general as a search for a proper authority or ultimate by which a person may center himself in the matrix of the world on all its levels—natural, historical, and transcendent. I find in my students the need "to make a world in which to find a place to discover a self,"⁴ to use Edith Cobb's very appropriate words. This need reflects the gnos-

tic impulse in the best sense of the term. The traditional faith systems of the West have been the exclusive sources for locating the self in the cosmic matrix. We no longer assume this exclusiveness.

What we seem to be detecting here in the common themes of body theology, Eastern meditation, and particularistic movements is an emerging alternative in authority. By definition, an authority is a fundamental source of truth and value, a set of criteria for deciding from among competing truth claims and beyond which there is no appeal to a higher level or a deeper ground of certitude and worth. Several such authorities vie for the allegiance of persons. These include reason, fact, self-experience, and revelation. The genius of science has been its ability to combine methodologically the authorities of reason and brute fact, with brute fact in a highly refined sense emerging as the ultimate arbiter of truth through empirical verification procedures. In like manner, self-experience and revelation of whatever sort often find alliance in the dual authority of the religious personality. Of course, any mere listing of authorities is a disservice to the seamless totality of human perception—a highly complex and integrated phenomenon. Lists are abstract catalogs which dismantle this integrity. They do, however, show the relative weight given to the various elements by a group or culture.

Given this brief taxonomy, an interesting thing is happening. The authority of self-experience is rapidly pulling abreast of other authority representatives in terms of the relative attention given to it by the culture. Science has always been roundly attacked for its inability to give the human self its proper status in reality. This point needs no documentation. Now we often hear the same argument offered against the authority of formal religion. The struggle of a number of women in the Episcopal church to receive ordination as priests is a case in point. Their struggle is based upon the authority of their self-understanding as full and equal persons called to that vocation. It is opposed by the understanding of many in the church hierarchy who set their claims upon the authority of canonical law and doctrine, itself based ultimately on scriptural sources of revelation. Rational theories supported by empirical data are not enough. Theological doctrines supported by revelation are not enough. They are not enough unless they ring true for me and for us in ways that contribute abiding wholeness to the self and permit committed response to occur.

A pervasive religious spirit continues to be strong and vibrant in our time. It flourishes as the quest of the self for a total understanding of its place in the world. The longing for an *axis mundi* or true gnosis is a primary existential and reality task for our entire culture. Any sys-

tem which proposes to answer that longing must give due consideration to the authority and requirements of the self.

THE FRACTURE OF HUMAN KNOWING: A PARADOX

For the sake of its effectiveness, a program of prognostics must come to grips with a second issue which, in the past, has presented considerable difficulties to the pursuit of a total understanding of what it means to be a self in the world.

There is an evident fracture in the very structure of human perception that must be brought to mind and kept there if the total human equation is to remain balanced. This fracture becomes most visible in any attempt to reconcile personal experience with the world perceived and explained objectively. Classic science derives its method from the operational principle of separation between the perceiving subject and the perceived object. The fracture of human perception is sharply distinguished by this policy. However, the method goes further in suppressing the status of the knowing subject in favor of total objectivity with the laudable intention of eliminating personal error and bias. As a consequence, the existence of a subjective self, a self that values, acts, decides, and signifies, is steadily read out of the nature of things much as the "god of the gaps" was forced into retreat and finally nonexistence by the ever-expanding store of scientific knowledge. If this mode of thought is pursued without sympathy for the claims of the self, the equation becomes imbalanced; the fracture is compounded.

The subtle collapse of one source of authority into the structure of another authority is well illustrated in a prevailing and highly promising strategy assumed by many who are sympathetic to the reconciliation of science and religion. This strategy is often called the "systems-functional" approach to society. As a systems theorist, an observer frequently occupies an objective vantage point beyond the social system he examines. He becomes a privileged spectator who is capable of determining the structure, interplay, and flows of the social system and its essential components with considerable detachment. From his position as an outsider looking in, the observer concludes that institutions and belief subsystems exist in order to provide abiding norms upon which policies can be based that will contribute to the stability and survival of the entire social system. This conclusion is certainly reasonable when considered under the method and in the context of the systems perspective. The system is given, and by definition its elements serve in some way to enhance the total functioning and reality of that system. If components or subsystems do not contribute on a minimal level of effectiveness, or if they actually interfere in the

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operation of the system, then it is reasonable to expect that modifications will occur or perhaps that superfluous components will atrophy and disappear altogether. Religious beliefs are ingredients in the society. They exist for a reason, and that is to aid the growth, stability, and survival of that society and must be justified accordingly.

There is a dilemma in this rational and thoroughly confirmed view which eludes the objective, monocular gaze of the systems theorists. In the objective approach and its assumptions of the ultimacy of systems survival, there can be no legitimate value or belief that is not instrumental or contextual, except, perhaps, the belief in the ultimacy of systems survival. To the observer, the worth of the existence of a norm or belief is evaluated by the sole criterion of utility or effectiveness.

Yet, from another perspective, that of the believing subject who is objectified as part of the social system, belief in an instrumental value is an alien belief if it is not at least instrumental to his intrinsic values. The belief or values are gauged and justified on their own merits. Intrinsic values have worth. Indeed, they *are* worth. They are self-verifying and self-satisfying and need no appeal beyond that worth. Further inquiry into the question of why a valued belief is valuable becomes redundant and logically unnecessary from the perspective of the believer. Of course, beliefs are frequently modified or denied on the basis of experience or persuasion, but these debates usually occur within the envelope of the conviction itself and often concern pragmatic difficulties of application. There is little or no appeal to instrumental appraisal. For a religious person who embraces a belief, that belief has a primacy, a truth content, and a significance all its own and confirms itself as a source of meaning for his identity and self-understanding. Indeed, the contribution of beliefs to the viability of the society would not be possible unless the participants valued the beliefs for their intrinsic and not their instrumental values. There are no beliefs without believers, whose own standpoints will differ appreciably from that of the system theorist viewing the society from afar. Insiders see things differently from outsiders.

This unsettling distinction in perspective constitutes another illustration of a more enduring and fundamental fact of human nature. This fact is the ability of the human animal to reflect upon itself, to be self-aware. It constitutes our second nature. On the one hand, I have privileged access to myself as a subject. My subjectivity includes my thoughts, moods, intuitions, and other experiences of myself which are directly available to me and indeed constitute this "me." This is where I abide and where I locate myself. On the other hand, I can perceive myself as an object situated in its context. By standing out-

side myself I can mirror back an appraisal of my present situation, my past, and my future options. The self remains the same, but the domain it perceives is expanded to include that very self. Introspection becomes extrospection. I am capable of transcending myself by assuming the vantage point of a spectator observing my relationships and behavior in much the same way I observe the interaction of any object whatsoever in its environment.

There is nothing mysterious or unreal in this biperspectival account of self-knowing. To dismiss it as a case of "reifying" language by mistaking words for hard realities is unfair since that opinion betrays a certain bias in the account of what constitutes reality. Our mirroring skill is a profound fact of human reality which continues to have utterly important consequences for our history. It is a fact that my existence is placed at my disposal and under my scrutiny, there to be created, healed, and even judged. I am a compound person who is present to myself as that self and yet at a different time is present to myself as other.

Because we are both subject and object to ourselves, we incorporate, within that coupling, structures that are characteristic of certain classes of paradox so fascinating to practitioners of formal logic. The similarities are enlightening. One celebrated example is the paradox of the lie. The statement, "This statement is a lie," certainly appears innocent enough. But upon further examination it becomes very perplexing. On the one hand, if I assume that the assertion is true, then it follows that it must be false since its truth resides in the claim to be a lie! On the other hand, if I assume it is false then it must be true because the falsity of the claim must be its opposite which is to be true! Classical logic is unable to handle this paradox without the imposition of further conditions. These conditions were set forth by Bertrand Russell in the concepts of set theory or the theory of logical types. Russell promotes the notion that logical paradoxes arise because they are statements which try to do too much. They attempt to include themselves in the class of objects which they attempt to describe. The statement, "this statement is a lie," is an assertion about a class of statements called "lies," a class which includes the statement itself. The theory of types denies the consistency of such self-inclusive statements. They lead to contradiction and thereby produce a case of logical fudging.

Formal logic is fortunate. It can define away and avoid many species of statements considered illogical. However, if paradoxes appear in the domain of human existence, we must live with them. As Paul Watzlawick and others have shown, there are indeed such paradoxes. Our self-knowledge is in a position akin to logical

paradoxes. In any situation in which a person examines, with his mind and imagination and from a self-transcendent perspective, a class or system which includes himself as an element in that class or system, he is liable to paradox. That is, he is liable to produce assertions which make claims about the self as object which are incompatible with the self as subject. While paradoxical statements are of a logical order, those dealing with human perception and action are ontological. They not only contain propositional information but also encompass the very being of the proclaimer himself.

The danger of this condition has serious practical consequences when the observer makes a claim about a particular class of things or events in which he is an element—for example, human nature, society, or history. Indeed, historians have long recognized the danger of attempting objective or scientific history since the study of history constitutes a study of my history and the culture which produced me and my standpoint. How can you interpret history if the very principles of interpretation are themselves historical—that is, produced and conditioned by the phenomenon under investigation? Any attempt to account exhaustively for the human being in terms that do not permit the inclusion of the conscious agent doing the accounting tends to produce a theory of human nature that is paradoxical. It strives to be a theory about the theory maker which denies him theory-making consciousness! We are no longer troubled by Gilbert Ryle's ghost in the machine. The ghost of the privileged objective spectator is outside the machine and remains a fugitive but a real fugitive nonetheless!

The resemblance holds in our previous case of the systems-functional approach to social values and beliefs. If I experience myself as objective other, I see that my beliefs do indeed serve me and through me my society after a functional manner as a means of securing survival. But if I participate in those beliefs with my being as self as subject and there confess my conviction *qua* conviction, I intend more than the operational understanding of the assertions I make. I intend to participate in the reality I confess, and that is a different matter.

Perhaps this concept of survival is the key to our predicament since it is the singular and tacit norm which the systems-functional approach often assumes to be operating in natural and human systems. From a severely objective stance the only question is one of survival—how we must behave in order to exist. Since the range of possible responses is limited by the nature of the question, all modes of survival are appraised in terms of their instrumental contributions to this minimal end.

The concept is originally derived from the Darwinian theory of

evolution where it means simply that a creature is successful in producing offspring capable of maintaining the genetic line. Whatever functions to provide for the generation of progeny, who in turn survive to generate progeny over long periods or indefinitely, is adaptive, and whatever thwarts it is maladaptive. Hence all functional traits are contextual in that they are successful, adaptive responses to the environmental situation providing for procreation. What is it that really survives in any sense of remaining in being? Only the constant capability of successfully reproducing. Survival in this sense is the successful functioning of a system of functions.

These functions are the embodied standards of survival for the system. They constitute minimal standards designating requirements without which the system would not be. High-order systems, including human sociocultural systems, enjoy ranges of possibilities which can be realized without either enhancing or jeopardizing survival. Much of what we call civilization is the elaboration of artifacts and ideas that are superfluous when considered under the norm of survival.

Without further analysis, this concept of survival takes our inquiry only so far. The question begs for content: the survival of what and whom and why? If we pursue warrants for survival exclusively from an objective or functional perspective, the responses to the question will simply deny that values have any intrinsic worth or at least redefine them. Value priorities are then established by the fact that anything is permitted as long as it contributes to survival when survival is defined as a continuation of the system.

When the systems-theoretical question of survival is given a subjective component, the larger dimension of the preservation of worth is introduced. What must we preserve, what must we keep in being, in order to live and to live well? If we knew the answer to these questions, then we could name the constant factors that we ought to prize and in which we ought to invest ourselves. Strangely enough, this is exactly the problem that prompted Plato to seek true being in the realm of eternal forms intuited and prized by the soul's life. Platonism has its problems, to say the least. Yet the very human task of naming authentic virtues is not a spurious maneuver.

When total participation is sundered, the results are pathological. If we theoretically conclude from our examination of natural and social systems that all values and convictions are functionally derivative from the norms of survival which we do not ourselves feel or share in our humanistic or religious ideals, then we have dissevered our vision of reality. Also, if we do not pay attention to the understanding and insights given by the recent generalized pictures of viable or enduring

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cosmic, biologic, and cultural patterns of evolution, both intellectual integrity and depth of response are lost. We then live by an ontological double standard that compromises the integrity of being and human being in a most paradoxical fashion.

WHOLENESS AND THE RELIGIOUS QUEST

No one likes to leave the world in that unsatisfactory and ambiguous state of affairs. The split has significant bearings on the efforts of prognostics. If there is no way to heal fundamentally the quarantine between subject and object, then it is foolish to harbor hopes of reconciling scientific objectivity with religious self-investment. The question, then, is simply one of how the two standpoints are to be reconciled. Denial of the one in proclaiming the ubiquity of the other is not a viable alternative. Unfortunately, the popularized struggle between science and religion, as we have broadly defined it, resolves nothing. Even Keen, who aggravates the cleft most starkly in his contrast of the Apollonian and Dionysian life-styles, concludes with, "I would hate to be condemned to live without efficiency or ecstasy."⁵ The unusual nature of the human being as biperspectival cannot be cavalierly denied. When peering through binoculars, depth of field is lost unless both eyes are open at the same time!

Religious inquiry is more than a simple reliance upon the sanctions of self-experience. It is the attempt to locate the self in its cosmic matrix and there to discover that truth is found in the coincidence of the real and the important. The only adequate approach to such holistic understanding is one that takes seriously both knowledge of the self as object and the self as subject. Confrontations arise and result in the denial of the whole self when we forget either religious or scientific concerns. The actuary poring over his statistical tables concerning life expectancy easily confirms the ancient premise that all men are mortal. But until he recognizes and acts upon the truth that he too must die, he remains ignorant of the entire truth of his situation.

Religious inquiry requires a complete answer to the question, Who am I, who are we, in the scheme of things? An objective response is essential but only partial. The total response requires a yea-saying to any objective appraisal in terms which confirm the significance of the person in the total context and generates the resolve to act vigorously on that account. The goal of the synthesis of science and religion is to discover a definition of human being in the world that has objective certitude and which satisfies the needs of the person for self-understanding. The goal is one of rendering an account of world

being and human being that together constitute *well-being*. The alternatives are compartmentalization and the vertigo of radical relativity. The continuing adventure of self-discovery and world discovery as the total perception of the compound person is a task requiring general intuition. Teilhard de Chardin puts this well: "What happens when chance directs his [the self's] steps to a point of vantage (a crossroads or intersecting valleys) from which not only his vision but things themselves radiate? In that event the subjective viewpoint coincides with the way things are perceived objectively and perception reaches its apogee. . . . He sees."⁶

CONCLUSION

The signs of the season portend an imminent and radical shift in historical epochs that borders on dislocation. This fact calls for a reassessment of actions and strategies, even fundamental human categories, so that an adequate prognostic can be chosen. I have tried to show that general policies of action must be based on some definition of man that fully considers both the self as subject and the self as object. Any policy calculations that abbreviate one element in favor of the other can result only in an awkward imbalance of the whole. Science and religion possess great resources for addressing this question of definition if the binocular structure of human knowledge is respected. The elaboration of a total perspective that will both motivate and inform is the goal of dialogue and the foundation upon which the future is constructed.

The discussion began by specifying the similarities between the late Roman-Hellenistic period and our own predicament. This approach is often taken by those who want to draw attention to the parallels in the disintegration of both times. What we often fail to notice is that a high-level and enduring civilization, the medieval world, emerged out of the struggle to overcome the forces leading to the decline and fall of Roman civilization. Embracing the medieval world view in all its parameters is not the panacea for our predicament; no one is suggesting that. Yet the fact that such a unified perspective once came about engenders hope that we too can creatively synthesize the basics of a global orientation that will both entail constant and enduring values and contribute to survival without foreclosing further human achievement.

NOTES

1. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), chap. 1.

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2. Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought*, ed. Carl E. Braaten (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1968), p. 33.
3. Robert Wuthnow and Charles Y. Glock, "The Shifting Focus of Faith: A Survey Report, God in the Gut," *Psychology Today* (November 1974), pp. 131-36.
4. Edith Cobb, "The Ecology of Imagination in Childhood," *Daedalus* (Summer 1959), p. 543.
5. Sam Keen, "The Cosmic versus the Rational," *Psychology Today* (July 1974), p. 56.
6. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), p. 32.