

Man and Certainty

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of the essay, approved by the estate of Frithjof Schuon.*

Human intelligence is distinguished above all by its centrality and totality—that is, its capacity to conceive of the Absolute—and from this arises a further capacity, that of objectification, which coincides with a sense of the relative. Without the contemplation of the Absolute on the one hand and an intellectual penetration of contingencies in reference to this Absolute on the other, man ends up living beneath the level of his intelligence and therefore beneath his humanity. To say man is to say intelligence capable of the Absolute and of objectification or relativization; an animal has neither the sense of the Absolute nor therefore a sense of contingency.

An intelligence capable of the Absolute necessarily implies free will; the will is free insofar as the intelligence is total, and the intelligence is total in man as such, independently of its accidental obscurations; in other words every man of sound mind possesses a sense of the Absolute to the degree necessary for using his will for the sake of the “one thing needful”. If the normal and ultimate object of the intelligence is the Principle, the Absolute, the Infinite, then the normal object of the will must be what conforms to this supreme Reality, which means that the fundamental or quintessential function of the spirit is discernment between the Real and the illusory and contemplative concentration upon the Real—in other words, truth and union.

Like container, like content, and conversely: in nature a container is made for a corresponding content, and it proves the reality of this content, which in turn serves to show that such proof, though not necessary for every understanding, has a secondary and provisional usefulness. A human womb proves the existence of human seed just as a feline womb proves the existence of feline seed; similarly, the human Intellect proves its essential and total content,

namely, absolute and therefore transcendent Reality and—together with it—the reverberations of the Absolute in the contingent. The nature of our total or integral intelligence proves the existence of everything intelligible.

Whatever knows matter, and knowing it defines it as such, cannot itself be matter, nor can it be subject to the laws of matter; our immortality is therefore evident to “those who have ears to hear”. The conscious subject is too vast and profound, or too real, to be at the mercy of a fact as contingent and accidental as death.

Man, we have said, is able to conceive of the Absolute and to will freely; in the same way—and as a result—he is capable of a love that surpasses phenomena and opens onto the Infinite and of an activity whose motive or object is beyond earthly interests. The specifically human abilities—or those that are noblest and most completely human—prove in their own way what their objective is, just as the wings of a bird prove the possibility of flight and thus the existence of a space in which the bird can fly.

Free will entails the possibility of a mistaken choice and therefore of a passionate obscuration of the intelligence, for whoever chooses illusion has an interest in finding his happiness there, and man becomes what he chooses. To say total intelligence is to say freedom, and to say freedom is to say possibility of error, whence the fall and the necessity of Revelation, which restores the “lost Word”. And Revelation, which amounts to a “reminder” for humanity—or a given humanity—proves in its particular way the innateness of total Truth and therefore of all decisive truths.

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We could also express ourselves in the following manner: an animal gives proof of intelligence by the complexity of its adaptation to its environment and, in a higher sense, by its own type of contemplativity, which is passive of course but nonetheless connected to the universal Intellect; man, however, proves his intelligence—or the total character of human intelligence—by his consciousness of total Reality and of his situation within that Reality as well as by his contemplativity, that is, by his being fixed in “being” and not in “doing”, whatever the

nature of his outward activity. There are four different aspects here: comprehension, concentration, discernment, and contemplation; in the last of these, “knowing” becomes “being”. Conceptual understanding is the doorway to discernment, and concentration, united with discernment, is the doorway to contemplation.

Man is surrounded by a bewildering multitude of phenomena; perfect intelligence consists in perceiving their homogeneity and outwardness in reference to a transcendent unity and unified inwardness: the world then appears not as an incoherent mass of quasi-absolute phenomena but as a single veil into which the phenomena are woven; in this veil they are joined but not confused, distinct but not separated. In the center resides the discerning and unifying intelligence—an intelligence that is conscious of the Principle; it is thanks to this consciousness alone that the phenomenal world can appear both in its substantial homogeneity and in its contingency, outwardness, nothingness.

From a somewhat different point of view, which is connected with the experience of time—hence with the perspective of our life—the phenomenal world seems like a stream, in the midst of which intelligence abides as a motionless center: intelligence then becomes identical with the permanent present, with the sacred moment that belongs to God: it is consciousness of eternity.

These two spiritual dimensions also have a purely inward application insofar as the soul itself is the world and life, the “veil of *Māyā*” and the “stream of phenomena”; it expands and at the same time unfolds itself before the impersonal and inviolable gaze of the Intellect, which itself resides at the center and in the present and which becomes actual with the “remembrance of God” and on the basis of a metaphysical discernment between total Reality and its contingent reverberations, illusory as these are in the sight of the Absolute. For the Intellect or for the spiritual act conforming to it, there is no difference between the outward and the inward: the outward is also within since the soul is everywhere the soul, on the macrocosmic scale as well as within the microcosm, and the inward in turn has an aspect of outwardness since phenomena are everywhere phenomena, whether within or around us. Practically—and “alchemically”—it is therefore impossible to speak of the world and life without considering the soul and the flux of thought; the world is the soul, and the soul is the world. From this it follows—and here is the whole point of a distinction that may seem tautological—that in acting upon the inward we act upon the outward: we hold both the world and our life within our own soul. Nevertheless, when

we speak about the “world”, the question of knowing whether we are thinking of the outward or inward does not arise, for outward things come before inward things; our earthly environment existed before we were born, and a tree exists prior to our looking at it. The world is always *a priori* the realm of existence surrounding us; unless expressly specified, it is never our inward cosmos alone. The argument that the objective world is virtually identical to the sensations of the subject is invalid here, for these sensations—and the intelligence governing them—convey to us precisely the phenomenon of objectivity, in keeping with the real relationship; to deny this is to call into question the whole possibility of knowledge.

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Human life is studded with uncertainties; man loses himself in what is uncertain instead of holding onto what is absolutely certain in his destiny: death, Judgment, Eternity. But besides these there is a fourth certainty, which is immediately accessible to human experience, and this is the present moment, in which a man is free to choose either the Real or the illusory and thus to ascertain for himself the value of the three great eschatological certainties. The consciousness of a sage is founded upon these three points of reference, whether directly or indirectly and implicitly, through the “remembrance of God”.

Besides the dimension of sequence, however, one must also consider the dimension of simultaneity, which is based on spatial symbolism: the world around us is full of possibilities presented to our choice, whether we wish it or not; it is thus full of uncertainties, not successive as in the flux of life but simultaneous like the things offered to us by space. Whoever wishes to resolve these uncertainties must once again lay hold of what is absolutely certain, and this is what stands above us: God and our immortality in God. But even when we are confronted with the multitudinous and bewildering possibilities of the world here below, there is something absolutely certain—something of which sacred forms represent so many exteriorizations—and this is metaphysical truth and the “remembrance of God”: the center that is within us and that places us, insofar as we participate in it, beneath the “vertical” axis of Heaven, of God, of the Self.

Man finds himself in space and in time, in the world and in life, and these two situations contain two eschatological and spiritual axes, one static and “vertical” and the other dynamic and “horizontal”—or more or less temporal; this is how a contemplative man conceives of contingency in its relation to the Absolute, in its attachment to it, and insofar as it leads back to it. But these various points of reference are considered only insofar as a sage is necessarily conscious of contingent situations; they characterize his manner of taking account of his own relativity. Within this whole context—though entirely independent of it and not in any “localized” sense—resides the mystery in which knowing is being and being is knowing; what we mean is that these certainties of “succession” and “simultaneity”, of “life” and “world”, form the necessary framework of contemplation; they are like points of reference that serve to free us from the world and life or that facilitate this liberation. In the final analysis exoterism, which is the necessary basis of esoterism, is centered precisely on the elements that concern our final ends, namely, Heaven and God, or death, Judgment, and Eternity, as well as on our own earthly attitudes insofar as they bear upon these realities.

The important thing to grasp here is that the actualization of consciousness of the Absolute—“remembrance of God” or “prayer” insofar as it brings about a fundamental confrontation of creature and Creator—anticipates every station along the two axes: it is already a death and a meeting with God, and it places us already in Eternity; it is something of Paradise and even—in its mysterious and “uncreated” quintessence—something of God. Quintessential prayer brings about an escape from the world and life, and in this way it bestows a new and divine life upon the veil of appearances and the current of forms and a fresh meaning to our presence amid the play of phenomena.

Whatever is not here is nowhere, and whatever is not now will never be. What this moment is in which I am free to choose God, so will be death, Judgment, Eternity. And in this center, this divine point that I am free to choose when confronted by an immeasurable and multiple world, I am already in invisible Reality.

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We have seen that the world, life, and human existence show themselves in practice to be a complex hierarchy of certainties and uncertainties. If someone asks us what are the most important things a man should do, placed as he is in this world of enigmas and fluctuations, we would reply that there are four things to be done or four jewels that should never be lost from sight: first, to accept the Truth; second, to keep it in mind continually; third, to avoid whatever is contrary to Truth and the permanent consciousness of Truth; and fourth, to accomplish whatever is in conformity with Truth. All religion and all wisdom is reducible—extrinsically and humanly—to these four laws: in every tradition we see indeed an immutable truth; then a law of “attachment to the Real”, of “remembrance” or “love” of God; and finally prohibitions and injunctions. Here we have a fabric of elementary certainties that encompasses and resolves every human uncertainty and in this way reduces the whole problem of earthly existence to a geometry at once simple and primordial.