

Aspects of the Theophanic Phenomenon of Consciousness

by
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of Frithjof Schuon, of the article that appeared in Studies.*

The characteristics which man shares with the animals are not by definition beneath man and unworthy of him; they become so only when man renounces his humanity and fails to humanize what he shares with the animals. Now to humanize is to spiritualize, to sacralize; it is to open the natural to the supernatural whence it proceeds ontologically; it is to make the natural element the support for an awareness of the supernatural. For man, earthly experience coincides with the remembrance of a Paradise which, though lost, is still there, beneath the surface, and capable of being actualized.

What the animals and man have in common is, first of all, sensorial and instinctive intelligence; then the faculties of the senses and finally the elementary feelings. What is proper to man alone is the Intellect open to the Absolute; and also, by that very fact, reason, which prolongs the Intellect in the direction of relativity; and it is, in consequence, the capacity for integral knowledge, for sacralization and ascension. Man shares with the animals the prodigy of subjectivity—a prodigy that, strangely, the evolutionists do not understand—but the subjectivity of the animals is only partial, whereas that of man is total; the sense of the Absolute coincides with totality of intelligence.

The Intellect, the mental faculties and the sensorial faculties, including sexual sensibility, are so many aspects of this “naturally supernatural” prodigy that is subjectivity. The latter comprises two summits or two scales, one intellectual and one vital: intellective union and carnal union; it is usual to qualify the latter as being “animal,” which, of course, has no meaning except on condition of removing from the idea of animality its pejorative sense and making it neutral like the ideas of life and consciousness.¹ In reality, what we share with the animals is both animal and

¹ It is curious to note that it is precisely these two scales, intellective union and sexual union, that a certain religious moralism holds in suspicion or condemns, as the case may be, which indicates *a contrario* the paradoxical but real connection between the summits of intelligence and of life.

human; sexuality notably is animal in animals and human in men. To say that it is human means in practice that it demands spiritualization, hence interiorization and sacramentalization; human sexuality is specifically and pejoratively animal when man wishes it so, but not in the framework of what is truly human, which is spiritual.²

There is, moreover, a kind of compensatory complementarity between intellection and orgasm: just as sexual union, in order to be properly human, demands its sacramentalization and its spiritualization and hence its interiorization, so—conversely—intellectual knowledge, which is first of all mental and theoretical, demands a concretization in depth which adds an ecstatic dimension to it, whence the association of ideas between wisdom and wine.³ Let us recall in this connection that the Heart-Intellect is the seat, not only of Knowledge, but also of Love, that it is both Light and Heat; there is in fact no plenary knowledge without the concurrence of the element love or beauty, any more than there is fulfilled love without the concurrence of the element knowledge or truth.

Even so, it would be perfectly false to conclude, from what has just been said, that intellectuality needs sexuality as the latter needs intellectuality or spirituality; what the human spirit needs is not the sexual element, it is the element of infinitude of which sexuality is the manifestation on the vital and psychic plane. Whereas intellectuality or spirituality comprises a supernatural element by definition—a permanent or incidental intervention of the Holy Spirit—sexuality is something simply natural: but since it reflects a divine reality, it becomes a quasi-sacramental support for that experience of infinitude which is contemplative extinction;⁴ we could also say that it becomes so because it is human, and is for that reason intended for a spiritual purpose as well. All this evokes by analogy the alchemy proper to sacred art: this art, as we have said more than once, transmits not only abstract truths conveyed by symbolism, it equally transmits, precisely by its beauty, the perfumes, at once vivifying and appeasing, of divine Love.⁵

² In Christian climate, the sexual question is a thorny one because the Christian has difficulty in understanding that this subject can be broached without having a personal interest in it; this obliges us to specify, for all intents and purposes, that we are speaking of it because the nature of things demands it and not in order to defend a particular cause; our vocation being spirituality, all that is human is ours.

³ *In vino veritas*, says an ancient proverb recorded by Alceus; in the same sense, Theocritus brings out the esoteric connection between “intoxication” and “truth.”

⁴ As is pointed out notably by Ibn ‘Arabi; but even the cult of the Lady among the knights and troubadours, or the *fedeli d’amore* would have no meaning outside this analogy which is both doctrinal and alchemical or, one might say, “Tantric.”

⁵ The Prophet of Islam teaches not only that “God is Beautiful and loveth beauty” but also that “beauty of character is half of the religion”; this means that the sense of beauty is nothing unless it coincides with the sense of the sacred and with moral nobility. Let us take note that, according to another *hadīth*, “marriage

There is a spiritualization of sexuality just as there is conversely, an animalization of intelligence; in the first case, what can be the occasion of a fall becomes a means of elevation; in the second case, intelligence is dehumanized and gives rise to materialism, even existentialism, hence to a “thinking” which is human only by its mode and of which the content is properly sub-human. The flagrant contradiction of materialism is the negation of the spirit by means of the spirit; that of existentialism, is making use of this negation as a basis from which to dismantle the normal functions of intelligence under the pretext of defending the rights of “existence” or the “concrete” against “abstraction.” “The more he blasphemes, the more he praises God,” says Eckhart; materialist and concretist ideologies, by the very excess of their inanity, bear witness indirectly to the reality of the spirit and consequently also to its primacy.⁶

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All of these considerations are linked with what we have said before on the phenomenon of subjectivity, in that this phenomenon proves by its mere existence the inanity of the evolutionist and transformist thesis. Just as neither consciousness nor *a fortiori* intelligence can spring forth from “matter”—whatever explanation be given for this latter—neither can that modality of consciousness which is love be derived from it, always for the simple reason that the greater cannot come from the lesser; and it is a question here of an infinitely greater.

One must not tire of affirming it: the origin of a creature is not a material substance, it is a perfect and non-material archetype: perfect and consequently without any need of a transforming evolution; non-material and consequently having its origin in the Spirit, and not in matter. Assuredly, there is a trajectory; this starts not from an inert and unconscious substance,⁷ but proceeds from the Spirit—the matrix of all possibilities—to the earthly result, the creature; a result which sprang forth from the invisible at a cyclic moment when the physical world was still far less separate from the psychic world than in later and progressively “hardened” periods. When one speaks traditionally of *creatio ex nihilo*, one means thereby, on the one hand, that creatures do not derive from a pre-existing matter and, on the other hand, that the “incarnation” of possibilities cannot in any way affect the immutable Plenitude of the Principle.

is half of the religion” which, in the light of the preceding *hadīth*, points to the role of marriage as a means of forming character.

⁶ The existentialist will not ask, “What is this thing?” but “What does this thing signify for me?” Thus he will put the altogether subjective “significance” in place of the objective nature, which is not only the height of absurdity but also of pride and insolence. As true greatness “signifies” nothing for the little man, he will see in it only a kind of infirmity the better to be able to enjoy his own “significant” inflatedness.

⁷ Whether one imagines that it is loaded with evolutive “energy,” or transforms it into “genes” or into whatever else one pleases, changes nothing in the question.

In the beginning was the Spirit: hence the Word; for the Spirit, wanting and having to communicate itself because It is the Sovereign Good, brings about the manifestation of Its innumerable possibilities. The Spirit is both Light and Heat; the latter, life, is as miraculous as the former, intelligence, when we consider them on the plane of their earthly manifestation. Besides, to reduce all intelligence and all love to material causes is a way of not wanting to admit that our material existence is an exile; of wanting, on the contrary, to feel at ease in a world that presents itself as an end in itself, and which exempts man from the effort of transcending things and of transcending himself; whereas without this effort man bypasses the human vocation.

If the evolutionists are right, the human phenomenon is inexplicable and human life is not worth living. Moreover it is to these conclusions that they arrive in the end, whence their axiom of the absurdity of existence; this is to say that they attribute to the object, which is inaccessible to them, the absurdity of the subject, which they have deliberately chosen by following the propensity towards not innocent, but human, animality.

Credo ut intelligam; if, on the one hand, this saying expresses the viewpoint of a voluntarist spirituality, on the other hand it bears witness to the fact that believing is a way of understanding in virtue of a presentiment which is “supernaturally natural” to man, to the extent that he consents to remain faithful to his nature and to his vocation.

(Original editorial inclusion that followed the essay:)

God sends us nothing that is too hard or too painful to bear. He proportions all to our strength and abilities. Our trials are suited to our needs as the glove to the hand of the wearer. All things will contribute to our sanctification if we but co-operate with the designs of Divine Providence.

St. Alphonsus Liguori.