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A Larger Rationalism

Francis Story



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By

Francis Story

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riting in *The Humanist*, Mr. Hector Hawton once remarked that he had 'always been puzzled by the fact that Indians should become Christians;' and he adds: 'It is equally surprising to me that Europeans should become Mohammedans or Buddhists.'

Europeans who become Buddhists might well share his surprise at the fact that other Europeans become Muslims, since the basis of all theistic religions is the same, and lays them open to identical objections. What can be argued against one religion claiming divine revelation can be applied with the same force to all. If the choice between religion and non-religion could be settled simply by an appeal to the superiority of empirical knowledge over belief in the supernatural, the decision would not be difficult for anyone. And yet among the religions, the special case of Buddhism would still be left outside that decision. For while Buddhism is certainly not supernatural revelation, it does go far beyond the empirical knowledge with which it begins, while never coming into conflict with

what we are able to observe and verify for ourselves. Instead of contradicting knowledge and reason, Buddhism accepts, utilises and supplements them.

It sometimes happens that people change their religion not because one form of theistic revelation satisfies their reason more than another, but because the emotional appeal of a certain faith, or its associations, or perhaps simply revolt against the dogmas of their childhood, impels them to do so. But that is not always the case. There are some for whom the question of why they have not chosen one of the non-religious attitudes which others find satisfactory cannot be answered in terms of filling an emotional need, or following the attraction of the exotic. The rationalist may believe that it can; but his own case may not be so simple as it appears to him. Behind his rejection of all religion there may lie disguised a deeply-rooted feeling that if the faith of his ancestors and compatriots is outdated, all other creeds must be even more so. There is a kind of loyalty in this, but it is not exactly rational.

Those who have decided that Buddhism has more to offer them than atheistic faith on the one hand and the uncertain ethics of humanism on the other, usually come to that conclusion because they have been seeking a more comprehensive view of human experience in all its enigmatic, paradoxical variety,

and a more acceptable explanation of it, than either can give. For obvious reasons, religion which offers a supernatural account of man's being in the world is unsatisfactory; at the same time, it is hard to find any superiority in a system which offers none at all. Whatever view we may choose to take of the universe and man's place in it, there are teleological considerations in the very structure of our thinking which refuse to be ignored; there are problems of purpose and of value which insist upon intruding into our picture. The rationalist who succeeds in treating them as though they did not exist is tricking himself in the same way as the religionist who firmly closes the doors of his mind against the improbabilities of his creed.

Rationalism is believed to be based upon a scientific view of the world. But the popular phrase, 'a scientific view,' calls for more clarification than it usually gets. A view that is rigidly confined to what happens to be scientifically demonstrable at any given time is not the same as a scientific view. If it were, no outstanding scientist could be said to have a 'scientific view,' for every advance in science has been the result of someone taking an imaginative leap beyond the bounds of what is already known. The mind which does not reach out, like a plant thrusting towards the light, is dead. Should we accuse Einstein of not having

a scientific view because he divined the general principle of relativity first by a kind of insight, and only verified it scientifically afterwards?

At present, scientific thought is satisfied with tracing and defining the operations of the physical world, and its speculations have to proceed cautiously, step by step. It does not concern itself with why these operations take place. Its interest is limited and selective, and is unfortunately bound to become more and more so as specialised knowledge accumulates. We have come to a stage at which the separate departments of knowledge are as clearly marked out as political territories on a map. And just as the map is concerned with nothing more than these arbitrary divisions as they exist, while the reasons for them come within a different province altogether, that of the historian, so the scientist, as far as the field of his particular research extends, can quite happily dispense with all notions of purpose and design, and he is quite justified in doing so.

To take one example, we know biological evolution to be a fact. We are more or less familiar with its general development, and science does not encourage us to ask ourselves precisely why this complicated process began at all; or, having begun, what guiding impulse it was that by laborious trial and error over aeons of time converted elementary single-cell

organisms at last into the highly-complex, though still imperfect, structure of human beings. Once it is seen that no Creator-God is necessary — that such a God is not only redundant, but actually impossible — it is thought that all problems connected with a purpose and a directing principle can be set aside. The layman is inclined to believe that because science disregards such questions they are of no importance, or that they have been answered. In this way a mythology of science has grown up which is not the fault of the scientist, but rather of the ordinary man who confuses science with omniscience. It is of course true that some knowledgeable specialists take the view that because science has not so far disclosed any purpose in the universe, there cannot be one, but they are becoming fewer as the vistas of knowledge extend. By appropriating to itself more and more of the supernatural (or what would have been considered so, not very long ago), science is becoming increasingly metaphysical. But it is only by taking a survey of it that is at once minute and comprehensive, that this fact can be appreciated.

In regard to the origin and development of life on this planet, it may quite reasonably be assumed that some fortuitous combination of chemical elements gave rise to the first emergence of living from non-living matter; there is nothing improbable in this. We

now know for a fact that living cells could in the beginning have developed from non-living substance, and that it could quite well have happened accidentally or in the normal course of events. It must in fact be inevitable under the right conditions, and for this reason we are justified in assuming that there are other inhabited worlds besides our own. But, granted that life had this beginning, why did not the process stop at unicellular protoplasm? Or, if it did not stop altogether, why did it not go on repeating the same elementary forms instead of, as it actually did, progressing from one stage to another with an ever-increasing organic and sensory equipment?

The answer usually given is that it was in order to master the environmental conditions. But this in itself is an answer on the teleological level. It prompts the further query, What was it that gave apparently intelligent direction to these developments? Was there a something which was able to discern particular needs, however dimly, and to work through natural selection and other biological principles to produce the required organs? For after all, living structures show a degree of organisation, with many details still not understood, which seems unaccountable on the theory that it was reached by the purely negative process of eliminating the inefficient. A positive, active process must be in operation before a negative one can

take place. Although we see that there could not have been any omniscient power guiding the series of events (since, had there been such a power the fumbling process of trial and error, with all its ruthless wastage, could have been by-passed) are we altogether justified in dismissing the problem as irrelevant?

Even the earliest forms of life were undoubtedly fitted to survive in their surrounding medium, and many have survived to the present day. If, therefore, the sole objective was to produce living forms that could survive and propagate, they were perfect from the beginning. Even locomotion is not essential to life, for plants exist successfully, and in complete adaptation to their environment, without it. All that is needed for the act of living organically is a mouth, a stomach and an excretory system. There was no real need for the single-cell protozoa to develop more organs; no need for successive appearance of eyes, fins, legs, wings or any other embellishments to the primary forms. We choose to regard these as aids in the struggle for survival, but there is another point of view in which they may be seen as causes of that struggle. From either of these two viewpoints, however, the question of what it was that foresaw each need, and experimented until the need was met, remains unanswered.

It worried no less a person than Darwin, to such an extent that he was compelled to put forward, without evidence, a theory by which every cell in the body was supposed to send its representative to the germ cells, there to debate, in parliamentary fashion, the best course for the next generation. Unlike his more timid followers, Darwin repeatedly emphasised the need for speculation. 'How odd it is,' he wrote in his autobiography, 'that anyone should not see that all observation must be for or against some view if it is to be of any service.' So to meet a need he did not hesitate to regard cells as thinking, willing and desiring entities.

To discuss questions of motive without being able to define what it is that experiences the motivating urge, is unsatisfactory; but in this instance we have no alternative. It is at all events necessary to assume some connecting principle between one generation of living beings and another which converts each generation into a link between what is desired and its realisation. Biological evolution may choose to ignore this, but it cannot dispose of the need, nor close up the gap in our understanding which it leaves, so long as it is treated as an illegitimate field of speculation. Where we see something like intention at work it is natural to ask from what the intention derives. And when, because it blunders towards its goal and operates extravagantly

and amorally, we can no longer believe it to be the activity of an omnipotent and merciful Creator, we are not thereby compelled to reject the possibility of other sources of activation.

If the development of more complex and refined organisms was not absolutely necessary to survival, we have to seek elsewhere for a possible cause. We find then that while the acquisition of higher sensory organs did not contribute materially to the ability to survive, it contributed to the ability to enjoy. A tree lives longer than a man, but a man's life is preferable.

So it becomes apparent that survival is not the sole or chief objective: there is another motivation, that of hedonic satisfaction. And this is not merely ancillary to the survival motive, but is in reality the objective that lies beyond it, and to the realisation of which survival is only the first necessity. Biological evolution is subservient to the pleasure principle; its purpose is nothing but the development of organisms that are capable of heightened sensory experience, the pleasures of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching—and thinking.

It is precisely this desire for sensory pleasure that Buddhism declares to be the life-impulse, the causative principle behind every living form, whatever may be its particular stage of development,

and whether it be on this planet or any other. Defined simply as taṇhā (literally, thirst or craving), this takes the place in Buddhism of a 'Creator.' Since it is self-renewing, the process of creation is perpetual and cyclic, and there is no need for a First Cause. Although our universe had a beginning, and will one day come to an end, in the Buddhist view it is only one of a series of universes, and the series had no ultimate beginning. According to Buddhist cosmology, when a world-system comes to an end a long period ensues during which matter remains in an unorganised state; then by degrees it forms into fresh world-systems, or island universes, and gradually life appears once more. When it does so it is the result of the rebirth of beings from the previous world-cycle, whose Karmic force acts together with chemical processes in nature to produce the first organic structures. The process is described in a mixture of literal and allegorical language in the Aggañña Sutta of the Dīgha Nikāya and elsewhere. In interpreting the Buddhist account of evolution it is useful to remember that we have no geological record of the very first living organisms that appeared on earth. Being protoplasmic they passed away without leaving any fossilised traces. For all we know, there may have been other, even less substantial beings in existence before them, and the Aggañña account may be more literal than it appears.

Craving is a mental impulse, and Buddhism treats mental energy as a force in some ways analogous to electricity, or perhaps to electromagnetic waves. That thought-impulses do take some such form is supported by the evidence of their action on the Hans Berger encephalogram. We will leave aside any reference to telepathy because, although it has been proved to the satisfaction of most reasonable people, there are still those who refuse to acknowledge its reality. Even leaving aside all arguments that can be drawn from parapsychology, science has shown that the great governing principles of the universe operate by means which are themselves invisible and often indefinable. Electric current under the right conditions is transformed into heat, light, sound and power; yet still its actual nature eludes definition. Gravitational force keeps the galaxies in place and the moon gives us our tides, but we can find no physical connection between the moon as a body in space and the water on our planet. We are not even certain whether gravity is a property of matter or a special function of curved space. It is often necessary to remind ourselves that while science points to causal relationships between events it cannot always explain just what these relationships mean in physical terms. Some philosophers of science are even ready to throw the whole concept of causality to the winds. A great part

of the scientist's time is devoted to examining and measuring the tangible effects of forces which themselves cannot be examined, and so remain essentially a mystery. If this is true of physics it is even more true of genetics and biology.

So when Buddhism asserts that it is 'Craving' which gives directional impulse and purpose to the processes of physical evolution, through mental energy transmitted by one being to another in successive lives, the materialist may raise his eyebrows but he is unable to point to any established scientific truth that is outraged by the theory. The Buddhist, on the other hand, can offer in support of his view the opinion of several eminent men of science to the effect that something like thought and intention is visible in our universe.

In this world, mind depends upon matter for its manifestation, just as the electrical current depends upon some more ponderable agency to convert it into heat, light or power. This fact has given rise to the very unwarranted assumption that mind is a product of matter. It is unwarrantable because the position could quite well be reversed, without changing the picture of the universe as we know it. But avoiding these two extremes, Buddhism maintains that matter and mentality are interdependent; the living organisms produced in the evolutionary pattern have

been the result of a transmitted will-to-live, a current of 'becoming' which is based upon craving, and which can be perceived only through its material manifestations, the various grades of living beings. Mind, or mental energy, operates on and through matter to attain its ends.

There is one truth which science impresses upon us very strongly: that this universe is not a universe of 'things' but of events. It is a complex of dynamic processes in which an everlasting 'becoming,' that never reaches the state of perfect 'being,' is the sole actuality. This is the truth as it was seen and taught by the Buddha from the beginning of his ministry. The much misunderstood doctrine of rebirth in Buddhism does not mean the transmigration of a soul, for the existence of any such persisting entity is completely denied. There is no question of a personal survival or immortality, either partial or complete. Personality is seen as a collection of aggregates, physical and mental, which come together and disintegrate again in obedience to natural law and to the mind-originated causes from the past. Everything that is subject to conditionality is subject to dissolution, and can never attain completeness.

Each state of existence is therefore only a momentary link between past and future states, and what we call life is nothing but a causal continuum. To

put the case in simple and concrete terms, an old man is not the same person as the infant he once was; that infant has vanished for ever. The old man is the present result of the infant's having existed in the past. Between these two extreme points in the current of cause and effect that makes up the individual's world-line there have been innumerable other continuity-links from childhood to maturity, and it is not possible to single out any particular stage and say of it, 'This is the man as he really is—this is his essence and real self.' In the same way, at his death there can be no totality of 'selfhood' to survive and be reborn. Instead of the animistic concept of an unchanging soul-essence there is the transmission of his thought potential, by which his will-to-live produces another being (or a further stage in the causal series) to carry on the tendencies engendered in the past. It was this concept of the will manifesting itself afresh in a new individual which Schopenhauer called 'Palingenesis.' If the term can be dissociated from Haeckel's use of it in a biological sense it will serve as well as any other to express the Buddhist idea of rebirth.

It is quite commonly supposed that modern science knows all there is to be known about genetics. This is an exaggeration. Enough is known, certainly, to account for the reproduction of species considered only as a mechanical process, but whether it is

sufficient to cover all the phenomena is another matter. The biologist is satisfied to name the chemical DNA as being the carrier of the genes which provide the fundamental units of heredity. It appears that all the necessary information concerning physical structure is somehow packed into this substance and thus transmitted from one generation to another. But the theory does not carry us any further than that. It may be adequate to explain how the blueprint of the unborn being is fed into the genetic machinery, but it leaves little room for variations on the given design. Yet variations of a minor kind are constantly occurring, and without them evolution itself would have been impossible. It does not attempt to explain how individual modes of thinking, specific characteristics and, above all, the complicated patterns of instinctive behaviour found in certain animals, can all be conjured into a chemical which, without doubt, we shall soon be able to produce artificially. It is all rather like the unsophisticated savage's notion that the London Symphony Orchestra is seated inside the radio receiving set. Whether there are such simple aborigines today is questionable—but we still have the scientific theorists. Had Flaubert been living now he would probably have found no reason to alter his dictum that heredity is a true principle misunderstood. The real function of DNA may be just

what it is claimed to be, but that does not make it anything more than the physical conductor of an unknown force. According to Buddhism, that unknown factor is Kamma, and DNA is just another material auxiliary to the process of rebirth.

Sometimes it is said that the Buddha made no direct pronouncement concerning God, and that his position was agnostic. This is completely false. The Buddha categorically denied the existence of a Creator or Overlord, and his system of philosophy leaves no room for a 'Supreme Being.' The Buddha's refusal to discuss eschatological questions was not due to the agnostic's lack of knowledge ; it came from the fact that the mind in its purely intellectual functioning is not capable of dealing with anything outside the realm of relative concepts, and there is no language to express those areas of experience which lie beyond the temporal and spatial relations. We can think and speak only in terms of comparison and contrast, and our communication of ideas is limited to those things we all know and can name. Of ultimate truth nothing at all can be predicated. On the other hand, our need to think in terms of a beginning and a 'First Cause' is conditioned by our habitual use of ideas which involve relationships. Ordinarily, relationships and sequences dominate our thinking as space dominates our physical movements. Yet there is no need to resort

to metaphysics in order to understand that the idea of a beginning to time is self-contradictory. Although, like the curved space of Einstein's mathematics, it is a truth with which formal logic and semantics cannot cope, we can discover its necessity by reminding ourselves that space and time are concepts derived from the relationship between things and events. There could not have been any time before objects and their movements existed. Consequently, the idea that the universe could have arisen from nothingness at a particular point of time is a contradiction.

But while the life-process had no point of beginning in time, it can be brought to an end by the individual, for himself. He can put a stop to his own particular current of existence, the 'wearisome round of rebirths,' and Buddhism offers a technique of mental cultivation by which this is possible. It consists in the total elimination of all the craving impulses. This fundamental psychic transformation is accompanied by the development of higher faculties of perception and insight, in which the reality beyond conditioned existence is directly experienced. It was this knowledge that the Buddha possessed, and the evidence for it is in the doctrine he taught—a doctrine so different from any other creed that it is even doubtful whether it should be included under the heading of 'religion.' In this method of approach

starting from observed facts, analysing and probing into causes and relationships, the Buddha more nearly resembled a scientist of today than any of the mystical dogmatists who have provided the world with religions. But his area of exploration was the mind, not the physical universe. It may be that the future of our own science will also lie in this direction. To understand the external world is merely knowledge ; to understand oneself is wisdom.

The humanist and rationalist viewpoints appear to leave no opening whatever for a continuity of experience beyond that of the one life known to us. The good man and the bad, and the man whose life has been nothing but a chronicle of failure and frustration, alike come to the same end, a dark oblivion. If that is indeed the case, the most outstanding characteristic of life is its enormous inanity, its fatuous meaninglessness. Those who have contributed to human progress have no share in its results; they die without even any assurance that the progress they worked for is a reality. We who live in the present century can no longer believe in progress in quite the same way that our grandfathers did. The idea that evolution marches in a straight line to perfection has had to be discarded. Science itself, which holds out to us gifts with one hand and swift destruction with the other, is rapidly qualifying for a

place among the discarded gods. On what evidence can we believe that science will ever succeed in abolishing disease, congenital mental deficiency or deformity? If it cannot do this, it cannot ever assure happiness to all. Even its very real material contributions, which no one can deny, have not brought the happiness which we take to be the chief goal of existence; instead, they have given us more desires. And for many people those desires can never be satisfied.

Apart from these facts, we are confronted by the disturbing realisation that this view of life gives us no rational justification for ethical principles. It is useless to talk of a purer ethic emerging from the multiplication of desires; that is the last fatuity of wishful thinking. If the sole object to living is experience of pleasure—which we must accept if we confine our vision to the goal of biological evolution—the most successful organism, be it a man or an animal, is the one that has experienced most pleasure. The means by which it has done this do not matter ; the cardinal rule of life on the biological level is that survival and enjoyment are to be achieved at the expense of other weaker organisms. Therefore, any moral principles that man may import into the system are entirely artificial and unnatural. Let those who use the word 'unnatural' as a rhetorical term of

condemnation stop for a moment to consider what is 'natural' and what is not! The plain truth is that Nature is amoral, and in this view man's introduction of morality is a perversion. When the humanist says, truthfully, that he experiences happiness in working for others, he is unconsciously denying the basis of what he understands by a rational philosophy. What his experience really suggests is that the ethical motivations which religion has brought into an amoral world survive in certain types of men even when religion itself has been discarded. How else can we explain this curious phenomenon of happiness arising from a subjugation of self-interest which is contrary to all the principles of survival in nature?

There is in fact another explanation, and it is the one that Buddhism offers. There is a larger rationalism, in which it is reasonable and good to introduce pity into a pitiless world, justice into a world of injustice, unselfishness into a system of survival by selfishness. In the higher types of men this knowledge exists subconsciously; they instinctively follow its promptings, whether it agrees with their philosophy or not. But to make the higher instinct rational we have to cast our vision beyond the limitations we have ourselves imposed. It is necessary to leave the dogmas of both religion and science behind. We may then arrive at the Buddhist truth that while all

manifestations of life, from the amoeba to man, are dominated by craving and are therefore doomed to perpetual dissatisfaction, there is a fulfilment of another kind to be sought and striven for, and that the moral principle is an inherent part of the universal law of cause and effect. In place of the endless struggle for existence, with its emphasis on egocentric values, Buddhism puts a perfection to be reached on a higher level, the annihilation of desire and the final extinction of the life-asserting urges. When this becomes the end in view, morality ceases to be a morbid excrescence on the natural lust for life, and becomes a logical necessity. The transitory and incomplete happiness that the humanist finds in labouring for mankind is then enlarged to an all-embracing compassion, in which the individual ego is seen to be an illusion.

Then is the Buddhist goal a merely negative one? To the life-worshipper it may appear so. But when we re-orient ourselves to a view that is neither pessimistic nor optimistic concerning man's portion of happiness, but is realistic in its acceptance of the facts, we find that the oppositions of negative and positive have no significance. Or they take on a different meaning in the new context. If all the life-processes are, as Buddhism teaches and experience confirms, impermanent, subject to suffering and void of ego-substance, it follows that their cessation, the Nibbāna

of Buddhism, must be the sole reality.

The real cannot be described in terms of the unreal, and the only possible answer to those who wish to know what it is must lie in the Buddha's own words: 'Come, and see for your-self.' Buddhism does not ask us to take any belief on trust, and the Buddha was the only religious teacher in the world's history who condemned blind faith. The worship of science is after all nothing but another kind of religion. The appeal of Buddhist thought to the Western mind is that it has no 'Either/Or.' It opens the door to a wider rationalism.

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