

THE OPIUM OF THE PEOPLE?

CHAPTER 17.

But let us suppose that I am wrong to think that cumulative selection, which is not only necessary but is the very condition for Evolution to take place, could come into existence only with an undercurrent of a desire for life. Let us suppose it came into being in a purely mechanical way; after all, when I was a student, the lecturer told us with great excitement that they had just crystallized the tobacco-mosaic virus. So this substance, whatever it was, had some of the properties of life inasmuch as it could reproduce itself and spread as a parasite on the tobacco plant; yet it had some of the properties of an old-fashioned chemical in that it had a regular structure, otherwise it could never have formed a crystal lattice, without which crystals cannot grow. Let us suppose, due to the wonderful process of cumulative selection, life began in a purely mechanical, or chemical way.

And for simplicity let us imagine we are still in the stage of primitive life, and that there are two moulds growing over the face of the earth; one by chance dedicated to the process of cumulative selection, a kind of virile “Herrvolk” mould; and the other a decadent happy-go-lucky mould which just wanted an easy life. They lived side by side, until suddenly the whole earth was filled; and either physical space or the earth’s limited resources brought things to a crisis. Something had to happen. You might have thought that in a completely meaningless world, life would simply have smothered itself, rather like someone putting a pillow on a baby’s face. But no; what happened was that the virile virus decimated the effeminate virus, and the struggle for life began in earnest. From that moment, there was an undercurrent in Evolution of the desire for life and for survival, and later on for a sense of purpose as well.

You could be forgiven for thinking that this was the ingenious way the Divine Creator chose to instil a sense of purpose and a love of life into His Creation. But you would be wrong; it was all mechanical, and this sense of purpose that the virile mould enjoyed, and flattered itself was part of its heroic achievement, was pure illusion. And so when eventually man appeared, his sense of purpose too was pure illusion, foisted on him by a combination of limited space, and the greater efficiency of cumulative selection.

Then suddenly, well relatively suddenly, Man conceived the idea of God. It began with the idea of river and forest gods, but we can skip all that; and go to the moment when Man conceived the idea of a personal God, whom he could worship, and who was concerned in some way about him. Pure illusion of course; but man’s vanity is such that he is sure in his mental dreams (because that is all they are) that there must be a God who deigns to notice

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him, and that gives man an added sense of self-importance. What sort of a God is it that Man dreams about? Is it the god of Cumulative Selection, or survival of the fittest, a god who praises virility and scorns effeminate sentimentality? No! The God of Amos was a God of Righteousness. The God of Hosea was a God of loving kindness, and of reconciliation with a wife who had gone badly astray. The God of Zephaniah was a God who gave widows and orphans equity, but the fat sheep of the House of Israel who elbowed others out of the way would receive Justice (which in those days meant execution). Not what you would expect at all in a mechanical Universe, to have its heroes threatened with the gallows.

“Who told thee that thou wast naked?” The writer of that lovely story had the imagination to grasp that you do not pluck the emotion of shame out of the air. You need to have sinned, or to have thought that you had sinned, before you first can appreciate shame. So in a purely mechanical world of cumulative selection, in which the apparent altruism of animals in nourishing and defending their young is actually nothing of the kind, it is an efficient and effective manifestation of survival of the fittest, where does this idea of a just and merciful God come from? Does it occur first to the under-dogs, the losers in the race for life, who would like to think they are not so pathetic after all, as compared with the Herrvolk of the survival of the fittest? Well it reached its apotheosis in Jesus, who was anything but pathetic; he chose to die the most horrible death, to teach others that his life was the way to live. How does this idea make its appearance in a wholly mechanical world, dedicated to natural selection and survival of the fittest? It was the utter defiance of a world of creeping and disloyal servitude to an occupying power; perhaps faintly mirrored in the female animal’s willingness to fight and die to protect her young. Yet all this is mechanical; and any feelings of heroism are delusion in those who sacrifice themselves, and fantasy in those who look on. Well, maybe these thoughts did first occur in the minds of the under-dogs; but it still does not answer the question how these thoughts ever arose in a purely mechanical and meaningless world? Was Gethsemane a mere ritual, with the actions and the agony merely dictated by the genes of those present? **If the mechanism of the body is mechanical, the mechanism of the mind must be too;** for if the experience that mind influences matter, which we all have, is genuine, and not illusion, then the moment animals and men learn to think, their bodies break free of their servitude to mechanics. But if the mechanism of the body is truly mechanical, that of the mind must be too. And if the mind is not free to think, then it is all Marshall Saxe’s dream anyway; and there is no reality in thought, in matter, in experience, or in anything else. You do not normally pluck figs from thistles, nor sublime

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structures of thought from will-o-the-wisps; but perhaps we all have to learn afresh what the world is like, although if it is all mechanical, there is no point in our doing so.

Or is it a more likely speculation that these Old Testament ideas about God arose from a heart-felt belief, amounting almost to fury, that a “natural” explanation of the world was the biggest lie in Creation, and those who peddled it the biggest dupes? Certainly there is this much to be said for that view: that it is one of the crowning mercies of Creation, that the most intelligent people are often those prone to the most astonishing lapses of judgement.

Marshall Foch was an able soldier, and is regarded as an outstanding general in the First World War; but his theory that the offensive had the moral superiority, because the attacking soldiers would be likely to fire more bullets, has been described as mathematical abracadabra, and an example of how a rational man may become obsessed by an irrational theory. And it sent hundreds of thousands of French and British soldiers to their deaths. An amateur can understand what happens in War, particularly if as Clausewitz says his chosen profession has a good deal in common with war; but an amateur could not conceivably put his limited understanding into practice, because he lacks the detailed practical knowledge of what is possible and what is not, which alone would command authority with the men. Whereas a man of great authority and ability, like Foch, can talk rubbish and be obeyed, to everyone’s cost. Similarly I cannot seriously criticise the biologist’s account of the mechanism of Evolution. I can only point out that it is hopelessly inadequate, not just to explain human genius, but even to recognise how human genius changes the conditions under which we all labour, and so in solving one problem creates the next. Nor does a cheery determinism account for, still less explain, the emotions the Greeks attributed to the Furies.

How can genes or cumulative genetic change describe, let alone explain, how a few cruel words can destroy the cohesion of a family, not for hours but for years; and result in there descending on some members of the family a sadness and a desolation that few things can assuage? It is ludicrous to think it can; just as ludicrous as it is for Jung to say that the psyche or soul is unbelievably complex, but for clergymen never to suggest that it has any structure at all. To all intents and purposes Jung and the clergy live in different worlds; as different as the world of atomic particles is from the world of human phenomena, and the world of human phenomena is from the world of astronomical galaxies. Or as chemistry and genes differ from the world of relationships, and even that world from interpenetrating minds.

In science, theory is not primarily a matter of deduction, nor even of induction, but of inspiration which can be confirmed by experience. The rest is speculation; like theories of infinity. In advocacy, which is conflict, the technique of lying constantly improves, so you

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sink to a dreary level of uniformity where the plausible liar is usually believed in Court. Then you need a moment's inspiration, and for someone to think out a better way of exposing lies; and for a time it works, and then you sink back to uniformity as lying improves yet again. The seemingly mechanical ritual of life only provides the background; and its function is to stimulate the native genius of men and women to rise above it, and give an example to their fellow men and women that they too can rise above the prevailing dreary mediocrity.

So to begin with, Evolution may have been 99% mechanical; but we have left that period behind, just as we have left bows and arrows behind in War. There was nothing wrong with bows and arrows; they were deadly against the Scots at Falkirk and Halidon Hill; and curtailed Scottish military prowess, until the introduction of firearms, the genius of Gustavus Adolphus and the men whom he inspired, and the reckless courage of the Highland clan, revived it. The Scottish victory at Bannockburn, whose date lies between those of the other two battles, was an exception, although it secured the independence of Scotland. It was largely due to the folly of the English in falling into the ambush Robert the Bruce laid for them; by crossing the river with their armour into the bog in which Bruce had dug concealed pits, and by Bruce's appreciation that he must get rid of the English archers. This he did with his light horse, when the archers were foolishly left unprotected. The real conflict was between the Scottish pikemen and the English armour floundering about in the bog, with no room to deploy or manoeuvre. It must have been a grim one-sided encounter, and slaughter, as the armour was driven into an ever smaller space. Does anyone seriously suggest it was all decided by the genes of the men involved? But we have moved on from bows and arrows. We have moved on in the evolutionary world too. It is a seemingly endless cycle now, of imagination having to find a way through the ever increasing complexity of life; and of course creating more problems as it goes. It is a spiritual world of seemingly endless richness.

Anything less like an opium of the people is hard to imagine. When viewing the history of man's evolution through the eyes of individual man manifestly fails to make sense of what has happened, it is only common sense to look for another interpretation. In particular, when evolution by cumulative genetic selection fails to make sense of human emotions, and the interpenetration of the sympathy we all believe we have for one another, it is only sensible to think that other factors have come into play. Indeed remembering the idea of Occam's Razor, that you do not multiply imponderables, we can ask what hypothesis reduces the problem to its simplest conception? And my answer is that viewing the history of evolution as a phenomenon of interpenetrating minds does reduce it to simplicity, because

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everything falls into place. **I mean the mind of God seeking and gradually finding an interpenetration with the slowly dawning consciousness of man.** “Guilt” is then seen as a rupture of that communication, which arises when man does something of which God disapproves. And forgiveness is the re-establishment of that communication and communion. As I say, everything falls into place. William of Occam would have approved!