

The Search for Identity

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My talk is about man's search for the meaning of his **existence**. "What is man?", "Who am I?", "Where are we going?" -these are questions which have been asked for centuries by philosophers, scientists and poets, amongst others. They have come up with various answers, none of them conclusive or universally acceptable. I do not pretend to know the right answers, but I would like to discuss why the answers have eluded us, and whether the questions themselves have become academic in view of the uncertain prospects for mankind.

What I have to say is not the result of scholarly research, nor even of systematic reading. I am only too well aware that I am short on references, skimpy with data, and deficient in analysis. My only excuse for choosing a subject I know so little about is that I share the curiosity and concern of my fellow beings as to what and who we are, and what the future holds for us.

There is an old saying that man is but an idea in the mind of God. Someone has turned that around, somewhat irreverently, to say that God is but an idea in the mind of man. And a present-day philosopher has gone on from there to postulate that man is but an idea in the mind of man. This is an intriguing proposition, reminiscent of the arguments that went on when the mathematical theories about sets were first developed. The point is : can the whole exist in a part of the same whole? If not, how can man be an idea in the mind of man? But before we reject the proposition on that score, we ought to establish whether or not the mind of man is a part of man. It may well be that it is not, or at least we are not sure. And what do we understand by "idea"? Can man, so obviously made of flesh and blood, be merely an "idea", be it in the mind of God or of man himself? I shall return to this interesting proposition later, but before I leave it I ought to mention that, as far as the mathematical parallel is concerned, the apparent contradiction led to more intensive work on set theory, which in turn paved the way for the invention of the computer.

At the risk of over-simplification, I would like to discuss very briefly three models of man which have been developed by philosophers, and which have acquired some measure of

general acceptance over a long period of time. The first model is that of man as a beast. This concept of man has come about as a result of the long-standing debate among philosophers, in both the East and the West, as to whether the nature of man is good or evil. On balance, those who believe that the nature of man is evil appear to have won the day, and I for one am not surprised. There are good men and true the world over, men who dedicate their lives to noble deeds, but they are a very small minority. The rest of us are up to no good in various ways and in varying degrees. The history of human **civilization** is punctuated with glaring examples of man's inhumanity to man. If man were a **good-natured** fellow, he would not have created so many different kinds of hell on earth. And in recent years we have seen a spectacular upsurge of man's evil genius. I refer to the acts of international terrorism which occur with increasing frequency, where innocent people are killed or maimed or held hostage for political ends, or simply for personal gain. I need hardly go into the gory details of such operations, since the most recent one, which took place barely two months ago in Amsterdam, is still fresh in our memory, But regardless of whether man is or is not a beast, the description concerns only his nature; it does not really answer the question, "What is man?"

The next model of man portrays him as a free agent. This is an attractive proposition which asserts that man is free to do as he pleases, that human existence is open-ended rather than **pre-determined**. Our lives may not be programmed down to the last detail, but can we really do as we please? There are of course degrees of freedom, and it is doubtful if absolute freedom exists or has ever existed. Man's actions are influenced, sometimes directed, by his fellow men. Most of the things we do are dictated by social pressures over which we have little or no control as individuals. But in any case, to say that man is a free agent is merely to say that he has a freedom of choice in his actions; it does not describe the totality of man.

The third and last model of man is that of a machine. This is a model favoured by scientists, as it is supported by documented case histories of emotionally disturbed persons who believe they are machines. One such case history is that of a **nine-year-old** boy, a schizophrenic, who not only believed he was a machine, but took great care to act as one. Thus he would "come to life" only when he plugged himself in to an electrical socket by means of **imaginary** wires. His performance as a machine was so convincing that the doctors and nurses attending to him were completely taken in. They responded to him as a machine rather than as a human being;

they took care not to step on the imaginary wires which linked him to the power supply, and they ignored him completely when he was "turned off". This would seem to suggest that even those of us who are not emotionally disturbed can on occasion react like a machine. But does that make machines of us all? The **mechines** we know, however simple or complex, are designed and built to perform a function. If man is a machine, what is the function he is supposed to perform and for whose benefit? Furthermore, a machine has to be turned on and off, usually by pressing a button. In the case of man the machine, who presses the button?

This brings us to the question of how life begins. Scientists have long studied living things; they have solved the mystery of how living cells are structured; they have even produced new forms of life in the laboratory. In fact, they have been so successful in this line of research that a controversy is raging in scientific circles as to whether their experiments should continue. Those who advocate continuation do so because the new forms of life produced in the test tube may be of immense benefit to mankind; for example, they could lead to a breakthrough in cancer research or to a vast increase in agricultural production through effective pest control. On the other hand, those who favour legislative control of genetic experimentation fear that the whole thing may get completely out of hand, and a new species of life may emerge from the laboratory to pose a threat to human survival. I mention this great debate only to show that the biological sciences, which started way behind the physical sciences, have made vast advances in recent times. But they have yet to explain how life begins, to pinpoint at what precise moment and by what process life is activated. In this connection, I am reminded of **Michaelangelo's** master-piece, "The Creation of Adam", painted on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel at the beginning of the 16th Century. This painting shows God passing the divine spark of life to Adam. When I first saw it many years ago, I was struck by the fact that there was a gap between the life-giving finger of God and the life-receiving finger of Adam, rather like the gap in the spark plug of a motor car. Most artists would have painted the finger of God touching the finger of Adam, but not **Michaelangelo**. He had intuitively anticipated the invention of the spark plug, and realised that there had to be a gap between the two fingers to produce the spark of life. Anyway, in the absence of a scientific explanation, Michaelangelo's version of how life began is as good as any.

At the other end of the life cycle, there is the mystery of death. Doctors may ascribe the cause of death to a variety of diseases or to the failure of

the vital functions of the body, but does that really explain the act of dying? Gerontology, or the science of caring for the aged and dying, is receiving increasing attention in the medical profession, but of late a new subject called **Thanatology** has emerged, dealing exclusively with the phenomenon of death itself. It is a course of study available in many American universities; there is even a Centre for Death Education and Research at the University of Minnesota. If dying is as logical a process as doctors would have us believe, it can scarcely become a subject of serious study at University level.

Man's puzzlement over death is reflected in the many different ways he disposes of the dead, some of which are quite bizarre. The ceremonies which attend the disposal of the dead are also of infinite variety, but in most of them may be detected two main elements; the first is some kind of ritual whose main purpose is to help the living absorb the shock of losing a loved one; the second is the promise of life beyond death, either somewhere else, or a reincarnation on this earth. Somehow, it comforts the living to believe that life goes on in some form or other after death. Indeed, many of us spend the greater part of this life preparing for the next.

The twin mystery of life and death is thus central to our inquiry. Without an understanding of the beginning and the end of life it is futile to probe what is in between. Another difficulty we encounter in our inquiry is that we are not really able to see ourselves. We can of course look at a mirror or have a photograph taken of ourselves. We can even see ourselves in motion if we use a **ciné** camera. But what we see is only an image of ourselves, not the real thing. This is true not only when we see with our eyes, but also when we see with our mind. We are unable to detach ourselves from ourselves, and therefore unable to discover what we are. Perhaps this is what is meant by the proposition I mentioned earlier on, that man is but an idea in the mind of man.

In recent times, the prospects of mankind have come under scrutiny, mainly by economists and a new breed of researchers known as futurologists. Some people regard futurologists with suspicion, if not with contempt, branding them as soothsayers and crystal-ball gazers of the new generation. I think it is as well to remember that what they gaze into is not a crystal ball, but sets of hard facts and figures. Moreover, they are highly intelligent people trained in a variety of disciplines, and they have at their disposal the most sophisticated techniques and machines to analyse data and make projections. I am not saying that they are infallible, but I think they deserve to be taken seriously. According to the most pessimistic forecasts, man is **practically** an

endangered species, doomed to extinction. On the other hand, there are those who believe that we are about to enter an unprecedented era of idyllic existence, when most of the problems which plague us will have been solved. And there is of course a wide range of opinion in between these extremes. It is unlikely that any of us present here in this auditorium will be around to know who is right and who is wrong. But the very fact that the future of mankind is the subject of serious debate by highly educated and concerned people points to the possibility that our enquiry may well be a purely academic one.

We seem to have reached a turning point in world history, one that suggests either a bleak future for mankind or a complete change in the way society is organised. One of the main concerns which has brought about this outlook is the energy crisis- I do not mean just the steep rise in the price of petroleum, but the growing realisation that our energy resources are non-renew-able. In other words, the day will come, sooner or later, when all supplies of the existing forms of energy will have run out. The Hudson Institute estimates that the proven reserves of fossil fuels on earth will last about 100 years at current projections of world consumption. Potential resources, some of which are extremely difficult to exploit, may last us another 500 years. But a more recent study undertaken by the CIA forecasts serious world petroleum shortages as early as the mid 1980's, and that is too close for **comfort**. Whatever the degree of accuracy of these forecasts, the fact remains that our existing energy resources are of finite quantity, and the same is true of nearly all our raw materials.

It may well be argued that the end of available energy need not necessarily mean the extinction of the human species. After all, man inhabited the earth long before fire was discovered. But not knowing how to mobilise energy is one thing, doing without it is quite another. Earlier this month New York was without electricity for only 25 hours; it was long enough to bring out the looters and arsonists; it was also long enough to drive home the point that man can no longer live **without** a constant supply of energy. Indeed, long before the last oil well runs dry, other developments may precipitate the end of human **civilization**. The dwindling energy resources will magnify the disparity between the "haves" and "have-nots", and the breaking point will be reached that much sooner. When that time comes, there may well be a war to end all wars.

To be sure, there are weapons galore to stage such a holocaust. The recent SALT talks have given us a glimpse of the awesome arsenals maintained by the two most powerful nations on earth. And there is more bad news in the production pipeline. There

is the Cruise Missile, a computerised conveyor of death capable of flying at a very low altitude to avoid enemy interception, and of literally going round obstacles in its path to find its target. There is the Neutron Bomb, an ingenious device which destroys only lives, not property. It is a sad commentary on the state of **civilization** that man should consider man-made things more worthy of preservation than human lives. And then there is a laser-like beam, as yet unnamed, which disintegrates everything in its path. Such weapons of mass destruction used to exist only in science fiction not so long ago. Today, the only thing that threatens their very real existence is the development of other weapons of even greater destructive power.

What is even more alarming is the very real danger that nuclear war may be started by accident. There is really no such thing as fail-safe, however elaborate the precautions may be. So long as nuclear weapons are set off by human beings, the risk of human error is there. The only thing to be said about such an error is that we can be sure that it will not be repeated.

But let me end on a brighter note. I have painted such a bleak picture not because I believe the worst will happen, but only to show that the pos-

sibility of its happening has a bearing on our conception and perception of this creature called man. As I have said earlier, there are other concerned and thinking people who forecast a very bright future for mankind. They believe that we are about to enter a post-industrial era when all the major problems now facing us, including such hitherto insoluble ones as the energy crisis, the population explosion, the food shortage and the gap between the rich and the poor nations, will be solved once and for all. In fact, the only problem that will remain is what to do with the increased leisure time available to the inhabitants of planet earth who will no longer have to work so hard. This may sound like wishful thinking, but the optimists who hold such views present their case in all earnestness, and their arguments and supporting data are no less convincing than those of the prophets of doom.

My own view, for what it is worth, is that we are in for a rough time, at least in the short term. In the long term, when space **colonization** becomes a reality, we may indeed experience a new golden age. Whatever the outcome, I believe that so long as man remains creative, so long as he strives for excellence, mankind will not only survive, but prevail. Who knows, some day man may even acquire the wisdom to know himself.