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THE REDISCOVERY OF MEANING

AMID ALL THE MENACING SIGNS that surround us in the middle of this twentieth century, perhaps the one which fills thoughtful people with the greatest foreboding is the growing general sense of meaninglessness. It is this which underlies most of the other threats. How is it that the more able man becomes to manipulate the world to his advantage, the less he can perceive any meaning in it? This is a paradox which has often been noted and has sometimes been attributed to a fundamental perversity, a sort of "pure cussedness," in human nature. In fact, however, it arises from a clearly identifiable and comparatively recent bit of history.

Most people are well aware that, with the advent of the Scientific Revolution about three hundred years ago, the mind of man began to relate itself to the world around it in an entirely new way. The habit then first arose of meticulously observing the facts of nature and systematically interpreting them in terms of physical cause and effect; and this habit has been growing ever since, with incalculable and largely beneficial results for the accumulation of practical knowledge, or knowledge enabling the manipulation of nature. What is less clearly realized is the precise nature and significance of a certain further step which was taken in the nineteenth century. It was then that this habitual practice in the pursuit of knowledge was formulated as a dogma under the name of the "positive" philosophy, or positivism.

Positivism is the philosophical name for the belief now more widely known as "materialism." It is the doctrine—propounded originally by Auguste Comte—that the above-mentioned method of interpreting the facts of nature is not merely a useful but the only

possible one. Obviously a proposition that only one method of scientific investigation is possible cannot itself (except for devout believers) be based on scientific investigation by that method. The proposition is, therefore, in fact a dogmatic belief although it has been so thoroughly absorbed into the thought stream of Western humanity that it has come to be regarded, not as a dogma, but as a scientifically established fact.

Now there is usually little connection between the physical causes of a thing and its meaning. An important physical cause of what I am just now writing is the muscular pressure of my finger and thumb, but knowing this does not help anyone to grasp its meaning. Thus, in investigating the phenomena of nature, exclusive emphasis on physical causes and effects involves a corresponding inattention to their meaning. And it was just this exclusive emphasis which came into fashion about three hundred years ago. What happened later, in the nineteenth century, was that a *habit* of inattention, which had become inveterate, was finally superseded by an *assumption* (sometimes explicit but more often implicit) that scientific attention to the meaning, as distinct from the causes, of phenomena was impossible—even if (which was considered improbable) there was anything to attend to. The meaning of a process is the inner being which the process expresses. The denial of any such inner being to the processes of nature leads inevitably to the denial of it to man himself. For if physical objects and physical causes and effects are all that we can know, it follows that man himself can be known only to the extent that he is a physical object among physical objects. Thus, it is implicit in positivism that man can never really know anything about his specifically human self—his own inner being—any more than he can ever really know anything about the meaning of the world of nature by which he is surrounded.

Up to now even those who reject materialism as an ultimate philosophy have been content to accept the limitations which positivism seeks to impose on the sphere of knowledge. True, they say, the spiritual values which constitute the true meaning of life can be dimly felt and are, in fact, what lie behind the symbols of religion and the mysterious phenomena of art. But we can never hope to know anything about them. There are—and this is often suggested

with a certain unction—two kinds of truth: the scientific kind which can be demonstrated experimentally and which is limited to the physical world and, on the other side, the "truths" of mystical intuition and revelation, which can be felt and suggested but never known or scientifically stated. And if these seem to be incompatible with the truths of science—well, perhaps that is all the better. "The heart has its reasons whereof reason knoweth not."

In this way for a number of years a precarious equilibrium may be said to have been established between a meaningless and mechanical world of physical events described by science and some kind of ulterior spiritual significance which that world might be supposed to conceal and with which it had little if anything to do. The idealist philosophies of the nineteenth century made it their business to maintain this equilibrium by rationalizing it as best they could.

It was a state of affairs that could not last, and its latent instability has been exposed by a certain further step which the doctrine of positivism has taken in our time. The older positivism proclaimed that man could never know anything except the physical world-mechanism accessible to his senses. The twentieth-century variety—variously known as "logical positivism," "linguistic analysis," "the philosophy of science," and so on—goes further and avers that nothing can even be *said* about anything else. Language is meaningful only insofar as it communicates, or at least purports to communicate, information about physical events, which observation and experiment can then confirm or disprove. The ground is cut away from beneath the feet of any idealist interpretation of the universe by a new dogma, not that such an interpretation is untrue but that it cannot even be advanced. The language in which it is couched is not really language at all (although it may obey the rules of grammar) because it has no meaning. Not only that, the ground is cut away from any sort of inner life at all. Moral judgments, for instance, have no factual reference. If we say, "Cruelty is wicked," all we really mean is that we don't like it. Words which purport to refer to anything beyond the reach of the senses do not in fact refer to anything at all. Our conviction that they do is merely a mistake we make about the possible ways of using language. When we combine such words into sentences, we imagine we are saying something, but

in fact we are merely making noises, which express our feelings, as laughter and tears and grunts express our feelings. This, it is claimed, has always been the case, and all mythology and religion, together with practically all philosophy before the rise of positivism, are simply examples of these linguistic errors.

The upshot of all this was once well put by C.S. Lewis, when he pointed out that by and large, if the new positivism is right, the history of the human mind since the beginning of time has consisted in "almost nobody making linguistic mistakes about almost nothing." Even so, modern "analytical" philosophy is interesting and significant just because it forces the issue to its logical conclusion and brings into the open the mental predicament which acceptance of positivism has always really implied. Like a sort of scalpel, linguistic analysis lays bare that connection which we began by affirming between the rise of positivism and the general sense of meaninglessness in the West. At last the choice is plain. Either we must concede that 99 per cent of all we say and think (or imagine we think) is meaningless verbiage, or we must—however great the wrench—abandon positivism.

"Wrench" is not too strong a word; for positivism is subtly entangled with our thinking at all points on almost all subjects. A rather similar wrench was required of the Western mind at the close of the Middle Ages. Those who have not studied medieval thought will hardly believe how stubborn and inveterate the assumption had become that it was impossible to go outside Aristotle. Originality, new discoveries, experiments were all very welcome—provided they remained within the encompassing framework of Aristotelian conceptions: for instance, that the earth is fixed in the center of the universe, that the heavenly bodies are weightless, that heat, or fire, is one of the elements. These were taken absolutely for granted and anything which seemed to throw doubt on their validity produced—above all in the acknowledged leaders of contemporary thought—a violent reaction, which made them condemn it as nonsense or even blasphemy. The study of the transition from medieval to modern thought is the study of the great and painful wrench with which this dogma was at last abandoned. Now if we substitute positivism for Aristotelianism, we may get some idea of what is in store for us when

we first begin to cast doubts on it. For it is a mistake to suppose that we are more open-minded today; we are merely open-minded about different things.

We will, nevertheless, try the experiment and we will begin at the furthest point which positivism itself has reached, as we have seen, in its nihilistic advance; that is to say, at the primary vehicle which we possess for the understanding and expression of meaning; in other words, with language.

How did it come about that a very high proportion of the words in any modern language do refer (or appear to refer) to matters and events which are not part of the world accessible to our senses? To the historical student, language appears at first sight to consist of what has been well called "a tissue of faded metaphors." From the time of the nineteenth-century philosopher, Max Müller, onward this has been the common topic of innumerable books on words. Thus, as Ernest Weekley explained many years ago:

> Every expression that we employ, apart from those that are connected with the most rudimentary objects and actions, is a metaphor, though the original meaning is dulled by constant use.

And he went on to illustrate his meaning from the words used in that very sentence:

> Thus, in the above sentence, *expression* means "what is squeezed out," to *employ* is to "twine in" like a basket-maker, to *connect* is to "weave together," *rudimentary* means "in the rough state," and an *object* is "something thrown in our way."

Above all, we find that all words used to describe the "inside" of ourselves, whether it be a thought or feeling, can be clearly seen to have come down to us from an earlier period when they also had reference to the outside world. The further back you go in time, the more metaphorical you find language becoming; and some of the pioneers of etymology even anticipated the later positivism we have just described by claiming that mythology and religion were simply

the result of the "mistake" which was made when, later on, the "metaphors" came to be taken literally.

Since their time, however, a great deal more thought has been given to the whole problem of meaning and symbolism. In particular it has been realized that symbolic significance is not the exclusive attribute of religion and art, but is an intrinsic element in language itself. How did it come about that the shapes and objects of the outside world could be employed, and were employed, by man to express the inner world of his thought? It is because he was able to use them, not merely as *signs* for drawing attention to his feelings and impulses, but as *symbols* for his concepts. A thing functions as a symbol when it not only announces, but *represents* something other than itself. We owe the existence of language to the fact that the mental images, into which memory converts the forms of the outer world, can function not only as signs and reminders of themselves but as symbols for concepts. If this were not so, they could never have given rise to words—which make abstract thought possible. If we reflect on this fact unprejudiced by any positivist assumptions, we must conclude that this symbolic significance is inherent in the forms of the outer world themselves. The first metaphors were not artificial but natural.

In other words, the positivists are right in their conclusion that *if* (they would say "because") nature is meaningless to the human mind, most language is also meaningless. But the converse is equally true that, if language is "meaningful," then nature herself must also be meaningful. In fact, as Emerson pointed out long ago, "It is not only words that are emblematic; it is things which are emblematic." Man, he reminded his unheeding contemporaries, "is placed in the center of beings and a ray of relation passes from every other being to him. And neither can man be understood without these objects, nor these objects without man." It is precisely in this "ray of relation," which positivism cannot admit and which has therefore come to be overlooked, that the secret of meaning resides.

I have reached the conclusion that the natural world can only be understood in depth as a series of images symbolizing concepts; further, that it was out of man's rich awareness of this meaningful relation between himself and nature that language originally came

to birth. How is it, then, that early man possessed this rich awareness while we have lost it? In answering this question we already begin to feel the great wrench; for we find that the abandonment of positivism involves a drastic revision of our whole conception of prehistory.

Consider the conventional picture of the history of the earth and man. It shows us, first of all, a purely physical earth without life or consciousness; then the arrival on that earth of animals and men as physical objects moving about on it; finally the development by man, out of nothing, of a faculty of imagination and thought enabling him to mirror or copy inwardly an outer world which had existed solidly for millions of years before him. We see the inner world evolving at a comparatively late stage from the outer. For this picture we shall surely have to substitute the more difficult and less crude one of inner and outer worlds coming into being alongside one another. For the reciprocal relation between the two, which language reveals, will not allow of one's ever having existed without the other. It points back instead to a *common origin*. The distinction between inner and outer, which seems so fundamental to us, will be seen to have been brought about by man himself in the very process of exercising the symbolizing faculty which gave him his language.

Ernst Cassirer, dealing with language in his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, showed how the history of human consciousness was not a progress from an initial condition of blank darkness toward wider and wider awareness of a pre-existent outer world, but the gradual extrication of a small, but a growing and an increasingly clear and self-determined focus of inner human experience from a dreamlike state of virtual identity with the *life* of the body and of its environment. Self-consciousness emerged from mere consciousness. It was only in the course of this process that the world of "objective" nature, which we now observe around us, came into being. Man did not start on his career as a self-conscious being in the form of a mindless or thoughtless unit, confronting a separate, unintelligible objective world very like our own, about which he then proceeded to invent all manner of myths. He was not an onlooker, learning to make a less and less hopelessly inaccurate mental copy. He has had to wrestle his subjectivity out of the world of his experience by polarizing that world gradually into a duality.

And this is the duality of objective-subjective, or outer-inner, which now seems so fundamental because we have inherited it along with language. He did not *start* as an onlooker; the development of language enabled him to *become* one.

Let us digress for a moment and examine the other, the received view, that the history of human thought is the history of an onlooker learning to make a better and better mental copy of an independent outer world. All positivist science is based on mathematics and physics; and modern physics originally set out to investigate nature as something existing independently of the human mind. But this was a postulate which it had more and more to abandon as time went on. At a quite early stage a distinction was made between "primary" qualities, such as extension and mass, which were assumed to inhere in matter independently of the observer, and "secondary" qualities like color, which depend on the observer. Roughly speaking, physics has ended by having to conclude that *all* qualities are "secondary" in this sense, so that the whole world of nature as we actually experience it depends for its configuration on the mind and senses of man. It is what it is because we are what we are. Thus our common assumption that the main effort of human thinking has been to make a mental replica of a pre-existent outer world is incompatible even with the scientific approach to things out of which it arose. This assumption is indeed determined by science; but by a science of the day before yesterday.

Early man did not observe nature in our detached way. He participated mentally and physically in her inner and outer process. The evolution of man has signified not alone the steady expansion of consciousness (man getting to know more and more about more and more); there has been a parallel process of contraction—which was also a process of awakening—a gradual focusing or pinpointing down from an earlier kind of knowledge, which could also be called participation. It was at once more universal and less clear. We still have something of this older relation to nature when we are asleep, and it throws up the suprarational wisdom which many psychoanalysts detect in dreams. Thus, it is rather true to say that we have come to know more and more about less and less.

"Man is the dwarf of himself," said Emerson. It is this fact which

underlies the world-wide tradition of a fall from paradise; and it is this which still reverberates on in the nature-linked collective consciousness that we find expressed in myths, in older forms of language, and in the totemic thinking and ritual participation of primitive tribes. It is from some such origins as these and not from an alert, blank stare of incomprehension that we have evolved the individual, sharpened, spatially determined consciousness of today.

It is a process which continued even into our own era. We have only to go back as far as the period immediately before the Scientific Revolution in Europe, when the world picture still held sway of man as a microcosm within the macrocosm, and we shall find the felt severance between man's inner being and the world around him still noticeably less than it is today. There is not space to do more than casually allude to one or two examples; but anyone who studies medieval art and medieval thought a little will find that, for instance, the four elements, earth, water, air, and fire (which were not conceived as merely physical substances) were assumed as a matter of course to be functioning not only in the outside world but also in the human temperament as its four "humors"—melancholic, phlegmatic, sanguine, and choleric—while similar links between the planets and the metals and the dispositions of man were equally taken for granted. Of course, positivist thinking assumes that these were all erroneous speculations and had nothing to do with fact; but it transpires from the whole course of history that they were in truth vestigial remains of the "common origin" of man's outer and his inner worlds.

It remains to be considered whether the future development of scientific man must inevitably continue in the same direction, so that he becomes more and more a mere onlooker, measuring with greater and greater precision and manipulating more and more cleverly an earth to which he grows spiritually more and more a stranger. His detachment has enabled him to describe, weigh, and measure the processes of nature and to a large extent to control them; but the price he has paid has been the loss of his grasp of any meaning in either nature or himself. Penetration to the meaning of a thing or process, as distinct from the ability to describe it exactly, involves a participation by the knower in the known. The meaning

of what I am writing is not the physical pressure of thumb and forefinger, or the size of the ink lines with which I form the letters; it is the concepts expressed in the words I am writing. But the only way of penetrating to these is to participate in them—to bring them to life in your own mind by thinking them. A Chinese looking at this page would indeed be limited to describing its outer appearance. We are mere onlookers at a language we do not understand. But confronted with a language we have learned to understand, we not merely observe the shapes of the letters—in the very act of observing these we "read" their meaning through them. In the same way, if we want to know the meaning of nature, we must learn to read as well as to observe and describe. Is there any possibility of scientific man's ever recovering the old power to "read," while still retaining his hard-won treasure of exact observation and manipulative control—for no one would advocate a mere relapse into the past? Signs are not altogether wanting that there is such a possibility, though they are at present rudimentary.

We have seen that man can only begin to "read" the meaning of nature, when instead of merely copying and describing what he senses, he begins to apprehend it as a series of images symbolizing concepts. Now the word "imagination" has come to mean, for most people, the faculty of inventing fictions, especially poetic fictions; but in its deeper sense it signifies that very faculty of apprehending the outward form as the image or symbol of an inner meaning, for which we are looking. It is therefore not surprising that the first stirrings of a movement of thought in this new direction should have occurred among those who interested themselves in the deeper significance of art, and especially of poetry. Thus, it was held by Coleridge that the human imagination, at its highest level, does indeed inherit and continue the divine creative activity of the Logos (the "Word" of the opening verses of St. John's Gospel), which was the common origin of human language and consciousness, as well as of the world which contains them. Out of the whole development of the Romantic Movement in Europe at the turn of the eighteenth century and in the nineteenth a conviction arose in these circles that man's creative imagination can be applied, not only in the creation and contemplation of works of art but also in the contemplation of nature herself.

Through its exercise we begin once more to tò experience nature as image; and indeed an obscure recognition of images underlies that feeling for the beauty of nature which differentiates us so sharply from the eighteenth century. It may even lead, as in some of Wordsworth's childhood recollections or in our own time in the poetic vision of Kathleen Raine, to glimpses of the "common origin":

> *Do you remember, when you were first a child,*
> *Nothing in the world seemed strange to you?*
> *You perceived, for the first time, shapes already familiar,*
> *And seeing, you knew that you have always known*
> *The lichen on the rock, fern-leaves, the flowers of thyme,*
> *As if the elements newly met in your body,*
> *Caught up into the momentary vortex of your living*
> *Still kept the knowledge of a former state. . . .*

But all this does not amount to very much more than that vague "idealism"—a general intuition of some sort of meaning behind the totality of things—which, as we have seen, can peacefully coexist with the positivist dogma, at all events in the latter's earlier stages, before it begins to disintegrate language. It is much too subtle for the man in the street; but most contemporary enthusiasts for art and poetry accept some form of the doctrine of "two kinds of truth" to which we have already referred. They are content that the business of detailed investigation should be left to positivist science. In the book of nature the whole may mean something, but the details mean nothing; or if they do, we can never know it.

This however is not what we feel when we read an actual book. There the meaning of the whole is articulated from the meaning of each part—chapters from sentences and sentences from words—and stands before us in clear, sharp outlines. The vital question is whether science can ever discover how to read the book of nature in *this* way. It would not matter so much if its field were limited to mechanics and physics. But in fact man looks more and more to science for guidance on *all* subjects. As we rise in the scale of creation from the lifeless to the living and from the living to the psychic and human—from mechanics to sociology—the question of the

meaning of what we are dealing with becomes ever more insistent. Must this always be ignored or can science ever learn to supplement its weighing, measuring, and statistics with the systematic use of imagination? Of course, scientists already use imagination at a particular juncture in research—namely, the devising of hypotheses to explain new facts. But this would be something quite different; it would be the use of imagination at each point and in the very act of observation. Is such a development even conceivable?

It has not yet been very widely realized that the genius who was possibly Europe's greatest poet, but who was certainly the greatest figure in the Romantic Movement, actually devoted more of his time to scientific investigation than to poetry and at the end of his life attached more importance to this part of himself then he did to his world-famous poetry. Goethe was convinced that the scientific method which came into vogue with the Scientific Revolution was not the only possible one. In particular he held that for dealing with the phenomena of life and growth it was an inadequate method. For the whole process of "becoming" is one which eludes the categories of cause and effect. The method which he applied in his work on *The Metamorphosis of Plants*, and elsewhere, was based on the perception that nature has an "inside" which cannot be weighed and measured—or even (without training) observed—namely, the creative thoughts which underlie phenomenal manifestation. Before the Scientific Revolution, when some attention was still paid to such problems, they would have called it "potential," as distinct from "actual" nature. And, Goethe claimed that this side of nature, too, was perceptible, not indeed to the untrained senses, but to a perceptive faculty trained by systematic practice to participate in those creative thoughts.

By ordinary inductive science the unifying idea, or law, behind groups of related phenomena is treated as a generalization from particulars; it is an abstract notion, which can be inferred only from observations of their results; and it must be expressible in terms of measurable quantities. For Goethean science, on the other hand, this unifying idea is an objective reality, accessible to direct observation. In addition to measuring quantities, the scientist must train himself to perceive qualities. This he can do—as Goethe did when

he saw the various parts of the plant as "metamorphoses" of the leaf—only by so sinking himself in contemplation of the outward form that his imagination penetrates to the activity which is producing it.

Goethe's morphological observations on plant and animal played a significant part in the development of the (then quite new) concept of evolution and are referred to by Darwin in the introduction to his *Origin of Species*. But, because their whole epistemological basis was undermined by, and submerged in, the rising flood of positivist assumptions, little attention has been paid to them. They have been looked at from time to time but almost always through the spectacles of positivism.

By detaching himself more and more from the world of nature—as he has been doing ever since the Scientific Revolution—man has gradually developed the exact quantitative approach which has given him, over such a wide area, his marvelous powers of manipulative control.

But in doing so he has necessarily lost for the time being that felt union with the inner origin of outward forms which constitutes perception of their meaning. He can begin to recover this only if he develops his science beyond its present positivist limitations; and it is just such a development to which the way has already been pointed by one of the greatest minds Europe has ever known. What is needed now is for someone to try the experiment of taking off his positivist spectacles and examining Goethe with the naked eye.

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