CHAPEL X. THE DOCTRINE OF THE POINT OF VIEW

Let us now recall the opening considerations of this discourse. Modern tradition presents us with a choice between two opposed methods of dealing with the antinomy between life and culture. One of them—rationalism—in its design to preserve culture denies all significance to life. The other—relativism—attempts the inverse operation: it gets rid of the objective value of culture altogether in order to leave room for life. Neither of these solutions, which appeared sufficient to the generations of the past, finds an echo in our own sensibility. Neither of them can live without being blind to the other's existence. Our own age, not being a prey to such obfuscations, and seeing with perfect clarity the significance of both contending powers, cannot bring itself either to accept the idea that truth, justice and beauty do not exist, or to forget that their existence requires the support of vitality.

Let us make this point clearer by concentrating upon that element in culture which is the easiest to define, viz., knowledge.

Knowledge is the acquisition of truths, and in acquiring truths we become acquainted with the transcendental or trans-subjective universe of reality. Truths are eternal, unique and invariable. How, then, can there be, in the knower, any process by which they can be identified? The reply of rationalism is narrow and arbitrary: knowledge is only possible if reality can penetrate it without the least disturbance of its own fabric. The knower, therefore, must be a transparent medium, lacking any sort of special quality or characteristic colour: he must be the same yesterday as to-day or to-morrow: he must therefore be ultra-vital and extra-historical. Life has essential characters of its own, it changes and develops: in a word, it is history.

The reply of relativity is equally narrow and arbitrary. Knowledge is impossible; there is no such thing as transcendent reality, for the reason that every real knower resembles an arena that has its own special formation. Reality would have to alter its own fabric in order to enter such an arena, and the particular alteration made would in each case be falsely construed as reality.

It is interesting to notice how in recent times, without any mutual collaboration or premeditation, psychology, biology and the theory of knowledge have each, in their survey of the facts which form the basis of both rationalist and relativist views, been obliged to make certain corrections, and are now unanimous in formulating the problem in a new way.
The knower is not a transparent medium, a pure Ego, possessed of fixed identity and an invariable nature, nor does his reception of reality result in disturbances of fabric in the latter. The facts impose a third view of the process of knowledge, which is a perfect synthesis of the other two. When a sieve or a net is placed in a current of liquid it allows certain things to permeate it and keeps others out; it might be said to make a choice, but assuredly not to alter the forms of things. This is the function of the knower, of the living being face to face with the cosmic reality of his environment. He does not allow himself, without more ado, to be permeated by reality, as would the imaginary rational entity created by rationalist definitions. Nor does he invent an illusory reality. His function is clearly selective. From the infinite number of elements which integrate reality the individual or receiving apparatus admits a certain proportion, whose form and substance coincide with the meshes of his sensitised net. The rest, whether phenomena, facts or truths, remain beyond him. He knows nothing of them and does not perceive them.

An elementary and purely physiological instance of this process may be found in the mechanism of sight and hearing. The ocular and auditive structures of the human race admit wave vibrations between fixed minimum and maximum velocities. Such colours and sounds as remain outside the two limiting points are unknown to humanity. In a similar way man's vital framework has a certain influence upon his reception of reality; but this does not mean that this influence or intervention involves alteration of the fabric of reality. A whole repertory, and a fairly large one, of perfectly real colours and sounds reaches his consciousness, and he is unquestionably aware of them.

The same process as operates in the case of colours and sounds applies also to truths. The psychic structure of each individual plays the part of a receptive organ in possession of a determinate form which admits the comprehension of certain truths and is condemned to an obstinate blindness to others. Similarly, all peoples and all epochs have their typical souls, that is to say, their nets, provided with meshes of definite sizes and shapes which enable them to achieve a strict affinity with some truths and to be incorrigibly inept for the assimilation of others. This means that all epochs and all peoples have been able to enjoy the measure of truth which suits them, and there is no sense in any people or epoch setting up in opposition to the rest, as if their particular share of truth were the reservoir of the whole of it. All have their fixed position in the historical series; none can legitimately aim at abandoning their posts, for such an act would be the equivalent of converting the agent into an abstract entity, and this would involve a total renunciation of existence.

Two men may look, from different viewpoints, at the same landscape. Yet they do not see the same thing. Their different situations make the landscape assume two distinct types of organic structure in their eyes. The part which, in the one case, occupies the foreground, and is thrown into high relief in all its details, is, in the other case, the background, and remains obscure and vague in its appearance. Further, inasmuch as things which are put one behind the other are either wholly or partially concealed, each of the two spectators will perceive portions of the landscape which elude the attention of the other. Would there be any sense in either declaring the other's view of the landscape false? Evidently not; the one is as real as the other. But it would be just as senseless if, when our spectators found that their views of the landscape did not
agree, they concluded that both views were illusory. Such a conclusion would involve belief in the existence of a third landscape, an authentic one, not subject to the same conditions as the other two. Well, an archetypal landscape of this kind does not and cannot exist. Cosmic reality is such that it can only be seen in a single definite perspective. Perspective is one of the component parts of reality. Far from being a disturbance of its fabric, it is its organising element. A reality which remained the same from whatever point of view it was observed would be a ridiculous conception.

The case of corporeal vision applies equally to all our other faculties. All knowledge is knowledge from a definite point of view. Spinoza's species aeternitatis, or ubiquitous and absolute point of view, has no existence on its own account: it is a fictitious and abstract point of view. We have no doubt of its utility as an instrument for the fulfilment of certain requirements of knowledge, but it is essential to remember that reality cannot be perceived from such a standpoint. The abstract point of view deals only in abstractions.

This way of thinking leads to a radical reform in philosophy, and also, which is more important, to a reform in our sensuous reaction to the cosmos.

The individuality of every real subjective entity was the insurmountable obstacle encountered by recent intellectual tradition in its attempt to make knowledge justify its claim to be able to enter into possession of truth. Two different subjective entities, it was supposed, would acquire the knowledge of two divergent types of truth. We can now see that the divergence between the worlds of two subjective entities does not involve the falsity of one of them. On the contrary, precisely because what each one sees is a reality, not a fiction, its aspect must be distinct from what the other perceives. The divergence is not a contradiction, but a complement. If the universe had presented an identical appearance to the eyes of a Greek of Socrates' time and to those of a Yankee we should have to suppose that true reality, independent of subjective entities, does not reside in the universe. For the fact that it looked the same to two men placed at such diverse standpoints as those of Athens in the fifth century B.C. and New York in the twentieth A.D. would indicate that there was no question of any objective reality at all, but rather of a mere image which happened to occur, with identical features, in the minds of the two persons concerned.

Every life is a point of view directed upon the universe. Strictly speaking, what one life sees no other can. Every individual, whether person, nation or epoch, is an organ, for which there can be no substitute, constructed for the apprehension of truth. This is how the latter, which is in itself of a nature alien from historical variation, acquires a vital dimension. Without the development, the perpetual change and the inexhaustible series of adventures which constitute life, the universe, or absolutely valid truth, would remain unknown.

The persistent error that has hitherto been made is the supposition that reality possesses in itself, independently of the point of view from which it is observed, a physiognomy of its own. Such a theory clearly implies that no view of reality relative to any one particular standpoint would coincide with its absolute aspect, and consequently all such views would be false. But reality happens to be, like a landscape, possessed of an infinite number of perspectives, all equally veracious and authentic. The sole false perspective is that which claims to be the only one there
is. In other words, that which is false is Utopia, non-localised truth, which "cannot be seen from any particular place." The Utopian (and such is essentially the character of the rationalist) goes further astray than anyone, since he is the spectator who loses confidence in his own point of view and deserts his post.

Up to the present time philosophy has remained consistently Utopian. Consequently, each successive system claimed to be valid for all ages and all types of mankind. Isolated beyond vital, historical and "perspectivist" dimension, it indulged from time to time in various unconvincing gestures of definition. On the other hand, the doctrine of the point of view requires a system to contain a properly articulated declaration of the vital perspective responsible for it, thus permitting its own articulation to be linked up with those of other systems, whether future or exotic. Pure reason must now give place to a vital type of reason in which its pure form may become localised and acquire mobility and power of self-transformation.

Now, the reduction of the world to a horizon, or its conversion into one, does not lessen the quantity of reality in it to the smallest degree: the process simply puts it into relation with the living observer, whose world it is, endows it with a vital dimension and localises it in the current of life which flows from species to species, from people to people, from generation to generation and from individual to individual, gradually possessing itself of more and more universal reality.

Accordingly, the peculiar property of every living being, the individual difference, far from impeding the capture of truth, is precisely the organ by which the specially corresponding portion of reality is perceived. So that each individual, each generation or each epoch may be considered as an apparatus, for which there can be no substitute, directed to the acquisition of knowledge. Integral truth is only obtained by linking up what I see with what my neighbour sees, and so on successively. Each individual is an essential point of view in the chain. By setting everyone's fragmentary visions side-by-side it would be possible to achieve a complete panorama of absolute and universally valid truth. Now, this sum of individual perspectives, this knowledge of what each and all have seen and recognised, this omniscience, this true "absolute reason," is the sublime faculty which used to be attributed to God. God is also a point of view: but not because he possesses a watch-tower beyond the confines of the human area from which he can behold universal reality directly, as if he were one of the old rationalists. God is not a rationalist. His point of view is that of each one of us: our partial truth is also truth to him. Our perspective is veracious and our reality authentic to that extent. The only point is that God, as the catechism says, is everywhere and therefore enjoys the use of every point of view, resuming and harmonising in his own unlimited vitality all our horizons. God is the symbol of the vital torrent through whose infinite nets the universe gradually passes, being thus continuously steeped in and consecrated by life, that is to say, seen, loved, hated, painfully endured and pleasurably enjoyed by life.

Malebranche used to maintain that if we know any truth at all, it is because we see phenomena through God's eyes or from God's point of view. To me the inverse seems more probable, viz., that God sees phenomena through the medium of mankind or that mankind is the visual organ of divinity. It is therefore peculiarly incumbent upon us not to defraud the sublime requirement that depends upon our co-operation for its fulfilment, and, planting ourselves firmly in the position we
find allotted to us, to open our eyes wide to our environment with a profound faith in our own organism and vital nature, and accept the labour that destiny assigns us---the modern theme.