

Man in the Universe: Permanence Amidst Apparent Change

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[Introduction]

THERE is no domain in which change and transformation reign with the same supremacy and totality as in that which concerns nature and man's relation to it as well as his knowledge of it. Modern science, which has acted as a catalyst during the past centuries for change in so many other fields, is itself based upon change and impermanence. Were it to become stationary and immutable it would cease to exist in its present form. And since this is the only science of nature known to modern man, the whole relation between man and nature, as well as the nature of man himself and the Universe that surrounds him, is seen only in the light of flux and change. The view that man's position in the Universe and his knowledge of it, not to speak of the object of this knowledge, is constantly changing has come to appear as so obvious and evident as to make any other point of view seem absurd and well-nigh impossible to understand. Modern man is bewildered at even the possibility of an element of permanence in his relation with the Universe, not because such an element does not exist, but because the problem itself is never considered from the point of view of permanence.

[Main Debate]

It is often forgotten that before man began to view his relation to nature only from the aspect of change and impermanence, he had become himself inwardly detached from the immutable principle of the Intellect, the nous, which along with revelation is the only factor that can act as the permanent and immutable axis for the machinations of human reason. With the weakening of gnostic elements in Christianity the rational faculty of Western man became gradually estranged from the twin sources of immutability, stability and permanence: namely, revelation and intellectual intuition.^[1] The result was on the one hand the nominalist trend, which destroyed philosophical certainty, and on the other this reduction of man to the purely human cut off from any transcendental elements, the man of Renaissance humanism. Such a concept of man itself implied sheer change and becoming—which are apparent even outwardly during that period in those rapid transformations of Western society which have given the Renaissance its transitional character. But even then man's concept of the Universe had not as yet changed. His science of nature was still essentially medieval, comprised of Hermetic and Scholastic elements. It is only his conception of himself that had changed, leading in turn to a change in his concept of the Universe and his own place in it.

It is always essential to bear in mind the time-lag between the religious and metaphysical revolt at the end of the Middle Ages expressing an attempt on the part of Western man to cut himself away from his celestial and immutable archetype and to become purely terrestrial and human, and the scientific revolution which carried this secularized vision of man to its logical conclusion by creating a purely secular science, Man, once he came to consider himself a predominantly secular being, developed a science that considers the changing aspect of things alone, a science that is concerned solely with becoming rather than being, and this is a most logical happening if we remember that even etymologically secular is derived from the Latin *seularis* one of whose meanings is change and temporality. The destruction of the sacred vision of man and the Universe is equivalent to the destruction of the immutable aspect of both man and the Universe. A secular science could not have come into existence without being wholly concerned with change and becoming.

If we keep in mind the historical factors that brought into being a world-view in the West based solely on the changing aspect of things, it should be possible for us to reconstruct and bring back to light permanent elements in the vision of modern man without appearing to speak of absurdities; but this can only happen if there is an understanding of traditional metaphysics and the language of symbolism through which the metaphysical truths have always been revealed.^[2] Metaphysics, or the science of the permanent, can be ignored or forgotten; but it cannot be refuted precisely because it is not concerned with change qua change. That which deals with permanence cannot become "out of date," because it is not concerned with any date as such. The permanent elements in the relation between man and the Universe remain as valid now as ever. Only they must become known once again after the long period during which the West did not search for permanent

elements in change and even sought to reduce permanence itself to change and historical process.

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From the point of view of traditional metaphysical and cosmological doctrines there are several elements of permanence in the relationship between man and nature and in man's own situation in the Universe. The first and most basic element is the fact that the cosmic environment that surrounds man is not ultimate reality but possesses the character of relativity and even illusion. If one understands what is meant by the Absolute then by the same token one understands the relative and comes to realize that all that is not Absolute must of necessity be relative. The aspect of the world as *mâyâ*, to use the Hindu term or *samsâra* in the Buddhist sense, is itself a permanent element of the cosmos and man's relation to it. The Universe, in its cosmic aspect, was always *mâyâ* and will always be *mâyâ*. The Absolute is always the Absolute and the relative the relative, and no amount of historical process and change can turn one into the other. Historical process can cause a people or even a civilization to forget for a while the distinction between the Absolute and relative and therefore to take the relative for the Absolute as modern science seems to have done. But wherever and whenever metaphysical discernment appears, the distinction becomes clear and the world becomes known for what it is, namely *mâyâ*. The changing element of the world which the concept of *mâyâ* implies is itself a permanent feature of the world. It is in the nature of the world to be changing, to undergo generation and corruption, to experience life and death. But the meaning of this change can only be understood in terms of the permanent. To have understood that the world is *mâyâ* is to have understood the meaning of *Atmân* or *Brahmân* that transcends *mâyâ*. To know that the world is impermanent or *samsâric* in nature is to know by extension the presence of the *nirvânic* state beyond it.^[3] The changing character of the world reveals metaphysically the permanent reality that transcends it. To realize the relativity of things is to know, by extension of the same knowledge, about the Absolute and the Permanent. Throughout history, in all periods of human culture, this metaphysical distinction has existed. It lies in the nature of things and so is there for all to see, provided they turn their vision towards it. Only, in certain periods such as ours the relative has come to be idolized as the Absolute. Today, one often hears the claim that all is relative. But the same people who make such a claim often bestow an absolute character on the domain of the relative itself. Without always being fully aware of it they have mistaken both *Brahmân* and *mâyâ*, due to a lack of discernment and true knowledge, an ignorance which itself stems from *mâyâ*. But when there is metaphysical knowledge there is also awareness of the relativity of things in the light of the Absolute, and this fundamental truth is a permanent element in man's situation in the Universe, and concerns his destiny as a being who is called upon to seek to transcend the cosmic crypt into which he has fallen and to return from the domain of the relative to the Absolute.^[4]

Another element of permanence in the relation of man to the Universe is the manifestation of the Absolute in the relative in the form of symbols

understood in the traditional sense of the word.^[5] A symbol is not based on man made conventions. It is an aspect of the ontological reality of things and is as such independent of man's perception of it.^[6] The symbol is the revelation of a higher order of reality in a lower order through which man can be led back to the higher sphere. To understand symbols is to accept the hierarchic structure of the Universe and the multiple states of being.

During phases of the historical process symbols which are given special significance and power in a revealed religion through the revelation itself can gradually lose their efficacy either partially or completely, as a result of the weakening of the spiritual basis of that religion as can be seen in the case of the de-mythologizers of our day. Nevertheless, the symbols of nature are permanent and immutable. What the sky signifies symbolically, as for example the dimension of transcendence and the Divine throne, ('arsh) to use the Islamic image, is as permanent as the sky itself. The sun symbolizes the Universal Intellect as long as it goes on shining and the tree with its extended branches is a symbol of the multiple states of being as long as trees grow on the surface of the earth. That is why one may speak of a cosmologia perennis, of a qualitative science of nature which is always valid and which reveals an aspect of nature which is, to say the least, no less real than the changing aspect studied by modern science.^[7] The main difference between the traditional and modern sciences of nature lies in the fact that modern science studies change with respect to change, whereas traditional science studies change in the light of permanence through the study of symbols which are nothing but the reflection of permanence in change.

A civilization may develop a science which turns its back upon the qualitative aspect of things revealed through symbols to concentrate upon the changes which can be measured quantitatively; but it cannot destroy the symbolic reality of things any more than can a qualitative and symbolic study of natural phenomena destroy their weight or size. Today through the destruction of the "symbolist spirit",^[8] men in the West have lost the sense of penetrating into the inner meaning of phenomena which symbols alone reveal. But this impotence does not mean that natural symbols have ceased to exist. The symbolic significance of the homocentric spheres of Ptolemaic astronomy, which the immediate appearance of the heavens reveals, remains valid, whether in the theoretical Newtonian absolute space or in the curved space of relativity the earth moves around the sun or the sun around the earth. The homocentric spheres symbolize states of being above the terrestrial sphere in which man is presently placed. The states of being remain true whether we understand and accept the natural symbolism which the heavens themselves reveal to us in our immediate and direct contact with them, or whether we destroy this immediate appearance and the symbol in the name of other theoretical considerations.

In fact even new scientific theories, if they conform to any reality at all, possess their own symbolic meaning. To correspond to reality means to be symbolic. If the Ptolemaic spheres symbolize man's position with respect to higher states of being, the galactic space of modern astronomy itself symbolizes the indefinitude of the relative, the vastness of the ocean of samsâra. It is itself proof of the fact that man's intelligence was created to

know the Infinite rather than the indefinite. But in a more direct sense, the symbolic meaning of the phenomena of nature, not to speak of scientific theories based upon them, represents a permanent aspect of things and of man's relation to the cosmos. It is upon this permanent character of the symbolic content of the phenomena of nature that one can construct a symbolic science of nature, a traditional cosmology which remains of perennial value and permanent importance, and which is of particular significance today when the purely quantitative sciences of nature and their manifold applications threaten the existence of both man and nature.^[9]

Yet another permanent feature of the relation between man and the Universe, at least according to a certain aspect of the situation, is the way that nature presents itself to man. Today man seeks to change all his social, political and even religious institutions with the excuse that nature itself is always changing and therefore man must change likewise. In fact just the reverse holds true. It is because man's mentality has lost its anchor in the permanent and become itself a fleeting river of ever changing ideas and images that man sees only change in nature. If modern man has read evolution into nature, he had begun to believe in evolution in his mind before observing it in nature itself. Evolution is primarily not the product of natural observation but of a secularized mentality cut off from every avenue of access to the immutable, which then began to see its own fleeting nature in outward nature. Man always sees in nature the reflection of his own being and his conception of what he himself is.

If we study the world about us we see that in fact the terrestrial environment in which men saw permanence for millenia has not changed in its general features. The sun still rises and sets the same way now as it did for ancient and medieval man, who looked upon it as the symbol of the Divine Intellect. The natural forms still reproduce them-selves with the same regularity and through the same processes as in older historical periods. Neither the petals of the rose nor its scent have changed since Dante and Shakespeare wrote about them. Nor in fact has man himself evolved biologically since there has been a recorded or even unrecorded human history. Today's man is biologically the same as the men of old who believed in permanence and transcendence. If modern men have ceased to so believe they had better find some other excuse than their own biological or natural evolution.

In this question of the permanence of natural phenomena as they appear to man there is a diametrical opposition between the traditional and that modern point of view which is its direct inversion. Today all things are considered to be changing, yet the hypothesis of uniformitarianism is used with such certainty in geology, paleontology and even anthropology that one would think it was a proven law. On the one hand it is said that laws have been uniform and so we speak of events having taken place millions and billions of years ago without considering precisely what it is that we mean by a "million years." On the other hand we say that nature changes all the time, without considering the possibility that what appears as a "law of nature" today may itself have changed over the ages or under particular circumstances and conditions. If we cannot walk on water, there is no

logical reason why such and such a medieval saint could never have done so.

The traditional view of nature reverses this situation completely. In place of change it substitutes permanence and in place of uniformity and immutability of natural conditions, qualitative change. The changing processes of nature are viewed as permanent patterns which through repetition integrate time and process into the image of eternity.^[10] The apparent uniformity of nature is in turn modified by the theory of cycles, the yugas of Hinduism or adwâr and akwâr of certain schools of Islamic thought, which do not mean mere repetition of the same patterns but rather bring out the qualitative difference between different epochs both in the cosmos and in human history. The modern inversion of these two realities has destroyed the vision of permanence in nature as well as the realization of the qualitative differences in the various cycles. In fact this inversion is itself proof of the reality of the cosmic cycles and only confirms what all authentic traditions teach about them.^[11]

For this reason alone older works of natural history and mythology have become closed books and at best are interpreted in a purely psychological manner, whereas they can be understood in the light of the fact that there is a qualitative difference between the cosmic milieu of the ancient natural environment and our own. There was not the same crystallization and condensation, the same separation of matter from spirit. The water of Thales was still full of the animating spirit of nature and in fact symbolized the psycho-physical substratum of things. It was very far removed from the post-Cartesian dead matter with which Lavoisier was experimenting twenty-four centuries later.

Yet, between this change and that permanence and across this inversion of views there remains one immutable element: that is, the way in which the phenomena of nature appear to man. The sky, the sea, the mountains, the seasonal cycles, these realities manifest themselves now as in the millenia before, except for certain qualitative differences involved, and they are the majestic testament of the Immutable manifested in the process of becoming. Men who love nature are essentially in quest of the permanent, and nature in fact itself gives the lie to those who want to limit all reality to change and becoming. Such philosophies never arose among people who lived close to nature but have always been the products of sedentary environments where an artificial atmosphere has enabled men to forget both nature and the permanent elements which she reveals to man, elements which evoke in man those factors that are permanent and anchored in the immutable strata of man's own being.

As far as the present sciences of nature are concerned, much though they differ from the various traditional cosmologies, even here there is an element of permanence if one takes modern science for what it really is. Of course by the very fact that modern science has consciously turned its back upon the metaphysical and symbolic aspect of things, it is cut off from the traditional view of nature through its own point of view and must ignore any metaphysical significance that its own discoveries may possess. Yet, these discoveries, to the extent that they have a connection with the reality of

things, do possess a symbolic significance. For example the fact that order repeats itself in all planes of material reality from the galaxy to the atom, or the fact that with whatever unit science deals with, whether it be the biological cell or the atom, there is a harmony of parts within a whole, represent permanent features of any science of nature whether one bothers to take these facts into consideration or not.

Even in a more evident manner, one sees the repetition of certain patterns and problems throughout the history of science, a fact which more than any other has attracted many modern scientists to its study. No matter how much science changes, the encounter of man's mind with nature seems to produce certain permanent features. Take for example the problem of continuity and discontinuity of bodies, which had occupied Aristotle and the Greek atomists, the Muslim Peripatetics and theologians as well as the modern physicists; or the relation of the One to the manifold, or between order and disorder or between chance and determinism; these are all problems that recur perennially in all forms of science. Many scientists turn today to the history of science to find inspiration for new methodologies in order to face problems of contemporary physics or biology which are basically related to the problems of the ancient and medieval sciences. The recurrence of these patterns and problems is yet another element of permanence in a domain that is the most changing and fluid of all fields, just because men have turned their backs upon Unity to view multiplicity, to study the contingent without considering the Principle.

But perhaps the most important permanent element in man's relation to the Universe is his "existential" situation in the hierarchy of universal existence. Traditional man knew with certainty where he came from, why he lived and where he was going. Modern man, however, for the most part knows neither where he comes from nor what his end will be and therefore, most important of all, why he is living. Nevertheless, like the traditional man he faces the two points which determine the beginning and end of his terrestrial life. He is born and he dies. This fact has not changed one iota nor will it do so through the cheap form of would-be immortality that modern man seeks, if unconsciously, through such artificial means as heart transplantations. The only difference is that what was once certainty has become today doubt and fear. But the reality of birth and death remains, and no amount of modern science can unravel the mysteries of these two "eternities" between which stands the flickering moment of earthly life.^[12]

It is these two "infinities" which determine the character and meaning of the finitude that stands between them. With respect to these two "infinities" the situation of man has not changed at all even if the destruction of the medieval cosmologies has destroyed for most men the metaphysical doctrine of the states of being which that cosmology symbolized so beautifully. Man is still a finite being with an intelligence made to understand the Infinite and the Absolute and not merely the indefinite and the relative, whereof the total grasp lies forever beyond the ken of any human science. With respect to the Absolute and all the states of being which comprise the Universe man is what he has always been and will always be, an image of the Absolute in the relative, cast into the stream of

becoming in order to return this becoming itself to Being. Today there is so much talk of change that men are hypnotized by their own phrases and forget that just beneath the surface of these ever moving waves of change lies the immutable and permanent sea of man's real nature. The situation of this permanent nature which man carries within himself wherever he comes face to face with the Real, in its metaphysical sense, has never changed nor can it ever alter. The ontological situation of man in the total scheme of things is forever the same; it is, more than all the other elements of cosmology and the sciences that relate man to the Universe, a situation of permanence midst apparent change.

NOTES

- [1] See S. H. Nasr, *The Encounter of Man and Nature, the Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man*, London, 1968, pp. 63 ff.
- [2] See F. Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, trans. by P. Townsend, London, 1953, pp. 9 ff., and R. Guénon, *La métaphysique orientale*, Paris, 1951.
- [3] See F. Schuon, *In the Tracks of Buddhism*, trans. by M. Pallis, London, 1968, where the relation between nirvana and samsâra is discussed in all its amplitude and depth.
- [4] Concerning this theme in its Islamic setting, see S. H. Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*, Cambridge (U.S.A.), 1964, chapter XV.
- [5] The meaning of traditional symbols cannot be treated here. This question has been amply dealt with in the writings of F. Schuon, R. Guénon, T. Burckhardt, and A. K. Coomaraswamy as well as H. Zimmer and M. Eliade.
- [6] "The science of symbols—not simply a knowledge of traditional symbols—proceeds from the qualitative significances of substances, forms,..., we are not dealing here with subjective appreciations, for the cosmic qualities are ordered both in relation to Being and according to a hierarchy which is more real than the individual..." F. Schuon, *Gnosis, Divine Wisdom*, trans. G. E. H. Palmer, London, 1959, p. 110.
- [7] On the cosmologia perennis, see T. Burckhardt, *Scienza moderna e saggezza tradizionale*, Torino, 1968; see also his *Alchemie, Sinn and Weltbild*, Olten, 1960, which deals with permanent values of Hermetic cosmology.
- [8] Concerning the "symbolist spirit" see F. Schuon, "The Symbolist Outlook", *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Winter, 1966, pp. 50 ff.
- [9] The author has dealt fully with this question in his *Encounter of Man and Nature*.
- [10] On the relation between linear and cyclic time as it effects both history and cosmology, see M. Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. by W. Trask, New York, 1954; see also, A. K. Coomaraswamy, *Time and Eternity*, Ascona, 1947, where the metaphysical relationship between time and eternity in different traditions is elucidated.
- [11] The downward tendency of the Kali Yuga or Dark Age which itself obliterates the vision of qualitative time for most men is admirably treated by R. Guénon in many of his writings, especially *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*, trans. by Lord Northbourne, London, 1951.
- [12] "Modern Science, which is rationalist as to its subject and materialist as to its object, can describe our situation physically and approximately, but it can tell us nothing about our extra-spatial situation in the total and real Universe". F. Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, trans. by Lord Northbourne, London, 1965, p. 111.