

THE CONCEPT OF MAN*

I hope I am justified in presuming that no extensive or elaborate apology is needed for convening an interdisciplinary Seminar on this theme, whose importance cannot be over-stated. Ever since the first faint glimmers of self-consciousness in him, the "*homo-sapiens*" has been a problem to himself—an intriguing and challenging, elusive and persistent problem. Being genuinely curious about himself and his kind, he is engaged in a perennial quest for his essence, for the meaning and purpose of his life, for his origin and destiny. Through the ages, cascades of questions have been asked by man about man and are still being asked—because many of them have remained unanswered. Indeed, every age does, and must, pose these questions anew and seek its own answers, taking into account all the changes and challenges, promises and pitfalls peculiar to the age. Every age and every culture needs to develop what Julian Huxley has called a "Science of human possibilities", in the light of which it may create its own future.

What is man? An aberrant primate, or a fallen angel? The consummation of evolution, the acme of creation, or speck of dust on this soap-bubble universe? A glorified beast or made in the image of God? Does he come to this world trailing clouds of glory or burdened with the original sin? Is he a free and responsible moral agent, or a plaything in the hands of destiny? Is he a solitary or a social animal? Are his foremost virtues and graces primarily social or private? Does he find himself in creative self-expression or in selfless service of his fellows? Is he a creature of circumstances or an architect of his own life? Does he live by reason alone, or is he led by the elusive unconscious? Is his personality—which is perhaps his supreme glory—a datum or an achievement? Is he wholly educable or only partially so? What is the secret of his unconquerable mind and spirit? Should they be explained in reductionist terms, as

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cosmic categories, or as distinctively human-attributes and phenomena? Is it possible for man to dispel the darkness within and conquer the chaos without or is he fated to fall into the abyss of beastliness which he himself has built? Will he ever be able to lead an authentic existence, or be condemned to live forever as a being self-alienated and alienated from his fellows? Is it justified—and possible—to conceive an essential unity of mankind, or is there only a functional unity? Or is it man's lot to be left adrift on a sea of loneliness? Should man's superiority to other species be judged by his being a master of nature or a captain of his soul? Will man, ultimately, let himself be gobbled up by the Frankenstein's monster—the highly refined techniques of destruction, physical and spiritual—or will he rise above the increasingly mechanical, mercenary and dehumanizing tendencies and trends of his age? In other words, can his latent humanity triumph over the beast in him? And finally where does he stand in relation to the cosmic powers that be?

These and many other questions about himself and his race have long been troubling the mind of man, because man is, above all, a self-questioning animal. But at present, these crucial questions have acquired an unprecedented urgency and relevance. If modern man wants to improve the waste-land in which he is living, he must have before himself a creative perspective of the future. And no vision of the future can be meaningful and adequate without a clear, coherent and consistent concept of man and his excellence. Moreover, the reaffirmation of the essential unity of mankind in the light of universal concept of man is the crying need of a world torn with strifes and stresses. Today the race is between self-knowledge and self-mastery on the one hand and self-annihilation on the other.

The ever-increasing multiplicity of various disciplines engaged in the study of man, leading to a plentitude of ideas is a healthy sign, no doubt. But the lack of co-ordination and communication between them leads to lop-sided views about man. What Max Scheler said almost forty years ago is still applicable to the situation obtaining today. "In no other period of human knowledge, has man ever become more problematic

to himself than in our own days. We have a scientific, a philosophical and theological anthropology that know nothing of each other. Therefore, we no longer possess any clear and consistent idea of man."

A genuine dialogue is yet to be established between various social and humanistic disciplines concerned with the study of man, since each of them concentrates on one particular dimension of man. But as someone has so aptly said: "If we know only one narrow dimension of man, we do not know even that." No doubt a considerable wealth of knowledge about different facets of man has been amassed through the ages as a result of the valuable studies of numerous specialists. But there is a very real danger of our losing sight of man in the bewildering thicket of facts and fancies about him. Therefore, the pressing task, today, is to gather the diffused and dispersed rays of understanding and insight to illumine this thick foliage so that the whole man—not the dismembered creature—may be seen in all his diversity, complexity and multi-dimensionality. Perhaps the tendency on the part of several disciplines to lay an inordinate emphasis on their respective methods is an obstacle in the way of an open-minded, constant dialogue between different approaches to man. This excessive emphasis has created a veritable mystique of method within certain disciplines which is held almost sacrosanct by the devotees. And that is quite justified up to a certain point. However, a concerted and concentrated effort should be made by different students of man to ensure that the end is not relegated to the background and the means is not allowed to reign supreme. Thus, what is envisaged here is not a uniformity of method but a unity of purpose.

Indeed, the importance of different modes of inquiry into the nature of man can hardly be over emphasized. No testimony to human nature should be dismissed out of court. And that is precisely because man is a complex and unique creature, carrying within himself an entire universe; suspended in Pascal's words "between the infinite and the infinitesimal"; at once a child of the earth and of the starry heavens; continuous with nature, yet transcending it through his gifts of historical

consciousness and creative imagination, his conceptual thought and the freedom of his mind and spirit. Thus, empirical and the introspective, the rational and the intuitive, the historical and the imaginative modes of studying man should be considered complementary, not contradictory.

Like other objects, man can also be studied by the scientific method—and with rewarding results. We owe much that is concrete, reliable and precise in our knowledge of the origin of man, the processes of his development, and his psychological potentialities, to the scientific method applied to the study of man. And yet, the empirical method can be useful in building up a rounded and balanced concept of man, only upto a point. An immediate and intimate awareness by himself, of his mental processes, his feelings and emotions, must be an integral part of the concept of man. Man is not merely an object. He is also—and primarily—a subject in search of himself. There, he cannot lend himself to objectification all along the line. Neither can he be explained and understood by invoking the sub-human categories. An approach to man based merely on his animal origin is no more than a reductive or genetic fallacy. A view of man which does not take into account his past failures and achievements, his present problems and predicaments, as well as his future possibilities and potentialities is awfully lacking both in depth and range.

The social sciences, including psychology, sociology, anthropology, political science and psycho-analysis, have all contributed amply and richly to the treasure-house of man's knowledge of himself penetrating-searchlights on different aspects of facets of man, studying him as a psycho-somatic organism, a member of society, a creature and creator of culture, a political animal and a being driven by unconscious motives and drives hidden deep in the psyche. However, each of them provides a somewhat piece-meal picture of man and needs to be supplemented by other approaches.

Philosophy provides a more comprehensive outlook on man. Much that is profound, and meaningful, and broad in our understanding of man is the gift of the philosophic method and outlook. As against the one-sided approach of many other

disciplines, philosophy brings a broader and more integrated vision of man. However, the danger of abstraction is always present, even if latent, in this approach to the phenomenon of man. The pulsating life of man in all its concreteness, diversity and resplendence cannot quite be reflected in the cold light of reason, or captured by the flights of abstract speculation. Thus, even philosophy cannot claim an exclusive right over the interpretation of man.

Art and literature can, no doubt, create pictures of man with warm shades and hues. The gamut of human relations, passions and emotions can best be revealed in and through literature. The best literature of all ages is characterized by uniqueness, individuality and concreteness on the one hand, and universality on the other. The poets, playwrights and novelists can give us clearer glimpses of human nature and provide us with a deeper insight into the mystery that is man, than many a sage and scientist can. Who has ever illuminated the dark recesses of human soul better than a Dostoevsky? Who has ever portrayed man in all his squalor and splendour, his follies and glories, his villainy and heroics, better than a Shakespeare? And who can describe the anguish and loneliness of the modern man in a more soul-stirring manner than a Camus or Sartre? By heightening and intensifying our experience of the many-coloured episode that is human life, literature can be a great help in our attempt to elucidate our concept of man... Cassirer has made a forceful case for art and history—as “the most powerful instruments in our inquiry into human nature”. And I cannot do better than to quote him at some length. “Without them,” he wrote, “our picture of man would remain inert and colourless. We should only find the ‘average’ man. In the great works of history and art we begin to see behind this mask of the conventional man the features of the real individual man. In order to find him we must go to the great historians or the great poets... poetry is not a mere imitation of nature, history is not a narration of dead facts and events. History as well as literature is an organ of our self-knowledge, an indispensable instrument in building up our human universe.”

However, even literature cannot feed on itself. Its insight into human reality must be deepened, and its range must be perpetually widened, by vital contacts with the psychological, social and philosophical currents of thought.

Thus, no simple or single "formula", no isolated viewpoint and no one-sided approach can do justice to the concept of man. Man has many layers of being, many modes of functioning, many levels of meaning and, as such, deserved a comprehensive, all embracing, multi-sided approach. Perhaps, education as a discipline can be a point of confluence for these different streams of thought, because it has neither a rigidly confined subject-matter nor a religiously-cherished method of its own. It draws freely upon diverse social, humanistic and even scientific disciplines, aiming to weave their multi-coloured strands into a harmonious pattern which may be given the name of educational theory. Thus, the very nebulousness of education makes it an ideal meeting-ground for methods and approaches as remote from one another as the empirical and the imaginative, for instance. Different polarities in search of man, therefore, may come together in the sphere of education. Hence, it is only fit and proper that the Department of Education should organize an interdisciplinary Seminar, whose primary object is to facilitate a meeting of minds on the Concept of Man—the supreme concern of educational theory and practice.