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On Man's Making the World and Himself

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INCREASING NUMBERS of people nowadays are concerned about themselves as persons. The immediacy and constancy of their concern show that they recognize a primacy in themselves; yet it is a primacy which they seemingly do not know how to exercise. The difficulty is all the more acute because, as many clear-sighted commentators have suggested, man is somehow persecuting himself. The results of his own activities seem to make it increasingly difficult for him to be himself. The solution to the troubles we are describing awaits our realization that we can neither fulfil nor produce ourselves, in any final sense, by the scientific and technocratic methods characteristic of our age. Yet, with a hope in science, which is becoming increasingly mythological in character, many people feel obliged to try to live exclusively within the world defined by man's scientific activities.

The physical and mathematical sciences are rigorous and abstract disciplines whose clarity is proportioned to their abstractness. The trick man plays on himself is to argue that, because of the type of clarity these sciences have, their abstract viewpoints must be prior to all else in reality, even in *his* reality. The uneasy situation in which man finds himself today is the direct result of the attempt to make the immediately experienced primacy of himself as a person coincide with, or try to live within, the abstractions of science.

Treating man as a thing among things, looking at him as if he were only a special kind of thing, ends by making personal living superfluous and impossible. Man behaves differently from the material objects science studies. The fact that man has developed a science, which things have not produced for themselves, shows that he is basically different from things. Yet the paradoxical fact remains that in his scientific activity—in the realm in which he is obviously different from things—he frequently tries to explain himself totally in their terms. In an area of his life made possible only by his freedom and autonomy, man, in the name of "enlightenment," thus tries to deny the true basis of his scientific endeavours.

Roger Mehl has written: "The paradox of scientific research is to require of the expert an activity of effacement. The truth will be so much the better attained as the researcher will have known how to reduce his ambitions, his experiences, and to place himself in conditions which are a denaturation of the true human state. . . ."[1] What many people nowadays forget is that, the results of scientific investigation notwithstanding, the "activity of effacement" of which M. Mehl speaks is itself an act of deliberate

1. Roger Mehl, *La condition du philosophe chrétien* (Neuchâtel: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1947), p. 39.

personal choice. The primary conditions of specialized scientific thinking, taken as a whole, always depends on man, as he is an autonomous person, even if some of the specific results of science do not. It is only to the extent that other people are willing to make the same antecedent choice as the scientist that they are able to recognize the formal value of scientific facts.

That man cannot actually live the formal denial of himself which the results of his abstract science prompt him to make is a major source of his present malaise in the world. The anonymity which the scientific and technocratic methods foster contradicts contemporary man's most immediate experience of himself as a person. One cannot help but limp if he tries to walk through life with one foot on the sidewalk of personal identity and the other foot in the "gutter" of scientific anonymity.

Science puts man in a world, but it is a scientific world. There is nothing wrong with such a world. It is good in itself and much additional good has come from it. The difficulty is that, although good, it is inadequate. The insight which so many of our contemporaries lack is the recognition that the so-called scientific world is in itself a derivative world; it is sustained and found within another world prior to and more complete than it. As a given collection of abstract statements the scientific world-view certainly depends upon man.

We do not get newer dimensions of living from formal science, but fewer. *Life-dimensions* are concrete, qualitative wholes. They add richness and fulness to life by offering new totalities within which man can live in the totality of his being. In its formal activity science does not add richness to our lives; it abstracts from that richness. The impressive development of science in recent years has not added any new rooms to the house of our lived world. Still less has it offered us a house that is totally different from our ordinary lived world. We cannot step *into* science as we can into a room of our house and discover new areas of personal living. Science is written on the walls of our already-existing rooms and is carried on within them; it has not put a new addition on our house as a whole.

The *n* dimensions of mathematics, for example, are not new dimensions of personal living. They define the *limits* of our personal lives much more than they provide new dimensions for those lives. The "world of science" is one into which we cannot step—it is literally a "no man's land," to use Georges Gusdorf's description—but because it gives us valid insights into certain aspects of the world in which we live, it can change what we do within *that* world. There is, however, a tremendous difference between changing what goes on within a world and changing the world itself. Science abstracts from the concreteness of the lived world; it, as a formal object, has fewer dimensions of being than the men who produce it. The attempt to derive man in his fulness from the results of his own abstract investigations is analogous to trying to draw depth from a surface, to wondering why we have no room to live deep lives in a two-dimensional continuum.

We must remember that man always *finds* himself in a world. A world

is presented to him with his being. In some unique sense, the world in which we so find ourselves must be *man's* world, for only in it can he be himself. What we have said is not to deny that man can change this world. There is, in fact, a two-way influence: from man to the world, from the world to man. The important thing is that the world which is somehow correlative with man is the only world sufficient for him.

Contemporary man has lost the nerve that is necessary to live in *his* world. He wants to fabricate a world according to his own design; one in which he will be safe from the dangers which confront him in the fulness of reality. In man's real world he must take a chance. He must dare to be himself; he must at times commit himself morally to such a degree that there can be no compromise within his decision. Such a world is not always a place of comfort, but it is the only kind of environment within which truly personal growth can occur. Thinking that he has already grown, present-day man is more anxious to protect himself than to be himself. He does not realize that to be a man means to have a destiny at every moment which can be either won or lost.

In order for there to be a primacy of the person there must be a primacy of the person's world. That world is the world of values. The greatest danger facing man is that he will be devalued, will be shorn of value, will try to live without value. Yet such devaluation is exactly what he is doing to himself in the activities of which he is most proud, namely, in the physical and mathematical sciences. The devaluation of the human world by physical science has gone so far that in many quarters people think the realm of fact is totally distinct and separate from the realm of value. If we are troubled with a question of fact, we are told that science can handle the matter. Since facts are stable and objective, and since descriptions of fact are the product of science, values are held to be subjective, arbitrary opinions men project into the world. There is common agreement that all judgments about the importance of things are value-judgments; to say that something is important to us is to say that it has value for us. The difficulty is that, taking all the just-mentioned views together, we are left with a position which says that what is important for man has no necessary connection with facts, and what is valuable for man can have no objective stability.

There is some truth in all the opinions we have just stated. Human values are not the same as scientific facts, but that need not imply that such values have no relation to facts or that scientific facts have no value in themselves. There is a sense in which the highest values for man depend upon his free decisions, but that need not imply that such values are arbitrary options. That there are facts upon which one can base a description of the proper values for man does not in any way relieve man of the responsibility of actually choosing those values if they are actually to be realized in him and in the world.

As an actualizer and experiencer of value man most completely escapes the bounds of science. Science has an important role to play in the delibera-

tions from which man's value-judgments result, but science cannot control those judgments by itself because it abstracts from too much of man in carrying out its own activities. The realm of value is the realm of participation; as such, it is always immediate and experiental in nature. Truly human values involve the total participation of the whole man. That wholeness transcends science and cannot be produced by science.

Value is fulfilment; it signifies the satisfaction and completion of tendencies. As such, value is always—and only—found at the level of living, acting being. Food is good or has value for me in so far as it satisfies my hunger. There are, to be sure, reasons why food satisfies my hunger. These reasons can be systematized and described in the special sciences, such as chemistry, physics, biology, and nutrition. Nevertheless, these descriptions, no matter how complete and accurate, are not themselves the actual satisfying of hunger. For that reason they have no value for me as food; they are no good to me when I am hungry. As an existing subject, both I and my needs transcend description. The scientific description of the passage of food in my mouth and digestive tract is a totally inadequate substitute for the goodness and value of food itself. The value of food comes from the fulfilment and actualization which it brings; that actualization is not unrelated to the scientific description of the facts, although it is certainly different from such a description. Any attempt to substitute descriptions of man for human value destroys man as an actually living entity; any attempt totally to separate human value from a rational description of the world reduces his personal life to blind caprice.

Man's destiny unfolds and must be worked out in history because it is a search for value. To find value is to participate in a good. Destiny is a life-quest; it is a challenge to live fully, and it, in turn, must be fully lived. To discover value is to "belong." Can we not see an obvious connection between man's present disdain of value and his feeling of not really belonging in the world? The need to "humanize the world" is, indeed, *man's* need. But to do this we must, first of all, not be ashamed to be men. Neither theological surfeiting nor scientific subtracting must be allowed to sublimate our true vocation as embodied persons.

Man is called to do nothing less than to make himself and to make his world. Our contemporaries are right in saying that man makes himself in making his world, for man can be himself only in a world. Correctly understood by the Christian, these statements are professions of humility and courage, not of perversion and blinding pride. Man is called to make himself and his world by the grace of God and in the order of God's providence. *What* God wills for man and *how* he wills it done must never be so stated as to obscure the fact *that* it must be done. God's command to live in a certain way, to *participate* in the fulness of reality in a certain way, cannot be avoided if man realizes that it is God's will to valorize the world through him—through his participation in the redeeming work of the Son of Man. It is in Christ that we are to become ourselves and to make the

world. Action is our destiny, but it must be Christian action—action whose sole motivation is God, not ourselves. Such action is sometimes called Christian passivity, but we must not let the word "passivity" deceive us. *Existence* is always an act; even the Scholastics knew that. Christian existence is to act like a Christian; it is a life, a living.

Many people feel estranged in the world today because of their misconception of what man's world is. First of all, man's world is not the abstract, partially devalued world of science; science is only an aspect of his world. Secondly, the world to which we truly belong is not a finished world; it is waiting to be finished, waiting to be made. We can be at home as persons in the material world only to the extent that we make that world ours by actualizing *human* values in it.

To say that man must make the world is not to deny the reality of the world; it is rather a way of affirming the nature of personal presence in a physical location. We can try to live in things, or we can try to live through them. To live through them is to be beyond them; that is exactly the status of a person. Man is related to his physical body in a similarly transcendent way. Because persons transcend *things*, things can be made to say more than they *are*. Jesus Christ dignified human life and gave new value to it. We are called to do the same thing in him. If we confine ourselves to the value in things, we shall be compelled to live in a world that is inadequate for us, if not totally foreign to us. We must use things for our purposes, transform and make personal instruments of them. As human beings, we never "have it made." Neither we nor our world are finished. The condition of man and of his world is one of constant change. Dreams of peace in the unchangeable and the static are not projections of our true goal; they are rather denials of our human status.

The stability of man comes from the constancy of the values he chooses, and so gives to the world. He hopes in vain if he expects even to draw his stability from the ceaseless flux of the material universe. It is an old insight, constantly reaffirmed in science and in our daily lives, that the material world is forever changing. Anyone who seeks security in his physical health, for example, is haunted by this knowledge. Our stability comes from God; it passes through us, to the world. We are to stabilize the world by using its constant flux as unending occasions to show God's purposes for it.

To live Christ's victory over the world is the way we remake the world. God keeps us always, but we must not expect him to keep us as we keep a thing in a museum. We are most ourselves in making responsible decisions. The God who created us sustains us only so that we can continue to make such decisions. In the highest, moral choices of man, there is no lasting value in having acted once. The most significant decisions must be made and remade throughout our lives. We are not determined once for all by an act in the past as a medal is stamped by a machine. In this fact resides our vocation, our richness, and our hope. Even the revealed life of God is, in some sense—in the highest sense—ever-active, consummating, responsible

decision. Only so can God be Love—the most intimate union of persons. We cannot expect to be Christians and at the same time pray for release from love's primary function, choosing.

As we indicated just a short time ago, our essential passivity in relation to God is one of activity in relation to the material, factual world. It is only as we transcend the natural world and its values by freely willing to give God's-value-in-Christ to it that we are the selves God created us to be. We are most with God and most in his Image as we transcend the world; transcending the world, by doing God's will in it, is the way God and we are in each other's presence as persons.

As St. Paul put it in his Second Epistle to the Corinthians: ". . . through Christ our consolation overflows" (1:5 NEB). Participation in Christ is the value which consummates our lives. While we live in him, he overflows us, and so remakes the world through us. Such a remaking of the world is its redemption and true humanization. The only way the world can be humanized is by divine help; the world becomes "fit" for man—becomes his suitable home—only by means of something more than man. But, by being made man's in this manner, the world becomes more obviously God's, for God is the source and strength of the values that constitute man.

Man is a part of the material universe, and that universe is incomplete without his lived reaction to it; he, on the other hand, is incomplete without God. Man lives God's love by completing God's world with the Son's perfections. Sharing and choosing our values in the Son, we are most truly one with each other and one with the Father. Living in this way we participate in the stability of God, whose beauty is holiness, and we participate in the work of the Son, who redeemed the world and gave us his Spirit.