

## INTELLECT AND CHRISTIANITY

***Intellect and Immortality.*** There is a traditional argument for the immortality of the soul which serves also for the intrinsic merit of the intellectual life. This is based on the close relationship between the soul and the eternal realities, which has already been considered. But in the real world as we know it, is anyone really made morally better, let alone immortal, as a result of a devotion to intellectual values, and a commitment to the truth-seeking faculty? Although some such thing has long been believed, there is a disturbing lack of evidence for it in the world of today. The most intellectual person could even be the most morally corrupted, and according to C.G.Jung the best qualities of the heart and of the head never occur in the same person. Besides, a strong intellect may be undeceived about an infinity of things and still be deceived about its possessor's relation to any number of other persons or to the purpose of intellectuality itself.

And yet there remains the simple intuition that high and universal matters are far from the mortal realm in which the commonest conflicts and corruptions arise, so that it would seem to follow that such a rarefied pursuit ought to release one from the moral traps into which most people fall. There is the old adage: "as you think, so you will be." But even that truth is endangered when the philosopher takes this to mean that he can attribute the moral purity of ideas to himself, by a direct act of choice. Nevertheless, truth and virtue are both essentially supernatural; to separate them is to devalue both of them. But just as clearly, not just any intellectual activity can suffice to realize its spiritual potential and make it a vocation in the religious sense of the word. The exact nature of one's commitment to it is both essential and hard to define.

As St. Augustine testifies, a high value has in fact been accorded to the life directed to wisdom since ancient times, and the same ideal can be seen in certain passages in the *Philokalia*:

"The intellect manifests itself in the soul, and nature in the body. The soul is divinized through the intellect, but the nature of the body makes the soul grow slack. Nature is present in all bodies, but intellect is not present in every soul; and so not every soul is saved." And:

"The soul is in the world because it is begotten; but the intellect transcends the world, because it is unbegotten."

(*Philokalia*, vol.1, St. Anthony the Great, "On the character of men," 135 & 136.

The attribution of this text to St. Anthony is disputed, mainly because of the idea of some part of us being unbegotten, and therefore presumably uncreated. Nevertheless, something important is being referred to here, namely, that the intellectual faculty in mankind has a perfection equivalent to that of the Forms to which it relates. Even though it is not self-existent as God is, (i.e. its non-existence is conceivable), it does not participate in the relativities of nature as one's bodily life does. We cannot say it is literally uncreated, therefore, but it still belongs to a higher order of creation than that of the creatures in nature, and that can justify what is said of it in the above texts, even though they may be lacking in precision.

I have also referred to the spiritual role of the intellect in *Foundations of Free Will*, to maintain that it could not be part of creation in general and still be meaningful, but rather that a faculty of the human soul making it capable of relating to intellect is delegated by the Creator to all those whose souls are rational by nature, if not by choice. This special status of the intellect means that it must be above the level of being on which sinful propensities and actions arise. This fact alone would support the conclusion that the more one is involved with it, the more it should remove one from moral and spiritual error. This would clearly support what is said of it in the above text.

The soul's intellectual faculty, or *synderesis*, is a mean between the natural and the supernatural, so that its Divine or supernatural powers are objectively real, and that is why it is equated with God in cultures where God's revelation of Himself is not known. Philip Sherrard treats this reality as follows:

"[patristic] theologians do recognize the presence in man of something which, if it is not divine, is yet not undivine; which if it is not uncreated, is yet not created." This, he says, is "a point of unity between his (man's) spirit and the spirit of God: some organ on the borders, so to speak, of the created and the uncreated." (*The Rape of Man and Nature*, Ch.1, p.32)

The reason Sherrard gives for this reality is that, without it, a huge amount of recorded Christian spiritual experience would be without meaning and without foundation.

Without the transcendent intellect all accounts of spiritual experience could only be more or less disguised forms of moralizing in relation to the natural life common to all. Here, then, is the issue upon which the argument of St. Augustine from knowledge of eternal truths (see *Soliloquies*. . .) comes to a head: the soul is naturally united to the intellectual faculty, and the intellect is outside nature and creation. Augustine did not take the argument explicitly to the above conclusion, that the intellect is as eternal as the eternal realities it knows, and that the soul is so likewise by participation. The True Itself, the Beautiful Itself, the Just Itself are, like all the Forms, divine without any implication that they are God, and the same applies to the rational soul. One speaks of the soul's "intellectual faculty" because it cannot be equated with the *Nous* since it is always capable of error.

[This conclusion concerning the *Nous* is also the crux of the difference between Platonism and Christianity on the one hand, and the monistic theory of Advaita Vedanta on the other. Its ignoring of the difference between the divine and God as such makes Advaita doctrine look like a mutilated and crudely simplified form of Platonism].

***Living the Truth.*** In relation to the above argument, it can be known *a priori* that God's primary purpose for mankind must be something of which only the human being is capable, besides what goes with the moral criteria which apply to everyone, or the basics of religion, because no one is ever free from the need for grace, however well-defined the task of intellect may be for some persons.

The intellectual faculty's lack of direct or intrinsic involvement in the external world means that it transcends the purposes that are pursued out there while still remaining applicable to them. The rarity of the vocational choice based on it comes from the problem that most people are unable to enjoy the use of ideas. What makes that very strange is the fact that to those who do have this vocation, it is enjoyable enough for it to be a reason for living. Something open to all, and ever-present, is thus a delight to some, and a boring irrelevance to others; the feast of truth is there, but the majority prefer to starve. This kind of inequality is indeed a mystery. It may even be imposed by the Creator as a condition for the continuation of the material world.

The best thing to do in response to this is to explain what is involved in a way which can dispel the doubts and prejudices which it so unnaturally arouses.

There are few who have any idea as to what the philosophic ideal is. It is to realize, however imperfectly, the operative role of the intellect in the personality. This role is manifest in a personality which identifies with the intellect in such a way that the needs of the latter decide

the direction of the will as much or more than the inputs from the subconscious. A personality whose priorities are ordered in this way, with the work of the mind coming first, makes intelligence in a sense incarnate in the individual. This means a reversal of an effect of the Fall, which brought all our faculties down to the same level, instead of being a hierarchy headed by the intellect. There are countless other things on which one may centre one's identity, but this one is in a central position in relation to them all, and that accounts for its special dignity. Conversely, a personality which fails to connect with its intellectual faculty is too close to animality to be truly human.

The main issue, then, is a practical realization of spirit, no matter how great or small the powers of the intellect may be, and how much or how little it is in a position to do, given only that its values come first. Prioritization is the essential condition, where the true and the good are sought for their own sake, in a way which is free from the usual concerns of earning money and seeking status in social and professional hierarchies, and also free from egotistic and unprovable merits like originality. In this regard, there is some truth in the saying that "the best is the enemy of the good," since exceptional intellectual powers, having an impact on the external world, often cause people to despise their own intellectual potential and the spirituality it gives rise to.

Whatever the capacity of any given intellectual faculty, the constant factor is that one knows the truth, loves to know it, and that this knowing and loving rule the direction

of one's life. Where the intellect has this kind of influence on the will, it can rightly be called "operative." If this possibility is ignored, one's personality will still be ruled by something, or some things, which are more than likely to be either objects of perception or of imagination, and therefore peripheral to the real self. In such cases, the self gives up the right to be ruled by something that belongs to its own essence, i.e. its natural form of self-government.

The realization of spirit must be understood as both moral and intellectual equally: according to Jacob Needleman (see *The Heart of Philosophy*, pp.234-235), this is exemplified by the pursuit of truth, which he says is the only truly unselfish activity available for most people most of the time. In this case, its spiritual value would be beyond question, but this seems to be opposed by the fact that most lives are filled with doing things for others, especially in their families, and the fulfilling of obligations. But the problem with all such unselfishness of a social kind is that one can hardly ever determine how much of one's activity is for others and how much for oneself. Given the confusions possible here, such interpersonal unselfishness cannot be morally pure, however demanding it may be.

That defect could only be avoided in some kinds of service which involve continual privation and even suffering, such as some missionaries have shown, but there are not many takers for that option. The pursuit of truth for its own sake, however, has the same moral purity, besides which it does not involve suffering, either in oneself or in anyone

else, which makes it all the more remarkable that there are not many more takers for the Truth Option than for the morally heroic one. Why should a spirituality available for nearly everyone be so neglected when it can easily be a source of happiness as well? Some lose the moral ideal for the sake of some kinds of happiness, and some lose happiness for the sake of the moral ideal, but to ignore the intellectual way is to lose both a real happiness and the moral ideal at the same time. The answer may sound paradoxical: that most people do not really want happiness, but want only things which are taken to *symbolize* happiness in popular opinion, not the thing itself. (ref. John Cowper-Powys, *A Philosophy of Solitude* Ch )

To opt for real happiness would mean putting aside the point of view of those who do not want it, and that would mean ceasing to be controlled by the herd-instinct. That could only be done with a conscious reliance on God which would be very unusual in today's world, and it shows that one may have to suffer in order to be happy. Control by the herd-instinct is a collective manifestation of an individual subjection to the subconscious in those who are affected in this way. The individual faculties of reason, imagination and feeling operate between the intellect and the subconscious, the one being "above" the sensory world and the other being "beneath" it. The philosopher's commitment to the intellect means that he aims not to be controlled any more than partially by the subconscious, as the impulses of the latter are counteracted from the intuitions of the intellect, which are consciously cultivated.

The pursuit of truth for its own sake is a practice which

could form part of religion as much as of philosophy, but why should the two be separated? In religion, one's activities and experiences are "self-filtered" on moral grounds so as to keep in touch with the religious ideal. The philosopher accepts this kind of filtering, but adds one more filtration of experience to it, this time on intellectual grounds. This is because ignorance and irrationality can be seen to make war against the good of the soul as much as moral wrongs, and they are in any case closely related. On this basis, philosophy could be said to have a higher ideal, but in fact both sides claim the higher ideal.

For Christianity, it could be objected that the philosopher is hiding himself from living life to the full, so that he is only better by being diminished. This objection is however, only too similar to the objection that pagans raise against religious life: it is too narrow and dull, makes you less than yourself, and allows people to be ruled by fear. To answer this, one must explain why the moral "filtration" is all we can really need. Besides, one must explain why the limitation of life on moral grounds is benign in a way in which the intellectual limitation is not.

There is probably no conclusive answer to this issue; if it is said that man is made in the image of God, philosophy could be a kind of supererogation, something which God has not commanded, but the Divine image is to a large extent in need of being realized in human form, and neither the moral nor the intellectual capacity is enough for this by itself.

It will be said that this option requires too much time, which is always needed for earning a living, but here again, this is simply a matter of priorities, or "quality time," not quantity. Thus the time spent on truth and wisdom, be it long or short, is in any case the focal point of one's day and the justification of the rest of it. Even so, this may still be too simple an answer, because the mere fact of significantly different priorities from those of one's contemporaries, even if nothing was said about it, can still be sensed instinctively, and is therefore liable to invite rejection. This is the point at which the world's evil must be confronted, and prayerfully, so as not to succumb to obsessions of evil directed specifically at oneself, and not at mankind in general.

It is remarkable how sensitive most people are to the presence of those who are not conflicting with them but simply not going the same way as they are, and it exposes the fact that they know at heart that their choice of life is not a very good one, hence the irritation caused by those who live by a different rule. The different rule requires a defiance of herd-instinct: self-justification is nearly always felt to be based on being like one's contemporaries, and not on the light of the individual mind and heart. This kind of conflict can be aroused by nothing more than a quiet belief in God, in an ethos of unbelief, but it is all part of the conflict between light and darkness, and when it can be seen to be so, the difficulty of facing it is much reduced.

When the usual way of life is more democratic than this, the intellect is allowed a decisive role only sporadically, as one option among others, but in those who accept its

leading role, its presence in the person is realized in a practical manner. This is morally demanding for the reasons just referred to, but it is truly a state of "realization" in a much more objective and meaningful way than in the impenetrably vague utterances about "realization" by Guenon and his "Perennialist" followers, who took it over almost unchanged from Theosophism. It is as though Guenon knew that those who made up his audience had to be offered something quasi-magical here, because they were not open to the long-term moral effort required by commitment to the intellectual vocation; on the contrary, it merely insinuates that one no longer need do anything. The typically modern character will try anything for five minutes, in the manner of a tourist who will stay anywhere for a week. In any case, none of the Guénonians ever say anything about their "realizations" that would indicate any knowledge as to what it might be, but this very lack of definition appeals to "eternal tourists" whose interest in religion goes only this far.

When the intellect is employed and identified with in the above manner, one's relation to it works in a way which parallels the way in which remembrance of God works in religion, and invites comparisons. In religious practice, experience is filtered only to exclude what is hostile to faith and morals, whereas in the philosophic life the filtering is extended to exclude things that would make the work of the intelligence ineffectual or domesticate the irrational. Intellectuality therefore has too much in common with religion to make itself self-sufficient, not least because the lone individual, however intelligent, never has anything like complete self-vision, and that means one is always subject to deceptions and pressures which can only be

overcome by an external obedience to an authority of Divine origin. Even if this were not true in theory, it nearly always is in practice, and this dependence on the external form of the Divine is not reduced by the rights the individual may have against the materialism of society.

With that said, the work of operative intellect, or "philosophy" in the essential sense of the word, is a realization of the redemptive function of religion in an intelligible and self-directed form within the human microcosm. This is a life which is modelled on Christ's Incarnation in a transparent way, since whoever is an image of the Logos will have a function in the world which parallels that of the Divine. Formalism in such a life is scarcely possible, since there is hardly any interval between the Incarnation and the kind of intellectual way which is an instantiation of it.