

## SPIRITUAL PROGRESS AND THINGS MODERN

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OUR truer progress is that advance of inward enlightenment and spiritual delicacy which holds no brief for mischief, folly or atavistic impulses. It makes no base concessions to bare physical acquisitions nor does it offer any loud eulogy on the material perfection of external things. Its applauded achievements indeed are usually found formally set up in the vulgar world of sense and tangible quantity, but seldom in the nobler world of spirit and intangible powers of character. The speed and luxury of our living lend no credential to our truer progress, though they do seem to command quite an extensive clientele among the world's elect. As being listed among the leading causes of most of our modern chaos and corruption they are really rather antithetical and exclusive of any actual achievement of the good, any real improvement in the life or character of man. They surely enough do lend a goodly store of prestige to our fine exteriors, our dress and diplomatic manner of gaining a livelihood; they foster further patronage of the physical follies and mechanical mischiefs with which our modern days so raucously resound, but they most certainly fail to nurture any noble courage, they lend but feeble support to moral fibre even when it has miraculously become somewhat matured, and they almost wholly miss the aim of any generous social temper, any philosophical refinement, any friendly devotion, or any spiritual aspiration.

Life's highest ideal is not one of the Horation *otium cum dignitate*, but one of toil and love, thought and courage, faith and generosity. Life can get along without dignity with fair success and happiness, but not without energetic activity, the enthusiastic effort to achieve some great ambition, some work of art or science, some

worthwhile social fellowship. Even a retired gentleman should still take sufficient exercise to keep fit for the struggle which gives zest and fascination to life. Whether it be in modern Massachusetts or in ancient China our conception of a gentleman is of one who is actively concerned in some worthy work or cause, one who is honorable, intelligent, kind, just, industrious, and free from all petty rivalries, vulgar aims and plays for favor. He has conscious purpose to stay on the path of virtue, to follow Nature's laws, to trust in God and love his fellow man; he never feels that the Universe was made for him alone, seeing everywhere Divine Providence, intelligence, physical powers and sensory endowments rully as significant and useful in the insects and lower animal world as in his own. Like the mystic he knows that no man gains his point by denying reality or otherwise trying to tear the great truths and beauties from Nature's brow, only to trample them in the dirt of his own foul enterprises.

Justice, rectitude, honesty, beauty, truth, love, courage, faith—all these are the great facts and values of human life; they cannot be rendered any less real or valuable because of some scoundrel's spoliation of them, they cannot ever be blamed for the shrewd advantage some clever hypocrite takes of them. But to have them warm and living within one's bosom, giving daily expression to them in one's whole conduct of life—that is ideal and exemplary, that is commendable and worthy of emulation. Cold negation, doubt and sloth are culpable of practically all the wrongs which desecrate man's eminent domain; they hatch up mischiefs first in embryo which if left alone would have stayed quite harmless and impotent. If the whole Universe were of truly cynic mold the desolation and sterility would not match that of the sceptic's soul when he denies the very things which color and fertilize his life. It is not the Universe which is author of whatever evil and corruption spoliates the world; it is man's own devilish devices, his sophist scheming for success, his vandal vice and vulgar motivations. There is no cosmic chaos, no general disorder in Nature, she going always about her business with strict attention to law and order; but man's affairs are ever in a mess, either ready for revolt or on the verge of other dire disaster. Man's acquisitions pain him more than all the ruthless power of Nature, for he so often tries to force his will upon her kind yet austere disposition and she in turn pronounces judgment with no

regard to his petty plots and private purposes. No matter how sentimental or sorrowing a man is, Nature looks on and decides his true deserts; man's pain and suffering are usually results of his own mischief, and do not fall upon him because of any malice or vengeance on the part of Nature. Modern man, it seems, is the weakest and most ignorant of any age yet listed in the weary chronicle of civilization; his spiritual culture is as yet mostly a sham procedure of specious prestige, he is conscious of no pre-existence and is little concerned in his posthumous pilgrimage; he is ever ready to exaggerate his petty philosophical powers but is still always afraid to be poor, never afraid of the insatiable demands of a false culture but cringing forever in despair lest his private patrimony, his meagre material attachments shall be swept away.

This, I truly believe, as did William James in one of his charming moods, is one of the worst faults and fallacies of the modern world, and of the educated classes especially. If nothing else mattered, it would still be a deplorable condition because it minimizes our less worldly ambitions; it thwarts our nobler purposes, cools our passion for spiritual goods and brutally discounts the faith of reverent people everywhere. Devotion to the material world can never show an unswerving fidelity and devotion such as may be read into that Francesca da Rimini and Paola episode anticipated fifty thousand years ago in the archeological findings of the Grimaldi skeletons, two crouching lovers holding fond embrace even in death, they seeming to have been buried alive. Even the clumsy machinery of modern educational methods, even so overly emphasized and stulticated as they have been of late, is fast failing to produce anything but philistines and fools whose mercenary palms forever itch for an easy living. Those grand and lovely spirits of yesteryear seem grown extinct, and all those kind heroic souls who used to counsel and console us seem forgotten by the wayside while the speeding pleasure cars and heavy motor trucks pass to and fro. But few and lonely as we find them, they are occasionally at hand in times of need and still give inspiration and encouragement to our tragic cycle of existence. Their ways still charm the tastes of the elect, their heroism still throbs immortal in the breasts of those not yet wholly debauched by the maddening hedonism of the age. The pedagogue of today, like the demagogue of an obsolete political policy, can waste his creed on simple putty minds, but he has no tools to hew a marble

shaft in commemoration of man's martyrdom for beauty, truth, honor, love and justice.

An honest educational method will look to the wisdom of its ideals, it will examine and validate the efficiency of its apparatus, for these are what it works with, these are its patterns to follow in prospect of achievements worthwhile. No age can be counted truly great or strong whose leaders are mercenary or corrupt, whose heroes are vulgar, mediocre or selfish. It may be an age lavishly spending its forces and resources on material monuments to its industry and conquests over Nature, but it will still be an age practically devoid of spiritual achievement, practically still ignorant, narrowminded and irreverent. Saints and sages know the cause and remedy for this condition, but their counsels are invariably ridiculed and repulsed. Nevertheless, our own is just such an age, and I would advise simply this: that it might as well be honest at least with itself and see that these would-be "high points" of modern power and prestige are moral defects rather than powers of character, that their true nature, like *its* actual disposition and policy, is superficial and selfish rather than sturdy and heroic. No national strength or adequate self-defense can be built thereon, and in the event of trial or impending disaster what trust can be put upon a people who are born in a brutal environment, reared up in rhyomistic schools, given individual maxims in how to realize a specious happiness philosophy, and hence have no definite or decisive sense of cosmic unity, national safety or social duty at heart? And yet we can get away from mediocrity and the false democracy of the proletariat by still honoring and emulating that fast diminishing aristocracy of the wise, the virtuous, the heroic and the just.

Emerson says that all things are known to the soul in her native realm, that although we cannot know all her natural history as a circulating power in the Universe, yet we do know that she partakes the general warmth of Nature and the Divine Intelligence of God. Thus are the sense-world devotees, empirical scientists, and worldly fools generally, rebuked for claiming that there are no such things as innate ideas, no spiritual economy or strictly moral conscience underlying man's superficial physical life. It is just these subtle presences which prevent our life from being chaotic and insane; it is just our recognition or at least our power to recognize the possibilities of Nature which keep us in touch with the overworld, and

make us relish mystic raptures and consider them common sense. Bare sensory experience and physiological function are not enough, we still require the additional process of spirit to give us patterns of philosophy with which to lend meaning and system to our various points of contact with reality. The soul is a unit of cosmic energy, and it partakes of the three principles of such energy, viz: creative spontaneity, continuity and integrity.

In a very portly volume of 875 pages, Dr. John M. Macfarlane has compiled forty years research and study in the deductions and inductions of modern evolutionism, a science which he has appropriately named Bionergics. It is noteworthy that he sees in continuity the great organizing power of the Universe, a principle to be recognized as of extreme importance even in morality and religion (a point quite distinctly brought out and emphasized by Drummond). No system of philosophy can afford to deny the spiritual side of man's nature, for *that* is what gives him any philosophical power at all, because it is part and parcel of the cosmic sobriety, its integrity and spontaneous activity being man's chief credentials for immortality. This, I believe, accounts in a large measure for the universal esteem which all honest scholars and thinkers feel toward Denmark's great sage, Harold Höffding, whom the French Comptists mistakenly called "notre ami Effdong."

Emile Boutroux, however, is a French philosopher who tries another tactical route for getting at the problem of how to make spiritual progress against an adverse world. His recent work on *The Contingency of the Laws of Nature* comprises the metaphysical magic of a philosopher who admirably, but with questionable success contends against the many restrictions of human intellectual capacity, the fallibility of logical establishments, and the inscrutable dominance of death. He finds that the actual and unavoidable fact is that man is a finite center of life or of that sphere which offers possibilities of intelligent interest and experience; man really is no match as yet for the ruthless vandal power of Nature, his petty wishes and impotent will being always brushed aside in the vast decisions and disasters of natural procedure. The illusion of self-determination, like the delusion of self-importance, is the film which dims our metaphysical as well as our realistic and impressionistic vision. Boutroux asks, Is the Universe absolute and necessitarian; is its code of laws inflexible and mechanically precise in its fatal

eventuations? Or is it an open Universe; an infinite vale of possibility, creative freedom, dramatic conflict, spontaneous will and ultimate (though hardly efficient or economically worthwhile) success? Thus do we look through the Cosmos for just those qualities and characteristics which we wish to cultivate in our souls; but if we are allowed to develop a sense of duty, integrity, justice, love and accurate judgment, it seems quite reasonable to think that these are already existent qualities in the natural world, the structure of the Universe.

Accordingly we find good grounds for arguing that stability and necessity are no more fundamental characteristics of the Universe than change and contingency. We find that there are many phases of disparate existence, many separate cycles of reality; we find that the Universe is plurally real in the sense that there are several systems or spheres of action whose functions are as separate as their structures. Even our own may be analyzed and found to consist in many lesser domains such as those of the possible, the existential, notional, material, living, thinking, social and spiritual worlds. By dint of natural law they fall into a ready order and upward progress of amplitude and power. Each has its own degree of freedom to act, its own skill-limits and action-patterns, its own proportion of the Universal Fund of creative spontaneity, continuity and integrity; and therefore the amount of contingency present in any sphere is always heuristic of a progressive development whose terms vary only with its freedom and skill, its aspirations and affections.

The great ideal of all consists in drawing nearer to God, in resembling Him, each after its kind and according to its capacity for achievement. Truly enough, moral necessity exists, but it is not so much an urge or push as it is an inspiration and a guide; it does not exist as a gale driving us from behind, but as a beacon marking the route of destiny, encouraging and guiding us along our course of safety and duty. Spiritual progress is impossible without some measure of persistent good, some actual security from the pitfalls and vices of worldly life. Nature does all she can to guide us aright, even penalizing every misstep we take, but we must be ourselves erect without her stern support, we must exercise our own integrity, our own devout ambition to be wise and good.

Boutroux also shows that the various habits and prejudices of the metaphysical mind make up the various sources (codes of laws,

aims, ideals and principles) of our philosophies of Nature. And where all is intellectual contingency, how then can we expect to ever validly repudiate and destroy the necessity so loudly emphasized by the absolutist? The soteriology of empiricism, meaning a constant peirastic program of creative experiment and verification, is the solution of this problem of our philosophical redemption; and it must replace the historicist's rationalized prospect of future possibilities prefigured in an over-selective, over-simplified, but insufficiently representative past. Our only reliable staff on the jagged upland path is the moral choice of noble motive, virtuous action and heroic spirituelle. As mystic rapture swells our dream-ship's sails and we seek emprise on the soul's inviting voyage, no hope is too sublime, no sacrifice too great, no toil too arduous. The storms of speculative contingency are no true hazard to our fortitude, the cross-tides of adverse circumstance or of foolish conduct are not good cause for alarm.

Such high prospects of progress in the coming age reminds me of Mazzini's *Faith and the Future*, in which he tells us that true faith requires an aim that is capable of embracing life as a whole, it requires the power of concentrating all life's numerous ideals and manifestations, the executive capacity of directing all our many modes of social activity or of repressing the unworthy impulses in favor of those more noble. In order to be an adequate confession of devotion and spiritual fidelity it requires an earnest, unalterable conviction that that aim shall be realized sometime, somewhere and somehow; it also requires that that power shall be decisive and give significant purpose to the profound belief in either our own or some worthwhile vicarious mission, as well as the conscientious obligation to fulfil it. Above all, it requires the everpresent consciousness of Supreme Power divinely watching over the deeds of the faithful as they pursue the path towards its realization. Spiritual progress means spiritual accomplishment, development and intelligent expression of soul; it means that we have achieved worthy aims and have given the prestige of purity to our loves and aspirations. These elements are indispensable to every honest faith, every reverent devotion to things divine; and wherever any one of them is wanting we will have sects, schisms, schools, political parties, fads and fashions, but true and cosmic faith will never be in vogue; there will never be on every hand the sturdy martyrs of old, no one to

make heroic sacrifice, and only a quondam flourishing of those who seek constant hourly piety for the sake of a great religious idea. This latter condition is all too much the label on our modern situation; we are mad with mercenary motive, we are foolish and extravagant world-seekers chasing selfishly and impatiently after the vanities of things modern. But the former condition, holding forth bold brief for noble faith, inspires new life and hope, encourages and energizes us to make new effort toward spiritual achievement. It is always a stroke of genius to catch fleeting truths and give them stable affection in the heart of man. It is always a token of spiritual progress to have that power over material things which can and does render them no more seductive and misleading; that capacity which empowers a man to practice courage, wisdom, justice and love. Such a strength of character makes for spiritual progress, and such a spiritual progress makes for both the honest doubt of things material and the honest faith in things divine. But it takes them both to give direction to our destiny, to make the future pre-exist in us, for we and our highest aspirations are creative of it.