

## PLURALISM, LIFE AND "VALUE"

BY VICTOR S. YARROS

SINCE the brilliant and often paradoxical William James startled the metaphysicians and philosophers of his day by arguing for the possibility, or probability, of a "pluralistic" universe, not a few writers have ventured to supply additional—and stronger—props for that speculation.

The latest contributor to the discussion is C. E. M. Joad, the British author and exponent of recent philosophical thought. He has published a book on *Matter, Life and Value*, and, as the title perhaps indicates, the argument throughout is an effort to demolish the basis of Monism and to prove that pluralism is, at least, more consistent with the facts we human beings are forced to face and to explain.

We cannot here consider the argument in all its details, but some of Mr. Joad's views, methods of forming and drawing conclusions, and rather curious logic will be examined and analyzed.

In the first place, he questions the right of any school of thought to make definite statements concerning the nature and complexion of the universe. We do not know, he says, the *whole* of the universe, and consequently our notion about it must necessarily be *partial, incomplete and inexact*. This is true enough, but the reason Monism has found wide acceptance is to be found in the simple fact that it gave a better account of what we did and do know of the universe than does any other theory. If new knowledge, additional data, tend to refute Monism and enthrone pluralism, the philosophical situation is undergoing a great change, and serious thinkers will have to readjust their view.

Mr. Joad says further that he has never been able to find a good

reason why the universe should be reduced to one thing instead of two or more things, or principles. Yet the reason or reasons have been presented again and again, and most thinkers have found them cogent and satisfactory. It is the business of the pluralists to refute and invalidate them, and this they have scarcely succeeded in doing thus far.

The quintessence of Mr. Joad's own argument may be summarized as follows:—We are bound to conceive of or construct the mental model of the universe with the materials we possess, ignoring nothing and assuming nothing. Well, the actual materials, contends our author, include at least three independent existing "reals"—namely, Matter, Life and Value. No philosophy, it is contended, has covered and explained all reality, though some systems have furnished tolerably respectable accounts of some realities. The *physical universe* is "given." It is a fact from which the human mind cannot escape. The *Life Force* is another and distinct fact; it resists any effort of thinkers or rhetoricians to merge it with matter. The latter, indeed, seems to act as the instrument or servant of the former. Finally, there emerges the *World of Value*—distinct, self-existent, supreme. In its highest forms and reaches, according to the author, life contemplates and exalts value. Mystics, poets, prophets and idealists excel all others in their appreciation and realization of value. The goal of evolution is to be conceived as "continuous awareness of a world of objective value." When that final stage is reached, "the Life Force will come to rest in the contemplation of reality."

However, this ecstatic contemplation of reality fully revealed will never be possible to the average man. Only the happy few, the chief actors in the evolutionary drama, will catch fleeting glimpses of the infinite, the realm of pure being. Only the life force in its totality will rejoice in the apprehension of the complete reality.

Truly, a fearful-wonderful metaphysical system! Alas, it sounds better than it is. Let us reduce it to its elements and see what is left of each of them after majestic and noble words have been translated into plain terms of speech.

First of all let us ask whether it is true, and universally admitted to be true, that matter, life and value are *distinct, self-subsistent reals*. This claim is opposed to all modern physics and astrophysics. What is matter? We do not know. It is composed of atoms, and

the atoms are miniature solar systems with positive and negative units of electricity as the planets. Well, what is electricity? Again, we do not know. We do not know the stuff of our material universe. Hence we have no right to call it "material." We have no right to call it spiritual, or anything else, either. We simply note its behavior in certain circumstances and describe it.

In the second place, let us ask our metaphysician if he knows where matter, no-life ends, and Life begins. He cannot tell us, and no one else can. The line is far from clear or bold. We do not know what life is, what causes it to emerge, and just what occurs when it does emerge. We know that living beings act differently from things that are not alive, but that is all. For practical purposes, to be sure, life is a distinct real, but metaphysics and philosophy are not satisfied with practical purposes. Life and matter may not be as independent of each other as they seem to be. We simply must suspend judgment upon the question of their interdependence or mutual independence.

Now, as to Value. It is to be granted, of course, that value *implies* life. Where there is no life, there can be no thought, no contemplation, no wonder and awe, and hence no conception of value or values. But—is value a human monopoly? The Life Force informs, and acts through, the lower animals and the tiniest insects as well as through evolved and "Godlike" human beings. The most marvelous thing in nature, said Darwin, is the ant's microscopic bit of matter we call its brain. Does that bit of matter generate value? If not, at what point *is* value born?

But, insists Mr. Joad, value though it implies life, is yet a distinct and self-subsistent real. Is it? Modern thought holds that value is significant *only because it enhances and exalts life*, not for its own sake, if we can think at all of value-for-its-own sake. Value is a name we give to qualities or manifestations of Life, which makes our own existence desirable, pleasant, thrilling, worthy from a certain point of view. Life, even animal life, would be impossible without value—without, that is, altruism, sympathy, mutual aid, even sacrifices. How, then, can it be maintained that value is distinct from life? And in what sense can it be called self-subsistent?

Value has always, and in all religious systems, been regarded as a condition of the good life—either on earth or in some other and better world. Mr. Joad renounces personal immortality and the

whole notion of life after death so far as individuals are concerned. But he cannot deny the importance of value—of goodness, truth, beauty, wisdom—to life on earth. It is therefore, inconsistent for him to assert the independent, self-subsistent reality of value, apart from life.

He may claim, if the words convey any meaning to him, that, *in addition* to the limited, prosaic values of our sublunar existence, there is the ultimate value of the contemplation of the Infinite of Pure Being by the abstract, disembodied force of life. Frankly, to most modern thinkers such phrases must seem empty and barren. How does a life force engage in contemplation, and to what end and purpose?

Mr. Joad appears to know what the goal of evolution is. No one else knows that,—at least, no one else who thinks scientifically. The ignorant, naive fundamentalists imagine they know the goal of evolution, but who attaches the slightest significance to their childish ideas?

The simple truth is, no human mind can hope to form any hypothesis regarding the purpose or goal of evolution. The guesses and notions of the past are crude and naive, and we have nothing to substitute for them. Mr. Joad himself has only contempt for the notion that the purpose of the universe is "the preparation of a certain number of human souls for perfection." But even if we suppose that *all* human beings are to achieve perfection at some remote day, it would be rather ridiculous to assume that the universe was set developing just for the purpose of fitting the human race for what is vaguely called perfection. What larger purpose would that purpose serve?

Apparently, Mr. Joad believes that certain privileged persons—poets, mystics and prophets namely—are able to read some of the secrets of the universe, to enjoy ecstatic visions of reality. Then why have these happy few never been able to communicate their special knowledge to the rest of us? What philosopher, poet or mystic has vouchsafed to us a tolerably satisfactory account of Reality? When they try, words fail them, or rather, *ideas* fail them. They cannot describe what they feel or think they see. They talk of communion with the Whole, or with God, or with nature. Some of them say that their visions convince them that the universe is friendly to Man, and they conclude, therefore, that the alleged

human craving for immortality—a sheer assumption—must be gratified somehow and somewhere, and that life must ultimately realize itself in some glorious and permanent form. Unfortunately, those who talk about their intuitions and visions are not necessarily good interpreters of these phenomena. Professor Leuba thinks that psychology and psychiatry have more prosaic and scientific explanations to give us of the alleged glimpses and fleeting contacts with the infinite.

After all, the staunch and unterrified orthodox thinker, who says he accepts God on faith and finds the commandments and injunctions of God in some book, is more rational than the mystical metaphysician. The former knows that the ways of his God are inscrutable and mysterious, and that finite minds cannot enter into any actual relation with the infinite, perfect and eternal. The latter images vain things and evolves theories out of his own inner consciousness, which he often misreads.

No, it is idle to pretend that Pluralism explains any facts left unaccounted for by Monism. On the contrary, it raises more difficulties than does Monism. The agnostic leans to the latter view because its simplicity accords with the observed unity and order of nature. It may not solve the ultimate problem, but it emerges out of the study and contemplation of the phenomena of nature, *including the human spirit*. The doctrine of relativity re-enforces Monism. The new physics, with its striking comparisons of stars and atoms, also re-enforces the Monistic conception. The modern idea that mental and physical are merely *two aspects of the same occurrence* is clearly Monistic in its implications.

To repeat, we may not know or understand the whole of nature, but we cannot build on the unknown and the unrevealed. It seems certain that what we do know points to Monism.

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