

THE OBJECTIVE IDEAL

WE have become accustomed to condemn outright those reactionaries who would wish to return to the manners of the Middle Ages. So much apparent good has come to light since those dim and ruthless days that its denial seems almost blasphemy against the Creator who gave man powers capable of continuous development. In the main a condemnation of this sort may be justified, yet there existed at least one fundamental attitude of mind, lost in the debris of the medieval ruin, the absence of which we must deeply lament for it would be capable of setting the modern world in order if it were present to-day. This attitude, crystallized in the word "objectivism," has been supplanted by its opposite, a disruptive force which is responsible for many of the modern evils, for when modern subjectivism ousted the medieval objectivism at the Reformation a unity in multiplicity gave place to a multitude of units. It is a commonplace that the Reformation with its insistence on the importance of the individual and its implicit denial of the mainstays of human society gave birth to a subjectivism and a concentration upon self which the Christian world has never since been able to master.

This false attitude of mind has become part and parcel of our mental make-up. It has been handed on from father to son until it has become almost connatural in every act of the mind or will. We can to-day think only in terms of reference to ourselves, forming all things to our own image and likeness as though we were at once the begetter and the conclusion of all things. One's birthday is a great feast, remembered every year, for that was the beginning. In the beginning was myself, and I am my own god. Death holds intense horror before us, for that is the end, the end of everything. Hideous annihilation, thy sting is the more bitter since there can be no more experience even of pain and suffering. All will have perished.

Many obvious diseases have arisen from this egocentric attitude towards the rest of the universe. The numerous *Isms* which now hedge us in on all sides, and especially

scepticism and individualism, have grown out of all proportion to truth. The subjectivist must soon begin to doubt the existence of everything beyond himself, so that self increases in value by leaps and bounds. Yet all the arrogant offspring of the subjective attitude may be gathered into two families, according as the effects qualify the individual in himself or in his social relations with his fellow beings. The habit of mind which refers all primarily to self will affect both the individual and the society in which he lives, so that whether it be cubism in art that we ascribe to this fundamental principle of anarchy, or Nazism in politics, birth control in the home or scepticism in the individual, it will always be reducible to some distortion either in the man or in society.

The effect upon the individual is well exemplified in the modern paganism and cultivation of nature. No man is considered worth anything unless he attempts to live his life to the full in such a way that he may gather most experiences but especially those which he shares with the animal. "Self-expression" is the watchword; "Develop *all* your faculties to the full" the slogan. In such a world celibacy has become an anomaly and the religious life mere foolishness. The only type of asceticism that can be tolerated is the one that will finally enable the individual to cultivate yet another human power. One may give up smoking and even fast in order to complete the hundred yards a second or two sooner, yet a similar self-denial for the purpose of reaching heaven with greater alacrity is regarded as queer if not entirely ridiculous. It might be considered the question of a fool or an impertinence to enquire the reason why self-expression and personal development should be given such absolute values, why human purpose is to expand natural life to the fullest possible extent. If however an answer be condescended it must necessarily be centred on the idea that each man is here on earth for himself, and that under such conditions it would be foolishly wasteful to neglect one's opportunities.

Such an attitude may appear obviously pagan and irreconcilable with Christian principles. Attempts have often been made, however, to combine this subjectivism with Christian morality. Moreover, quite apart from any con-

scious attempt at a compromise, it was inevitable that a religious form of this concentration upon self should make its appearance. The whole of the post-Reformation period has been permeated by a religious atmosphere wherein religion is thought of in terms of self and attention is focussed on one's own salvation and religious experiences. We may see this exemplified in two facts. Firstly, the study of mysticism and mystical theology as a distinct science has only appeared in recent history. The classification of the various mystical experiences and of the degrees of the spiritual life have only been tabulated in the last five hundred years. It needed this new attitude to give impetus to an enquiry into the exact positions one could hold in supernatural society. Secondly we may see it in adverse light in the modern disease of scruples, to which may be allied the theological disputes over the question of a doubtful conscience. Only the one who thinks mainly of himself, albeit in spiritual terms, could be shattered by such doubts as are the terrible inheritance of the scrupulous. No one except a subjectivist could be seriously concerned with the question of exactly how far one can go towards a so-called "liberty" in cases of a double-faced conscience. In such an atmosphere these things are inevitable and must necessarily engage our attention, but a general return to objective standards would see them fade into the background.

The question of the social effects of this universal self-reference is necessarily far larger since it leads to all sorts of contradictory or otherwise irreconcilable positions. Capitalism and Communism may both be traced back to this same fountain-head. But for the present purposes we shall only notice a few effects having a connection with the latter. Such self-emphasis tends at the same time to emphasize the fact that all men have a common nature. One self is as good as another. All selves have the right to expand to the maximum of their power. Consequently, apart from the obvious result of continual friction between all those self-developers, there is much insistence upon the equality of man according to his common nature and origin. Once the external value of the object has been destroyed there remains

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no reason why one man should be the superior of another in rank or society. The equal rights of all men demand universal suffrage and eventually Communism, where the only superiority to be admitted is that due to personal initiative in terms of the survival of the fittest. Birth cannot give rank. Classes are directly against the nature of man who should only live in terms of a universal brotherhood in which all are born simultaneously, no eldest and no youngest. In other matters, too, this levelling of the hills and the valleys in society may be observed. The absolute equality of woman and man is now vehemently proclaimed on the assumption that woman should be as free as man to look after her self. Or the ideas may be translated into terms of a nation when it becomes the dangerous proposition of the self-expression and self-expansion of a whole race.

These are a few of the more obvious effects of a subjectivism which has come to occupy a central position in the present civilization and may be traced, therefore, in every detail of human affairs within that civilization. Though all these effects suffer from the danger of being but half-truths, they are by no means all evil in character. Witness the growth of the science of mystical theology with its profound and beneficial results in the supernatural life of so many. In the natural sphere too it has produced a society which, unless angered, is more humane and more considerate for human needs and suffering than that of former ages. There are many good aspects of this modern subjectivism, but alone and uncorrected by the ideals of a true objectivism they have at best an intrinsic tendency towards a disruptive selfishness.

The Church of Christ on the other hand has consistently offered to all a habit of life which is externalized, which draws away from the subject and leads directly to an object superior to, and dominating, the totality of human affairs. Ever since Christ told His disciples to seek first the Kingdom of God and that all the rest would be added unto them, the Church has shown us the God to Whom we must attain—a God not merely of nature, still less a pantheistic god who might conceivably benefit by our own self-expression and development, but a supernatural God, the God of revelation,

into Whose life we may be raised and to Whom we owe everything in complete abandon. Though this God is intimately present to every single creature, He may be considered from another aspect as the supernatural end outside creation to which everything must move in its own particular way. Man moves towards Him truly when, having received the gift of grace, he believes in and loves Him in His intimate divine nature. Such a union of mind and heart with God demands first of all that only those means be taken which lead to Him, and that all others be rigorously excluded. We must seek the kingdom of God in every action we perform whether it be in peeling potatoes or praying in the very highest altitudes of contemplation. Union with such an object demands complete self-surrender, the absolute denial of self in order to affirm the reality of the divine object. We came out from God, we owe all to God, and we are returning to Him. Hence the sooner we give ourselves entirely to Him the sooner we shall have attained our end. Thus is the ideal of the Christian life to be externalized; it is to be objective and oblivious of self. This we may see in the almost exclusively Christian connotation of such terms as self-sacrifice, self-denial, abandonment to the will of God. All this stands out in sharp contrast to the ideal of the subjectivist, whose terminology lies in the opposite direction, self-expression, self-fulfilment and so on.

Moreover this finality in the supernatural God includes all the good elements of subjectivism in their proper place, for such an attitude of mind embraces the whole truth. The whole perfection of the subject, the perfection of the man himself, follows as a natural, and in a sense an unexpected, consequence. If with our whole attention we seek the kingdom of God without being solicitous about what we shall eat, or wherewith we shall be clothed, then we shall discover that all these things have been added unto us. If we are prepared to pluck out an eye or to go about maimed and lame rather than to deviate a step from the road towards God, then we shall find that we see with a clearer vision than those who have concerned themselves about seeing all they can with their two eyes, that we are more fully

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developed and self-expressed than any who have sought self-expression. St. Thomas has enuniated this idea clearly in an article on the virtue of religion. "We pay God honour and reverence," he says "not for His sake (because He is of Himself full of glory to which no creature can add anything) but for our own sake because by the very fact that we revere and honour God, our mind is subjected to Him; wherein its perfection consists, since a thing is perfected by being subjected to its superior, for instance the body is perfected by being quickened by the soul, and the air by being enlightened by the sun" (II-II, q. 81, art. 7). By intending God's glory, by seeking His will in all things, we by that very fact attain our human perfection and fulfilment. Even in the natural order we notice that the man who, for example, consciously endeavours to become cultured never achieves a true culture. It would seem, too, that the medieval Benedictine schools were not attempting to pass on the survivals of a culture or civilization, but that their main preoccupation was to form true servants of God. By an education of that nature they handed on a real culture and not a self-conscious learning. So finally the complete self-expression will be attained in Beatitude, the face to face Vision of the one real object, only to be reached through death which is now no longer the end of things, but the beginning, the *natalitia*.

If this objective outlook is the true salvation of the individual in himself, it is equally true for man in his social context. Such finalization demands orientation to an end and the due subordination of all things to that end. In other words, just as the whole universe is a hierarchy of means and ends all intended finally to praise God as an expression of His goodness and wisdom, so men themselves, in spite of their common nature, must be hierarchized in order to offer praise to this God Who has revealed and communicated Himself to man. There is little order to an end apparent in a buzzing horde of flies, each with equal rights to fly round as he pleases. The equality of nature in man must be qualified by the need of ordaining society to the one supreme object to which society as a whole owes

absolute allegiance and complete surrender. This requires that one man should be to a degree the master and others the servants, that there should be superiors and subjects. Such a hierarchy is most perfectly exemplified in the Church which leads immediately to God. Jesus Christ, both God and man, is the central figure, the perfect master of all since He is divine; the Pope as Christ's visible vicar on earth gathers the whole Church round him; then the bishops and clergy in descending scale—servants, yet masters forming part of the magisterium of the Church. This is an ordered society which has always been objective in its outlook and consequently hierarchical in its composition. On this basis all other societies should be built up, conscious of the equal rights of man, but conscious too of the claims of God to Whom they must all ultimately be ordered as a whole united body made up of many members. God made the earth high and low, with land and sea, hill and vale; He did not make a plain globe of unbroken surface. Similarly human society has its kings and its kitchen maids.

The present Holy Father has mapped out this objective programme both for the individual and for society in his *Quadragesimo Anno*. "For according to Christian doctrine, man endowed with a social nature is placed here on earth in order that he may spend his life in society, and under an authority ordained by God, that he may develop and evolve to the full all his faculties to the praise and glory of his Creator; and that by fulfilling faithfully the duties of his station, he may attain to temporal and eternal happiness." If all is done for the praise and glory of our Creator by the individual and by society, then both these will attain their greatest development. The Renaissance and the Reformation taught us how to do things for our own praise and glory, and it is hard to expel an atmosphere become now so universal. If a return to medieval conditions could regain for us that objective habit of mind it would be worth all the hardships and sacrifices necessarily entailed. Yet we need not hark back to a dead and bygone age, for these standards are the living standards of the Church of Christ.

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