The Demise of Man

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The theme of this article was suggested by an enigmatic remark of the French philosopher Michel Foucault on the final page of his book *The Order of Things*. "Man", he writes, "is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end."[1] I wish to reflect upon this suggestive remark though in somewhat different and broader terms than those of its author.

Since the time of Hegel's use of the phrase, and particularly since Nietzsche's sensational application of it, it has been fashionable to speak of "the death of God"–the death of God at the hand of man. However, the elimination of God which it was hoped would enable the reality of man to become more effectively visible has been superseded by a more radical consideration whose consequences profoundly affect our theory and practice today. It is the consideration that a true idea of man far from emerging into assured and concrete realization is rather breaking up and disappearing into an impersonal anonymous ground. The evidence suggests that the achievement of our age is the death of man at his own hand, at least speculatively if not yet in effect.

In this essay I propose to illustrate, and draw some conclusions from, the significance of this phenomenon by situating it in the context of its historical evolution. In what will inevitably involve rather broad generalisations and systematic simplification I will try to indicate how man today has come to be seen chiefly in socio-centric, impersonal and structural terms by contrast with two previous conceptions which can be globally described as the theo-centric and the anthropocentric conceptions of man.

In a general way one can speak of the conception which western man had of himself prior to the development of modern science and modern philosophy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a theo-centric view of man. Thus both for Greek and medieval man there was a rational divinely ordered kinship of man and nature. The world was a cosmos–an intelligible, harmonious and beautiful totality–fashioned not by man but in accordance

[1] M. Foucault, *The Order of Things–An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, (trans) London, 1970, p. 387.

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with a divine blueprint of eternal ideas or providence. In particular, man's meaning and purpose were laid down and governed by a divine scheme of things and were to be discerned in the divinely ordered world of nature. They were given more precise specification in the Christian era through reference to supernatural Revelation.

Morality was based upon a divinely given human nature which constituted man generically as an animal and specifically as rational. Thus man was considered as a being incarnate in the world having a set of objective potentialities which were part and parcel of a given human nature. These were identified through their purposes and the ordered fulfilment of them through the will constituted the morally good life. Authentic human activity was an implementation of natural law which was a participation in the eternal law of God governing all creation.

In brief, man experienced himself as part, admittedly a very significant part, of an objectively ordered and purposeful universe of divine origin.

An interesting, though relatively primitive and undeveloped, illustration of this viewpoint is provided by the account proposed by both Plato and Aristotle of the vertical orientation of the human body as the ideal orientation of a living being.[2] This ideal is realised when the head is on high and the chest, stomach and entrails beneath. This form is privileged because it conforms to the objective orientation of the cosmos which has the more excellent realm, the heavens, above and the cruder material parts beneath. Thus, as is appropriate to his superior nature, man's erect posture is the ideal and objectively normal one for a living being whereas the brute because of its greater materiality finds its head dragged down to the same level as its body and has to walk on all fours and the unfortunate plants saturated as they are with materiality have their head and mouth (i.e. their roots) in the utterly abnormal upside down position.

This outlook presupposes that the universe has an objective 'normal' orientation which we can know as such. Today such an idea would strike us as decidedly odd. Why should the sky be privileged vis-a-vis the earth rather than the other way round in which case the orientation of the plants would be normal and that of man abnormal? The truth of the matter would seem to be that Plato and Aristotle affirmed as objective or normal the orientation of the world which turns out to be complimentary to man be-

[2]Cf. J-Y Jolif, "Le Monde–Remarques sur la signification du terme" *Lumiere et Vie,* t. X1V. 1965, no. 73, pp. 25-46.

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cause they had already unconsciously projected onto this world, as an ideal of normality, the orientation of their human erect posture. This they accepted pre-reflectively as normal because it was the position in which they naturally lived out their everyday lives. In other words underlying their supposedly objective cosmology there lurked an unsuspected anthropomorphism.

Moreover, the rationality, intelligibility and beauty which they apprehended in their objective cosmos as something given rather than as something humanly intended greatly facilitated their affirmation of a divine source of this rationality, intelligibility and beauty. Not adverting to man himself as a source of the meaning and value of the world of experience they moved readily from experience to a world of ideas, a demiurge, a self-thinking thought as the rational foundation of the cosmos and the ultimate good of human contemplation.

Thus prior to the development of modern thought man understood himself as having a given nature and destiny in a world which was a divinely fashioned, purposeful, moral order. He considered himself in terms of objectivity rather than of subjectivity. His subjectivity did not present itself as a serious problem to him. It was part of the objective order of things. He was a special kind of substance with spiritual faculties midway in the analogical hierarchy of beings—an intermediate link in the great chain of being.

Now in many ways the story of man in modern philosophy is the story of the triumph of subjectivity over substance. The great symbol which is also the great source of this movement is the philosophy of Descartes (1596-1650) which called in question, albeit only provisionally, the reality of the external world and required man, envisaged as a pure *cogito*, to recoil within the resources of his own self consciousness for the roots of meaning and value. This coupled with the technological know-how and practical control over nature made available through the development of modern science inaugurated a new humanism of liberty—a new way of understanding the meaning and destiny of man. Henceforth, instead of looking to a divinely ordered scheme of things in which he might find his appropriate place and conform thereto man sought rather the expansive liberation of his subjectivity. Henceforth, instead of conformity to an eternal, objective, divinely ordered system, it was in terms of the requirements and resources of his own subjectivity that he sought the direction which he must pursue and the criteria of his actions. The world was no longer viewed as a divinely fashioned system in which man could discover his eternally predetermined, dependent place and in which he could fulfil himself by directing his potentialities and activities

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along the path of their divinely ordained objective goals. The world was rather a world in the making—to be fashioned and developed at the technological, political and speculative levels through man's own creative ingenuity in accordance with self-given goals. To illustrate this revolutionary ferment at work in these various levels one need only mention the industrial revolution, the American and especially the French revolution, and the Copernican revolution of Kantian philosophy.

Undoubtedly it was some time before this viewpoint became fully explicit. Indeed in its early formation, for example in the case of Descartes himself, it was thought that through the exploration of human subjectivity one could regain in a more profound and critical manner an absolute, objective divinely ordered rational scheme of things. Similarly, many eighteenth century thinkers believed that they lived in the best of all possible worlds and that the divine harmony and intelligibility of the components of reality were fully accessible to man through the resources of his rational reflection.

Such enlightened optimism concerning the underlying harmony of the divine order of *substance* and the human order of *subjectivity* could not persist indefinitely in view of the increasingly ambiguous significance of the achievements of the new humanism of liberty. Concomitant with the general wealth engendered by the Industrial Revolution there came the unprecedented poverty of an exploited working class whose utter economic alienation paved the way for the emergence of an explosive proletarian consciousness. Similarly, the reign of liberty, equality and fraternity promised by the French Revolution quickly degenerated into the notorious Reign of Terror and the new absolutism of the Napoleonic era.

At the philosophical level also the rational bonds between nature, man and God were shattered by the penetrating critique of the great eighteenth century thinkers Hume and Kant. In the empiricism of Hume the solidity of nature and the substantiality of the self were fragmented into a series of unconnected atomic data. His rejection of the objectivity of causality eroded the cement of the universe which previously assured the ontological bonds between man, nature and God. With Kant likewise we find a denial that human rationality can achieve any objective insight into the nature of reality. The real nature of the world and of man's substantial self are forever hidden in unknowable darkness. All that can be known is our own subjective synthesis of the data of sense experience. There is no science of reality only a science of appearances as filtered through the labyrinth of the pigeon-holes

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of our mind. Henceforth, the only world of which we could with justification speak was a world shrouded in the web of our own thought and our own norms of action.

The philosophy of Hegel in the early nineteenth century represents the last great, but ultimately unsuccessful, attempt to reconcile the traditional theocentric conception of man with the anthropocentric view which was unfolding in modern thought. He sought to reconcile in a higher unity the various forms of unresolved duality which had become manifest at the heart of human existence. The opposition between mind and matter, appearance and reality, faith and philosophy, substance and subject, man and God, were all brought together into a dialectical unity in his remarkable philosophy of spirit. The emergent claims of human subjectivity were given a new ontological solidity and foundation as necessary moments in the progressive realization (in the dual sense of becoming self-aware and becoming actual) of God's divine life. He explained how in and through the higher activities of man, namely art, religion and philosophy the Absolute comes to concrete awareness of itself. In attaining at last the absolute viewpoint of Hegelian philosophy man accomplishes the divine purpose of history and the achievement can be described indifferently either as man's knowledge of God or as God's knowledge of himself in man. Without the achievements of human subjectivity God could not be God.

Hegel's exalted conception of man as an indispensable moment in the realization of the life of absolute spirit was soon subjected to harsh criticism from many different angles. For example, it was denounced as too speculative, as too pretentious, as compromising the claims of individual subjectivity, as postulating an utterly unattainable state of omniscience, as being *practically* ineffectual. The consequence of this barrage of criticism was the reappearance with greater force and insistence than before of two central themes of Kantian philosophy. These were, on the one hand, the theme of human subjectivity as an irreducible creative source of meaning and value, and, on the other hand, the theme that genuine knowledge is confined to the realm of empirical science so that metaphysical knowledge of reality as it is in itself is strictly unavailable to man. The development of these two themes gave rise to two influential contemporary conceptions of man—on the one hand the conception which finds expression in existentialism and on the other a conception animated by a type of socio-centric positivism which finds its most recent expression in various versions of structuralism. In the existentialist approach we find a radical development of the humanism of liberty which seeks to

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locate within the resources of human freedom the absolute source of all meaning and value. In the other approach we find a conscious repudiation of the phenomenological viewpoint of existentialism and rejection, as illusory, of the claims which it has made on behalf of the inherent significance and irreducible worth of the supposedly free individual man.

Let us briefly consider each of these conceptions in turn with a view to elucidating the basic theme of this article, namely, what it means philosophically to speak of the death of man in contemporary thought.

Existentialism, which is more a distinctive style of philosophising than a clearly defined philosophical doctrine has found expression in a considerable variety of forms. However, as a generalisation, it would not be too wide of the mark to say that basically existentialism is an attempt to provide an account of man from the standpoint of individual subjectivity. This signifies more than the banal truth that all philosophising is inevitably the work of an individual subject. It means that existentialism resists the common philosophical presumption that to know truly and profoundly one must achieve a transformation of consciousness from the standpoint of individual subjectivity to that of a detached impersonal spectator of an absolute order of objective reality. On the contrary, it insists that only by consciously adopting and maintaining as basic and irreducible the phenomenological standpoint of concrete subjectivity can we have access to authentic philosophical truth.

The main lines along which existentialist philosophy has developed were prefigured in the thought of its nineteenth century founding-fathers Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Both of these, just as had Hegel before them, rebelled against the anonymity, unfulfilled promise and alienation of modern man. But they resisted the tendency to tackle these problems in idealistic and universalistic terms. The real solution they argued was to be found, not in terms of a communal absorption into the life of absolute spirit, but rather in terms of the unsuspected potentialities of the free individual. Whereas Nietzsche pinned his hopes on the audacious claim of the exceptional individual, the genius or superman, to transcend the mediocre herd morality of ordinary man, Keirkegaard sought rather to awaken ordinary men to their own possibilities of becoming the uncommon man. He sought to show how each individual could single himself out from the irresponsible crowd and formulate for himself a personalised account of his unque meaning and value.

It was Kierkegaard who first used the term 'existence' to con-

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trast the distinctively human mode of being with the merely factual reality which all other beings enjoy. Man's being is distinguished from that of other realities in that man is infinitely interested in his existence. Whereas each person has in common with everything else a given *factual reality,* his *existence* is a variable which develops as a consequence of his own passionately interested choices.

I do not propose to dwell upon Kierkegaard's well known account of the various levels of human existence at which a man can live.There is the precarious aesthetic life of the sensual man. There is the ethical life of the man who tries to live, as Kant envisaged, according to a framework of self-given moral laws. Finally, there is the religious life of the man who risks to live his life in relation to God, which in its most sublime form means living a passionate commitment to what is objectively absurd, namely, the Christian God conceived as the union of the eternal and the temporal at a moment in time.

The feature of Kierkegaard's thought which is of particular interest in terms of influence on the subsequent development of existentialism is his insistence upon the crucial importance of free decision in the attainment of authentic existence and his consequent reformulation of the meaning of truth in terms of subjectivity. Thus Kierkegaard argues that the different levels of possible human existence are logically discontinuous. They are connected not by reason but by passionate acts of choice, which although perhaps to some extent rationally prompted are not at all rationally necessitated. This is particularly evident in the transition from the ethical stage of existence to the religious stage. It is essential to the leap of faith that it be made with passion in the face of objective uncertainty and ultimately in the face of objective absurdity.

In elaborating this view Kierkegaard proposes his account of truth as subjectivity.[3] He distinguishes in any belief between the objective content of what is believed and the subjective attitude of the individual who holds the belief—between the *what* and the *how.* Somebody may be "in the truth" either in the objective sense that what he asserts is in accordance with objective facts or in the subjective sense that his way of believing is of the right kind i.e. utterly sincere and passionately committed. What is objectively true may, as uttered by some individual, become untrue, for example, when an habitual adulterer proclaims the virtue of marital fidelity, or a totally self-indulgent person sings the praises of Christian selflessness.

[3] Cf. S Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript,* Princeton 1941, pages 169-224.

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In matters which bear upon man' ultimate significance only the belief which is affirmed with a living passionate inwardness unreservedly deserves the name of truth. Mere objective dispassionate truth is not the kind of truth which is relevant or appropriate to the concerns of authentic human existence.

In this context Kierkegaard provides a summary of his view with a famous definition of truth. He writes: "an objective uncertainty held fast in an appropriation process of the most passionate inwardness is the truth, the highest truth attainable for an existing individual."[4] He points out that there can be no faith without risk. Real faith involves objective uncertainty and insecurity. This objective uncertainty and even absurdity gives to faith its requisite and desirable tension which constitutes it as authentic truth, namely, the truth of subjectivity. Instead of trying to counter objections to religious doctrine by appeals to objective evidence we must become passionate and subjective. Thus he took the bold step of turning objective difficulties in religious belief to his own purpose and argued that essential truth is attained only through the power of subjectivity in the face of objective uncertainty. He claims that "it is subjectivity that Christianity is concerned with and it is only in subjectivity that its truth exists if it exists at all; objective Christianity has absolutely no existence."[5] Moreover, in his view there is 'more truth' in being subjectively in the truth than in being objectively in the truth. He writes: "only in subjectivity is there decisiveness, to seek objectivity is to be in error. It is the passion of the infinite that is the decisive factor and not its content."[6]

It can be argued that Kierkegaard's defence of Christianity was bought at too great a price. For it involves a voluntarism and potential irrationalism that has inspired the contemporary existentialist conception of man to which, in the final analysis, any affirmation of God is at best utterly irrelevant and at worst morally reprehensible. The clearest example of this development is to be found in the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre which proclaims an absolute humanism of liberty.

Sartre is commonly hailed as the philosopher *par excellence* of human freedom. An unshakable commitment to the absolute freedom of man and a ruthlessly honest acceptance of what he sees to be its implications is a characteristic feature of his existentialist philosophy. Fundamental to this conception of man as absolute freedom is a denial of an objective human nature and *a fortiori* a denial of God as the intelligent Creator of human

[4] *Ibid,* page 182 [5] *Ibid,* page 116 [6] *Ibid,* page 181

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nature. For, according to Sartre, any affirmation of God as Creator would reduce man to the status of an artefact produced by a supernatural artisan. In his estimation the only conception of human freedom worthy of the name is that which responsibly acknowledges itself as the absolute creative source and goal of the sense and value of human life. Man is truly man only in virtue of that continuous self-surpassing through which all his actions are given as their ultimate significance the expansion of freedom itself as such. Human existence is a spontaneous centre of absolute freedom which decides for itself how it shall be. There is no independent order of meaning and value in which human freedom can be anchored as in an absolute norm of voluntary action. My freedom is not simply a matter of being capable of assenting to an independently meaningful order of being but of choosing passionately and courageously what shall be the meaning of my life. Moreover, my choice, in whatever form of life it expresses itself, retains an irreducible quality of gratuitousness in that I cannot demonstrate the rectitude of my choice by any appeal to its conformity with norms or authorities beyond my freedom. There is no consideration which can or should affect my freedom decisively since it is this freedom which decides which considerations shall be effective. The man who convinces himself that he acts in accordance with a fixed objective moral requirement deceives himself and acts in bad faith.

From the viewpoint of this philosophy of absolute freedom we can look back along the distance which has been travelled from the traditional view of human existence which explained its meaning and value in terms of a divinely fashioned human nature, and even from the Kantian view which held that man himself as a rational agent could serve as an adequate basis of a universally constraining moral order involving the mutual recognition of persons in a human kingdom of truth and justice. In existentialism an insurmountable chasm has arisen between man and nature, subjectivity and objectivity, consciousness and being. The more human freedom has been emphasised the more vacuous has the notion of man as a moral agent become. In traditional thought man was morally responsible before God and actions could be condemned as violating a divine moral order. Even with Kant, although one no longer referred to God in expressing one's moral evaluations, there was at least a reference to a rational order of personal values. In existentialism, as formulated by Sartre, there is no place for moral vision, only for moral courage.

Nor is this conclusion proper to Sartre alone. It is a view for which close parallels can be found not only in other continental

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philosophers but also and pervasively in recent British philosophy reaching back at least as far as the Logical Positivism of A J Ayer which denied any objective validity to ethical judgements and treats them as merely expressions of feeling.

The widespread currency of this despair of moral insight has been highlighted by the Oxford philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch in a collection of essays entitled *The Sovereignty of Good.* In this book she expresses dissatisfaction with the contemporary situation in moral philosophy. She sees its shortcomings as deriving from an inadequate philosophy of man and ultimately from the lack of an adequate metaphysical background for the moral life. In an illuminating generalisation she classifies together as existentialists both continental philosophers such as Sartre and typically British philosophers such as Hampshire, Hare, Ryle and Ayer. She sees as characteristic of both an identification of the human person with an empty choosing will and a corresponding anti-naturalistic denial of moral vision. There is an elimination of the substantial self and a glorification of the solitary omnipotent will. Authenticity, commitment and courage become the decisive moral criteria as no basis remains for talk of just appraisals, loving discernment or virtuous activity.

Miss Murdoch argues that such a philosophical conception of man which does not allow for objective moral discernment makes nonsense of the concrete experience of our ordinary moral life in which we strive to ensure that the exercise of our freedom be guided by genuine moral insight. The moral life, she argues, is not primarily a matter of heroic sincere free choices but of coming to envisage and treat a world of persons in a just and loving manner, i.e. a real world which provides an ontological basis for the morality.

The existentialist tendency to identify man with an empty choosing will is in a sense an extreme exaltation and divinization of man and yet in another sense it amounts to a destruction and elimination of man and of human endeavour generally. For as a conception of man which cuts him off from rational moral insight it has the consequence that all choices are equally valuable and therefore equally futile so that all one can cling to as worthwhile is the passionate intensity of the choice itself. But such sheer self-assertive choice may not be as transcendent and specifically human as may appear at first sight. It can, at times at least, be a blind capitulation to an uncontrolled upsurge of fantasy. As Miss Murdoch perceptively observes "the proliferation of blinding self-centred aims and images, is itself a powerful system of [quasi-mechanical] energy, and most of what is often called

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'will' or 'willing' belongs to this system." [7]

Thus, by way of reaction, the exaggerated yet empty existentialist view of human freedom raises doubts which tend ultimately to call in question the effective reality of this freedom itself. This, it seems to me, is perhaps the distinctive tendency of the approach to man in most recent contemporary philosophy—a tendency that seeks to subordinate existentialist claims about human freedom to more verifiable considerations of system and structure which commend themselves more persuasively to a culturally pervasive positivistic mentality.

In effect, the existentialist claims about the absolute autonomy is a fiction. Indeed, on an increasing scale, the claims of subjectivity, particularly inasmuch as it has been identified with freedom, appears to be illusory. Thus, for example, in a paradoxical way the very exercise of our supposedly free subjectivity in the domain of scientific investigation has undermined confidence in the ultimate significance of this subjectivity. For instance, the expansion of astronomy has in a sense reduced the human milieu to insignificant cosmic proportions. Similarly, the findings of the biological theory of evolution have highlighted the precariousness and instability of our form of life and emphasised our temporal roots in the anonymous pre-rational order. However, these are not, I believe, the most influential considerations in what may be described as the contemporary elimination of the notion of autonomous human subjectivity. The real challenge to the humanist and existentialist conception of the free individual man comes rather from the distinctively human sciences such as psychology, linguistics, anthropology and sociology.

The general nature of this challenge can be indicated in terms of the following rather simplified outline. It can be suggested that prior to the emergence of the modern era the reality of the individual person as a subject in his own right was somewhat obscured inasmuch as he was seen primarily as a divinely fashioned substance, an *imago dei* with a predetermined place and purpose within a divine cosmic order. In modern philosophy, in virtue of its emphasis on subjectivity, which originated with Descartes was developed by Kant and culminated in existentialism, the individual existing subject became progressively more visible in his own right. However, in the light of the remarkable achievements of Marx, Freud, de Saussure, Levi-Strauss and Wittgenstein, to mention but a few outstanding contributors to the formation of contemporary thought, the free individual person is in the process of disappearing from the centre of the

[7] I Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good,* London, 1970, page 67.

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scene. Instead the social fabric of the human reality and in particular, the structural threads of the obverse side of this social tapestry are at last becoming visible. The free individual is being dissolved into the web of his enveloping structures.

No very profound knowledge of the human sciences is required in order to recognise that the life of contemporary man is massively structured and systematised. For it is a fact which increasingly characterises our ordinary self-awareness today and makes talk about absolute freedom seem increasingly unreal. In one of its more sensational manifestations this awareness expresses itself negatively in the phenomena of the hippy and the drop-out who represents a formal but ineffectual protest against the all embracing claims of "the system".

The many familiar pre-scientific illustrations of the influence of structure and system upon our human existence can be seen as so many functions of an exosomatic milieu–in other words of a sort of prolongation of our bodies. As one writer observes: "we can consider as belonging to the exosomatic milieu everything that has to do with organisation. Though an organisation is made up of human individuals, as organisation it is nothing else than a system of relations allowing the flow of information, and carrying out different operations according to pre-established programmes, controlling its own functioning in that it is capable of appreciating the results of its operations (according to criteria decided in advance) and modifying them where necessary. In so far as it is a system, an organisation is independent of the individuals who form it: it functions so to say by itself." [8]

It is worth noting how various cultural systems have a curious way of reacting back upon man, their originator and refashioning the individuals which they encompass in accordance with the requirements of the inherent logic of the system. Thus, although the original intention in devising the system may have been to achieve a greater measure of liberation, the spin-off from the system may result in a greater contraction of freedom. For example, the system of motorways which we devised to facilitate greater freedom of movement has developed a logic of its own which makes movement through a city almost impossible. Similarly, the armaments system which we devised to protect ourselves has left us more vulnerable than ever. There are many other instances that one could cite which would be aptly described by the remark one often hears concerning some human casuality "the unfortunate fellow, nobody's fault really, just an-

[8] J Ladriere, "Crisis of Civilisation–Crisis of Institution" *Convergence.* vol 1, 1970, page 4.

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other victim of the system!"

These ordinary everyday obsearvations about the significance of system and structure are intended as an introduction in pre-scientific terms to the kind of viewpoint which characterises the research of many human scientists and philosophers today. In their investigations the focus of interest is not the subjective consciousness of a unique anguished individual striving to accomplish an authentic personalised existence through his own courageous choices. There is rather a determination to move beyond existentialist and phenomenological talk about freely intended meaning and value to a consideration of the structures and systems which profoundly condition the human reality. Instead of envisaging the system as merely a function of the free choice of individuals, the individual is seen rather as a function of the autonomous life of the system. For example, the realm of interiority and thought is seen as a function of a social institution, namely, language. Having a concept is being able to use a word correctly in accordance with the rules of a given language system. The limits of language delineate the limits of the world and language can be considered as a system quite independently of its use in the speech of individuals. Whatever is spoken is already allowed for and structurally prefigured by the combinatory rules of the language system. Similarly, other forms of conscious articulated behaviour such as cuisine, fashion, art, kinship and marriage regulations are analysed in terms of the unconscious systems which underly and determine our subjective consciousness in these domains. Not surprisingly, psychoanalytic theory and Marxist political economy have been illuminatingly reformulated in structuralist idiom, by Lacan and Althusser respectively. The conscious meanings proclaimed within the life of the ego or the cultural superstructure find plausible structural explanations in terms of the determining structures of the unconscious or the predominance of the economic infra-structure.

In various versions the structuralist approach to the human reality exhibits a decidedly reductionist and positivistic bias. Its tendency is to interpret higher structures in terms of lower structures and to envisage a basic prepersonal structure of which all conscious meaning is merely an application. The unconscious structure is not simply a necessary but a sufficient and determining condition of conscious meaning. Thus one commentator remarks: "If structuralist analysis begins from the level at which the elements of articulated behaviour are given conscious meaning, it works towards the level at which those elements can be seen to assume significance and determine their appearance in

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behaviour without the awareness of the person behaving. It amounts, therefore, to an attempt to debunk conscious meaning, to put unconscious significance in its place; it is the search for mechanism at work in the formation of meaning."[9]

Thus, for example, Levi-Strass would explain speech as wholly though unconsciously determined by the rules of its language system, which in turn is determined in a compulsory fashion by the laws operative in its underlying phonemic system of sounds. The logical outcome of his approach, which he envisages with complacency, is that all forms of behaviour in a human society are related as transformations of one basic unconscious code.[10] He accepts the description of his thought as a Kantianism without a transcendental subject. The ultimate principle of categorisation is essentially impersonal. "Within my perspective", he writes, "meaning is never a basic phenomenon; it is always reducible. In other words behind every sense there is a non-sense and not vice-versa. For me meaning is always phenomenal".[11]

A similar view is advocated by Michel Foucault from whose book *The Order of Things* I have taken the theme of this article. In this work he attempts to give an account of the underlying *episteme* or unconscious logical system which controls the schemes of perception, language, values and practices of various periods of European culture. Each period, for example the Renaissance, the Classical Age, the nineteenth century to the present day, has its own characteristic epistemological field, its own distictive modality of the basic reality of order which makes possible the theories, belief and practices of the time. The different periods of history are the consequence of an enigmatic mobility and discontinuity in overall epistemological arrangement. In virtue of a mysterious mutation suddenly a new *episteme* or modality of order arises which shapes in a new mould all dimensions of our conscious experience in such a way that various features are thrown into relief and assume a particular significance. For example, the *episteme* of the past two centuries has highlighted the human reality in a way which has made us attribute a focal significance to the idea of "man". However, instead of restricting philosophy to treating man as the absolute and irreducible explanatory principle we should realise that he is merely the product of the conceptual system or modality of order of a particular epoch on

[9] P Pettit, "Wittgenstein and the Case for Structuralism" *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology,* vol 1, 1970, page 47.

[10] Cf. C Levi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology,* London 1972, page 87.

[11] C Levi-Strauss, "Reponses a Quelques Questions", *Esprit,* Nov 1963, page 637.

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the basis of which we think as we do in that epoch. The truly philosophical enterprise, is to seek to bring to light the thought which precedes thought, the system underlying all systems and of which each *episteme* or controlling conceptual system is a particular expression. Foucault in no way finds this relativisation of man disconcerting. Indeed he sees it as a source of comfort and relief. He writes: "Strangely enough, man—the study of whom is supposed by the naive to be the oldest investigation since Socrates—is probably no more than a kind of rift in the order of things, or, in any case, a configuration whose outlines are determined by the new position he has so recently taken up in the field of knowledge. Whence all the chimeras of the new humanism, all the facile solutions of an 'anthropology' understood as a universal reflection on man, half-empirical, half-philosophical. It is comforting, however, and a source of profound relief to think that man is only a recent invention, a figure not yet two centuries old, a new wrinkle in our knowledge, and that he will disappear again as soon as that knowledge has discovered a new form." [12]

Thus whereas an existential phenomenologist such as Sartre would proclaim the irreducibility of man's freedom and the preeminence of subjective consciousness, structuralists such as Lev-Strauss and Foucault discount such claims as largely illusory. Man does not so much act as be acted upon by the unconscious structures which encompass him. The idea of the *cogito* in conscious control of his destiny must be replaced by that of the determining influence of an all embracing impersonal system.

By way of conclusion I will summarise the reflections outlined above adopting a simile which enables me to intimate a line of personal reflection upon what has been described.

Prior to the modern era the axis of enquiry concerning man was like a hand on a dial pointing virtically upwards.[13] Man sought to understand himself in terms of God's word or the visible world order which bore witness to the divine mind. Since the modern era there has been a progressive secularisation of the world and knowledge. Interest in human history replaced interest in divine providence. An account of man was sought in terms of himself rather than in terms of God. The hand on the dial of enquiry had moved down through an angle of ninety degrees until it was in a horizontal position on a level with man.

The investigation of man within the context of his finitude led in two directions. One, developing along the line of an analysis

[12] M Foucault, *op. cit.*, XXIII

[13] This simile is suggested by T de Quenetain, "What are the Building Blocks of Structuralism?" Realtes, Sept 1967, Pages 30-34.

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of subjective consciousness which would make man transparent to himself, culminates in existentialism which in its ultimate extreme identifies man with an empty choosing will. The other, developing along the lines of the human and social sciences came to envisage man as composed of subtle structures invisible as it were to the eye of existential consciousness yet fundamental to his make-up. Gradually the centre of interest has become, no longer the individual self-conscious man as such, but rather the order of systems and structures which transcend yet determine him. The hand on the dial of enquiry is moving as it were through a further angle of ninety degrees until it is pointing straight down into the structural depths which underpin in a controlling manner the human reality.

However, at this point, as the author of the simile observes, the hand on the dial of enquiry will also be on the vertical line pointing upwards towards God. But it must be said at once that structuralists such as Levi-Strauss and Foucault would not take kindly to any development of this observation. They are explicitly atheistic and reductionist in outlook.

Yet it seems to me that a Christian philosopher of religion may discern an unsuspected significance in the structuralists quest for the hidden code or rationale of all articulated human behaviour. Their investigations may suggest a fruitful approach in creating a contemporary conceptual space within which faith can appear as a significant response to a genuine question. For example, inasmuch as Revelation speaks of God as Logos or Word it illuminates Foucault's extremely enigmatic observation that: "In order to conceive the system, I was acting under compulsion from a system underlying the system, a system of which I am ignorant and which will move further back as I discover it or it reveals itself."[14]

The philosopher of religion will see suggestive analogies between the theme of the Word of God and the structuralist quest for the hidden ultimate code of all articulated behaviour. Moreover, inasmuch as the divine Word or code is envisaged not just as an unconscious happening but the fruit of a divine freedom and subjectivity the dimensions of personal subjectivity and structure will not appear so antithetical as they are sometimes represented. He may be inspired to undertake a reappraisal of the aspirations of human subjectivity which will open up the possibility that it is grounded ultimately not in an anonymous prepersonal structure but in a transcendent principle of spirit or love wherein logos coincides with creative subjectivity.

[14] Quoted by de Quenetain, *op. cit.*, page 33.

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In an attempt to show this I think one would need to work via reflection upon the exigencies of the spirit of love which not just in the life of the Godhead but in our own lived experience is the harmonising bond between creative freedom and logos or system. In concrete terms this would mean initiating our reflection on man in the realm of praxis and in particular in terms of an analysis of the exigencies of genuine morality. To refer once again to the theme mentioned by Miss Murdoch, we must allow ourselves to be led by the insight that the moral life is not primarily a matter of heroic sincere choices but of coming to envisage and treat a world of persons in a just and loving manner. More metaphysically, we must liberate ourselves from both the tyranny of empty freedom and the abstraction of the hard world of facts set up by science and logic. We must learn to live *under the authority* of the beautiful and the good. In a word, we must cultivate a critical normative realism. For knowledge is not restricted to the realm of facts which science can establish impersonally nor is morality simply a matter of courageous choices freely made given these facts. "Moral concepts do not move about *within* a hard world set up by science and logic. They set up for different purposes a different world.... It is in the capacity to love, that is to *see*, that the liberation of the soul from fantasy consists....What counteracts the system is attention to reality, inspired by, consisting of love."[15] This loving attention means first of all an acknowledgement of the other person not just as a moment of a system, nor as merely a possible object of my egoistical self-fulfillment, but in his irreducible significance precisely as other person. Thus, it seems to me, that a philosophy of man today should develop from a consideration of the event of the other person viewed as object of loving concern. Such a philosophy would imply a metaphysics more basic than the prevailing metaphysics of freedom and structure, namely, a metaphysics of justice and love.

[15] I Murdoch, *op. cit.*, pages 28 and 67.

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