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## Progressions

The four great Levels of Being exhibit certain characteristics in a manner which I shall call *progressions*. Perhaps the most striking progression is the movement from Passivity to Activity. At the lowest level, that of "minerals" or inanimate matter, there is pure passivity. A stone is wholly passive, a pure object, totally dependent on circumstances and "contingent." It can do nothing, organize nothing, utilize nothing. Even radioactive material is passive.

A plant is mainly, but not totally, passive; it is not a pure object; it has a certain, limited ability of adaptation to changing circumstances: it grows toward the light and extends its roots toward moisture and nutrients in the soil. A plant is to a small extent a *subject*, with its own power of doing, organizing, and utilizing. It can even be said that there is an intimation of active intelligence in plants—not, of course, as active as that of animals.

At the level of "animal," through the appearance of consciousness, there is a striking shift from passivity to activity. The processes of life are speeded up; activity becomes more autonomous, as evidenced by free and often purposeful movement—not merely a gradual turning toward light but swift action to

obtain food or escape danger. The power of doing, organizing, and utilizing is immeasurably extended; there is evidence of an "inner life," of happiness and unhappiness, confidence, fear, expectation, disappointment, and so forth. Any being with an inner life cannot be a mere object: it is a subject itself, capable even of treating other beings as mere objects, as the cat treats the mouse.

At the human level, there is a subject that says "I"—a person: another marked change from passivity to activity, from object to subject. To treat a person as if he or she were a mere object is a perversity, not to say a crime. No matter how weighed down and enslaved by circumstances a person may be, there always exists the possibility of self-assertion and rising above circumstances. Man can achieve a measure of control over his environment and thereby his life, utilizing things around him for his own purposes. There is no definable limit to his possibilities, even though he everywhere encounters practical limitations which he has to recognize and respect.

This progressive movement from passivity to activity, which we observe in the four Levels of Being, is indeed striking, but it is not complete. A large *weight* of passivity remains even in the most sovereign and autonomous human person; while he is undoubtedly a *subject*, he remains in many respects an *object*—dependent, contingent, pushed around by circumstances. Aware of this, mankind has always used its imagination, or its intuitive powers, to complete the process, to extrapolate (as we might say today) the observed curve to its completion. Thus was conceived a Being, wholly active, wholly sovereign and autonomous; a *Person* above all merely human persons, in no way an object, above all circumstances and contingencies, entirely in control of everything: a *personal* God, the "Unmoved Mover." The four Levels of Being are thus seen as pointing to the invisible existence of a Level (or Levels) of Being above the human.

An interesting and instructive aspect of the progression from passivity to activity is the change in the origin of movement. It is clear that at the level of inanimate matter there cannot be movement without a physical cause, and that there is a very

close linkage between cause and effect. At the plant level, the causal chain is more complex: physical causes will have physical effects as at the lower level—the wind will shake the tree whether it is living or dead—but certain physical factors act not simply as physical cause but simultaneously as *stimulus*. The sun's rays cause the plant to turn toward the sun. Its leaning too far in one direction causes the roots on the opposite side to grow stronger.

At the animal level, again, causation of movement becomes still more complex. An animal can be pushed around like a stone; it can also be stimulated like a plant; but there is, in addition, a third causative factor, which comes from inside: certain drives, attractions or compulsions, of a totally nonphysical kind—they can be called *motives*. A dog is motivated, and therefore moved, not merely by physical forces or stimuli impinging upon it from the outside, but also by forces originating in its "inner space": recognizing its master, it jumps for joy; recognizing its enemy, it runs in fear.

While at the animal level the motivating cause has to be physically present to be effective, at the level of man there is no such need. The power of self-awareness gives him an additional motivation for movement: *will*, that is, the power to move and act even when there is no physical compulsion, no physical stimulus, and no motivating force actually present. There is a lot of controversy about will: How free is it? We shall deal with this matter later. In the present context it is merely necessary to recognize that at the human level there exists an additional possibility of the origin of movement—one that does not seem to exist at any lower level, namely, movement on the basis of what might be called "naked insight." A person may move to another place not because present conditions motivate him to do so, but because he *anticipates in his mind* certain future developments.

While these additional possibilities—namely, the power of foreknowledge and therewith the capacity to anticipate future possibilities—are no doubt possessed, to some degree, by all human beings—it is evident that they vary greatly from individ-

ual to individual, and with most of us are very weak. It is possible to imagine a suprahuman Level of Being where they would exist in perfection. Perfect foreknowledge of the future would therefore be considered a Divine attribute, associated with perfect freedom of movement and perfect freedom from passivity. The progression from physical cause to stimulus to motive to will would then be completed by a perfection of will capable of overriding all the causative forces which operate at the four Levels of Being known to us. ✎

## II

The progression from passivity to activity is similar and closely related to the *progression* from necessity to freedom. It is easy to see that at the mineral level there is nothing but necessity. Inanimate matter cannot be other than what it is; it has no choice, no possibility of "developing" or in any way changing its nature. The so-called indeterminacy at the level of nuclear particles is simply another manifestation of necessity, because total necessity means the absence of any creative principle. As I have said elsewhere, it is analogous to the zero dimension—a kind of nothingness where nothing remains to be determined. The "freedom" of indeterminacy is, in fact, the extreme opposite of freedom: a kind of necessity which can be understood only in terms of statistical probability. At the level of inanimate matter, there is no "inner space" where any autonomous powers could be marshaled. As we shall see, "*inner space*" is the scene of freedom.

We know little, if anything, about the "inner space" of plants, more about that of animals, and a great deal about the "inner space" of the human being: the space of a *person*, of creativity, of *freedom*. Inner space is created by the powers of life, consciousness, and self-awareness; but we have direct and personal experience only of our own "inner space" and the freedom it affords *us*. Close observation discloses that most of us, most of the time, behave and act mechanically, like machines. The spe-

cifically human power of self-awareness is asleep, and the human being, like an animal, acts—more or less intelligently—solely in response to various influences. Only when a man makes use of his power of self-awareness does he attain to the level of a person, to the level of freedom. At that moment he is living, not being lived. Numerous forces of necessity, accumulated in the past, are still determining his actions, but a small dent is being made, a tiny change of direction is being introduced. It may be virtually unnoticeable, but many moments of self-awareness can produce many such changes and even turn a given movement into the opposite of its previous direction.

To ask whether the human being *has* freedom is like asking whether man *is* a millionaire. He is not, but can become, a millionaire. He can make it his aim to become rich; similarly, he can make it his aim to become free. In his "inner space" he can develop a center of strength so that the power of his freedom exceeds that of his necessity. It is possible to imagine a perfect Being who is always and invariably exercising Its power of self-awareness, which is the power of freedom, to the fullest degree, unmoved by any necessity. This would be a Divine Being, an almighty and sovereign power, a perfect Unity.

### III

There is also a marked and unmistakable *progression* toward integration and unity. At the mineral level, there is no integration. Inanimate matter can be divided and subdivided without loss of character or gestalt, simply because at this level there is none to lose. Even at plant level inner unity is so weak that parts of a plant can often be cut off, yet continue to live and develop as separate beings. Animals, by contrast, are much more highly integrated beings. Seen as a biological system, the higher animal is a unity, and parts of it cannot survive separation. There is, however, but little integration on the mental plane; that is to say, even the highest animal attains only a very modest level

of logicity and consistency; its memory, on the whole, is weak, and its intellect shadowy.

Man has obviously much more inner unity than any being below him, although integration, as modern psychology recognizes, is not guaranteed to him at birth and attaining it remains one of his major tasks. As a biological system, he is most harmoniously integrated; on the mental plane, integration is less perfect but capable of considerable improvement through schooling. As a *person*, however, as a being with the power of self-awareness, he is generally so poorly integrated that he experiences himself as an assembly of many different personalities, each saying "I." The classic expression of this experience is found in Saint Paul's letter to the Romans:

My own behaviour baffles me. For I find myself not doing what I really want to do but doing what I really loathe. Yet surely if I do things that I really don't want to do, it cannot be said that "I" am doing them at all,—it must be sin that has made its home in my nature.<sup>1</sup>

Integration means the creation of an inner unity, a center of strength and freedom, so that the being ceases to be a mere object, acted upon by outside forces, and becomes a subject, acting from its own "inner space" into the space outside itself. One of the greatest Scholastic statements on this *progression of integration* is found in the *Summa contra Gentiles* by Saint Thomas Aquinas:

Of all things the inanimate obtain the lowest place, and from them no emanation is possible except by the action of one on another: thus, fire is engendered from fire when an extraneous body is transformed by fire, and receives the quality and form of fire.

The next place to inanimate bodies belongs to plants, whence emanation proceeds from within, for as much as the plant's intrinsic humour is converted into seed, which being committed to the soil grows into a plant. Accordingly, here we find the first traces of life: since living things are those which move themselves to act, whereas those which can only move extraneous things are wholly lifeless. It is a sign of life in plants that something within them is the cause of

a form. Yet the plant's life is imperfect because, although in it emanation proceeds from within, that which emanates comes forth by little and little, and in the end becomes altogether extraneous: thus the humour of a tree gradually comes forth from the tree and eventually becomes a blossom, and then takes the form of fruit, distinct from the branch, though united thereto; and when the fruit is perfect it is altogether severed from the tree, and falling to the ground, produces by its seminal force another plant. Indeed if we consider the matter carefully we shall see that the first principle of this emanation is something extraneous: since the intrinsic humour of the tree is drawn through the roots from the soil whence the plant derives its nourishment.

There is yet above that of the plants a higher form of life, which is that of the sensitive soul, the proper emanation whereof, though beginning from without, terminates within. Also, the further the emanation proceeds, the more does it penetrate within: for the sensible object impresses a form on the external senses, whence it proceeds to the imagination and, further still, to the storehouse of the memory. Yet in every process of this kind of emanation, the beginning and the end are in different subjects: for no sensitive power reflects on itself. Wherefore this degree of life transcends that of plants in so much as it is more intimate; and yet it is not a perfect life, since the emanation is always from one thing to another. Wherefore the highest degree of life is that which is according to the intellect: for the intellect reflects on itself, and can understand itself. There are, however, various degrees in the intellectual life: because the human mind, though able to know itself, takes its first step to knowledge from without: for it cannot understand apart from phantasms. . . . Accordingly, intellectual life is more perfect in the angels whose intellect does not proceed from something extrinsic to acquire self-knowledge, but knows itself by itself. Yet their life does not reach the highest degree of perfection . . . because in them to understand and to be are not the same thing. . . . Therefore, the highest perfection of life belongs to God, whose understanding is not distinct from His being.<sup>2</sup>

This statement, unfamiliar as its mode of reasoning may be to the modern reader, makes it very clear that "higher" always means and implies "more inner," "more interior," "deeper," "more intimate"; while "lower" means and implies "more

outer," "more external," "shallower," less intimate.

The more "interior" a thing is, the less visible it is likely to be. The *progression* from visibility to invisibility is just another facet of the great hierarchy of Levels of Being. There is no need to dwell on it at length. Obviously the terms "visibility" and "invisibility" refer not merely to the visual sense but to all senses of external observation. The powers of life, consciousness, and self-awareness which come into focus as we review the four Levels of Being are all wholly "invisible"—without color, sound, "skin," taste, or smell, and also without extension or weight. Nevertheless, who would deny that *they* are what we are mainly interested in? When I buy a packet of seed, my main interest is that it should be alive and not dead, and an unconscious cat, even though still alive, is not a real cat for me until it has regained consciousness. The "invisibility of man" has been incisively decried by Maurice Nicoll:

We can all see another person's body directly. We see the lips moving, the eyes opening and shutting, the lines of the mouth and face changing, and the body expressing itself as a whole in action. The person *himself* is invisible. . . .

If the invisible side of people were discerned as easily as the visible side, we would live in a *new humanity*. As we are, we live in visible humanity, a humanity of *appearances*. . . .

All our thoughts, emotions, feelings, imaginations, reveries, dreams, fantasies, are *invisible*. All that belongs to our scheming, planning, secrets, ambitions, all our hopes, fears, doubts, perplexities, all our affections, speculations, ponderings, vacuities, uncertainties, all our desires, longings, appetites, sensations, our likes, dislikes, aversions, attractions, loves and hates—all are themselves invisible. They constitute "oneself."<sup>3</sup>

Nicoll insists that while all this may appear obvious, it is not at all obvious: "It is an extremely difficult thing to grasp. . . . We do not grasp that we are invisible. We do not realise that we are in a world of invisible people. We do not understand *that life, before all other definitions of it, is a drama of the visible and the invisible*."<sup>4</sup> There is the external world, in which things are visible, i.e., directly accessible to our senses; and there is "inner



space," where things are invisible, i.e., *not directly accessible to us*, except in the case of ourselves. This all-important point will occupy us at some length in a later chapter.

The *progression* from the totally visible mineral to the largely invisible *person* can be taken as a pointer toward Levels of Being above man totally invisible to our senses. We need not be surprised that most people throughout most of human history implicitly believed in the reality of this projection; they have always claimed that just as we can learn to "see" into the invisibility of the persons around us, so we can develop abilities to "see" the totally invisible beings existing at levels above us.

(As a philosophical mapmaker I have the duty to put these important matters on my map, so that it can be seen where they belong and how they connect with other, more familiar things. Whether or not any reader, traveler, or pilgrim wishes to explore them is his own affair.)

#### IV

The degree of integration, of inner coherence and strength, is closely related to the kind of "world" that exists for beings at different levels. Inanimate matter has no "world." Its total passivity is equivalent to the total emptiness of its world. A plant has a "world" of its own—a bit of soil, water, air, light, and possibly other influences—a "world" limited to its modest biological needs. The world of any one of the higher animals is incomparably greater and richer, although still mainly determined by biological needs, as modern animal psychology studies have amply demonstrated. But it also contains something more—such as curiosity, which enlarges the animal's world beyond its narrow biological confines.

The world of man, again, is incomparably greater and richer; indeed, it is asserted in traditional philosophy that man is *capax universi*, capable of bringing the whole universe into his experience. What he will actually grasp depends on each person's own Level of Being. The "higher" the person, the greater and richer

is his or her world. A person, for instance, entirely fixed in the philosophy of materialistic Scientism, denying the reality of "invisibles" and confining his attention solely to what can be counted, measured, and weighed, lives in a very poor world, so poor that he will experience it as a meaningless wasteland unfit for human habitation. Equally, if he sees it as nothing but an accidental collocation of atoms, he must needs agree with Bertrand Russell that the only rational attitude is one of "unyielding despair."

It has been said: "Your Level of Being attracts your life."<sup>5</sup> There are no occult or unscientific assumptions behind this saying. At a low Level of Being only a very poor world exists and only a very impoverished kind of life can be lived. The Universe is what it is; but he who, although *capax universi*, limits himself to its lowest sides—to his biological needs, his creature comforts, or his accidental encounters—will inevitably "attract" a miserable life. If he can recognize nothing but "struggle for survival" and "will to power" fortified by cunning, his "world" will be one fitting Hobbes's description of the life of man as "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."

The higher the Level of Being, the greater, richer, and more wonderful is the world. If we again extrapolate beyond the human level, we can understand why the Divine was considered not merely *capax universi* but actually in total possession of it, aware of everything, omniscient: "Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings, and not one of them is forgotten before God?"<sup>6</sup>

If we take the "fourth dimension"—time—into consideration, a similar picture emerges. At the lowest level, there is time only in the sense of duration. For creatures endowed with consciousness there is time in the sense of experience; but experience is confined to the present, except where the past is made present through memory (of one kind or another) and the future is made present through foresight (of which, again, there may be different kinds). The higher the Level of Being, the broader, as it were, is the present, the more it embraces of what, at lower Levels of Being, is past and future. At the highest

imaginable Level of Being, there would be the "*eternal now.*" Something like that may be the meaning of this passage in Revelation:

And the angel which I saw stand upon the sea and upon the earth lifted up his hand to heaven, and swore by him that liveth for ever and ever, who created heaven, and the things that therein are, and the earth, and the things that therein are, and the sea, and the things which are therein, that there should be time no longer.<sup>7</sup>

## V

An almost infinite number of further "progressions" could be added to those already described, but that is not the purpose of this book. The reader will be able to fill in whatever seems to him to be of special interest. Maybe he is interested in the question of "final causes." Is it legitimate to explain or even to describe a given phenomenon in teleological terms, i.e., as pursuing a purpose? It is ridiculous to answer such a question without reference to the Level of Being on which the phenomenon occurs. To deny teleological action at the human level would be as foolish as to impute it at the level of inanimate matter. Hence there is no reason to assume that traces or remnants of teleological action may not be found at the levels in between.

The four great Levels of Being can be likened to an inverted pyramid where each higher level comprises everything lower and is open to influences from everything higher. All four levels exist in the human being, which, as we have already seen, can be described by the formula

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Man} &= m + x + y + z \\ &= \text{mineral} + \text{life} + \text{consciousness} + \text{self-awareness} \end{aligned}$$

Not surprisingly, many teachings describe man as possessing four "bodies," namely,

- the physical body (corresponding to *m*)
- the etheric body (corresponding to *x*)

the astral body      (corresponding to  $y$ ) and  
 the "I" or Ego  
 or Self or Spirit      (corresponding to  $z$ )

In the light of our understanding of the four great Levels of Being, such descriptions of man as a fourfold being become easily comprehensible. In some teachings,  $m + x$  is taken as one—the living body (because an inanimate body is of no interest at all)—and they therefore speak of man as a threefold being, consisting of body ( $m + x$ ), soul ( $y$ ), and Spirit ( $z$ ). As people turned their interests increasingly to the visible world, the distinction between soul and Spirit became more difficult to maintain and tended to be dropped altogether; man, therefore, was represented as a being compounded of body and soul. With the rise of materialistic Scientism, finally, even the soul disappeared from the description of man—how could it exist when it could be neither weighed nor measured?—except as one of the many strange attributes of complex arrangements of atoms and molecules. Why not accept the so-called "soul"—a bundle of surprising powers—as an *epiphenomenon* of matter, just as, say, magnetism has been accepted as such? The Universe was no longer seen as a great hierarchic structure or Chain of Being; it was seen simply as an accidental collocation of atoms; and man, traditionally understood as the microcosm reflecting the macrocosm (i.e., the structure of the Universe), was no longer seen as a *cosmos*, a meaningful even though mysterious creation.

If the great Cosmos is seen as nothing but a chaos of particles without purpose or meaning, so man must be seen as nothing but a chaos of particles without purpose and meaning—a sensitive chaos perhaps, capable of suffering pain, anguish, and despair, but a chaos all the same (whether he likes it or not)—a rather unfortunate cosmic accident of no consequence whatsoever.

This is the picture presented by modern materialistic Scientism, and the only question is: Does it make sense of what we can actually experience? This is a question everybody has to decide for himself. Those who stand in awe and admiration, in

wonder and perplexity, contemplating the four great Levels of Being, will not be easily persuaded that there is only *more or less*—i.e., horizontal extension. They will find it impossible to close their minds to *higher or lower*—that is to say, vertical scales and even discontinuities. If they then see man as *higher* than any arrangement, no matter how complex, of inanimate matter, and *higher* than the animals, no matter how far advanced, they will also see man as “open-ended,” not at the *highest* level but with a potential that might indeed lead to perfection.

This is the most important insight that follows from the contemplation of the four great Levels of Being: At the level of man, there is no discernible limit or ceiling. Self-awareness, which constitutes the difference between animal and man, is a power of unlimited potential, a power which not only makes man human but gives him the possibility, even the need, to become superhuman. As the Scholastics used to say: “*Homo non proprie humanus sed superhumanus est*”—which means that to be properly human, you must go beyond the merely human.