

# THE CONDITION OF MAN

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# THE CONDITION OF MAN



## INTRODUCTION

What is man? What meaning has his life? What is his origin, his condition, his destiny? To what extent is he a creature of forces beyond his knowledge and his control, the plaything of nature and the sport of the gods? To what extent is he a creator who takes the raw materials of existence, the heat of the sun, the stones and the trees and the soil, his very body and its organs, and refashions the world to which nature has bound him, so that a good part of it reflects his own image and responds to his will and his ideal? These questions are as old as the ability to put them in so many words; perhaps older. And in framing its answer each epoch in human culture, each generation, leaves its characteristic mark.

All the questions man asks about his life are multiplied by the fact of death: for man differs from all other creatures, it would seem, in being aware of his own death and in never being fully reconciled to sharing the natural fate of all living organisms. The tree of knowledge, with its apple that gave man awareness of good and evil, also grew a more bitter fruit man wrenched from its branches: the consciousness of the shortness of the individual life and the finality of death. In his resistance to death man has often achieved a maximum assertion of life: like a child at the sea's edge, working desperately to build up the walls of his sand castle before the next wave breaks over it, man has often made death the center of his most valued efforts, cutting temples out of the rock, heaping pyramids high above the desert, transposing the mockeries of human power into visions of godlike omnipotence, translating human beauty into everlasting stone, human experience into printed words, and time itself, arrested in art, into a simulacrum of eternity.

Death happens to all living things; but man alone has created out of the constant threat of death a will-to-endure, and out of the desire for continuity and immortality in all their many conceivable forms, a more meaningful kind of life, in which Man redeems the littleness of individual men.

To achieve knowledge of himself and his place in the world man has from the earliest appearance of civilization scanned the heavens above

and looked into his own heart. Like every other animal, he survives because he plays nature's game: he, too, seizes food and seeks shelter, he mates and reproduces; he learns to kill dangerous rivals and to avoid poisons: he schools himself to co-operate with his own kind and to wage war against all hostile, or seemingly hostile, forms of life. So well did he master these primitive arts, with his free hands, his upright posture, his discriminating, self-controlling forebrain, that he finally dominated every other species on the planet; and in this very process accomplished an even greater miracle—he domesticated himself. Here was a new form of life-play; and out of it most of the life-conserving, life-furthering processes of civilization have grown.

During the last century the nature of man has been redefined by scientific investigation: much that was in the realm of myth or poetry hitherto has now been substantiated by detailed analysis and united to broader generalizations than any single myth or religious intuition had established.

With Charles Darwin, we understand that man's nature is continuous with that of animal creation: the biological past of many contributing organisms has shaped the organs of his own body: their needs, their impulses, their urges have laid channels for his own conduct. Every fresh emergent that man has made always runs the risk of being dragged back to the norm of his animal past: that is the "original sin" whose burden he can never escape, though it carries with it as compensation all the vitalities of the animal world and all those primitive processes of co-operation, loyalty, and sexual love which have been the foundations of his higher life.

Again, like every other organism, man is in constant interaction with his environment, mainly by his daily effort to protect himself against danger, to nourish his body, and to secure his future survival. Karl Marx's stress on the fact that work conditions all of man's other activities, his belief that changing processes of production result in cultural transformations that affect seemingly remote parts of man's social life, are now integral parts of our knowledge of man's nature.

Man's capacity to impose work on himself not merely gave him greater security and freedom but made possible a more highly organized kind of society: not by accident perhaps was the original step from tribal societies to civilization accompanied for long by the enslavement of large groups, until all men were ready to submit to the slavery of work itself for the purpose of the wider and completer liberation that results from the economic division of labor. But in origin work and play have the same common trunk and cannot be detached: every mastery of the economic conditions of life lightens the burdens of servile work and opens up new possi-

bilities for art and play; and in these realms man gains a fuller insight into his surroundings, his community, and himself. Thus man's released activities grow out of his conditioned activities: the esthetic flower out of the economic leaf.

Without compulsory labor, civilizations would not originally have produced enough spare energy to maintain their higher activities. Without freedom from compulsory labor, man cannot enjoy these higher activities.

Man is pre-eminently the handy animal: his meeting thumb and forefinger and his free arms have given him a power to manipulate his environment that no other creature possesses. No organic view of man can, accordingly, ignore the weight and significance of man's technics: the first book in the present series, *Technics and Civilization*, is devoted wholly to this subject. But this is not the same as saying that economic needs and technical processes are self-perpetuating and self-transforming, and that man's life in work constitutes his only essential reality. Those who believe in economic determinism, as the single clue to history, ascribe an independent life to mechanisms and conceive of the human community as being passively molded by them. To hold that man is completely conditioned by his agents of production is as false as to hold that he can completely escape their pervasive effects.

Man gains, through work, the insight into nature he needs to transmute work into artifacts and symbols that have a use beyond ensuring his immediate animal survival. The ultimate justification of work lies not alone in the performance and the product but in the realm of the arts and sciences. The *role* of work is to make man a master of the conditions of life: hence its constant discipline is essential to his grasp of the real world. The *function* of work is to provide man with a living: not for the purpose of enlarging his capacities to consume but of liberating his capacities to create. The social *meaning* of work derives from the acts of creation it makes possible.

If work is the chief of man's self-maintaining activities, every act that he performs has the same underlying purpose: to effect within the organism a dynamic equilibrium and to enable it to continue the processes of growth and to postpone those that make for death. A succession of physiologists, from Claude Bernard to J. S. Haldane and Walter Cannon, have established the importance of man's internal environment: its delicately maintained stability is the condition of his being set free to think and feel and exercise his senses without keeping too sharp an eye upon the bare necessities of survival. Disturbances in this internal environment affect the psyche long before they cast a burden on man's other organs; and there is much reason to think that the opposite process also takes



place: a succession of investigators from Janet and Freud onward have established the fact that psychic disharmony may disrupt the equilibrium of the whole physical organism and even cause drastic disturbances of function in one or another organ.

Man's sanity and health consist, in fact, in his maintaining this double balance: an even internal environment that frees the mind for independent explorations and a balance of mind that enables the body to function as an effective whole, despite continued changes of circumstance, changes of occupation, and changes of physiological equilibrium through growth itself. Change is a constant factor in all these processes: but not indefinite change, for all life-maintaining changes are in the direction of equilibrium: those old standards of the Greek philosophers, harmony and composure under all circumstances, as in Socrates' imperturbable conduct at Potidea, have the sanction of scientific wisdom. That equilibrium is itself dynamic: for it is only by accepting and controlling change that man can maintain his organism at its full capacity to function.

As with other organisms man is subject to arrests, fixations, lapses into inertness. In his desire to avoid physical danger, he may imitate the errors of the armored reptiles; in trying to achieve a stable social order, he may be tempted to imitate the ants, which have achieved complete social harmony at the price of going no farther in their development; in his desire for an easy physical life, he may resort to parasitism, and in his effort to overcome pain he may deliberately choose insensibility, which is a living death.

All these temptations are vices because they are denials of the essential nature of the living organism: denials of its capacity for variation, in which it differs from insensate matter; its capacity for experimental life-play, seeking a fuller mastery of its circumstances and its very self; and finally, its capacity for insurgence, its unwillingness to take things lying down. Variation, experiment, and insurgence are all of them attributes of freedom; and though all organisms seem to make a bid for freedom, it is man who has strained hardest to achieve it and to keep it as an essential attribute of at least some part of his society: even when he denied it to a whole community, he reserved it for a favored group or class.

Man's extraordinary biological success has been due to the fact that he was, in an extreme degree, the free and adventurous animal, with insatiable curiosity that was stronger than that of the elephant's child, with a desire for mobility that has finally given him command of every medium of locomotion, even the air, with an audacity that gave him control over fire and now promises to release intra-atomic energy. But he was also the self-nurturing, the self-domesticating animal, who prolonged his own mat-

ing season past the period of rut and prolonged the infancy of his children long enough to turn random infantile vocalizations into the orderly associations and symbolisms of language. Man's freedom has always been achieved within the co-operative patterns of his culture: not freedom to reject his social heritage, to depart from the human norm, but to select, to modify, to augment that heritage, and to raise the norm.

So much for the elemental nature of man. It is an essential part of his history; but there is another part that it is even more important to reckon with: that which he shares with the other social animals, and above all, that which emerged through the development of man's specifically human traits.

Man's life differs from that of most other organisms in that individuation has become more important to him than strict conformity to type: he participates in all the characters of his species, and yet, by the very complexity of his needs, each individual makes over the life-course of the species and achieves a character and becomes a person. The more fully he organizes his environment, the more skillfully he associates in groups, the more constantly he draws on his social heritage, the more does the person emerge from society as its fulfillment and perfection. But that process is never finished. Every other animal but man is a complete representative of his species: man remains the unfinished animal, like the measuring worm at the end of a twig, in Albert Pinkham Ryder's illustration, ever reaching out into the unknown. Man's growth, therefore, is not completed by his biological fulfillment as a mate and a parent: nor is it completed by his death. Man's nature is a self-surpassing and a self-transcending one: his utmost achievements are always beginnings and his fullest growth must still leave him unsatisfied.

This quality of self-transcendence must be joined to another fact about the nature of man: namely, that above his instinctive and automatic activities lies a whole stratum where purpose and meaning have full play. A meaningless life and a purposeless life belong to the not-yet-human. Man does not, therefore, merely function toward survival, his own or that of his species, like other animals: he functions towards ends, which he himself becomes progressively conscious of and progressively able to define. Outside such meanings and ends, the bitter words of the Preacher will hold: All is vanity. Man's purposes are not alone given in nature, but superimposed on nature through his social heritage: man's ecologic partnership with the earth and all other living forms must—as Patrick Geddes elaborated—be complemented by man's special creations, art, culture, and polity, the processes through which he has made over every aspect

of his natural environment, turning love-calls into music and stone quarries into cities.

Like the social insects man has found a way of strengthening certain useful individual traits through the social division of labor: a further working out of the original biological division of tasks between the sexes. Because of the element of compulsion and exploitation that was present in the passage from primitive tribal co-operation to organized communities, these functional divisions have often tended historically to harden into castes. But the real justification for the social division of labor lies in the fact that it gives the individual personality the benefit of the whole community's heightened capacities. It is in and through the community that the individual person finds himself enlarged, energized—and completed. In society man faces himself and realizes himself; and in a free society, mobile and democratic, like Athens in the fifth century B.C., each citizen has an opportunity to plumb all his potentialities: the specialized fragments are re-united in the whole man. At that point the human person becomes an emergent from the community, embodying it and transcending it: rejecting complete “adjustment” for the sake of growth.

The social division of labor found in some degree in all human societies was made possible by an even earlier human advance: the invention of symbolization and the development of language. This is the most specifically human characteristic; and it has given a special kind of cohesion to the human community: that which results from a common response to a common group of symbols. Man's natural environment is complemented by his *idolum*: and by *idolum* I mean a symbolic milieu composed of images, sounds, words, fabrications, and even natural objects to which man has attached a representative value. Symbolic representation makes possible an interchange of experiences without respect to immediate limitations of time and space. As man found ways of creating “permanent” symbols in stone or reproducing his symbols by manifolding and copying, he has been able to make larger and larger areas of his otherwise private experience available to other men, though they are separated from him by birth or distance.

The ability to create symbols and respond to symbols is an essential difference between the world of brutes and the world of men. Without symbols, man's life would be one of immediate appetites, immediate sensations; limited to a past shorter than his own lifetime, at the mercy of a future he could never anticipate, never prepare for. In such a world out of hearing would be out of reach, and out of sight would be out of mind. By means of symbols man builds a coherent world out of patches of sense-data and gleams of individual experience.

The failure to understand the role of symbolization in human life has been responsible for a grave misunderstanding of the nature of man. Because symbols are subjective in origin, in that they are not found in nature outside man, many people fancy that they are unreal, mischievous, or that a more sound existence would be possible if all symbols were excluded except those that could be reduced to quantities or visible operations. Those who have advocated this view lack an understanding of man's essence and true aptitude. On this subject Jean Calvin, for example, is a safer guide than many current behaviorists. "The manifold agility of the soul, which enables it to take a survey of heaven and earth; to join the past and the present; to retain the memory of things heard long ago; to conceive of whatever it chooses by the help of imagination: its ingenuity, also, in the invention of such admirable arts, are certain proofs of the divinity of man." Thus Calvin. This agility of the soul is the result of man's development of the symbol: a more miraculous tool than the fire that Prometheus stole from heaven.

Communication, communion, and co-operation, the three essential attributes of human society, are all dependent upon the acceptance of common symbols to which the same meanings, functions, and values are attached. Without those symbols there may be cohabitation; there may even be a primitive kind of co-operation confined to the visible object and the passing moment: but no more. And in turn, the deepening humanization of man in society depends upon his capacity to turn experiences into symbols and symbols into life-experiences. With limited symbols, he lives in a closed world, closed in time, closed in space: a world without distances, perspectives, alternatives, prospects. Only by means of symbols can man widen the powers of discrimination and the acts of choice: only by symbols can he release himself from immediate pressures and cast the events of his life into an order he has pre-ordained and shaped in the mind. Thus symbols are not vicarious substitutes for experience but a means of enhancing it and enlarging its domain.

Ritual, art, poesy, drama, music, dance, philosophy, science, myth, religion, are accordingly all as essential to man as his daily bread: man's true life consists not alone in the work activities that directly sustain him, but in the symbolic activities which give significance both to the processes of work and their ultimate products and consummations. There is no poverty worse than that of being excluded, by ignorance, by insensibility, or by a failure to master the language, from the meaningful symbols of one's culture: those forms of social deafness or blindness are truly death to the human personality. For it is through the effort to achieve meaning,

form, and value that the potentialities of man are realized, and his actual life in turn is raised to a higher potential.

The three studies in this series attempt to give full weight to all the essential conditions for man's development; but in this survey of *The Condition of Man* it becomes important to redress the conventional contemporary unbalance, by giving emphasis precisely to those aspects of man's life that are usually neglected: his dreams, his purposes, his ideals, his utopias. Many and various are the products of man's art: but his final work of art is himself.

To achieve a more organic view of man's nature and prospects we must reverse the conventional metaphysics, which looks upon the so-called physical universe as basic and ultimate, and which regards the facts of human existence as derivative. This metaphysics became popular because uniformities and mathematical certainties were first established in the physical sciences and first applied to the heavenly bodies, remote from this man-infected world. But man is not born into that bare physical universe: rather, he is born into a world of human values, human purposes, human instruments, human designs; and all that he knows or believes about the physical world is the result of his own personal and social development. The very language he uses for neutral scientific description is a social product that antedates his science. Indeed, the tendency to look upon processes in the physical world as more important, more fundamental, than the processes of organisms, societies, and personalities is itself a by-product of a particular moment of human history: the outcome of a systematic self-deflation.

The path of human development has been from sensation to significance, from the externally conditioned to the internally conditioned, from herdlike cohesion to rational co-operation, from automatism to freedom. Thus the poor beplagued creature of circumstances who greets us at the beginning of history becomes progressively the shaper of his own character, the creator of his own destiny. But only up to a point. . . . For this increase of self-control is subject to numerous hazards and setbacks: man is the sport of natural forces both outside and within himself, forces he sometimes circumvents but never entirely sets at naught. Pride trips him; reason unnerves him. Even man's cunningest efforts to escape nature's dominion may recoil against him: has he not, at this moment of apparent triumph over nature, seen himself slip helplessly back from freedom to automatism, from civilization to barbarism? In short, man's creativeness is always subject to his creatureliness; in the end, as Robert Frost says, he must leave something to God.

Man's higher development has been due to his unwillingness to accept

the limits of the outer world as his own ultimate boundaries. Dreams, impulses, intuitions, welling up within him, have helped man to give part of that world the dimensions of his own being: a Kantian discovery that positivism unreasonably condemns. Man sees God, as the theologians say, and seeks to walk with Him in righteousness. Against the naked wishes of his own ego he sets the super-ego: on one side a collective censor and mentor, a judge and a moral conscience, bringing the private self into relation with the public self, uniting the wishes of the moment with the needs of a lifetime; and on the other side, the gods and muses, ministers of grace, urging him to goodness and beauty, beguiling him with visions that surpass the ego's most exalted private dreams.

Often man's imagination has led him into error and his search for light has plunged him into deeper darkness, even as his will-to-perfection has sometimes made him inhuman, cruel, life-denying. It was easier for myth and religion to personify subjects than for science to objectify objects. But the final outcome of these efforts has been a deeper insight into his condition and destiny than his practical activities by themselves would ever have called forth. For it is by means of his ideal fabrications that man circumvents his animal fate: his *idolum* and his super-ego help him to transcend the narrow pragmatic limits of human society.

Thus, deviously but persistently, man has developed into a person: tied to a local community, yet seeking brotherhood with all like-minded men; bound to his own tribe, yet seeking a common tongue which others can share and a wider purpose in which they can cooperate; tethered to his biological destiny, yet most deeply human when he is detached and released, when, "counting gain or loss as one," he accepts Krishna's call to face battle and death. Man comes into the world, he struggles, he triumphs, he dies, not in order merely to perpetuate his species but to give it a new destiny—that which his own cumulative culture makes possible: a destiny that gives to the cosmos itself, perhaps, an emergent end, only latent in matter and life till man himself appeared. A monad that can think and feel is more important than a galaxy of impassive stars. The soul, as Whitman well says, stands cool and composed before a million universes.

Man's subjective and his objective world are in constant interplay: nothing that he knows about the universe can be dissociated from the facts of his own life; and no product of his culture is so detached from the larger groundwork of existence that he can impute to his individual powers what alone has been made possible by countless generations of men and by the underlying co-operation of the entire system of nature. Nature has helped man to model his very self, and in turn, his own *idolum*

has become a second nature, fulfilling more completely his latent powers. Such historic accumulations of culture form the topsoil and humus in which the higher life of man has flourished. Let the historic roots of a culture be plowed up, let the dust storms scatter the loose soil, and what is left is a bare surface of non-historic experience which will not sustain human life or thought.

Man alone lives in a time-world that transcends the limitations of his local environment: the world of the past, the present, and the possible; or, if you will, the real, the realizing, and the realizable. Once he loses hold on any of these dimensions of his experience, he cuts himself off from a part of reality.

The slogan of the political reformers of the eighteenth century was—The past has nothing to teach us; history is only the record of superstitions, frauds, miseries, and lies. But the actions of these reformers were usually more rational than their doctrines: they were not so indifferent to human experience as to deny that honesty was better than fraud or justice better than crime. Only in our own age have the final consequences of their anti-historic nihilism shown themselves. During the last generation, particularly in the United States, it became popular to say that only contemporary history was important; whereas the truth is that all history is important *because* it is contemporary and nothing is perhaps more so than those hidden parts of the past that still survive without our being aware of their daily impact. He who knows only the events of the last generation or the last century knows less than nothing about what is actually happening now or what is about to take place.

So far from being overwhelmed by the accumulations of history, the fact is that mankind has never consciously carried enough of its past along with it. Hence a tendency to stereotype a few sorry moments of the past, instead of perpetually re-thinking it, re-valuating it, re-living it in the mind. It is only by this act of deliberately recapturing the past that one can escape its unconscious influence; and this ordering of man's real experience is, as Croce has well said, the true groundwork of philosophy. By lengthening the historic perspective, one gains power to throw off the partialities and relativities of one's immediate society; likewise, by facing the totality of human experience, one becomes aware of elements that the fashion or habit of one's own particular epoch may arbitrarily have neglected: archaic elements, primal elements, irrational elements, neglected mutations and concealed survivals, often overlooked by the wise in their too narrow wisdom.

In this sense, history is a reservoir of human creativeness. Without the perpetual rediscovery and reinterpretation of history, without free access

to that reservoir, the life of any single generation would be but a trickle of water in a desert.

The limited conventions of historians have made us forget, however, that history has an anticipatory side: it is the domain of the possible, the starting point of the ideal. The real future is no mechanical continuation of the present, which can be projected by a simple curve on a graph. From moment to moment the inertia of the past may be altered by new factors springing from both inside and outside the human personality. The creation and selection of new potentialities, the projection of ideal goals is, with reference to the future, the counterpart of an intelligent commerce with the past. The neglect of the ideal leads only to the covert practice of giving to the present an ideal significance it does not possess. Utopia, as the expression of rational possibilities, is an integral feature of purposive living; for no human life is fully rational unless it anticipates its own life-course and controls its present actions and present needs in the light of some more general plan, some larger system of values, into which all the parts of its existence tend to fit.

History is the dynamic working out of the drama of a culture; and in the drama of a culture, the nature of man defines itself and realizes itself in partial detachment from the world common to other living organisms. If nature is the theater of human life, the historic cultures provide the scenery against which men act their parts. Much of the activity that goes into a drama is preparatory and instrumental: but who would go to the theater if all that went on was the raising and lowering of the curtain or a perpetual change of scene—no matter with what mechanical adroitness those tasks might be carried on? The combined efforts of the architects, builders, mechanics, scene shifters and spectators would not, in themselves, produce a significant drama.

The drama itself is not a mere repetitive doing and acting: it consists in symbolic deeds and actions and words through which the characters who participate in it realize their fullest potentialities as men and women, in a significant and purposive performance. Only when the drama is enacted are the struggle and sweat of the preparatory workers justified. All our questions as to the condition of man, then, remain bottomless until one places man in the frame of a particular culture and a particular historic moment: for his nature reveals itself only in the acting out of his particular drama; and it cannot be understood by a static external analysis, since time and purpose and development are of its essence.

With such basic notions as to the nature of man we now approach the present crisis in modern civilization and attempt to bring to it a fresh understanding.



In the present book I purpose to deal at length with the tangled elements of Western man's spiritual history. People whose course of life has reached a crisis must confront their collective past as fully as a neurotic patient must unbury his personal life: long-forgotten traumas in history may have a disastrous effect upon millions who remain unaware of them. If we have not time to understand the past, we will not have the insight to control the future; for the past never leaves us, and the future is already here.

The period through which we are living presents itself as one of unmitigated confusion and disintegration: a period of paralyzing economic depressions, of unrestrained butcheries and enslavements, and of world-ravaging wars: a period whose evil fulfillments have betrayed all its beneficent promises. But behind all these phenomena of physical destruction we can detect an earlier and perhaps more fundamental series of changes: a loss of communion between classes and peoples, a breakdown in stable behavior, a loss of form and purpose in many of the arts, with a growing emphasis on the accidental and the trivial: in short, the earliest form of this crisis was an internal "schism of the soul," as Toynbee calls it, and a break up of the over-all pattern of meaning.

The drama our civilization had presented during the last four centuries was played to its end: it was in fact played out; and the continued presence of the actors on the same stage, babbling the same parts, repeating gestures too well learned, resulted only in a confusion that covered their general emptiness of purpose.

The time has come for a new drama to be conceived and enacted. Each of us has his part to play in that renewal. And first of all, we must understand the formative forces that are still at work in our civilization: by such fuller and deeper knowledge of our own living past, we will re-fashion the actors themselves and give them new parts to perform. Now, as once before in the disintegrating classic and medieval worlds, the achievement of a new personality, a new attitude toward man and nature and the cosmos, are matters of life and death. We must recapture once more our sense of what it is to be a man: we must fashion a fresh way of life, which will give to every man a new value and meaning in his daily activities. A crisis that has been faced and mastered gives the survivor a new confidence in his powers: thereby he reaches a higher point than he might have achieved through a more normal line of growth. There lies our hope.

In an attempt to control the disintegrating forces that are at work in our society, we must resume the search for unity; and to this end, we must explore the historic nature of the modern personality and the com-