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ENVIRONMENT EVOLUTION and VALUES

*Studies in
Man, Society and Science*

D.P. CHATTOPADHYAYA



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To my teachers

SIR KARL R. POPPER

PROFESSOR A. C. DAS (in memory)

PROFESSOR J. W. N. WATKINS

PROFESSOR K. K. BANERJEE

in esteem, affection and gratitude

Preface

Of the fifteen papers included in the book four (3, 7, 12 and 13) have been published before: 3 in my book *History, Society and Polity*, Macmillan, New Delhi, 1976; 7 in *Philosophy: Theory and Action*, Poona, 1980; 12 in *Philosophy and Social Action* Vol. I, No. 2, 1975; and 13 in *Philosophy of Human Rights* (Alan S. Rosenbaum ed.), Greenwood Press, West Port, Connecticut, 1980.

All other papers, except 2 and 9, have been presented before some or other conference, seminar, symposium or learned society. The first essay was presented to Seminar on Man held at the Centre of Advanced Studies, Simla, in 1973; 4 before the Pierre Teilhard de Chardin Birth Centenary symposium at Unesco, Paris, in September, 1981 (revised later on); 5 before Sri Aurobindo Bhavan, Calcutta, in December, 1981 (revised later on); 6 at Interdisciplinary Seminar on Man and Nature at the University of Poona in January, 1981; 8 at Seminar on Philosophy in Science at Jadavpur University in February, 1980; 10 before the Golden Jubilee Session of the Indian Philosophical Congress, Delhi, in December, 1975; 11 at Gandhi Study Centre, Jadavpur University, in March, 1974; 12 at All India Sociological Conference, Banaras, 1975, and the present version before the Centre for Asian Affairs at MIT, Cambridge in March, 1982; and 14 at Seminar on Politics and Morality at Rajasthan University, Jaipur in June, 1980.

I wish to thank the editors and publishers of the publications listed above for permission to use the materials in this book. The papers have been organized into Parts according to subject, and a new introduction has been written for each part. They are intended to provide conceptual notes concerning the problems dealt with in the papers, to relate the papers to each other, to other papers in the book, and to the current issues delineated and debated by other investigators and to carry investigation a little

beyond. For advice, encouragement, comment and criticism I am indebted to many teachers, students, colleagues and friends, especially to K.K. Banerjee, J.W.N. Watkins, H.D. Lewis, P.K. Sen, Kalyan Sengupta, T.K. Sarkar, P.K. Mukhopadhyaya, Archana Banerjee, Tirthanath Banerjee, Krishna Roy, and Shefali Moitra. It is a great pleasure to acknowledge my obligations to Professor S.P. Banerjee and Dr. (Mrs) Minakshi Roy Choudhuri, who read most of the text; and to Professors Ernest Gellner, Erwin N. Hiebert, Hilary Putnam, Thomas Kuhn, Daya Krishna, Kireet Joshi, and Chhanda Gupta, each of whom read one or more chapters. None of them is responsible for mistakes which will doubtless be found in the book, especially since their advice was not always heeded. The influence of the writings of Marx, Sri Aurabindo and Popper should be evident. I have benefited as much by the ideas which I have criticized as by those which appear closer to my own. It would be clear from the following pages.

It is only during the first three months of 1982 that I could have uninterrupted time to complete the work necessary for converting the essays, though otherwise thematically related, into a book. My work has been supported, partly, by a Fulbright Scholarship enabling me to visit and work at Harvard University and Jadavpur University by granting study leave for nine months. I am grateful to the concerned authorities.

I would like to thank my friends, Buddhadev Bhattacharya and Vinod Kumar, for taking sustained interest in the production of this book and much besides.

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Introduction

The essays of the book, though written on different occasions spread over eight years (1973–81), have an evident thematic unity and are concerned with the nature of man and his activities, both individual and collective. Different forms of knowledge and language-use are, on scrutiny, found to be basically social in character. In the book a sustained attempt has been made to show the evolutionary nature of man and his activities, social and valuational. An equally sustained argument has been developed to show the inadequacy of the static-structural concepts of man and his activities. In the structural approach the importance of time, evolution and history are systematically underestimated. There is a persistent impression among a section of structuralists that if *historism* and *evolutionism* are seriously recognized, then such concepts as *universality*, *necessity*, and *objectivity* cannot be satisfactorily accounted for. To my mind, the basic ideas of structuralism are associated with such names as Plato, Descartes, Kant, some neo-Kantians like Cassirer and Strawson, and Piaget, Levis-Strauss, and Chomsky.

It goes without saying that their views are not similar on all philosophical and social issues. But they have one point in common and that is denial of the evolutionary or the process character of reality and man's cognitive competence. In spite of his known sympathy for Plato the thinker made a most remarkable attempt to the process character of reality is to my mind, Whitehead. And it is a pity that I could not examine some of his arguments in the book. It is on this basic point that my difference with some structuralists would be evident in the following pages. Structuralism has been proved indeed very "seductive" and infectious. In contrast to them, I shall argue, among other things, that reality is evolving;

the human ways of knowing reality are evolving; and human values diverse and dynamic.

In course of my arguments, I would like to show that laws of science, though intended to be universal, are never strictly necessary, in the cognitive sense of the term. Logical necessity is a *postulation* and not a cognitive achievement. Consistently with my realistic position I am obliged to believe that there are universal structural properties of reality, but since that obligation cannot be cognitively fully discharged, I cannot claim that human *beliefs* regarding those universal structural properties can be justified in any strong sense. By implication I admit that the universality claim of our knowledge should be subjected to *critical* and, if possible, experimental scrutiny. In fact, *history* of human achievements, social and cognitive, make this point evidently and abundantly clear. I have an insistent feeling that *history* of such *sciences* as cosmology and biology should be brought closer to philosophy and linguistics so that some of our basic and recurrent misconceptions are seriously and critically reviewed and removed.

When it is said that the human nature is evolving, it entails two other things. First, the concepts and theories in terms of which man organizes his sense-experiences are not innate and permanent but formed and subject to transformation. The symbols and the strings connecting those symbols are also found to be subject to the laws of social change. Secondly, the capacity underlying the formation and transformation of concepts and theories and symbols and strings of symbols purported to express the former is also subject to change. This *change in human capacity* is best understandable in terms of the process of *biological evolution* and *ecological interaction*. Our capacities and their exercise are contingent upon the availability or lack thereof some powers not entirely or permanently native to our nature.

There is no fixed *essence* of man which is insulated above the process of evolution and protected against the forces of ecological interaction. The essentialist or the structuralist fails to account for the change in Man's *linguistic competence*. Alternatively, he claims that the change is merely a surface-phenomenon, confined only to the level of *performance*, and does not affect the basic competence of man. From this insistent position of the structuralist arise a number of paired concepts: performance and competence;

appearance and reality; phenomena and noumena; surface-structure and deep-structure; opinion and knowledge.

While as a gradualist I do not deny that there is a difference between the members of the said pairs, I am of the view that the difference is one of grade and not of kind. The thesis of gradualism that I propose to defend in the following pages is pitted against the sort of dualism that is there, implicitly or explicitly, in the ideas of Plato, Descartes, Kant and his modern followers, and the structuralists working in the fields of anthropology, psychology and linguistics. *Realistic gradualism*, defended in this book, clashes with cognitive and valuational universalism of Plato and Kant, structural universalism of Chomsky, and Piaget's psychological universalism. As regards Kant I would like to add, somewhat qualifying my general anti-structuralist position, that by redeploying some of the arguments, especially those pertaining to teleology, of the Third Critique Kant's view, unlike Descartes's one, can be brought closer to gradualism.

In fact I want to do away with man/nature dualism. Man is natural and simultaneously aware of his being natural. What we call human culture is humanly transformed or nurtured nature. Man's ways of transforming or appropriating nature are *partly* inherited from nature itself. Firm-foot in nature, man rises above nature, and becomes author of culture. It is through his concept-forming and symbol-using capacities that individual men are in a position to exchange their experience and ideas and pool them together for both individual and collective purposes. Though man is the basic *dynamo* of social dynamics, he cannot completely break away from the group dynamics of which he is both a creator and a creature.

Social change may be viewed from different aspects: synchronic and diachronic. Generally speaking, in cultural anthropology we come across a synchronic or static view of social change. As Bergson was fond of reminding us that a snap-shot (i.e. static) view of changing reality does not take away the changing character of reality itself. Rightly understood, the synchronic view of reality is not inconsistent with, but rather complementary to, the diachronic or the historical and the evolutionary view of reality. While the cultural anthropologist concentrates on the details of social interaction within a given timeframe, the historian and the evolutionist tries to trace the successive forms of the human evolution, from the biological to the social stage. Interaction and change are two

aspects of one and the same process, the same dialectical process. One might say: structure has history and history has structure. But, then, it has to be added: the structure of history has itself a history (of course at a higher level) The hierarchy does *not* end with "the Platonic Form of Forms" at its top.

The dialectic between man and nature, between nature and culture, both generates new needs in man and makes him increasingly conscious of the same. The human needs are partly natural, native to his biological being, complex extension of the powers and laws of nature, and partly social. The body of man is so equipped and organized that it can decode the encoded messages received from nature, interpret the same creatively, extrapolating beyond the given. It enables him to initiate actions, resist others' actions, and adjust himself with different situations. What we call values are partly expressive of his needs, biological and social, and partly recognition of the properties of the objects he needs for his satisfaction of different sorts. The *valued properties* of the objects and *man's needs* of the same are neither fixed nor permanent: they interact, evolve and interact.

Part I: Human Evolution

As specimens of very difficult questions about man one might ask "what is the nature of man?" and "what is the essence of man?" It is not that this sort of question has not ever been asked. The answers to them, on examination, have been found to be as unsatisfactory as the questions themselves. Whatever answer one gives in answer to either of the questions or both, viz., "man is a rational animal" or "man is a symbol-using being" or "man is the crown of creation", it is always possible to observe, critically, at the end, "is that all about man?" The impression that this type of observation conveys is that *enough* has not been said and that *more* could be said about man. The trouble is there is no *end* to this quest for *more*. For it seems there is no "*the nature*" no "*the essence*" of man which can be *exhaustively* defined or stated, at any particular point of time, to the total satisfaction of the misled questioner. The main mistake of the questioner is that he himself does not know what answer would possibly satisfy him. And this is a pointer to the direction of how to raise the question rightly and where to look at for the right answer.

Essentialism fails, both in science and philosophy, and, it seems, *evolutionism* is called for. Man *is* what he does. And there is no end to the story of what he can possibly do. Man's history, like man himself, is open-ended. He is *not* the sum total of his doings. For that would be an unsatisfactory, superficial and nominalistic answer. What man wants to do, strives for, is also a part of his being. And it is mainly from man's doings and strivings that, Vico assures us, we can construct possibly the most intelligible account of what man is.

Without trying to enter into the elusive human "nature" or "essence" one can have a fairly clear, though not perfect, image of what man is from all that he does and, as a member of a species,

or a community, has already done. Among many other things, man has succeeded, partly, in understanding and taming the forces of nature, both living and non-living, and in using symbolic language for the purposes of storing and communicating experiences and ideas. The implications of this success, though partial, are enormous and far-reaching. Pooling their informational sources together and making *needed* use of them, men have known their species, formed various social and other institutions, and, what is very important, become conscious of what he has been able to do and what remains yet to be done. This consciousness is *historical*, disclosing to man both his competence and performance, what he can possibly do and what he has done. Incidentally, this reflective consciousness reveals to man his dependence upon, relation with, and reinforcement by, the laws of nature. Man knows that he is endowed with immense competence by nature and yet, at the same time, limited by its forces and subject, for example, to the laws of birth, growth, decay and death.

In the papers of part I of the work I have tried to focus my attention on some of the aspects of man's relation with nature, on the one hand, and culture, on the other hand. And it would be noted that I have tried to show the *graduated* or *continuous* character of the relation between the two. Man is a sort of *tertium quid* between nature and culture, endowed with the capacity to transform some parts of nature into objects of culture, and, as this capacity is finite and subject to the laws of wear and tear, he cannot do it in whatever way he pleases. It is only as *nature's natural* that man is the author of culture. Here I should clearly state what is perhaps obvious from the context, that I am using the term *man* in the sense of *species-being* and not as *this* or *that* individual. This concept of man is not only intrinsically social but also *evolutionary* and *anthropological*.

Some elucidations are in order. Nature-culture dualism, or nature-nurture dualism, as it is sometimes said, can be done away with in several ways. Reality may be conceived of as a *unified* hierarchy of many ascending/descending levels—the physical, the ~~mineral~~, the vegetative, the biological, the psychological and so on. The hierarchy may be considered as static-structural or dynamic-evolutionary, depending on the ontological status given to *time* in it. The unity of the different levels may be taken mechanically or teleologically (providentially). When man

is deemed to be an evolute of a long evolutionary process one thing which is sought to be conveyed is this: he, though more free than other living evolutes, is finite, fallible, both in action and cognition, and perishable. These characteristics of man prompt me to characterize the view of man defended in the book as *anthropological* as distinguished from *metaphysical* or *essential*. In fact I am trying to describe what man is and not what his *essence* is, for, it seems to me, there is no *timeless essence* of man or for that matter even of species-man. The species-man, too, is subject to the laws of evolution as is evident from the researches in palaeontology, biology, neurophysiology, and other allied disciplines. Man is being continuously shaped and reshaped by what he receives from nature and culture, how he makes use of them, and gives back the "same" to their "sources". I say "the same" and "sources" because in and through the interactive process these also change their identifying characteristics.

Finitude, fallibility and perishability or mortality of man have, it seems, some important epistemological and cosmological implications. I have tried to clarify some basic issues concerning the scope and limits of human knowledge as influenced by the said characteristics in essays 2 and 3. It would be noted that essay has been included, without modification, from my previously published book, *History, Society and Polity* (Macmillan, New Delhi, 1976). My present studies, it may be observed, are the follow-up of what I have written and published earlier. Being finite and fallible as he is, man cannot know the world as such but only as interpreted by his body, mind, language and other attending conditions. In ultimate analysis man's is a body among bodies (of course with a privileged endowment and that is its reflective ability or self-consciousness) and its activities and propensities are, to a great extent, understandable in terms of the laws of natural and cultural dynamics. Body is both a limiting and an enabling condition of man's thought and action. By acting and thinking man keeps on changing his body, his self. For purposeful thought and action man needs and makes use of culturally available frame(s) of reference. Even for the purpose of creating a new frame of reference, or theory, he uses an existing, may be even obsolete, one. Therefore, both in thought and action, a continuity, evolutionary or historical continuity, is clearly discernible. A human creator is not a canvas-cleaner, does not create out of nothing. To know or

to create man does not go out of himself, break away with his biological heritage and cultural tradition, and start everything *de novo*. Unless a frame of reference is accepted, even to the expression "*de novo*" a clear sense cannot be assigned. To *break* a frame one needs a *frame*. To break and make the frames necessary for thought and action man is obliged to make use of the resources or competence biologically and socially made available to him. In a manner of speaking one can always say, as I have said, man cannot jump out of his own skin to think and act freely and fashion the world as he pleases. Nature and culture have a say even on his pleasure. Man has been nurtured by them both.

In essays 3, 4 and 5 I have tried, referring critically to the views of Sri Aurobindo and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, to trace, in depth, the relation between species-man and nature, in the broadest scientific sense, as studied by cosmologists. While I am deeply interested in the future of mankind, which partly explains my studies in the evolutionary theories of these two distinguished thinkers, I find certain difficulties in accepting their views on the *inevitable* evolution of the Kingdom of God on the earth. Given the validity of the Second Law of Thermodynamics and its ramifications, including the rule of entropy, I do not quite see how Sri Aurobindo's vision of the Supermind, and Teilhard's Omega-point could be defended. However, to my mind, their views and arguments are very insightful and interesting, and do deserve careful study. If my conclusions sound somewhat negative, it is because of my primary sympathy with science. The contemplation of the law-governed character of the universe, its origin and evolution, gives to many of us deep emotional satisfaction. Does one *need* an anthropomorphic God who can interface with the laws of nature or is himself bound by the same? If one does, is it not because of one's long cultural affiliation to some or other institutionalized religion? Some of these questions are bound to crop up in the mind.

Without knowing the universe he is in, man cannot be satisfied, rationally and emotionally. This knowledge, if available and seriously accepted, should not evoke in man either a myopic love for life or a rootless fear of death. It has been persuasively argued by scientists like Einstein and Eddington, who cannot be considered anti-religious, that the "doctrine of a personal God interfering with natural events could never be *refuted* ... by science,

for this doctrine can always take refuge in those domains in which scientific knowledge has not yet been able to set foot." Even Theodosius Dobzhansky, the distinguished biologist-philosopher, who does appreciate Teilhard's evolutionary ideas, has to admit that "such grand conceptions are patently undemonstrable by scientifically established facts."