

Evolutionism and Traditional Cosmology

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While it is routine for writers from a traditionalist or perennialist perspective to compose condemnations of Darwinism and to expose what Titus Burkhardt, in a celebrated article, called the 'transformist illusion' it is rarely acknowledged that the evolutionist doctrine is, in part at least, a corruption of a traditional doctrine. *There is nothing new under the Sun*, as the Preacher sayeth, and the novelties and "discoveries" of modernity are either misconstructions or negations of traditional ideas and forms. Darwinism is no exception. We find it prefigured in traditional accounts by which the human microcosm reflects - and is "coagulated" or "extracted" or "condensed" from - the macrocosm. No less a representative of Tradition than Rumi gives a famous example of an "evolutionary" perspective:

I was a stone and I died as a stone and was born a plant. I died as a plant and was born an animal. Later I died as an animal and I was born as a man.

Those who attempt to marry modern science with traditional wisdom very often quote this passage from Rumi as a way of saying that the sages of old had an intuitive knowledge of truths that Darwin made concrete and scientific. In part - but only in part - they are right to do so. Here Rumi reiterates a sequence of states that at least resembles the Darwinian account of man, for by Darwin too man was once stone, and flower, and so on, in a progressive sequence. Certainly, Rumi does not suggest "natural selection" as the device by which he "dies" from one form after another, but he nevertheless understands the human state as the fulfilment of a sequence of creatures, each more complex and "evolved" than the previous. He was at first a stone - inert matter. Then vegetable. Then animal. And at last human.

But the modernists are wrong to suppose that Rumi is entirely at one with Darwin and that modern, quantitative science is the fulfilment of ancient wisdom traditions. Rather, we must understand Rumi in the context of the traditional cosmological sciences

and, in the case of this passage, realise that Rumi is giving expression to the cornerstone of traditional cosmological thought, the microcosm/macrocosm doctrine. He is describing the condensations of the macrocosm into the human microcosm which - by all Traditional accounts, and by definition - contains, in essence or in tincture, the whole of the macrocosm. Man has a nature that is stone, and vegetable, and animal, which is testimony of his "extraction" from the macrocosm. The profane doctrines of evolutionism bear a *resemblance* to this in so far as they propose that the human being has emerged and is constituted from "the environment." Traditional sources more often describe this in terms of an "involution", since the microcosm is an "interiorization", and without the progressive and "evolutionary" sequence used by Rumi, but the crude notion that man has emerged and is constituted from his external world need not be ruled anti-traditional in itself, provided we understand that the modern doctrine is, all the same, a hopelessly limited and partial view - of both man and the universe.

The traditional doctrine - in an admittedly simplified and incomplete rendering - can be presented in the following few points:

1. A Metacosmic Principle - Pure Subject in contemplation of Its own Object, Identity, at once Unique and Infinite.
2. The macrocosm is an "exteriorization" of the Principle (as Object) *through the microcosm*.
3. The microcosm is - at the same time - an "interiorization" of the Principle (as Subject) *through the macrocosm*.

This is leaving aside any account of "patterns" or "forms" or "archetypes" or any further distinctions (hypostases) that reside in and are manifested from the Principle. It is enough to say that there is a macrocosmic order and a microcosmic order and these are complementary expressions of the same Principle which fact is the basis of their mutual reflection. That is, they reflect each other as well as (and because of) reflecting the

Principle - and this because of the very nature of the Principle Itself. Within the non-manifest Principle there is neither an inside nor an outside, subject or object; it is beyond but also the root of these dualities which dualities, therefore, are not final. Taoism, which embodies and preserves the ancient "alchemical" perspective more explicitly than other traditions (and is in some respects, we might say, the least theological and most cosmological of religions) depicts this arrangement in the classical yin-yang symbol where the yin is contained in the yang, and vice versa, and both have identity in a non-manifest Principle (The Tao). In the occident, the caduceus of Hermes, and other symbols with interwining serpents or dragons, represent aspects of the same thing. There is an unfolding and an infolding at the cosmological level, but no movement at all at the level of Principle.

For our present purposes the thing to note is that point 3. allows for the idea that man is an extraction of the cosmos and a reorganisation of macrocosmic elements. The organisation of man reflects the organisation of the cosmos, and this because he has been constituted from the cosmos, or rather *from the Principle through the cosmos*, which distinction is all-important. It will be seen that evolutionism is a specific misconception of point 3. at the level of this distinction and is an overall misconception by being ignorant of points 1. and 2. But in the first instance there is nothing altogether illegitimate about the notion that man is constructed from and has within him the fire, air, water and earth that are the constituent elements of his abode. It is not even necessary to make the proviso that it is only his material frame that is so constituted, for even his "consciousness" may be taken as an internalization of the light that illuminates his abode and so his "consciousness" is in that sense derivative from his "environment." His waking and sleeping are an internalization of Sun and Moon.

In such a perspective it is entirely possible to conceive of man as the culmination of a succession of animal forms, each more completely internalized than the previous. It is possible, then, to conceive of this internalization as the key to "survival of the fittest" - fittiness being a measure of macrocosmic involution - and we may even hypothesize, with Darwin, that chance mutation is the propelling device. That is, life "evolves" from

inert matter by chance mutations, and those mutations which give rise to internalized forms survive in so far as internalized faculties - because they are reflections - enable a creature to respond successfully to its external circumstance. At length, a creature (*homo sapiens*) "evolves" that is a virtual reflection of the whole cosmos. It is possible to conceive of this as having taken place gradually with other less successfully microcosmic forms appearing along the way, the gradual and linear trajectory of the process being a consequence of the temporal arena in which it occurs.

To adapt a traditional symbolism to this, the living entity and the universe that is its environment are as *mirrors* to each other, and the fossil record appears as a process of bringing the mirrors into alignment or into focus. The mirrors move by "chance" forces, let us say, and are sometimes near to focus and at other times wide of focus, until - by "chance" forces, let us say - they hit an alignment that finally yields a true or near-to-true reflection, namely the human form. And let us also say, conceding further to Darwin, that "focus", in this analogy, is the key to creaturely survival. Man won the race because the human form is the better focus between the two mirrors; this is what it means when we say he is adaptable; his internal resources correspond best to the requirements set by his external world. But, let us remember, there is no "chance" at the level of Principle and the appearance of "chance" at the cosmological level is an illusion. (The Greeks more correctly called it "Necessity.")

And, more importantly, where these mirrors - entity and world - reach focus they reveal the Principle that is responsible for their correspondence and the basis of the "mirroring." *The true reflection reveals the principle of reflection.* This is the point at which the subject/object duality is resolved; what is inside is outside and what is outside is inside. The metacosmic Principle is beyond subject-object complementarism and resides in its own Isness, having no complementary opposite, Pure Subject in eternal self-contemplation, its own Object.

There is no need to say anything further about this Principle, for we are considering its cosmological function and not its metaphysical content, and it is

especially unnecessary at this level to introduce theological subtleties: the point is that man is not only the summation of the macrocosm - the subject that answers to its object - but he also embodies the Principle that resolves and transcends subject/object and so is *a spiritual or transcendent being*. This means, precisely, that he is capable of grounding his being in the Principle and make the "point of view" of the Principle his own, so to speak. Darwinism, along with modern thinking generally, is guilty of the most appalling underestimation of the ontological range of man, but so far as they go the general propositions of evolutionism may not be entirely deviant.

Finally, we should note that traditional accounts tend to give priority to point 2. because Subject is logically prior to Object. If it is true to say that man is an "extraction" of the cosmos it is nevertheless more true to say the cosmos is a "casting off" or "excrecence" or "evaporation" or "filtration" of or "projection" from man - or rather through man (and, if you like, from Man, i.e. Primordial Man, Adam Kadmon, Perusha.) Darwinism, of course, has no notion of this and so is hopelessly partial in its perspective and for that reason destructive to the wisdom traditions of the ages. It is entirely understandable that those in whom a sense of the sapiential heritage of mankind is preserved are hostile to Darwinism and to so-called "spiritual Darwinists" such as Teilhard de Chardin. But like other heresies Darwinism is a perverted truth rather than a complete falsehood. It would be helpful if this point were better appreciated in the on-going debates about evolution and religion.