

THE IDEA OF PURPOSE

BY CURTIS W. REESE

I

PHILOSOPHY properly understood is perhaps the most important of all studies. It is not, however, to be thought of as a system of a priori hypotheses, but rather the art of thinking in an orderly way and on the basis of factual experience about one's total situation. In recent times the idea has taken hold of many minds that philosophy must give way to the sciences. I regard the growth of the sciences as one of the most encouraging of modern developments; but the basic terms and concepts of the sciences need constant critical scrutiny and the results of scientific inquiry inevitably lead thoughtful persons to wonder what it is all about. The examination of terms and concepts is the critical function of philosophy and the attempt to form opinions about the totality of experience is its speculative function. Without this critical and speculative service of philosophy, the sciences would suffer and life adjustments in a world sometimes all too chaotic become even more difficult than they are at present.

The focussing of attention upon the sciences, and especially of late upon technology has naturally taken attention away from the more far-reaching problems of man's place in the cosmic arrangement. Nevertheless, the "how" of things, which is the particular interest of science, cannot thrive unless someone attends to the "why" of things, which is the particular interest of philosophy. Nor can the "why" be fruitful unless someone attends to the problem of "how" things come about.

So, after all the marvelous progress of modern science, we still find ourselves puzzled more and more over the old philosophical problem of the nature of being, and still wondering whether

in point of fact there is an increasing purpose running through the ages and if so, what it is.

It is no surprise to find this state of uncertainty about things cosmic when one considers the causes that lead to it. First of all there is the appalling state of the human race. Poverty and ignorance and disease and war and the like menace the human family. Ages pass and conditions are changed but little, and then not always for the better. Second, there is the old naturalism which spreads terror. One could fairly hear the scream of the cosmic wheels as they rolled relentlessly through the years, and feel the cold blast of surely enveloping winter as it chilled the soul. And, third, we were taught that the universe itself was running down at a terrific speed. The classic expression illustrative of man's desperate situation is found in Bertrand Russell's *The Free Man's Worship*. Here is another characteristic statement from his pen, as quoted by Hoernle in *Studies in Contemporary Metaphysics*: "The universe as astronomy reveals it is very vast. How much there may be beyond what our telescopes show, we cannot tell; but what we can know is of unimaginable immensity. In the visible world the Milky Way is a tiny fragment; within this fragment, the solar system is an infinitesimal speck, and of this speck our planet is a microscopic dot. On this dot, tiny lumps of impure carbon and water, of complicated structure, with somewhat unusual physical and chemical properties, crawl about for a few years, until they are compounded. They divide their time between labour designed to postpone the moment of dissolution for themselves and frantic struggles to hasten it for others of their kind. Natural convulsions periodically destroy some thousands or millions of them, and disease prematurely sweeps away many more. These events are considered to be misfortunes; but when men succeed in inflicting similar destruction by their own efforts, they rejoice, and give thanks to God. In the life of the solar system, the period during which the existence of man will have been physically possible is a minute portion of the whole; but there is some reason to hope that even before this period is ended man will have set a term to his own existence by his efforts at mutual annihilation. Such is man's life viewed from the outside."

Another classic utterance in similar vein, but with a different purpose in view, is from Balfour's *Foundations of Belief*. He

says, "Man—past, present and future—lays claim to our devotion. What, then, can we say of him? Man, so far as natural science by itself is able to teach us, is no longer the final cause of the universe, the Heaven-descended heir of all the ages. His very existence is an accident, his story a brief and transitory episode in the life of one of the meanest of the planets. Of the combination of causes which first converted a dead organic compound into the living progenitors of humanity, science, indeed, as yet knows nothing. It is enough that from such beginnings famine, disease, and mutual slaughter, fit nurses of the future lords of creation, have gradually evolved, after infinite travail, a race with conscience enough to feel that it is vile, and intelligence enough to know that it is insignificant. We survey the past, and see that its history is of blood and tears, of helpless blundering, of wild revolt, of stupid acquiescence, of empty aspirations. We sound the future, and learn that after a period, long compared with the individual life, but short indeed compared with the divisions of time open to our investigation, the energies of our system will decay, the glory of the sun will be dimmed, and the earth, tideless and inert, will no longer tolerate the race which has for a moment disturbed its solitude. Man will go down into the pit, and all his thoughts will perish. The uneasy consciousness, which in this obscure corner has for a brief space broken the contented silence of the universe, will be at rest. Matter will know itself no longer. Imperishable monuments and immortal deeds, death itself, and love stronger than death, will be as though they had never been. Nor will anything that *is* be better or be worse for all that the labour, genius, devotion, and suffering of man have striven through countless generations to effect."

It is not yet possible to feel altogether comfortable about the enviring situation, but our fears are a bit assuaged by the increasing testimony of competent thinkers to the effect that while our knowledge of the universe does not allow us to affirm dogmatically that we are the favorites of the cosmos; neither does it allow us to pronounce dogmatically the final doom of all things good and fair. Professor Perry of Harvard, in his *Present Philosophical Tendencies*, says, "To pretend to speak for the universe in terms of the narrow and abstract predictions of astronomy, is to betray a bias of mind that is little less provincial and unimaginative than the most naive anthropomorphism. What that residual cosmos which

looms beyond the border of knowledge shall in time bring forth, no man that has yet been born can say. That it may overbalance and remake the little world of things known, and falsify every present prophecy, no man can doubt. It is as consistent with rigorous thought to greet it as a promise of salvation, as to dread it as a portent of doom. And if it be granted that in either case it is a question of over-belief, of the hazard of faith, no devout soul can hesitate."

Professor Lewis of the University of California, in a recent work on *The Anatomy of Science*, testifies that he finds no evidence that the universe is running down; and Professor Millikan believes that he has found positive evidence that the creative process still functions on a cosmic scale. While such testimony is encouraging, especially since the feeling of dependence that most of us have to an alarming degree predisposes us in favor of facts or even theories that increase our confidence in cosmic support, it is nevertheless a long leap from such fragmentary bits of hope to the affirmation of a purposeful universe which concerns itself with human affairs. And I myself am not yet prepared to make it, save as the idea may apply to orderly movement and to the partial achievements of parts.

The idea of purpose carries us beyond peace meal issues to considerations of the whole, so it is fundamentally a religious problem; and for this reason, among others, the warfare of conflicting ideas of purpose has been intense, sometimes bitter. There is a feeling, which I believe to be well grounded, that what one thinks about the problem of purpose really makes a difference in human conduct. The idea of purpose, therefore, should be studied not merely in the light of personal experience, which is oftentimes crude and chaotic, but in the light of highly organized systems of thought as worked out by mature minds. The effect in personal development and social action of theories held on such a subject, in my judgment justifies careful scrutiny of the problem as thought out by various schools.

Moreover, purpose must be interpreted broadly. It is not tied up essentially with any single manner of origin, or mode of realization. Orderly movement is the essential criterion. A machine-like universe moving toward a fixed goal would surely indicate purpose, even though we should never find out what the purpose is. An absolute that eternally reorganized its inner parts would be pur-

positive. And by the same token, a universe with no total goal would be purposive as regards its parts that come to fruition. Should the cosmos end in utter oblivion, it would still be true that the mind of a Plato or of a Francis Bacon resulted from purposive process of whatever origin and however operative. And especially would the result of human wills, or of human wills linked in a common cause fall within the scope of purposive processes. From such broad view as this, and not from a narrow personalistic view, must we approach the subject.

The quest for purpose in the universe has resulted in many theories, some of which we shall now briefly sketch.

1. In the early days of human life it was thought that spiritual beings, both good and bad, inhabited things and influenced or controlled their doings. This animistic, or as it is called in its earlier form animatistic, view held sway for along into comparatively modern times, and in a modified way still commands the allegiance of many people. Indeed vitalism is animism's sophisticated city cousin. Animism concerns itself not so much with ultimate and far-flung purposes as with immediate ends. There are floating sou's, or souls in general, that enter into relations with things and persons, sometimes briefly, sometimes taking possession for extended periods. All sorts of curious, unusual, or dramatic happenings are accounted for in animism by the purposive operation of spirits that infest the earth. The effort to get rid of evil spirits or to induce good ones to become operative has resulted in the creation of all sorts of ceremonies, many of which continue long after the spirits that they were designed to placate have faded into myths. Other sou's inhere in rivers and seas and mountains, the winds and the heavens above. Sometimes these spirits rise to the position of presiding Gods, thus passing from an animative status to that of a directive spirit. Fauns and the like constitute the souls of plants and trees. The souls of animals are manlike in ideas and mental processes. Man himself in his basic nature is soul, his bodily form being a more or less unnecessary impediment. The whole world is full of purposes and the means for their realization, but the idea of one inclusive or increasing purpose has not yet dawned to trouble the mind of primitive man.

2. Animism, which by reading a part into the whole, levels nature up to man, may be contrasted with materialism, or as it was

known in its lower stages, atomism, which levels man downward and constantly looks with suspicion upon all that is not explainable by the locomotion of materials. This is an ancient notion of the way things operate dating back no doubt far beyond Democritus in whose hands the theory took more or less reputable form. But the atomic theory fared poorly due no doubt to the long alliance of Aristotelian Philosophy with Theology, till in the 17th century it merged into a more general materialism. Regarding the elements not as properties but as bodies, was an effort to find constant qualitative elements, and was a fruitful scientific method. But it was not quite so fruitful in philosophical results. And, unfortunately for materialism, the atom was found to be made up of lesser units of uncertain nature, which behaved in ways not altogether characteristic of material units. So the effort to eliminate purpose from nature, or to reduce it to clocklike motions has resulted in more uncertainty as to what things are composed of and how they operate than ever before in human history. If it be conceded that all is matter, then comes the query, what is matter? And any effort to answer this question requires the use of terms that are suggestive of anything else but a block universe. So the materialistic hypothesis proved to be no more philosophically fit than was animism. Both views are mirrors in which the face of reality is distorted.

3. Perhaps the most ambitious attempts to find a satisfactory explanation of things, and to give man a feeling of cosmic support, fall under the general head of theocracy. True the idea of God or gods did not arise from this or any single motive, the origin of God idea is most complex and is still shadowed in mystery. But perhaps from earliest times, the shorthand explanation of mysterious, or even commonplace occurrences was to credit them to the operation of God or gods. Man sorrowfully faced sure defeat when the gods were against him. He joyfully faced sure victory if they were allied with him. Always, however, there were sophisticated intellects who had their doubts about the adequacy of theocracy. But only the most courageous gave vent to their doubts. What happened was that the gods were gradually reduced in number and their functions quietly reduced in scope. Aristotle's prime mover is a case in point. Another is the whole movement which in its later and more developed form is known as deism. For some purpose as

yet unknown, God started the world going, established laws for its movements and then retired, leaving the vast machine to itself. I think the chief motive in deism is not so much to find what the end is, as to find what the beginning was. Getting things started was the big job, so God was regarded as the great first cause, or the Divine Technician. At best this idea of God was satisfactory only to those persons whose chief interest was speculative. It never warmed the heart to the point of discipleship. It left the world in cold isolation from the hearthstone of the old homestead, in sharp contrast with the brooding will of theism. Little wonder that theologians, with more or less consistency, balanced transcendence with imminence. In this effort to harmonize transcendence and imminence is found the doctrine of theism properly so called.

4. Theism is the hypothesis that the ultimate ground of the universe is intelligent will fulfilling a moral purpose in the course of which he either consciously and specifically influences human fortunes or so orders the cosmic situation as to make possible the realization of moral ends by human beings. This is a very satisfactory view for one who can bring himself to the point of holding it with deep conviction, but it seems to many persons to be inadequate. Romantically viewed, theism has the edge on all other forms of theocracy. But realistically viewed by one who wants to know the truth even though the truth fail to set him free, the theistic hypothesis presents insuperable difficulties. To apply such terms as "moral," "intelligent will," and the like to the ultimate ground of the universe, or to the universe itself, is to take terms that belong to the human realm out of their human setting and apply them to a totality which is non-human though including the human. Moreover, it is noteworthy that only the good qualities of men are read into the ultimate. By the same process that one uses in arriving at a personal God, one might arrive at the idea of a personal devil. Nor are the doings of the cosmos such as to indicate that the term moral has cosmic significance in the sense that it has human significance. The universe seems to be either above or below good and evil. Cosmic forces seem to be irreconcilable with theism. Theoretically, also, the theistic view is unsatisfactory, for the mere purpose of working out a pre-destined end a mechanistic arrangement would seem to be preferable. Such an arrangement would make unnecessary the conscious and specific influence of human

affairs, or even attention to cosmic happenings. It might be said in rebuttal that if the end in view were the production of free human personality, a mechanistic arrangement would not suffice. But in view of the moral waste on every hand, and the present conception of the vastness of the universe with its millions of suns, such concern for human welfare seems highly improbable. Furthermore, the evidence, as evidence is ordinarily understood, for the theistic type of influence of human fortunes is lacking. By the common consent of the competent, the experience of God in the very act of influencing human fortunes is the only valid evidence. Such mystical experiences are exceedingly rare, and such as exist are capable of explanation on grounds other than the theistic, and in any event they could have no primary validity for persons having no such experience. Evidence, to be scientifically valid, must be capable of verification.

For these reasons, the theistic hypothesis seems to me to be an unsatisfactory way of finding purpose in the universe. That theistic theologians are aware of the inadequacy of theism as historically held is evidenced by the fact that many of them are developing variations of the theory that leave the old view very much the worse for wear. Thus Beckwith's theory of a Finite God; Wieman's theory of God as a Phase of the Behavior of the Universe, and G. B. Smith's theory of God as that Quality in Environment that Sustains Human Values.

5. Closely related to theology, but essentially philosophical, is the theory of the absolute. The absolute whether basically psychic or otherwise, puts the end in the beginning. All things work together for good. The outcome is sure. There is no ultimate hazard. The eternal rearrangement of parts constitutes the activity of the whole. Novelty is out of the question. The universe is sewed up from everlasting to everlasting. In its more extravagant moods, this theory is not satisfied with fixing the part irrevocably within the whole; it also puts the whole within every part. The idea of the absolute, however, is facing more and more opposition till one may perhaps safely predict the abolition of the absolute. The good, the true and the beautiful are being transformed into the idea of good things, true occurrences, and beautiful situations. The theory of the relativity of things seems to be making great headway in all fields of thought. Not even the speed of light

may be said to be absolute. At best, the accepted rate of the speed of light is only approximate. Light is not constant when passing through water or through a gravitational center. The "am—was—evermore—shall—be" arrangement, whether applied to parts only, or to the whole increasingly seems an unlikely situation. But, no doubt, in due course, someone will claim that the principle of relativity is itself absolute and then the old warfare will be fought over again. But for spiritual purposes, the absolute is losing its significance.

6. In contrast with theocracy is the old naturalism. Where theocracy is dualistic, even with the doctrine of immanence taken into consideration, naturalism is monistic. It keeps all within one being. Supernatural becomes a term of reproach. But unfortunately the old naturalism is defective in that it oversimplifies the nature of things. It reduces the higher to nothing but the lower. The evolutionary idea had not gained great headway even in naturalistic circles when the old naturalism was at its height. So no place is provided for genuine novelty. Mind, itself, is not taken seriously even as a variant of matter. The old naturalism is imprisoned within the facts and ideas and categories of the exact sciences. The biology and the psychology of the 19th century were far from being the valid sciences that they are today. So the tendency of the old naturalism is to bring mind down to brain as kinetically conceived, instead of bring brain up to mind as empirically known as is the present tendency with evolutionary naturalists. But in contrast with the old theocracy, the old naturalism is to be commended for attempting to explain the order of the universe on the basis of efficient causes without calling into service the doctrine of final ends as consciously held in the purposes of God.

7. But after all the battle is between vitalism and mechanism both of which are more significant as representing large points of view than they are as representing careful analysis. Vitalism has an effective protest against the cocksureness of mechanism, or at least of some mechanists. It is a thorn in the flesh of scientists who are tempted to wander along the road of vague generalization. It is a fighting philosophy. It searches diligently for holes in the armour of its opponents and upon finding them fires with sure aim. Had vitalism stopped with this negative aspect it would still be worth special note. Its purpose, however, is not merely that of one

who loves argument. It really believes in dualism. It challenges the self sufficiency of the so-called physical realm. It posits a non-physical agency, an *elan vital*, to explain the processes which it believes cannot be explained mechanistically. Prof. Roy Wood Sellers, the leader of the American Critical Realists, says that "it is a mistaken philosophy that makes the vitalists dualists." "As the physical world was ordinarily conceived by scientists they had a right to be dualists. They were simply more courageous and more speculatively inclined than the ordinary experimentalist. But I do not think that they were very original, or they would have attacked the adequacy of traditional mechanism and the exclusion of mind and consciousness from the organic level of the physical world. They have, it seems to me, not been courageous enough. Why did they accept the traditional limitations assigned to the physical? The suspicion will not down that they were idealists at heart. Driesch and Bergson assuredly are and, from his interest in psychical research, I infer that McDougall is likewise. It is this too ready acceptance of the stereotyped view of the physical which betrays them."

8. The mechanists, on the other hand, encourage detail experimentation. They hunt down correlations. They search for differences that really make a difference. They try to find out how in point of fact organisms really work. And it is hardly fair to identify present day mechanism with mechanism of the old materialism. The ever ready machine theory is not to be identified with mechanism. Chemical and biological processes do not act as do the parts of a machine. In other words, mechanism is expanding to fit the observed unitary facts of nature. Organism is mechanistic, but not in the kinetic sense; and it is vitalistic, but not in the dualistic sense. It seems to me that controversy is reaching a stage where vitalism and mechanism are merging into an organic, unitary view of being.

9. It may be that we shall find even the term "organism" too small for philosophical purposes, but at present it seems to be a suitable term. Organic suggests the dominance of the teleological. That is to say, an organism seems to function to some purpose, form and process being subordinate to ends. Furthermore, the organic idea suggests evolutionary processes, purposive capacities, creative levels, plastic diversity, uniqueness, mutual support and the

like. In the organic idea we may find a harmony of nature embodying all that is really essential in the old ideas of purpose. In an organism the past lives effectively in the present and projects itself into the future. Each organic level is what it is,—physically, chemically, psychologically, but the whole is a greater than the sum of its parts: and even the parts are different when in the total setting from what they are in isolation. In the organic there is an empirical teleology not found in the inorganic realm. There is a cumulative creative synthesis. The organic rises to mental levels. The idea of the future is purposive in the present. The organic realm seems to move toward increasing harmony.