The Dilemma Of Faith

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When the deadly, billowing, mushroom-shaped cloud signifying the explosion of the atomic bomb surged skyward over Bikini Atoll, it marked the opening of another chapter in the history of man's attempts to control the universe. Small, weak, and insignificant though he appeared when contrasted to the unlimited expanse of the cosmos, that branch of the animal world known as man had now tightened and extended his control over the universe. Is it any wonder that his chest swelled with pride as he contemplated his latest achievement of power? Is he to blame for suddenly wondering if he could not someday gain absolute control over the universe?

Is it a ludicrous picture, this scene in which a tiny man on a small segment of the cosmos suddenly decides that he can become master of the universe, and consequently denies his belief in an all-powerful, loving, guiding God — denies the one power around which his whole life has centered for centuries? Is it possible that by slowly untangling natural laws man has proven what a few skeptics have long maintained, that the world and the universe are governed only by a material force — or worse, no force at all? Has man at last usurped the power of God, only to discover that there is no God but only a complicated mass of mathematical formulae?

Following a century of scientific advance into the unknown, the civilization of today is asking these questions, and the abstract thoughts of a few philosophers concerning immortality and God have become the questions of all men. Moreover, it appears that we can no longer cling blindly to the guiding hand of the church as was our custom a century or so back, for while the church is the same, man and his accomplishments have gone on. The answers of yesterday do not seem to fit the questions of today. And so every man must try to answer these questions for himself, in his own way. To do this, he must eventually dwell upon the following line of thought:

As we look about us, we see the earth, a tiny speck in the gigantic space of the universe. Science pictures the cosmos as a vast, precise, mechanical system regulated by mathematical formulae and natural, impersonal laws. It is a picture which remains the same for all ages — a picture of an immutable universe controlled by fixed, unvarying laws. With this picture in mind, it is hard to conceive of a God. It appears that the laws of the universe must be obeyed, and these laws seem designed only for the physical universe; they operate unaware of man and often in direct conflict with his life. Man seems to be the enemy of the universe, fighting for the right to live amidst a terrifically competitive system. Therefore, any acts of man are essentially dictated by a desire for self-preservation.

Carrying this idea further, we draw our picture of civilization. Men have banded together for protection, and have developed an ordered way of life in order to survive. Society merely reduces competition among men, so that they may present a united front in their fight against the universe. The cosmos then, as it is here conceived, contains no basis for morality or ethics. The harsh laws of self-preservation and survival of the fittest

leave no ground for morality or ethics.

But at this point man is confronted with the evidence of morality and ethics in himself. It is apparent that there exists within us an ethical tendency which does not come from obeying the laws of nature. We then decide that this conception of morality is a growth brought about through our evolution; that is, as we have become more civilized, morality has become a part of our outlook. However, in accepting this explanation, we are presented with a new problem. The facts of evolution explain the presence of good and evil, but they can not prove that one is more desirable than the other — they merely show the gradual development of the two ideas. Man then wonders where his real sense of right and wrong came from.

When we reach this point in our reasoning, we are forced to face the idea that this sense of right and wrong might have come through divine revelation. And hence we are face to face with the power of a God which we thought we had discarded. We also see that even as men in the past were not in possession of all the facts with which we have to reason, so it is undoubtedly true that we ourselves are not in possession of all the truths of the universe. We see that much remains hidden to us. Still, we cannot help but wonder if an omnipotent and completely just power controls the universe, even while we realize that at this point mere conjecture alone is possible; we cannot prove that God does exist, neither can we prove that God does not exist. But we feel that we must draw some logical conclusion, even if it is mere speculation.

The first step in our speculation is to decide upon whether or not the universe is governed by some force. In surveying the complicated and yet precise movement of the universe, it seems logical to assume that some great force does direct it. But is this force a personal force which possesses absolute control over the universe, with power to change its laws; or is this force impersonal, fixed, and constant, without the power to vary its course? In speculating upon this question, man sees that if the latter view of an impersonal force is accepted, he must admit that it matters not what he does through life as his existence is pre-determined by set, natural laws. Immediately all meaning and purpose vanish from life, and man is left a mechanically-controlled and directed path to follow. But man may rebel at this explanation, and decide upon a personal force which possesses absolute control over the cosmos, with power to vary its laws.

If such a force does exist, he may reason, then man could be created without tendencies toward evil. (This would merely mean the instituting of a uniform idea in the minds of men by which they would all see alike on moral issues.) But if man were created without tendencies toward evil, his life would have to follow only one path. Man would be a robot, with his course through life already plotted for him. And every man would have the same course to follow. Therefore, at this point man conceives of an omnipotent force which leaves to him his own choice as to the path he will follow in his development. Man has developed the idea of "free will" — the idea that he can manage his own life within the sphere of certain natural laws as he wishes, without interference from this personal, controlling force. Then, naturally, man is held responsible for his own actions.

Having developed this idea of "free will" and having accepted a belief in an omnipotent power, man logically concludes that every person should have an equal place from which to start his life. But as

we look around us, we see that heredity and environment determine to a great extent the path that our lives will take. It seems that the directing force has merely surrendered its power over man to the whims and dictates of chance or fate. Consequently, it appears to make no difference what we do with our lives, as they are seemingly governed only by fate.

Here, confronted again with conflicting evidence as to the existence of an omnipotent force — a God — man has only one ground left to fall back on. He must rely on faith. And so, in a sense, the guiding hand of the church still exists for man. But is this faith a mere subterfuge on the part of man to keep his belief in his personal immortality from wavering? Is it something which he uses to fill the gaping holes made by his own doubts, to be accepted without question, or inquiry, or reason? Or does faith actually exist as an unexplainable capacity of man in an apparently contradictory universe, even though man may never use this capacity?

It is possible for man to conceive of a world of the senses too remote for his feeble brain to comprehend. Few of the world's population has seen the microscopic world of the microbe or the immeasureable extent of space; yet this does not make their existence untrue. For centuries the world of the bacteria flourished, unconceived and undiscovered by man, and yet it did exist. Since the beginning of time the atom has contained its enormous store of energy, yet this energy has only recently been discovered. But when man thinks about God, doubts creep into his mind. Why? The only logical conclusion that man can draw about an omnipotent force — or a God — is that faith is necessary in order to believe. And we realize that when we do understand all the truths of the universe, we will cease to exist in our present form. But the capacity of faith in man allows us to believe things which we can never know as facts in this life.

When man acknowledges within himself, much as he may suppress or deny it, the secret belief of a God, and the undying hope of immortality, he also admits that faith exists. And as no two men are alike in every respect, so it must be true that they differ in their capacity for faith. But the faith does exist.

The picture is still the same to our scientific generation, and the power of the atomic bomb still rests in the hands of man. But this power is dwarfed by a power which comes to us over the centuries — the power of faith, faith in a kind, just, all-powerful God. And only when man ceases to speculate upon his own immortality will this faith die.