

Knowledge and Liberation

In no other period of the history of man has the concept of liberty been so keenly felt and so much thought of as now; never before has it been so frequently the subject of dialectical discussions, being even used in political struggles as a soul-stirring myth.

A Western thinker, dealing with this matter recently, sounded a note of warning, pointing out that liberty is never so far off as when it is too much talked of. There is some truth in this assertion, especially in view of the ever present danger of confusing real freedom, which is the independence of the inner man from all human conditioning factors — with false freedom which consists in the removal of all impediments that stand in the way of such conditioning.

We are now suffering from a misunderstanding of this kind. Therefore any contribution made to a right understanding of this matter, any stimulus given to that « discernment » that enables at least a few to distinguish between « necessity » and « liberty », and to impart their awareness to those who confuse personal freedom with the assertion of natural necessity, has its importance.

Writing on this subject in his recent work *Essais sur l'expérience libératrice* (Gallimard, Paris, pp. 344) Roger Godel reveals himself as one of the most efficient expounders. Possessing a harmonious and unified vision of Western culture, he seeks for the positive links with the metaphysics of the East on all those points on which they may afford spiritual and helpful inspiration on matters relating to our outlook on the world and its problems.

He recognises the possibility that knowledge may rise to the threshold of the Impersonal

through the gradual dispersal of all that « conditions » it, and he begins by showing the relativity of all values that are exclusively scientific, in so far as they are a « luciferous » endeavour, that aims at introducing a kind of definitive predominance of those conditions that govern sense experiences. Passing through an exclusively exterior change, the spirit finds itself at the mercy of sense perceptions, and in the impossibility of making room for forms of knowledge other than those of the physical world and for forms of culture unrelated to that uni-dimensional knowledge. The spirit is in need of an activity in keeping with its own nature, through which it can attain virtual independence from sense experiences. Hence the need of meditation and concentration, i.e. of inward convergence towards the centre of ourselves; it is in this that liberation consists.

This convergence of all our forces towards the centre does not imply meditation as the only means, but it calls for a general attitude of the soul in its relations to existence. One cannot, on the one hand, cultivate the discipline of the inner faculties, and on the other preserve intact the usual attitude towards objects, beings, nature. The ordinary outlook must be dissolved at the same time; one must set oneself free, detach oneself from the suggestion of appearances, — a suggestion which does not arise from the appearances themselves, which is not in the things in themselves but in us — until we attain the stability arising from a pure and limpid consciousness which can feel the world in itself and itself in the world.

Self-sacrifice, heroism, mystic fire and glacial asceticism are the elements giving rise to

the purifying and enlightening action. They should not be sought as ornaments of the soul, they should not be desired *per se*, but only as the means for realising what we ourselves are in the inner depths of our nature, so as to attain the state of *Sahaja-Samadhi*, that is to say the conscious conquest of the « noumenon ». A task which in itself is a liberating experience.

Roger Godel is one of those students of the Orient who, though in a different order of culture, language and civilisation, wish to be the bearers of the *Sanâtana Dharma*, the « perennial philosophy » which contains the essential message of the East. This in itself is an ascetic and heroic task, demanding the devotion of a whole lifetime if it is to be undertaken in its reality and therefore in its final value.

In his treatment of the matter, Godel has given ear to the consonance between some Western themes dear to mythology, mysticism, and modern psychology (the dream of Perseus in which the A's language rises to the heights of poetic imagery, the legend of the Holy Graal, the spiritual light of Meister Eckhart, the positive exigencies of psycho-analysis and of analytical psychology), and the eternal principles of Eastern metaphysics: Taoism, Hinduism, Zen Buddhism. In this work of syntonisation and in this effort to bring forth from a supersensible reality the coincidences of eternal motives, he proceeds with poetic lucidity and tenacious determination until he has created an atmosphere of lofty thought and opened a wide horizon.

The criticism of that agnosticism that is characteristic both of modern scientific enquiry and of the general attitude towards the applications of those enquiries, would require that positive science to transcend itself, and in the opinion of the Author the way for so doing has been unintentionally prepared by the latest conquests of science itself. Now this is just the point on which we feel there can be well justified doubts.

It is not by pursuing still further the inquiries into this finite world that we can reach the Infinite. Experience of the finite does not lead us to extreme consequences of such a nature as to make it possible to enter freely into the realm of the spirit; we cannot do so because by reinforcing the limit it becomes ever more difficult to get beyond it. This scrutinising the dust of matter to which we give the name of atoms, merely binds us still more firmly to the physical dimensions of things,

viewed from a unilateral standpoint which, even if claiming a philosophical value, only marks more clearly our failure to recognise the other dimensions of being, the psychic and the spiritual.

All modern atomic physicists ought once for all to confess their impotence when brought face to face with the mystery of life contained in a single blade of grass.

It is not possible to pass beyond the sphere of sense-perceptions by using the intellectual means that have been forged for the purpose of enquiries made in that sphere, that is to say by means of thought moulded exclusively on the basis of sense perceptions. The fact that where once we saw *matter* we now see *energy* with the play of atoms, alters nothing in the cognitive relation of man to the object of his enquiry. The form of the limit has been changed, but nothing has been altered in the limit itself, which is not external to man but within him, in his mind which has been following a system of certainties based on physical causality and now — alas — claims the right to apply this method to the whole universe, inclusive of that which is not physical.

There is, however, one positive aspect of the experience the Western man has of the finite world; this experience, for those who still cling to its positive character, prepares them to accept the possibility that they themselves may be enclosed within a real and present limit and standing on a real and positive foundation, and in this wise man may come to know the evidence of his self-consciousness under his particular conditions.

This experience therefore contains a value unrecognised by those whose conception of the spiritual is mystical only; but such lack of recognition is no less serious than that which considers the ultimate trend of scientific enquiry as tending towards ritualism, towards an atomism which would only bind man more closely than ever to matter.

The picture Godel draws of the play of dualities and the tyranny of forms from which we must rid ourselves, gives a vividly lucid picture of the reality of the spiritual experience, but the means suggested for attaining this liberation do not go beyond a descriptive asceticism which may be valuable as an exercise in meditation, but does not seem to appeal to the radical process of the conscience of the Western man. Let us try to explain our meaning.

The Western man at this stage of his mental crisis, no longer needs to be directed towards a « knowledge » that presupposes the direct discovery and revelation of truth without intermediaries; what he wants to know is how the spirit begins to live in cognition itself, not in the object that gives rise to it. This indeed is precisely the ultimate content of Taoism, Zende Buddhism, Yoga. This is the ultimate formula of Shri Aurobindo and of Ramana Maharshi. It is not a method, not a discipline, it is not *Sastra*; it is not the doctrine that awakens man to the metaphysical experience, but the spirit in which a method or discipline is lived; not cognition itself but the activity of cognition set in motion; not the object itself but the inner force for which the object is only a pretext.

Truth is not something external to us to be won by following a given tradition; it is something that we create, and it is this creation that dignifies us, inserting us in the perennial current of a spiritual tradition which before did not exist. The truth is absolute mediation: it is thought in a nascent condition, thought springing from the wellhead; it is the first movement of self-perception and the essential condition of self-awareness. It is a condition that the common man partakes of unaware, constantly degrading it in the series of trifles of which his existence is woven. But this degradation, whether it be vitalistic or naturalistic or pragmatic, in short materialistic, does not imply the unreality and non-value of the principle from which it springs. One cannot turn to the true East if one has not seized the ultimate value of the knowledge which has taken part in the formation of our modern Western culture. The ideal of all research directed towards the discovery of a definite and fixed truth will again be realised when once it is perceived that metaphysical truth is immediate, not mediate.

A radical defect of our mental make up and of our culture is the belief that there is in nature and in history, as in all fields of spiritual enquiry, a fixed truth that man may not know, but that sooner or later he can know, and that when known can and should be defined in a system which in its turn can be the fixed limit of a spiritual enquiry; and which when once known will make the act of cognition superfluous. Such is the ideal objective of all metaphysics, all revelations, all mystagogies, all doctrines that claim to exhaust once and for all the *objectum mentis* —

to use an expression of Spinoza's — by offering a definite point of support to this mental world, eliminating once and for all the act of thinking, the only act which has the merit of having perceived the need of knowledge and of having started research. Can it be that it is just thought itself that has no part in the « liberating experience »?

Can it be that the West, which seeks for the spirit as understood by the East, must take a leap, must, that is to say, destroy the bridges that connect it not only with the world of European philosophies but also with that faculty of cognition which those philosophies take as their premise? And may we not be justified in thinking that it is precisely this aptitude for knowledge in its pure, pre-dialectic state, that has the power to awaken in the Westerner what is vital and perennial in the Oriental doctrines?

It is not easy to make people understand that we are not alluding to any particular philosophy, to any particular doctrine, but to a possibility inherent in the act of cognition itself, which is implicit in every philosophy, in every form of culture; something which is there but has so far only cast a shadow, a reflection, a dialectical projection of itself. — that is to say it has made itself known only in forms which may authorise a negative judgment in its regard.

Godel might remark that it is precisely the positive aspect of Western « mentality » that qualifies it for entering into communion with the spirit of the East, but in this case it would no longer be a question of atomism, or of psycho-analysis, or of domesticated spiritualism, but of a cognitive activity which is not only capable of no longer attributing metaphysical values to what lies beyond its enquiries into things perceptible to the senses, but is also able to throw off its fetters and retrace backwards the process it has followed, *ambulare ab intra*, and having rid itself of its object, assert itself as a spiritual activity *per se*, i.e. as something essentially different and which, with rare exceptions, has never yet been achieved.

Generally speaking the Western man conceives of his cognitive faculties as of something subjective, abstract, unreal, possessing no vital force. In his conception it is in the world of arguments, of reasoning that life can once more be found. And when he wishes for something more — for something vital and positive — as a rule he either seeks

for an East which can justify the repulsion he feels for the abstract by getting beyond the « mental » — an East which is therefore seen by him in conformity with the inner insufficiency of his own nature — or else he consoles himself by adopting a new eastern philosophy of the existentialist variety (Heidegger, Jaspers, Marcel), or with psycho-analysis or analytical psychology (Freud, Jung, Adler).

But in none of these cases has the Western man solved his problem. The world of the machine, of exasperated rationalism, of the activities proper to an exclusively practical life void of feeling; all this is something that cannot be ignored or exorcised by following a « path », the choice of which is from the start bound to the very evil the Western man wishes to master. This arid rationalism to which he has given birth, that is rooted in his mode of thinking, needs to be dissolved there where it arose by reversing a process that affects him as a Western man only. We are dealing, in short, with a force that must be set right, not contradicted or denied. The *rasanas*, the inferior *prakriti*, the *mâyâ*, proper to the Western man, are to him something very different from those of which the Indian tradition speaks and which are still full of significance for the modern Oriental. The advance of materialism, and the consequent experience of realism, pragmatism and scientific thought, are something still more systematic in their negations than anything contemplated in that Indian tradition. One may say that the injury they cause is much more serious, but at the same time the Promethian, Faustian expressions of experience are capable of important developments.

The Western man, even when he is not a materialist, suffers — though unawares — from the disease of naturalism. That is to say he is accustomed to view nature as something external to himself; nature stands before him as an object, with its facts and phenomena, and he feels himself to be a separate entity whose business it is to interpret what lies before him. And he carries this attitude into all his activities, into philosophy, metaphysics, historical enquiry, and even into the enquiries into the Tao, the Atman. Nothing whatsoever is safe from this contamination. He looks on revelation, on metaphysics as a higher form of nature that stands before him; he calls on them for results that he always projects « outside » of himself, in a duality, a play of opposites, for which he will never be able to find

a solution unless he become aware that what counts is not Tao, Atman, Yoga, but the inner activity that is set in motion.

To ask for a « conversion » of the Western man on the lines of oriental metaphysics will be a mere mythical philosophising if a spiritual cosmos and a correlative experience are contemplated apart from the subject that perceives them, that is to say outside of that cognitive activity which is the only medium through which such experiences come. Now for the Western man this cognitive activity is identical with that which, combined with physical research, gives us the skyscraper, the jet plane, the atomic bomb.

The task is not to ignore this cognitive activity, not to eliminate it, not to silence it. How indeed could we eliminate it when it interprets for us the doctrines of the East, and when it is its motion that decides for us the choice of a doctrine, including the very one whose wish would be to eliminate and silence it.? Our task is to discover that cognitive activity in its purest, most real form, leaving nothing out. To possess it in its reality means to have it in that form in which it is not yet bound to a content perceptible to the senses. This is perhaps the path leading to the Graal, the real achievement of that which when sought by other means presents itself to us as a myth but which for men like Novalis or Goethe was a positive and wonderful experience.

To consider that super-sensible reality can be rediscovered by freeing ourselves from rationalism is to take a leap into a *sâdhanâ* which has been attained precisely by the help of reason; we there manifest the desire to seek for the spirit everywhere except where it has begun to reveal itself.

The Western man cannot but take into account the world of ideas, and he cannot renounce understanding the value of the world of sense perceptions which have provided him with the foundations on which he has built his conscience. Only one way is now open to him for the solution of the *mâyâ*, that of realising the illusiveness of appearances. Indeed, *maya* continues, in spite of all, to be very true and very illusive, if we measure it only on the vague assumption, intuition, or praiseworthy belief that it is an illusion.

Nor can the Western man succeed in dispersing *mâyâ* by renouncing that intellectual and critical faculty which by expressing itself for the present in its « depotentiated » form is

itself the begetter of *mâyâ*, for it leads him to see the world as split in two, as subject and object, spirit and matter, the ego and the non-ego. By failing to face the illusion at its origin, the Western man allows it to dwell intact within the depths of his soul and goes on to a series of experiences of an occult order which will inevitably lack foundations and will continuously present themselves as distortions of what they should be.

In our ordinary experience, ideas and perceptions are separately present in reality; they are only artificially *thought* of as separate by a mind which has accepted dimensions perceptible to the senses as *his* and as universal. Only such a mind can represent to itself nature void of spirit, for it has separated the world of ideas from the world of nature which it considers to be subjective, reducing ideas to abstractions, thus making it impossible for them to acquire life and by means of concentration and meditation reveal their relation to things. This is why things are conceived of as things, nature as nature, (a conception which is a novelty born of the modern man, unknown to antiquity as Mircea Eliade has clearly shown in his *Traité d'histoire des religions*). Matter is seen as a reality in itself, and we are materialists even when we believe ourselves to be spiritualists and criticise materialism. It should, however, be noted that Goethe, for instance, did not fall into this error when he contemplated nature with those « pure eyes » with which only a disciple of the Zen could look at her.

The distinction drawn between the world of ideas and the world of the senses is justified by the first uncertain form in which man acquires knowledge. He must let reality speak to him in its dual aspect, one of which is granted him without need of any mediator. He need only let it reach him through his senses. But he creates the other aspect within himself; man cooperates in forming it in his conscience; and this cooperation on his part takes a more or less noble form, depending on the degree of education of his consciousness that allows ideas to blossom in accordance with the laws of the world of ideas and not according to the needs of the person in question.

Things that make themselves manifest through the senses reveal their essence on a stage which is the soul of man. There they can announce their own law, their own ἐντελεχεία *i. e.* that which is always hidden to outward experience. It is here that the essential

quality of nature finds at last the means of revealing itself, provided man knows how to open himself to the ideal impulse, the secret content through which nature speaks in him. But the man who knows how to unite in himself the message of nature with the law proper to her, has set himself free from laws, he is in line with *ati-dharma*. Man alone is responsible if at first this revelation seems a mere conception, an abstraction; it is he who has not yet known how to open himself to the vast transparent life of thought. This is the Yoga that the Western Man can follow without renouncing his own nature. The constitution of man alone is responsible for the fact that things can only be known to him through a duality, *i. e.* through the apparent division of the world in two — the « broken sword » of cognition. Thus each of the two aspects considered separately is erroneous, but at the same time true and necessary in their deep relation to each other. But the origin of this duality is one, and man should not accept this statement on faith or by some vague intuition; he should allow the synthesis of the two poles of existence to take place in his conscience. He who fails to undertake this task plays false to the gods who have led him to the threshold of self-awareness, offering him the proof of liberty. He escapes into mystical and metaphysical notions that have nothing in common with super-sensible reality.

The true seeker of the spirit comes to perceive in himself the consonance of the two contents, that of the senses and that of ideas, and in the language of the latter — provided its true sense be gathered — he may arrive at understanding what the things of the senses really have to tell us of themselves. It is only those who realise nothing but the mere discursiveness — that is to say the rhetorically intellectualistic aspect — of the modern rationalistic experience, — and they are the majority — who can believe that the ideas aroused in them by things are a subjective creation of their own and not the real essence of the things themselves that is beginning to take conceptual shape and to enter the conscience.

Intuition taught a Novalis and a Goethe, and more recently a Shri Aurobindo, that the man who knows how to unite in himself by the magic act of cognition the exterior and the interior poles of life, begins to work as creative nature works; he is truly one who goes beyond himself and in his inner life the

becoming of the Universe continues. His thought is no longer abstract but a spring of living water for the soul of the world. The soul of the world is born again in him. Nor can the mastering of the materialistic error take any other positive form. It would seem that the time for this discovery has come.

Anyone who enquires into the problem of the spirit and seizes this possibility, in which lies the ultimate content, the synthesis and the message of that Promethean and luminous thought construction which is modern Western philosophy, may then really turn to the East; he has the key to open that door. This metaphysical conception will be the object neither of his rationalism nor of his mysticism.

He who can perceive by intuition the secret of the spirit of the West can by means of the

same intuitive faculty come into contact with the spirit of the East. He is thus building a bridge between the two worlds. This faculty of intuition, this comprehension is an act of cognition which does not take place outside the becoming of the world, but is the substance of that becoming. It may be said that the « becoming » of the world can now only take place through man's true understanding. True knowledge is a rite celebrated in the sanctuary of the soul, and its sacrificial value arises from the fact that it is the synthesis of thought set free and of pure perception, that is to say of two decisive inner achievements to which modern man is called; for nothing can be more urgent or of greater importance.

Massimo Scaligero



Mother India (A Byzantine metal relief of the VIIIth century).