

THE CHALLENGE OF UNITY: Some Philosophical & Theological Implications of Teilhard's Vision for our Time

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A question which I believe must have arisen for all of us who have studied Teilhard's vision of evolution is: what response does this call for from me? In what way am I called upon to participate in the grand pilgrimage of mankind towards the ultimate spiritual transformation of the world?

I am sure we have asked ourselves this question and, like me, perhaps been rather daunted by it. One of the reasons it is so daunting is because Teilhard presents his vision in very broad strokes and on such a large scale that it is difficult for us, as individual particles of consciousness, to find our local place in the grand design. Certainly, we can each encourage our friends and colleagues to study Teilhard, and that is important. Yet that does not really answer this question – though it passes it on. So I am wondering how some of the broad principles Teilhard has discerned can be brought more sharply into focus and show us in some detail what we need to attend to in our own lives and work.

To my knowledge, there is as yet no literature that fleshes out facets of Teilhard's thought which makes it immediately applicable in the times in which we live. Owing to the initial controversy when Teilhard's work was first published, a great deal of effort has been expended in trying to overcome misunderstanding. I think it is time now to move beyond debate and defence and begin to *think with* Teilhard. It is time to try to relate Teilhard's understanding to the immediate world around us. If we attempt to do this we begin to see several areas where his vision could transform our understanding and thus begin to change the way in which modern man lives in the world.

If we ask ourselves where are the great problems that confront the modern world, I think we can begin to see where we might address our efforts. It seems to me that two connected problems call for our attention: the clash of different cultures and the meaninglessness of most human work. These two things may not at first appear connected. But they share in common a need to break down walls of human isolation. Until our time the world's nations and cultures dwelled in happy isolation from one another, and the western mind has complacently regarded non-western cultures as backward and in need of our helpful intervention. This blinkered view has fortunately been challenged by better knowledge. Modern man, even if vaguely, sees himself as part of a

far greater and more complex drama of the rise of civilisation which has diverse elements. This sense of being part of a greater human story has thrown into relief the narrow vision of personal life, at least for western man, conceived as little more than labouring to sustain existence, to find shelter and to eat in relative comfort. For the wealthy nations food, shelter and comfort are already attained easily by most, yet precisely this abundance of material wealth shows us the futility of most kinds of labour that accomplish it. There is, I would like to suggest, a growing sense that *human work* should fulfil something far greater than this, that it should call upon the deepest creative powers of man and increase his being and consciousness. This sense is especially evident in the younger generation, and it may well underlie the apparent cynicism we often observe. Work, all genuine human work, should ennoble the human spirit, not merely keep destitution from the door. Yet for most people their work, far from increasing being and consciousness, exhausts and diminishes them, so that leisure-time is largely taken up with distractions. We might say that leisure and consumerism are now the opium of the people, since they consist largely of distraction from the general barrenness of working life. Even the wealthiest seem to need drugs to take the edge off the dullness of being and the emptiness of consciousness.

At the same time we see the growing conflict of cultures, of religions, ideologies, the struggles for meaningful identity manifest in searching for ethnic roots, the rise of feminism, so-called cultural pluralism, globalisation, competing human rights, environmentalism and so on. These are all struggles truly felt. Yet if we look at them more deeply, real and pressing though each may seem, they are all founded in limited very visions of human nature and human destiny. Human discontent has far deeper roots than the various issues that get taken up in the public mind.

These two things, then – the clash of cultures and barrenness of most human labour – both press us for a higher order understanding of our human situation. As Teilhard points out, the human race is now being thrown back upon itself, compelled to come together in mutual understanding, and so there are clashes between world-views, ideologies, aspirations, moral values and so on. This larger convergence cannot be blandly accommodated to cultural relativism or pluralism. Something far greater than mere tolerance of differences is needed in response to these emerging pressures.

It seems to me a salutary moment when the west was suddenly compelled to realise that the traditional wisdom of India or China was equal to that of the west, if not even greater in certain regards, and that there are different modes of human spiritual life that touch the essence of the Absolute. The East has looked heavenward far longer than the West. On the other hand, through

its probing into the nature of the physical world the Western mind has unleashed powers from nature undreamed of even a hundred years ago. Yet for all the advances of the physical sciences, it remains a serious question as to whether this has any parallel raising of the being or spirit of man.

These different spiritual and physical orientations are not simply bringing about a confusion in their clashes, they are each being thrown into inner turmoil. Many peoples are desperately trying to find roots and identity in their traditions, seeking some firm ground amidst the psychic turmoil, but all too often this leads only to trying to rebuild the old walls of isolation. A phrase like “multi-culturalism” may sound attractive and edifying, but actually it is just renaming social and ideological ghettos. The human soul cannot ground its identity in a tradition which would hold time still – that is to say, human identity is not to be found in retreat from the pressure for humanity to come together as one family. These walls of isolation are being built on the false premise of the autonomy of the individual. For example, there is great concern for human rights at the present time, which on the face of it seems a good thing, but these are in general expressions of the private claims of individuals, codifications of private wants and demands upon others. They do not represent a shared world, and even less a shared work of the transformation of the spirit. We need not doubt the good intentions of many of these codified rights, but they are misguided in so far as they are isolationist. They may protect, as insurance policies protect, but they do not *enhance* greater being or enable creative action. They do not liberate human potential. What use, we may ask, is the right to work if that work does not nourish the spirit of man? What use are proclamations of equality if all they mean is entry into the common competition for material plunder? We cannot legislate well-being, yet that is precisely what much political effort is being presently expended on trying to accomplish, owing to lack of any greater vision of human potential.

It is worth noting with regard to the question of human rights that, in Teilhard’s view, all rights follow first upon “the absolute duty of the individual to develop his own personality,” after which follows “the relative right of the individual to be placed in circumstances as favourable possible to his personal development”, and then “The absolute right of the individual, within the social organism, not to be deformed by external coercion but inwardly super-organised by persuasion, that is to say, in conformity with his personal endowments and aspirations”, (*The Future of Man*, “Some Reflections on the Rights of Man”, p. 195).

If we follow Teilhard’s thought in these matters, we see the inevitability of these pressures now confronting humanity. The human race is being shaken into living in a larger and more

complex world in which all must come to live and work together. But this living and working together is not some blind mechanical collective. It calls for a higher order of consciousness and an understanding that the depth of freedom is correlated with the depth of participation. Freedom is not rooted in claims upon anything but upon openness to everything. Freedom is receptivity, and only in receptivity is true creativity possible. Seeing and being converge in freedom.

If we take Teilhard's great principle *unity differentiates* as a guide to our thinking, then I believe we have a key to what rightly should be understood as the metaphysics of socialisation, a key that goes to the heart of all human relations and to the essence of human work. Here, precisely, is a task of thinking that calls to be done.

It may seem an extraordinary claim to make, but it is true to say that the relatively new disciplines of social anthropology or political science have not yet thought the being of society or civilisation. These are studied as mechanical entities, morphologically, and not yet as manifestations of the human spirit, as living beings, as forms of conscious energy. Yet this was something Julian Huxley called for back in 1971 at the UNESCO conference marking the tenth anniversary of Teilhard's and Einstein's deaths. I believe it is worth asking why it is that thought about the nature of society has not yet progressed beyond mechanistic analysis and begun to see it, as Teilhard did, as the direct manifestation of the noosphere – not itself the noosphere, but as its body, so to speak. The arts, institutions of learning and of law, government and religion are all, by nature, articulations of the collective intelligence of society, painstakingly built up over centuries, expressions of a collective quest for unity of understanding and mutual action. All extend the range of thought and action of the solitary individual. But so long as they remain unseen in their essence they appear to constrain rather than augment individual potential. By nature they demand a vocational and participatory consciousness, and it is an obvious fact that when such institutions are used for individual ends or ambitions they become deformed and oppressive. Therefore it is perilous for a society to remain unconscious of the nature these institutions¹. A society unable to consciously reflect upon its own nature is not yet truly a society. The law of self-reflection as a precondition for individual autonomy applies equally to society or civilisation.

Unity differentiates, Teilhard tells us again and again, and the social corollary of this that *society individuates*. To be an

¹ It is often said that institutions are by nature corruptive, but this is to equate failure with essence. That institutions fall short of their proper functions within society is no different than any organism failing in its proper function in nature. The evolution of the organs of society follows the same laws, though on a higher level, as the evolution of organic matter to successful life-forms.

autonomous individual is to be a centre that can act in reference to the whole and for that which is greater than himself.. Autonomy is not merely the power to act self-referentially. Without reference to the whole there is no sphere for individual autonomy to act within. Yet it is clear that, as yet, most human beings are only what we might call “passive” members of society. They demand the protection of its institutions – their rights and freedoms and so forth - but do not enter the sphere of higher activity that these open up to them. They criticise the failures or lack of integrity of these institutions, but do not realise that these institutions can only function according to their proper ends to the degree to which society as a whole reflects upon their essence. Yet even this critical expectation indicates at least an elementary sense of participation. The criminal expects justice from the law. Even the atheist expects holiness from the religious!.

There is a social law at work here. The potential of society is determined by its degree of self-knowledge or self-reflection. It can accomplish nothing outside the boundaries of the way in which it conceives itself. How it conceives itself determines its orientation to the world at large. Therefore the prevailing notions of the nature of society are determinative. And I believe it is true to say that the limited and mechanistic notions of society which generally prevail in our time lie at the root of the social problems that continually confront us. Plenty of good people – more than we might think – work to remedy these problems, yet what is needed is a transformation of understanding of the nature of society. Here I do not mean some new ideology, I mean an enhancement of perception, a lifting of our gaze from measuring the mechanisms of society to understanding its living intelligence. In short, a social metaphysics, a genuine ontology of society.

For example, the whole of modern economic theory consists entirely of statistically measuring and trying to predict probable outcomes. This reduction of economics to mathematical models completely dehumanises human work, from the composing of a symphony down to the production of a box of matches. Within such a framework debates about how production should be shared, or labour made more efficient, are pointless. That reduces human beings to mere consumers of wealth. Why does this model hold sway in our thinking? Because the sacramental and transformative meaning of work remains wholly unacknowledged in all economic theorising. So long as work is regarded as no more than a means of holding poverty at bay, then its true significance, as that through which the human spirit attains fuller being and consciousness, remains entirely obscured.

In this mechanistic economic model there is a clear contradiction between conception and actuality. Every human being naturally desires to realise their creative potential, to bring into existence through work the seeds of what lies in them to make

or to build or to discover. That is the true ground of work, in which full intelligence is married with passion and conscience. To witness work being done in this manner is an extraordinary thing. It is sacred. It is at once natural, moral and life-enhancing, and it brings a gift to all mankind because what is created in this way is always true, good and beautiful. It nourishes both maker and receiver.

This truth about the nature of work manifests itself on a higher plane than the individual worker. What in classical economics is called the division of labour, in which each contributes according their particular talents, also makes possible the undertaking of collective creativity, in which, through mutual collaboration, the highest talents are called forth in a way far beyond anything the individual could accomplish alone. There is a leap from work being merely labour for survival, to work becoming an act of creative adoration. One has a glimpse of this in the extraordinary enterprise of the building of the Medieval cathedrals in which every kind of human skill was called upon, from the simplest manual labour to the highest sacred art. Here was an enterprise which united nations in a common task and a common vision and which substantially sustained the whole European economy. There are tasks that can be accomplished only through common vision and mutual endeavour, and it is these tasks which call forth the greatest human creativity, the noblest enthusiasm, and which at one and the same moment individualise the single worker and unite him with every other. Yet this particular work was rooted in the adoration of the transcendent and perhaps only thus could it call upon every level of human knowledge, skill and dedication.

This contradiction between the models of the human world and the natural aspirations of the human spirit shows clearly the deficiencies of reductive, mechanistic ways of viewing reality. They represent a contradiction between thought and being, and in practice they constrict the human spirit. But more than this – and I would emphasise this point – they show us that there is in human nature a “natural knowledge” of the world which does not require experts to bring to light. Just as there is in each human soul a natural sense of justice, so there is a natural knowledge of the meaning of creative work. The modern models of economics obscure this knowledge, and so produce a debilitating division between thought and being. This natural knowledge belongs, I suggest, to the realm of the noosphere, as it is a knowledge shared and recognised by all. The mechanistic models, on the other hand, belong to the dualistic mode of thought of the Enlightenment, in which the world and the inner being of man were wholly divided. For all the complex sophistication of modern economic thinking, it is still essentially a model of the hunter-gatherer society. It entirely fails to take into account the cultural dimension of human

work, and this failure of perception is in turn reducing modern education to the mere acquisition of basic skills – skills that would be acquired incidentally if education aimed higher. Skills acquired without any creative impulse produce next to nothing. It is, generally speaking, by accident or by luck that any talents grow through our modern education. It is as if human beings were created merely to supply the production plant.

This example from economic thinking is but one example among many we could mention. The reduction of reality to the quantitative permeates many realms of thought, not just the natural sciences, and this is why, as Teilhard so often pointed out, the organisation of matter towards complexification and consciousness fails to be seen. For all the progress of modern science, in effect it is widening the division between thought and being, as is evident in the ever-increasing moral problems it is raising. I am aware, as no doubt you are too, that evolutionary scientists are split between two camps, the reductive mechanists of blind chance, and the teleologists who discern progressive design. This in itself shows us that there are two orders of science currently being practiced, the reductive and the unitive, which we might term first and second order science. I am not a scientist, but I am concerned with the underlying metaphysics of science, and it seems obvious to me that the proper work of scientific research is to come to understand the total order of observable reality. It is only science of this kind that has meaning to culture generally, because it confirms the natural intuition of the human spirit that reality *in totum* is a unity, or a unity in diversity. The fundamental metaphysical intuition of mankind has always been that everything is connected with everything, even though this has been conceived in a variety of ways. This metaphysical intuition is embodied in the ancient religious cosmologies of all cultures. The human quest for knowledge, in every sphere, is to bring to light in detail the nature of this complex unity. Knowledge of this kind connects thought and being, mind and reality, matter and soul. It situates the human essence in the cosmos.

Perhaps this problem of the growing division between thought and being may be brought more clearly into focus with the current fascination with physics. There is much talk of the “new physics”, of “multi-universes”, “string theory” and so on, and there is a growing literature which tries to raise these theories to a type of mystical apprehension of reality. As a student of mysticism I find this strange, to say the least. The reason for this is quite simple: for the non-physicist these theories have no meaning. They are kinds of knowledge that belong solely to experts and are incommunicable in any real way to the non-expert, and this means they do not touch the conscious life of our culture. I am not refuting these theories. But I am saying that they do not open up any possibilities for the non-expert. They do not increase

perception. Nor do they relate in any way to what may genuinely be called mystical knowledge. Mystical knowledge is not concerned with explanatory theories of reality, least of all ones at the rudimentary mechanistic level of unconscious matter, but rather with a direct intuition of ultimate unity. Theories of reality that cannot be tested for their truth by the natural intelligence of mankind at large have no real relation to human life. They may fascinate, but they do not liberate.²

It may seem strange that I raise this point while at the same time following Teilhard the scientist. Why should I, as a non-expert, believe Teilhard shows me something while these theories do not? Again, the answer is simple: what Teilhard discerns in nature are laws that apply to many planes at once. For example, his “law of complexity” clearly manifests on planes observable to the non-expert – the most obvious being the socialisation of man. It is clear that the greater the capacity of the individual to participate in society, the more whole he becomes as an individual. By extrapolation it is equally clear that the greater the capacity of the different social groups to participate with humanity as a whole, the more integrated each social group becomes in itself. The law of complexity extends all the way from the simplest inorganic matter to the highest conscious organisation of living matter, expressing itself visibly in the cultural life of mankind which involves the convergence of many minds. There is, let me suggest, that which can be thought only through the conjunction of many minds, just as there are tasks that may be accomplished only through the combined effort of many hands. It is a principle discovered long ago by Plato that real insight into the highest truths can only come about through discourse. Such insight, though won through effort, is by nature open to all. Philosophical knowledge is a kind of knowledge that belongs to mankind as such, and this is because it transforms the power to see. True philosophy is concerned with direct insight into the nature of reality, and from such insight the conduct of life itself is transformed. There is a direct relation here between knowledge and virtue – and thus between knowing and being.

No such relation between knowing and being arises from the new physics. This kind of knowledge does not apply to the

² It should be noted here that the common claim that the sciences deal only with empirically tested “facts” by rigid reasoning is a misleading over-simplification. The further claim that physics is the most rational of the sciences because it works with mathematics is also misleading. Reasoning is greater than mathematics, and the mathematical model of reasoning is the most mechanical. In practice, scientists use methods which suit what they are investigating. Biologists and physicists, for example, do not proceed by a common method. It should also be noted that even within single disciplines some scientists are seeking a synthesis in what they observe while others are seeking a reduction. It is this difference in what is sought that divides biological evolutionists. See for example Simon Conway Morris *Life's Solution*, Cambridge, 2003

different planes of reality. Julian Huxley, who I mentioned a moment ago, noted that physics is falsely regarded as the most important science because it has progressed faster than the other sciences. He writes:

It is true because physics is the most abstract and therefore the simplest science. It consequently obtained a head start over the other sciences . . . and was able to probe deeper and more rigorously into its own area of study just because this is a secluded domain at the furthest remove from the actual complexities of nature, and in particular from the highest complexities we know, the mind-body organism of man. It is credited with probing the mysteries of matter . . . but it has failed to pay attention to the only real mystery – the fact of mind and its evolution. (*Science and Synthesis, An International Colloquium organized by Unesco on the Tenth Anniversary of the Death of Albert Einstein and Teilhard de Chardin*, Springer-Verlag, New York, 1971, p. 31)

“a secluded domain at the furthest remove from the actual complexities of nature”, by which Huxley means human consciousness.³ Huxley believed that the real challenge of science is the study of the higher complexities of nature, and it is worth remarking that the higher the realms it studies the more closely it touches the realm of human life itself and thus becomes meaningful to man generally. It is also worth noting that the more complex⁴ the realm it studies the less abstract it becomes. The study of consciousness, the highest complexity we know, turns out to be the most accessible to understanding. And it is to the highest realm of consciousness that mysticism rightly belongs, the furthest realm from abstract physics. Here we arrive at the mystery of the relation of consciousness to the totality of reality, of the relation of man to the cosmos and to the ultimate destiny of all things. The sciences, as we know them, have no access to this realm. At best mysticism can be approached through metaphysics and the fundamental questions of being and knowing, such as we find in Meister Eckhart.

The ascent through the types of knowledge upwards from physics leads us not only in the direction of higher complexity but also into modes of what we might term “participatory knowledge”, to an order of knowledge that properly belongs to every human

³ Although Huxley made this observation in 1971, none of the advances in physics since that time have extended the realm of physics to the study of conscious life or complexity-consciousness. This remains, by the very nature of the discipline, outside its provenance. The study of conscious life belongs to other scientific disciplines, and these, as yet, are still in their infancy. It should also be noted that Teilhard first studied physics and changed to geology.

⁴ Here we mean complex in Teilhard’s sense.

being by the very nature of things, the truth of which can be verified by natural intelligence. It is a progressive move from theoretical explanation (the most mechanistic) to direct observation (the most conscious), and thus into the field of human action itself in relation to all that is.

It is here, and only at this level, that the work of the scientist, the philosopher, and the theologian can converge, where there can be any meaningful exchange between them. The same may be said, of course, of the social anthropologist, the historian and the economist. These studies have yet to fully encompass their proper object, mankind as the self-reflective being on the way to unity. It is only when these disciplines touch the essence of human nature that they really enter the realm of human culture. This move towards essence is in quite the opposite direction to that of making the sciences accessible by so-called “dumbing down” to the ordinary public, which provides only a sort of pseudo-education.

Let me try and make this point as clearly as possible. A minute analysis of the works of Shakespeare, enumerating every instance of each letter of the alphabet, measuring the number of words in his works, estimating his knowledge of Latin or Greek and so on would reveal many things, but it would not reveal anything of Shakespeare’s meaning or why his works touch us so profoundly. This is because Shakespeare perfectly marries language and essence, and so touches the human spirit directly. Shakespeare communicates because he touches the highest in man and the universal, and this is what situates his works in the cultural domain. Any sort of mechanistic analysis of his works situates them below the cultural domain and below the level of universal significance. The highest art does not need to be “disseminated” since it is already, in the very nature of things, part of the fabric and spirit of the culture. It brings into reflective articulation that which is already in the heart of mankind. The same may be said of serious philosophy or theology. Man is the being who thinks metaphysically, and ultimately the meaningfulness of any branch of knowledge depends on what it reveals metaphysically.⁵

If we are to begin to apply the vision of Teilhard to the modern world as we find it and the problems it presently confronts us with, then, as I said at the outset, we need to begin to draw out in detail the implications of his thought, and in particular in the social realm. I have suggested three obvious realms where such explication would be illuminating and also practical: the meaning of human work, the relation of the different cultural traditions among the family of mankind, and an

⁵ This order of knowledge belongs to humanity as such in principle. I do not mean to imply that such knowledge is actually attained by all human beings. In the same way self-knowledge belongs to every human being in principle, but it does not follow that every human being has accomplished that natural or innate knowledge.

understanding of economics at a higher level. I have suggested that Teilhard's great principle, unity differentiates, is a key to insights into all these, a key which could unlock an order of knowledge which could transform the life of mankind and unleash huge potential creativity which presently is constrained or thwarted by mechanistic modes of thought, that is, by trying to understand the activities of man by the least conscious measures.

I cannot close without touching more directly on religion. There has never been a time when mankind has had such access to all the great religious traditions and the special insights that belong to each of them. Translations of the scriptures of Hinduism and Buddhism, the philosophical works of China and Greece, the myths of almost forgotten times and peoples, are available to all. Not to mention the works of the great thinkers, saints and mystics of our own civilisation. On the other hand there has perhaps never been a time when each of the great religious traditions need to rediscover their own essence within themselves, in particular their mystical essence. I need hardly point out, as Teilhard did, that the apparent decline of Christianity is due to its institutional reluctance to embrace the world as meaningful. The reduction of the world to a mere moral testing ground for souls in preparation for a spiritual mode of existence beyond the grave has no place in modern life. Religion as a mere palliative for life has no vision and no nobility. Such a limited view cannot form the ground for any fruitful discourse with the other religions. Nor has the view of religion as private consolation in a confusing or suffering world any place. The task before the religions now, through re-grounding themselves in their own deepest roots and highest essence, is to seek ways in which all human endeavour can be spiritualised, so that the love of the transcendent can manifest and fulfil itself in the natural love of life and truth and creativity in daily life. It is of the essence of religion to resolve any duality between spirit and matter. That, I believe, lies at the heart of all Teilhard's thought. Only in such a task can the different religions befriend one another. This is, in my view, the immediate and tangible challenge of unity. The age in which each individual sought their own solitary spiritual destiny is over. As Teilhard himself observed of his many atheist friends, it is a vision too small in the face of the vastness and majesty of the universe.

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Paper delivered to the Twenty-Third International Teilhard Conference, 2004