

## COSMOS AND CONSCIOUSNESS: *A Study of Teilhard de Chardin I*

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In these two lectures we shall explore the evolutionary theory of Teilhard de Chardin. Through this exploration I shall try to bring together a number of themes that seem to me to be of great significance and invite careful reflection. It is not my intention, let me say at the outset, to expound Teilhard's theory of evolution so much as to explore some of its philosophical and mystical implications. I trust that the general shape of Teilhard's conception of evolution will emerge by itself. First, however, I wish to relate this lecture to the common theme of this series, Paradigms of Reality.

The scope of this series, as I am sure you are aware, is enormous. It is an attempt to survey a fundamental quest of man; the quest to conceive reality in its totality. This quest is to be found in every civilisation and every culture throughout human history. Whatever conception of the totality of reality reigns in any given age, that conception determines the values and the possibilities of mankind. That conception attempts to bridge the mysterious gulf between the bare "givenness" or "facticity" of reality and the "meaning" it bears or holds for mankind. Although there may be variants within any given culture of its conception of reality, at a more fundamental level there is also a shared set of presuppositions about reality, and therefore about meaning. These shared presuppositions are not necessarily obvious to everyone who holds them. Very often it is the philosopher, or the artist, or perhaps the theologian who finds means to articulate them, and so bring them into the realm of direct human reflection.

Why does mankind seek to comprehend reality? Why do we seek ways of grasping the nature of the universe? Is this a scientific, a philosophic or a religious question? There is no simple answer. Let me suggest, however, that the quest to grasp reality stems from an original intuition of totality. It belongs to human consciousness to sense an underlying wholeness, purposefulness and meaningfulness to reality. This sense is extremely complex. It contains within itself feelings of mystery, of sacredness, of absoluteness. But also it contains an ambivalent sense of belonging and alienation, of closeness and remoteness, of disclosure and hiddenness, of concreteness and infinitude. It is my considered view that this intuitive sense of totality is at once the distinguishing feature of human consciousness, separating man from all other creatures, and

the root of all religion, and thus the root of human culture. The sense of totality, of universal coherence, permeates every genuinely human activity, whether that be social, moral, political, scientific, artistic, philosophical, metaphysical or mythical. In one way or another it validates all these concerns, or else it passes ultimate judgement upon them.

I suggested a moment ago that this sense of totality contains within itself a quality of mystery, as well as qualities of immediacy and hiddenness. At one level this may be due to our present incapacity to grasp reality in its totality, but on another level it may be said to be due to the mysterious and paradoxical nature of reality itself. Here I mean mystery in its original religious or mythic sense, the quality of infinite sacredness, the quality of a divine presence as the substratum and cause of all that is. I wish to draw attention to this because I believe it accounts for the diversity of our paradigms of reality, ancient and modern, Eastern or Western. I am not suggesting that all paradigms have equal status, but I am suggesting that there are many approaches to comprehending the wholeness and coherence of reality. These approaches we may call different discourses. I say "discourses" because each such approach belongs to a community of thought, not merely to private individuals, and because each has its own distinctive language or mode of discourse. We have already mentioned some of these; the discourse of science, the discourse of philosophy, of myth, of religion, of the arts. Each of us is probably at home, so to speak, with a particular one of these discourses - and probably not so at home with another.

It is important to notice, however, that one or another of these discourses prevails in any given culture. By "prevails" I mean it is given special authority and status. Over the last two centuries in the West the discourse of science has prevailed over almost every other discourse, although that is now in some ways changing - not because science has been discredited, but because it has been recognised as only one discourse among many and is itself under revision. Nevertheless, we should recognise that the principal reason science gained such status was due to it being a shared discourse, that is, a discipline which could be checked and criticised by the community of scientists and philosophers of science. Its strength lies in its verifiability or the consensus it makes possible, and in the value it attributes to objectivity. While other discourses have fragmented into different and often opposing schools of thought - think of literary criticism or political theory for example, not to mention religion - science in general has maintained its integrity, leaving aside bad and pseudo science.

It is in the light of this sense of wholeness that I would like to discuss the paradigm of evolution.

Teilhard de Chardin, a scientist and Jesuit priest, found himself at

home in the discourse of science, or, more precisely, with the disciplines of geology and palaeontology. As I am sure you are aware, he developed a radically new theory of evolution. And I am sure that you are also aware that his theory of evolution was, and still is, highly contentious, both within the Church and among scientists. Hopefully this will make it all the more exiting to explore in these lectures! Let me confess, however, that I find Teilhard's thought extraordinarily interesting. I have no problem with the notion of evolution as such, and this I say as a student of comparative religion, whose natural home is with Advaita Vedanta and Platonism. But it is not my present purpose to mount a defence of Teilhard, although I will admit that I have read no attack on Teilhard's vision of evolution, either scientific or theological, that does not display a misapprehension of his thought and which cannot be answered directly from Teilhard's own writings. His thought and work has often been misunderstood both by his proponents and opponents.

In approaching Teilhard's thought we should observe that it moves on three distinct but integrated planes; a scientific plane, a philosophical plane, and a theological plane.

These three discourses need a little clarification. On the scientific plane we need to remember that Teilhard was a geologist and palaeontologist. These two sciences have their own methodology and must not be confused with any general theory of scientific methodology. Actually, there is no single scientific methodology that applies to all the sciences. Even within a single science there are divergencies, as for example in physics where, as Teilhard points out, there is one physics of immense magnitudes and another physics of the infinitesimally minute. But there is, however, a general rule that whatever any particular science asserts is measurable and verifiable. But this general rule applies most rigidly to such sciences as physics and chemistry, but far less to palaeontology or geology, although certain aspects of these sciences can be undertaken by some of the other sciences. This is the case with carbon dating, for example. But no theory of evolution can be verified or disproved by scientific experiment. You cannot put the universe into a test tube. You cannot duplicate geological time in the laboratory. Any theory of evolution is therefore necessarily a conceptual extrapolation from the order that emerges from an exploration and classification of the pattern of the past. It is a matter of perceiving an overall shape and a general direction or movement in the sequence of the strata of geological and biological time.

It is worth noting at this point that Teilhard was himself deeply interested in scientific method, or the philosophy of science. He criticises Darwin, and other evolutionists, for confining their observations simply to morphology, that is, simply to the forms of things. The earth has three layers, the geosphere, the biosphere, and

the noosphere, that is, a material layer, a biological layer and a conscious layer - matter, life and mind. Darwin, along with most evolutionists, omitted the sphere of mind or consciousness in his theory of evolution. We shall see shortly how the inclusion of consciousness radically changes how we may look at evolution.

On the philosophical plane Teilhard presents us with a new ontology, or a new dimension to ontology, namely an ontology of development, or what he calls a "dynamic ontology". With this he calls into question what he calls the "static ontology" of traditional philosophy and metaphysics, Eastern and Western. The universe, and therefore every creature within the universe, is involved in a process of becoming, of unfoldment of being, of actualisation. We do not live in a static universe in which everything is settled and finished as it stands. This has enormous scientific, philosophical and theological implications, as we shall see.

On the theological plane Teilhard presents us with several very challenging ideas. One is his claim to recover a lost or neglected aspect of early Christology, namely the cosmic aspect of Christ as we find it in St. Paul and in the early Alexandrian theologian Origen. But perhaps the most challenging is his rethinking of the Christian doctrine of the Fall and the problem of evil. These are problems I shall address in the next lecture.

Once we see that Teilhard is addressing evolution on these three planes, we see why his thought presents such a challenge to us. By attempting to synthesise these three planes into a single vision - a single paradigm - he inevitably challenges certain aspects of each of the orthodox paradigms at each level. He lifts the discussion of the nature of the universe, the destiny of man and the ultimate meaning of existence above the level of the conflict between science and theology. And in lifting the discussion above the conflict between science and theology he at the same time lifts it above the conflict between traditionalism and modernism. Teilhard is one of the few modern thinkers who had the capacity to integrate the immediacy of living wholly in the twentieth century with a profound sense of the presence of the past, which is one of the great challenges of our time when we have unprecedented access to the fruits of human civilisation.

From these general remarks, let us move to our central theme.

The title of this lecture is Cosmos and Consciousness. These two terms imply one another. If man calls the sum of all that is "cosmos" he is telling us something both about himself and about what he sees. On the one hand the word "cosmos" implies a complete and ordered totality, while on the other hand the word "consciousness" implies grasping or apprehending all that is in its totality. The problem of talking about "reality" therefore has two sides: the reality *spoken of* and *the speaker*, or the *perceived* and the *perceiver*. What emerges

between the perceived and the perceiver is a relation between the cosmos and consciousness, and what arises from this relation of cosmos and consciousness is human reflection which manifests in the word, in the concept, in human discourse. What arises from the word, or from human discourse, is the apparently endless number of relations between man and the cosmos.

To put this another way and more shortly, we may say that cosmos and consciousness mutually shape one another. Out of cosmos arises consciousness, and out of consciousness arises cosmos. This is at once a scientific, a philosophical and a theological statement, though each of these disciplines will reflect upon it in their own specialised ways.

Speaking generally, we may say that science is principally concerned with reflection upon the *nature* of the cosmos, with what can be said of the cosmos *in itself*. Because of this emphasis science tends to place man among the objects of perception and to look at him from “outside” like any other phenomena. Again, speaking generally, we may say that philosophy is principally concerned with reflection upon *how* man speaks of the cosmos and therefore with the relation of thought to reality. It is concerned with the ratio between speech and perception, and therefore philosophy looks at man in terms of his *relation* to the cosmos or to the sum of reality. Thirdly, still speaking generally, we may say theology (or religion) is principally concerned with the ultimate *significance* of man’s existence in the cosmos and with the destiny of the all that is. Theology focuses upon the *telos* of cosmos and consciousness. These three discourses all arise, however, from the conjunction of cosmos with consciousness. And it is clearly from this conjunction of cosmos with consciousness that all paradigms of reality arise, from the very crudest to the most sublime.

It seems to me that any truly meaningful discussion of evolution, and therefore any evaluation of any theory of evolution, is required to take full account of cosmos and consciousness. This, I suggest, is what Teilhard attempted to do and that is why his work is worth our while examining. It is not enough simply to correlate *thought* with reality, enormous and worthy as that task may be. Ultimately it is necessary to correlate *being* with reality. It is at this point, and never before it, that man’s intuitive sense of wholeness or cosmos reaches its term or fulfilment.

Let us pursue this relation of cosmos and consciousness in more specific evolutionary terms. According to Teilhard the relation between cosmos and consciousness emerges at the material level through a progressive process of *centro-complexity*. By centro-complexity Teilhard means the extremely high level of biological complexity that arises in life forms that develop into complex groups that attain autonomy, out of which arise the variety of types or

modalities of consciousness. These complex forms become centres or points of consciousness, at first of very low order, characterised by mechanical instinct, but gradually emerging into higher and higher degrees of complexity. There is an exact correlation between the degree of complexity and the degree of consciousness in the hierarchy of living forms. Thus Teilhard writes “consciousness presents itself to our experience as the effect or the *specific* property of this complexity, when the latter is taken to extremely high values”. (A Summary of my ‘Phenomenological’ view of the World, *Toward the Future*, p. 212) The most complex organisation and centration of matter we know is the human brain. It is important to grasp here the meaning of “centred” in this conception of complexity. This high complexity is not dispersed but rather intensely focused or gathered into a single centre of high organisation which is characterised by autonomy. In a word, it is what Teilhard calls the *interiorization* of matter. Interiorization emerges into view at the point where organised form bursts into life, and again, in a yet higher order, at the point where life bursts into consciousness.

Looking back upon the emergence of life on earth, Teilhard traces a series of what he calls “critical points” of complexification. He summarises these as follows:

#### 1. *Critical point of vitalisation*

Somewhere, at the level of the proteins, an initial emergence of consciousness is produced within the pre-living . . . And, by virtue of the accompanying mechanism of ‘reproduction’, the rise of complexity on earth increases its pace phyletically (the genesis of species or speciation).

Starting from this stage . . . it becomes possible to ‘measure’ the advance of organic complexification by the progress of cerebration. That device enables us to distinguish, within the biosphere, a specifically favoured axis of complexity-consciousness: that of the primates.

#### 2. *Critical point of reflection (or hominization)*

As a result of some ‘hominizing’ cerebral mutation, which appears among the anthropoids towards the end of the Tertiary period, psychic reflection - not simply ‘knowing’ but ‘knowing that one knows’ - bursts upon the world and opens an entirely new domain for evolution. With man (apparently no more than a new zoological ‘family’) it is in fact a *second species of life* that begins, bringing with it its new cycle of possible patterns of arrangement and its own special planetary envelope (the nooshere).

#### 3. *Development of co-reflection*

I will paraphrase Teilhard on this point rather than quote him. By the development of co-reflection Teilhard means the rise of human socialisation, that is to say, the arising of communal enterprises and institutions in which the human individual deepens his own personhood through participation in society and in the activities peculiar to humanity as a whole. This means the actualisation of

human gifts and talents through collective thought and action. Thus arise the *inventive* and the *moral* qualities of man, the capacity of *foresight*, and what Teilhard calls the “sense of humanity”. Human socialisation, taken as a global phenomenon, represents a new order of centro-complexity in which unity through co-reflection intensifies individual autonomy. Society, or civilisation, is more than mere human collectivisation in the sense of a general conformity to a norm. It intensifies individuality through unification or, to use Teilhard’s formulation of the principle at work here, “unity differentiates” - that is the central core of his notion of centro-complexity. The higher the order of unity, the higher the order of self-reflection and interiorization. Unity in nature is not a force that obliterates distinctions, reducing forms into homogeneity. Unity *demand*s autonomy among the elements united together. Contrary to society submerging and limiting the human individual, it creates the individual, demands that he is most himself the more he participates in the larger human enterprise of civilisation. To grasp this fully - and this is where we may be critical of mechanistic social theories - we need to see society as a *psychic* phenomenon, as the arena of mind, and mind as the upper layer of the biosphere. Thought, in all its myriad forms, is in fact a new mode of life, a new dimension of reality.

Teilhard goes further in this series of critical thresholds and predicts, or extrapolates from the shape of the evolutionary journey thus far, a future phase which he terms ultra-homization, in which man participates in the spiritualisation of the universe. I shall leave discussion of that phase to the second lecture. Here I would like to go over the three phases we have just outlined in a slightly different way.

Looking back over the vast stretch of time in which the earth has taken form, Teilhard discerns a distinct sequence of stages in the progress from inert matter to the rise of reflective consciousness. This sequence shows us the connectedness of that progress through a series of “leaps” into different types of higher orders. The sequence is as follows:

- Multiplicity
- Organisation
- Complexity
- Life
- Interiorization
- Consciousness
- Reflective Consciousness

No matter in which direction we look, whether to the greatest in magnitude or to the minute, the “atomic” or “granular” characteristic

of the universe appears to us. The universe is, so to speak, a swarm of particles. To the reductive observer, who would pin reality down to a single factor, that is *all* that there is. Multiplicity, however, when looked at more closely has a number of quite different behaviours. It is not an anarchy of isolated grains. The multiple gathers into different planes of order or organisation. The universe suddenly appears to have a “geometry”, to have “form”, and this in itself is as mysterious as anything else in the universe. Matter is not merely dispersed evenly throughout space, it gathers or congregates. Then a further fact strikes us. Organised matter does not simply organise into fixed forms and rest there. It continues to move, and that movement emerges in a vast sequence of more and more complex forms, forms that are related to other forms, and thus organisation arises into a higher order of interrelatedness. All this appears, however, to be mechanistic. But then another factor emerges. Complexity polarises itself into *relationship* and *autonomy*, and thus life emerges, characterised by the power to reproduce itself. There is no *mechanistic* explanation for the emergence of life. Many scientists suggest that life is an improbable event in the universe, while others say that it is a mere local accident on our planet earth. These ideas, however, ought not to surprise us, since life represents a new order or realm of reality, founded upon all that preceded it, but discontinuous with the mere extension of mechanistic organisation, and freeing itself from the law of entropy.

Many scientists would regard the story of evolution complete with the emergence of life. From this point on, they say, life merely struggles to survive, and different life-forms win over other life forms or adapt more readily to environmental factors. According to Teilhard, however, life is the foundation for yet another leap into a further realm of being. Life extends the line of integration (or adaptation to environment) and autonomy to concentrated interior organisation. This takes the form of the emergence of complex nervous systems, refined instincts and more powerful senses. The power to see, that is, consciousness, springs out of life. At this point we witness different creatures specialising in different types of sustenance and protection - the bird with its beak, the elephant with its trunk, the tiger with its swiftness. Life diversifies into a highly complex ecosystem.

But then something new happens just as “improbable” as life itself. Life concentrates within itself and arises as intelligence. We do not know the way different creatures “think” about their existence, but it is clear that many creatures have the power to some degree to conceptualise, that is to say, to represent to themselves some kind of interpretation of their world, even if that representation amounts to no more than an instrument for them to follow their unconscious instincts. The emergence of consciousness is just as mysterious as the

emergence of life, for it is even less mechanical than life. But consciousness leaps beyond another threshold; consciousness runs counter to the localisation of life, for consciousness opens out to everything that is.

The emergence of consciousness does not stop here, however. It now moves in three directions simultaneously in the form of reflective consciousness. This leap from consciousness as simple awareness to reflective consciousness, the leap which Teilhard describes as the leap from “knowing to knowing *that* we know” and which he calls *hominization*, brings us to a threshold of unimaginable possibilities. But we can outline its general shape. On the one hand it opens up the possibility of life reflecting upon itself. This is its inward possibility. On the other hand, precisely because it is now reflective, it can gaze outwardly in completely new ways. It can reflect upon the nature of everything. It can represent the cosmos to itself. Non-reflective consciousness knows *its* world, but reflective consciousness knows *the* world. From this arises the third feature of reflective consciousness, the power of foresight.

Consider what this power means. Foresight opens up to our perception and understanding the *processes* of being in the world, from the most elementary deductions of cause and effect to the most complex anticipations of the future of the entire universe. The power of foresight allows us to situate ourselves within the infinity of time and space. Foresight is the foundation of all our hopes and fears. Foresight releases our creative powers in every conceivable direction. Foresight made it possible for man to create the first tool, just as it made it possible to create civilisation. But foresight also has an inner dimension. Because foresight opens up the possibilities of determining our individual and collective actions, it gives birth to the moral dimension of human life. Here I do not mean the simple choice between legal right or wrong, but the choice between acting for our own exclusive advantage or for the totality of everything. The moral act is the more *inclusive* act, founded upon a refined sense of wholeness or unity. Seen from the perspective of the emergence of reflective consciousness, virtue is rooted in the capacity to participate in the wholeness of reality, while vice is a failure to participate. The criminal, the delinquent, is really the person who puts themselves outside society, outside humanity, or at least the person who lacks the capacity to fully participate in life. The same may be said for all abuses of life, ranging from individual self-interest to the international company monopolising a market. And this is why modern individualism produces so many problems. “Doing one’s own thing” is opting out of the drama of evolution which tends towards higher and higher orders of unity.

The process of evolution arrives, then, at a stage that Teilhard calls “involution”. That is to say, having dispersed itself throughout space,

matter superconcentrates into life forms and finally into reflective consciousness, and the rest of the unfolding of the evolutionary journey moves along the axis of interiority and consciousness. Put shortly, the universe awakens to self-consciousness and begins to know itself. The vehicle or instrument of that self-knowledge is mankind. Where are the horizons of this process? So far as we can see, there are no horizons to reflective consciousness. Consciousness is infinitely open, or, to put it another way, consciousness is open to the infinite. Boundaries or fixity deny its essential characteristic of infinite receptivity. The only pressure that comes with reflective consciousness is the restlessness of the human spirit to settle for less than totality of being, or, to use Teilhard’s phrase, to settle for *well being* instead of *more being*.

Here we begin to discern the dynamic and teleological properties of consciousness. I will draw to a close with some final reflections on this aspect of consciousness. It is the dynamic property of consciousness that reveals to us the link between the unfolding of the evolution of the universe and the mystical aspect of religion. Possibly questions about the relation of evolution to man’s religious quest have stirred in our minds throughout this lecture. I am quite aware of the ongoing controversy here, both from the side of science and the side of religion. It is my considered view, however, that the modern debate - if that is what it is - between science and religion is generally founded on false premises. Scientific knowledge and revelation are qualitatively different orders of knowledge and arise from quite different acts of being. If science disputes the existence of God, or if religion disputes the findings of science, then both orders of knowledge are compromised or deformed, both destroy their integrity. The deeper question we ought to ask about science and religion must surely be: What is the relation between these different orders of knowledge and experience? It is precisely here where I think Teilhard de Chardin has a contribution to make. And here is where a brief examination of the dynamic properties of consciousness will throw some light.

Human consciousness aspires to full knowledge in three directions. First and most obviously consciousness tends outwardly through the senses to the world and seeks to understand the order and meaning of the creation. At the same time, mankind seeks to affirm his existence in the world through action. Second, every human being aspires to self-knowledge and self-actualisation - man desires to *be himself* and to be *true* to himself. Third, consciousness aspires to a non-relative transcendent that lies beyond the play of the world, a point where consciousness can finally come to rest and fulfilment in absolute truth and absolute being.

Once we see these three aims of consciousness, three tendencies which cannot be separated from consciousness, we can begin to see

that the different quests for knowledge are not at variance with one another. Problems arise only when one of these properties of consciousness is valued above the others. When religion resorts to denying the meaning of the creation in its concern to reach the transcendent it puts consciousness in conflict with itself. When science resorts to denying the value of the human person in its quest for objective knowledge, it ceases to be responsible and human. When the quest for individual human fulfilment denies the value of every other human individual and looks upon the world simply as “material” for self-development, it devalues and negates the very foundations of being. What becomes clear, when we look at these three dynamic properties of consciousness carefully, is that they mutually support one another. One aspect cannot be fulfilled without the other two. Teilhard discusses this in some detail in an essay entitled *Reflections on Human Happiness*. Here he starts from the perspective of the desire of every human being to become wholly unified in himself. He says:

When we examine the process of our inner unification, that is to say our personalization, we can distinguish three allied and successive stages, or steps, or movements. If man is to be fully himself and fully living, he must, (1) be centred upon himself; (2) be ‘de-centred’ upon ‘the other’; (3) be super-centred upon a being greater than himself.

I think we can clearly discern the three dynamic properties of consciousness in this analysis. The aspiration to become a fully integrated human being emerges as a responsibility of self-consciousness. But one cannot fully become oneself in isolation from the rest of mankind, or from the universe, or from the transcendent. In order to fulfil itself, self-knowledge must reach outside itself and embrace the being of all beings. Unity refuses any horizons. Our selfhood rests in the same being of every being. The human individual, then, becomes most himself the more deeply he participates in the whole of humanity and in the whole human story. Here, surely, is a fundamental principle which ought to inform education at every level. But then, to be fully human we must add a third dimension beyond all the beings that are beside us. The individual must transcend himself by participating in, or centring upon, the transcendent beginning and end of all things. Thus Teilhard says:

We must, then, do more than develop our own selves - more than give ourselves to another who is our equal - we must surrender and attach our lives to one who is greater than ourselves. In other words: first, be. Secondly, love. Finally, worship. Such are the natural phases of our personalization.

In this example it becomes clear that the inward, the outward and the transcendent dimensions of consciousness are not in conflict with one another. Rather they necessitate one another if they are each to attain their full term. It is only when they are limited that they become aberrations. Religion can degenerate into extreme or false asceticism, science can degenerate into materialism, and self-fulfilment can degenerate into individualism. But this is for each of them to fail in their natural ends.

Let me close by looking at this from another perspective which Teilhard brings to our notice. On the one hand he observes that mankind desires to fulfil himself in the creation. For many of the most noble minds of recent times “religion” seems to offer a poor alternative to action in the world. The God of Christianity appears to them as “too small” to account for the marvels of nature, the extraordinary design of the universe, the mystery of being. These “workers” and researchers tend towards pantheism, Teilhard observes, and their participation in the world is fired by love and infused with a type of mystical surrender. On the other hand there are those who turn their gaze beyond the world and centre their entire efforts upon uniting with the transcendent. These two tendencies lie at the root of the conflict between science and religion. Mankind is divided into the “worldly” and the “other-worldly”. However, once we see that the universe, in Teilhard’s view, is in process of ascent towards higher and higher orders of being and consciousness, this division becomes a false division. The universe itself, once we realise it is converging upon its creator, through becoming conscious of itself, becomes the revealer of the divine, even the embodiment of the divine.

The question of evolution, then, let me finally suggest, raises the question of the transcendent to a higher pitch and calls into doubt any idea of an ultimate division between matter and spirit, between creator and creation. It turns out, if we think of it seriously, that God is more immanent than we thought, and that the universe is more divine than we thought.

## THE SPIRITUALISATION OF THE UNIVERSE

### *A Study of Teilhard de Chardin II*

Joseph Milne  
Temenos Academy Lecture 1995

In the previous lecture we traced in general outline the phases of evolution that led to the birth of the noosphere, that is, to reflective consciousness. In this lecture we shall look at Teilhard's vision of the future and the final end of evolution. Any meaningful speculation on the future of man and the universe, Teilhard insists, must, on the one hand, be grounded in a clear understanding of the shape of evolution up to the present from which we can extrapolate a possible future, and, on the other hand, it must, to be worth pursuing, meet the highest aspirations of life and the human spirit. That is to say, there must be a reasonable expectation of an opening into a possible future, informed by a sound knowledge of the nature of the universe, to which mankind can dedicate itself wholeheartedly. These preconditions call into question many of the traditional assumptions about the nature of time.

There are several ways in which we can speculate on time and the future. First, we can, with a kind of ascetic resignation, regard time as a closed circle of endless repetition from which the human spirit can only hope one day to escape, like the endless wheel of karma that Buddhism envisages. Here time is a prison of the endless play of cause and effect. It has no resting point and no meaning. Secondly, we can envisage time as a grand cycle, a burgeoning forth of beings into existence and the experience of joy and sorrow, destined one day to terminate where it began, leaving no trace and no value behind. Here existence is little more than a grand illusion, a mere appearance, the play of the gods, which resolves itself finally only by a return to some type of pure, timeless Being in which all differentiation is obliterated, all temporal aspirations relativised or wiped out like the awakening from a dream. The soul returns at last to its original immortal condition in union with Absolute Truth, as in the Platonic and Hindu visions. Third, we can envisage time as many scientists do, as an outflow and flowering of the universe in all its diverse forms, a grand drama of the warring elements of life and death, a glorious display of endless variations, finally closing in a total death, an obliteration and a return to nothingness.

Intermediate to these three visions of time there is a fourth vision that awaits or expects the coming of a Golden Age in which all sorrow will come to an end, where all conflict will cease, in which the world will be rebuilt into a utopia. This is the millennialist vision, in which

the present time and all its ills can be borne in expectation of it being one day wiped out and replaced by a new order in which all effort and all struggle will end.

These four visions of time produce different ways of life. For the first, time is nothing more than bondage and suffering from which all efforts should be wisely mustered to find a way of being stoically "unaffected" or unmoved. For the second, time is, as it were, the place or condition in which one dedicates one's life and energies to eventually winning a place in a world beyond the world in which the endless demands of existence are lifted off one's back like a heavy burden. For the third, time is no more than the field of a purposeless spectacle, to be enjoyed while it lasts by the fortunate, to be patiently resigned to by the unfortunate, but in either case having no ultimate meaning or value beyond what we might attribute to it ourselves. For the fourth, the present time is but a waiting period for the new dawn that will come of itself and give life meaning by itself.

The common feature, however, of all these visions of time is that they relativise time, or understand present time is finite and even total time as finite. If we entertain the notion of an evolving universe, a universe moving from an origin which Teilhard calls Alpha to an end that he calls Omega, in which there is an overall unfolding process taking place *once only*, then time itself takes on a shape and a telos, and it becomes cumulative. Further, if the evolutionary journey so far has been in the direction of autonomy or self-determination, manifest in the rise of reflective consciousness, then its possibilities or potential are expanding rather than being merely "expended". There is a movement, as we suggested in the last lecture, in a counter-direction to entropy. Consciousness escapes entropy. To put this into other terms, the universe is in process of transformation. Thus a new concept of time itself emerges: time as transfiguration.

Such a concept of time, if we reflect open it, provides us, at least intellectually, with a way of relating transcendent eternity to finite time as we have always thought of it. The time of what we may call Absolute Being and the time of mere passing, or of cyclical repetition, meet in transformative time - what the Christian tradition has always called eschatological time, the time of the sacred history of the creation. This is not a millennialist view of time, and neither is it a grand cyclic view of time. It is time in which the universe can determine its own destiny - if we may put it so boldly - or time in which creation can escape its finitude. A considered understanding of transformative time offers a way out of the duality of eternity and temporality.

This understanding of time only becomes meaningful, however, once we see that there is a qualitative difference between what we might call "material time" and "conscious time". The time of material objects, their coming and going, their movements in space, is

the usual scientific concept of time. This is also what we commonly regard as historical time. Conscious time, however, is quite different. In the mind there are, as Plato points out, permanent objects that have no material counterparts. One of these is number, and this still puzzles mathematicians. There is, as we discussed in the previous lecture, the idea of the whole. But there is also the special kind of time that the mystics speak of, the “timeless moment” - the time that is at once paradoxically specific and yet unbounded. There is the time of dreams. There is the peculiar time of the sudden insight. There is the mysterious time that shapes music. There is the time of human memory. The experience of types of time that are neither wholly “eternal” nor wholly “finite” is not foreign to us. But what is new and perhaps challenging to us is that the material universe itself is unfolding in another order of time than our senses usually lead us to suppose, an order of time that is meaningful and intelligent, an order of time that has some ultimate consummation as its goal, an order of time that makes all past time ultimately purposeful, no matter what sorrows and tragedies have been undergone in that time.

If, as Teilhard suggests, the universe is in process of evolutionary transformation, then the power of foresight which comes with reflective consciousness, need not be, as it is for the nihilistic existentialists, a curse but rather a tool with which mankind can take upon himself the responsibility of actualising his own being and creative possibilities, not merely for himself, but for all that is. Self-determination, seen from this large perspective of the whole, is not an “opt-out” from responsibility, or a retreat back into personal fulfilment according to one’s own whim, it is an act of taking on the full implications of being in its most profound and fundamental sense.

This new order of time which the ascending process of evolution reveals to us opens the way, Teilhard believes, to reconciling what he takes to be two fundamental human aspirations. On the one hand the quest for the transcendent, which is the predominant feature of the world religions, and on the other hand the quest to perfect human life in the world. These two quests are generally considered to be in conflict with each other. The quest for the transcendent is all too often portrayed in religious literature as an effort *against nature*, as a struggle between the flesh and the spirit, while the way of the world is considered to be a denial of the spirit. Teilhard argues, however, that both ways spring from the cosmic sense of the whole and the fundamental desire for union. There is a difference, however, in either *conception* of union. The quest for the transcendent, which Teilhard calls God-mysticism, conceives ultimate union in terms of suppression of the multiple, as a negation of all difference. The quest of the world, which Teilhard calls nature mysticism, conceives union in terms of unity in diversity, or as a grand synthesis of the multiple

into a greater whole. Thus God-mysticism regards the journey to union as a “regress” back to the One prior to all manifestation, while Nature-mysticism regards the journey to union as an outward progress or actualisation towards union. The first is an elimination of all difference, while the second is a totalisation through differentiation.

In Teilhard’s view God and Nature are not at variance with each other. The way of regress and the way of progress are the two poles of a dynamic unity in which the beginning and end of all things converge. The two ontological categories of “being” and “becoming” actually belong together, and to negate one is to negate both. The suppression of development is in fact a suppression of being itself. The denial of the creation is ultimately a denial of the Creator. Once we see that “becoming”, whether on the scale of the individual or of the entire creation, is the way “being” affirms itself or declares itself, we are compelled to question the completeness of any “static” ontology of pure being.

It is worth pausing here to consider the problems that arose in Neoplatonism where this conflict between the ontological status of the One and that of the creation occurs. A serious difficulty arises in conceiving the initial step from the One resting eternally in itself and shining forth or emanating itself as the cosmos. Why and how does the One emanate at all? Plotinus solves this difficulty by likening the One to the Sun. The Sun, so to speak, is self-sustaining, self-generating, complete in itself, and yet it shines forth also by nature. Take away the rays of the Sun and you remove the Sun itself. Thus the One, in a similar manner, is both wholly at rest with itself but also, by the superabundance of its Being, shines forth as the cosmos. Thus transcendence and immanence really belong together. Being and becoming are in fact wholly united, even though we must conceive of them separately. Even so, the Neoplatonists found it necessary to place a number of stages or steps between the One and its emanation of itself in order to preserve the integrity of the One as purely transcendent. A logical difficulty arises in maintaining the absolute integrity of the One remaining wholly at rest with itself and wholly manifesting itself, since the manifestation of pure being into a state of becoming appears to imply a degradation of pure being, a falling away into nothingness at the farthest bounds of emanation.

This kind of metaphysical difficulty is resolved, in Teilhard’s view, once we begin to see that the creation is in fact in process of self-unification. The progress of evolution, as we discussed it in the previous lecture, runs counter to any conception of cosmogenesis as a “falling away” from being. To see this demands that we take an overview that looks upon the universe in its entirety. If we look simply at objects in their immediate presence, we see that they come into being and pass away. If we stand back, however, what appears at

first sight as mere transience turns out to be a continuous process of transformation. And if we stand back yet further, what appears to be mere cyclical transformation from one form to another, shows itself to have an overall design and telos. There is something unfolding in the universe that is a single action or event. It is gathering itself into an ultra-complex unity in which all its elements are being refined into higher orders of particular being which together compose a single being, or a single act of being.

It is on this basis that Teilhard proposes a reconciliation between the two ways that attract man to unity. If we imagine the quest for the transcendent as an attraction to the Above, as a vertical line that rises up from time, and the quest to know and perfect the world as an attraction from Ahead, as a horizontal line of potential in time, then there exists the possibility of time itself being transfigured by rising upward towards the transcendent, not by negation of the world, but through its realisation. On other words, there is a middle way between the escape from temporality and the mere exhaustion of finite time, a way that takes time into itself and transforms it into spiritual potential. In this way the outward emanation of life and its source ultimately converge. The quest for unity ceases to be a negative quest in either of its forms.

Teilhard suggests that mankind is gradually moving to a position where such a choice must be made. Looked at simply as another zoological species, humanity is reaching the point where the phase of spreading and multiplying upon the globe is no longer a way forward. The “fanning” of *Homo Sapiens* is now virtually complete. The next phase is that of convergence, that is to say, of inward conscious growth as a whole species. This phenomenon is manifest in the socialisation of man. Whether we like it or not, our finite globe forces us to socialise, to form ourselves into societies and discover new potential there. This phase has been in progress, Teilhard suggests, since the beginning of recorded history. Now, in our own century, individual societies and nations are being compelled to associate, through economic necessity, through research, even through the threat of total extinction through war. In short, collective responsibility is being forced upon mankind whether he wills it or not. The survival of the human species depends upon its power to co-operate and integrate. This pressure, at the physical level enforced by the roundness of the earth, reaches man as a moral pressure on the social and political level. The age of the separate individual, or of the separate nation, which could go its own way regardless of the species as a whole, is coming to a close. Man is being forced to come into a new relation with the earth, and consequently into a new evaluation of himself and his destiny, not merely out of idealism, but out of necessity.

All this is, Teilhard concedes, confused at this time. We are

groping for a right way ahead. Evasions are being sought. The self-interest of individuals and of nations is still being served. Even so, the pressures to find a way forward intensify. The ills that befall a people in a far off land now have repercussions on the world economy, the discoveries of science have consequences for all peoples, the abuses of natural resources ultimately extract a price from the abusers. That is on the negative side. But on the positive side the “private moralities” of individuals and nations are increasingly looking frail and unworkable and a new sense, vague but nonetheless compelling, of a total human history and a total human destiny is emerging, and a new set of values that respects the integrity and potential of all life is increasingly looking like the only workable approach to life. The emergence of human society as a purely mechanistic phenomenon, like the hive, is showing us not only to be undesirable but unfeasible. All these pressures point in one general direction: towards the awakening of collective responsibility. This is what Teilhard calls the maturation of the species. In short, the mere struggle to survive, though it may be the lot of a very large portion of humanity, is in itself an insufficient reason, and has insufficient power, to sustain the species. This means a complete reevaluation of the nature and purpose of human work. Work that denies human dignity and which does not lend itself to the full cultivation of the human person saps strength from the roots of life. If man does not find a way forward that meets the deepest human aspirations for fuller being, then the species will simply wither away.

All these pressures upon man, Teilhard observes, amount to a re-emergence on the psychic plane of the impulse of matter to complexify and re-order itself into higher unities. The biological instinct to survive reappears on the psychic plane transformed into the moral sense, that is, as conscience. Conscience adds a new dimension to the instinct to survive: the duty to fulfil one’s own being in a manner that supports all beings. This birth of conscience, the sense of responsibility to one’s own self and to the world, opens an entirely new domain of activity and purposefulness, as well as a new order of energy in the world. The desire for fuller being which, until the human species, expressed itself merely through propagation, is now transmuted into the *desire to serve* and the willingness to sacrifice personal ends for some greater end, for some *absolute Good* that is worth everything.

It is worth considering Teilhard’s notion of the moral sense a little more closely. Looked at from the perspective of the rise of reflective consciousness, conscience arises from the sense of totality, the cosmic sense of the whole, which was our starting-point in the last lecture. The sense of the whole is, once articulated, a metaphysics, a vision of coherence. The moral sense is, according to Teilhard, the *active* component of this sense of the whole. Thus Teilhard says “The more

an individual, as a consequence of his metaphysical convictions, recognises that he is an *element* of a universe in which he finds his fulfilment, the more closely he feels that he is bound from *within* himself to the duty of conforming to the laws of the universe.” It follows from this, of course, that we can infer the underlying metaphysics of any moral act of man, or any moral system or code of laws. This means that, in the act of conscience, there is a correlation between perception and will, and this correlation amounts to a union of reason and the heart, that is, a direct union of the “without” and the “within”, or, to take it to its highest metaphysical level, between *universal being* and *individual being*. Conscience, then, is an expression on the psychic plane of the law of complexity-consciousness which Teilhard’s finds to be the key to the process of evolution, in which union differentiates. The moral act is a direct expression of this, since it draws forth an individual act of being that unites the individual with the whole and yet affirms the integrity of both. This provides us with a critique of all moral systems.

I said a moment ago that conscience also releases a new form of energy and therefore opens a new field of activity unique to man. It is not hard to see that, raised to a higher plane, conscience, in the sense Teilhard sees it, is the root of the human sense of vocation, the desire to fulfil one’s own being through service to the whole. The sense of vocation, the sense of being called to act, is surely a marriage between truth and goodness. If this principle is applied to every human activity, to every civilised institution, to society as a whole, then it becomes clear that the perfection of human society depends upon the release of this higher energy. The only way out of the problem of human society becoming a burden to man, or of man becoming a slave to meaningless economic activity, or society becoming mechanised like the hive, is for each individual to find his particular vocation in which he fully actualises his being in relation to the whole. This implies the awakening of a collective human conscience. The awakening of this collective human conscience, Teilhard suggests, is the next phase of human evolution. In his view, human society has not yet been born. Society as we know it is really society in its embryonic stage. Man has not yet awakened to what he calls the sense of species. He has not yet awakened to his purpose in the universe as the vehicle through which the creation becomes conscious of itself. This will become possible only when humanity becomes united in a unanimous love of truth.

Conscience, then, when it flowers through vocation and matures into the love of truth, turns out to be the active principle in the world that opens the way to a convergence of the actualisation of human potential and the quest for the transcendent. The universal intuition of all religions that God is both Absolute Truth and Absolute Good find confirmation in the very necessity of the created order. Truth

and goodness reveal themselves to be the dynamic properties of being and becoming, rather than conflicting principles. The good finds its term in truth, while truth demands of every being the full expression of itself as an element of the whole. The within and the without, the transcendent and the immanent, matter and spirit ultimately converge once this profound relation between being and becoming is grasped. Seen from this perspective, the choice between escape from the world into union with an unmoving transcendent and commitment to the world through personal actualisation shows itself to be a false pair of alternatives. The two belong together and are falsified if separated. Nor does this view contradict Christian theology, for Aquinas says that the love of God which culminates in mystical union with God is at that moment transfigured into God’s universal love for all things. Nor does it contradict the mysticism of Hinduism, in which every creature is regarded as a manifestation of the Supreme Brahman. The only kind of mysticism it denies is the pseudo-mysticism of private fulfilment or the limited religious ideologies of purely personal salvation.

Once we take on board Teilhard’s notion of transformative time, then the question inevitably arises: What is the ultimate future of the universe and of mankind? This question brings us to the problem of the final dissolution of the universe. How can man, Teilhard asks, have the determination to fulfil his destiny through the world, no matter how nobly he conceives of it, if what awaits him at the end of time is the catastrophe of the disintegration of the universe? Surely it is a prerequisite if man is to have faith in the world, and if his actions are to have ultimate value, that the end of the universe is not total destruction.

It is on this question that Teilhard ventures his boldest vision. Given that the human species is not wiped out by some accidental catastrophe, or by disease, or by war, but endures until the end of cosmic time, what kind of end is he to meet? To this question Teilhard has two answers, one natural and one mystical, which between them form his complete answer. On the natural side Teilhard takes the process of evolution as it has unfolded until the present. As we have seen, this process moves from multiplicity to unity, to higher and higher orders of complexity which have culminated thus far in reflective consciousness. Teilhard suggests, on the one hand, that we have no reason to suppose that this process will not continue into the future, repeating itself on higher and higher planes. This process of complexification is the counter-movement to entropy. Consciousness represents an *increase in energy* and potentiality. There is nothing to suggest that the universe is in any sense “running down” once the implications of conscious transformation are taken into account. The idea that the universe will use up all its energy belongs to a partial and mechanistic view of

reality. On the other hand, Teilhard suggests that it is inconceivable that a universe evolving to higher and higher orders of consciousness, and ultimately to full self-consciousness, should meet upon its full awakening nothing but the prospect of its total death. What point would there be to all that effort and groping towards higher forms of being if, at the end of it all, only consciousness of total death awaited the entire drama? Why, indeed, would the universe thrust its way to such an end? What could impel it to do so?

This problem calls us again to Teilhard's teleological notion of time. The static notions of time which we considered earlier understood causality simply in terms of an original cause. The ancient cosmologies, because they are based upon a static ontology, envisioned the universe as simply the "result" of some prime cause or prime mover. Two factors, well known to philosophy, indicate that this notion of causality is inadequate. First, the Aristotelian notion of first, material, efficient and final causes show us that causality resides both in the beginning and the end of things. If, for example, man makes a tool to cut wood, it is clearly the desired end that causes him to make the tool. The cause does not lie within the physical qualities of the tool itself, nor in the man who makes it. All four causes are present. So likewise, when we consider causality in relation to the universe we have to logically assume a final cause as well as a first cause. In an *evolving* universe this becomes compelling. In some manner the universe contains its final end in its beginning and is drawn to its culmination from ahead. All that is essentially different in thinking of the universe as drawn from ahead towards a final cause, as compared to any other act we know, is the magnitude of the time-scale and the immediate appearance of completeness or motionlessness. Those who would wish to argue for the final death of the universe are surely required to explain why the universe is the sole exception to a law that governs everything within it. We are compelled, therefore, Teilhard argues, from our knowledge of the process and pattern of evolution and by logic to expect the universe to culminate in perfection and not in disintegration. Our difficulty lies in imagining that perfection.

From the spiritual point of view, and especially from that of Christian revelation, it becomes inconceivable that God should create a universe from the depths of His being and infinite love that is one day to end in total destruction. Such a prospect can only degrade our conception of God. It is indeed for this kind of reason, Teilhard often observes, that many scientists reject the Christian idea of God and declare themselves atheists - a position that Teilhard absolutely respected. A God that is less than the universe he has made is surely no god. The god who is nothing more than the administer of rewards and punishments, as so many Christians conceive him, is hardly a god that holds ultimate attraction to man or who gives ultimate value to

creation.

But of course this is not the God we encounter in the Old and New Testaments, nor in the lives of the great Christian mystics. The essential Christian mystery lies in the Incarnation of the Word in the creation and in taking all things into himself that they might be fulfilled, and that, in the words of St. Paul, God should become "all in all." Teilhard insists that this essential Christian mystery, as St. Paul and St. John of the Fourth Gospel clearly show, is a *cosmic* mystery, and that the act of Redemption is the drawing of all things into God and therefore into their full actualisation. The cosmic Christ, as Teilhard insists on calling the Word, is both the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and end of the universe, and the process of evolution is nothing else if not the realisation of mystic absorption of the creation into God. Christian theology, Teilhard remarks many times in his writings, has traditionally emphasised the "human" Christ above the Cosmic Christ, and in so doing has compromised the Christology both of the New Testament and of the early Church. Modern man's discovery of evolution at once presents a challenge to this diminished Christology and opens the way to a restoration of its original universal vision.

For Teilhard, then, there is no contradiction between the unfolding of the universe towards ultimate union with God and the essence of Christianity. For him, the vision of science, when pressed as far as we can see, and the vision of revelation point to the same ultimate purpose and mutually confirm one another. It remains only for mankind to find ways that lead him to his maximum development and personal fulfilment within the world and in complete harmony with the ultimate destiny of all things in God.

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