

# Foreword

## Banishing Consciousness

YOU ARE TALKING, let us say, with a close and dear friend. The talk has been animated, and you have both been involved in it, in its varied twists and turns, questions and gropings. But now the conversation begins to stray into more idle channels, and your attention also strays. Not entirely; half your mind can still follow the talk, the other half, in a mood of odd detachment, has fallen into staring at the face and body of your friend as he talks.

Not that there is anything odd or unusual in his appearance; it is the same face, familiar and beloved, as always. It is only that, in looking, your own mind has been invaded with an unusual question. His lips move as he talks, his eyes gleam, and there is the occasional movement of hand and arm as he gestures. All quite as usual. But now the question taking shape

in your mind seems to place these ordinary facts in a strange light: Is there really a mind or consciousness behind this physical appearance?

We all have such moments of passing schizophrenia. They come and they go, and normally we do not attach much importance to them. But now this passing mood is buttressed by a solemn body of theory. In our modern world there are philosophers and psychologists who maintain that this human consciousness of ours is an item that can be dispensed with in our theoretical explanations. The theories sometimes differ in their varying degrees of dogmatism or subtlety, but in the end they come to the same thing. We can proceed, they tell us, *as if* the consciousness of the friend does not exist, and we shall find his bodily envelope and its behavior sufficient for all purposes of understanding.

Why this strange fear of human consciousness? Why this uneasiness at admitting it as a clear and evident fact within our human world? Well, for one thing, there is what has been called the "problem of other minds." After all, I do not see the consciousness of my friend, nor do I have any direct sensory datum of it. It is something that I infer; and in this same spirit of hardheaded empiricism I must not treat this consciousness of the other person as a basic datum for explanation. I need not deny its existence outright, but wherever possible, wherever my theoretical ingenuity can manage it, I must proceed "as if" this consciousness were not there.

We may note in passing that this "problem of other minds" is largely a modern invention. The problem is not found among ancient and medieval thinkers. Whatever their other aberrations, these older thinkers did not doubt that we lived in a world that was shared by our own and other minds. But in this modern, scientific age of ours we feel compelled to raise such doubts out of a spirit of what we imagine to be theoretical exactness.

But surely there is something a little strange, even foolish, about this flight from consciousness. Is the consciousness of

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another person something that we should reasonably expect to see? And should we therefore find it questionable and doubtful if we cannot isolate it in any single sense datum? We are plentifully aware of the minds of other people, but in another and more engulfing way: We share them. They are part of the vital flow of life that surrounds and sustains us, in the coming and going of family, friends, and those close to us. We are surrounded by a life larger than ourselves, of which we are an intimate part. Suppose, out of a moment of theoretical austerity, seeking to commit ourselves only to the minimal theory, we strive to consider those close to us "as if" they had no minds and were not conscious, but were only behaving bodies. We would very shortly be schizoid, deranged. Or, to make the illustration as plain and grotesque as possible, you are approaching a moment of tenderness and passion with the woman you love, but for a moment you stop to reflect that theoretically you can treat her words and caresses as if there were no consciousness or mind behind them. That way madness lies!

In short, there is a gap here between theory and life. You entertain and support in argument an intellectual position that you could not possibly live. Such gaps are not uncommon in the Modern Age, but the one we are dealing with is particularly ominous. We have therefore to take a step backward to see how it has come about.

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It will soon be the year 2000. The date is awesome, however much we shall probably cover over the occasion with frivolous celebration. After all, it is not every anniversary that we are able to mark as not only the end of a century, but of a millennium. A millennium! That is a long stretch of time, and we are bound to ask ourselves what shape or direction of human history we can mark in those thousand years. Already, in fact, we are near enough to that date that the mind naturally gravi-

tates there as the point from which to look around and take stock of our past.

Of course, there is the nagging question abroad whether this civilization of ours will survive to reach that date. Nowadays, one cannot escape this apocalyptic note. Sometimes we may seem to make too much of it; perhaps we are beginning to develop and indulge a taste for the apocalypse. Sometimes this vision of universal destruction seems to be invoked all too easily as a camouflage for political pleading. No matter; this fear of the apocalypse, whether bogus or genuine, is there, and it is revelatory of our time. It will serve to indicate therefore how we are to situate this century and this millennium historically. After all, it was a very different kind of apocalypse that people waited for in the year 1000.

For the centers of our fear now are technology and science. Because we have developed the technical means to blow our world to bits, we are afraid that in some reckless or berserk moment we might send that world up in flames. In the light, or darkness, of this fear, technology and science emerge as the unique and central facts about our Modern Age.

When did this Modern Age begin? Historical epochs merge into one another, and it may be arbitrary to seek for points of absolute beginning. When, for example, did the Middle Ages begin? When end? It would be futile here to seek an absolute point of division between the past and the epoch that succeeded it. But sometimes there are points at which we can see clearly that by this time something new has already arrived and is bound to transform human history radically. Accordingly, we may take the beginning of our Modern Age to be the early-seventeenth century. For that was the century that created modern science and its accompanying technology; and these two, science and technology, have become, as we have seen, the driving forces within modern civilization.

What is modern science? As often as we have asked and answered this question, we need to rethink it again as we approach the end of the millennium in which that science has



decisively transformed human life. We shall have more to say on this question in a later chapter. Suffice it here simply to note that, whatever else it may be, science is an exhibition of the power of the human mind, of its freedom and originality to construct concepts that are not passively found in nature but nevertheless serve to organize our experience of nature. Thus the existence of a body of science is in itself a powerful evidence of human freedom.

Yet here a curious paradox arises. Mechanics was a central part of the new physics; until mechanics was firmly established, physics could not get under way. But the science of mechanics was no sooner founded than a widespread ideology of mechanism followed in its wake. Man is a machine, so the lament goes. The molecules in nature blindly run according to the inalterable mechanical laws of nature; and as our molecules go, so do we. The human mind is a passive and helpless pawn pushed around by the forces of nature. Freedom is an illusion. And this lament was to rise to a crescendo of pessimism during the nineteenth century.

In short, no sooner has science entered the modern world than it becomes dogged by its shadow, scientism. What is this peculiar phenomenon we call scientism? It is not science, any more than the shadow is anywhere identical with the substance of a thing. Nor is science ever evidence of scientism. At most, science merely serves to heat up the imagination of certain minds—and they are not few—who are too prone to sweeping and unqualified generalizations in the first place. Scientism is pseudoscience or misinterpreted science. Its conclusions are sweeping and large, and therefore sometimes pretend to be philosophical. But it is not a part of philosophy, if by philosophy we mean the effort to think soberly within the restrictions that human reflection must impose for itself. No; scientism is neither science nor philosophy, but that peculiarly modern invention and malady—an ideology. And as such, along with other ideologies that beset us, it has become a permanent part of our modern culture.

✓ The science which the seventeenth century sought was chiefly physics, the understanding of physical nature. But at the same time, as the science of nature blossoms, the theories of mind that sprout among philosophers become more paradoxical and at odds with each other. It is as if the thinkers who had reared this dazzling structure of the new science were more and more puzzled to understand the mind that had produced it. The situation has not improved since. In the three and a half centuries since modern science entered the world, we have added immeasurably to our knowledge of physical nature, in scope, depth, and subtlety. But our understanding of human consciousness in this time has become more fragmentary and bizarre, until at present we seem in danger of losing any intelligent grasp of the human mind altogether.

It may be worthwhile, then, to take a step backward and try to see how this situation has come about. For this purpose we need not burden the reader with heavy and excessive historical detail. We shall be pursuing a single theme throughout, and we shall make use of only as much history as may serve to establish its thematic clarity. Nor shall we be seeking here to establish any new "theory of mind," whatever that might be. Such theories, in their ingenuity, sometimes lose their grasp on the very fact of consciousness itself as they seek to replace it by something different; and what we shall be trying here to do is simply to lay hold of the fact itself, the fact of consciousness as a human reality that seems on the way to getting lost in the modern world.

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