

Towards a Phenomenology of Hope in 'The Phenomenon of Man' of Teilhard De Chardin

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Introduction

Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) opens his premier work, 'The Phenomenon of Man', with a rather terse articulation of the vision he wished to share: "This book deals with man *solely* as a phenomenon; but it also deals with the *whole* phenomenon of man."¹ In a subsequent essay, though, he elaborates on this intent:

By the expression 'The Phenomenon of Man' we mean here the empirical fact of the appearance in our universe of the power of reflexion and thought. For enormous periods the earth certainly lacked any real manifestation of life. Then for another enormous period in the layer of organic matter which appeared on its solid or watery envelope, it presented only signs of spontaneity, and unreflective consciousness.... Finally in a relatively recent epoch, automatism and consciousness acquired on earth, in the zone of life that had become human, the property of isolating and individualizing themselves in their own sight. Man knows that he knows. He emerges from his actions. He dominates them in however feeble a way. He can therefore abstract, combine and foresee. He reflects. He thinks.... For a very long time there was no thought on earth.

¹ Teilhard de Chardin. *The Phenomenon of Man*. Trans. Bernard Wall (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960), 29. [Henceforth, references to this text will be abbreviated PoM and added at the end of the text.]

Now there is, and to such a degree, that the face of things is entirely changed.²

Moreover, Teilhard does not make any pretension with regard to his focus: "We would view it here... as a simple point in history and science;"³ and does frankly admit the limit of his approach: "I would remark that our viewpoint is purely methodological... taking up our position in the field of pure empirical science..."⁴

Henri de Lubac, a fellow Jesuit and a close friend of Teilhard, admits just as much:

Père Teilhard was a scientist of the first order and... reflected deeply on the new evidence provided by science... It was simply that his competence lay in another field. He knew this and generally took his stand upon it. In comparison with that of his friend Père Auguste Valensin... he described his own 'intellectual position' as 'more empirical, more modest, closer, too, to the scientific approach'.⁵

It would then seem ironical to develop, as we are trying to do in this study, a phenomenology of hope from a reading of 'The Phenomenon of Man'. Teilhard himself issued the caveat "not to expect a final explanation of things" (PoM, 35) in his work. We are encouraged, however by his own reading of the human phenomenon as an event that "can serve as a point of departure for many philosophical, moral, or religious trains of thought."⁶

We beg to disagree therefore with some writers who claim that this work of Teilhard "cannot be read without a feeling of suffocation, a grasping and flailing around for sense...real distress,... even despair." We tend to agree instead with those who find 'The Phenomenon of Man' "an inspiring attempt to sketch an optimistic

² Teilhard de Chardin. "The Phenomenon of Man," in *The Vision of the Past*. Trans. J. M. Cohen (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1966), 161.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Henri de Lubac. "Scientist, Prophet, and Mystic," in *The Religion of Teilhard de Chardin*. Trans. René Hague (New York: Image Books, 1968), 98f.

⁶ Teilhard de Chardin, "The Phenomenon of Man," 161.

philosophy of the cosmic, biological, and human evolution... a ray of hope."⁷

In the following pages we wish to show what does that hope consist in and what is the source from whence it springs, as can be gleaned from a reading of Teilhard de Chardin.

Teilhard on Man *in* Evolution

Teilhard lays down, immediately at the outset, the two assumptions that animate his work: "the pre-eminent significance of man in nature, and the organic nature of mankind." (PoM, 30).

With regard to the first, Teilhard lamented that up till his time, man had not been accorded his proper place in the universe by science. And he himself matter-of-factly concedes the following:

We may as well admit that science has not yet found a place for him in its representations of the universe. Physics has succeeded in provisionally circumscribing the world of the atom. Biology has been able to impose some sort of order on the constructions of life... Anthropology in its turn does its best to explain the structure of the human body and some of its physiological mechanisms. But when all these features are put together, the portrait manifestly falls short of the reality. Man, as science is able to reconstruct him today, is an animal like the others – so little separable anatomically from the anthropoids that the modern classifications made by zoologists return to the position of Linnaeus and include him with them in the same super-family, the hominidae. (PoM, 163)

This is grossly disconcerting for Teilhard, to say the very least; for although the biological leap between animal and man may be extremely slight, nonetheless, it was the outcome of almost a revolution in the history of life. Indeed the significance of the appearance of man on the surface of the earth cannot be gainsaid.

⁷ For a fuller discussion of the various reactions to *The Phenomenon of Man*, cf. *Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's Philosophy of Evolution* by H. James Bix. (Springfield: Charles C. Thomas, 1972), xi-xvii.

We already knew that everywhere the active phyletic lines grow warm with consciousness towards the summit. But in one well-marked region at the heart of the mammals, where the most powerful brains ever made by nature are to be found, they become red hot. And right at the heart of that glow burns a point of incandescence.... After thousands of years rising below the horizon, a flame bursts forth at a strictly localized point. (PoM, 160)

That flame refers to the birth of thought which accompanies the birth of man, an event of no small importance, comparable to the first appearance of organic beings.

Teilhard calls the above the human paradox for, while externally almost nothing in man had changed, however, internally a massive revolution has in fact occurred. The advent of thought ushered in the capacity for reflection of man, a palpable indicator that life has passed over a threshold and an unmistakable proof of the superiority of man over the brutes. Teilhard celebrates this evolutionary focal point with utter glee:

Now the consequences of such a transformation are immense, visible as clearly in nature as any of the facts recorded by physics or astronomy. The being who is the object of his own reflection, in consequence of that very doubling back upon himself, becomes in a flash able to raise himself into a new sphere. In reality, another world is born. Abstraction, logic, reasoned choice and inventions, mathematics, art, calculation of space and time, anxieties and dreams of love – all these activities of *inner life* are nothing else than the effervescence of the newly-formed center as it explodes onto itself. (PoM, 165)

Without a doubt, the birth of man, and therefore of thought, cannot be isolated from the whole chain of evolutionary movement. It is correct therefore when materialists maintain that man is just one, albeit further, term in a series of animal forms. "From the cell to thinking animal, as from the atom to the cell, a single process (a psychical kindling or concentration) goes on without interruption and always in the same direction." (PoM, 169)

At the same time, however, Teilhard maintains that this birth of man not only signifies a change of state but in fact the beginning

of another, an altogether different, kind of life. It is a "discontinuity in continuity." The coming of reflection radically changes everything. As Maurice Keating paraphrases the plot of this wondrous story: "After the grain of matter, the grain of life, and then at last the grain of thought. From this crucial point life has acquired another degree, another order, another complexity."⁸

Teilhard calls attention to the magnificent and noteworthy fact that this event of the phenomenon of man signals a further continuity in this discontinuity. Man grows and his growth involves the simultaneous growth of thought.

As soon as a child is born, it must breathe or it will die. Similarly the reflective psychic center, once turned in upon itself, can only subsist by means of a double movement which is in reality one and the same. It centers itself further on itself by penetration into a new space, and at the same time it centers the rest of the world around itself by the establishment of an ever more coherent and better organized perspective in the realities which surround it. We are not dealing with an immutably fixed focus but with a vortex which grows deeper as it sucks up the fluid at the heart of which it was born. The ego only persists by becoming ever more itself, in the measure in which it makes everything else itself. (PoM, 172)

This process is called *personalisation* and it bears with it the mark of individuality; hence, by this process the cell "has become someone" and the branch has ceased "to bear as an anonymous whole." The phylum has given birth to a person.

In a sense, then, the arrival of the person signifies some kind of an end to the evolutionary movement; for with *personalisation* we reach the threshold of the phylum. Let this not be interpreted to mean, however, that the phylum has become useless and thereby withers away. Far from it, "the phylum does not break up like a fragile jet just because henceforward it is fraught with thinking centers; it does not crumble into its elementary psychisms." (PoM, 173) On the contrary, what we find is not just another level of

⁸ Maurice Keating. *Understanding Pierre Teilhard de Chardin*. (London: Lutterworth Press), 46.

progress but one which is made up of additional progresses, “a movement of movements.” (PoM, 174)

From reflection onwards, the reality of this mechanism becomes not only manifest but preponderant. Under the free and ingenious effort of successive intelligences, *something*... irreversibly accumulates, according to all the evidence, and is transmitted, at least, collectively by means of education, down the course of the ages. The point here is that this ‘something’ – construction of matter or construction of beauty, systems of thought or systems of action – ends up always by translating itself into an augmentation of consciousness, and consciousness in its turn, as we now know, is nothing less than the substance and heart of life in process of evolution. What can this mean except that, over and above this particular phenomenon – the individual accession to reflection – science has grounds for recognizing another phenomenon of a reflective nature co-extensive with the whole of mankind... The human individual does not exhaust in himself the vital potentialities of his race... we meet with a stream whereby a continuing and transmissible tradition of reflection is established and allowed to increase. So from individual men there springs the human reality; from human phylogenesis, the human stem. (PoM, 178-179)

The personalization process then does not remain within the individual but extends outside of him to the entire human species and across civilizations. To this “grand process of sublimation” Teilhard assigns the term *hominisation*.

Furthermore, the effect of *personalisation* and *hominisation* is not restricted to the level of the individual and species, respectively; as a matter of fact, it affects life itself in its organic totality, and, consequently, the state of the entire planet. This process is what Teilhard calls *noogenesis* and to it corresponds a new layer in the planet earth, the ‘thinking layer,’ the *noosphere*.

This *noosphere* surpasses in evolutionary import all the other previous geological spheres: the metallic, *baryshpere*; the rock, *litosphere*; the water, *hydrosphere*; and the living, *biosphere*. Teilhard contemplates the overwhelming and stirring significance of this pinnacle of all spheres:

With that it bursts upon us how utterly warped is every classification of the living world (or, indirectly, every construction of the physical one) in which man only figures logically as a *genus* or a new family.... To give man his true place in nature it is not enough to find one more pigeon-hole in the edifice of our systematization or even an additional order or branch. With hominisation, in spite of the insignificance of the anatomical leap, we have the beginning of a new age. The earth 'gets a new skin'. Better still, it finds its soul.... Thenceforward, given its place in reality in proper dimensions, the historical threshold of reflection is much more important than any zoological gap... Among all the stages successively crossed by evolution, the birth of thought comes directly after, and is the only thing comparable in order of grandeur to, the condensation of the terrestrial chemism or the advent of life itself. The paradox of man resolves itself by passing beyond measure This sudden deluge of cerebralisation, this biological invasion of a new animal type which gradually eliminates or subjects all forms of life that are not human, this irresistible tide of fields and factories, this immense and growing edifice of matter and ideas – all these signs that we look at, day in day out – seem to proclaim that there has been a change on the earth and a change of planetary magnitude. (PoM, 182-183)

The place of man in the cosmos for Teilhard is thus manifestly established. He does not assign to man a place at the center of the universe; no, "but something much more wonderful – the arrow pointing the way to the final unification of the world in terms of life." (PoM, 224).

This brings us to the second assumption of Teilhard, namely, the need to view man and the universe as an organic whole. There is at the core of the transition from the lowest sphere to the highest a process of becoming, of arriving at new levels of existence and organization, a genesis or an evolution.

The discovery of evolution is for Teilhard the great intellectual event by which the nineteenth century will be remembered. Its impact on every department of empirical science is almost immeasurable as it shatters the previous view, held for a long time by physicists, which regarded the universe as one gigantic system

constituted of immutable elements maintaining each other in equilibrium. Today this static conception of the universe has been altogether discarded.

Extraordinary though this may appear, the universe has not always seemed to man to be vast and in motion. We have only to go three or four generations back... Until the end of the eighteenth century, the earth was still thought of as a world ... whose elements appeared suddenly ready made, and already possessed of their present forms; a world whose internal relationships express a purely ideal plan to the exclusion of all organic connections. Today... the whole appearance of beings in nature has changed to our eyes. Below and behind us, the unbounded abyss of time has opened; and our picture of the world before us is now that of a temporary stage in an immense genesis (or one might say embryogenesis).⁹

Teilhard proposed a theory of evolution that is unique and distinctive in its description of the process as an irreversible increase in quality as much as in quantity. For him everything in the universe moves from the simple to the complex according to what he posits as the law of increasing complexification. This means that there is an interior propensity in the material world that impels it forward; cosmic matter tends to concentrate itself toward a more highly organized form. Teilhard calls this inner principle the *within* or consciousness of matter.

The existence of the *within* is immediately obvious in man, "in whom the existence of a *within* can no longer be evaded, because it is the object of a direct intuition and the substance of all knowledge." (PoM, 55) It can also be easily detected in the behavior of vertebrates. It becomes less difficult to detect, though, as we move on to the plant world and much less so as we go lower down the scale. Teilhard even acknowledges that some scientists simply fail to apprehend this *within* of things: "In the eyes of the physicist, nothing exists legitimately... except the *without* of things... the same intellectual attitude... in the bacteriologist." (Ibid.)

⁹ Teilhard de Chardin, "Man's Place in Nature," in *The Vision of the Past*, 175-176.

Teilhard likewise noted the tendency of some scientists to restrict the phenomenon of consciousness to the higher forms of life. The main reason he gives for this is the plain refusal to consider the existence of a new aspect or dimension in the stuff of the universe. He argues, however, that by reason of the fundamental unity of the world, it must be granted that a phenomenon, even if only in one aspect, necessarily has an omnipresent value and roots.

It is impossible to deny that, deep within ourselves, an 'interior' appears at the heart of beings, as it were seen through a rent. This is enough to ensure that, in one degree or another, this 'interior' should obtrude itself as existing everywhere in nature from all time. Since the stuff of the universe has an inner aspect at one point of itself, there is necessarily a *double aspect to its structure*, that is to say in every region of space and time – in the same way, for instance, as it is granular: *co-extensive with their Without, there is a Within*¹⁰ to things. (PoM, 56)

This is the only one sufficient and logical account that could be given of the entire cosmic phenomenon. In an earlier part of his work, Teilhard codified this conviction into a principle: "In the world, nothing could ever burst forth as final across the different thresholds successively traversed by evolution (however critical they be) which has not already existed in an obscure and primordial way." (PoM, 71)

There is, furthermore, one element in the evolutionary theory of Teilhard which stands out as its most definitive feature, namely, his idea of *orthogenesis*. In one of the last papers he wrote, the very same year of his death, he defined orthogenesis as "*directed transformation* (to whatever degree and under whatever influence, this

¹⁰ What he referred to by this *within of things*, he explicates more directly in *The Heart of Matter*: "Crimson gleams of Matter, gliding imperceptibly into the gold of Spirit, ultimately to become transformed into the incandescence of a Universe that is Person – and through all this there blows, animating it and spreading over it, a fragrant balm, a zephyr of Union – and of the Feminine... The Diaphany of the Divine at the heart of a glowing Universe, as I have experienced it through contact with the Earth – *the Divine radiating from the depths of blazing Matter...*" (*Itals.*, mine), 16.

'direction' may manifest itself.)"¹¹ Through this concept, Teilhard wished to show "that the development of the various living species is not merely a case of *simple diversification*; it is also an instance of *oriented intensification*. Evolution cannot be explained by chance, by the accidental clash of countless factors."¹² He strongly argued instead for the presence of a *preferential direction*, a certain *drift* upwards, a *trend* towards increasing complexity-consciousness. For this reason, he readily declared: "Willingly or unwillingly, paleontology is, and cannot help becoming increasingly the *science of orthogenesis*, which it must consider both in its general, fundamental drift and in the various branches into which it divides in the course of its route."¹³

The reality of orthogenesis is, for Teilhard, far too evident to be overlooked. Without concluding to its operation in the evolutionary process, the multiple and varied activities of the cell would only have led to a surface deployment of organisms and a proliferation and alteration always on the same level. If there were no orthogenesis, Teilhard mused, the evolution of life would have been like a funny airplane that can taxi along the runway but not able to take off. "Without orthogenesis life would only have spread; with it there is an ascent of life that is invincible." (PoM, 109) Indeed, for Teilhard, there is no more persistent truism than this: "evolution has a direction."¹⁴ (PoM, 146)

¹¹ Teilhard de Chardin, "A Defence of Orthogenesis in the Matter of Patterns of Speciation," in *The Vision of the Past*, 269.

¹² Joseph F. Donceel, "Teilhard de Chardin: Scientist or Philosopher?", *International Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. V (1965), 248.

¹³ Teilhard de Chardin, "A Defence of Orthogenesis," 273.

¹⁴ Teilhard was well aware of the daring novelty of his thought, especially among the scientists of his time, but he was also boldly optimistic that in time his concept will receive a fair hearing in the scientific world. "That there is *an* evolution of one sort or another is now, as I have said, common ground among scientists. Whether or not that evolution is *directed* is another question. Asked whether life is *going anywhere* at the end of its transformations, nine biologists out of ten will today say no, even passionately... Leaving aside all anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism, I believe I can see a direction and a line of progress for life, a line and a direction which are in fact so well marked that I am convinced their reality will be universally admitted by the science of tomorrow." (PoM, 142) Perhaps we can say, today, that these words of Teilhard have turned out prophetic. For in a rousing article, "Science Finds God," Sharon Begley writes

Springs of Hope in Teilhard

And that direction has brought us into the modern world we have today – a world vastly different and a world that has equipped us with new ways of seeing: “the definitive access of consciousness to a *scale of new dimensions*.” (PoM, 219) Teilhard never entertained any single doubt, therefore, with regard to the centrality of evolution in the way we perceive the world:

Blind indeed are those who do not see the sweep of a movement whose orbit infinitely transcends the natural sciences and has successively invaded and conquered the surrounding territory – chemistry, physics, sociology and even mathematics

about what may truly be the vindication for the orthogenesis of Teilhard: “Physicists have stumbled on signs that the cosmos is custom-made for life and consciousness. It turns out that if the constants of nature – unchanging numbers like the strength of gravity, the charge of an electron and the mass of a proton – were the tiniest bit different, then atoms would not hold together, stars would not burn and life would never have made an appearance. ‘When you realize that the laws of nature must be incredibly finely tuned to produce the universe we see,’ says John Polkinghorn, who had a distinguished career as a physicist at Cambridge University before becoming an Anglican priest in 1982, ‘that conspires to plant the idea that the universe did not happen, but that there must be a purpose behind it.’ Charles Townes, who shared the 1984 Nobel Prize in Physics for discovering the principles of the laser, goes further: ‘Many have a feeling that somehow intelligence must have been involved in the laws of the universe.’” *Newsweek* (July 27, 1988), 46-47. Another stimulating article, “Science, God and Man,” written by Robert Wright, has this to say: “... One hallmark of 20th century science, as it draws to a close, is how much fertile ground it has provided for bona fide theological speculation: speculation about whether the universe is a product of intelligent design, whether the human experience is part of some unfolding purpose, whether we were in any sense meant to be here.... Look at the big picture that some people see being painted by 20th century science: a universe all but destined to create platforms for life; a still unknown but increasingly suspected physical law that all but destined some of these platforms to be populated by little living specks; an evolutionary process that was almost destined, given enough time, to turn those specks into thinking, wondering, self-aware beings. Suddenly the universe seems almost designed to yield creatures that read articles about how they came to be here. With a little effort, some people say, you can see the hand of God.” *Time* (December 28, 1992), 42-43. For a fuller discussion of this thematics in current scientific environment, please confer *Cosmos, Bios, Theos: Scientists Reflect on Science, God, and the Origins of the Universe, Life, and ‘Homo Sapiens’*. Eds. Henry Margenau and Roy Abraham Varghese (Illinois: Open Court, 1992), and *Cosmos and Theos: Ethical and Theological Implications of the Anthropic Cosmological Principle* by Errol Harris (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1992).

and the history of religions. One after the other all the fields of human knowledge have been shaken and carried away by the same under-water current in the direction of the study of some development. Is evolution a theory, a system or a hypothesis? It is much more: it is a general condition to which all theories, all hypotheses, all systems must bow and which they must satisfy henceforth if they are to be thinkable and true. Evolution is a lamp illuminating all facts, a curve that all lines must follow. (PoM, 218)

The progress of the world has indeed been unrelenting; its evolution has carried man along a steady stream towards new species of experience and new modalities of existence. Already, during his time, Teilhard noted how the world has become vastly different along various fronts: economic, industrial, and social. At the same time, moreover, he was keenly aware that, still, the world was moving further on, that in fact each moment in the history of the world is but a "passing through an age of transition." No wonder, Teilhard exclaims: "In every epoch man has thought himself at a 'turning point of history.' And to a certain extent, if he be thought to be on a mounting spiral, he has not been wrong." (PoM, p. 213)

If Teilhard were to behold the world today, he would marvel at a society that has become so transparent to itself. This has been made possible by the technologization of society, particularly the explosion of mass media. Thomas Berry painted so accurately a picture of the present world in these words: "We no longer inhabit isolated nations or cultures or continents. The thoughts and problems of one man are now the thoughts and problems of the entire world. The creative work of one part of the world is shared almost instantly by the entire world. A new world culture – a new world society – is arising."¹⁵

We have converged more and more into what Teilhard predicted, namely, a world where "the distinctions we cling to from habit (at the risk of over-partitioning the world) lose their value," a world where we will discern more and more clearly how closely

¹⁵ Thomas Berry, "The Threshold of the Modern World," *Proceedings of the Teilhard Conference*. Ed. Robert J. O'Connell et al. (Belgium: Cultura Press, 1964), 57.

linked are a thousand social phenomena – the development and specialization of new industries, even the formulation and propagation of philosophic and religious doctrines – with biology; a world where “mere inexplicable similitude is resolved in identity – the identity of a structure which, under different forms, extends from the bottom to the top, from threshold to threshold, from the root to the flowers – by the organic continuity of movement or, which amounts to the same thing, by the organic unity of *milieu*.” (PoM, 223)

What has actually evolved in the world is “an accretion of consciousness.” Previously, according to Teilhard, naturalists and physicists imagined themselves a mere spectator of the universal evolutionary stream that they had discovered. Nothing could be farther from the truth for Teilhard however. He was therefore wary and critical of those continually inclined to isolate themselves from the things and events which surround them, as though they were looking at these from outside, from the unaffected and distant shelter of an observatory, rather than elements of what is going on. Pity the first evolutionists that they widely missed the fact that their scientific intelligence has something to do with evolution!

Teilhard rejoices that at last realization has triumphed. He calls this the phenomenon of emergence, by which our mind is able to penetrate the absolute. “... First recognized only at a single point, then perforce extended to the whole inorganic and organic volume of matter, evolution is now whether we like it or not, gaining the psychic zones of the world and transferring to the spiritual constructions of life not only the cosmic stuff but also the cosmic ‘primacy’ hitherto reserved by science to the tangled whirlwind of the ancient ‘ether.’” (PoM, 220-221)

Evolution, in other words, is nothing else but the progress towards thought and man is indeed evolution become conscious of itself. On this realization and conviction Teilhard grounds his every dream for mankind. “On this summit and on this summit alone are repose and illumination waiting for us.” (PoM, 221) And he further elaborates below:

The consciousness of each of us is evolution looking at itself and reflecting.... With that every simple view, destined, as I suppose, to become as instinctive and familiar to our descen-

dants as the discovery of a third dimension in space is to a baby, a new light – inexplicably harmonious – bursts upon the world, radiating from ourselves.... Step by step, from the early earth onwards, we have followed *going upwards* the successive advances of consciousness in matter undergoing organisation. Having reached the peak, we can now turn round and, *looking downwards*, take in the pattern of the whole. And this second check is decisive, the harmony is perfect. From any other point of view, there is always a ‘snag’: something clashes, for there is no natural place, no genetic place – for human thought in the landscape. Whereas here, from top to bottom, from our souls and *including* our souls, the lines stretch in both directions, untwisted and unbroken. (PoM, 221-22)

Hope and Its Task

The primary spot that man occupies in the evolutionary scale as “the last-born, the freshest, the most complicated, the most subtle of all the successive layers of life” definitely bears with it a fundamental obligation on his part: “Certainly in our innermost being we all feel the weight, the stock of obscure powers, good or bad, a sort of definite and unalterable quantum handed down to us once and for all from the past. But with no less clarity we see that the further advance of the vital wave beyond us depends on how industriously we use those powers.” (PoM, 225)

In another passage, Teilhard reflects on this task, in even more specific terms:

Hence we were not saying enough when we said that evolution, by becoming conscious of itself in the depths of ourselves, only needs to look at itself in the mirror to perceive itself in all its depths and to decipher itself. In addition it becomes free to dispose of itself – it can give itself or refuse itself. Not only do we read in our slightest acts the secret of its proceedings; but for an elementary part *we hold it in our hands*, responsible for its past to its future. (PoM, 226)

This task is undoubtedly a cause of disquiet for man. What he has discovered about the immensity of space disconcerts as it casts the “confused sensation of a gigantic shadow passing over the serenity of his joy.” The enormity of duration besides confronts him

as a heavy burden that has the effect of an abyss or of stability and monotony. And, finally, his awesome realization of his being just one among a multitude terrifies and reduces him to puny insignificance.

The situation of man is so replete with temptation to despair, of man who has waken up to the horizons and is now susceptible to fears that his forebears never had to contend with. Teilhard nonetheless rallies man not to succumb to this temptation for it is not an irremediable situation. And he points the way out of this impasse:

In truth, half our present uneasiness would be turned into happiness if we could once make up our minds to accept the facts and place the essence and the measure of our modern cosmogonies within a noogenesis. Along the lines of this axis no doubt is possible. The universe has always been in motion and at this moment continues to be in motion. (PoM, 229)

There is, nevertheless, one more dark and foreboding alley before man: he is haunted by the uncertainty of the future, that is, "not being sure, and not seeing how... there is an outcome – *a suitable outcome* – to that evolution." Maybe it is a bane of his humanity that he would never take a step in the direction he suspects to be blocked; a condition to which the animal – who could rush headlong, without a care in the world, towards a precipice – is, fortunately perhaps, not heir too. Indeed, man will never set himself to pursue the task set before him to push *noogenesis* onward if he fears that his effort is not guaranteed a chance of success.

At this point Teilhard brims with hope that the assurance is there for everyone to see. For no matter how innumerable are the critical points that dot the way, the movement towards higher progress is unstoppable. Every increase of internal vision can only stimulate a further vision. This trend is irreversible. Teilhard is therefore able to celebrate in this moving passage:

Hence this remarkable situation – that our mind, by the very fact of being able to discern infinite horizons ahead, is only able to move by the hope of achieving, through something of itself, a supreme consummation – without which it would rightly feel itself to be stunted, frustrated and cheated. By the nature of the work, and correlatively by the requirements

[*exigence*] of the worker, a total death, an unscalable wall, on which consciousness would crash and then for ever disappear, are thus 'impossible' with the mechanism of the activity of reflection (which would immediately break its mainspring) The more man becomes man, the less will he be prepared to move except towards that which is interminably and indestructibly new. Some 'absolute' is implied in the very play of his operative activity. (PoM)

There should then be no more misgiving about the boundless possibilities of progress and the limitless fecundity of human consciousness. This progress and this fecundity are not figments of a wild imagination. The incontestable and incontrovertible truth is that man *is* evolution.¹⁶ (PoM, 233)

Teilhard once more reminds us of the evolutionary track record of the world: "To bring us into existence it has from the beginning juggled miraculously with too many improbabilities for there to be any risk whatever in committing ourselves further and following it right to the end." For him this can only be an indication of one sure thing: "If it undertook the task, it is because it can finish it, following the same methods and with the same infallibility with which it began." And, finally, what greater guarantee could there be that it should unerringly happen other than because it is vitally necessary. "We have said that life, by its very structure, having once been lifted to its stage of thought, cannot go on at all without requiring to ascend ever higher." (PoM, 234)

The more rational choice there is for man is no other than to look towards the future sustained and energized by hope.

Hope Amidst Evil

Something begs to be said about the menace of evil which beclouds the brightness engendered by hope. To be sure much of what threatened the world in the recent past is gone. Communism

¹⁶ Teilhard appends a very interesting footnote here that serves well the theme and thesis of this paper: "There is no such thing as the 'energy of despair' in spite of what is sometimes said. What those words really mean is a paroxysm of hope against hope. All conscious energy is, like love (and because it is love), founded on hope." (PoM, 233)

and its totalitarian tendencies have collapsed in the very place where it built its strongest foothold. The peril of a nuclear holocaust has dissipated with the end of the Cold War and the abandonment of hegemony by so called super powers. And yet there is enormous danger which remains. What Berry wrote almost two decades ago still rings very true today:

There are serious flaws in the new order into which we are entering, flaws which justifiably cause a certain hesitation at the threshold. There are new tyrannies, new intellectual confusions and contradictions, artistic aberrations, emotional instabilities, social unrest, political crises. All these and many other evils permeate the new order to the very depths of its substance.¹⁷

As a matter of fact, right at this very moment we are cowering in fear of a war that could very well worsen into a clash of civilizations. Aside from this physical danger, there is the moral danger which is even more pernicious as it creeps deeply into our society. The human conscience has become so frivolous, most especially the scientific conscience, which had no qualms in birthing such technological breakthroughs – like genetic engineering, cloning, test tube babies, artificial insemination – that constitute a cursory tampering with nature and life.

In dealing with the problem of evil, Teilhard almost dismisses it as inconsequential in the context of his evolutionary theory. The world is not the outcome of a sudden eruption but of a long process involving numerous elements. As such evil is inevitable. Let us borrow the illuminating words of Georges Crespy in explaining this point of Teilhard:

Our experience of evolutive operation of this sort is sufficient to show that they cannot be conceived to take place without some wastage, some slag, some rubbish; for to organize is, to be precise, to *overcome disorder*... Evil arises, so to speak, from the actions through which the world achieves unity under the divine influence; and evil can then occur, according to the level of the complexity of the ordered matter, as a conflict, a physical disorder, as suffering or sin, without any need for seeking the source of evil in the chemical, biological

¹⁷ Berry, "The Threshold of the Modern World," 65.

or spiritual as such. Evil results, in short, from a statistical necessity...¹⁸

Equally enlightening is how Teilhard himself made sense of scientific breakthroughs and the most devastating invention of man during his time, namely the atomic bomb:

By the liberation of the atomic energy on a massive scale... man has not only changed the face of the earth; he has by this very act set in motion... a long chain of reactions which ... has made him, virtually at least, a new being hitherto unknown to himself... Exploding the atom... was also enough to ensure that the nightmare of bloody combat must vanish in the light of some form of growing unanimity. We are told, that drunk with its own power, mankind is rushing to destruction, that it will be consumed in the fire it has so rashly lit. On the contrary, I think that through the atom bomb war itself may be on the eve of being doubly and definitely destroyed."¹⁹

Having seen in evolution the grandeur of a creative work such as mankind has never before contemplated or experienced, Teilhard remained resolute and unwavering in his choice to hope amidst tolerable evil and the occasional darkness. He has set his sights permanently towards the future; he fervently believed that nothing in the world is really of value except what happens in the end!

Conclusion

In the very first line of his Preface to 'The Phenomenon of Man,' Teilhard de Chardin invites the reader to read the book "not as a work on metaphysics, still less as a sort of theological essay, but purely and simply as a scientific treatise." (PoM, 29) He would repeat himself in a number of other writings to restate that he operates exclusively within the realm of scientific observation. And yet, many of his critics precisely point to his methodology as the main source of the hesitation and even refusal to accept the validity of his views. Michael Murray captures the objection of the many in these words:

¹⁸ Georges Crespy, "Teilhard de Chardin on Evil and the Cross," *Philosophy Today*. Vol. III, No. 2 (Summer, 1964), 93.

¹⁹ Teilhard de Chardin, "The Spiritual Repercussion of the Atom Bomb," in *The Future of Man* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 141-146.

... Anyone who has even a high school familiarity with science (one might venture to say *especially* those who have had only an elementary course in science) could object that his arguments bear no resemblance to scientific texts and indeed go far beyond the disciplines and limits of scientific method. Teilhard's talk of an imperceptible psychic "within" of matter, of "spiritual energy," of teleologically directed evolution is already scientifically suspect, not even to speak of such notions as the "noosphere," "super-consciousness," the "hyper-personal," and, above all, Christ-Omega and immortality of the emergent spirit.²⁰

Teilhard, for sure, would not deny that his work contains more than just scientific data and evidence. As a matter of fact, at the end of 'The Phenomenon of Man', he shares a bold vision of the future, which he has formed by extrapolating the operative principles and ascending stages of phenomena as they appear to science in history. "He describes it in terms of the organic centering of the noosphere upon itself, the 'hominization' of mankind, that is, the emergence by synthesis of a unanimous, thinking, social organism which comprises and raises all sentient beings (on condition that they accept the requisite ex-centration of their egos) to a new spiritual level."²¹

There is no imperative, as far as this paper is concerned, to rationalize or justify what Teilhard has done. Suffice it to say that the sciences have long taken a radical shift, which Mary Hesse defines as an assimilation to something approaching the hermeneutic critique:

... It is impossible in studying theories of evolution, ecology, or genetics, to separate a mode of knowledge relating to technical control from a mode relating to the self-understanding of man. This is not just to assert that human values will be involved in applications of these theories, though that is true too; it is also, and more centrally for the present discussion, to assert that the very categories of these theories, such as

²⁰ Michael H. Murray. *The Thought of Teilhard de Chardin: An Introduction* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1966), 123.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 54-55.

functionality, selection, survival, are infected by man's view of himself.²²

Teilhard would easily assent to this view and practice of science. And he would not have objected to this description of himself: "a priest-scientist who saw his faith in the context of evolution and evolution in the context of the cosmic Christ."²³ For as he himself explained the scientific method: "Every experience, however objective it may seem, inevitably becomes enveloped in a complex of assumptions as soon as the scientist attempts to explain it. But while this aura of subjective interpretation may remain imperceptible where the field of observation is limited, it is bound to become practically dominant as soon as the field of vision extends to the whole." (PoM, 30)

This can be the only way for knowledge, including *scientific* knowledge, otherwise we would be caught in some kind of an epistemological fix from which we cannot move ahead:

How much has been said even recently about our powerlessness to penetrate... beyond the primitive vision shared by the earliest human minds; that is to say, the impossibility of our advancing a step towards the direct or indirect perception of all that is hidden behind the veil of tangible experience! But it is just this supposedly impenetrable envelope of pure "phenomenon" which the rebounding thrust of human evolution pierces, at least at one point, since by its nature it is irreversible.... This does not mean that we can see what lies beyond and behind the trans-phenomenal zone of which we now have an inkling, any more than, having discerned the shape of the earth, we can foresee the landscape lying beyond the horizon. But at least we know that something exists beyond the circle which restricts our view, something into which we shall eventually emerge. It is enough to ensure that we no longer feel imprisoned.²⁴

²² Mary B. Hesse. *Revolutions and Reconstructions in the Philosophy of Science* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 186.

²³ Owen W. Garrigan, "Chemical Evolution," in *Proceedings of the Teilhard Conference*, 23.

²⁴ Teilhard de Chardin, "The Human Rebound of Evolution and Its Consequences," in *The Future of Man*, 210.

Evolution has not only emancipated thought from matter, or the person from the cell; in truth and in fact, it has liberated us from the limited view of the fleeting present to allow us to take a distant gaze at the promising future. □

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