There are two main streams of thought concerning the nature of things including human beings. They can be called the objective stream and the subjective stream. The objective stream goes back at least as far as the Greek philosophers such as Thales and Democritus about 500 BCE. It finds its great burst forth in the scientific revolution in the 15th and 16th C. continuing to this day. The subjective stream goes at least as far back as Ikhnaton in Egypt about 1374-58 BCE. It has been the stream to which many poets, and some philosophers and theologians belong.

The objective stream of thought is typified by scientific understanding. It has had a revolutionary influence on our world, particularly the Western world. Its model is the machine. The Copernican universe is a huge machine. The atom is a smaller machine, though not the smallest. In biology the heart is interpreted as a machine, as is the DNA molecule. The theory of evolution of life is a mechanistic theory. An overriding principle of this stream is the interpretation of the higher in terms of the lower. Human life and for that matter all life is to be interpreted in terms of the atoms and molecules that make up the living organism.

The subjective stream of thought is not one but many streams that sometimes coalesce. Its emphasis is on the world of feeling. What is it like to be a human being with all its joys and sorrows, its values and disvalues, the good and the bad. If there is an overriding principle it is the interpretation of the lower in terms of the higher. Human feelings provide a clue to the nature of nature all the way down from the human being to the atoms and molecules that constitute the human being. The universe may have mechanical aspects, but it is also a feeling universe. The human is not the only pebble on the cosmic beach of feeling. This way of looking at things is a first person view of things as contrasted with the scientific mode which is a third person view of things. The discoverer of the electron just over one hundred years ago J.J. Thomson said to know what an electron really was you would have to be one! That has of course its difficulties. How can I have a first person view of an electron? We can best approach that sort of question by coming to it closer to home namely the life of a cat. In the Middle Ages the scholastic case was argued of a cat that stood to the left of a pillar. The cat may adjust itself to the pillar so that, for example, it gets shade from the very hot sun. Its quality of experience is definitely qualified by its relation to the pillar. We don’t have the experience of the cat but by inference from our own experience we can reasonably infer some sort of feeling of the cat which changes as it changes its position in relation to the pillar. The cat we say is a subject. The pillar is an object, for nothing similar is obvious concerning the pillar’s relation to the cat. The pillar, we say, has only external relations to the world (a bulldozer may destroy it). The cat has external relations but also internal relations, namely its feelings to the world. The question then arises — what are subjects and what are objects only. That is a topic beyond this preface, yet a very important one.

From time to time in history the two streams of understanding meet, sometimes in opposition, sometimes in coalition. At the height of the scientific revolution in England
there was what has been called the romantic reaction against science. The relevant poets were Milton, Pope, Wordsworth and Tennyson. Wordsworth’s characteristic thought was ‘We murder to dissect’ which is what he saw science as doing. He protested the scientist who ‘botanised on his mother’s grave.’ The romantic reaction was a protest against mechanism on behalf of values and feelings.

It is my view that the greatest coming together of the two streams in modern times is that of A.N. Whitehead who was both scientist and philosopher. He owes a great deal to a subjective stream of thought from Plato onwards with the so-called process thinkers and their philosophy of organism. A famous statement of Whitehead is ‘The philosophy of organism is mainly devoted to the task of making clear the notion of being present in another entity’ (eg the pillar in the life of the cat or the cat in the life of a human being). It is a philosophy that brings science and the subjective together in a holistic view. It is an event way of thinking as opposed to a substance way of thinking. It is in the network of internal relations of persons (our feelings) that reality is seen to be most fully revealed.

In his book _A Species In Denial_ Jeremy Griffith seeks to bring together the two streams of thought, the objective and the subjective. He is not, of course, the first person to try to do this. The questions the reader will ask are these. Is it true? What light does it throw on the human condition? I don’t propose to answer these questions directly but to suggest to the reader to bear in mind that Jeremy Griffith’s ideas have taken root in his Foundation for Humanity’s Adulthood (now the World Transformation Movement). Its many supporters testify to the transforming influence of the ideas they have discovered in this Foundation. That is the story that primarily interests me rather than to make a critical analysis of the ideas which every reader should be encouraged to do for themselves as they read this book.

Charles Birch

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