

Chapter 1

The Riddle of Man

It is not self-evident that man should inquire into his own nature, or even that he should ask questions at all. To ask questions and to take things for granted are incompatible attitudes; when man begins to inquire, he can no longer take things for granted. A mysterious movement has begun, and none can tell whither it may lead. Moreover, once the question of his own nature has been raised, man seeks an answer to a second, still more disquieting question. The earlier questioning had made only his surroundings, the shell of his existence, seem insecure; now, however, he himself feels insecure. Not only is the world full of riddles; he himself, who asks the riddles, has become a riddle. Small wonder, then, that man tries to evade this upheaval. He feels the danger of inquiry, and tries to avoid it by persuading himself that it does not really matter. A sane human being, he says, has something more sensible to do than to look at himself in a mirror. In any case, man should not consider himself so very important. What is there in him so outstanding—this speck of dust, this none too successful late product of Nature? In the world of antiquity it was perhaps allowable that man, with his restricted view of the world and his geocentric outlook, should consider himself to be specially important; but we modern men, for whom astro-physics has shattered the familiar and homely picture of the world, and has opened up to our gaze the infinity of the universe, can no longer ascribe any special importance to man and his problems. Man must accustom himself to the idea that he is only one problem among many others, and by no means the most important.

But the riddle of man cannot be shelved like this. This riddle is not the fruit of our opinions; it springs from its own inward necessity, as the question above all others. Other problems may seem to us to be greater or more important, but they are still *our* problems. It is *we* who probe into the remote recesses of the world's existence; it is for *us* that the

phenomena of the universe become questions. All our problems are focused in this one question: Who is this being who questions—the one behind all questions? Who is this who perceives the infinity of the world? Who is this who is tortured by all life's problems—whether in human existence or outside it? Who is this being who sees himself as a mere speck in the universe, and yet, even while so doing, measures the infinite horizon with his mind? We are here confronted by the problem of the *subject*, separated by a great gulf from all problems of the objective world. What is this to which things are objects, which they are 'set over against'? What is this unextended point, like the inapprehensible originator of waves behind a field of electro-magnetic force, its emissive and receptive centre—the soul?

'Go hence; the limits of the soul thou canst not discover, though thou shouldest traverse every way; so profoundly is it rooted in the Logos,'¹ says the great sage of Ephesus, he who was the first to utter the proud word: 'I have inquired of myself.'² Hence the soul is separated, as by a deep gulf, from all that man can know or discover by search and inquiry, because the soul itself, which makes itself known, is that which knows; because in the very act of laying something upon the dissecting table for examination, the soul looks away beyond it. It is the inquiring eye, the intelligence, that makes what is examined into a unity; this it is that knows the problems and seeks to solve them. But the soul does not only think and examine; it also wills and feels, makes estimates, loves and hates. It gives its rightful place within the intellectual life as a whole to research, science, thought—to all, indeed, that has value and meaning. Only he who forgets this can overlook the fact that the question of man as subject is not one among many others; it is a new dimension of questioning, and the soul is an 'object' whose particular problems consist in the very fact that it is not an 'object' at all. We cannot assign any place to the soul—that is, to man—because the soul itself is that which puts everything else in its right place. Hence man is unfathomable in a way different from everything else, because he himself fathoms things; he is the discoverer of that

1. In Diels, *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, Fr. 45.

2. *Ibid.*, Fr. 101.

which is unfathomable. If to fathom anything means to get to the other side of it, then the soul is unfathomable because it is that which penetrates to the other side. The fact, however, that man, who can include in his gaze the whole horizon of the world, is at the same time a minute point in the world, an object of infinite smallness in space, does not reduce, but rather increases, the riddle of his being. The difference—indeed, the unfathomable gulf—between the subject and the object, the soul and the world of things, between soul and body, is one problem; a second problem, and one with which thinkers have wrestled in vain for thousands of years, is that of the relation between both, and the way in which both exist alongside of one another—the problem of body and soul.

Even the ‘man in the street’ is aware of this dualism, although he does not give it much thought. He knows that he ought to treat human beings differently from things, not only because they ‘react differently,’ but because he has no right to treat them as things. A purely objective attitude where human beings are concerned is not only impossible; it is not right, and is therefore forbidden. It is precisely this sense that he has no right to dispose of himself and of his fellow-creatures in such a way that gives man the consciousness of his peculiar nature—of his being as man. This ‘thou shalt’ and ‘thou shalt not’ is not something added externally to human existence; it constitutes the heart of man’s being. Man’s being is inseparable from his sense of obligation.

Once again a new depth in human existence is disclosed. Man is not merely what he is; his peculiar being is characterized by that inward and higher ‘something’ which confronts him either with a challenge or at least with pressure from without. But this element which confronts him does so as that which is ‘over against’ him, and not as an ‘object.’ It is genuinely ‘over against’ him, whereas objects are not really ‘over against’ but ‘beneath’ us. This challenge, then, is not foreign to man’s life, but it comes as a call to one’s own nature, as the call to accept responsibility for one’s own life,³ to be truly oneself,

3. The original word is *Eigentlichkeit*—an allusion to one of the leading ideas in the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. If ‘one’ accepts responsibility for one’s life, if a person desires to be what he w, and to decide on his own

and yet it exercises a kind of compulsion. Man is not only one who can ask questions because he is subject; but he is one who *must* ask them—one who is constrained to do so because he does not yet know, and is not yet what he would be. Whether he will or not, in some way or other he must reach out beyond himself; he must transcend himself; he must measure his thinking, willing, and acting by something higher than himself. As the butterfly is attracted by the light, so irresistibly is he drawn by this 'higher' element, whether it be the 'truth' which he does not yet know, and by which he tests his thought, or by 'righteousness,' 'the good' or 'the beautiful,' 'the perfect' or 'the holy,' or even that which is 'truly human.' However he may explain this 'higher' element to himself, he cannot escape from it, and the disturbance which it causes is so intimately connected with his existence that without it the nerve of his existence as man would be cut, and he himself would sink to the sub-human level. Just as the tension of the bow-string makes the bow—apart from this it is merely a piece of wood—so it is this tension between him and this 'higher' element which constitutes the essential human quality in human existence, without which man would be only a particular kind of animal. Man is not merely what he is; he is the being which first seeks himself. All that man creates by his own works, which express his nature, is at the same time a manifestation of the fact that he seeks to understand himself.

Man is not at home with himself; as he is, he cannot come to terms with himself. He desires to be and to express himself as that which he is; yet at the same time he does not want to be what he is. Hence he conceals himself behind his ideals. He is ashamed of his naked existence as it is. He cannot tolerate it; he feels that in some way or other he must live for a future existence in order to endure his own view of himself. In some way or other he counts that 'higher' element

responsibility, then he is *eigentlich* (literally 'proper,' 'true,' 'real'). If, on the other hand, man allows himself to be concealed by conventional fictions about himself (idealistic, traditional, etc.), he does not accept responsibility for his own life, and is therefore *un-eigentlich*. On Heidegger's philosophy, see Werner Brock's *Contemporary German Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 1935).—Translator.

as his own, in order to be able to say 'yes' to himself, and yet he knows that this 'higher' element is not real. Thus—in a far deeper sense than in the dualism of body and soul—he is a divided being, and is always conscious of this division. The 'harmonious human nature' completely at rest within itself is an extreme instance which does not really exist, whereas the other extreme instance certainly does exist—that of the man who is so divided that his inner nature no longer finds any unity at all, the schizophrenic, the insane. The sense of division, however, owing to the contrast between that which he is and that which he ought to be or would like to be, forms part of the very essence of all human life known to us. We are all aware of this defect in the bell, and of the discords which it causes. Man is a contradictory creature in a threefold sense: he contains contradictions within his own nature, he knows that this is so and suffers accordingly, and, on account of this very contradiction, opposes himself to and vainly tries to free himself from this contradiction.

Or can it be that 'man with his conflict' is fortunately an exceptional instance? Is it true to say that 'man' as such exists at all? Is not that an unreal abstraction, and can it be that the illusion of the contradiction is created by the fact that in a quite unallowable way, which completely sifies reality, the various qualities of the individual man, as we observe him, have been ascribed to a common denominator, in order that we may then exclaim: 'See, what a monster is man?' If this were so, then we should be dealing not with a contradiction but with *individual differentiation*. The one *genus humanum* is presented to us in a variety of species, sub-species, varieties and individuals, each uniform in itself, but impossible to reduce to a common denominator. How can we possibly speak of 'man'³ in view of the immense differences between the races and historical epochs—from the cave-dweller of the Stone Age to the Athenian of the days of Pericles, from St. Francis to the man of the age of ferro-concrete and of the wireless; in view of the differences which separate the civilized world of the East from that of the West; or again, in view of the fundamental differences which are brought out by the psychological study of types and of character? Does what we

say about the old apply also to the young man, and what is true of man to woman as well? This at least is true, that to speak of man as a whole without taking these differences into account would mean that one was talking not of man as he actually is, but of an empty abstraction.

But the converse is also true. All these human beings are bound to one another not only by a very far-reaching common element in their physical and mental endowments, but also by that 'something' which makes man *man*, the 'mind' or the 'reason'; so that, in spite of all differences, they can speak with one another, work together, create and tend common goods and hand them down to succeeding generations. The term 'man' not only denotes a zoological species, but, in contradistinction from all names of zoological species, it also seems to denote an independent whole, something which is distinctive, in contrast to all that can be conceived from the biological point of view; that is to say, the *humanum*. Indeed, is it not a fact that it belongs to this common element—common, that is, to all human beings, but to them alone—continually to deny the reality of that *humanum* which distinguishes it from all other creatures? Is it not part of the picture of man that he is the being who can deny his nature, his human existence, and continually turn into his opposite, the inhuman? Is it not in this *humanum* itself that the cause of the conflict from which man suffers resides? Is it not a fact that the mind, the very element which teaches human beings to understand one another, is also the main cause of their being brought into conflict with one another? Indeed, is it not true that the more we learn to understand man the more we see that it is impossible to understand him?

Then perhaps, though for a different reason, we are not justified in speaking of 'man' in general. When we do so, we think involuntarily of the individual human being, even if at the same time we also think of the common element present in all. May it be, after all, for this reason, that 'man' is an abstraction, since he cannot in any way be understood as an individual? Possibly what leads us astray in the line of thought which starts with the contrast between the subject and the object is this: that it isolates the individual human being as

though it were something which could be understood as an independent entity, whereas man in his concrete actuality not only does not occur as an individual, or cannot exist physically, but precisely in his peculiar existence as human can only be conceived and understood in his relation to the other. The decisive, distinctive element is not the 'I' which confronts the object, the 'It,' but the 'I' which confronts the 'Thou'—or rather does not confront the 'Thou,' but in its very existence as an 'I' is also determined by the 'Thou.' However unfamiliar this view of human nature may be, may it not be the correct view? Has it not always been familiar in some way or other to non-reflective thought—to thought which has not been corrupted by the abstractions of philosophy?⁴

The fact that man is a *zoon politikon*, a social being, was already taught by Aristotle in a decisive passage.⁵ The fact that the individual can only be understood in the context of a larger whole was indeed, although in an entirely opposite way, brought afresh to our consciousness by Darwin and Hegel; the former, by treating seriously the idea of the *zoon*, and the latter, by dealing seriously with the idea of the *politikon*: the individual human being a dependent member in the series of his species, and further in the series of living creatures in general; the individual man a more or less unimportant point of transition in the universal history of Spirit, which attains its highest point in the State. In both views the individual is understood as a collective being, as a dependent part of a larger whole.

But the idea that the 'I' can only be understood in the light of the 'Thou' means something quite different. It is not the member of a species, not the *zoon*, and not man as the more or less indifferent transitional point in the history of civilization and of Spirit, the spirit-being, which knows the 'Thou,' but solely the human being who, in the 'Thou' of the 'Other,' comes to realize that his being a Self means his being a person, which

4. The 'thou' as the theme of anthropology and philosophy dates from Kierkegaard's philosophy of existence, though in the narrower sense only since Buber and Ebner (in spite of appearances to the contrary, Feuerbach cannot be mentioned in this connexion). On this cf. Cullberg, *Das Du und die Wirklichkeit* (Uppsala, 1933).

5. Aristotle's *Politics*, 1253a.

is not subordinated to any higher 'something,' but is itself the ultimate meaning—that which alone gives to every mental object, to all culture and civilization, and to all life in political communities, its meaning and its right. By this we do not mean merely Goethe's conception that 'the highest happiness of earth's children is in personality alone'; for this saying again suggests that the individual is the ultimate and final point of reference. What is meant is the person, which only arises and exists in inseparable union with the 'Thou' of the 'Other' as 'I-Myself? Just as man, as the subject of all science, stands over against all objects of knowledge, and cannot be included among them as a member of a series, so man as person stands over against all his intellectual objects, his science, his art, his civilization, his political life, as their source, the one who gives them meaning, and their measure, and is neither incorporated with nor subordinated to them. Man does not exist for the sake of culture or civilization, he is not a means to an end, but he is an end for himself, precisely because, and in so far as, he, as person, is a self which is related to and bound up with a 'Thou.' A new depth of human existence and of the riddle of man has disclosed itself to our gaze. Can it be that this is ultimate and final?

Man is part of this world; he is a physical body, a conglomeration of chemical compounds, a *zoon* with a vegetative and sensory-motor system; he is a species of the great order of mammals. He is also the *homo faber*, the maker of tools—and what a monstrous tool he has created for himself in modern technique! He is, however, also the *humanus*, that is, the being who not only makes signs, but can and does speak; the being who not only maintains his own physical existence, but creates and shapes culture and civilization. As this individual human being, he is an individuality which cannot be compared with any other. Hence, in spite of all human resemblances, and in spite of his power to communicate with others through the medium of speech, in the depths of his being he is incomprehensible to every other human being. He is the person who only becomes an 'I-Self' in union with the 'Thou.' And he is also the little creature who is for ever seeking himself, and therefore also fleeing from himself; one who is for ever

being drawn and attracted by something higher, and yet is ever seeking to release himself from this higher element; the creature who is both aware of his contradiction and yet at the same time denies it; a creature so great and again so pitifully small that he can measure the universe and yet can be attacked by a bacillus and die. Man is a spirit which dreams of 'eternity' and creates 'eternal' works—and then the loss of a little thyroid gland makes him an idiot. Man is all this. Is this all?

There is one final depth in man which we have hitherto ignored. Man has gods, and he renders them homage. He has *religion*. Whatever may be said of the dividing-line between him and the other living creatures known to us, this at any rate is his special preserve; it has been characteristic of him from his earliest beginnings, and seems to be an inseparable part of his existence. Whether he adored his totem animal or the gods of the sun, the moon and the stars; whether by the practice of magic he tries to gain control of supernatural forces; whether by the practices of asceticism and of Yoga he achieves union with the 'Wholly-Other'; or whether in union with his fellow-countrymen he brings a solemn sacrifice to the high gods, or somewhere in solitude he approaches the Ground of all being in mystical contemplation; one thing remains the same, namely, that just as man is *homo faber*, so also he is *homo religiosus*. He is this even when he renounces all mythology, all ideas of a supernatural being, and becomes an agnostic or an atheist. The dimension of the infinite, of the absolute, of the unconditioned, is not empty for any human being, even when he has cut himself adrift from all traditional religious ideas. If he no longer has any personal gods, all the more surely he has one or more impersonal gods⁶—something which he regards as taboo, something which may not be touched at any cost, whether it be his Communism or his Nationalism, his civilization or 'life.' 'Man always has God or an idol.'⁷ He can no more rid himself of this dimension of his existence than he can rid himself of the dimensions of time: past, present, and future. Just as little as he can get rid of his past by ceasing

6. Cf. Th. Spoerri, *Die Götter des Abendlandes*.

7. "Der Mensch hat immer Gott oder Abgott," Luther.