

THE HUMAN QUESTION

By C. DELIA

BIOLOGISTS speak of man's instinct for self-preservation. S. Freud considered the sexual urge as one of man's basic drives. For the philosopher, an equally fundamental human urge is what we may dub 'the inquisitive drive'. Some biologists would reduce all of our drives to the primary instinct for self-preservation. Other secondary drives are, in their view, developed in the service of biological well-being. Some extreme Freudians trace man's inquisitive drive back to the sexual-aggressive instinctual couple. The philosopher, however, views the inquisitive drive as a primary phenomenon, which cannot be reduced to more basic instinctual sources.

It is this inquisitive urge which lies behind and stimulates scientific research, space explorations and such trivial everyday actions as reading a newspaper. For, as Aristotle wrote in his *Metaphysics* (1, 1), 'All men naturally desire to know.' This natural desire or drive to know is an implicit search for an answer to man's constant asking of express or unformulated questions. The human mind's natural drive to ask and to know is the presupposition not only of intellectual pursuits, but of human relations and human life as we know it. If this mental curiosity were extinguished, normal human life as we know it would, as such, atrophy.

The number of non-thematic and explicit questions which originate in the human mind is legion, and their variety is unlimited. Yet, I suppose, they can be schematically represented by one question, which is like the form and substance of them all, namely the query: What is it? For, in fact, what are we doing when we ask a question, or seek some information, when we are curious in the broadest sense of the term, when we want to know, is to enquire after *what is*. We want to reach out towards reality, towards things as they are, or in other words, 'being' and truth. This search for truth is accompanied by a natural conviction that we can reach 'being' and truth, and by the hope that we shall eventually attain our aim.

The typical question is of its very nature dia-logic. It arises within the context of a meeting of some kind between two persons.

Questions, which are not inter-personal, are so called by analogy with the typical question, which is a search for the 'logos', for being and truth, undertaken by the conjoined effort of two persons in 'conversation' (dia-logic). This feature of the question springs from and is indicative of the structure of the human mind. Man is not an island. He is essentially a builder of bridges or what we might term 'a being of links', linking himself particularly with other 'I's, who thus become his 'Thou'. This spontaneous human operation fulfils man's nature and personality by meeting one of his basic needs and desires: his natural longing to know truth, both for its own sake and so as to be able to take his bearings in the world. Truth, however, cannot be reached except in a community, by means of conversation and dialogue, by speaking and listening, questioning and answering. Each one of us looks at reality from his own limited standpoint, from his position in space and time. Each one brings to the world of truth the world of his own psyche, culture and upbringing. All this limits the power of our 'sight' and tinges our vision with a certain bias. Our individual limitations restrict the range of our gaze both in extent and in depth, and can even endanger the truthfulness of our vision. These deficiencies are counteracted by dialogue, the very warp and woof of which is the exchange of a question and an answer by the partners. Just as men can only be united together in and by truth, so they can only reach truth by communion: by becoming a responding 'Thou' for each other, while maintaining and fulfilling their 'I' by their questions.

A question is basically a search after truth. As such it constitutes a typical operation of the human mind. Aristotle taught that our minds start out on the itinerary as if they were a *tabula rasa* (cf. *On the Soul*, III, 4, 429b-430a), a *carte blanche*. In other words, our mind is not a possessor of truth, which is its very life-blood, so to say. It is indeed born with a desire for truth, which already implies a dim vision of truth itself and a search for it. But truth is something it has to acquire. Only through acquisition can truth become its possession. The initial lack of, and desire for, truth survives the primordial stage of the life of the mind, and continues to characterize its life and activity. For truth will always remain a prize to be won, and its very acquisition the source of further search. Truth, in all its splendour and many-faceted beauty, re-

veals* itself to us in successive stages, without its riches ever being exhausted. Somewhat like Heidegger's 'Sein', it remains veiled at the very moment in which it unveils itself, for its dimensions are infinite. As truth, which in its life-source is infinite, so the human mind, in spite of its limitations, has an infinite capacity for truth. That is why it will, and can, never rest on the laurels of its acquired truth, but will ever continue to delve deeper, to search and to ask.

The extent of our questioning is unlimited. Not only do we ask innumerable questions of all kinds about all sorts of objects; we could potentially ask about anything and everything whatsoever. The horizon of our questioning is not limited to one set of existents, but is co-extensive with existents themselves. Our mind, then, is not only open and oriented to one field of knowledge, but to the 'questionable', that is to whatever might possibly be questioned, and consequently to whatever is know-able, or to knowledge wherever it can be had, or in other words to all reality. For it is only 'nothing', that is the absence of reality, which I cannot enquire about, and which consequently cannot be known and contains no truth. The questioning activity of the human mind is characterized by universality. This universality rests on man's ontological relationship with all beings. Because he can communicate with every existent, man 'real-izes' each and every one of them by 'humanizing' them, that is by making them meaningful for himself and thus part of *his* world. That is his privilege. On the other hand, it depends ultimately on man alone which beings actually do inhabit the human world, insofar as they have meaning and relevance for man. And that is man's responsibility!

Every question that we ask presupposes knowledge and ignorance, an ignorance that is aware of itself, or in Cusanus' language, a 'learned ignorance'. It would be useless for me to ask a question if I already knew the answer. A question is, on this count, always an inquiry into the unknown. This 'un-known' is not, however, in the realm of total obscurity. For I could never possibly ask a question about something unless I had at least some awareness of the object of my query. Otherwise my question would be pointless. Furthermore, unless I knew about the 'un-known' as such, I would never be induced to ask about it, which is as much as saying that every question is the last analysis motivated by 'knowing an un-known'.

In this sense each question is a sure sign of the limits of man's knowledge, and of man's power to surpass the limit and be always already beyond it.

A question is accompanied by the conviction and by the knowledge that there is a relevant answer, which corresponds to 'the thing itself'. In other words, when I ask a question, I know that there is a reply, which is absolutely valid because it tallies perfectly with the truth of 'the thing itself'. Through the expectation of the 'correct' reply to my question, I am therefore aware of absolute validity, as concomitant with the truth and with the correctness of the 'right' answer. What does absolute validity imply? A relationship to the totality of all existents. For, if something is true, it is true 'absolutely'; that is, it is valid, 'it holds' for every being whatsoever. If this were not the case, if truth connoted only relative validity, if a statement or a 'truth' held for only a limited sector of existents excluding even a slight margin of beings, it would always be possible for it to be proved false or contradicted by just those regions of reality which would not be, so to say, bound by it. In which case the statement, the answer or the 'truth' concerned would only improperly be called 'true'. Inasmuch, then, as I am enquiring after *truth* when I ask a question, I have a certain fore-knowledge, however dim, of all existents *as a totality*,¹ which guarantees the absoluteness of the truthful answer I expect to receive. This fore-knowledge accompanies our questioning as a *conditio sine qua non*. I can ask questions in so far as I am somehow related to the totality of beings.

One of the most distinguishing features of the human mind is its inquisitive disposition, that is its search after being and truth. This search is stimulated and sustained by the hope that the aim will be reached. Can this hope be a fundamentally vain expectation? In other words, is our hope of reaching truth merely a will-of-the-wisp? Is truth a too distant objective for the human mind? Just as our questioning activity pertains to the make-up of our mind and of our human nature, so too the hope of attaining truth, which is

¹ This totality is to be understood *formally* as that which makes accessible to my unlimited possibility to know *all* that is to be known. It is the 'horizon of Being', within which, so to say, I ask my question or posit my affirmation.

logically inherent in our questioning, is a natural dynamism. If this natural stimulus were doomed to perpetual frustration, the object of man's hope in our case, that is the *attainment* of truth, would be illusory; the object of man's hope would be something which it is humanly impossible to realize.

This would be tantamount to saying that the human objects of human hope, is in this connection, non-existent.

A fundamental natural dynamism which is essentially directed towards the attainment of an objective cannot conceivably be thought to subsist if its goal is non-existent, because its objective is impossible to attain. If such a fundamental natural dynamism as the hope under consideration were therefore *per impossibile* fundamentally deprived of the possibility of attaining its aims – i.e. truth – it would logically have to destroy itself.

THE VOLCANO

by JOHN MICALLEF

A Parable about man as an existent-towards-death

THE sun was hot; the soil cracked and the grass parched. Flora and her husband were sitting under a chestnut tree; a bottle of wine was on the grass beside the skeleton of a roast chicken. They were relaxed, like they were back on their honeymoon picnic; but Victor was fat now in his late fifties, and had a double chin, and Flora with her features hard set as in rock looked older than her age. Victor reached out for the wine; he frowned as he twitched his back.

'Don't strain yourself!' She poured the wine.

He drank slowly as he gnawed at the leg of the roast chicken. 'What a blow-out!' he murmured. 'It reminds me of the past when I could eat a chicken all by myself'.

'We should be going.'

'What's the big hurry for, Flora? Let's watch the volcano spew fire.'

'I hate that monster up there; yet somehow it fascinates me,' she remarked.

'I'd be thrilled to see an eruption,' he said.

'You'd be scared to death,' Flora replied. 'But I – I would be thrilled. I've always been the stronger one, Vic.'

'That's why you *married* me?'

'That's why you married *me*. You needed a stronger woman to lean on.'

'You wanted to boss over me,' Victor said. 'You never loved me?'

'What a question after thirty years of marriage!'

'I was always scared to ask you.'

'What makes you bold now?'

'I'm still scared, but more curious than ever. I'm getting on, one of these days you'll bury me.'

'You speak like an idiot.'