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The Intellectual Background

In this chapter we will concentrate for the most part on a phenomenon that I shall describe as the strange persistence of the eighteenth century, for it is in that century that what is called "the modern man" originates. Until that time western culture idealized its origins in ancient Greece. Christian thought from the Fathers of the early Church onwards entertained a profound respect for Greek philosophy during the age of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. The great intellectual revivals of the ninth, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries were primarily a return to the richness and achievements of classical thought. The Renaissance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was perhaps an aesthetic rather than an intellectual return to the classic models. It was the beauties of Greek mythology and the grandeur of the Greek poets and dramatists rather than the greatness of Greek philosophers which bemused the mind of the time. But in the eighteenth century we find men obsessed with contemporary values, with the new enlightenment of the new man. It is true that Gibbon interpreted the eighteenth-century enlightenment as a revival of the supposed glories of the Roman Empire during the age of the Antonine emperors, but more often it was taken to be a novelty and not a revival of anything at all. Mankind had at last grown up and reached the adult stage. All things were beginning anew. Civilization had come at last and we had entered by
the grace of something, although not perhaps the grace of God, into the rational age. All that remained was a laborious educational task that would end by producing a mass as enlightened in the eighteenth-century sense as the élite of that century already was. Of course this development of thought had its roots in the seventeenth century, but in the eighteenth century, particularly in France and England, it first achieved full consciousness of itself.

Dean Swift’s *Battle of the Books* is perhaps the first sign of an enlightenment that no longer interprets itself as a revival. The ancient world was not very old, but very young. The wisdom that comes from age and experience is to be found not in the youthful enlightenment of centuries ago but in the new enlightenment of to-day. Contemporary books are thus more significant than ancient ones.

It is strange how this mood has persisted. Later writers shift the eighteenth century into the nineteenth century and then into the twentieth, but they still tend to think of the present age, whichever it happens to be, in the same exalted terms. Thus for the self-consciously contemporary twentieth-century man the twentieth century is his eighteenth century, his age of enlightenment. What he calls the modern mind or the modern mood represents a tremendous intellectual advance over all its predecessors. There is nothing to be learned from the past except the importance of avoiding its mistakes. Each modern generation is born into and actually achieves the modern enlightenment which its predecessor believed itself to enjoy.

It is not merely that eighteenth-century writers still possess a prestige which is not generally conferred on other thinkers of past epochs. There is still, of course, a tendency to regard figures like Hume and Voltaire with an exaggerated reverence, as though they first achieved a point of view
which is still recognizably ours. More generally we may say that from the point of view of each succeeding generation the thinkers of the eighteenth century made only one mistake. They thought that they had created the enlightenment, whereas in fact we have. They were heralds of the dawn who committed the relatively trivial error of supposing that the day had already come. Apart from that they were basically right. The flood of light comes now. Wisdom is a modern, not an antique achievement. We have the good fortune to witness its inception.

Of course, most people would not put it like this, and those who could would probably prefer to refrain from doing so. I am describing the modern mood rather than the modern mind, an attitude which is implied, suggested, and presupposed rather than actually formulated and taught, except perhaps by very crude and immature young people. Nevertheless, the fact remains that this is the way in which most people nowadays do think, although think is not perhaps precisely the right word. This is the way in which they presuppose rather than think, an attitude taken for granted and never analysed or questioned, the assumption that lies behind all that they do actually think. We use phrases like “nowadays”, meaning “in this age of enlightenment”, “the modern way” of doing something or other, meaning “the civilized and rational way”. The man who quietly and without protest decides to divorce his wife because she has fallen in love with someone else excuses his lack of passion by pretending that he is modern and civilized. The terms perhaps compensate him for being an apathetic agent in an apathetic age. Far from murdering his faithless wife and her paramour, he will not even lose his temper, and this, he tells himself, not because he is emotionally inferior, but because he is intellectually superior to his predecessors. In any case there are plenty more wives where she came
from. Earlier, cruder man brought too much passion to life. He was capable not only of jealousy and violence, but also of love. Modern man has risen above them all. Apathy is the essence of civilization. Even though we are not morally better than our forefathers, at least we are more tolerant of sin, and perhaps better prepared for death by being half dead already.

This strange persistence of the eighteenth century is not an entirely unique phenomenon. Other anti-Christian revolts have also persisted long after their intellectual, philosophical, and scientific foundations have crumbled away. For example, Manichaeism has persisted like a ghost in an age in which believing Manichaean heretics no longer inhabit the earth. But the horrid, perverted quarrel between spirituality and nature still continues in an attenuated form. For example, we can still perceive the remnants of Manichaeism in the enormous enthusiasm of many people for extreme measures of physical hygiene, and in the passion with which others throw themselves into propaganda that aims at persuading people to have fewer babies, as though the gospel of family limitation was a spiritual matter calling for almost religious zeal. The Manichaeans, of course, objected to the reproduction of the species because it brought new spiritual beings into the kingdom of the evil god of this world. Nowadays we talk in a dark Malthusian way about the possibilities of a population explosion and the dire economic

1 We must be clear in our minds as to the precise meaning of the phrase “the population explosion”. Local examples of grave imbalance between the size of the population and the economic resources of the region it inhabits have occurred again and again throughout recorded history. They still occur, particularly in parts of Asia, but also elsewhere. These are the countries which are the recipients of Foreign Aid, the services of the Peace Corps, and other well-meaning and often well-planned attempts to rejuvenate an inefficient economy. But local imbalances of this kind are not what
consequences of a world in which there are too many people. But the enthusiasm is still disproportionate and we may still feel that the ancient heresy of Manichaeism has merely assumed a modern disguise and has not really died.

Again, the aesthetic and literary humanism of the Renaissance, the belief that Christianity has sinned against the essential spirit of dramatic literature by banishing from the world the possibility of ultimate tragedy is with us still, not only in some of the professors of literature, but also in many of the existentialists. We cannot give the highest value to the life of man so long as we are compelled to contrast it unfavourably with the life of God. "If there is a God," cried Nietzsche, "how could I bear not to be God?" One might as well say, "If there is a President of the United States, how can I bear not to be the President?" It is astonishing how easily most of us continue to put up with this frustrating disappointment. Nevertheless, this basic idea of a kind of war between the greatness of God and the greatness of man still lingers with us centuries after the Italian Renaissance has come to an end. Man can be free and great only if God is dead. The trouble is that when God is dead, man's freedom is no more than the triviality of his ultimate irresponsibility, and his supposed greatness nothing but the little parochial splendour of a mere flash between the twilight and the dark. If we will not tolerate the greatness of being God's beloved children, we shall not find any other

we have in mind when we discuss the population explosion. The population explosion implies an enormous increase in the population of the whole world—such as will quite certainly occur during the next century—combined with little or no significant increase in the world's economic resources. In other words the population explosion would be a situation in which the whole world would become one huge example of the kind of local imbalance that we find already, for example, in many parts of India. See also below, pp. 50-2.
kind of greatness, only the cosmic irrelevance of a meaningless accident.

We can find similar vestiges of the ancient Manichaean doctrine in the contemporary existentialism of writers like Heidegger and Sartre. Their doctrine tends to become “a philosophical plea for a kind of formless liberty for man in a sea of meaninglessness”. The world which surrounds and environs man, both the natural world and the social world, both the it and the they are hostile and unresponsive to the freedom of the existential subject. Inevitably in a world in which the total environment is meaningless and absurd the existential subject with his formless freedom is meaningless and absurd also. Once again we are confronted with a Manichaean doctrine of a perennial conflict between man and nature, even between man and human nature, which can only be solved by a total triumph of the one over the other. Because, without the Manichaean God, this can only be the triumph of nature over man, a triumph made manifest in the death of each man, contemporary existentialism provides us with an anthropology even gloomier and more pessimistic than ancient Manichaeism.

Yet in many respects these doctrines are strikingly similar. It is perhaps interesting to notice how very little real novelty heresy and unbelief are able to bring forth. New ways of expressing and formulating some ancient and outworn manifestation of the anti-Christian spirit are indeed devised, but the substance of what is formulated remains remarkably the same. It is often supposed that whereas Christian thought merely repeats an ancient orthodoxy, non-Christian thought is always original and productive of novelty. The very reverse, on close analysis, appears to be the case. Non-Christian thought is a manifestation of that

deep-seated anti-Christian complex which is perhaps as old as the first preaching of the Gospel. Like so many psychological complexes it petrifies and paralyses thought, and fosters new ways of formulating ancient errors rather than any genuine appropriation and expression of new truth.

The extent to which this is true is particularly obvious to-day in contemporary Anglo-Saxon culture. If, for example, we compare the writings of the leading British philosophers, from Bertrand Russell onwards through the logical atomists and the logical positivists to the linguistic analysts, with the works of David Hume, we cannot say that very much has been added or that any really new thoughts have been introduced. No doubt, the basic Humean ideas have been more cogently expressed and applied to a wider scale of problems, but they still remain the basic Humean ideas. If, however, we compare a recent contribution to philosophical theology like the late Archbishop Temple’s *Nature, Man and God* with a celebrated theological treatise more or less contemporary with Hume, for example Arch-deacon Paley’s *Natural Theology*, we are at once struck with the enormous contrast and the immensity of the development. It would be hard to find any nineteenth-century theological writing which in any way anticipates Teilhard de Chardin’s *The Phenomenon of Man*. No doubt, the teachings of this last book were to some extent anticipated in the 1920s by Father Thornton’s *The Incarnate Lord*, but de Chardin’s work, although wholeheartedly orthodox both in mood, manner, and achievement is nevertheless fascinatingly original. The orthodoxy of one age resembles the orthodoxy of another much less than the heresy of one age resembles the heresy of another. No doubt this is partly because of the way in which the orthodox tend to adapt and use such new ideas as can be gleaned from the heretics for their own purposes. In the providence of God it is the
function of heresy to broaden orthodoxy. Our first reaction to a new idea is to experience it as the antithesis of older ideas, but greater familiarity with it enables us to assimilate it, to broaden the existing structure so as to incorporate the new idea, rather than to use it as an alibi for abandoning older ones. Whatever the reason, orthodox thought still continues to be characterized by the kind of genius that is always able to bring out of its treasure-store things both new and old, to enrich thought with one fascinatingly new synthesis after another.

However, of all these survivals of persistent and apparently indelible error, so often reformulated but so seldom re-thought, incomparably the most significant for our time is the persistence of eighteenth-century rationalism with its strange idea of a new enlightenment of the mind which may be dubbed “modernity”. But, although it often calls itself “modern thought” it is more frequently termed “rationalism”. Indeed, whenever the word “rationalism” is used by Christian writers in an unfavourable sense, it is the rationalism of the eighteenth century that they have in mind. In another, and we would say better, sense of the word, the intellectualism of the Christian tradition has always been rationalistic. For this kind of rationalism, which we may call religious or Christian rationalism, the supreme rational agent is not man but God. Man indeed reasons, because he is made in the divine image, but the principal rational agent, the supremely rational being, is not man but God. All human reasoning is a kind of humble creaturely participation in the divine reasoning. When, for example Duns Scotus tells us that nothing exists which is outside the range, scope, and competence of reason, he is thinking not of human reasoning but of divine reason. Everything is rational because God made it, but that does not necessarily mean that everything will be successfully reasoned out by man.
Finite man, by the grace of God, and because he is made in the image of God, will no doubt succeed in reasoning out many things, but he is unlikely to succeed in reasoning out everything, even though it may be true that nothing that exists is irrational or beyond reason _per se_. Reason, from the point of view of this Christian rationalism, is thus one of the most significant of our human characteristics, a veritable candle of the Lord, a mark of Adam which man carries with him through life, a true work of the Holy Ghost, who eternally labours to keep alive and make manifest the image of God in human beings. Its potentialities are unlimited even though we can never hope that in man its achievements will ever be final or total. For us there will always be something fresh to reason and wonder about. With the aid of reason we are indeed able to explore the depths of creation. Because of human finitude this noble and exciting verification of our intellectual at-homeness in the world can never be brought to a conclusion. Our human systems of thought, valuable though they are, can never achieve either totality or finality.

In sharp contrast to doctrines of this kind, eighteenth-century rationalism begins with human reason, not divine. Indeed, perhaps because of those anti-rational currents in Reformation thought which were so boldly and vehemently attacked by the "judicious Hooker", even religious rationalists seem to have forgotten that God himself was rational at all. Eighteenth-century rationalism believed that reason was competent and trustworthy, not so much because reason is great as because the universe is simple. Even as early as Henry More, the most famous of the seventeenth-century Cambridge Platonists, we can trace this strange belief in the simplicity of the universe. In the eighteenth century this cosmic simplicity was perhaps best exemplified in the Newtonian equations which seemed to reduce the
movements of the planetary system to a few relatively simple mathematical formulae. It is questionable whether this belief ought to be called rationalism at all. True rationalism asserts the grandeur of reason, one might almost say its intellectual omniscience. This reduced, "lower case" rationalism of the eighteenth century asserts not so much the grandeur of reason as the basic simplicity of the task confronting it. Indeed, in the eighteenth century it was not difficult to find people who supposed that little more remained to be done, and that the total work of reason would be accomplished quite shortly. It was rather like saying to a cricketer chosen to play for England in a test match, "Well, you are not much of a batsman, but the bowling is so childishly simple and the wicket so true and easy that you can hardly fail to score a century."

This belief in the fundamental or basic simplicity of the world is with us still, and has strangely survived the frustration of the more naïvely optimistic eighteenth-century hopes. Men assert and presuppose it because it seems to them that there is no substitute for such an assumption. It is a kind of rational faith which no amount of experience is allowed to disprove. And, of course, if we eliminate any belief in the absolute competence of the absolute reason of God, there is perhaps no alternative except to deny the competence of reason at all, which would be absurd. If we will not believe in the supernatural grandeur of reason, the only way to bolster up our sense of its importance is to assert this unlikely hypothesis of the basic simplicity of the vast world that confronts it. Reason is small, we seem to say, but the problems of knowledge are even smaller and simpler.

I term this hypothesis of the basic simplicity of the world unlikely, because, after all, we have no reason to suppose it to be true, and experience continually suggests that it is
false. The ordinary intelligent man confronted by life and the world given to him in direct experience finds it fascinatingly complicated, indeed so intellectually enriching and provocative that it seems to set before him an enthralling infinity of problems, so that, for example, to solve one problem is always to be confronted by a host of others. Even in the physical sciences, the great virtue of a successful hypothesis is not so much the way in which it solves the problem which puzzled the mind of the investigator at the outset, as the way in which it facilitates further scientific research by pressing other, hitherto undreamed of, problems upon the attention of the scientific mind. Everywhere we are confronted by ultimate mystery because everywhere we are confronted by infinity. Man is intellectually at home in the universe because both he and the universe are rational, yet he finds no resting place in the universe, no final point of arrival, because both he and the universe participate in and exemplify the infinity of its creator. We have thus no warrant at all for believing in the basic simplicity of the universe. Both experience and analysis tell in the reverse direction. The ground of the rationalistic faith must be sought elsewhere. The rationalism of the eighteenth-century enlightenment is hoist with its own petard. It must be rejected for rigorously rational reasons.

Yet what are the alternatives? Either theological rationalism which most “modern” thinkers habitually distrust, since it forms no part of their eighteenth-century tradition, or a bold irrationalism which most of us think absurd, unless we happen to adhere to a certain type of contemporary existentialism, in which case we are quite willing roundly to assert that not only rationalism but everything else is absurd. In a world of universal absurdity there is perhaps nothing particularly absurd about being absurd. After all, what else could we expect anything to be?
The contemporary philosophers of the absurd have at least this virtue: they are the only people who have clearly seen and courageously formulated the ultimate consequences of the so-called "death" and denial of God. Without the absolute and necessary existence of God, all existence is inexplicable ultimately and per se and, in consequence, the existence of anything or everything is absurd. There is no ground of being, only an endless procession of inexplicable and ridiculous actualities. Thus Jean-Paul Sartre correctly remarks that the belief in real kinds (i.e., the belief in clusters of things that share some kind of common nature and are susceptible of valid scientific generalization) is the last relic of the belief in a divine being who created the world with some kind of rational plan or blue-print in mind.\(^3\) In other words, the belief in the possibility of science is a theological belief which should be abandoned by all those who have accepted the necessity of abandoning theology. We read this kind of thing with a sigh of relief. Here is a truly logical atheism at last.

So far most of the atheism we have experienced in the western world has always contrived to insinuate the possibility of lurking compensations. Men who do not believe in God at least need not fear him, nor need they indulge any ideas about ultimate judgement and therefore ultimate responsibility. Men left alone in the world can at least fancy themselves left alone to please themselves. The world is safe for a rational and restrained selfishness that is willing to display some consideration for other, at bottom equally selfish, beings. The atheist world might conceivably become a pleasant neighbourly place in which our innate human objectives, though they may not come first, or even last, or even at all in the world’s programme of values, at

least can come first for us. If only we will learn from experience the necessity of an enlightened, civilized, tolerant selfishness, our basic selfishness, which is the same thing as our ultimate irresponsibility, can flourish as much as it will. Nor does it call for any apology or justification. The existentialism of our time at least sees through this shallow atheism. It knows that there are no compensations. It offers man nothing but the possibility of being a tragic hero. Being a tragic hero is, of course, very exciting, but the cost is exceedingly heavy. We may doubt whether in the long run men will be very greatly reassured by such an ominous message. Either they will have to shy away from existentialism and retreat back into the shallow rationalism and atheism of the past, or move forward into a new affirmation of God and meaning. We venture to think it more probable that they will do the latter, though not perhaps until the existentialists have been even more successful with their unintended preparatio evangelica than they have been up to now.

This phenomenon which I have described as the strange persistence of the eighteenth century is in part due, especially in English- and French-speaking countries, to the immense repute of eighteenth-century writers. There is still a tendency in France to look back to Voltaire and the authors of the famous French Encyclopedia as the greatest and most characteristic of all French writers and thinkers. Reading them now we shall probably feel that they were much more gifted as writers than as thinkers. To a considerable extent their high reputation is due to the way in which the intellectual defects of their thought, indeed its characteristic superficiality, were concealed and compensated for by the wit and brilliance with which they expressed themselves. Even to-day in contemporary France Voltaire, for example, is regarded by many people as a great philosopher, although it does not require any considerable powers of philosophical
analysis and criticism to show that this way of estimating and complimenting his genius is very hollow indeed. He was a great writer who gave memorable, even classical expression to a very shallow way of thinking. Indeed the very shallowness of his thought lent itself and contributed to the literary brilliance with which he expressed it.

In English-speaking culture, the same classical rôle is played by the empiricist philosophers, particularly David Hume. Except for a brief neo-Hegelian period at the end of the nineteenth century, English philosophy has continued to be dominated by the empiricist movement. Most of the nineteenth century—we may instance here John Stuart Mill—was a mere continuation of eighteenth-century philosophy. The primary interest is in sense data, which provide us with the bricks out of which we construct our picture and conception of the external world, and logic, which provides us with the basic principles that inform the construction. From Bertrand Russell and G. E. Moore on through the logical atomists, the logical positivists, and the linguistic analysts, Hume has continued to be the presiding genius. The conviction still remains that the eighteenth century was basically right. All we have to do now is to think its thoughts more clearly and rigorously and to find new and more cogent ways of expressing them. In the modern world English and French have been incomparably the most important languages. (The only possible rival is German, but in Germany the tendencies have been somewhat different, and here we do find a much greater degree of reaction against the eighteenth century, although here also by far the most important figure has been that of an eighteenth-century professor, Immanuel Kant.) Thus the eighteenth-century period has become for many people the classical age in which were laid the foundations of the characteristic modern point of view, which the contemporary
world continues to regard as its essential point of departure. Yet, in many ways the optimism and confidence of the eighteenth century have received characteristic shocks and checks in our own twentieth century. The vast and destructive wars, the bloodiness of our communist and fascist revolutions, the universal fear of "the bomb", have reminded us of the horrifying survival of savagery even in a period which is enlightened in the eighteenth-century sense. Of course, we can interpret these things as disappointing rather than disillusioning, and see in them no reason to recheck or rethink our basic assumptions. Mankind will speedily resume its broad advance towards the eighteenth-century goal. The "century of genius" perhaps overestimated the ease and speed with which its objectives would be attained, but it was not wrong in selecting them as the right objectives, nor in believing that they would be attained at last. Modern man still moves in the same direction, although a little more uncertainly, perhaps because he knows no other. All that has occurred is a disappointing postponement of the millennium.

Again, science itself, particularly in the most advanced and successful of the sciences, mathematical physics, has to a considerable extent changed its nature. It is much less obviously a purely empirical discipline than it appeared to be in the eighteenth century. It includes significant rationalistic and speculative elements, and in a way it fulfils the programme of Plato rather than that of the eighteenth-century empirical philosophers. Once more we seem to find ourselves torn between a world in which we live and observe, a world of concrete changing things, and a world in which we think, a world of unchanging mathematical structure. The precise relationship between these two worlds is still a matter of considerable obscurity, but we find that the more profoundly we enter with our minds into the world of
thought and structure, the more efficiently we are able to interpret and manipulate the variety of concrete things in our world of life and observation. We are reminded of the late Professor Eddington’s myth—I think we may call it a myth in the Platonic sense—of the two tables. “One of them has been familiar to me from earliest years. It is a commonplace object of that environment which I call the world. . . . Table number two is my scientific Table . . . my scientific Table is mostly emptiness. Sparsely scattered in that emptiness are numerous electric charges rushing about with great speed; but their combined bulk amounts to less than a billionth of the bulk of the table itself. . . . If the house catches fire my scientific Table will dissolve quite naturally into scientific smoke whereas my familiar Table undergoes a metamorphosis of its substantial nature which I can only regard as miraculous.”

Eddington’s “Table number one” was the familiar table he was able to observe with his physical senses. His “Table number two” was a conceptual construction which he could only think. Yet in some sense they were both the same table, although it is difficult indeed to fathom the mode of the identity. We can interpret a passage like this only as a return to the basic doctrines of Plato. Oddly enough the difficulty is still Plato’s difficulty. Allowing for the coexistence of this world we think in, and this second world we live and observe in, and assuming with both Plato and the modern physicist that in the last analysis they are both the same world, what is the precise relationship between the two? We can and must ask the question even though, like everybody else, we are at a loss to provide the answer. It is still the case that physics ends up by immersing us in the problems of metaphysics. It is certainly the case that a merely empirical eighteenth-century description of the scientific

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process is not a good description of the kind of rationalistic, speculative science that we know in the twentieth century. Yet a widely diffused, if philosophically rather ill-defined, sense of the great successes achieved by science and the scientific method played as big a part in creating the mood of eighteenth-century modernity as it does in our own day. In the eighteenth century, of course, science meant, above all, Newton and the Newtonian mathematical physics.

Nature and Nature’s laws lay hid in night:
God said, “Let Newton be”, and all was light.\(^5\)

The couplet superbly sums up the confidence of the age in the timeless validity of the Newtonian hypothesis. Of course nobody would write of Newton now in quite that way, but people still feel that same sort of confidence in the great scientific figures of our own age. No doubt in a hundred years’ time the contemporary adulation of figures like Freud and Einstein will seem similarly somewhat dated and exaggerated, but the emotion itself may still persist. It is perhaps above all from this kind of confidence in what seems to us the finality of contemporary science that we derive these widespread ideas we have already discussed about the coming of age of modern man.

No sensible man would undervalue the immense significance of the modern scientific achievement. We sometimes lose sight of the fact, however, when comparing our own culture with that of earlier epochs, that while science has done much to alter our way of thinking about the world, it has done very much less to alter our way of experiencing the world. Thus, in earlier pre-Christian times, men thought the world was flat, and they had little idea of the vast extent of the universe in space. Even after the Hellenistic astronomer Ptolemy had altered all that, they continued for a thousand

years or so to regard this earth as the centre of the universe, with the sun and the planets moving around it. Similarly, their sense of the age of the earth made it impossible for them to think in terms of evolution, for the evolutionary process demands more time than it seemed to them possible to postulate. If our sense of time is exhausted by the span of known or fabled history, we cannot think in terms of evolution. Evolutionary categories are possible only after geology has strikingly altered our notions about the age of the earth.

Yet it would be a mistake to suppose that men in these earlier pre-scientific times, as they are sometimes called, felt that the earth was small. On the contrary, they were just as overwhelmed by the huge extent of space and time as we are. Like us, they felt themselves surrounded by an immense context which beggared the imagination and finally lost itself in ultimate mystery. For, the fact is that, on what we may call the perceptual level of immediate experience, the world is to us exactly what it was to them. Thus, we still experience, as we look out across the world to the horizon of our vision, the earth as immense and flat. We do not think that it is flat, for we know very well that it is spherical, but we certainly see and experience it as flat. Similarly, when we are not thinking about astronomy, which for most of us—even for most astronomers—is very frequently, we still experience the world as the centre of the universe. Though it is not the centre of the real universe, it is certainly the centre of the universe of our experience. In other words, we experience the world precisely as the ancients did.

Primitive science, for that is a better term than pre-science, made the mistake of a too naïve empiricism and supposed that the world is as it appears to be. Intellectually, thanks to science, we no longer make that mistake, and we can now think it as it appears not to be, but even to us it nevertheless appears as it appeared to the ancients. That is why the poetic
imagery, based on this primitive scientific empiricism and used, for example, in the Bible and in much of the language of our religious expression, is still meaningful to human beings, and as valid in this century as it was in the first and will be in the thirty-first. Such a language is "impressionistic" in the sense of being the outcome of our vivid immediate experience of the world. There are many ways of thinking the world, and no doubt as time and science continue there will be many more, but there is only one human way of experiencing the world. Scientifically it has misled us, but poetically it has inspired us. Our immediate first-hand experience of reality is the stuff of poetry rather than the stuff of science. And that kind of validity no science can take away.

It is all rather like the story of the American family who lived in a stately mansion in the east close to the Atlantic shore, but later moved to California and purchased an equally fine home commanding broad views of the Pacific. One day, shortly after this translation, the young son of the family was walking with his Negro nurse on the sandy shore. "Look," he said. "That's the Pacific Ocean. We used to live by the Atlantic Ocean. But the Pacific is much bigger than the Atlantic." "Yes, dear," she replied, peering at the horizon, "I can see it is." Science has taught us to conceive the world as very much larger than we once supposed it to be, but in fact we always knew it was immense, so vast that we are incapable of experiencing it as any larger than we always felt it to be. No doubt our science differentiates us from our predecessors, but our immediate apprehension is basically the same as theirs. From this immediate apprehension of the world come the forms of our art, the expressiveness of our poetry. Science has transformed thought but done remarkably little to alter the balance and testimony of experience.
The point is that even scientific men inevitably spend more of their time experiencing the world than thinking about it scientifically, and that makes them, "one with Nineveh and Tyre". All this should render us less dogmatic and confident about the enormous distance between the consciousness of modern man and the consciousness of ancient man, less apologetic about the way in which the ageless language of religious—or for that matter, irreligious—poetry antedates the development of modern scientific thought. It can still, nevertheless, speak both out of and to our immediate and human experience of the world. After all, imagery of this kind does not need to be scientifically true. What it needs to be is what it is, humanly compelling.

There is more to be said about the absurd notion of the coming age of modern man. If we attribute this coming age of modern man to the brilliant success of science, honesty will compel us to admit that most modern men know little about modern science, understand almost nothing of its language, and would be quite incapable of doing so even if they tried. Most of them very wisely do not even try. All that the ordinary man knows about science is the wonder and splendour of its visible and tangible technological effects. Of science itself, as an inquiring spirit, as an intellectual humility, and as a rigorous methodology, he comprehends nothing and imagines, if anything, even less.

The overwhelming majority of our contemporaries have as little appetite or capacity for intellectual effort as the men of the stone age. They live in a different world, which they have not made, but they are still very much the same people. Stone-age men did not make their world either. They chipped their flint arrowheads but they knew as little about the first inventors of this useful craft as contemporary men know about the inventors of electric light when they switch it on.
Anyone who experiences modern men grappling with their modern problems knows that they are quite as fallible and fragile as their predecessors. As we have already noticed, education is supposed to have produced almost universal literacy, but has not in fact done so. Even though most of the people can read, the great majority of them hardly ever do so. Real illiteracy is still much more common than real literacy. We greatly overestimate the achievement of our culture if we suppose that the ordinary citizen of our western countries, even after a century of universal compulsory education, is an adult citizen of an adult world, a scientifically-minded inheritor of a scientific age. If we look at the non-western countries this is even more obviously the truth, but even here in the highly developed lands it howls at the observer from every street corner.

The prevalent tendency to ignore these grim realities is fatal in two ways. In the first place, it blinds us to the immense amount of redeeming educational work that still needs to be done. Ours is emphatically not a world in which the spirit of self-sacrificing service can be allowed to die. The worst of being too confident about the state of the world is the impression that our confidence may engender that the state of the world is such that we can safely leave it to look after itself and irresponsibly spend the time looking after ourselves. Cosmic optimism is often an alibi for selfishness and irresponsibility, whereas a vivid sense of the world’s tragedy, subjection, and pain breeds the capacity for service and sacrifice. In the second place, too much extravagant optimism about the world as it is, or at least about the direction in which the tides of progress seem to be tending, threatens us with the danger of a complacent conservatism. Again it is a responsible sense of man’s ignorance, injustice, misery, and pain which keeps us vividly aware that our world needs our service and God’s redeeming
love. Of course, our service can be of little avail without God’s redeeming love; for what can mere men do alone against the immense futility and waste of the vast tides of history? Face to face with the vanity and emptiness of the lost fallen life, which promises so much and whose potential is so glorious but is everywhere disillusioning and disappointing, men can only serve effectively in a universe in which God loves freely and triumphantly. Indeed, man’s service of man is not primarily a service of man at all, but rather a service and ministry of God’s love. The sense of the world’s misery and pain not only sets the tides of human compassion freely flowing, it also helps us to realize the necessity of a religion of redemption and to respond with understanding to a gospel of salvation. The experience of life which releases human compassion is the experience of life which enables us to make sense of the divine passion. It is when we observe the many crosses and feel their weight that we begin to comprehend the Cross.