

THE HUMAN MIND

I am going to discuss with you that inscrutable mystery, the human mind. It is the topic of the day. Psychiatrists swarm like flies and apparently, every one without exception is a subject for their care. By reason of all the attention, which the mind has been receiving for a long time past, one would imagine that it should have yielded up its secrets and that by now it would have been brought to a great state of perfection. Yet I do not think that there is justification for the common belief that the brain has become a more subtle instrument than it used to be, and that the ancients were less able thinkers than the moderns. Read the very oldest classics and you must be convinced that the essential thought-power in them – as apart from the gloss, which more advanced knowledge would have added in – is just as intense as it would be today.

Brain Power in Evidence Down the Ages

Of course a development has been at work throughout the ages. We know much more than the ancients by virtue of the fact that man stands upon the shoulders of the men who went before him. He

may add to what he receives but he depends on his predecessors. Also, education is widely spread; people read, and in general brains are more busy than they would be in less advanced conditions. But this is a different thing from an actual improvement in the quality of the brain itself. We must distinguish between essential quality and activity.

Furthermore we must not let the present-day brilliant show of scientific discovery cause us to imagine that the ancients were benighted people in comparison to ourselves. Considering their equipment, which according to our standards was nil, they achieved sensational results. Starting from nothing, they dug astonishingly deep into the laws and secrets of nature. A thousand years before Copernicus they had got as far as he subsequently did. They knew of the atom. We talk about our plastics; they invented glass which is the most significant plastic of them all. Many of the things, which are at the foundation of mathematics and science were devised by those same ancients. So it would be impossible, I think, to compare the relative achievements and then to decide that the quality of the brain of man has improved or disimproved with

the passage of time. I suppose that the position is that it remains the same in spite of the appearance of development. Knowledge is not quality. For instance the average person today knows more about the functioning of electricity than Michael Faraday who pioneered that science. But that person has not Faraday's brains.

Who can assess the wonders of the intellect which can penetrate into the most complicated operations of nature and then put them into the daily service of man; which can steer men to the moon, put them on it, and bring them back home with luggage which they had picked up there; and which can distinguish between and harness innumerable rays and bodies beyond the range of the microscope – and so forth on to exploits too numerous to mention, as the phrase goes. And we are still on the way of discovery which will end no one knows where.

Why Then This Mental Feebleness?

But the vital question is: Why does this wondrous instrument operate so feebly in the average person? It is true that many are veritable thinking machines. Their brains are always stirring and fermenting ideas. But should we not expect that to be the normal

mental state, whereas the opposite is the general case. What is the nature of the brain that it can be so torpid? That quality would appear to put it into a different category to all the other organs of the body which seem to crave for activity.

This is really a most serious proposition and it would be interesting to see it subjected to careful analysis. The fact is, I fear, that the faculty of thinking, as opposed to the mere action of the senses, seems in very many people to be inactive, almost as if in a sort of sleep. They pursue their avocations, seeing, hearing, feeling and so forth, and yet most of what comes into the brain through those senses is passively received and no real mental activity ensues.

It is to be wondered if this is not very much the condition of the animal whose senses are more acute than ours and which possesses some sort of primitive intelligence. Certain of those impulses from the senses produce a reaction in persons, which results in their doing something. But that is not necessarily an operation of the intelligence; the animal reacts in more or less the same way. It is true that our reaction might be on a higher level than that of the animal. Its reactions are the elementary ones of seeking or

escaping or feeding. Our reactions might rise higher than that but they are still only a mere reflex, a response, a rebound like that of a ball thrown against a wall, or the ringing of a bell when it is struck.

Being prodded into a mere response by external impulses is not the act of pure thinking that I am referring to. I mean something superior, a true operation of thought, which originates a conception, examines it, develops it and builds upon it, producing a new brain-child. Surely the average brain is meant to function like that? Then why is it dependent on being jogged from outside?

Surely the main life of man should be in his brain which should be discharging a function somewhat like that of an engine in a car which can run by itself without reference to the car and which can connect with the car when required? Should not the average brain be something more than a reflex mechanism which only acts when it receives impulses from outside? Is this not ominously like animal behaviour? Is the brain not supposed to be doing better than that?

Two Thirds of Brain Unused

The brain is infinitely too complex an instrument to surrender its inner life to anyone. But all the time

ingenious effort to probe it is going on. One of the results of this investigation is the declaration that only a fraction of the brain is in practical operation. Various conjectures are presented as to what that fraction is. I think those estimates would boil down to the suggestion that only one-third of the brain is being used. This figure does not represent an average of the thinkers and the non-thinkers because that could mean that many people are at present getting 100% value out of their brains. No, that is not the idea at the back of those investigations. It is insisted that humanity is not getting any use whatever out of that larger portion of its brain. That is equivalent to suggesting that in every man there is lurking a superman of thought, a being like man before the Fall. But that superman is totally cut off, unable even to signal to us.

If there is anything in this, and presumably there is, it puts us face to face with overwhelming considerations. Let us touch on a few of them:

FIRSTLY, are we supposed to be advancing in this regard? Do those investigators hold that as man goes on he is penetrating more and more into those hidden recesses of the brain and mastering them, and

that a process is at work akin to that of man's material conquest of the world where more areas are being opened up, fresh treasures unearthed, new secrets of nature revealed. If so, it would mean that just as the earth will be fully exploited some time in the future, all its resources mobilised, so would the brainpower of man be brought into operation 100% instead of 33%. Certainly that would be a dizzy prospect.

SECONDLY, if the brain in general is thus being brought into progressive fertility, presumably by exercising it, how does it come that after such a considerable period of universal education, free libraries and all the rest, that position which I have been discussing of merely reactive intelligence can persist. If ordinary methods of education are not at present producing that higher level of brain activity, what is going to do it in the future? I would fear that the ordinary process of teaching boils down to little more than the supplying of a vast amount of information to the brain, which the latter is capable of rendering up when the necessary stimulation is applied – a little like what a computer does.

But does this not put us back where we started, that is at the reactive rather than at the creative? Are we

really using or exploiting the brain progressively? Indeed in one department we may be retrograding. I point to the faculty of memory, which becomes impaired to the extent that we depend on books and notes as our memories. A faculty can die of disuse.

THIRDLY, all human bodies (omitting of course the classification of defectives) are roughly made the same and with kindred capacities. Certain persons stand out as record-breakers and prodigious figures, but we can imagine a very large proportion of humanity as capable of being brought to the same standard by opportunity and suitable training. To what extent does this apply to the brain? Surely all brains are created with much the same possibility in them? How is it that we can easily visualise mankind being developed to full physical potential while at the same time we are told that only one-third of the brain is being given any use at all? This would seem to indicate an anomalous disparity between the brain and the body. Does it point to the fact that we know how the physique is to be handled and brought on to perfection, while we have no notion as to how we are to do the same with the brain; so that we are only, so to speak, fooling around with our present system of education?

FOURTHLY, it is not immediately obvious why the brain should be two-thirds fallow. Ordinarily nature fulfils itself, as I have pointed out above in regard to physical development. There would appear to be the operation of two different laws, one for the body and one for the brain. And there is where I think that we may find the solution. Can we not believe that it would be the higher faculties of man which would receive the major effects of the Original Sin, just as it was those higher faculties which produced the sin? The Catechism speaks of the weakening of our will and the darkening of our understanding. Well, there are the scientists telling us what amounts to the same thing. What we have received on faith and known all along, they are only now arriving at through profound research.

Effect of Original Sin

But this introduces us to another problem. To what extent is the loss of two-thirds of our brain power going to be repaired as time goes on? Are we destined to advance in that department? If the explanation of Original Sin is not the correct reason, it is to be presumed that improved education and psychological formation will further develop the brain – even to the

extent of opening it up to its full 100% potentiality. But if that undevelopment of the brain is the sequel to Original Sin, as I would unhesitatingly believe, then it is not destined to be overcome in this world by the wiles of science.

Man is going to be left to suffer that defect throughout all his life on earth, just as he is due to suffer sickness and deprivation, no matter what wonderful new discoveries may emerge to relieve ailments and pain. We may continue to make advances in all those departments and to prolong life, but all the miracles of science will not prevent men from suffering and from dying. To the very end the consequences of Original Sin will remain with us. I would argue that the same law would apply in a higher way to the mind so that it will continue in its half-paralysed condition during this life.

In the afterlife of heaven all that labour, painfulness, and defect will be magnificently compensated for. Our poor bodies will rise triumphantly from their fallen condition and will enter into the fullness of the glory intended for them. Then too will the human intelligence, blighted on earth to that alleged extent of 66%, share in the transformation of our

resurrection and minister to our glory with all of its 100% capacity.

The Conspiracy Against Man

Milton's colossal work, *Paradise Lost*, depicts the fall and degradation of the rebel Angels. He goes on to imagine them as bitter and vengeful and looking for further trouble. Word comes to them that God has made a new creation of beings composed of spirit and body and that He intends to give them the inheritance, which they, the Angels, had forfeited. They determine to queer the pitch and they ransack the universe for further information. It is intriguing to see how well Milton understood the illimitability of the universe; he depicts those sad spirits as spending long in their probing through space, even though they are moving at the speed of light.

They discover Adam and Eve and they glimpse God's plan in regard to them. They hatch out a scheme to thwart it, and Satan is sent to the Garden of Eden to try to ruin them. Then God sends the Angel Raphael to Adam and Eve to give them warning as to the plot, which has been laid against them. Gustave Dore, the artist, has a beautiful picture of the Angel conversing with our first parents in Eden

and putting them on their guard. We may believe that the caution was sufficiently explicit as to the nature of the danger. Adam and Eve were given full warning, perhaps even to the extent of a repetition of the original Commandment.

Here is what God had said to them: "O every tree of Paradise you shall eat, but of the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat. For in the day that you eat it, you shall die the death". (*Gen. 2, 15*).

Man Sins in his Highest Faculty

But defiant of that most solemn injunction to obedience, and in the teeth of the Archangel's renewed warning, and in spite of their closeness to God and their clear intelligence, our first parents went wilfully on. As a sequel, the common law of nature operated; their progeny inherited the situation.

Whether that item of the angelic visit is founded or not, is immaterial. We know that Adam and Eve would have been sufficiently protected, so that what they did was no case of simpletons falling foolishly, but was indeed a display of obstinate sinning possessed of no shadow of excuse. We know this from the insights, which God has permitted us into His

nature and into His attitudes towards ourselves.

But man did not then die a physical death, so that God was designating a higher form of dying, principally spiritual but also a decaying or blighting in the natural order, and particularly affecting the very faculty which man had turned against his Creator, that is the intelligence, and presumably the very highest aspects of that intelligence.

Perfection of Mary's Mind

This idea of the destructive effect of the Original sin on the mind of man leads to an intriguing consideration. Did the brain of the Blessed Virgin, which was immune from that disintegration, preserve its full powers, that is possess a 100% efficiency? The inference seems to be unescapable that she did, but of course we cannot even imagine the manner in which that higher part of her intelligence would work. Did it merely intensify exceedingly the operation in her of the brain as we know it? Or did it bring into play in her a whole new set of mental operations – those that the psychologists are declaring to be closed up in us?

Even in us there are whole areas of the mind, which are potentially productive but not exploited. For example, people have capacities, which they do not

know of, and which lie latent because they are never elicited. You will recall the line in Gray's poem about the obscure country grave, which holds one who, if given his chance, would have been no less great than the Milton whom I have been quoting. In the deep recesses of our brains, defective as they are, are deposits of precious things, of penetration and inspiration. At times some penetrate into that region and come up with exquisite treasure – what we call flights of genius.

Even though Our Lady possessed a brain of 100% potency, it would not mean that she would be found exercising it all, showing a universal knowledge. No, because before she would be able to exhibit such a full range, she would normally need to be taught. What she was not taught, she would ordinarily not know; in the main she lived according to the common dispensation of having to acquire knowledge; but with this difference that her mind of extreme clarity would learn with ease. She would have an unparalleled comprehension and an unfailing memory. To her the learning of a language would be only the giving to her of a sufficiency of instruction to cover the ground: no need for the million painful repetitions, which we require. She would assimilate

knowledge effortlessly.

In the Council legislation, Mary is described as being now what the whole Church will be like in the next life. The reference here is to grace, but we could not restrict it to that. Of course it would stand for her intelligence just as it would for her holiness. And this brings us back to the presumption that whatever that paralysed area of brain may be in all humanity, there was nothing of that kind in her.

A mother wishes to give herself to her child. More than any natural mother, Mary would yearn to give herself totally to her human children, not alone in the order of grace but in the order of natural qualities and gifts as well. She wants to develop her children. And so, we can confidently go to her in this matter of improving our mind and of opening up our latent aptitudes, which could be utilised for good and would thus give glory to God.

Formula for Developing Latent Aptitudes

Groups with cultural or higher recreational objectives should have recourse to this principle of Mary's fruitful motherhood, proceeding by the Mystical Body way of incorporating prayer in their meetings and aiming at bringing each individual into

action. The results, which have issued from this approach have been surprising and would appear to justify the theory.

All the foregoing suggests vistas and horizons alluring and without limit. This torpid intelligence of ours must be confronted in the same way and by the same means as we face up to the question of spiritual restoration. As the intelligence shared in the withering of the soul, so will it partake of any uplifting of the soul; the two are intimately united and Mary is the mother of both. Therefore if we pray, that action of the soul stimulates the mind. Mass and Holy Communion will nourish the mind along with the soul. If we put ourselves into the hands of Mary, her fostering care envelops both soul and mind.

I am not here suggesting that by any such efforts we will be able to bring into function that allegedly inaccessible two-thirds of the brain. But I do contend that we will be led to fuller use of the one-third, which we have and which we are not utilising for what it is intended, that is as a thinking apparatus. Moreover the consecration of our mind in that way to Mary would guarantee that it would be used aright and placed at the full disposition of God.