

PROLOGUE

An ant marooned on a leaf as it circles down a millstream may be observed twitching his antenna as he contemplates the water in the best attempt he can to ascertain the physical parameters of his surroundings. He may well be constrained to confine his observations to the consideration that they are wet and distinctly liable to engulf him. On this foundation he may, if he wishes, build his philosophy; or suspend decision. He may wonder about the source and destination of the stream, but he has little hope of formulating questions about the mountains or the oceans, or the world beyond the banks of the stream. He may know about yesterday and tomorrow, but the thoughts of a winter freeze-up would be idle speculation as he struggles to retain his foothold.

Man's view from Spaceship Earth has for sometime been a good deal wider than that of an ant, and directly or indirectly we have at our command a formidable battery of antennae. Is our view though, different in kind, or are we subject to similar constraints to those of our fellow-travelling ant? Our reply has to try to avoid both subjectivity and overreaction against the fear of subjectivity.

What in fact is the scene we are currently able to observe as our vehicle jostles its way down the stream? Over the years the view has kept changing as our antennae have developed. As a group we now deploy a waving forest of antennae, some little more sophisticated and perhaps even less so, than those of our cousin ant; but some of great and growing sensitivity. Our assessment as provided through this whiskery bundle is, though, still a matter of relatives, since none of the antennae have penetrated to the edge of our environment or even indicated that there is an edge.

This account is an attempt to summarise the view from our perilous vehicle as the stream of time rushes through man's Golden Age, the climactic years of earth's first thinkers and the dramatic opening of the Era of Intelligence.

Golden Ages are legendary times. They have the freshness of beginnings and the

glow of achievements, and seen from later years they stand as the beacons on the summits; some bright, some fading into the mists. One's recognition of them may be subjective, but they are real all the same, unimpressed as the average man may be by the Golden Age of the Pterodactyls, or the Buddhist by the Golden Age of Greeks.

None can question the freshness of today's beginnings. Never in 2000 million years of evolution has the outlook of the species been restructured so fast. In a few brief centuries the life-style and concepts of men have changed beyond recognition - in one generation we no longer pause to watch the jetliners and we confidently expect instant views from anywhere on earth to be brought into our sitting rooms. In so short a time we have ceased to argue about the flatness of the world and the location of Eden, and instead we argue Big Bangs, black holes and quarks. In so short a time the subject classes of the West, and in many other societies, have thrown off most of their man-made shackles, birth control has done much to free the female half of the species, living standards have in many places clawed their way up to give the potential of a real freedom, empires have wished themselves away. It is certainly fresh and new, pace those who call it grey to demonstrate their regret at the loss of the elitism on the reverse side of the coin of slavery.

The blue sky has not changed in blueness, nor the spring of greenness, the ring of crimson still circles between the light and dark sides of the globe. It frames now, though, a world in which more men and women than ever before are able to reach a high degree of self-realisation. In the ultimate analysis this state is made possible by the total of the wealth and power of the species, which in turn derives from the application of knowledge to the available raw materials.

One cannot doubt that man as a species is having it good, periodical bouts of obscuration and the little local problems of Bangladesh and Indonesia, there seems no reason to doubt that his knowledge will continue to grow. Why then, should he not continue on the upward slope towards greater freedom for more people? We are conditioned to the idea of upward slopes - the child progresses to an adult, knowledge grows, for centuries the west has climbed out of the Dark Ages,

despotisms tend to give way to freedoms.

It would be nice for upward slopes to continue upwards. In theory, as we contemplate the potential power of thermonuclear energy, we may feel that there is a sporting chance that they could do so. No doubt many of us, as individuals, feel that if granted the authority to make the arrangements, we could ensure that the road sloped upward all the way.

If this were so the Golden Age would lie ahead. Regrettably we are beginning to feel that it seems likely to be otherwise. It is clear enough that intelligence equals knowledge equals power equals freedom equals problems. Too many individuals for comfort are involved in doing their own thing in freedom.

Man is a group species that has been moulded in the bloodstained battlefield of evolution, in which the only imperative is the victory of the group, at whatever cost. Throughout every cell of his being every man is designed to this end; and the spearhead of his arsenal of weapons is his intelligence. We are the children of the strong; the most effective fighting animal of earth's history.

As a by-product of his intelligence man has been able, by a thousand routes, to formulate his access to the unity of all things, which he calls the divine, in a way that no other animal has yet been able to do. Hence he is pulled in a multitude of conflicting directions – some arising from his individual interests, some from the increasingly complex group loyalties generated by his intelligence and some from his differing perceptions of the divine – an interwoven bundle of barely understood motivations that he has had to distil into precise, and preferably consistent, reactions to the waves of circumstance which roll over him.

In a biological sense man has two simple needs from his group relationships if he is to work to design efficiency - he requires an internal group to which loyalty can be owed, as in the case of a pack of hunting dogs, and an external group that constitutes a threat or a challenge sufficient to hold the internal group together.

This is a simple situation, in which man's intelligence and its cultural application evolved with such overwhelming success. One by-product of this development, access to the divine, has already been mentioned: another has been the growth of the global village in which the group tends to comprise all humanity and around which there is no effective external group.

Both of these by-products result in a shattering interference with design efficiency, paradoxically most damaging to the efficiency of the more advanced groups. It is as though the by-product of a wonder drug is a toxin, which disorientates the patient.

The problem is that biological efficiency, almost by definition, demands a ruthless concentration on group interests to the extent firstly of streamlining the group and secondly of possessing a willingness to exterminate defeated competitors. Once this has been done an expansion of the more efficient group can occur and another step along the path of human evolution will have been taken.

Access to a formulated appreciation of unity, and as communications improve a consensus view that all men are brothers, militate both against a tightly organised group effort and against genocide. Instead of pointing in its earlier, clearly defined direction, the bundle of motivations starts making off in all directions simultaneously. The effect is as if evolution has brought man to the point where he has suddenly grown up and will no longer take cognisance of the arbitrary reactions which further evolution requires. It means, however, the end of human physical evolution, and it means an explosive dissipation of effort in a thousand conflicting directions. It means freedom; and because of the power now at our elbows it means periodical major accidents.

There is another strand to this story - the growth of population. As in all animals this treads on the heels of the potential that the environment (including its resources and its predators) support, but in this case an environment which is being enfeebled by the depletion of easily accessible raw materials. These two curves cannot go on forever.

As we approach the crunch we have also acquired our freedom to try to move in all directions simultaneously. Hence there is a perspective of confusion and problems yet to be fully appreciated. We look forward to them from the pinnacle of the Golden Age, still in the first flush of our freedom, albeit a somewhat ragged affair, still with useful supplies of raw materials for many of us, still not quite suffocated by our expanding numbers, still with a degree of group discipline lingering on. For a few brief decades many of us are having it in the best of all ways.

This is not to say that we are all in the same fortunate position, and in places the straightforward evolutionary instincts are still very much alive. Kolweizi recalls Tasmania and Celtic Britain. It can never be expected to be pleasant at the negative end of the evolutionary process.

What attitudes do we take when our brothers in the global village insist on cutting us down with machine guns, thus demonstrating their position at the lower level in the intelligence-derived global awareness, but at the same time ensuring the perpetuation of their particular line of descent rather than ours by a process of local evolution in reverse? We reflect on the fact that the global village concept to which we have been driven by the march of events has distinct drawbacks in terms of human design efficiency and, too late, we may be tempted to have a change of heart about our attitude to our brothers. As we expire we constitute one small demonstration that human evolution in the direction of increasing intelligence has ended.

Our consolation, if it is any help, has to be that it is difficult to see any intelligent animal following any different course, and therefore not merely do we die in our Golden Age, but at the highest peak of comprehension to which any life form is ever likely to be able to aspire, on earth or elsewhere amongst the countless stars.

It seems not unfair to regard our viewpoint as different in kind from that of our ant in his millstream.