



Universal Man

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The effective realization of the being's multiple states is related to the conception that various traditional doctrines, including Islamic esotericism, denote by the term 'Universal Man,' a conception that, as has been said elsewhere, establishes a constitutive analogy between universal manifestation and its individual human modality, or, to use the language of Western Hermeticism, between the 'macrocosm' and the 'microcosm.' This idea may moreover be envisaged at different levels and with various extensions, the same analogy remaining valid in all these cases; thus, it may be restricted to humanity itself, considered either in its specific nature or even in its social organization, for on this analogy the institution of the castes among other applications, essentially rests. At another and more extended level, the same notion may embrace the domain of existence corresponding to the whole of a given state of the being, whatever this state may actually be; but this signification, especially if it be a question of the human state (even when taken in the integral development of all its modalities) or of another individual state, is still properly no more than 'cosmological,' and what must essentially be considered here is a metaphysical transposition of the idea of individual man, a transposition to be accomplished in the extra-individual and supra-individual domain. In this sense, and if reference is made to what has been said earlier on, the conception of 'Universal Man' will apply in the first place to the sum total of the states of manifestation; but it can be rendered still more universal, in the fullness of the true meaning of that word, if it is also extended to the states of non-manifestation, and hence to the complete and perfect realization of the total being – taking this in the higher sense indicated above, and always with the reservation that the term 'being' itself can then be used in a purely analogical sense only.

It is essential to note here that every metaphysical transposition of the kind just mentioned should be regarded as the expression of an analogy in the rightful sense of the word. To make clear what this implies, we would recall that every true analogy must be applied inversely: this is represented by the well-known symbol of the 'seal of Solomon,' formed by the combination of two opposed triangles. For example, just as the image of an object in a mirror is inverted in relation to the object, so that which is the first or greatest in the principial order is, in appearance at least, the last or smallest in the order of manifestation. To take terms of comparison from the mathematical sphere, as we have already done in order to make the matter clearer, the geometrical point is quantitatively nil and occupies no space although (as will be explained later) it is the principle by which the whole of space is produced, the latter being no more than the development or

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expansion of its virtualities. In the same way, arithmetical unity is the least of numbers when considered as situated among them in their multiplicity, but it is the greatest in principle, since it virtually contains them all and produces the whole series of them by the mere repetition of itself.

There is thus analogy, but not similitude, between individual man – a relative and incomplete being, who is here taken as the type of a certain mode of existence, or even of all conditioned existence – and the total unconditioned being, transcendent in respect of all particular and determined modes of existence, who is symbolically designated as ‘Universal Man.’ To apply this analogy, it may be said that if ‘Universal Man’ is the principle of all manifestation, individual man represents, in his own order, its resultant and as it were its end-product, and for this reason all traditions agree in regarding him as being formed by a synthesis of all the elements and all the kingdoms of nature. This must be so if the analogy is to be exact, and so in fact it is; but in order to justify it completely, and with it the very designation ‘Universal Man,’ it would be necessary to go into the question of the cosmogonic function that is peculiar to the human being; to develop this fully would however take us too far afield and we must await another occasion. For the present then suffice it to say that the human being, in the realm of individual existence that pertains to him, plays a part that may truly be described as ‘central’ in respect of all other beings likewise situated in that realm. By virtue of this part that he plays, man is the most complete expression of the individual state in question, for all its possibilities are as it were integrated in him, at least in a certain respect and on the understanding that they are taken, not in their corporeal modality alone, but in the whole range of all their modalities, with the indefinite extension of which they are capable. Here lie the profoundest of the reasons on which the analogy we are considering rests; and it is this particular situation that allows of a valid transposition of the notion of man, rather than of any other manifested being in the same state, in order to transform it into the traditional conception of ‘Universal Man.’

One further remark should be added, which is of the first importance: ‘Universal Man’ exists only virtually, and as it were negatively, in the manner of an ideal archetype, so long as the effective realization of the total being has not endowed him with actualized positive existence. This is true for any being whatsoever, when regarded as carrying out, or destined to carry out, such a realization. To avoid all misunderstanding, it should be added that such a manner of speaking, which presents as successive that which is essentially simultaneous, is valid only insofar as one adopts the special standpoint of a state of manifestation of the being, this state being taken as a starting-point for the realization. Again, it is clear that expressions such as ‘negative existence’ and ‘positive existence’ are not to be taken literally in contexts where the very notion of ‘existence’ can be properly applied only in a certain degree and up to a certain point; but the imperfections inherent in language, bound up as it is with the conditions of the human state and even more particularly with its corporeal and terrestrial modality, often necessitate the use, with some precautions, of ‘verbal images’ of this kind, without which it would be quite impossible to make oneself intelligible, especially in languages as little adapted to the expression of metaphysical truth as are the Western ones.