Chapter II

The Age of Individualism
and Reason

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N INDIVIDUALISTIC age of human society comes as a result of the corruption and failure of the conventional, as a revolt against the reign of the petrified typal figure. Before it can be born it is necessary that the old truths shall have been lost in the soul and practice of the race and that even the conventions which ape and replace them shall have become devoid of real sense and intelligence; stripped of all practical justification, they exist only mechanically by fixed idea, by the force of custom, by attachment to the form. It is then that men in spite of the natural conservatism of the social mind are compelled at last to perceive that the Truth is dead in them and that they are living by a lie. The individualism of the new age is an attempt to get back from conventionalism of belief and practice to some solid bed-rock, no matter what, of real and tangible Truth. And it is necessarily individualistic, because all the old general standards have become bankrupt and can no longer give any inner help; it is therefore the individual who has to become a discoverer, a pioneer, and to search out by his individual reason, intuition, idealism, desire, claim upon life or whatever other light he finds in himself the true law of the world and of his own being. By that, when he has found or thinks he has found it, he will strive to rebase on a firm foundation and remould in a more vital even if a poorer form religion, society, ethics, political institutions, his relations with his fellows, his strivings for his own perfection and his labour for mankind.

It is in Europe that the age of individualism has taken birth and exercised its full sway; the East has entered into it only by contact and influence, not from an original impulse. And it is to its passion for the discovery of the actual truth of things and for
the governing of human life by whatever law of the truth it has found that the West owes its centuries of strength, vigour, light, progress, irresistible expansion. Equally, it is due not to any original falsehood in the ideals on which its life was founded, but to the loss of the living sense of the Truth it once held and its long contented slumber in the cramping bonds of a mechanical conventionalism that the East has found itself helpless in the hour of its awakening, a giant empty of strength, inert masses of men who had forgotten how to deal freely with facts and forces because they had learned only how to live in a world of stereotyped thought and customary action. Yet the truths which Europe has found by its individualistic age covered only the first more obvious, physical and outward facts of life and only such of their more hidden realities and powers as the habit of analytical reason and the pursuit of practical utility can give to man. If its rationalistic civilisation has swept so triumphantly over the world, it is because it found no deeper and more powerful truth to confront it; for all the rest of mankind was still in the inactivity of the last dark hours of the conventional age.

The individualistic age of Europe was in its beginning a revolt of reason, in its culmination a triumphal progress of physical Science. Such an evolution was historically inevitable. The dawn of individualism is always a questioning, a denial. The individual finds a religion imposed upon him which does not base its dogma and practice upon a living sense of ever verifiable spiritual Truth, but on the letter of an ancient book, the infallible dictum of a Pope, the tradition of a Church, the learned casuistry of schoolmen and Pundits, conclaves of ecclesiastics, heads of monastic orders, doctors of all sorts, all of them unquestionable tribunals whose sole function is to judge and pronounce, but none of whom seems to think it necessary or even allowable to search, test, prove, inquire, discover. He finds that, as is inevitable under such a regime, true science and knowledge are either banned, punished and persecuted or else rendered obsolete by the habit of blind reliance on fixed authorities; even what is true in old authorities is no longer of any value, because its words are learnedly or ignorantly repeated but its real
sense is no longer lived except at most by a few. In politics he
finds everywhere divine rights, established privileges, sanctified
eyrannies which are evidently armed with an oppressive power
and justify themselves by long prescription, but seem to have
no real claim or title to exist. In the social order he finds an
equally stereotyped reign of convention, fixed disabilities, fixed
privileges, the self-regarding arrogance of the high, the blind
prostration of the low, while the old functions which might
have justified at one time such a distribution of status are either
not performed at all or badly performed without any sense of
obligation and merely as a part of caste pride. He has to rise in
revoit; on every claim of authority he has to turn the eye of a
resolute inquisition; when he is told that this is the sacred truth
of things or the command of God or the immemorial order of
human life, he has to reply, “But is it really so? How shall I know
that this is the truth of things and not superstition and falsehood?
When did God command it, or how do I know that this was the
sense of His command and not your error or invention, or that
the book on which you found yourself is His word at all, or
that He has ever spoken His will to mankind? This immemorial
order of which you speak, is it really immemorial, really a law
of Nature or an imperfect result of Time and at present a most
false convention? And of all you say, still I must ask, does it
agree with the facts of the world, with my sense of right, with
my judgment of truth, with my experience of reality?” And if it
does not, the revolting individual flings off the yoke, declares the
truth as he sees it and in doing so strikes inevitably at the root
of the religious, the social, the political, momentarily perhaps
even the moral order of the community as it stands, because it
stands upon the authority he discredits and the convention he
destroys and not upon a living truth which can be successfully
opposed to his own. The champions of the old order may be
right when they seek to suppress him as a destructive agency
perilous to social security, political order or religious tradition;
but he stands there and can no other, because to destroy is his
mission, to destroy falsehood and lay bare a new foundation of
truth.
But by what individual faculty or standard shall the innovator find out his new foundation or establish his new measures? Evidently, it will depend upon the available enlightenment of the time and the possible forms of knowledge to which he has access. At first it was in religion a personal illumination supported in the West by a theological, in the East by a philosophical reasoning. In society and politics it started with a crude primitive perception of natural right and justice which took its origin from the exasperation of suffering or from an awakened sense of general oppression, wrong, injustice and the indefensibility of the existing order when brought to any other test than that of privilege and established convention. The religious motive led at first; the social and political, moderating itself after the swift suppression of its first crude and vehement movements, took advantage of the upheaval of religious reformation, followed behind it as a useful ally and waited its time to assume the lead when the spiritual momentum had been spent and, perhaps by the very force of the secular influences it called to its aid, had missed its way. The movement of religious freedom in Europe took its stand first on a limited, then on an absolute right of the individual experience and illumined reason to determine the true sense of inspired Scripture and the true Christian ritual and order of the Church. The vehemence of its claim was measured by the vehemence of its revolt from the usurpations, pretensions and brutalities of the ecclesiastical power which claimed to withhold the Scripture from general knowledge and impose by moral authority and physical violence its own arbitrary interpretation of Sacred Writ, if not indeed another and substituted doctrine, on the recalcitrant individual conscience. In its more tepid and moderate forms the revolt engendered such compromises as the Episcopalian Churches, at a higher degree of fervour Calvinistic Puritanism, at white heat a riot of individual religious judgment and imagination in such sects as the Anabaptist, Independent, Socinian and countless others. In the East such a movement divorced from all political or any strongly iconoclastic social significance would have produced simply a series of religious reformers, illumined saints,
new bodies of belief with their appropriate cultural and social practice; in the West atheism and secularism were its inevitable and predestined goal. At first questioning the conventional forms of religion, the mediation of the priesthood between God and the soul and the substitution of Papal authority for the authority of the Scripture, it could not fail to go forward and question the Scripture itself and then all supernaturalism, religious belief or suprarational truth no less than outward creed and institute.

For, eventually, the evolution of Europe was determined less by the Reformation than by the Renascence; it flowered by the vigorous return of the ancient Graeco-Roman mentality of the one rather than by the Hebraic and religio-ethical temperament of the other. The Renascence gave back to Europe on one hand the free curiosity of the Greek mind, its eager search for first principles and rational laws, its delighted intellectual scrutiny of the facts of life by the force of direct observation and individual reasoning, on the other the Roman’s large practicality and his sense for the ordering of life in harmony with a robust utility and the just principles of things. But both these tendencies were pursued with a passion, a seriousness, a moral and almost religious ardour which, lacking in the ancient Graeco-Roman mentality, Europe owed to her long centuries of Judaeo-Christian discipline. It was from these sources that the individualistic age of Western society sought ultimately for that principle of order and control which all human society needs and which more ancient times attempted to realise first by the materialisation of fixed symbols of truth, then by ethical type and discipline, finally by infallible authority or stereotyped convention.

Manifestly, the unrestrained use of individual illumination or judgment without either any outer standard or any generally recognisable source of truth is a perilous experiment for our imperfect race. It is likely to lead rather to a continual fluctuation and disorder of opinion than to a progressive unfolding of the truth of things. No less, the pursuit of social justice through the stark assertion of individual rights or class interests and desires must be a source of continual struggle and revolution and may end in an exaggerated assertion of the will in each to
live his own life and to satisfy his own ideas and desires which will produce a serious malaise or a radical trouble in the social body. Therefore on every individualistic age of mankind there is imperative the search for two supreme desiderata. It must find a general standard of Truth to which the individual judgment of all will be inwardly compelled to subscribe without physical constraint or imposition of irrational authority. And it must reach too some principle of social order which shall be equally founded on a universally recognisable truth of things; an order is needed that will put a rein on desire and interest by providing at least some intellectual and moral test which these two powerful and dangerous forces must satisfy before they can feel justified in asserting their claims on life. Speculative and scientific reason for their means, the pursuit of a practicable social justice and sound utility for their spirit, the progressive nations of Europe set out on their search for this light and this law.

They found and held it with enthusiasm in the discoveries of physical Science. The triumphant domination, the all-shattering and irresistible victory of Science in nineteenth-century Europe is explained by the absolute perfection with which it at least seemed for a time to satisfy these great psychological wants of the Western mind. Science seemed to it to fulfil impeccably its search for the two supreme desiderata of an individualistic age. Here at last was a truth of things which depended on no doubtful Scripture or fallible human authority but which Mother Nature herself had written in her eternal book for all to read who had patience to observe and intellectual honesty to judge. Here were laws, principles, fundamental facts of the world and of our being which all could verify at once for themselves and which must therefore satisfy and guide the free individual judgment, delivering it equally from alien compulsion and from erratic self-will. Here were laws and truths which justified and yet controlled the claims and desires of the individual human being; here a science which provided a standard, a norm of knowledge, a rational basis for life, a clear outline and sovereign means for the progress and perfection of the individual and the race. The attempt to govern and organise human life by verifiable Science,
by a law, a truth of things, an order and principles which all can observe and verify in their ground and fact and to which therefore all may freely and must rationally subscribe, is the culminating movement of European civilisation. It has been the fulfilment and triumph of the individualistic age of human society; it has seemed likely also to be its end, the cause of the death of individualism and its putting away and burial among the monuments of the past.

For this discovery by individual free-thought of universal laws of which the individual is almost a by-product and by which he must necessarily be governed, this attempt actually to govern the social life of humanity in conscious accordance with the mechanism of these laws seems to lead logically to the suppression of that very individual freedom which made the discovery and the attempt at all possible. In seeking the truth and law of his own being the individual seems to have discovered a truth and law which is not of his own individual being at all, but of the collectivity, the pack, the hive, the mass. The result to which this points and to which it still seems irresistibly to be driving us is a new ordering of society by a rigid economic or governmental Socialism in which the individual, deprived again of his freedom in his own interest and that of humanity, must have his whole life and action determined for him at every step and in every point from birth to old age by the well-ordered mechanism of the State.¹ We might then have a curious new version, with very important differences, of the old Asiatic or even of the old Indian order of society. In place of the religio-ethical sanction there will be a scientific and rational or naturalistic motive and rule; instead of the Brahmin Shastrakara the scientific, administrative and economic expert. In the place of the King himself observing the law and compelling with the aid and consent of the society all to tread without deviation

¹ We already see a violent though incomplete beginning of this line of social evolution in Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, Communist Russia. The trend is for more and more nations to accept this beginning of a new order, and the resistance of the old order is more passive than active—it lacks the fire, enthusiasm and self-confidence which animates the innovating Idea.
the line marked out for them, the line of the Dharma, there will stand the collectivist State similarly guided and empowered. Instead of a hierarchical arrangement of classes each with its powers, privileges and duties there will be established an initial equality of education and opportunity, ultimately perhaps with a subsequent determination of function by experts who shall know us better than ourselves and choose for us our work and quality. Marriage, generation and the education of the child may be fixed by the scientific State as of old by the Shastra. For each man there will be a long stage of work for the State superintended by collectivist authorities and perhaps in the end a period of liberation, not for action but for enjoyment of leisure and personal self-improvement, answering to the Vanaprastha and Sannyasa Asramas of the old Aryan society. The rigidity of such a social state would greatly surpass that of its Asiatic forerunner; for there at least there were for the rebel, the innovator two important concessions. There was for the individual the freedom of an early Sannyasa, a renunciation of the social for the free spiritual life, and there was for the group the liberty to form a sub-society governed by new conceptions like the Sikh or the Vaishnava. But neither of these violent departures from the norm could be tolerated by a strictly economic and rigorously scientific and unitarian society. Obviously, too, there would grow up a fixed system of social morality and custom and a body of socialistic doctrine which one could not be allowed to question practically, and perhaps not even intellectually, since that would soon shatter or else undermine the system. Thus we should have a new typal order based upon purely economic capacity and function, gunakarma, and rapidly petrifying by the inhibition of individual liberty into a system of rationalistic conventions. And quite certainly this static order would at long last be broken by a new individualist age of revolt, led probably by the principles of an extreme philosophical Anarchism.

On the other hand, there are in operation forces which seem likely to frustrate or modify this development before it can reach its menaced consummation. In the first place, rationalistic and physical Science has overpassed itself and must before long be
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Overtaken by a mounting flood of psychological and psychic knowledge which cannot fail to compel quite a new view of the human being and open a new vista before mankind. At the same time the Age of Reason is visibly drawing to an end; novel ideas are sweeping over the world and are being accepted with a significant rapidity, ideas inevitably subversive of any premature typal order of economic rationalism, dynamic ideas such as Nietzsche’s Will-to-Live, Bergson’s exaltation of Intuition above intellect or the latest German philosophical tendency to acknowledge a suprarational faculty and a suprarational order of truths. Already another mental poise is beginning to settle and conceptions are on the way to apply themselves in the field of practice which promise to give the succession of the individualistic age of society not to a new typal order, but to a subjective age which may well be a great and momentous passage to a very different goal. It may be doubted whether we are not already in the morning twilight of a new period of the human cycle.

Secondly, the West in its triumphant conquest of the world has awakened the slumbering East and has produced in its midst an increasing struggle between an imported Western individualism and the old conventional principle of society. The latter is here rapidly, there slowly breaking down, but something quite different from Western individualism may very well take its place. Some opine, indeed, that Asia will reproduce Europe’s Age of Reason with all its materialism and secularist individualism while Europe itself is pushing onward into new forms and ideas; but this is in the last degree improbable. On the contrary, the signs are that the individualistic period in the East will be neither of long duration nor predominantly rationalistic and secularist in its character. If then the East, as the result of its awakening, follows its own bent and evolves a novel social tendency and culture, that is bound to have an enormous effect on the direction of the world’s civilisation; we can measure its probable influence by the profound results of the first reflux of the ideas even of the unawakened East upon Europe. Whatever that effect may be, it will not be in favour of any re-ordering of society on the lines of the still current tendency towards a
mechanical economism which has not ceased to dominate mind and life in the Occident. The influence of the East is likely to be rather in the direction of subjectivism and practical spirituality, a greater opening of our physical existence to the realisation of ideals other than the strong but limited aims suggested by the life and the body in their own gross nature.

But, most important of all, the individualistic age of Europe has in its discovery of the individual fixed among the idea-forces of the future two of a master potency which cannot be entirely eliminated by any temporary reaction. The first of these, now universally accepted, is the democratic conception of the right of all individuals as members of the society to the full life and the full development of which they are individually capable. It is no longer possible that we should accept as an ideal any arrangement by which certain classes of society should arrogate development and full social fruition to themselves while assigning a bare and barren function of service alone to others. It is now fixed that social development and well-being mean the development and well-being of all the individuals in the society and not merely a flourishing of the community in the mass which resolves itself really into the splendour and power of one or two classes. This conception has been accepted in full by all progressive nations and is the basis of the present socialistic tendency of the world. But in addition there is this deeper truth which individualism has discovered, that the individual is not merely a social unit; his existence, his right and claim to live and grow are not founded solely on his social work and function. He is not merely a member of a human pack, hive or ant-hill; he is something in himself, a soul, a being, who has to fulfil his own individual truth and law as well as his natural or his assigned part in the truth and law of the collective existence. He demands freedom, space, initiative for his soul, for his nature, for that puissant and tremendous thing which society so much

2 This is no longer recognised by the new order, Fascist or Communistic, — here the individual is reduced to a cell or atom of the social body. “We have destroyed” proclaims a German exponent “the false view that men are individual beings; there is no liberty of individuals, there is only liberty of nations or races.”
distrusts and has laboured in the past either to suppress altogether or to relegate to the purely spiritual field, an individual thought, will and conscience. If he is to merge these eventually, it cannot be into the dominating thought, will and conscience of others, but into something beyond into which he and all must be both allowed and helped freely to grow. That is an idea, a truth which, intellectually recognised and given its full exterior and superficial significance by Europe, agrees at its root with the profoundest and highest spiritual conceptions of Asia and has a large part to play in the moulding of the future.