Chapter XVII

Nature’s Law in Our Progress —
Unity in Diversity, Law and Liberty

FOR MAN alone of terrestrial creatures to live rightly involves the necessity of knowing rightly, whether, as rationalism pretends, by the sole or dominant instrumentation of his reason or, more largely and complexly, by the sum of his faculties; and what he has to know is the true nature of being and its constant self-effectuation in the values of life, in less abstract language the law of Nature and especially of his own nature, the forces within him and around him and their right utilisation for his own greater perfection and happiness or for that and the greater perfection and happiness of his fellow-creatures. In the old phrase his business is to learn to live according to Nature. But Nature can no longer be imaged, as once it was, as an eternal right rule from which man has wandered, since it is rather a thing itself changing, progressing, evolving, ascending from height to more elevated height, widening from limit to broader limit of its own possibilities. Yet in all this changing there are certain eternal principles or truths of being which remain the same and upon them as bedrock, with them as a primary material and within them as a framework our progress and perfection are compelled to take place. Otherwise there would be an infinite chaos and not a world ordered even in the clash of its forces.

The subhuman life of animal and plant is not subjected to this necessity of knowledge nor of that which is the necessary accompaniment of knowledge, a conscious will impelled always to execute what knowledge perceives. By this exemption it is saved from an immense amount of error, deformation and disease, for it lives spontaneously according to Nature, its knowledge and will are hers and incapable, whether conscient or subconscient, of variation from her laws and dictates. Man seems, on the
contrary, to possess a power of turning his mind and will upon Nature and a possibility of governing her movement, even of varying from the course she dictates to him. But here there is really a deformative trick of language. For man’s mentality is also a part of Nature; his mentality is even the most important, if not the largest part of his nature. It is, we may say, Nature become partly conscious of her own laws and forces, conscious of her struggle of progression and inspired with the conscious will to impose a higher and higher law on her own processes of life and being. In subhuman life there is a vital and physical struggle, but no mental conflict. Man is subjected to this mental conflict and is therefore at war not only with others but with himself; and because he is capable of this war with himself, he is also capable of that which is denied to the animal, of an inner evolution, a progression from higher to higher type, a constant self-transcending.

This evolution takes place at present by a conflict and progress of ideas applied to life. In their primary aspect human ideas of life are simply a mental translation of the forces and tendencies of life itself as they emerge in the form of needs, desires and interests. The human mind has a practical intelligence more or less clear and exact which takes these things into account and gives to one and another a greater or less value according to its own experience, preference and judgment. Some the man accepts and helps in their growth by his will and intelligence, others he rejects, discourages and even succeeds in eliminating. But from this elementary process there emerges a second and more advanced character of man’s ideas about life; he passes beyond the mere mental translation and ready dynamic handling to a regulated valuation of the forces and tendencies that have emerged or are emerging in him and his environment. He studies them as fixed processes and rules of Nature and endeavours to understand their law and norm. He tries to determine the laws of his mind and life and body, the law and rule of the facts and forces about him that constitute his environment and determine the field and the mould of his action. Since we are imperfect and evolutionary beings, this study of the laws of life is bound to
envisage two aspects: it perceives the rule of what is and the rule of what may or ought to be, the law of our actualities and the law of our potentialities. The latter takes for the human intellect which tends always to an arbitrary and emphatic statement of things, the form of a fixed ideal standard or set of principles from which our actual life is a fall and deviation or towards which it is a progress and aspiration.

The evolutionary idea of Nature and life brings us to a profounder view. Both what is and what may be are expressions of the same constant facts of existence and forces or powers of our Nature from which we cannot and are not meant to escape, since all life is Nature fulfilling itself and not Nature destroying or denying itself; but we may raise and we are intended to raise, change and widen the forms, arrangements and values of these constant facts and forces of our nature and existence, and in the course of our progress the change and perfectioning may amount to what seems a radical transformation, although nothing essential is altered. Our actualities are the form and value or power of expression to which our nature and life have attained; their norm or law is the fixed arrangement and process proper to that stage of evolution. Our potentialities point us to a new form, value, power of expression with their new and appropriate arrangement and process which is their proper law and norm. Standing thus between the actual and the possible, our intellect tends to mistake present law and form for the eternal law of our nature and existence and regard any change as a deviation and fall or else, on the contrary, to mistake some future and potential law and form for our ideal rule of life and all actual deviation from that as an error or sin of our nature. In reality, only that is eternal which is constant through all changes and our ideal can be no more than a progressive expression of it. Only the utmost limit of height, wideness and fullness of self-expression possible to man, if any such limit there be, could be regarded, did we know of it, — and as yet we do not know our utmost possibilities, — as the eternal ideal.

Whatever the ideas or ideals which the human mind extracts from life or tries to apply to life, they can be nothing
but the expression of that life itself as it attempts to find more and more and fix higher and higher its own law and realise its potentialities. Our mentality represents the conscious part of the movement of Nature in this progressive self-realisation and self-fulfilment of the values and potentialities of her human way of living. If that mentality were perfect, it would be one in its knowledge and will with the totality of the secret Knowledge and Will which she is trying to bring to the surface and there would be no mental conflict. For we should then be able to identify ourself with her movement, know her aim and follow intelligently her course,—realising the truth on which the Gita lays stress that it is Nature alone that acts and the movements of our mind and life are only the action of her modes. The subhuman life vitally, instinctively and mechanically does this very thing, lives according to Nature within the limits of its type and is free from internal conflict though not from conflict with other life. A superhuman life would reach consciously this perfection, make the secret Knowledge and Will in things its own and fulfil itself through Nature by her free, spontaneous and harmonious movement unhasting, unresting, towards that full development which is her inherent and therefore her predestined aim. Actually, because our mentality is imperfect, we catch only a glimpse of her tendencies and objects and each glimpse we get we erect into an absolute principle or ideal theory of our life and conduct; we see only one side of her process and put that forward as the whole and perfect system which must govern our ordering of our life. Working through the imperfect individual and still more imperfect collective mind, she raises up the facts and powers of our existence as opposing principles and forces to which we attach ourselves through our intellect and emotions, and favouring and depressing now this and now another she leads them in the mind of man through struggle and conflict towards a mutual knowledge and the sense of their mutual necessity and towards a progressively right relation and synthesis of their potentialities which is represented in an increasing harmony and combination of realised powers in the elastic potentiality of human life.
The social evolution of the human race is necessarily a development of the relations between three constant factors, individuals, communities of various sorts and mankind. Each seeks its own fulfilment and satisfaction, but each is compelled to develop them not independently but in relation to the others. The first natural aim of the individual must be his own inner growth and fullness and its expression in his outer life; but this he can only accomplish through his relations with other individuals, to the various kinds of community religious, social, cultural and political to which he belongs and to the idea and need of humanity at large. The community must seek its own fulfilment, but, whatever its strength of mass consciousness and collective organisation, can accomplish its growth only through its individuals under the stress of the circumstances set for it by its environment and subject to the conditions imposed by its relations to other communities and individuals and to humanity at large. Mankind as a whole has at present no consciously organised common life; it has only an inchoate organisation determined much more by circumstances than by human intelligence and will. And yet the idea and the fact of our common human existence, nature, destiny has always exercised its strong influence on human thought and action. One of the chief preoccupations of ethics and religion has been the obligations of man to mankind. The pressure of the large movements and fluctuations of the race has always affected the destinies of its separate communities, and there has been a constant return-pressure of separate communities social, cultural, political, religious to expand and include, if it might be, the totality of the race. And if or when the whole of humanity arrives at an organised common life and seeks a common fulfilment and satisfaction, it can only do it by means of the relation of this whole to its parts and by the aid of the expanding life of individual human beings and of the communities whose progress constitutes the larger terms of the life of the race.

Nature works always through these three terms and none of them can be abolished. She starts from the visible manifestation of the one and the many, from the totality and its constituent
units and creates intermediary unities between the two without which there can be no full development either of the totality or of the units. In the life-type itself she creates always the three terms of genus, species and individual. But while in the animal life she is satisfied to separate rigidly and group summarily, in the human she strives, on the contrary, to override the divisions she has made and lead the whole kind to the sense of unity and the realisation of oneness. Man’s communities are formed not so much by the instinctive herding together of a number of individuals of the same genus or species as by local association, community of interests and community of ideas; and these limits tend always to be overcome in the widening of human thoughts and sympathies brought about by the closer intermingling of races, nations, interests, ideas, cultures. Still, if overcome in their separatism, they are not abolished in their fact, because they repose on an essential principle of Nature, — diversity in unity. Therefore it would seem that the ideal or ultimate aim of Nature must be to develop the individual and all individuals to their full capacity, to develop the community and all communities to the full expression of that many-sided existence and potentiality which their differences were created to express, and to evolve the united life of mankind to its full common capacity and satisfaction, not by suppression of the fullness of life of the individual or the smaller commonalty, but by full advantage taken of the diversity which they develop. This would seem the soundest way to increase the total riches of mankind and throw them into a fund of common possession and enjoyment.

The united progress of mankind would thus be realised by a general principle of interchange and assimilation between individual and individual and again between individual and community, between community and community and again between the smaller commonalty and the totality of mankind, between the common life and consciousness of mankind and its freely developing communal and individual constituents. As a matter of fact, although this interchange is what Nature even now contrives to bring about to a certain extent, life is far from being governed by such a principle of free and harmonious mutuality.
There is a struggle, an opposition of ideas, impulses and interests, an attempt of each to profit by various kinds of war on the others, by a kind of intellectual, vital, physical robbery and theft or even by the suppression, devouring, digestion of its fellows rather than by a free and rich interchange. This is the aspect of life which humanity in its highest thought and aspiration knows that it has to transcend, but has either not yet discovered the right means or else has not had the force to apply it. It now endeavours instead to get rid of strife and the disorders of growth by a strong subordination or servitude of the life of the individual to the life of the community and, logically, it will be led to the attempt to get rid of strife between communities by a strong subordination or servitude of the life of the community to the united and organised life of the human race. To remove freedom in order to get rid of disorder, strife and waste, to remove diversity in order to get rid of separatism and jarring complexities is the impulse of order and regimentation by which the arbitrary rigidity of the intellectual reason seeks to substitute its straight line for the difficult curves of the process of Nature.

But freedom is as necessary to life as law and regime; diversity is as necessary as unity to our true completeness. Existence is one only in its essence and totality, in its play it is necessarily multiform. Absolute uniformity would mean the cessation of life, while on the other hand the vigour of the pulse of life may be measured by the richness of the diversities which it creates. At the same time, while diversity is essential for power and fruitfulness of life, unity is necessary for its order, arrangement and stability. Unity we must create, but not necessarily uniformity. If man could realise a perfect spiritual unity, no sort of uniformity would be necessary; for the utmost play of diversity would be securely possible on that foundation. If again he could realise a secure, clear, firmly-held unity in the principle, a rich, even an unlimited diversity in its application might be possible without any fear of disorder, confusion or strife. Because he cannot do either of these things he is tempted always to substitute uniformity for real unity. While the life-power in man demands diversity,
his reason favours uniformity. It prefers it because uniformity gives him a strong and ready illusion of unity in place of the real oneness at which it is so much more difficult to arrive. It prefers it, secondly, because uniformity makes easy for him the otherwise difficult business of law, order and regimentation. It prefers it too because the impulse of the mind in man is to make every considerable diversity an excuse for strife and separation and therefore uniformity seems to him the one secure and easy way to unification. Moreover, uniformity in any one direction or department of life helps him to economise his energies for development in other directions. If he can standardise his economic existence and escape from its problems, he is likely to have more leisure and room to attend to his intellectual and cultural growth. Or again, if he standardises his whole social existence and rejects its farther possible problems, he is likely to have peace and a free mind to attend more energetically to his spiritual development. Even here, however, the complex unity of existence asserts its truth: in the end man’s total intellectual and cultural growth suffers by social immobility,—by any restriction or poverty of his economic life; the spiritual existence of the race, if it attains to remote heights, weakens at last in its richness and continued sources of vivacity when it depends on a too standardised and regimented society; the inertia from below rises and touches even the summits.

Owing to the defects of our mentality uniformity has to a certain extent to be admitted and sought after; still the real aim of Nature is a true unity supporting a rich diversity. Her secret is clear enough from the fact that though she moulds on one general plan, she insists always on an infinite variation. The plan of the human form is one, yet no two human beings are precisely alike in their physical characteristics. Human nature is one in its constituents and its grand lines, but no two human beings are precisely alike in their temperament, characteristics and psychological substance. All life is one in its essential plan and principle; even the plant is a recognisable brother of the animal; but the unity of life admits and encourages an infinite variety of types. The natural variation of human communities from each
other proceeds on the same plan as the variation of individuals; each develops its own character, variant principle, natural law. This variation and fundamental following of its own separate law is necessary to its life, but it is equally necessary to the healthy total life of mankind. For the principle of variation does not prevent free interchange, does not oppose the enrichment of all from a common stock and of the common stock by all which we have seen to be the ideal principle of existence; on the contrary, without a secure variation such interchange and mutual assimilation would be out of the question. Therefore we see that in this harmony between our unity and our diversity lies the secret of life; Nature insists equally in all her works upon unity and upon variation. We shall find that a real spiritual and psychological unity can allow a free diversity and dispense with all but the minimum of uniformity which is sufficient to embody the community of nature and of essential principle. Until we can arrive at that perfection, the method of uniformity has to be applied, but we must not over-apply it on peril of discouraging life in the very sources of its power, richness and sane natural self-unfolding.

The quarrel between law and liberty stands on the same ground and moves to the same solution. The diversity, the variation must be a free variation. Nature does not manufacture, does not impose a pattern or a rule from outside; she impels life to grow from within and to assert its own natural law and development modified only by its commerce with its environment. All liberty, individual, national, religious, social, ethical, takes its ground upon this fundamental principle of our existence. By liberty we mean the freedom to obey the law of our being, to grow to our natural self-fulfilment, to find out naturally and freely our harmony with our environment. The dangers and disadvantages of liberty, the disorder, strife, waste and confusion to which its wrong use leads are indeed obvious. But they arise from the absence or defect of the sense of unity between individual and individual, between community and community, which pushes them to assert themselves at the expense of each other instead of growing by mutual help and interchange and
to assert freedom for themselves in the very act of encroaching on the free development of their fellows. If a real, a spiritual and psychological unity were effectuated, liberty would have no perils and disadvantages; for free individuals enamoured of unity would be compelled by themselves, by their own need, to accommodate perfectly their own growth with the growth of their fellows and would not feel themselves complete except in the free growth of others. Because of our present imperfection and the ignorance of our mind and will, law and regimentation have to be called in to restrain and to compel from outside. The facile advantages of a strong law and compulsion are obvious, but equally great are the disadvantages. Such perfection as it succeeds in creating tends to be mechanical and even the order it imposes turns out to be artificial and liable to break down if the yoke is loosened or the restraining grasp withdrawn. Carried too far, an imposed order discourages the principle of natural growth which is the true method of life and may even slay the capacity for real growth. We repress and over-standardise life at our peril; by over-regimentation we crush Nature’s initiative and habit of intuitive self-adaptation. Dwarfed or robbed of elasticity, the devitalised individuality, even while it seems outwardly fair and symmetrical, perishes from within. Better anarchy than the long continuance of a law which is not our own or which our real nature cannot assimilate. And all repressive or preventive law is only a makeshift, a substitute for the true law which must develop from within and be not a check on liberty, but its outward image and visible expression. Human society progresses really and vitally in proportion as law becomes the child of freedom; it will reach its perfection when, man having learned to know and become spiritually one with his fellow-man, the spontaneous law of his society exists only as the outward mould of his self-governed inner liberty.