**The Being and the Milieu**

**from Rene Guenon, "The Veil of Isis"**

*L’être et le milieu*, December 1935.

With regards to the determination of castes, we have said that the individual

nature of a being results first from what it is in itself and secondarily

from the influences of the milieu in which it manifests itself; it is

important to distinguish between these two elements and mark their relations

at the same time in a precise manner. For this purpose, we can

use the geometric representation which we have expounded in *The Symbolism*

*of the Cross*, relating the first element to the vertical direction and

the second element to the horizontal direction. Indeed, the vertical will

then represent what connects all the states of manifestation of the same

being, which is necessarily the expression of this very being, or, if you

will, of its ‘personality,’ the direct projection by which it is reflected in

all states, while the horizontal plane represents the domain of a certain

sense of manifestation, considered here in the ‘macrocosmic’ sense; consequently,

the manifestation of the being in this state will be determined

by the intersection of the vertical considered with this horizontal plane.

That being so, it becomes obvious that the point of intersection is not

arbitrary, but that it is itself determined by the verticality in question,

inasmuch it differs from any other verticality, i.e., in sum, this being is

what it is and not what any other being is also manifesting in the same

state. In other words, it could be said that it is the being who, by its very

nature, itself determines the conditions of its manifestation, being subject

that these conditions can only be a specification of the general conditions

of the contemplated state in any case, since its manifestation must necessarily

be a development of possibilities contained in that state, to the

exclusion of those who belong to other states; this reservation is marked

geometrically by the preliminary determination of the horizontal plane.

The being will manifest itself by putting on, as it were, elements borrowed

from the environment; in the case of the individual human state,

these elements will belong to the different modalities of this state, i.e.,

both to the corporeal order and to the subtle or ‘psychic’ order. This point

is particularly important in order to avoid certain complications which

are due only to erroneous or incomplete conceptions: indeed, if we translate

this in terms of ‘heredity,’ we can say that there is not only a physiologic

heredity, but also a psychic heredity, both of which are explained

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in exactly the same way, i.e., by the presence of elements coming from

the specific milieu in the constitution of the individual when the being’s

birth took place. In the Occident, some people refuse to admit psychic

inheritance because, knowing nothing beyond the domain to which they

relate, they believe that this domain must be the one that belongs to the

being itself, which represents what it is regardless of any influence from

the milieu. Others, who will, on the contrary, admit heredity, believe that

it can be concluded that the being, in all that it is, is entirely determined

by the milieu, that it is nothing more than the milieu which makes it to

be, because they cannot conceive of anything outside the corporeal and

psychic domains. These are therefore two errors, somehow being opposed,

but which have one and the same source: both reduce the entire

being to its individual manifestation, and they equally ignore any transcendent

principle with respect to the being. What is at the heart of all

these modern conceptions of the human being is always the idea of the

Cartesian ‘body-soul’ duality, which, in fact, is purely and simply equivalent

to the duality of the physiological and the psychic, considered as

irreducible and as comprehending all of the being in two terms, when in

reality they represent only the superficial and the external aspects of the

manifested being, that they belong to one and the same degree of existence

which is the horizontal plane that we have envisaged, so that one is

no less contingent than the other, and true being is beyond one as well

as the other.

To return to heredity, we must say that it does not fully express the

influences of the milieu on the individual, but that it constitutes only the

most immediately attachable part of it; in reality, these influences extend

much further, and one might even say that they extend indefinitely in all

directions. Indeed, the cosmic milieu, which is the domain of the state of

manifestation under consideration, can only be conceived as an ensemble

of which all the parts are linked together without any solution of continuity,

because to conceive it otherwise would be to suppose it as a ‘void,’

whereas this, not being a possibility of manifestation, could not have any

place. Consequently, there must necessarily be relations, i.e., at essence,

reciprocal actions and reactions between all the individual beings who

are manifested in this domain, either simultaneously or successively;

from the nearest to the farthest, it is only a matter of difference of proportions

or degrees, so that heredity, whatever its relative importance in

relation to all else, no longer appears as only a special case.

In all cases, be it hereditary or other influences, what we said at the

beginning is still true: the situation of the being in its milieu is ultimately

determined by its own nature, the elements that it borrows from its imRené

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mediate environment and also those it draws in some way from the indefinite

whole of its domain of manifestation must necessarily be in correspondence

with this nature, otherwise it could not effectively assimilate

them so as to make as secondary modifications of itself. This is what

the ‘affinity’ we have previously alluded to is: the being, one might say,

only takes from the milieu that which is in conformity with the possibilities

it carries within it, which are those of no other being than that

which, because of this conformity, must provide the contingent conditions

allowing these possibilities to develop or ‘actualize’ during its individual

manifestation. Moreover, it is evident that any relation between

any two beings, to be real, must necessarily be the expression of something

which belongs at once to the nature of both; thus, the influence

that a being seems to undergo from outside and to receive from someone

other than itself is never really of a possibility inherent in the very nature

of the being itself, when viewed from a more profound point of view as

a sort of translation in relation to the milieu.

However, there is a sense in which one can say that the being really

experiences the influence of the milieu in its manifestation; but it is only

insofar as this influence is envisaged by its negative side, i.e. insofar as it

properly constitutes a limitation for the being. This is an immediate consequence

of the conditioned nature of every state of manifestation: the

being is subjected to certain conditions which have a limiting role, and

which include firstly the general conditions defining the state under consideration,

and then the special conditions defining the particular mode

of manifestation of this being in this state. Moreover, it is easy to understand

that, whatever the appearances, the limitation has no positive existence,

that it is nothing other than a restriction excluding certain possibilities,

or a ‘deprivation’ in relation to what it thus excludes, i.e. it is

something purely negative in whatever way one wishes to express it.

On the other hand, it must be understood that such limiting conditions

are essentially inherent in a certain state of manifestation, that they

apply exclusively to what is included in that state, and that, consequently,

they cannot attach themselves in any way to the being itself and

follow it to another state. The being will naturally also find, to manifest

itself in this state, certain conditions having a similar character, but

which will be different from those to which it was subjected in the state

which we envisaged at first, and which will never be able to be described

in terms that are appropriate only to the latter, such as those of human

language, for example, which cannot express conditions of existence

other than those of the corresponding state, since this language is found

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in all things determined and shaped by these very conditions. We insist

upon this, because, if we admit without great difficulty that the elements

drawn from the atmosphere to enter the constitution of the individuality

must be restored to it when this individuality has completed its cycle of

existence and passes to another state, as everyone can directly see, at

least as far as corporeal elements are concerned, it seems less easy to

admit that the being then entirely exits the conditions to which he was

subjected in this individual state, although the two things are closely related.

Without a doubt, this owes above all to the impossibility, not of

conceiving, but of representing conditions of existence other than those

of the corporeal, for which one cannot find any term of comparison in

this state.

An important application of what we have just indicated is that which

relates to the fact that an individual being belongs to a certain species,

such as the human species, for example: there is obviously in the very

nature of this being something that determined his birth in this rather

than in any other. It is therefore subject to the conditions which expressly

define the very species, and which will be among the special conditions

of its mode of existence as an individual; these are, one could say,

the two positive and negative aspects of the specific nature, positive being

a manifestation of certain possibilities, negative being a limiting condition

of existence. Only, what must be understood is that it is only as an

individual manifested in the state considered that the being actually belongs

to the species in question, and that in any other state, it escapes

him entirely and does not remain bound to him in anyway. In other

words, the consideration of the species applies only in the horizontal

sense, i.e. in the domain of a certain state of existence; it cannot intervene

in the vertical sense, i.e. when the being passes to other states. Of course,

what is true in this respect for the species is also true, for all the more

reason, for race, for family, in short for all the more or less restricted

portions of the individual domain in which the being is included as to its

manifestation in the considered state. Naturally, the case of caste is no

exception here; this comes, more visibly than in any other case, from the

definition of caste as being the very expression of the individual nature

and uniting with it as it were one, which indicates that it exists only so

long as the being is envisaged within the limits of individuality, and that,

if it necessarily exists as long as it is contained, it cannot survive by itself

beyond these same limits, all that constitute its *raison d’être* being found

exclusively within these limits and cannot be transported to another area

of existence, where the individual nature in question no longer meets

any possibility.

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To close this exposé, we will say a few words as to how, from the

foregoing considerations, we may consider what is called ‘astral influences’;

first of all, it should be pointed out that we must not exclusively

understand, or even principally, the proper influences of the stars whose

names serve to designate them, although these influences, like those of

all things, probably also have their own reality, but these stars represent

above all symbolically, which does not mean ‘ideally’ or figuratively, but

on the contrary, by the virtue of actual correspondences founded on the

very constitution of the ‘macrocosm,’ the synthesis of all the various categories

of cosmic influences exercised on individuality. If we consider, as

is most commonly done, that these influences dominate individuality,

this is only the most external point of view; in a more profound order,

the truth is that if the individuality is related to a definite set of influences,

it is because this whole is the same which is in conformity with

the nature of being manifested in this individuality. Thus, if ‘astral influences’

seem to determine what the individual is, it is only in appearance;

at heart, they do not determine it, but they only express it. True determination

does not come from without, but from the being itself, and the

outward signs simply allow it to be discerned, giving it a sort of sensory

expression, at least for those who will be able to interpret them correctly.

In fact, this consideration certainly does not alter the results that can be

obtained from the examination of ‘astral influences,’ but, from the doctrinal

point of view which alone interests us here, it seems essential to

us to understand the true role of these, i.e., in short, the real nature of the

relations of the being with the milieu in which its individual manifestation

is fulfilled, since what is expressed through these influences, in a

form intelligibly coordinated, is the indefinite multitude of diverse elements

which constitute this whole milieu.