THE RENAISSANCE IDEAL TODAY

by Charles Toogood of SAROS

The Renaissance is viewed as a Golden Age in which Man's creativity flowered in abundance. This prolific era was associated with an idealism that suffused the art of the period, a vision of the "Whole Man". It was felt that to fully express himself the artist should cultivate his full range of capabilities, his physical, emotional and mental attributes. When we look today at the works of those artists which survive, the power of that ideal shines brilliantly through the centuries; the consummate physical skills evidenced in brushwork and sculpture, the breadth of learning and understanding of complex themes in the subjects portrayed and the depth of emotion, faith and love which enlivens and enriches us still.

Twentieth century information about the mind shows that the three faculties described correspond to different areas of the brain, each with its own memory and consciousness, fed and cultivated by different sorts of experience and education. Some modern educational theorists feel that present day methods concentrate too heavily on the mental faculty, largely ignoring the other two. Be that as it may, the fact remains that for any of us to fulfil our creative potential in whatever field of activity it is necessary to develop all three in harmony.

The process of cultural evolution has developed so that the challenges facing twentieth century man are very different from those in the Renaissance. Information and communication systems, printing and publishing techniques have multiplied the power of the organs of speech and hearing. Radio telescopes, electron microscopes have increased our visual acuity and extended the spectrum we perceive. One of our biggest problems is in dealing with the potential flood of information, in selecting what we need to comprehend the world. Information however is not the same thing as knowledge. Knowledge is that which enables us to make sense of information. Knowledge is essentially simple and possesses enormous creative power.

To illustrate this point and to look more closely at the phenomenon of knowledge examine Darwin's treatise on Evolution. Darwin's insight, the substance of the theory, was that Creation was not a one-off historical event but a continuous process. This knowledge is implicit in any view of Man as a creative being, and its incorporation into the twentieth century world view helped open the way to more rapid social change. As well as becoming a fundamental part of our understanding of the natural world, it gives a scientific basis for the mystical notion of the unity of all living things.

The development of physics in the modern era has extended the principle of the underlying unity of all things ever further. Einstein united time and space in the Theory of Relativity and tried to go still further in a Unified Field Theory. Quantum mechanics recast the impartial observer/scientist as participator in the strange world of sub-atomic particles. At the frontiers of cosmology today the Anthropic principle portrays the whole thrust of Universe towards the creation of sentient beings to inhabit it. In mathematics the development of Set Theory also illustrates the movement towards the underlying unity of different branches and has become a commonplace of Man's mathematical consciousness as the basis of teaching from primary level onwards.

All these developments seem to have a common theme and basis in terms of the essentially simple insights behind them, in the tremendous repercussions that they have had for our

technological development and the ease with which they have been absorbed into the consciousness of Man. The world view they represent does not conflict with mystical traditions far older, and their absorption into our modern world view suggests that they represent knowledge which is inherent in the structure of Man. That is to say that if Man takes a larger view of himself, if he knows himself truly, he can use that knowledge creatively in whatever field he chooses. The Renaissance taught Man about using the totality of himself in the field of art. In the Twentieth Century we are learning how to use that knowledge in science.

To return to the opening theme, the three faculties of Man harmonise to produce the totality of ourselves. We can in fact view these faculties as bodies within us, each with a different mode of operation. The physical body is that through which we act, upon whose health and strength we depend to operate and interact with others. The mental body is the organising structural principle which orders our thoughts and allows us to speak and recognise the world around us. It maintains our integrity. The emotional body is the motivator and mediator. It is from there that the highest aspirations come and what it loves (or hates) will determine the character and direction of our lives - the size and nature of the world we create for ourselves. It is the centre of our being.

This threefold structure can be seen throughout the natural world, nowhere more strikingly than in the atom. The nucleus of protons and neutrons is the structural passive principle of the atom corresponding to the mental body of man. The whirling electrons form its body and allow it to act and interact with other atoms. But the central fact of the atom is its size - the amount of empty space it encompasses. Even the densest materials on earth are 99.99% nothing. All the protons and neutrons that make up the planet packed closely together would be only the size of a pea. This is the mediating principle, the emotional body of the atom.

For Man the emotions are the pivot, the hinge about which the mental and physical must balance. It is here that knowledge resides, from which creativity springs.