

Trapped in Matter

(Spahic Omer)

Man is made of body and soul. The former represents the physical, and the latter the metaphysical level of existence. As such, man is a microcosm. In it, the macrocosm, or universe, and the entire idea, as well as phenomenon, of existence are reflected.

Man is the crown of Almighty Allah's divine creativity act. He created him with His Own Hands (Sad, 75) and in His Own Image (Sahih Muslim). Having fashioned him in due proportion, He also breathed into him of His Spirit (al-Sajdah, 9).

By means of Allah's creative will and power, man was thus transformed from frail and inconsequential clay to a being with a superior dignity, standing and purpose. He was made Allah's vicegerent on earth. He was honoured and favoured far above most of Allah's creation (al-Isra', 70).

Hence, man has been invested with countless signs (*ayat*). They generously testify to the existence, greatness and munificence of the Creator. The signs are manifested as much in the smallest as in the grandest aspects and features of man's being and life. It follows that man's multi-tiered existence is an ontological book that ought to be studied first and foremost by everyone. Each person should start with his personal volume.

Balance between matter and spirit

However, man was not a finished product, in the sense that his terrestrial self and status connoted an end in themselves. Rather than being goals desired for their own sakes, the earthly man and his existential context were meant to be but means for attaining

something else. The extraordinary especially spiritual and intellectual capacities given to man are expected to propel him to fulfil his high destiny.

This physical world with man's physical dimension in it was meant to be a launching pad for man's most genuine and most valuable personal and collective undertakings. The aim is the spiritual realm and the successes associated with it. All the obstacles that stand in the way should be eliminated at all costs.

Matter is just the carrier of the spiritual domain, deriving its meaning and purpose from it. The body is the carrier of the soul. Since it belongs to a lower grade of existence, matter feels comfortable with spirit, and the body with the soul, even if they fail to admit and appreciate it.

However, the same does not hold true as regards the spiritual kingdom. The soul does not feel comfortable coexisting with matter. It feels imprisoned and trapped, hence restless. It yearns for freedom and independence, and for its heavenly source and origins. It pines for a reunion with its corresponding realm of purity, virtue and impeccability.

While mired in cohabiting with the deficiencies of matter, the soul accepts only the prospect of conquering and controlling matter. It aims to subdue it to its noble goals. Unquestionably, man's entire life is an endless confrontation between matter and spirit, and between his body and his soul. Man can attain peace and happiness only when the spiritual side of life and of his very self prevails, and when matter becomes grounded and used only to serve a higher order of spiritual meaning, value and experience.

It is owing to this that in *Surah al-Fajr*, Allah identifies His servants who succeeded in their earthly mission as tranquil souls in complete

rest and satisfaction, well-pleased (themselves) and well-pleasing to their Lord (al-Fajr, 27-30).

The consequences of entrapment

That is a natural way. Nevertheless, it is grossly aberrant and so, repugnant if in man's life matter prevails and the spiritual dimension is inhibited or suppressed. Such is furthermore unnatural and breeds correspondingly unnatural consequences for man and his wellbeing.

With it, man denies the spiritual components to perform their intended task of stimulating life and injecting it with a true meaning, spirit and purpose. Man also divests himself of an opportunity to elevate his complete being along with his wearisome life struggles to the higher planes of heavenly substance and worth.

In materialism (believing that nothing exists except matter and that material possessions and physical comfort are more important than spiritual values) man goes against his very nature and the nature of life *en bloc*. From the very beginning since the dawn of the scientific revolution, man set himself on a collision course with every intrinsic spiritual and moral quality of life.

The results of such a philosophy are astounding. While man has made some remarkable progress in a number of scientific and technological fields, he failed himself twice as much in a number of other more critical fields. Upon those fields man's fundamental humanness, sociability, sustainable future, and the true meaning of pleasure, happiness, peace and prosperity, depend. For humankind, it was a case of one step forward, two or three steps back.

One of the greatest corollaries is that the modern materialistic man has forsaken the needs of his soul. He became trapped in matter, gradually suffocating in such a dire state. Worlds of non-material opportunities for man and his cultural and civilizational enriching have

been excluded thereby, crippling his innate vast potentials and talents.

This is a main reason why modern materialistic man suffers greatly from numerous and unidentifiable mental as well as spiritual disorders. Most conditions originate from the implications of the verity that people are disoriented and wedged in matter. They comprehend and live their lives wrongly. Their worldviews are seriously flawed. They do not live. They merely exist, just as the matter they worship does.

Accordingly, despite the vastness of the universe and the complexity of life, people remain stuck on the planet earth only (on a single plane), and live solely in order to enhance their physical comfort. There, in addition, due to the gravitational forces and the inherent shortcomings of man, people likewise get stuck on a very tiny segment of the earth's crust. They live on a small piece of earth and, in the end, get interred in yet a smaller piece. From clay people are created; they spend their lives failing to transcend the parameters of clay (matter) and wondering what life actually is and why they are part of it; to clay people are eventually returned, where they become clay yet again.

When Almighty Allah says in the Qur'an (al-Baqarah, 24; al-Tahrim, 6) that the fuel of Hellfire will be people and stones, the message might be - and Allah knows best - that the fuel, in fact, will be of a similar kind: stones and hardened clay, that is, people who reduced themselves and their life missions to the rank of clay only.

In other words, Hell-bound people are like terracotta: blocks (mere soulless bodies) formed from clay, with a hardness and blast resistance comparable to stone. No other incorporeal qualities do their lives and bodies contain.

Moreover, despite the longevity of the universe and life, people are granted only a tiny fraction of time. They can move neither forward nor backward in time. They are trapped in a moment. Their lives account but for a short series of moments. Man is born in a moment, in a moment he lives, and in a moment he dies. Man formerly was nothing; he lived a life that on a heavenly scale of value and consequence was equivalent to nothing; and when he dies, he returns to nothingness and oblivion whence he once originated.

The most painful form of claustrophobia

In other words, people are imprisoned in matter which controls every aspect of their lives. People are matter's slaves, consciously or otherwise.

Materialism is an ontological form of slavery. People do not own themselves. They are being owned. They cannot think properly on their own, for they are being "watched" and manipulated all the time.

All such matter is "dark matter". Together with its twins: "black holes", it sucks all life, all meaning and all beauty out of one's life.

On the whole, what an existential story that is!

Even the Holy Qur'an alludes to such a horrible state when it on two separate occasions describes a psychological consequence that results from disobeying divine injunctions. It says that the condition of those who resort to such a wrongdoing is like the one caused by the earth which, with all its vastness, appears as though closing in on them (al-Tawbah, 25); or like the one caused by the earth which, with all its vastness, appears as though closing in on them, and their own souls appearing likewise (al-Tawbah, 118).

Indeed, this is the most excruciating form of claustrophobia (the fear of being in a small space or confined area and unable to escape).

As a remedy, the Qur'an highlights the concept of *sharh al-sudur* (expansion or dilation of breasts and hearts). The Qur'an equates guidance and faith with the opening and expanding of breasts and hearts, just as it equates falsehood and disbelief with making breasts and hearts tight and constricted "as if they were climbing up into the sky. This is how Allah dooms those who disbelieve" (al-An'am, 125).

However, as a reward for the righteous, the Qur'an emphasizes the idea of Paradise as an abode as vast as the heavens and the earth, "which has been readied for the God-conscious" (Alu 'Imran, 133). This verse, and another one in *Surah al-Hadid*, verse 21, clearly call attention to the vastness and extensiveness of Paradise, as opposed to the smallness and constriction of the earth and its transitory life.

This means that the reward of the righteous people will not be confined only to their heavenly gardens and palaces. Rather, the whole Paradise - the whole heavenly universe - will be their home and at their disposal. They will not be restricted to one place as they were in this world, where just for reaching the moon, mankind's nearest neighbour in space, man had to struggle hard for years and expend excessive resources only to overcome the difficulties of a short journey. In Paradise, the whole universe will be accessible to the righteous. They will be able to see whatever they would desire from their stations and be able to visit whichever place they would like easily (al-Maududi).

It is no wonder, then, that the (materialistic) world's suicide rate is very high. Despite possessing things, people feel empty, worthless and cold. Despite the ostensible progress, people feel deceived and abandoned. On their very earth, in their very houses, and in their very selves, people feel incompatible, outsiders and unwanted. All this generates a sense of incurable hopelessness, anxiety and ennui, which inexorably leads to suicidal thoughts. Such lives are so boring and meaningless to be lived.

Allah thus warns the deluded and self-centred ones along the lines of their actual life condition (material captivity, or entrapment): "You shall not walk arrogantly on the earth, for you can neither rend the earth asunder nor attain the height of the mountains" (al-Isra', 37).

Also: "You, the assembly of jinns and men! If you have the power to get away from the boundaries of the heavens and the earth, then get away! You cannot get away except with Our authority" (al-Rahman, 33).

Is there any hope left?

Modern materialistic man is aware to some extent of the nature of his predicament. That is why he desperately tries to do something about it. However, all his approaches and strategies are downright wide of the mark, while time is running out.

The problems caused by worshipping matter cannot be solved by more matter and within the orb of matter alone. People cannot do the same things over and over again and expect different results. Albert Einstein calls that tactic insanity.

Certainly, intensifying and broadening a worship-like attitude towards matter is not the way either. Developing a quicksand into which entry could be swift and easy, but from which extrication would be impossible, is not what man needs today.

And that is exactly what modern divorced-from-spirituality-and-morality science - as the only claimed hope - offers. As exciting, promising and forward-marching as science is, it is also positively deceptive, misleading and anticlimactic. In the long run, it is set to perpetuate the woes of mankind.

Stuck itself in matter, materialistic science can only be as good as it gets. It can penetrate only as far as it can observe and experiment, which is only a momentary now and a restricted here. It is therefore

an insult to the miracle of life that science only has been sanctioned for its authentication and appreciation.

Thus, thanks primarily to science, modern materialistic man still has no clue about the meaning, origins, purpose and destiny of life, man and the universe. The issues of Truth, moral values, authentic knowledge, wisdom and aesthetics are as elusive as ever. Both modern man and science have virtually given up on them.

And what is more important and fulfilling than solving those problems and nourishing mankind with appropriate answers and solutions?

Consequently, as a result of their entrapment, modern man and his science keep oscillating from one extreme position to another, to at least superficially appease their intrinsic penchants for answers and explanations. Hence, we hear within the ambit of and in the name of science such debates as regards, for example, aliens and alien worlds, space colonization, evolution and end of history, time travel, the immortality of man, etc.

While all these may be conceived and hailed as segments of modern man's ultimate philosophy, vision and daring ambitions, the same in the eyes of such as have absorbed and luxuriated in the revealed Truth is regarded as signs of scientific arrogance, ignorance and essential defects. It is yet seen as bordering on the laughable and embarrassingly nonsensical.

Proponents of matter *versus* proponents of Truth

The whole situation is reminiscent of Prophet Muhammad's experiences with the materialistic polytheists of Makkah. The Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) was inviting his people to the truly unchaining, emancipating, enlightening and uplifting message of Islam as the only Truth. But the people, being fully caught up in venerating matter, were blinded thereby. They were myopic and could

not see beyond the considerations of their personal desires and their worldly interests.

Nor could they think in terms other than materialistic norms. Thus, their responses to the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) and his revolutionary call were outrageously absurd and pitiful. They said: "We will not believe in you until you cause a spring to gush forth from the earth for us, or until a garden of date-palms and grapes be created for you and you cause rivers to flow in it; or until you cause the sky to fall upon us in pieces as you have threatened us; or you bring Allah and the angels before us face to face, or a house made with gold comes into being for you; or you ascend to the sky - we shall not even believe in your ascendance until you bring down to us a book that we can read" (al-Isra', 90-93).

The position of matter-worshippers never changes. Recently, an atheist confronted a believer and said: "Please don't tell me you still believe that your primitive Prophet during a single night in 621 AC travelled from Makkah to Jerusalem (*isra*), and from there he ascended into the heavens (*mi'raj*), while we all know today how mind-bogglingly vast the universe is and how long it takes our most powerful and fastest rockets to reach the moon, our closest neighbour in space."

Listening to this denigration, one cannot help but sympathise with its author, for he is so mired in the world of matter that he thinks nothing else can exist. Matter is the measure of all things, so he could not think in terms other than its properties - in this particular case, tools and technologies.

Such people live in a cocoon of scientific - and materialistic - superficiality and ostentation. In essence, they never prove anything. They only exacerbate their own deficiencies and flaws.

The gist of Plato's allegory of the cave, or Plato's Cave, may well be applied to the case of this type of people. They live their lives chained to the walls of their distorted intellectual "caves". While inside in such a state, they develop their own concepts, interpretations and experiences, attempting to impose them on everybody else, both inside and outside their "caves". For them, no other realities, much less other realms or "caves", are likely to exist.