

The Problem of Pain and Suffering.

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THE existence of evil, physical and moral, is a standing difficulty for all kinds of philosophy which regard the world as rational, and has been wont to be called the crux of Theism especially, because that system regards the world as the expression of intelligent purpose emanating from one wholly good Will. And the problem has been brought home to us all, and perhaps to many for the first time, by the horrors of the recent war. Some theists, like Lotze, have professed ignorance as to how it is to be solved; and certainly it is one of the commonest grounds on which Theism, and indeed the Christian Faith, are rejected. In a previous paper on 'Recent Moral Arguments for Theism,' I indicated that a change of view as to the intractableness of this problem was characteristic of recent theistic literature, the standpoint being adopted that Theism alone, among the greater attempts to interpret the world and its meaning, can adequately account for the evil which abounds in it. That the difficulty is at any rate not insuperable is now to be contended more fully. In the present article the explanation of physical pain and suffering is to be attempted, and in a subsequent paper the existence of moral evil will be dealt with.

The many indictments of the world as bad with which we are familiar have all proceeded from a hedonistic point of view. The world has been pronounced evil, that is to say, because it is so far from being the pleasantest or the most enjoyable that our mind can conceive; and from its badness, in this sense, is referred sometimes its Godlessness, its inconsistency with the belief in a God such as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

But it is not pleasure or unmixed enjoyment that constitutes the highest good or gives the highest worth to human life. If that were so, assuredly we should have to admit that the world was hopelessly bad, and that its Author had no care for humanity. But the highest worth is moral character, capacity to appreciate, and to hold communion, and to co-operate, with God. The world is to be pronounced good or bad, then, worthy or unworthy of God and of man who bears or can

attain to the likeness of God, according as it provides or does not provide for a moral order and moral progress; for these are the best things conceivable in any such world as ours. To dispense with them would imply Divine preference for a worse world rather than for a better. God's love does not mean indulgent fondness; it rather consists in self-revelation and self-communication to finite beings whom He would educate to sonship, and seeks their highest welfare. And if we find reason to believe that in a finite evolutionary world such as ours, that highest welfare cannot conceivably be secured without the entailing of suffering—even so much suffering as humanity is here called upon to bear—we can look upon the world as 'very good' and upon God as Love, not so much in spite of, as because of, the manifold evils attendant upon our possession of the status of morality and sonship. We have advanced one step towards the solution of the problem of pain if we have decided that by 'good' we mean not 'enjoyable' in the animal sense, but 'of ethical value,' and if we are prepared to abide by that meaning and that meaning alone. We certainly cannot have it both ways: the pleasantest world cannot be the best, nor the best the most pleasurable while it is in the making.

The word 'cannot' leads us to another conception which plays an important part in the reconciliation of the world's evil with God's goodness, viz. the idea of omnipotence. I am to deal later with the topic of Divine omnipotence, and here I will only remark that almightiness does not include self-inconsistency or obliteration of the distinction between possibility and impossibility. God is not wholly indeterminate; He has a nature, and that nature He 'cannot' violate; He 'cannot' realize a contradiction: so much of limitation, at all events, we must impose upon our conception of omnipotence. And granted this, we have now the two presuppositions from which we may set out on our attempt to show that physical evil in our world is a logically necessary precondition of the realization of man's highest good, and consequently of the display of the Divine love.

It is not enough for our purpose to show that particular sufferings are sometimes educational and chastening, punitive, or preventive of worse evils. This may be true, but it only touches the fringe of our problem. For the question will always arise, Why the remoter evil, the general situation, which makes the painful remedy or discipline necessary or salutary? We need to prove that pain, in a world such as ours, is a logical necessity: that its non-existence would be contradictory of the nature of God, because suffering is the inevitable outcome of a developing moral order.

Now a world which is to be a moral order must in the first place be an intelligible cosmos; it must be characterized by uniformity or law. Without regularity in nature, there could be no intelligence in man, no room for prediction or prudence, for formation of habit or character, for progress or civilization; no possibility of morality. This will hardly be doubted, but its truth is often lost sight of when the problem of evil is under discussion. It is perhaps the key to that problem. The reign of law, then, is a logical condition of the highest good. But we cannot have the advantages of a uniform order without the disadvantages; this too is simply a matter of logic. Uniformity in nature involves that things have fixed and determinate properties, that, e.g., the water which cleanses and quenches thirst shall also be capable of flooding our fields and drowning us. For this to be made otherwise would require perpetual miracle; that is to say, an end to all the ordered experience and science on which the conduct of rational and moral life depends. God does not will our physical ills directly and as such; He does, however, directly will the moral order to which they would seem to be necessarily incidental. That there could be a determinate evolutionary world from which all events that happen to be painful to man were excluded, a law-abiding world which at the same time yielded unalloyed comfort and happiness, is a proposition the burden of proving which belongs to those who would argue from the evil of the world to its godlessness. From all we know about our world, such proof would seem impossible; and certainly it is not forthcoming. Physical evils, we conclude, follow with the same rigorous necessity as physical goods from that determinateness and regularity without which our world would be no stage for intelligent and moral life. The existence of such evil is no

sign of lack of either goodness or power in the Creator; it is simply the inevitable outcome of coherency in the world's structure and self-consistency in the Divine nature.

It follows, then, that the physical ills to which our flesh is heir are not absolute or superfluous evils. They are not absolute evils because they are part of an order which subserves man's highest good in providing for his moral status and his moral development; and they are not superfluous because they are a *necessary* outcome of that order. They are to be regarded as collateral effects or by-products of an order which itself has instrumental value of the highest kind, because it is indispensable for the attainment of the highest good of man.

This seems to me not only to be the ultimate truth of the matter, in so far as our thought can penetrate to ultimate truth at all, but also to offer a more satisfactory theodicy or vindication of the goodness of God than other views which perhaps are more commonly entertained. The theory as to the necessariness of evil to the working out of God's world-purpose which I have ventured to submit, conflicts no doubt with the view of simple-minded and simple-hearted piety, according to which all particular evils which happen to individuals are expressly 'sent' to accomplish a particular purpose, or are Divine 'visitations.' And it is with no desire to deal otherwise than reverently and tenderly with this expression of simple piety, or to remove a ground for belief without substituting a better one, that I proceed to call the popular view in question. Doubtless it is applicable to a large class of physical sufferings, whether it be true or not; but there are some cases where, as it seems to me, it breaks down or becomes intolerable. I refer, for instance, to the excruciating agony of tetanus or cancer, and to the birth of abortions and individuals of insane mind. In the latter case we have before us an affliction which is inexplicable on the view that every form of suffering to which man is liable is a particular providence, a directly willed Divine dispensation for the chastening and perfecting of the personality upon whom the affliction falls; and in the former we are presented with tortures which in all reverence we must judge to be excessive for the evocation of patience and fortitude. We could not feel sure that much human suffering is not superfluous if it were to be explained solely as a means to elicit

virtues such as self-control, sympathy, etc., which the bearing of pain undoubtedly tends in many cases to engender. And, once more, there remains that which is perhaps the hardest fact of all for our equanimity, namely, the distribution of afflictions among individuals. This seems to our intelligence so irreconcilable with any divine plan of adjustment of particular sufferings to the particular needs, stages of moral development, circumstances, and characters, of individual sufferers. If only we could discern any kind of adaptation in quantity and quality of pain to the individual's power to bear it or profit by it, to his need of awakening or of chastening, then we might assign a special purpose to every instance of affliction, however grievous. But our experience is rather such as that to which the writer of Ecclesiastes gave expression: 'All things come alike to all; there is one event to the righteous and to the wicked.' And this makes it difficult, nay, to some intolerable, to believe that the allotment of physical and mental sufferings to human individuals is the calculated action of an immanent God; it doubtless often leads men to 'charge God foolishly.' And this is apart from the further consideration that so elaborate a scheme of particular providences, as the belief in question presupposes, is difficult to distinguish from a 'miscellany of miracles' which would be inconsistent with the general Divine providence expressed in the regularity of nature. For these reasons, then, I would not shrink from recommending the view that human sufferings arising out of the relation in which we stand to the physical world are not allotted, or even directly willed, by God at all; that

God does not 'afflict willingly (*i.e.* from His heart) the children of men'; but that rather all physical ills such as disease, pestilence, floods, and earthquakes are incidental yet inevitable accompaniments of an order of nature and a law-abiding evolutionary world, logical consequences of what may anthropomorphically be called the 'world-plan.'

There remains the question of the worth-while-ness of human suffering: is the possession of the moral status worth the price we have to pay for it in pain? Well, it may surely be said that the human race has with practical unanimity answered in the positive. And it has answered with the less hesitation as moral and religious belief have advanced in purity. Man clings to life even here; and those who believe in a fuller life hereafter will recognize that it is not enough to look only on the things that are seen and are temporal, when weighing against the moral perfection of the race or of the individual its necessary cost in possible ills. Man acquiesces in God's ideal, and the more so as he becomes more godlike. We know that God in fulfilling Himself is fulfilling ourselves also, and fulfilling us for ourselves as well as for Himself. This it is which makes human life, in spite of its burden of trials and sorrows, a thing to be desired, and 'the sufferings of this present time . . . not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed.' Pain is none the less evil for that it shall be compensated, indeed; but its ugliness is transfigured if, while being necessarily involved in a 'best possible' world, it can be regarded as 'but for a moment' in the time-span of just men made perfect.

Contributions and Comments.

Jesus writing on the Ground (John viii. 6-8).

IN that well-known pericope, a detail has often exercised the sagacity of commentators: ὁ δὲ Ἰησοῦς κάτω κύψας τῷ δακτύλῳ ἔγραφεν εἰς τὴν γῆν . . . καὶ πάλιν κάτω κύψας ἔγραφεν εἰς τὴν γῆν. What is the meaning of Jesus' action? A remark to be found in an Arab Lexicograph seems to me to throw a new light on this enigmatical passage.¹

¹ Cf. also some Greek examples more or less similar, quoted by Wettstein, *Novum Testamentum graecum* . . . ad Joh. viii. 6.

In his large Arabic Dictionary (the *Lisân al 'Arab*), Djemâl eddin Mohammed ibn Mokarram (630/1232-711/1311)² explains thus: 'One is said to be writing on the ground when he is engrossed with deep thoughts and calculations (يقال

فلان يخط في الأرض إذا كان يفكر في أمره ويدبر

The writing is the conjurer's writing, viz. he writes with his finger on the ground and infers omen. The conjurer writes on the ground, *i.e.* with his

² Cf. Brockelmann, *Geschichte der arabischen Literatur*, vol. ii. p. 21.