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CREATIVE LIMITATIONS AND DEVELOPMENT.

THE subject of this article is one that bears directly on the question of Omnipotence, as to whether the term as applied to God is to be taken in its most extended meaning, or whether it admits of certain reservations.

That it is expressive of an energy incalculable and immeasurable, and that far transcends imagination, goes without saying. But that the word was originally intended to convey, in any absolute or unqualified sense, the idea of a Being who is able to do all things, cannot be maintained. Scripture itself is clear on this point, that there are some things impossible to God. And apart from an extreme Calvinistic position which would even claim for the Almighty the privilege of dispensing whenever necessary with His Own moral laws, theologians have generally postulated certain necessary restrictions in the Divine working, in so far that no one attribute of God must militate against another. They have recognized, for example, that the exercise of power is conditioned by the holiness of God, that He cannot deny Himself, or violate His word, or desire that which is evil—a tremendous limitation of power from a mere human standpoint, when we take into account all the misdirected energies of men. Moreover, as all truth emanates from God, its contradiction is inconceivable. If two multiplied by two equals four, we cannot conceive of any authority existing to reverse this product so as to make the total five. “Some things are impossible in their own nature,” says Charnock in a work, now little read, on the Divine attributes; “such as those things which imply a contradiction, as for a thing to be and not to be at the same time, . . . so it is impossible that a rational creature can be without

reason, . . . so it is impossible that the will of man can be compelled, because liberty is the essence of the will; while it is will it cannot be constrained, and if it be constrained it ceaseth to be will. God cannot at one time act as the author of the will and the destroyer of the will."¹ We may assume therefore that there are certain restrictions, of Divine origin, which regulate the nature and extent of all true and righteous action. There are laws of possibility which rest upon His sanction. But in particular, the idea that the Creator, beneficent and mighty though He be, is yet conditioned in His working by the Divinely appointed nature of the means employed, by the laws and properties which in His wisdom He has allotted to matter, derives undoubted testimony from the trend of modern physics and philosophy. Many conclusions, now generally accepted, tend to shew that the exercise of Omnipotence bears little resemblance to the display of magic influence which meets us in an eastern fairy tale—which causes the enchanted castle, perhaps, to rise in a moment from the ground without visible means or exertion of any kind.

On the contrary, the power of God would seem rather to resemble the steady silent working of some infinite mind which out of small beginnings and out of crude materials, slowly and imperceptibly, and, mysterious as it may seem, with apparent effort, attains perfection.

The following considerations would seem to bear out these contentions:

(1) In the first place, time, that is to say, the immeasurable period required for the teleological process would appear in itself to suggest a limitation in creative energy, from a human point of view at least, inasmuch as our conception of power is closely allied with rapidity of action and attainment. It is certainly the faculty of

¹ Charnock, *Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God*, 1849, p. 410f.

genius, under certain circumstances, to arrive in a moment, and without evident trouble, at results which are utterly beyond men of average abilities. It has been said, for example, of Shakespeare, that a careful study of some of his most sublime passages conveys the impression that he dispensed with preliminary reflection, as though each period was begun without any preconceived idea regarding its continuance or ending, as though thought and diction combined together in simultaneous action. Certainly, a very wonderful gift if true, but not one which presents any radical impossibility. But if the question be asked, Does the old conception of a six days' creation come within the bounds of possibility? it seems only reasonable to answer, No. From a philosophical standpoint time itself would seem to be the creative energy which God employs.² Creation, according to Professor Bergson, is practically synonymous with duration. "Duration," he contends, "is the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances. . . . The organism which lives is a thing that endures. Its past in its entirety is prolonged into its present, and abides there actual and acting."³ In every organism there is a lasting register of time, so that when a tree is cut down, it is possible to calculate by the rings in its trunk the number of seasons through which it has developed. In the same way, "the universe endures.

² Martensen, *Christian Dogmatics*, sec. 66 :—"The objection raised by some, that the world cannot have had a beginning, because every space of time must be supposed to have been preceded by another space, rests on forgetfulness of teleological principles. Time that precedes teleological time is a mere abstraction, . . . a naked chronos without determinate contents. This sort of time, gazing into which we seem to be gazing into an immense mass of mist and cloud, where there is no separation between light and darkness, . . . where there is no measure for time,—this time may fairly be termed limitless, immeasurable time."

³ Bergson, *Creative Evolution*. Trans. by Arthur Mitchell, ch. i., pp. 5, 16.

The more we study the nature of time, the more we see that duration means invention, the creation of forms, the continued elaboration of the absolutely new."⁴ If the force of these contentions be admitted, we mark a creative limitation in the fact that the goal of a perfect world cannot be attained at once. Creation which begins with time can, it would appear, only end with it as well.

(2) Again, the Cosmic process would seem to be conditioned by the laws and properties of matter which Divine wisdom has ordained. On this point, anything in the nature of creative effort amongst men affords a useful parallel. For example, in every work of art there is first the ideal conceived in the mind of the painter or sculptor, then the effort, often painful and laborious, to translate the abstract picture into concrete form. But, no matter how favourable the result may be, success is only partial. The work is limited in execution by the very instruments employed, by the inadaptability of the stone or canvas to receive a spiritual impression.

Not, of course, that the foregoing illustration will explain the difficulty which meets us here, as to why the material which the Divine Architect has Himself designed should be so intractible, so implastic to His hand. And yet, it is without doubt contrary to all laws of possibility that the ascending process, which is continuous with time, should commence from any lofty standpoint. We instinctively feel the truth of the poet's assertion that God has made nothing equal nor even secondary to Himself.⁵ God must always transcend His own creation, no matter how clearly it may reflect His supreme perfections. We fall at once into the fundamental error of Pantheism, if we forget that nature obscures, as well as reveals, the greatness of its Author. No, it is rather the degree of initial imperfection that

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁵ Horace, *Odes*, i. 12—"Unde nil maius generatur ipso Nec viget quicquam simile, aut secundum."

should surprise us, the utterly unpromising material of a lifeless world, the primeval rocks so essentially irresponsible to creative influences.⁶ Indeed, as we strive to picture that remote beginning, it is hard to say which is the greater cause of wonder, the barren crudity of the means employed, or the vastness of that power which, in spite of such limitations, caused the life and beauty of an ordered world to rise out of universal chaos.

(3) But there is a further aspect of creative limitation in the idea that the universe as a whole is based upon a principle of delegated and, in God's sight, necessary independence, though subject of course to His overruling Providence. In other words, reaching down from man, in whom conscious choice and self determination are apparent, there would seem to be an element of freedom, not altogether enslaved by instinct in the humbler creatures, nor perhaps, strange as it may seem, entirely absent from the mysterious properties of inanimate matter. No doubt, a doctrine like this runs counter to many preconceived ideas on this subject. But after all, there is nothing inconceivable in the universality of what may be a monistic principle, the widespread abuse of which, on the creature's part, would throw a ray of light, at least, on the insoluble mystery of evil.

It may be, perhaps, in the wisdom of God that a creation without some measure of freedom in this respect is impossible—contrary to those laws of possibility which emanate from God and which are expressive of His truth and righteousness. Even Professor Haeckel, in upholding a very materialistic and now discredited philosophy, is obliged to depart from his system so far as to claim for the atom a kind of soul with something that faintly corresponds to will power. Nay more, the

⁶ J. W. Gregory, *The Making of the Earth* (Home University Library), p. 207 :—"The existence of life on land required the breaking up of the surface by the various chemical and physical agents. They convert the upper layer of both primary and secondary rocks into the loose, decayed material known as soil."

very uniform working of natural law, which seems at first sight like blind obedience to authority, may possibly at times bear another interpretation. When the forces of nature press hardly on individuals, when, in the many unforeseen and disastrous calamities of life, they apparently contradict the loving Providence of God, something very like resistance to Divine control is suggested to our minds. Such times of extremity seem, at least, to call for that direct and miraculous intervention which was once manifested by our Lord when he *rebuked* the winds and waves upon the sea of Galilee.

But, however this may be, there would seem to be in nature as a whole, as there is in human nature, a principle of opposition to creative influences. Biologists assure us of the difficulty which life appears to have experienced in penetrating matter. "It seems to have succeeded in this by dint of humility, by making itself small and very insinuating, bending to chemical and physical forces, consenting to go part of the way with them, like the switch which adopts for a while the direction of the rail it is endeavouring to leave."⁷ We witness, in consequence, the extreme simplicity of the earliest organisms.

Again, progress is mainly tentative. Whole types of creatures in the struggle for existence pass away amidst adverse environment. Or various steps in the evolutionary process have to be retraced, and new paths discovered which perhaps in turn are abandoned. We find in all directions effort, but "most often this effort turns "short, sometimes paralysed by contrary forces, sometimes diverted from what it should do by what it does, "absorbed by the form it is engaged in taking, . . .

⁷ *Creative Evolution*, ch. ii., p. 103. See also p. 133 :—"It must not be forgotten that the force which is evolving throughout the organized world is a limited force, which is always seeking to transcend itself, and always remains inadequate to the work it would fain produce."

"at the mercy of the materiality which it has had to assume."⁸ The spectacle of failure, temporary though it may be, is widespread. More than half the creatures in existence are parasitic in their nature; that is to say, they are degenerates who have actually renounced the independent careers of remote progenitors, so as to live in torpor and idleness at the expense of others. Instead of the evolutionary process being always an upward movement, it is more often than otherwise retrograde in its tendencies. There is consequently ample confirmation of the Biblical theory that this is a fallen world, not alone because we see the abuse of human freedom in opposition to God's will, but because there is an enormous amount of testimony to support the conclusion that long before man appeared on this world at all, a mysterious spirit of independence had asserted itself against the forward movement of creation.⁹

But here it is necessary to pass on to a further consideration which may suggest some possible reconciliation of ideas that are apparently conflicting. If man, imperfect as he is, is the final goal of nature, the crown and glory of creation, it is only natural to expect that we may find, in the various stages of his intellectual and spiritual development, distinct evidences both of creative limitations and of the working of that Omnipotence which has made him what he is. And here again, in this investigation, the philosophy of Professor Bergson may prove helpful.

He pictures life as an immense wave existing at first outside the material creation, and containing within

⁸ Bergson, *ibid.*, p. 134.

⁹ *God and the World: A Survey of Thought* (S.P.C.K., 1914), p. 65 :—"The moment that the process of evolution begins to evolve not only cruel selfishness in its most odious forms, but deceit and artifice and treacherous cunning in the warfare which one animal wages with another, then I think you may be certain of one of two things—either the Creator is not all benevolent, or that that scheme is somehow working out as He never intended it should: there must have been some disturbing and hostile influence."

itself all the elements of perfection. But, as we have already seen, in taking possession of various organisms, this supra-conscious vitality is hypnotized in more or less degree by the inert qualities of the material which it interpenetrates. Consciousness goes to sleep in the vegetable, and even in the instincts of the lower animals, is lulled into partial insensibility. Man, too, in the process of creation has had to abandon something of this higher life on the way. The power of intellect has asserted itself at the cost of intuition.¹⁰ His intelligence is at home with the material universe, wonderfully adapted to the attainment of knowledge external to the Ego. But the faculty which looks within, to the spiritual region of the soul, can at best only recognize the higher realities of God which are hidden there, in a dim uncertain kind of way.

Too often they are lost sight of altogether in a mist of ignorance that is not, perhaps, always self-chosen.¹¹ "The light shineth in the darkness, and the darkness apprehendeth it not." And men everywhere grope their way through the most degrading conceptions of Deity and that inevitable divorce between religion and morality which marks the dawning of the religious faculty. We rise from the study of comparative religions with the conviction that the obstacles which withstand man's spiritual progress are well nigh insuper-

¹⁰ Bergson, *ibid.*, pp. 278ff.

¹¹ Bishop of Down, *Short Study of Ethics*, 1901, p. 231 :—"The sharpening and polishing of the faculties by civilization does not provide a cure for the undeveloped conscience as it does for the undeveloped intellect. A demonstration in Euclid was as convincing two thousand years ago as it is to-day, yet practices were permitted in the Athens of Plato which would be regarded with horror now. . . . In the words of Locke : ' he that will carefully peruse the history of mankind, . . . will be able to satisfy himself that there is scarce that principle of morality to be named, or rule of virtue to be thought on (those only excepted which are absolutely necessary to hold society together . . .), which is not somewhere or other slighted and condemned by the general fashion of whole societies of men.' "

able. And yet, notwithstanding those counter tendencies which cause men to revert over and over again to low and degraded ideals of the past, progress is to be seen. "To no sane observer," writes Dr. George Adam Smith, "can the religious history of Israel appear as anything but a course of gradual development. . . . Practices came to be forbidden in Israel, and tempers to be mitigated which in earlier days *were sanctioned in their extreme by the explicit decrees of religion*. . . . The prophets of that time [eighth century] condemn acts which had been inspired by their immediate predecessors; they abjure, as impeding morality, a ceremonial which the spiritual leaders of earlier generations had felt to be indispensable to religion, and they unfold ideals of the nation's moral destiny of which the older writings give us only the faintest hints."¹² Nay more, as we mark this onward movement, so slowly and painfully realized, the contrast between human ideas of power and the working of Divine Omnipotence presents itself forcibly to our minds. We look in vain for some overwhelming sign from Heaven which would dispel the darkness in a moment and at the same time dethrone the freedom of human choice and action. On the other hand, we recognize the stupendous authority of Him who permits vast obstacles to remain, and yet, in spite of their continuance, attains His purposes by patient and enduring effort. "A great but limited power may dispose of things and forces which cannot choose for themselves; but nothing but Omnipotence can create free wills and remain sovereign over them."¹³

Two other points remain which, within the limits of this article, can only be considered briefly:

(1) In a passage of prophetic fervour St. Paul represents the whole creation as groaning and travailing in pain, awaiting in eager expectancy the manifestation of

¹² G. A. Smith, *The Book of the Twelve Prophets*, 1900, p. 96.

¹³ A. J. Mason, *The Faith of the Gospel*, 1889, p. 35.

the sons of God.¹⁴ And though we may not be able to define in all particulars the Apostle's thoughts, yet there is much, from a modern scientific standpoint, that seems to presage the approach of a happier era in creation. That creation animate and inanimate may be said to rise with man in his advancement is more than poetically true. Already the progress of human knowledge has shown how the disastrous tendencies of nature may be controlled, how diseases can be eradicated or assuaged, and forces, once perhaps regarded as destructive, can be made subservient to human welfare. Nor is it hard to perceive that, with man's spiritual development, this growing power over nature will be directed more and more by the principles and towards the purposes of Christ.

(2) The force which inspires this onward movement is both personal and constant. The Incarnation is the climax of a spiritual impulse that has been continuous 'from the very first. "It may be said," writes William Law, "in a true and certain sense, that from the time of the Fall, the Incarnation of the Son of God began, because He was from that time entered into human nature as a seed or beginning of its salvation, hidden under the law, and not made manifest till He was born of the Holy Virgin Mary."¹⁵ Nay more, though the Incarnation represents a climax in the spiritual creation, it does not by any means imply a subsequent cessation in man's religious development. "The kingdom of the Spirit means progressive revelation; it involves belief in development. . . . The purpose of the Incarnation was to inaugurate a new era, not to preclude the possibility of any further advance. The reign of the Spirit is the reign of Christ. His object is to exhibit a Christophany in the life of humanity itself."¹⁶ Nor can it be denied for a moment

¹⁴ Rom. viii. 18—23.

¹⁵ Quoted by W. R. Inge, *Contentio Veritatis*, p. 102.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

that this extension of the Incarnation has been beset with all those contrary tendencies which retarded man's spiritual evolution in the old Dispensation. Even now, we are passing through a period when the blasphemous philosophy of Nietzsche has borne fruit in the war of frightful barbarity which Germany is waging throughout the world.¹⁷ And yet, it has been truly said that the study of history is the best cure for a pessimistic spirit. For, however dark and retrograde various eras may have been through which Christianity has passed, yet, because the Church of Christ is instinct with an undying life, it has always manifested within itself the power of recovery. "Christian morality," writes Dean Church, "lived even in the tenth century; even in the times of the Borgias. The wicked passed; passed with the good which they had frustrated, with the righteous whom they had silenced or slain. And when they were gone, when the tyranny was overpast, the forgotten law of right, the inextinguishable power of conscience were found to have survived unweakened through the hours of darkness, ready to assert, and to extend their empire."¹⁸ "The mills of God grind slow." The working of Divine Omnipotence is not to be estimated after the fashion of this world.

¹⁷ *The Gospel and Human Needs*, new edition, p. 5. Mr. Neville Figgis, in describing this philosophy, says: "One of the most brilliant of our modern poets writes:

' To purge the world of Christianity,
The sacrifice of every human life.
That now enjoys or nauseates the sun,
Would not be too exorbitant a price.'

or again:

' We mean by war, all that war ever meant,
Destruction's ministers, death's freemen, lust's
Exponents, daily like a blood red dawn
In flames and crimson seas we shall advance
Against the ancient immaterial reign
Of Spirit, and our watchword shall be still,
Get Thee behind me God,—I follow Mammon.'

¹⁸ R. W. Church, *The Gifts of Civilization*, 1898, Lect. ii., p. 140.

“The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds; casting down imaginations and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ.”¹⁹

¹⁹ 2 Cor. x. 4—5.

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