

Divine Omnipotence.

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THE meaning which the word 'omnipotence,' as denoting an attribute of God, should bear in theology is a matter of importance in several theological connexions, and especially for the discussion of the problems of Creation and of the Existence of Evil. Indeed, theology can easily be made to appear nonsensical if it is to be pinned down to such an interpretation of the term as would take it to imply that there is absolutely nothing that an omnipotent God cannot be or do. And if ever theology, when pressed to reconcile the evil of the world with the goodness of God, plead that omnipotence implies certain limitations, while, when it wants to establish belief in the future extinction of evil, it slides into using the word in its strict or unqualified sense, and then asserting that an omnipotent God must certainly triumph over perverted human free-will, it no doubt lays itself open to the accusation that it is, however unintentionally, involving itself in a dangerous confusion. And the question which it is important to answer, is whether it is possible to vindicate our belief that evil is a present necessity though destined ultimately to be overcome, without vacillating in our use of the word 'omnipotence.'

There is no doubt that theology cannot adopt the term in its 'strict sense' as above defined. For, among other reasons, that sense is nonsensical. It implies, for instance, that God can at once cause a thing to exist and to be non-existent, or disregard the fundamental laws of thought; and it enables such dilemmas to be put as the old question: Could God create a being of such a nature that He could not subsequently destroy it? Either answer we make to such a question is fatal to that omnipotence which the putting of the question presupposes; and this plainly indicates meaninglessness somewhere. The theist attributes to God certainly as much limitation as is required to make omnipotence exclude self-contradictoriness; and he has accordingly been asked to abandon the word 'omnipotent.' To this he will see no objection apart from mere inconvenience; and even if the request seem pedantic, he might otherwise be

willing to acquiesce. But, on the other hand, inasmuch as the 'strict' sense can be shown to be meaningless, he has even more right to suggest that it is the one which should be dropped.

The meaninglessness of 'omnipotence,' when it implies control over the possible and the impossible alike, might conceivably be shown in two ways. One of these assumes that the fundamental laws of logic—the principles of contradiction, excluded middle, etc.—are valid and real independently of God, and impose themselves upon Him just as they impose themselves upon us, with necessity, because they must be true of all thought, whether divine or human. Such an assumption will seem reasonable to common sense. But we shall do well not to rely upon it entirely, because the abstruse question whether the valid—such as the law of contradiction—can be real or can subsist, independently of existent beings or things of which it is valid, is debatable. There are some philosophers who hold that the valid apart from the existent, laws apart from things that exhibit or obey them, are but an abstraction and a mental figment: there can be no eternal *prius* of law, even of laws so fundamental as the laws of logic, eternal to or independent of the actual, or of God. Such laws, as much as the empirically discovered laws of Nature, must be grounded in the nature of God, which is simply what it is: 'I am that I am.' If, then, we adopt this latter view, we shall not be able to look upon the distinction between the possible and the impossible as a distinction having reality apart from, independently of, the nature of God and His world; though this would have been the most direct way of showing that the idea of omnipotence which disregards any such distinction is inherently absurd.

But there is another way open to us, and one which I believe is not beset with controversial difficulties. It is to assert that God, to be God at all, must be a *determinate* Being: not an indeterminate Absolute in whom all differences are lost. To be or exist is to be something, this and not that. 'I am that I am' implies 'I am not what

I am not': neither everything in general, nor nothing in particular. All determination, says Spinoza, is negation: negation, that is, of other conceivable characteristics. In that God is love, for instance, He is not hate; in that He wills a world that is an evolutionary moral order, He does not will a statically perfect paradise of angelic spirits; and so on. What is possible may thus be determined by what God is; and we need not look to reality outside or independent of Him wherewith to limit an omnipotence that involves superiority to determinateness. God simply is self-consistent, and is so without any diminution of His majesty. Determinateness, then, implies limitation of a kind; but not necessarily such limitation as seems to be implied sometimes in the phrase 'a finite God'—*i.e.* a God who is only somewhat superior in power and goodness to ourselves. Philosophers have endeavoured sometimes to conceive of an unconditioned Absolute in whom all determinateness and all differences are lost. But such an Absolute is far from being identical with the God of religion. And indeed it is not only philosophers who have resorted to the conception of an absolute Being for whom, and as to whom, impossibility is possibility; theologians, in their search for a conception of a perfect Being, have in the past adopted a similar self-stultifying notion. Some of the Fathers of the Church conceived of God in complete abstraction from His attributes such as wisdom, power, love, and so relegated Him to the realm of the unknowable, or resolved the living Spirit into a mere abstract idea.

This, of course, is the outcome of Oriental adulation rather than of philosophical theology. But modern Western philosophers have also at times fallen into the same error of confounding the idea of an omnipotent God with an indeterminate Absolute, especially when dealing with the problem of evil and arguing from the state of the world to atheism. They have taken omnipotence to imply not merely capacity to do whatever it is possible to do, but also the power arbitrarily to determine what is possible, and even to determine that the impossible shall be possible. What is possible may, as we have seen, have to be determined by what God is; but so long as 'possible' and 'impossible' have any meaning, their meanings must be different, and so long as their meanings are not distinguished it is meaningless to talk of omnipotence.

We need, then, clearly to recognize that there are qualifications to be added to what has been called the 'strict'—but which it would be better to call the 'absurd'—sense of 'omnipotent.' We do not mean by 'power' the capacity to realize a contradiction; consequently 'all-powerful' does not denote any such capacity. God is determinate and self-consistent; and consequently many appeals that are commonly made to His omnipotence are really but postulations of His self-contradictoriness. These at least should have no place in theology, nor should they be allowed without challenge to opponents of theological beliefs. We are too apt to assume that, as Dr. Martineau expressed it, there is nothing we may not ask of the omnipotence of God, and that no petition can be unreasonable addressed to such a Being. 'But it is absurd to treat the limits to such demands as a denial of the divine Almightyness; it is not a question about the power of doing, but of the compatibility of being and the consistency of thought.' How commonly omnipotence is mistaken for incompatibility of being and inconsistency of thought will have appeared in my previous articles dealing with the problems of suffering and moral evil. It is absurd, for example, to question the goodness of God because, in making moral beings, He did not make them temptationless; or because He did not make moral beings devoid of self-determination; or because the world, assumed to be a theatre of moral life, is a law-abiding, and yet not a painless cosmos: for all these 'possibilities' are self-contradictory, and therefore logical impossibilities, ruled out by the very nature of God.

If we dare not commit ourselves to the view that laws may be valid or real independently of God, because it involves disputable and disputed matters, in order to escape deriving the evil of the world, in the last resort, from the nature of God (for if there be no such independent laws, there remains nothing, prior to creation, other than God), we can still ground those laws, from which the necessity of evil follows, in the nature of God Himself, as we have seen; and to do so is only to ascribe to Him that determinateness and self-consistency without which there can be neither love, nor wisdom, nor truth, nor purpose. Limitations of omnipotence then become necessary accompaniments of determinate being; and it is only with this reservation that theology needs to qualify

that divine attribute, and only in so far as that reservation and nothing more is implied that it can adopt the phrase (which has lately passed into popular literature) 'a finite God,' when the question of divine power is under consideration. Such a reservation is not only necessary in order to make any theodicy, any vindication of God's goodness in face of the existence of evil, a possibility; it is also necessary for theology in general, for any conception of God which can be of value for religion. There are indeed other respects in which limitation, even if it be self-limitation, must be ascribed to God; the existence of finite selves and of their delegated freedom involves drawing a distinction between God and the whole of reality. Discussion of such limitation, however, will be more in place when, in a future article, we shall be concerned with the idea of a 'finite' God.

For the present we need but to point out the bearings of the conclusions at which we have arrived concerning omnipotence upon the hope, which any theodicy must justify, that human freedom with its power to hinder or thwart the will of God, is not necessarily destined to prevent the ultimate triumph of the good, and the realization of God's purpose for man. Some reasons have already been advanced in a previous article for believing that, in spite of the real limitation of omnipotence implied in the existence of finite free agents, the good is not doomed to be overwhelmed by evil. And to what was then urged, a few further remarks may now be added.

There is something in goodness which promotes its conservation, and something in evil which augurs disruption and extinction, free-will notwithstanding. And this is their intrinsic nature. The apparent gains of wickedness are not consolidated; evil purposes conflict, and so conspiracy in evil is thwarted. On the other hand there is inevitably a growing consensus of the good, and conquests in goodness are maintained. There is unity of aim, commonness of purpose and interest, between men of good-will. Good can come out of evil, but not evil out of good. The gains of good over evil are cumulative. For the higher the moral tone of the many, the harder to realize and the more obviously evil become the evil inclinations of the few. It is no easy optimism, therefore, on which we rely, but the intrinsic nature of goodness and evil, when we indulge the hope that the moral progress of mankind which history hitherto records will proceed in future ages. And if this be so, the objection that a God who is not omnipotent in the sense that for Him possibility and impossibility are alike, is inadequate to secure the ultimate triumph of goodness, loses its force. We have no need in this connexion to appeal to divine omnipotence in any sense other than that which alone we have found to be reasonable and meaningful: for it is in virtue of God being what He is that goodness and evil are what they intrinsically are, while it is in virtue of their being what they are that the one is destined to prevail over the other.

Contributions and Comments.

Did St. Paul quote Euripides?

THE question of the actual amount of literary culture that St. Paul had experienced, outside of Judaism, is one that is constantly recurring in unexpected forms. It began simply enough with the references to Aratus and Cleanthes in the speech before the Areopagus; it went on and included a copy-book line from Menander in the oration on the Resurrection: then it was noticed that his own story of his conversion contained an underlying Greek proverb, about the ox that kicks the goad, as old as Aeschylus or Pindar; and

the latest discovery of all discloses the fact that a supposed solitary line of his from Epimenides about the Cretans and their great Lie could be duplicated and its whole context restored. I am now going to show that a fresh ray of illumination on the Acts of the Apostles will be cast by the assumption of an acquaintance on the part of the Apostle with what is deservedly one of the most popular dramas of Euripides. In the twenty-first chapter of the Acts we have the account of the riot in Jerusalem, and the rescue of St. Paul by the Roman military governor. On the stairs of the Castle of Antonia, down which the soldiery had