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THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

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BOTH physical and moral evil are obtrusive facts in human experience. The presence of "evil," mingled together with what we call "good," constitutes the problem which we are to consider. Attempts at the solution of this problem may be reduced to five, and we may call them Pessimism, Optimism, Materialism, Dualism, and Christian Monotheism.

The first of these solutions consists in the denial of the reality of any good. Apparent good, that which promotes the production and evolution of life in sentient forms, is admitted to be abundant; sufficiently abundant, indeed, to secure the object contemplated. But the final end of the entire system is that its author, whoever he may be, may observe and enjoy the sufferings of these sentient creatures. This is Pessimism or Diabolism, as men may prefer to call it.

Those who accept this solution smile sardonically at the learning and ability of the biologists who set forth with painstaking care the innumerable and admirable devices by means of which Nature secures the development of life and its capacity to suffer. John Stuart Mill, one of the ablest and fairest of England's nineteenth-century non-Christian philosophers, thus sums up his arraignment of Nature and her processes: though he does not explicitly accept this solution. He was rather an Agnostic than a Pessimist.

"The word Nature has two principal meanings: it either denotes the entire system of things, with the aggregate of all their properties, or it denotes things as they would be, apart from human intervention. In the first of these senses, the doctrine that man ought to follow nature is unmeaning: since man has no power to do any thing else than follow nature: . . . In the other sense of the term, the doctrine that man ought to follow nature . . . is

equally irrational and immoral. Irrational, because all human action whatever, consists in altering, and all useful action in improving, the spontaneous course of nature: immoral, because the course of natural phenomena being replete with every thing which when committed by human beings is most worthy of abhorrence, any one who endeavoured in his actions to imitate the natural course of things would be universally seen and acknowledged to be the wickedest of men. The scheme of Nature regarded in its whole extent cannot have had, for its sole or even principal object, the good of human or other sentient beings."¹

This pessimistic solution is manifestly a doctrine of despair, and most men reject it as such.

The second solution consists in the denial of evil. What we call evil is to be regarded as good in disguise, because it is essential to the evolutionary processes of Nature, and therefore ought to be. The want of harmony between sentient beings and their environment secures a struggle for existence. This struggle brings pain and death to individuals, sometimes on a colossal scale. But the sufferings of death are very greatly exaggerated by human imagination; and the struggle issues in the physical, mental, and moral improvement of life; and, possibly, in the final abolition of evil.

This solution, even as it applies to physical evil, is not satisfactory, as Mill's criticism abundantly shows. Nature, to take a more modern definition than Mill's, is All-That-Is. It is immensely powerful and wise. If it is also beneficent, we are entitled to ask: What is the need for any struggle for existence; especially one attended with agonies on the part of the strugglers? Why does not Nature so limit the production of sentient beings as to keep the number within the ability of their environment to supply their needs while living, and to afford them a painless, if not a pleasurable, death. Men and women are quite able to limit the number of their offspring; and, as a matter of

¹Three Essays on Religion (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1874), pp. 64, 65.

fact, do so. Is All-That-Is less powerful and wise than the beings it brings forth? More than this: Why should the production of human beings be at the cost of exquisite pain on the part of mothers, when the number of human beings might well be reduced if there were no struggle for existence? No satisfactory answers have been given to these questions by those who propose this optimistic solution of our problem, and dissatisfaction with it is increased when we consider the facts of moral evil: the conflict of men with themselves and other sentient creatures.

This conflict is both irrational and immoral. It involves the exhibition of cruelty almost entirely wanting in the conduct of the animals from which men are said to have ascended. Animals do not eat to excess. They do not make and use intoxicating beverages and noxious drugs. They do not mistreat their mates and their young. They wage no war on other animals except for the sake of food and in defense of themselves, their mates, their young, and their dens. It is man, much above these so-called brutes in intelligence, who does all these evil things: killing animals for sport as well as for protection and food; killing his fellow men for the love of fighting, for the lust of power; waging war with measures of atrocity which would put a tiger to shame if a tiger were capable of the emotion. To say that there is no moral evil in the world, no diabolical spirit animating men, is to contradict the whole course of human history so far as it has been recorded down to this present year. There have been, indeed, manifestations of good in that history: teachers have protested and implored; prophets have warned of a superhuman vengeance; many individuals have heeded the teaching and the warning, but the race has remained substantially the same as it has been since the dawn of history. Each generation in turn needs to be taught and trained, to be coaxed or compelled, in order that some individuals to some extent may escape from this bondage to moral evil. Denial of this evil is no escape from its presence. Of all modern opinions this denial of the wickedness of the human race is the one

most lacking in evidence and most futile in outcome. It breeds more wickedness.

A third solution is offered by the Materialists. For them, too, Nature is All-That-Is; but this All includes no personal, superhuman power and intelligence good or bad. Their God is Law: Law, the uniform expression of Nature's energies without variableness or shadow of turning. According to this solution it is absurd to attempt to fix responsibility for any occurrence, good or evil, on any intelligent superhuman being. No such being in fact exists. Men regard as evil whatever inflicts pain upon themselves or interferes with their plans. Good and evil are relative terms. Definitions of these terms come out of the feelings of those who define them. What is good for one is evil for another. There is no authoritative and final account of either. Human life is a game of chance. Men must take the risks imposed upon them by Nature's laws.

The trouble with this solution is that it does not take account of all the facts, and rests upon a conjecture unsupported by evidence. The conjecture is, that there is no superhuman, personal intelligence and power. No one, until he has searched the infinite reaches of space and time, can successfully maintain this conjecture. The facts denied or ignored, or at least unduly modified, are the facts of man's freedom: his ability to choose his own course, to control his own conduct; and, to some extent, to determine his own destiny. What every sane man knows he possesses in the way of freedom the materialists deny to All-That-Is; though, confessedly, man is a part of this All. Man, the part, has become in one respect superior to the Whole: He is consciously a free agent; All-That-Is is an inexorable necessity. Notwithstanding his consciousness of and his inveterate belief in his freedom and his manifest ability by means of contrivances to counteract Nature's forces and to promote his own welfare, physical evil abides a constant element in man's experience; and moral evil remains in man's treatment of himself and his fellow sufferers.

The differences between Pessimism and Materialism are worth noticing. Pessimism is ancient; Materialism is modern. Pessimism offers a Devil of a Lawgiver; Materialism offers a Devil of a Law. Pessimism makes no prophecy of deliverance; Materialism abounds in prophecies of ultimate deliverance which are contradicted by human experience covering thousands, possibly millions, of years. The odds in these games of chance are in favor of the one which predicts the overcoming of the Devil of a Lawgiver. Under his evil reign there seems to be some scope for the exercise of man's freedom; some hope of his ultimate escape. Under the evil reign of Law there seems to be none, for there is no freedom to be exercised. Inexorable necessity reigns supreme and forever. As a matter of fact, outside of the beneficent influence of the Christian Revelation, there has been no deliverance from either physical or moral evil which is worth considering.

A fourth solution is Dualism. Dualism was a characteristic feature of the Old Persian Religion. It gave a tinge to later Judaism. To some extent it influenced early Christianity under Gnostic and Manichæan forms. It solves our problem by postulating two eternal, and presumably equal, forces waging perpetual war with each other. Men, according to their respective characters inherited or acquired, in the exercise of their freedom, align themselves on the side of the good or the evil, and thus play their part in the world-wide and unending war.

Dualism, it must be admitted, takes account of all the known facts. It is consistent with the uniformity by which physical energies manifest themselves. It finds a place for the exercise of man's conscious freedom, although it seems to deny freedom to the two great contending cosmic forces waging an eternal and necessary war. Moreover, in its ancient and purest form, Dualism approximated closely to monotheism and the Christian Religion. Ahri-man, like the Old Serpent, the Satan of the Christian Scriptures, is altogether an evil being, to be hated and to be combated. Ormazd, like the Christian's God, is alto-

gether good and should be worshiped and obeyed. In this form Dualism constitutes the best creed ever devised by men unassisted by a direct revelation from God. It offers opportunity to men to align themselves under the leaderships of the best, if not actually the greatest, of all beings, and to contribute in some measure to that upward tendency towards good, which may finally issue in a triumph over evil. Unfortunately a later development of this religion postulated a third somewhat above both the contending forces, indiscriminate as to its being, ethically indifferent in its character. This development may be regarded as a philosophic monism. It can scarcely be regarded as a religious monotheism. It offers no satisfactory solution of our problem.

This, it must now be admitted, is also true of the Christian Religion. But it frankly confesses failure and offers a remedy. It postulates a supreme God. It is monotheistic. Its account of God and the universe is based on a series of revelations which it claims to have come directly from God to men. According to these revelations God is beneficent, and of superhuman intelligence and power. The word "supernatural" is designedly avoided in this last statement. If Nature is "All-That-Is," then there can be no supernatural. The use of the word "Nature" in this sense is etymologically absurd; and, logically, is a "begging of" the fundamental question at issue. The word "Nature" suggests the conception, not of All-That-Is but, of all that is born. Birth requires a prior being or beings. The all-important question is this: Is there a begetter, or a creator, or a producer of Nature? The Christian Religion denies that Nature is All-That-Is. It asserts that Nature, man included, was originally produced by a previously existing being which it calls God, whatever the method employed in the production: a God good and not evil. Man and other intelligences, the products of God's wisdom and power, were originally good. God, in the exercise of his own freedom, endowed these intelligences with freedom; with ability to choose good or

evil: moral "good" is that, in the way of choice, which is conformed to God's revealed will; moral "evil" is that which lacks conformity to God's revealed will. Some of these intelligences, in the exercise of this God-given freedom, chose evil. Hence all our woes. Physical evil is a part of the penalty of man's evil moral choice. The other and greater part of this penalty is the moral depravity which so grievously afflicts mankind.

The all-important question now is: Why did God, in the exercise of his freedom, choose to create, or beget, or produce free agents some of whom he must have foreseen would choose evil? To this question the Christian revelation gives no answer, except as it is expressed by Jesus, who thus accounts for God's choice in a comparatively insignificant case: "Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in thy sight." In a word, God preferred to create some beings in his own image, free agents, rather than a universe composed altogether of machines operating according to invariable and inexorable laws. Why this choice? He alone knows.

Notwithstanding its failure to solve our problem, Christianity is clearly to be distinguished from, and to be regarded as superior to, either Dualism or Materialism, Pessimism or Optimism. It rests on a series of revelations which claim to come from God, the creator, begetter, or producer of all else that is, except the sinful thoughts and deeds of created beings, who are, like himself, free agents. This claim of the Christian Revelation to a divine origin is sustained by evidence, which, confessedly, is not compulsive, but sufficient to warrant faith. It asserts with authority much of that which man infers from his observation and study of Nature: that there is a superhuman power and intelligence, benevolent and possessing personality and freedom; that his laws, whether revealed directly by word to men, or mediately in the course of natural phenomena, are immutable and sustained by sanctions, the inflicted penalties of violated laws, bringing physical and

moral evil upon men because of the perverted and wicked use of their free agency.

Besides this agreement between the Christian Revelation and the deductions of man's reasoning based on his study of natural phenomena, it is sustained by miracles. But the Christian miracles involve no suspension or modification of God's laws physical or moral. They are neither scientific, nor philosophical, nor religious absurdities. According to the words used in the Revelation to indicate them, they are wonderful events, occurring within human observation, and signs of the immediate presence of God, working in ways unknown to the observers, and so rare and remarkable as to attest the genuineness of the revelations made by word. So far from being absurd, the Christian miracles are in strict accord with other wonderful and unexplained phenomena. To illustrate: Under certain well-known conditions grape juice ferments and becomes wine. Wine contains elements wanting in grape juice. The presence of these elements is supposed to be due to the action of living elements entering grape juice from the atmosphere. It is not known whether these living elements are vegetable or animal; nor has it been ascertained precisely how they discharge their office. The whole process testifies to the presence and activity of life, of a superhuman mind. The same testimony is afforded by the phenomena of sound. The occasion of sound is motion in particles of matter. But motion is not sound; and John Tyndall himself confesses, to the confusion of all thorough-going materialists, that the transformation of motion into sound is "a mystery which the human mind cannot fathom."¹

Similarly as to sight, taste, touch, and smell; indeed, all emotions of pleasure or pain. These experiences are mental and not physical. They are signs of the presence and activity of a superhuman mind or spirit acting mediately through the creations of his wisdom and power. The

¹ Volume on Sound (*Library of Universal Literature*, New York, P. F. Collier and Son, 1900), pp. 33, 34.

Christian miracles are signs of the action of his wisdom and power, either immediately or, if mediately, in ways unknown to the observers. In either case they afford evidence of God's presence and activity, attesting the genuineness and truth of his directly revealed will. We have, for example, Jesus' immediate transformation of water into wine; inexplicable certainly; but so is all transformation of water into wine, though it is a process requiring time and falling in part under human observation and explanation. In Jesus' act it is practically immediate and altogether inexplicable, except as it evinces the presence and activity of God's wisdom and power attesting the mission of his incarnate Son.

To the evidence of the truth of the Christian Revelation, based on its agreement with the general course of Nature and on miracles, may now be added the evidence afforded by its usefulness.

It is only fair that the usefulness of the Christian Revelation should be measured by the good effects it has produced. Confessedly it has been misunderstood and perverted. This has resulted in bringing much evil upon mankind. This last is to be deplored but not denied. In fact, as far as these misunderstandings and perversions go, they afford additional evidence of the truth of the Christian Revelation, which so clearly affirms the depravity of the human race as it now exists on the earth. At the same time the evidence that the Christian Revelation has brought much good to mankind is abundant and sustains the evidence otherwise set forth for its truth and divine authority. In its best and purest forms the Christian Religion has greatly mitigated the evils, and promoted the abolition, of human slavery. It has improved men's treatment of animals, even as it has elevated man above them. It places women upon the same moral and religious plane as that occupied by men. It has not abolished war nor the atrocities of war; but it has taught that offensive wars, the outcome of the lust of power and conquest, are unspeakably wicked, and to be combated and suppressed by physi-

cal force in the hands of civil government, whether wars be waged by individuals or by men organized into states. Under its protecting care, and stimulated by its teaching, the Christian Religion has promoted the study of Nature, the advancement of learning, the improvement of the morals of mankind, and the conditions under which its masses have toiled. It is to-day the bulwark of two benevolent institutions which it asserts to be primeval, appointed by God to be universally observed, and by means of which the evils which beset mankind may be mitigated and their welfare promoted.

These institutions are monogamous marriage and a seventh-day rest from toil. The latter is especially designed to promote man's regard for, and his obedience to, God. Upon the observance of the former depends the unity and sanctity of the family, the care of children; and, to a very great extent, men's peaceful relations with each other. In proportion to the extent which these two beneficent institutions have been disregarded by the human race, their knowledge of, and obedience to, God have diminished, and they have sunk into barbarism and its horrors. The Christian Revelation in its historical development places continued emphasis upon these two institutions, and utters solemn warnings against their neglect.

To the foregoing account of the usefulness of Christianity may now be added its doctrines concerning a future life with its rewards and punishments. It may be admitted that men need these doctrines more than they desire them. This need and its expression are found outside of the influences exerted by the Christian Religion. All down the ages thinking men have wondered over the allotments of God's providence. They have observed that wicked men prosper; that good men suffer. They intuitively feel that, if God is just as well as merciful, there must be a future state to afford opportunity for adjustment of this amazing maladjustment. The Christian Revelation, even that part of it which comes from the lips of Jesus, gives assurance of this adjustment. To this assurance may be

added a consideration, the force of which is admitted by some who reject Christianity but have experienced the joy of loving association with one or more of their fellows. To such persons physical death in itself may not be odious; but the renunciation of all hope of reunion with those dear to them, and who have died before them, involves a loss which is not to be denied nor extenuated. The sense of such loss may indeed excite hope of a future conscious life: a hope which if, apart from the Christian Revelation, cannot be assured to the bereaved, neither can it be disproved. To the evidence afforded by this hope, be it much or little, may be added whatever evidence may be accorded to alleged communications in our own times coming from discarnate spirits to their surviving friends on earth.

After all that has been or can be said, the chief characteristic of the Christian Religion is that it offers a remedy for evil, both physical and moral. This remedy, wonderful as it is, is based on the immutability of God's laws and the sanctions which sustain them; and yet is equally a wonderful manifestation of God's free agency: his voluntary assumption of man's nature, of man's obligations as a violator of God's laws; which obligations God discharges so that he can at the same time be just and the justifier of the ungodly; can punish sin and save the sinner; can take away the guilt of sin and purchase a Church with his own blood, a symbol of his incarnate life. The much reviled doctrines of incarnation, substitution, union between the Saviour and the saved, with consequent atonement accomplished, should command the respect and faith of mankind as well as their reverential awe. Unfortunately they have often been misunderstood and misrepresented. The word "guilt" in the Christian Religion has two meanings. One is personal blameworthiness on account of sins committed. The other is obligation to suffer the penalties of violated laws. Personal blameworthiness is not transferable, and this the Christian Religion admits. Obligation to suffer the penalties of violated laws is transferable; and, as a matter of fact, is transferred in human life with

the consent of human government. If a minor child commits a "tort" or wrong on the person or property of another, the obligation to repair the wrong, if practicable, rests on the father or other guardian of the child; though the personal blameworthiness, if any, is not and cannot be transferred. When once the wrong is atoned for or repaired, both guardian and child are released from further obligation to suffer. No illustration "goes on all fours," yet we can say, Similarly as to Christ and his believing people. He is their Guardian. In union with him they form one body of which he is the responsible Head. Their personal blameworthiness is not transferred to him. His personal righteousness is not attributed to them. Their obligation to suffer spiritual death, that is, separation from God's favorable presence, the penalty of violated law, is imputed to him; and his spiritual death, indicated by his lamentable cry on the cross, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me," is imputed to them. He thus, as the Head and Sponsor of his people, paid their legal debt, relieved them from the penalty of spiritual death, and secured for them a blessed eternal life. Taken together these doctrines of Atonement present a godlike contrivance, by means of which the sanctions of God's law are maintained and the violators of that law are pardoned and saved.

The solar system, in the physical sphere, offers an illustration. Two great opposing forces seem to make the orderly movements of that system impossible. One force impels all of the planets to fly apart from each other and their central sun. The other seeks to draw them together in a solid mass. God suspends, modifies neither. He uses both conjointly, and so "stretcheth out the north over empty space, and hangeth the earth upon nothing" (Job **xxvi.** 7). In the Atonement God's justice and love are similarly combined. Justice would forever drive the sinner from God as the author of blessedness. Love seeks to draw the sinner to God that he may be blessed. Both are immutable. God combines both to punish sin and to

save the sinner from both the guilt and power of his sins. For Christianity is not a bare atonement from the penalties of God's violated laws. It includes the gift of God's regenerating and sanctifying Spirit. It offers a remedy for the love and practice of sin. It is freely offered to men on the condition of an intelligent faith and a sincere repentance. It thus presents God in an attitude otherwise unknown; his manifested love for sinners; his willingness to suffer in their behalf; his ability and desire to save them from the evils incident to their own perversity, and to reward them with eternal good. Christianity thus presents God to sinners in attitudes eminently adapted to move them to faith and repentance.

Confessedly Christianity does not offer deliverance from freedom. It does not propose to turn men into machines. Nor does it offer a universal salvation from a persistent abuse of freedom. According to the teaching of Jesus himself, the God-incarnate Saviour, there will always remain two great object lessons, designed beneficently to influence the oncoming generations of intelligent free agents: one warning them to avoid evil; the other encouraging them to choose good. One it calls Hell, the other Heaven. Hell manifests the wisdom, power, and justice of God. Heaven manifests, in addition, his amazing grace to sinners. Why are both continued? God alone knows. Our problem remains unsolved until God is pleased to solve it for us.

The reader of this discussion is asked to recall the remarks already made showing the rational grounds for the Christian doctrine of future rewards and punishments. It is common now to sneer at the Christian doctrine of Hell. It is also more than ever common, even in polite, educated, and refined society, to use the word "hell" as the only adequate designation of many earthly conditions. A recent and widely circulated novel has been justly characterized as "truly a great and pitiless book." More than once the author of this book, after describing human experiences which are indeed hells, cries, "We are divinely

alone, the heavens have fallen on our heads." He asserts that "There is no paradise except that which we create in the great tomb of the churches. There is no hell except the frenzy of living"; that "The only thing which confronts the heart and the reason is the shadow of that which the heart and the reason cry for." His view of Nature is even more pessimistic than that of the philosopher, John Stuart Mill.

Meanwhile we should remember that Christianity offers to the heart and reason of mankind something more, and both better and worse, than shadows: in fact, two great realities, Heaven and Hell. In view of these two great object lessons, how imperative the command of Jesus to preach his gospel to all men! How impressive the question, "How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation?" (Heb. ii. 3).

The Visible Church to-day is subjected to much unjust criticism. It is often condemned for not doing what it has no commission to do, and no power to do. Many of its hostile critics seem to be acquainted only with those corrupted forms of Christianity which magnify ritual above truth, vestments above holiness, and escape from the penalties of sin as the chief end of Christian faith. This is unfortunate. There can be only one effective reply to such critics. The body of believing Christians must show in their daily lives that men are saved from sin in order to engage here on earth in beneficent services rendered to their fellow creatures wrestling with innumerable evils. This service must cover the entire life of the professed Christian. The only evidence worth considering that any man or woman is saved from sin is to be manifested in the home, in the social circle, in the place of business, by the exhibition of self-denying, Christlike, service. The gospel in all its fullness is to be taught to every Christian; and then taught by every Christian to those who are yet unsaved. The common practice of turning over the execution of Christ's Commission to a selected body of men and women, leaving the vast majority indifferent to and

negligent of it, is not Christianity, but a device of the Devil, the head and promoter of all evil, to prevent obedience to our Lord's last commands. It is the duty of every Christian to proclaim the gospel and to sustain the proclamation by the exhibition of a Christlike character.

Certainly the Church needs leaders. It is equally certain that the leaders need followers, actively participating in Christian testimony, in large gifts of time, energy, and money. The best, the only adequate, reply to modern sneers at the alleged failure of Christianity and its condemnation therefor, is a universal revival of Christlike conduct: world-wide evangelization; ministry to the poor, the sick, the suffering; less time, energy, and money spent on fine buildings, elaborate church machinery; and more, very much more, of all these spent on direct Christian service. The Christianity of Jesus Christ is the only hope of mankind, struggling in a world, pondering an unsolved problem of mingled good and evil. It is an ever-present war. Christians need so to act as to make it truthful for them to take up the opening words of Deborah's song, one of the great battle songs of the ages:—

“For that the leaders took the lead in Israel,
For that the people offered themselves willingly,
Bless ye, Jehovah” (Judges v. 2).