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TWO APPROACHES TO THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

There seem to be two basic approaches to the problem of evil. This is because the problem is formulated in two basically different ways. One way of formulating the problem is: What is the place of evil in a world created by God who is all might, all wisdom and all goodness? This is what may be called the religious approach or the approach presupposing God as the creator of the universe. It is as if the problem has arisen just because of the acceptance of the existence of God as creator and it would not have arisen otherwise.

The other approach is what may be called the purely philosophical or reflective approach. The manner of formulating the problem is different here. It may be stated thus: What is the root cause of all evil? Is it or is it not possible to get rid of evil fully and for ever? Here there is no reference at all to the existence of God; there is a spirit of free enquiry here. This is a purely critical and cognitive approach. Let us now proceed to state and examine the two approaches briefly.

I

Evil is usually said to be of three kinds: the physical evil or suffering; the moral evil or sin, and the metaphysical evil or finitude. The religious man or the believer in God, and the philosopher or the critical enquirer, both have to take note of these three kinds of evil. Theists may be classified, broadly speaking, into two types. There are those who believe that all that exists is the absolute creation of God, Who has no pre-existing material for creation to start with: everything including the souls is His creation. The other type of theists do not believe in absolute creation and hold that the souls and matter were already available, for God created the universe with these at His disposal. This

difference in their views of creation necessitates the difference in their approaches to the problem of evil.

It would appear that for the believers in absolute creation the whole responsibility for the existence of evil would rest on God. As a matter of fact, however, it is not so, because human souls are said to have freedom of will, freedom which may take one toward damnation. Thus man cannot escape his share of responsibility. But for man's sinful actions the world would have been much better. If man were virtuous, not only would moral evil disappear but the physical evil of suffering too would not be there as virtue and happiness go together. By pleasing God man can enjoy infinite beatitude and attain some kind of divine life and this would be as good as overcoming metaphysical evil. Virtuous life and love of God can thus help as to overcome all kinds of evil—physical, moral and even metaphysical. Self-will is the root of all sin, and physical evil and effects of metaphysical evil result from sin. So sin turns out to be the root cause of all evil and that is man's doing, not God's.

It may, however, be argued: Why did God give freedom to man at all? And since God has given freedom to man, God is really responsible for evil. If a father gives freedom to his child to do what he pleases, is he not responsible for the misdeeds of the child? This sounds unreasonable. If finitude and freedom were not given to man, he would not feel his separate existence; he would be like a piece of stone and the very purpose of creation would be defeated or rather such creation would be no creation. So far creation to be meaningful, man has to be given finitude and freedom. To say that man should not have been given freedom amounts to saying that man should not have been created. And then we have to remember that although God has given man the freedom to choose, He does care for his well-being because He loves man. He Himself comes to earth from time to time to look after the well-being of man. So God is good and the world created by Him is good but evil is introduced in it by man's sinful actions.

II

In the other type of theism which prevails in India and which does not believe in absolute creation, the approach to the problem of evil seems to be simpler. The problem of metaphysical evil is not there because all souls in so far as they are spiritual

entities are eternal. They have to be born and re-born in the form of men and other animals according to their *karmas*. But while animal life is meant purely for the liquidation of *karmas* human life has, in addition, the chance to enact new *karmas*. *Karmas* are of three kinds: the stock of *karmas* of past lives (*sancita*) out of which a portion is assigned for fruition (*prārabdha*) in the present life, and the new *karmas* (*kriyamāna*) which bear fruit in future. Man alone having freedom has the capacity to *earn* new *karmas*. All that he has in this life—his body, his parentage, his society and his environment i.e. everything good and bad is due to his *prārabdha*. The *Jainas* and the *Buddhists*, though they are not believers in God, hold that everything that an individual has is due to his past *karmas*, but they do not think that the procession of our fate is ordered by any benevolent being. For believers God has two functions to perform: firstly, He so arranges the order of different *jivas* and their environments that each one gets the fruits of his *karmas* in relation to other *jivas* and to his environment. This is the role of God as the law-giver of creator of an order. But mere liquidation of *karmas* is not the end. The goal is to attain *moksa*. So God's other function is to arrange the whole process of the fruition of *karmas* in such a manner that the life of *jivas* or the series of the lives of *jivas* ultimately leads them to the attainment of the highest goal of life i.e. freedom from *karmas* or birth and death. It is as if *karmas* bear fruit in such a manner that the *jiva* is thrown out of *karmas*. But it is not a mechanical process. There comes a time when the *jiva* reaches a point where he needs not only the operation of laws but also the love of God i.e. an external help to lift him out of *samsāra*. This is the grace of the Lord and it comes when the *jiva* feels fed up with the life of *samsāra* and looks up to the Lord in its state of helplessness and prays to Him for salvation. Mere moral life is not enough: prayer born out of the feeling of helplessness and disgust for *samsāra* or the life of birth and death is necessary. The Lord so arranged that at some point or the other the *jiva* comes to have that feeling and prays. So grace functions immanently in the operation of the law of *karma* and also transcendently from above. It is in this way that whatever God does is good and there is really no evil in the world; everything is meant for the ultimate good of man. Even the evil consequent upon *karma* is for man's good. Suffering is not to be regarded as evil since it serves the spiritual purpose of awakening man to the tragedy of the life *karma* and of making him look up to Him when he feels helpless.

If the world as created by God's goodness is good, one may wish to ask why man should desire to escape from it? The answer is: *samsāra* is good but only as a means and not as an end. It is the life of *samsāra* which by Divine dispensation enables man to liquidate the fruits of his *karmas* and also to aspire for a higher goal. But for the immanent presence of the higher goal in life *samsāra* would not be good. Goodness does not mean the attainment of pleasure nor does evil mean suffering: the real good is freedom from both pleasure and pain and the real evil is involvement in the circle of pleasure and pain.

It would thus appear that all theists, whether they belong to the east or the west, have to regard creation as good. This attitude is based not on any observation or evaluation but on the acceptance of the spiritual good of man on the one hand and the transcendent goodness of God on the other. It is in the light of God's goodness and the spiritual goal of man that everything in the world assumes a distinct colour, the colour of goodness. In the absence of that light the whole process of creation would appear to be dark, directionless and even devilish.

III

Just as we have distinguished two types of theism, we may distinguish two types of philosophical approaches to the problem of evil: naturalism and idealism. According to the naturalistic philosophers, the various kinds of evil have just to be accepted as facts, as part of life and reality. There will always be suffering, sin and imperfection in the world. The best one can do is to try to minimise evil as far as possible; we can never hope to get rid of it completely. Man has to depend on his own resources and feel neither helpless nor look to some power for help. It is this attitude which gives rise to various kinds of humanism. Here the problem of evil is really not solved, nor is any attempt made to solve it. Man is expected to note the fact of evil, try to trace its causes empirically and attempt to remove it to the best of his ability without being primarily concerned with making the world better than he found it. Inspired by this attitude, we undertake scientific discoveries, encourage technology and promote socio-economic organisations. What further strengthens our hopes is the theory of evolution. Man is by nature an experimentalist and modern man is experimenting with the present philosophies of naturalism. He may learn something in course of time or proba-

bly he has started learning even now. We have already started hearing echoes of disgust and discontent with the present ideology.

In India the purely a priori rational method is not followed. Here the emphasis is on the analysis of the various aspects of experience and on its confirmation by scriptures. It is acknowledged that the most outstanding feature of man is the fact of consciousness. Consciousness in the form of thoughts and ideas seems to be related to the functions and conditions of the body and the brain. Is consciousness, therefore, to be taken as a product of the bodily functions or in any way dependent on or related to something which is not consciousness? It is held that consciousness in the form of thoughts and ideas may be related to the states of the body and its functions but not consciousness as such. Pure and undifferentiated consciousness must be something to be realized its own level. Man is primarily a conscious being. This conclusion is confirmed by the Upanishadic statements or by men of experience—the saints and the sages. So it is concluded that man's essence lies not in his body or his brain but in his real self which is of the nature of pure consciousness. Man is essentially pure spirit which is infinite, indivisible and eternal. Other theories of self are found to be unsatisfactory.

If it is accepted that man is essentially pure spirit or pure consciousness, what will be our attitude to the problem of evil? Finitude or metaphysical evil becomes illusory as it is discovered that man as pure spirit is eternal and infinite; physical evil such as death, disease, old age etc., cannot be really be regarded as the lot of man as all these belong only to his body and not to his real self. In other words, physical and metaphysical evils are there only so long as man mistakes himself to be just body. The moment he discovers that he is really pure spirit, all these evils simply fail to be associated with him. But what about moral evil? It may be argued that sin and virtue cannot belong to the body; they must belong to the soul of man which has the sense of responsibility of freedom. But if we think a little more deeply, we might arrive at a different conclusion. Let us, for example, ask the question whether man considers himself to be an agent or a doer when he identifies himself with the body or also when he does not so identify himself. It is obvious that the question of sin and virtue arises only when man regards himself an agent and he can do so only when he considers himself to be just body. However, the moment he has the awareness that he is not just body but also pure spirit, he cannot claim any doership or

any sense of responsibility or freedom. Moreover, the feeling of doership is a sign of imperfection as it arises only when one feels imperfect. Because of his feeling of want or discontent consequent on his regarding himself as body the urge for action arises.

If man had regarded himself also as spirit, he would not suffer from this feeling of imperfection because spirit as eternal and infinite cannot be imperfect, and there would be no need for action, moral or immoral. It follows then that like finitude and pain, sin and virtue too do not belong to man's essential nature but only to his embodied state. Thus all evil is what belongs to our embodied state and the embodied state is not the real nature of man—it is only a result of his ignorance or forgetfulness of his true nature. No evil is ultimate; no evil is real. It is something which can be fully and finally get rid of, because ignorance can be fully and finally destroyed by knowledge, knowledge of the true nature or our self.

It turns out, therefore, that from the point of view of both, religion (devotion) and philosophical reflection, evil in the world is an appearance and nothing of ultimate value or significance. The devotee cannot see evil in God's creation because he loves God and God cannot produce any evil in creation because He loves His creation. For the man of reflection who has discovered that the essence of man is spirit (consciousness) and that spirit cannot in any way depend on matter, it would appear that all evil is there only so long as man does not regard himself as spirit; it affects only his physical life and does not touch his real essence or spirit: Love of God converts evil into good and knowledge makes it false.