The Problem of Good and Evil

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"Two men looked out from behind prison bars. One saw the mud; the other saw the stars."

In this anonymous couplet, the orator sees the law that impression precedes and determines expression, while the psychologist sees the law that apperception precedes and determines perception. In both senses, the couplet has a distinct bearing on the problem of good and evil, for reactions to this problem are largely a matter of personal impression—viewpoint, emphasis, attitude, and decision.

What men see is partly a matter of viewpoint. There can be no doubt that the view of the world from a palace window is different from the restrictive view from a prison window. But here we meet a strange fact. Often it is the "prisoner" in the palace who sees the mud, while it is the "freeman" in the prison who sees the stars. That is, there is a psychological as well as a physical viewpoint. The eyes are only a part of the mechanism or process of vision; the real seer is the mind, the self. Impressions in the mind due to previous experience and thinking determine what is seen. In ordinary language, we say that men see what they are looking for. In psychological expression, conception determines perception; mind is active in the process of vision. The "mud" and "stars" are first in the mind. If "mud" is in the absorbed vision, it is in the stream of thought. Hence it is not strange that the expressions of the arm-chair philosopher looking out upon life from his comfortable position differ from those of the afflicted. Paradoxically, the spectator is often the pessimist.

There is logic in this seemingly illogical contrast between the optimism of the sufferer and the pessimism of the mere spectator. Sorley has shown that the sufferer often has the better insight than the spectator who sees the whole mass of pain ob- livious of the fact that it is not so heaped up in actual life.

To estimate the true inwardness of suffering, we must not go to the professional pessimist, who counts up the grievances of humanity, as often as not, from the vantage ground of a position of personal comfort.

Mill, for instance, gathered together a pile of abstractions which shut out his view of the good, thus committing what Dr. Brightman has called "the unpardonable sin" of the philosopher, "indifference toward any area of experience." And personal experience proves the truth of Bowne's observation that the persons pitied "are commonly having from their own standpoint a pretty good time". Bowne adds that "the pessimistic illusion is completed by attributing all the sum of pains to the abstract man; and then all the conditions for the profound rhetorical woe are fully met."

Of course, spectators differ in viewpoint among themselves. Considering the world as a prison of finitude and mystery, we might say, "Two men - Mill and Royce - looked out from behind prison bars. One saw the mud; the other saw the stars." And sufferers agree as well as disagree in viewpoint. "Two men - Paul and Silas - looked out from behind prison bars. Both sang hymns; both saw the stars." That is, the religious man sees good and evil as one problem, grasping creation, sin, evil, redemption, and immortality as a unit. He perceives meaning and purposes to which the irreligious are blind. Naturally, he looks up rather than down, becoming, thus, a problem to the irreligious, who can not understand how men with bleeding backs can sing at midnight in jail, when men or-


Brightman, A Philosophy of Religion, p. 251.

Bowne, Theism, p. 267.
ordinarily complain or curse under such circumstances. It is a matter of viewpoint; in the eyes of Paul and Silas, they were not prisoners of Rome, but “of the Lord.”

Then, the problem of good and evil is a matter of emphasis. “A religious man is one who asserts the predominance of good in the universe.” Attention is determined by interest. One in jail can be aware of his muddy environment without concentrating attention upon it. Prisoners unjustly confined and suffering have it in their power to look either at the mud or the stars, to determine whether they are going to “curse God” and take the easy way out, or to worship God and continue to live and fight “to make the world a better place in which to live”, in the hope that the time will come when righteous men will not be jailed. This attitude of not taking evil as a finality and of regarding the real problem of evil as the “problem of how to overcome specific evils through intelligent activity,” has the approval of such philosophers as Hocking and Wieman. It is certainly more practical than mere speculation.

But it is harder for men to sing in their afflictions when they are self-imposed. Those suffering intense physical pain have testified that the worst suffering is that of an offended conscience. Vicarious suffering, in which there is both a revelation and a development of character, of the best in us, such as sympathy, is easier to bear. Our very capacity to “rejoice with those that rejoice” demands that we “weep with those that weep”. The solidarity of the race necessitates that we suffer for others.

So we may choose to emphasize either good or evil, and our choice stamps us as either optimists or pessimists. While it may be true that an omnipotent God cannot make evil good, even a finite man might make good come out of evil (as freedom out of war), even as he might make evil come out of good (as anarchy out of freedom). While God can “make the wrath of man to praise Him”, so man can make the goodness of God to curse Him (as in God’s generous gift of freedom to man). While to some the world is best described as “a vale of tears”, Bosanquet, Sorley, and a host of religious people take the more cheerful and practical view that it is “A Vale of Soul-making”. If, as Mill assumed, the goal of life is happiness, pessimism might be justified, that is, if there were any way of calculating the pleasures and pains of all time, past, present and future. But optimists choose to regard character as the goal, being able to find a place for evil and pain in the process that forwards man to that goal. Proverbially, the religious sufferer is optimistic, even cheerful, putting the more fortunate on-looker to shame. It is a matter of emphasis.

Personal attitude is a decisive factor in the problem. Perhaps the most striking characteristic of the world’s greatest sufferer, the Man of Sorrows, was His faith in His Father. Pain was not the last word in His life. Suffering intensely and unjustly, dying an ignominious death, He transformed the instrument of His torture from an emblem of shame to one of glory, illustrating the principle that pain changes its character, not only through spiritual vision but through “simple pastness or remembrance.” And it can be said of every vicarious sufferer, “He shall see the travail of His soul and be satisfied.” But the one who “freezes the process”, who sees the crucifixion isolated, who judges the tree by its green fruit, may have to declare the problem ultimately insolvable on the basis of theism.

Another determinative viewpoint is that of humility. We should beware of any demand, implicit or explicit, for a neat solution for every problem. To the one conscious of the limitations of human reason, and of his dependence upon a higher wisdom, this is irrational. With every problem solved, he sees little, if any, room for religious faith. In the eyes of many humble Christians, the yielding to the desire on the part of finite man “to know it all” at the
expense of faith, can only lead, as it has lead from the beginning of the race, to evil results. If we must have a solution for the greatest problem of all, that of evil, or forfeit the general theistic conception, if not faith in God’s very existence, we constitute ourselves “gods, knowing (completely) good and evil”. Höffding sees no reason why we should demand such answers at all costs, nor “why we should fetter reason for the sake of presumptive solutions which only give us back our riddle in still larger dimensions.” A reasonable faith, i. e., a humble attitude, will also prevent us from trying “to put all our eggs into one basket”; obviously, what will explain one evil may not explain another; it is sufficient for each explanation to make a contribution to the general solution. And if we really know only “in part” then we should suspend judgment on a few things, at least. Would it damage a philosopher’s reputation, therefore, to frankly confess sometimes, “I don’t know”? Is there no place in the same world for both faith and a wholesome measure of agnosticism, for the humble “I don’t have the answer, but I believe that the Great Problem Solver has it”?

This attitude of humility is very close to that of reverence. One sufferer, baffled by previous beliefs, unable to see the answer, came dangerously close to spiritual shipwreck on the rocks of charging God with injustice; Job finally won through, however, to a place of sublime faith, genuine humility, and commendable reverence. One is favorably impressed also by the reverence of Royce. Nowhere, not even implicitly, does he reproach God for the evils of the world, and he presents reasons for “greeting the unknown with a cheer.”

Finally, this is a matter for personal decision. Is life worth living? No one can answer for another, much less for the race. Is pain the last word? Let the Man on the Cross answer for Himself. There does seem to be a situation in which pain is endurable, “namely, when vanquished, dishonored, and abandoned, the wretch must gasp out his life in utter solitude,” and yet, need one feel alone in suffering? Let the One who seemed to pass through that experience answer again. That God suffers with us gives meaning to the Master’s words: “Happy are you that mourn, for you shall be comforted.” “Which is more important, a present perfect world or future perfect men? Let the Jobs of the world, like R. L. Stevenson, who have found both expression and development of character in imperfect conditions, answer. Is character or pleasure the true goal of life? Let both righteous and unrighteous sufferers answer, and then compare their answers. Is God’s will for virtue “baffled” as Mill said it is? If so, by whom? Let the awakened conscience of the evil man answer. Is freedom a blessing or a curse? Let the writer answer. Realizing that morality demands choice, and that choice, in turn, involves an alternative (evil as well as good), and faced with the choice of being non-existent or a machine on the one hand, or of being a free, moral agent on the other hand, even at the risk of suffering in time and eternity for a possible misuse of freedom, I would choose existence and the gift of freedom. If a man abused your gift of a safety razor to commit suicide, would you give yourself up as a murderer? If so, do you believe that there is a court in the land that would convict you? The final question is also for the reader: what are you looking at, the “mud” or the “stars”?


1 Matthew 5:4.