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ON THE EXISTENCE OF EVIL.

BY THE LATE

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ON THE EXISTENCE OF EVIL.

THE existence of evil has constituted a problem which men's speculative intellect has attempted to solve ever since speculation began. Throughout all the world there are suffering, pain and death. The young, the beautiful and the prosperous, no less than the aged, deformed and poor, are subject to them. The brightest prospects suddenly become clouded, the dearest hopes are dashed to the ground, the intensest enjoyments suddenly are turned into wormwood and gall, the most promising career ends in disaster. And it is not the immoral and irreligious alone that thus suffer; the virtuous and pious are equally the victims. The same thing happeneth to the just and the unjust.

Nor can the evil always be traced to causes which might have been avoided. It is sometimes inevitable, at all events inevitable by us. The elements of nature may combine against us—movements in society which work the general good may produce our ruin—friends may prove foes by their very friendliness. And even if we could trace all suffering to our own moral defects it would only be putting the question a step further back. Whence these moral defects? how came they into the world? how did they originate? and why are they not remedied? It is perplexing and full of mystery.

I may have something to say upon the method in which the question should be dealt with, towards the conclusion, but for the present I wish to call your attention to the way in which it was dealt with in ancient times. And it is with the oriental method I am now more concerned. Evil did not present itself

to the Greeks in those same despairing colours that it appeared to the Orientals in. They lived in the enjoyment of the present, a free happy life; and nature seemed to them full of beauty and gladness. When the subject of evil came before them therefore, it came in a tempered form, and they were calmer to answer it than the Orientals were. Besides that, we know very little of Grecian thought and speculation before the scientific spirit had begun to dawn upon them. Consequently when their authentic history begins the primitive beliefs are already modified and come before us considerably toned down. Yet that they felt the existence of evil a very mysterious problem their tragedians very impressively testify. They resolved it, however, all into the operations of a dark fatality, of which there was none to give an account, and which lay beyond the control alike of gods and men.

It was in later and more corrupt times that the notion arose that evil comes from the envy of the gods—a notion however, which could only arise out of a sense of prevalent happiness. The authentic history of the Hebrews begins about the time of the Babylonian captivity, but we get some glimpses into their theological conceptions before that time. So far as their sacred books inform us, however, the subject of evil does not seem to have weighed very heavily upon their minds. The account given in Genesis of its introduction into Paradise must have originated in very primitive, that is barbarous times, and has very much the appearance of being an importation from some foreign source. None but the rudest people could have imagined that tale about the serpent's tempting Eve and the curse subsequently pronounced upon the reptile. And the account seems never to have made any very deep impression on the Hebrew mind, or to have recurred in their history until a much later period. For we can hardly take the very contradictory myth of Moses healing the children of Israel by a brazen serpent

as having any reference to the one in Paradise. And yet this narrative in Genesis seems the only attempt to explain the origin of evil until the period of the prophets, if we can say an attempt was made then. But the truth is, we know so little of the Jews during the intervening period that it is difficult to say what their thoughts and speculations were. The book of Job indeed is wholly composed for the purpose of discussing this question of evil; but in the first place, it belongs to the period of the Babylonian captivity and in the second place it has been doubted whether it is Jewish in its origin at all. My own opinion is in favour of its late Chaldaic or Hebrew origin. For the introductory part which is anti-Hebraic, giving that account about Satan appearing before God and bringing evil upon Job, is no integral part of the book, and it is most noteworthy that whilst in those introductory two chapters all Job's evils are directly attributed to Satan, in the remaining forty chapters he and his doings are not once referred to as offering any solution of the mystery of evil, but the evil is directly and immediately, after the Hebrew method, referred to God.

At the time of the Jewish captivity, however, a new element was introduced into the Hebrew theology,—the doctrine of evil spirits. I do not mean to deny that they had some notions of their existence before; for they naturally arise amongst nearly all barbarous people, and it is difficult to suppose the Hebrews escaped. But during the captivity and after, the doctrine became elaborated, and henceforth formed a more and more prominent feature in their theology. It is generally said they derived these notions from the Persians. It is certain they brought them from Babylon. Amongst both Babylonians and Persians, and indeed the whole of those nations lying round about the regions of the Euphrates, these speculations concerning the source of evil occupied a very large measure of thought. Natural constitution and temperament acted on by climate, and

the vicissitudes of their ever-changing fortune seem to have forced them upon them. I can here only refer to the doctrine by which the Persians attempted to solve the mystery. Evil is so mingled with the good that the only explanation seemed to them to be, that there are two creators and rulers of the world, the one evil and the other good; that these two rulers are perpetually at strife with each other; that as the one prevails good follows, as the other prevails evil follows; and this strife will go on until at last the good will prevail over the evil, and the evil spirit will be held in eternal bondage. I am not clear whether the notion of a yet higher existence than these two creators whose interference ultimately ends their strife, is of so early a date as that I am now referring to; but the probability, at all events, is that it did not belong to the original conception of the theory. Now each of these creative spirits has caused to emanate from himself other spirits through whom he carries on the government of the world, the good spirit giving existence to angels, the evil spirit giving existence to devils or demons.

Now it is clear the Hebrews could only embrace this doctrine in a modified form, and probably the Chaldaeans only held it in a modified form, since, if we may trust tradition, the doctrine of the divine unity came from them. Be that however as it may, those who held, as the Hebrews held, the strict doctrine of Monotheism, could only hold the doctrine respecting the evil spirit and his emanations in a very subordinate sense. The evil spirit must be a creation of the Supreme, and therefore if not originally good, he can at all events have no power beyond what the Supreme permits him to exercise. Only one passage in the Old and New Testaments that I recollect refers to the fall of these evil spirits from a primitively purer state; but the Jews had determined their whole history long before the canon of the New Testament closed. In First Chron. chap. xxi. ver. 1, Satan is said to have stood up against

Israel, and provoked David to number Israel. This book of Chronicles belongs to the age after the Babylonian captivity, and strikingly illustrates the later growth of this doctrine of evil spirits; for in Second Samuel chap. xxiv. ver. 1, which is a more early composition than that of Chronicles, God himself is said to have been the instigator of David; and that is much more in accordance with the purer Hebrew idea. In the writings of the Apocrypha most of which belongs to the centuries immediately preceding the New Testament books, the doctrine of evil spirits comes out much more prominently, and you are enabled by a careful study to trace its growth with tolerable accuracy up to New Testament times.

I need not say how prominent the doctrine is made in the New Testament. Satan is invested with all but infinite powers, and all evil is traced up to his agency. The account given us of the temptation of Christ at the beginning of his ministry is one of the most extraordinary and extravagant conceptions in the world, and yet it is evident how deeply it laid hold of the Hebrew mind from the repetition of it in the three books of the evangelists. There, as you will recollect, Satan appears in person, and not only tempts Christ, but carries him sailing through the air to a pinnacle of the temple, and then whirls him away to the top of an exceeding high mountain, whence he shews him all the kingdoms of the world in an instant, the Indian, Persian, Roman, extending from the far east to the British Isles. The rationalists say, this was only a vision; but that shews, first, the rationalists will say anything to get out of a difficulty; and secondly, their ignorance of Jewish literature, which makes it plain that there would be nothing extravagant in this narrative to the Jewish mind. The Jews then could have believed more absurd things than this, if any one could have invented anything more absurd about the Devil. And therefore when the plain and evident meaning is the

literal one, it is as immoral as it is unscientific to seek for any other.

In the writings ascribed to St Paul, we find the doctrine of evil spirits employed to account for nearly all evil. The chief of these spirits is the "prince of the power of the air working in the children of disobedience," "the God of this world, blinding the minds of them which believe not," and, with his hosts, he constitutes the "principalities and powers" against whom all spiritual warfare has to be maintained. All not regenerated are "the children of the devil," and "his seed remaineth in them," so that they cannot cease from sin. Here you see is a trace of the old Persian doctrine of Satan's part in the creation of the world. Wicked souls are created by the evil spirit—and have their wickedness. The notions respecting these evil spirits were taken up thus into the Christian Church and developed there with the same absurdities that we find amongst the later Jews. Some of the Rabbi contended that they were created by God with all their evil propensities, on the second day of the work of creation at the same time that hell was created. Others that their creation was on the sixth day, and that God originally intended to provide them with bodies, but that immediately on the creation of their spirits the Sabbath commenced, so that there was no time to complete this part of the work.

I must here make what may seem almost like a digression to tell you a rabbinical story about Lilith, but which also accounts for the origin of evil spirits. Modern critics have noticed a contradiction between the narrative given of the creation of woman in the first and second chapters of Genesis. In the first she appears to have been created at the same time with Adam, and in the same way. In the second she is created after him and out of his side. Now the Rabbi saw the contradiction but explained it easily. They are in fact the narratives of two distinct creations, said

they. First of all God did create a woman out of the dust of the earth along with Adam. Her name was Lilith. But as soon as created, she began, like some modern ladies, to contend about her rights. Adam said, It behoves thee to be obedient ; I am to rule over thee. Nay, said Lilith, we are on a perfect equality, for we were both formed out of the same earth. So neither would submit to the other. But Lilith finding she was getting the worst of it, pronounced the Shem-hamphorash—*i.e.*, the forbidden name Jehovah. Instantly she was carried away through the air and became the mother of the evil spirits. God, to console Adam, afterwards created Eve out of his rib.

Amongst all barbarous people that have any idea of the supernatural at all the conception of evil spirits is found. It seems to the barbarous mind the natural counter-part of the notion of good spirits, and is as necessary to explain existent evil as that of good spirits is to explain existent good. Many of these nations pay far more attention to the worship of the evil one than they do to the worship of the good, because I presume fear is a more predominant feeling with them than trust.

But now, it is a curious and not uninteresting inquiry, how comes it to pass that so many people, apparently quite independent of each other, conceived this method of explaining the existence of evil, both physical and moral? Nay, that many people, and some of them those who are called well educated, in the present day cling to this method still? That even if we grant the existence of evil spirits, it would be no solution of the problem of evil, any thoughtful person I should think can discern. It would only remove the difficulties a step further back. For if evil spirits lead men to evil, how came they to be allowed such a power, and how came they to be evil? The Persian doctrine can be the only ultimate one in this direction, and that cuts the knot of the difficulty but does not untie it.

Now, it seems to me easy enough to account for the

method, for it arises out of the same principle as fetishism, polytheism and all those animations of the objects of nature which prevail in rude and barbarous periods. The tendency of all uncultured minds is to ascribe their own qualities to all the active powers in nature. And hence every thing seems to them moved by will, and is possessed of consciousness. By and by a little culture slightly modifies this tendency. As the natural object gives no sign of feeling, its possession of volition begins also to be questioned. Then comes the second, the polytheistic stage, when the moving power, the will, and the consciousness are supposed to reside not exactly in the natural objects themselves but in genii or spirits belonging to them. All nature is still instinct with life, but it is a life also above and besides nature. It is at this period the notion of evil spirits arises. Before, the natural object that brought the evil was in men's apprehension the person who did it and was blamed. Now, it is the spirit that moves the object for the purpose of inflicting the evil. And when once the notion of an evil spirit, above and beyond the object in nature which brings to one evil is conceived, every terror, every calamity multiplies the number and increases the dread of them. Our great poet has supplied us with the illustration of this in the "Midsummer Night's Dream" when Puck frightens away the mechanics of Athens by introducing their companion with an ass's head on his shoulder.

When they him spy,
 As wild geese that the creeping fowler eye,
 Or russet-pated choughs, many in sort,
 Rising and cawing at the gun's report,
 Sever themselves and madly sweep the sky,
 So at his sight away his fellows fly :
 And, at our stamp, here o'er and o'er one falls ;
 He murmur cries, and help from Athens calls.
*Their sense thus weak, lost with their fears thus strong,
 Made senseless things begin to do them wrong ;
 For briars and thorns at their apparel snatch ;
 Some sleeves ; some hats ; from yielders*
 ALL THINGS CATCH.

Now this is precisely the principle. Fear converts the briers and thorns, catching their garments as they flee, into spirits dwelling in the bushes, overpowers their senses, and drives them headlong before unseen beings. And so before terrible calamities men became overwhelmed with fear, and construed the calamities as the work of evil spirits. It is the advance of science which has expelled these evil spirits from the domain of the physical world, and which is expelling them from the domain of the mental world. In the physical world the work is almost complete, so far as the Western nations are concerned. What was formerly considered the result of the agency of good and bad spirits, angels and demons, is now proved to be the effect of natural forces acting according to fixed and unchanging laws. Storms, plagues, earthquakes, and such like things are now reduced to the categories of science, and the demons are exorcised from them. A nation visited with pestilence, and an old woman who has lost her cow, no longer think it the work of the devil, but know it is traceable to some natural cause.

The same cannot be said with the like extent of the domain of mind. There are numbers, and some of them so-called educated people, who not only believe in the existence of evil spirits, but also that they have power over the human mind to suggest evil thoughts, and to arouse evil passions. The reason that the notion lingers so much longer in the domain of mind is quite evident. Thought and feeling have only of late been made the objects of scientific enquiry, and perceived to be subject to law. The metaphysicians here have ruled with few to dispute their sway, and whilst they have not been slow to admit the existence of law in the order of the suggestion of thought and the excitement of feeling, their dogmas concerning the freedom of the will have overridden this law, and after all made it a fitful uncertain thing. But the more rigid investigations of modern biologists having reduced

thought, feeling, and will to the condition of functions of animal life, have made them as severely subject to natural law as any of the physical functions are. Thought and feeling originate in a definite order, and by a force strictly correlated with nerve force. There is no room left therefore for the play of evil spirits ; and of necessity they become superannuated. But this knowledge has not yet become widely spread, and those ignorant of it are therefore left free to the play of their fancies or the indulgence of their credulity. As soon as fancy becomes chastened by knowledge they too will lay aside such creations for facts.

But now, abandoning such a method of accounting for evil, where are we ? What other shall we adopt ? I shall not enter into the metaphysical explanations, which are numerous. None of them can possibly satisfy the mind, for they rest on no basis of fact, and often seem nothing better than a cloud of obscure words from which one cannot draw one ray of light. It avails nothing to be told that "evil is good in making," that it is "the negation of good, and arises out of the imperfection necessarily characterizing all finite things," and that it is "the permitted means by which God raises us to a higher condition." Such phrases explain nothing. They leave the facts only more obscured. Failing therefore all methods of explanation allow me to urge upon you the only wise course left open to us. And that is to give up all quest into the mystery, and just deal with the facts as they are so as to remedy the evil. All those teleological questions about the design the creator had in this thing and in that ; the questions about the reasons of this and the other, are idle and absurd. We know nothing of what lies beyond us, in regions our senses cannot penetrate. We know nothing of God's mind, designs, or aims, beyond what is actually done in nature. Let our theories therefore be ever so well constructed upon mere ideas and fancies—they remain nothing but ideas and fancies still, and these

are not worth one moment's care so long as they are not tested by facts. And there would be no practical good, even supposing it were possible, in solving such a question as the origin and the reason of evil. It would not make the pressure of the evil one whit the less. It would not give us one particle of help towards removing its pressure. What we really want to know is those laws of nature by observing of which we may prevent the evil, or if it come remedy it. And that, whether we speak of physical or moral evil, we can only do by the direct and careful study of nature—nature I mean in her physical and moral aspects. And the long ages that have been wasted in speculations about demons and evil spirits, or in metaphysical fancies, are chiefly to be regretted as so much time gone which might have been devoted to the pursuit of this useful knowledge, had men but cared more for facts than fancies, and known how limited their powers are. But their absurdities and failures may teach us wisdom if we be wisely inclined. Let us give up the foolish fanciful pursuits of our fathers. Let us take the world as we find it—let us study the order of its phenomena, and the imposed conditions of human well-being and happiness. And then, although we may leave the mysteries of evil unsolved, we shall daily become more free from the evil.