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THOUGHTS

ON

THE EXISTENCE OF EVIL.

BY

PROFESSOR F. W. NEWMAN.



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MY DEAR SCOTT,

I do not know whether you will take interest in this paper, which, in preparing to change my abode, I have routed out of a drawer. You will observe that it is dated 1841. At that time I had gone far from "the creed of the Reformers," but had not quite cut the last cords that bound me to the idea of Supernaturalism.—

Yours ever,

F. W. N.

June 9th 1872.

THOUGHTS ON THE EXISTENCE OF EVIL.

IT is impossible to extend inquiry and contemplation ever so little beyond the bounds of ordinary thought, without discerning how crude and untenable is the popular conception of divine Omnipotence. The child who is informed that God is Almighty, asks in great simplicity, why then does God let any body be unhappy? We may unhesitatingly deduce, that there is a real contrariety between the divine perfections, as conceived of by the child, and the existence of any evil. With the same logical force, though with more rudeness, some have alleged that the deity ought to have made man other than he is. Nor has the highest intellect and deepest piety ever essayed even to modify and relieve the difficulty, except by suggestions drawn from the topics of Optimism. It is said, "Perhaps the allwise God sees that *it is best* so to be: he sees ends to be obtained, *which could not be obtained so well* in any other way; and which are valuable enough to deserve being bought at such a price." In different forms, this is substantially the meaning of all that the humble and pious can adduce. Whether learned or unlearned, philosophic or simple, the topic to which they refer us, is, "*Perhaps* the Allwise God saw that there was *no better way.*"

A sentiment, even conjectural, which comes to us recommended by such authority, cannot be deemed rash and profane. If it is impious, what else is more pious? Is it not the zealous effort of piety to shelter and

defend its own existence? It is, and whether it be a just sentiment or not, at any rate it is devotional and humble. And yet, let us examine what it virtually means. The evil which God has either ordained or permitted is partly moral and partly physical; yet this, it is suggested, was probably seen by him to be the best means of attaining some eminently good end. Now it cannot be intended to imply that he thinks slightly of moral evil; an idea subversive of reverence for his holy character, and degrading him into one who will employ wicked means to compass his purposes. It must remain, that the argument intends to say, that inscrutable limitations exist in the divine power, which could never have been suspected until the broad facts proclaimed it; so that the deity had to submit necessarily, at least for a time, to a state of things contrary to his mind, as an essential prerequisite towards the attaining of a glorious end beyond.

A recent essayist, whose work has attracted more than usual notice, the Rev. Henry Woodward, has forced prominently forward the fact, that nearly all our reasonings concerning the *Wisdom* of God imply some limitation of his power. To a being, Omnipotent in the gross and popular sense, wisdom must be wholly useless, and in fact becomes in him an unintelligible quality. As policy is superfluous, to a conqueror who can apply overwhelming force, so is wisdom superseded by omnipotence. We admire the adaptation of lungs to air, and of air to the lungs, on the supposition that a difficult problem has been proposed,—how to free the blood from noxious particles? But if we are asked, “why might not the divine *fiat* have done it as well?” one reply alone is to be had,—that there are other objects to be gained by adhering to the general laws of matter, which objects *could not* have been so well gained by a direct exertion of divine power. If otherwise, there would be no intelligible wisdom in employing a circuitous, rather than a direct method of effecting

the end. The like may be observed in every other case. Hence, wisdom and power are in one sense antagonistic qualities ; the more you enlarge the sphere of the latter, the more you diminish that of the former; and every time we ascribe wisdom to the divine agent, we virtually imply some unknown limitation to his power, and deny the existence of almightiness in its vulgar sense.

To ignorant persons, who have imbibed with their devotional feelings the popular idea of omnipotence, it is apt to appear a profane thing to assert, that it is not within the power of the Almighty to recall the past ; or, to construct a square which shall have the properties of a circle. But all thoughtful and philosophical minds have long been aware, that that which is self-contradictory does not lie within the sphere of power ; and that it is no degradation to the Almighty that he cannot make the same thing both to be and not to be.

It being then certain, that limitations to the operations of his power may exist, and do exist, which the thoughtful of our race can discern, but of which the ignorant and unthinking are not aware ; we may presume that other limitations possibly exist, which no human mind would guess at *à priori*, and which may, as yet, be concealed from all. And it has appeared, that an analysis of every argument which ascribes wisdom to the deity, manifests that there is a secret conviction in all religious minds of the *reality* of that which has been just called a presumption. Applying such principles to the creation of intelligent and free beings like man, we presently fall upon the conception, that to be able to love God, man needed to be able to hate him ; if free to go right, man is free also to go wrong. At present it is enough to assert, that it is at least a plausible opinion that the two sorts of ability are inseparable. It is *not only* unproved that to create a being capable of holiness without being liable to sin,

is within the sphere of divine power ; but the *prima facie* aspect of the case is the reverse, tending to convince us that the very idea is as self-contradictory as that of a square circle. For when we try to analyse the notion of freedom, or indeed of holiness, we find it essentially implies a power of sin. For who would call a man honest, who had no natural power to be dishonest? or meek, who was physically unable to be angry? or humble, who could not help his humility? and so of all other moral excellences. Every one of them implies a *προαίρεσις* or *free choice*; and they not only could not be praised, but could not even exist; for it would not be a soul if there were no freedom. A liability to go wrong is then essentially inseparable from a capacity to go right, as much as convexity from concavity. They are little more than the same thing viewed from opposite sides. We do not praise a stone image of Xenocrates for temperance ; for it cannot be gluttonous ; and we do not blame a hog for gluttony or a fox for theft, for they are incapable of the virtues of temperance and of honesty.

Now if this does not wholly satisfy any one, let it be at least allowed that the opinion is not wholly imaginary or absurd, but that it has a measure of probability. That probability appears at once to be turned into practical certainty by the powerful testimony of matter of fact on the same side. We *do* find, to an amazing and appalling extent, moral disorder spread over the whole world as known to us ; and the greatest difficulty is met in accounting for such a phenomenon within the realm of so beneficent and wise a ruler as we believe to superintend the earth. The fact forces on all pious contemplators the conviction, that, in some sense or other, *he could not help it*, consistently with the attaining of some paramount ends. If it is a physical difficulty which he could not overcome, that no doubt tends to degrade our conception of divine power ; but if it is a metaphysical difficulty, not at all. On the contrary, our own minds are in fault for having invented

an absurdity, and then proposed it as a problem for his power to effect. The latter is at once both the alternative to which the case itself points us, and that which preserves the honour of the divine attributes. It does then appear to have as much proof as have any of the received propositions of natural theology, that *to create a being capable of having a holy will, essentially implies the endowing him with a power to sin*; and that even almighty power cannot separate the two, since the idea is self-contradictory.

If this is conceded, the first great question pressing on us is; "whether the evils resulting from the creation of man, as a being capable of holiness, are so enormous, as to outweigh all the conceivable advantages." We cannot set aside this, by imagining some metaphysical necessity to have forced the deity to the creation of mankind; without falling into a system of mere fatalism. It would make out, that he is not our voluntary creator, but is himself a kind of tool or machine in the hands of destiny; and by breaking the moral connection between the creator and his creatures, would appear to subvert all intelligent piety. Nor indeed can the intellect approve such a conception, any more than does our devotional feeling; for what can be a more unmeaning phrase, than that God should create us by necessity, and without his own choice? Forced then to regard the act as chosen deliberately and voluntarily on his part, we cannot help urgently desiring some ground to believe, that the contingent evils thence resulting are slight in comparison with the good. To suppose either that he knew they would outweigh the good, or that his foresight was defective, and that he did not know how great they would prove, would grievously impair our conception either of the goodness or of the wisdom of God.

It is useless to deny that the doctrine of eternal misery, whether as popularly understood, or as philosophically explained, spreads an impenetrable cloud over the whole divine character. It matters not whether we

conceive of God as exerting a direct act of judgment, to torture in everlasting flames the vast majority of the human race; or whether the wicked are to endure countless and never-ending agonies from accusing conscience and evil passions. The two doctrines possess in common the FACT of everlasting misery and everlasting sin, in appalling and ever increasing intensity; and this, to a vast majority of the children of Adam. Even if the last point were omitted, yet if there be millions on whom this horrible lot would fall, the human heart seems incapable of conceiving how this awful evil can ever be a desirable purchase money for some greater good; but we are forced back on the inevitable persuasion, that it had been better that man had never been created. Nay, could we realize what eternal sin and eternal agony mean, perhaps we should conclude that such suffering and such moral evil to a single individual would be too great a price to pay for the everlasting blessedness and perfection of all the rest of our race. No generous mind,—or rather, no heart not harder than flint,—could desire to purchase for itself a heaven at the price of a hell to its brother; but would wish a thousand times over that not one of the family had ever come into existence. Such is the unconstrained utterance of ordinary human feeling; and if we are *not* to ascribe the like to the supreme creator, if we are to suppose his strength of mind such, that he does not flinch from bringing about the welfare of the few, by results so appalling to the many; devotion is crushed into superstition, and adoration ceases to be intelligent. No effort can be made to dispel the darkness resting on the character of the most high, if the doctrine of eternal punishment, in the philosophical and exact sense of the term *eternal*, is true.

It is, however, certain, that one who is contemplating the facts of the world with the eye of a natural theologian, will not encumber himself with this doctrine. It is, if sanctioned by Christianity, a load to be supported by the credit of "revelation;" a new diffi-

culty introduced, of which we know nothing from a contemplation of nature : and in this case it must be allowed, that so far from bringing us "good news," and clearing up the difficulties which distressed faith and perplexed intellect, Christ has brought us the worst news we could possibly have had, worse than the wildest misanthrope could have imagined, and has intensely aggravated all pre-existing perplexities. In short, whatever is the amount of evidence testifying to the truth of the Christian revelation, it might seem an obvious axiom that it is the duty of every good man, as it must be the impulse of every humane man, earnestly to hope that Christianity may turn out to be a fiction, rather than that this doctrine should be true : and this circumstance loads it with so enormous an improbability, as would suffice to overturn all intelligent faith in the doctrine, were it even far better supported by Scriptural evidence than it is.

Supposing then that this doctrine is set aside, let us recur to the question, whether evil (physical and moral) may not ultimately prove a sort of evanescent quantity, in comparison to the good. The first step towards this will assuredly be taken, if it is believed that *the evil is temporary, the good eternal*. Now, to this, the general spirit of the Christian Scriptures strongly testifies ; nor are there wanting special texts bearing on this result. All sin is regarded as of the nature of *corruption* ; and is counted as "of this age ;" while all righteousness and goodness is regarded as both coming down from God, and as partaking of his nature, which is incorruption and eternity. To the same conclusion both conscience and philosophy point. From the very necessity of the case, inexperience appears to draw after it errors ; we make allowance for the indiscretions of youth : we should think it inhuman to wish a man to be punished to his dying day for his early offences. Moreover, the punishment which they draw after them has a very perceptible tendency to correct and improve the man. It would be unwise to desire that sin should not tend to

bring after it misery ; for it would be to lose a wholesome instructor : but as we must wish the punishment to be only in due measure, and to cease after it has annihilated that of which it was the chastisement, so we have the testimony of experience, that this is ordinarily the case. Man being himself finite, his sin is not infinite in its effects on others, nor on himself ; and if not always remediable, yet it tends to self-exhaustion. All virtue and goodness, being self-consistent, strengthen continually with growth : but vices in every shape are opposed to one another, and though occasionally they may strengthen each other, the contrary happens far oftener. Indeed, in different men, vices are in the long run obviously and surely opposed, and wear each other out in many ways. Now the fact is (however it be explained) that man comes into this world with intellect and conscience wholly unformed, and he has to be built up into a moral and spiritual being. It would be more reasonable to expect a person to be able to swim before entering the water, than to expect a human being to learn to go right, without ever going wrong. But if in manhood we look back with a smile and without pain at the sorrows of childhood, so also do we look back without shame or remorse at the peevishness, greediness, impatience, or other follies incident to that age ; nay, nor does any sound minded man feel humbled at the faults of youth, when they are merely the necessary defects of that age, and not his own personal and peculiar transgressions—I mean, such defects as the being too sanguine and ardent, hasty and imprudent, too ready to form friendships and to trust strangers, too vehement in love and in expectation, somewhat too confident of one's own opinion. Just in proportion as any of these were a voluntary transgression, they will call for and produce humiliation, but no further. But again, whatever may have been our past sufferings, yet when at last we obtain honourable and permanent repose, the remembrance of them is rather pleasant ; and if they have brought us spiritual improvement, we

may well count them a real good. No amount then of mere outward suffering, not connected with our own sin, during this short life, need cause the slightest difficulty in our present argument. All evil is ultimately annihilated, in comparison with the good. As concerns the moral evil in which each of us may have been involved, no one can repine and justly regret, if the fire which burns in the soul from this cause is fierce and gnawing. If remorse do its work, and the man learn to go softly all his days in the bitterness of his soul; he will only the better learn that sin stingeth as a serpent and biteth as an adder. In fact, as regards the mass of mankind, perhaps no wise man would desire to have the tormenting power of remorse lessened. Nevertheless, as in the case of slight transgressions,—an unkind word—a proud thought—a selfish neglect of another—there is a soothing of the conscience, when contrition has wrought its results,—confession and restitution; so of greater offences there may be a general repentance, quite unlike mere remorse, and where there is, some ultimate lesson may be taught both to the offender himself and to others: and though it is not to be imagined that it is better to him to have gone wrong, than to have been both wise enough and good enough to go right, yet his sin may in the end be a mere process of rising higher; just as the false notes on a violin are but a state of transition towards better play. Hence even the worst cases of guilt become reconcilable with the divine wisdom in ordaining the present scene of things: for in short, though all are transgressors, yet at the worst one portion is led on towards moral perfection and consequent happiness; and another portion, if it does not attain this, yet at some period ceases to exist. No difficulty arises, except on the belief that the sin and misery of the latter is unsubdued and everlasting. Exclude this conception;—believe that goodness alone is eternal; and it remains clearly intelligible, how the divine wisdom may have ordained, on the one hand, that man should gain a stable independent holy will,

so as to be capable of friendship with his infinite creator ; but that, on the other hand, this essentially demanded that he should be left free to sin, and consequently moral evil has abounded and abounds, but only for a time. Sin and its effects, remorse and misery, are to be abolished, and the fruit of holiness shall flourish to everlasting life.

But it will be inquired, is not this, after all, to maintain, that the holy God uses base and unholy means to work out his designs ? Does it not confound our sense of moral distinctions, and make evil to be good when it tends to a good end, if the view above given is correct ? This objection exerts a force that is hard to account for upon many minds ; for it does not seem to have any intrinsic weight. It might seem to have been borrowed from the barbaric reasoning of King Agamemnon in Homer, or from a bye-gone Predestinarian school, whose doctrine annihilated all human agency, and imputed to the deity the acts of all men. Certainly such a doctrine makes it impossible to defend the moral character of our creator. If vice and cruelty are bad, and he is as truly responsible for their existence, as though he were the immediate agent, there is an end of reasoning. The tyrant may justify himself, by saying, that when he oppresses, he is only the tool by which God scourges men. But the first principle of all intelligent worship recognizes in ourselves a power to resist the will of God, which constitutes *sin* against him. It is in extravagant inconsistency with this first principle, to imagine that because God gives us the power to sin, therefore God ordains the sin and is responsible for it. If with reverence we may use the phrase, we may say that he *is* responsible for the *general result* of investing us with such a power. Consistently with goodness and wisdom, he must have foreseen that in the long-run this arrangement was beneficent ; and consistently with justice, he must have provided that no individual should suffer disproportionately, beyond his deserts, from such an arrangement. But this may

co-exist with a steady upholding of the belief in his fixed hatred of moral evil. A wise father will give his son an allowance of pocket money, in order that he may learn to spend judiciously : and even when he sees him about to employ it foolishly, he will not check him, deeming it better that he should learn by experience, than by dictation. Without alleging that the cases are *perfectly* parallel, this suffices to put into a clear light the fact, that to make a beneficial disposal of affairs, well knowing that the parties so invested with power will partially abuse it, is quite consistent with the purest disapproval of such abuse. All that is needed to justify him who so ordains, is, a clear belief that in no other way will so good a total result be gained.

In this light we must look on the men who are generally regarded as the scourges of mankind. Who can read without shuddering the atrocities of a Timour or an Attila ? Indeed, in the latter, it appears less frightful from his very savageness. We judge of him as a wild beast, rather than as a man. But Timour was a legislator and a would-be reformer. Alexander the Great was eminent for political intellect. Our question, however, is not, What are we to think of the *men* ? but, How are we to vindicate the divine providence which permits their action ? It does not seem to be difficult, after the above. Indeed, an Attila may be classed with earthquakes or volcanoes ; fearful visitations not caused by moral evil ; and no one who holds that these physical evils are consistent with divine goodness (partly as the results of good laws impressed on nature, partly, as directly remedial) will find much difficulty in believing the same of Attila. But we may go further. Not only is it certain that we should injure man's nature, if we could wholly extinguish ambition ; certain, that the flame which in Alexander or Napoleon burned to intense and baneful fury, is in its milder forms quite essential to man's welfare : but it is credible, that, if we did but know the alternative possibilities (which we never can know), we might find that the

permanent good effected (blindly) by Alexander, by Julius Cæsar, by Napoleon, far more than out-balances their evil. We may even venture to believe, that, until mankind is otherwise more perfect, it is beneficial on the whole that men of unbridled ambition do exist, and will exist. This is God's great influence for fusing into one the separated tribes of the human race by conquest; the method by which the superior energies and talents of one nation are ultimately diffused over another: and although it produces countless miseries on the way, inasmuch as the conquerors are not *aiming* at good or concerned to use virtuous methods (and this is their sin), yet an extensive survey of human history will convince any well-judging mind, that our race would never have attained its present elevation or its present prospects of improvement, if ambition had always been thwarted before it could overflow in conquest.

It is striking to contemplate the analogy offered us in the whole field of nature, as to *the slow progress* of whatever is to be *ultimately great*. In the botanical world it has been long proverbial, that vast growths are slow; and the discoveries of geology magnificently illustrate the saying. But there is another aspect from which the same facts may be viewed. In one sense, the material universe may be called always the same. Having the same repulsions and attractions and the same material masses, only the same phenomena (it might seem) must for ever recur, did not *organic life* break in to disturb the monotony. The influx of vegetable forms introduces wonderful variety; yet each vegetable in itself is, within near limits, ever like itself; nor does any improvement in the individual, nor much in the species, take place. Moral growth is the last and most complicated of organic growths. If ferns took many thousand years to perfect themselves, it is but little to allow a hundred thousand years to man.

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