

GS351

A FEW THOUGHTS ON THE Philosophy of Evil and Suffering,

From the Stand-point of Reason and Intuition.



It is impossible for a reflective mind to contemplate the wonders of creation without feelings of awe and admiration at the manifestations of wisdom and power displayed in its marvellous adaptations and developments. The beauty, the grandeur, the beneficence, that meet us at every turn, speak of Intelligence and Design. The Power that governs the varied phenomena of nature is apparently unlimited. Our conceptions of this Almighty Power will depend either upon the theological education we have received, or upon the deductions of our own reasoning faculties from the phenomena of earth-life and experience. Starting from premisses which of necessity must be, to an extent, hypothetical, we proceed to deduce certain principles which appear to underlie the mysterious phenomena of Evil and Suffering.

Almost all religious minds will admit the following propositions: it is therefore not intended in this paper to discuss them:—

1. That Deity is an Intelligent Principle, Almighty in Power, and perfect in Goodness.
2. That Man is an embodied Intelligence, limited in Power, and imperfect in Goodness.
3. That Man is free to the extent of his power.
4. That Man survives the change we call death.

5. That by far the larger portion of human experiences are pleasurable.

6. That a very large proportion of Evil and Suffering may be traced to ignorance, and to errors arising therefrom.

With the rejection of so-called infallible revelations, the proofs we have of man's immortality are scientifically inconclusive. The universality of the feeling in favour of immortality may be regarded as a spiritual instinct. The feeling, however, is not altogether one of intuition, but rests upon a logical necessity, arising out of the utter impossibility of reconciling the experiences of life with the existence of a Ruling Power of infinite Intelligence and Goodness, except upon some such hypothesis.

A thoughtful mind can hardly rest satisfied with a negation. When, from the force of honest convictions, men are compelled to reject any particular account of the origin of Evil and Suffering, they are still pressed with the necessity of forming some theory to supply the void thereby occasioned. The facts are too painfully self-evident to be overlooked in any system of philosophy men may consciously or unconsciously entertain. With a profound conviction of the impossibility of any human faculties being able to compass the mind of Omnipotence, we would, with all reverence, use the powers given to us in endeavouring

to discover some beneficent purposes which Evil and Suffering may serve in the Divine economy.

Our conceptions of Deity will ever be the reflex of our ideas of Perfection. The embodiment of all that is Powerful, Holy, Righteous, and Good, is man's highest conception of *God*; and, wherever these attributes culminate in a high degree in any human being, that being becomes man's best representation or manifestation of Deity. The immeasurable distance between the finite representation and the infinite reality must, however, never be overlooked. Nature, in all its varied phenomena, is a manifestation of the Mind of *God*. The laws that govern creation are the expressions of the Divine Will. Motion, life, sensation, and intelligence, are exhibitions of God's Wisdom and Power. These manifestations are probably all that man can know of his Creator in the present state of existence.

It is impossible to suppose that the creation of the Universe and all that it contains is purposeless, or that Creation can fail to glorify its Creator. If the glory of God be the object of Creation, it follows that a Being of infinite Power and Wisdom must, of necessity, adopt the *best* means for the attainment of His purpose. May we now, without irreverence or presumption, assume a *necessity even to Deity*? From the constitution of our nature, we are justified, I think, in saying that, according to finite conceptions, even Deity could not possibly be glorified by intelligences who were not *free* to give or withhold their homage and affections. We have no faculties for perceiving how Infinite Intelligence could be satisfied with ought less than the *spontaneous* love and worship of His own intelligent creatures. Here, then, in the free will of man, appears to be the key which unlocks many of the mysteries at-

tached to the presence of Evil and Suffering in a world created and governed by supreme Love and Intelligence.

We postulate, then, the Love of the creature as the desire of the Creator; and, if this hypothesis be correct, it follows, that the free will of the creature is an indispensable condition to the spontaneity and perfection of that Love. If this be allowed, we may be said to have arrived at the conception of an adequate *purpose* in Creation, viz., the generation, development, and education of intelligences capable of perceiving, appreciating, and enjoying, by the spontaneous efforts of their own free will, the Love of their Creator. In this way we may regard the Creator as providing an outlet for the overflowing warmth of His Love, in the creation of individualized intelligences capable of glorifying their Divine Author, in the appreciation and enjoyment of the endless manifestations of His Perfections. On our hypothesis, it is necessary that the will of man, though under laws, should be absolutely free to the extent of his power; and experience proves the truth of this position. Hence arises the necessity for an education, and this brings us to the consideration of the *plan* by which the Creator, as we conceive, is accomplishing His divine purpose.

In considering the phenomena of earth-experiences we naturally turn our attention first to the material Universe in which we find ourselves, and which, from our point of view, is regarded as the projection of the Mind of God into the plane of action, resulting (possibly, through the condensation of spiritual principles, by a process incomprehensible by us) in the atoms out of which the Universe has been developed. These atoms, under the influence of the Divine Spirit, fulfil, by chemical changes, involving concentrations, combinations, and separations, the will of Him from whom

they emanated. It is the constant influx of the Eternal Spirit into these atomic condensations, called matter, which appears to give rise to the dualism of Life and Death, Good and Evil, which we see throughout nature.*

The action and reaction of this dualism is the pulsation of the heart of Deity, producing and upholding at its every beat the varied phenomena of mind and matter; and thus is evolved, in a perpetual series of progressive and ascending degrees, the endless variety of atomic combinations or organisms of which the Universe, with its varied productions, is composed; each attracting that which it needs and is capable of receiving from the fountain of Universal Spirit; the only limit being capacity, the only condition receptivity. Thus, from the most rudimentary atomic combinations to the most refined human organism, all draw from the same illimitable Source that which they are capable of receiving and appropriating; and this by laws which are immutable, because infinitely wise.

Inanimate Nature thus derives the Motion by which all its changes and developments are effected: this is the character of its receptivity, and this it attracts from the energy of the Divine Spirit, which fills all that is. The vegetable kingdom, by virtue of its advanced organization, in addition to Motion, is receptive of Life; and, to the extent of its capacity, is filled from the same Divine source. The animal kingdom, embracing the properties of the lower organizations, advances a step higher in its receptive capacity, and attracts to itself Sensation, answering to the instinctive faculties, enabling it to fulfil its part in the

Divine drama of life; whilst, from the same inexhaustible source in the progress of development (or order of creation), the human organism, in all its endless varieties, attracts to itself, in addition to the faculties possessed by the lower organisms, all those Spiritual powers of thought and ratiocination which constitute Man a rational being—an Embryo Spirit; having, compared with the animal world, increased perceptive powers and a receptive capacity for higher manifestations of the Divine intelligence.

From the reception of this intelligent principle by the refined human organism, arises that which constitutes the difference between the human and animal kingdoms; a difference not so much in kind as degree, viz.:—of enlarged perceptive powers—more refined susceptibilities, and a more acute sensitiveness, enabling man, by the exercise of these improved faculties, to acquire a knowledge of the constitution of his nature and the laws that govern it. From an intuitive or emotional feeling, arising out of the development of the intellectual faculties, originated, most probably, man's first conception of a Creator or God. As these increased powers of perception and ratiocination are evolved, the moral sense becomes developed, and a knowledge of what is not inaptly termed Good and Evil, with its attendant responsibilities, is attained. Thus, the first rays of Light from the Divine Intelligence break through the dark clouds of man's animal nature (dark by comparison only), producing within him a consciousness, to an extent, of the dualism of that nature, and a recognition, to an extent, of the Will of the Divine Spirit "in whom he lives, and moves, and has his being."

The Light of the Divine Spirit once recognised, Conscience may be said to be formed; and, however dimly this light may be discerned during the process of intel-

* "In the divine order," says Emerson, "intellect is primary; nature secondary. It is the memory of the mind. That which once existed in intellect as pure law has now taken a body as nature. It existed already in the mind in solution: now it has been precipitated, and the bright sediment is the world."

lectual development, to that extent, and that extent only, is man responsible to God for the action of his Will. Thus arises the conflict between so-called Good and Evil—the higher and the lower Good—the Flesh and the Spirit. This conflict originates in the dualism of our nature, educating us by its action and reaction, through and by ourselves, in the wise order of Providence, into the perception of that which alone can make us intelligent, wise, good and happy, viz. :— The knowledge and love of God.

The active recognition of the Spiritual character of this warfare between the lower and higher natures, of which man, as an entity, is a compound, may be well defined as being “born again of the Spirit.” It brings man into conscious contact with the Divine Spirit, and man perceives, as of himself, the Will of God in the eternal principles of Love and Righteousness, which are the points of universal agreement between men of every creed. And here, as ever in nature, for God is absolutely impartial, the conditions of receptivity are dependent upon the capacity of the Organism and the direction of the Will. Experience testifies to the fact that, if the Light of the Divine Spirit is actively lived out, the capacity to receive further light (all irrational influences apart) is correspondingly increased, and this quite independent of creeds or views which, when not the result of personal thought and investigation, are dependent mainly upon educational influences.

When the will of man is in harmony with the will of God, there is Peace, no matter what the stage of intellectual development, or what theological views its possessor has imbibed. If, on the other hand, the voice of Conscience is disregarded, then the light of the Spirit becomes obscured, but not extinguished. When once the spirit of man has perceived the will of God, he is under

law, and can no longer shield himself under the plea of ignorance. Man may, from ignorance, err and suffer; but if his conscience reproach him not, he cannot be said to *sin*. The silent monitor, once recognized, ever remains a witness and an accuser. In the torments of this inward self-condemnation and remorse may be traced the chastening of a Father's love, educating in suffering the will of His wayward and erring child.

The more we search into the phenomena of nature, the more impressed do we become with the fixity of the laws that govern its every change, and the marvellous adaptation of means to ends. This produces in the observant mind a conviction amounting to absolute certainty that the wisdom and beneficence here displayed cannot be lacking in the higher phenomena of human life and destiny. That the Creator is absolutely impartial in His government of the world, is to the reflective mind so obvious, that it is needless to dwell upon the fact. Were it not so, all science would be at fault, and wise men would lose hope if once it could be proved that the acts of God are capricious. On the contrary, the sun shines and the rain falls on the evil and the good alike. If this be so, and if it be allowed that all which emanates from the hands of Infinite Wisdom must of necessity be perfectly adapted to the purpose it is intended to fulfil, we are justified in regarding the world in which we live, with all the varied experiences of humanity, as the best school for the development and education of free intelligences, who are to work out their own endlessly diversified individualities (which in itself we conceive to be a great source of happiness), and develop by and through their individual and combined efforts the inherent possibilities of their nature.

Broken laws fail to explain the *whole* of the mystery of Evil and Suffering, as is evi-

dent in accidents by natural phenomena, and the inevitable decay of the organism, with its attendant weaknesses and ailments. In some way, Evil and Suffering are necessary accompaniments to progress. Why it is so we do not know; but if we are able to discover Love and Wisdom in the mental sufferings and remorse attending the violation of those moral laws which are revealed to all in whom Conscience is formed, we are justified in concluding that the lower form of physical suffering is also the best accomplishment of the Divine ends.

Where the intellect is undeveloped or the conscience seared by the vacillation of the human Will, producing a tendency to physical disorganization or mental retrogression, we can conceive how beneficent may be, and probably is, human sensitiveness to pain. The experience of pain leads to the investigation of its cause, and this tends to reflection, and ultimates in knowledge of a physical and mental character, the benefit of which, in the process of human education, is incalculable. This knowledge is cumulative; and, when men are free enough to think and investigate for themselves, and to live in harmony with the Divine laws, progressively unfolded to the earnest searchers after Truth, then may the first victory over evil and suffering be said to be won.

As, in the evolution of the world, physical convulsions and disasters are the means by which, in the inscrutable wisdom of Providence, Progress, Order, and Beauty are attained, so, in the development and education of mind, does it seem a necessity that human effort should be provoked by convulsions and catastrophes, which compel observation, reflection, and effort.* Thus considered, Evil and Suffering appear

as necessary aids to man, in provoking efforts which an atmosphere of ease and security would most assuredly discourage. Hence, while, on the one hand, the Love of the Creator is displayed in providing a series of ever advancing motives for man's progressive aspirations, so, on the other hand, God's Wisdom is equally displayed in providing, by laws that may appear harsh and cruel, those necessary incentives to action and effort by attention to which man's health, progress, and happiness, are assuredly to be attained. Evil—that is, lower good—and Suffering are the inseparable conditions of sensitive organic life. Without the aids of Evil and Suffering we are unable to conceive any possible means by which Man, as a free agent, could have attained to the higher good, or apprehended Truth and Goodness. Evil and Suffering are the levers by which God moves the world.

We are apt to overlook the compensatory nature of the laws that prevail in connection with Evil and Suffering. The undeveloped man has pleasures unappreciated by the man of refinement. The hardships he is thought to endure are more apparent than real, and his wants are comparatively few. The anxieties attending material prosperity, the nervous susceptibilities of the cultured intellect, and the acute sensitiveness to pain of the refined organism, are absent to a great extent in the ignorant and undeveloped. The so called evil man, whilst lacking the power of appreciating and enjoying the higher pleasures attendant upon a perception and appreciation of the higher good, is nevertheless compensated to a degree seldom duly estimated, in the enjoyment he derives from the gratification of the appetites of his lower nature. On the other hand, it must be allowed that the finest, the noblest, and the holiest men this world has produced, have been mould-

* "The law of growth," says a recent writer, "is this, that all progress is preceded by calamity, that all improvement is based upon defect."

ed and purified in the furnace of affliction and suffering.

How could man know aught of sympathy and love, were it not for sorrow and suffering which draw them out? How could man appreciate the beautiful as beauty, if there were nothing in the shape of contrast to guide him to recognize it? It appears impossible that self-educated free intelligences could ever have attained to a knowledge of such circumstances as Virtue, Pleasure, Peace, Knowledge, and Truth, without coming into contact with their opposites, Vice, Pain, Strife, Ignorance, and Error. The one is learned by and through contact with the other. Thus, the so-called Evils of life may truly be looked upon as lower Goods. Again, the Good of one generation has been the Evil of the next. The Good of the ancient Hebrews was to destroy their enemies. The Good of Jesus was to love them. By far the larger portion of the human race are still under the influence of the Evil (lower Good), and desire to destroy their enemies. The time will probably come when the religion of Jesus and other noble reformers will be understood, and the higher Good they advocated be actively displayed by the enlightened governments of a civilized world.

The principle of selfishness, inherent in sentient life, is an absolute necessity to its progress, and affords an apt illustration of the truth of the proposition that all so-called evil may be regarded as undeveloped good. Selfishness, born of sensation, generates desire, desire provokes action, action stimulates thought, and the exercise of thought (observation and reflection) develops intelligence. Indigenous to the soil of intelligence are those spiritual faculties or perceptions which correspond to the moral sense, in the exercise of which man inspires eternal principles from the all-pervading Spirit of Deity. The evolution and cultiva-

tion of these spiritual faculties appear to be at once the object and business of life. Man thus learns by and through the selfishness of his animal nature, to perceive, by comparison, the higher good of disinterested unselfishness or love in its highest (spiritual) sense.

Man, thus, is born in ignorance, and developed gradually from the lower Good to the higher, that he may learn for himself, through the experiences of life, which are alternately painful and pleasurable, of his own free will to choose the higher and forsake the lower Good. The evils and sufferings of life from this point of view may be truly and intelligently regarded as beneficent necessities, through and by which man is enabled to perceive God—first, in His works, then, in the operation of His laws, evidences of His will—and, finally, rise to the power of appreciating and enjoying the endless manifestations of the Divine love and perfections. If we can thus trace, with our present limited capacities and knowledge, evidences of wisdom and goodness in the so-called evils and sufferings of humanity, constituting a beneficent necessity in the development and education of free intelligences, we may reasonably infer that the sufferings of the animal kingdom are neither vindictive nor purposeless. We are here more in the dark, from the fact of our being unable to enter into the experiences of the animal creation, or to gauge their sensitiveness to pleasure or pain. Change and decay, life and death, good and evil, certainly seem inseparable conditions to the combination of spirit with matter, in its early stage of development. Thus, with animals as with man, the individual amount of suffering can only be fairly reckoned in the account; and again the term of suffering must not certainly be regarded without reference to the pleasure of existence. In the case of slaughtered animals, or those who

are the victims of beasts of prey, they probably have none of those sufferings by suspense and anticipation which must be far greater than the sudden, unexpected, and, perhaps, unconscious separation of life from the organism. In addition to this, from the lack of sensitiveness in the organisms themselves, the sufferings of animals may possibly be reduced to the minimum. The laws relating to the conjunction of spirit with matter (if God be impartial) are compensatory. The capacity for enjoyment is coextensive with the sensitiveness to pain; hence, the more refined and complex the organism the greater the capacity for pleasure, the more sensitive is it to pain. On the other hand, the lower and simpler the organic combination the less acutely it experiences either pleasure or pain. Our ignorance as to the experiences and destiny of the lower kingdoms makes it more difficult for us to trace a cause for their undoubted sufferings; but that there is no suffering without a reason, a purpose, and a compensation, is shown to us by those beneficent results of suffering we are enabled to trace in the kingdom to which we belong.

To sum up our thoughts. It appears that all creation derives from the Divine Spirit, who upholds and governs it, that which it is adapted to receive and appropriate in order to fulfil its destiny. Man, an intelligent individuality, derives from the Divine Energy which fills the Universe that Life which the condition of his animal organization enables him to receive and appropriate; and, from the Divine Intelligence, that Light which from his condition physically, mentally, and morally, he is capable of receiving and appropriating. Physical conditions are dependent upon the bodily organism which, though capable of considerable modification and improvement by the action of man's free will, neverthe-

less, to an extent, retains its inherent individuality. This involves an endless variety of receptive capacities, a wise and beneficent arrangement, contributing greatly to human happiness. The condition of mental receptivity depends upon the degree of intellectual development and mental culture, the extent of a man's knowledge, and the perfect freedom he enjoys to observe, reflect, and investigate. The condition of man's moral receptivity is dependent upon the action of his will. When a man is honestly living out his conscientious convictions as to what is Good and True, that man (with perfect intellectual freedom) must of necessity be progressing in the knowledge and love of his Creator; and, where this is combined with a healthy organism, we are justified in regarding that man as possessing as much of human happiness as humanity is capable of enjoying. Thus, simply stated:—We have what we are capable of receiving, and are what we make ourselves. The incomprehensible Intelligence, whom we call *God*, governs His creation by laws that are infinitely wise. The apparent contradictions and inexplicable expedients that appear to be adopted in the evolution of a world and the development of individualized intelligences are the conditions by which the immutable laws of God are transforming a nebula of chaotic Atoms into a World of beauty, grandeur, and intelligence, in whose womb are generated, and on whose bosom are developed, educated and purified, immortal spirit-entities, who, in the furnaces of affliction and suffering, and in the warfare against the propensities and passions of their lower nature, are made thereby meet to glorify their Creator in an active obedience to His will, in which is involved their own everlasting happiness.

If this is clear to us, it follows that the sufferings of the Animal Kingdom are also

the results of wise and beneficent laws, employing apparently cruel agents in the accomplishment of equally benevolent ends. Under any circumstances, the difficulties are enormously increased on the theory of Evil and Suffering being the result of a single act of disobedience committed in the infancy of the race.* Earth-Life thus appears to be the first chapter in a Book the pages of which are endless, the theme of which is the Wisdom, Power, and Goodness of God, and its earliest teachings the rudimentary principles of Spirit existence. To attain a knowledge of these principles, appears to be the work of every individual soul, and the means best adapted to the purpose are, in the wisdom of God, the experiences incidental to this stage of existence. In the action and reaction of God's immutable laws (material and spiritual), men are ever learning lessons, the full value of which, like children at school, they will realize in after life.

In a recent essay by Moncure D. Conway on "Theism, Atheism, and the Problem of Evil," he says,—"Seeing so much, we remember that we have come to it only very gradually. We know that the human mind once saw disorder in many regions where it now sees order; that knowledge reveals good in many things which ignorance held altogether evil, consequently we are warranted in believing that more and more experience, and increasing knowledge, will make clear the surrounding realm of darkness." "If we could now by a

* The sincere evangelical Christian believes that the Evils and Sufferings of men and animals, and the natural dissolution of living organisms, are all the results of "The Fall"; that death leads to an eternity of misery for all who are unable intellectually to apprehend and consciously to lay hold of such doctrines as "The Trinity" and "The Atonement." It must be left to the reason and conscience of intelligent men to judge on which side the balance of probability lies.

word remove from the world all that has been done for it by pain and evil, we should behold man relapsing from the height he has won by struggle with unfriendly elements and influences, falling back from point to point, losing one after another the energies gained by mastering evil, and sinking through all the stages of retrogression to some miserable primal form too insignificant to be attacked, too nerveless to suffer." "But even now this darkness rests only upon the final cause of evil, that is, upon the inquiry why the ends secured by evil were not reached by a more merciful method. If, in reply to the question, Why is not the universe painless? we must answer, We do not know. In reply to the question, What good end does evil serve? we may answer, We know very well."

I am here reminded of a question put to a distressed parent by a little girl during a prolonged and painful illness, "Why does Maggie suffer so?" The parent was wise, consequently silent. Religion may tranquilize, intuition whisper hope, and philosophy produce resignation; but reason is here out of its depth. We can but say,—we do not know. Theories are propounded, and it is impossible for thoughtful men, consciously or unconsciously, to avoid entertaining some views with regard to the presence of Evil and Suffering in a World created by Infinite Wisdom, governed by Infinite Love, and upheld by Infinite Power; but so long as we are under the influence of reason, and alive to the dictates of conscience, we cannot rest satisfied with any explanation of this mysterious phenomenon which involves the contradiction of the highest and noblest impulses of our nature, or the absence of those principles of Righteousness and Justice which are the intuitions of the civilized conscience.