

I

INTRODUCTORY

I wonder at the hardihood with which such persons undertake to talk about God. In a treatise addressed to infidels they begin with a chapter proving the existence of God from the works of Nature... this only gives their readers grounds for thinking that the proofs of our religion are very weak... It is a remarkable fact that no canonical writer has ever used Nature to prove God.

Pascal *Pensées*, IV, 242, 243.

Not many years ago when I was an atheist, if anyone had asked me, “Why do you not believe in God?” my reply would have run something like this: “Look at the universe we live in. By far the greatest part of it consists of empty space, completely dark and unimaginably cold. The bodies which move in this space are so few and so small in comparison with the space itself that even if every one of them were known to be crowded as full as it could hold with perfectly happy creatures, it would still be difficult to believe that life and happiness were more than a by-product to the power that made the universe. As it is, however, the scientists think it likely that very few of the suns of space – perhaps none of them except our own – have any planets; and in our own system it is improbable that any planet except the Earth sustains life. And Earth herself existed without life for millions of years and may exist for millions more when life has left her. And what is it like while it lasts? It is so arranged that all the forms of it can live only by preying upon one another. In the lower forms this process entails only death, but in the higher there appears a new quality called consciousness which enables it to be attended with pain. The creatures cause pain by being born, and live by inflicting pain, and in pain they mostly die. In the most complex of all the creatures, Man, yet another quality appears, which we call reason, whereby he is enabled to foresee his own pain which henceforth is preceded with acute mental suffering, and to foresee his own death while keenly desiring permanence. It also enables men by a hundred ingenious contrivances to inflict a great deal more pain than they otherwise could have done on one another

and on the irrational creatures. This power they have exploited to the full. Their history is largely a record of crime, war, disease, and terror, with just sufficient happiness interposed to give them, while it lasts, an agonised apprehension of losing it, and, when it is lost, the poignant misery of remembering. Every now and then they improve their condition a little and what we call a civilisation appears. But all civilisations pass away and, even while they remain, inflict peculiar sufferings of their own probably sufficient to outweigh what alleviations they may have brought to the normal pains of man. That our own civilisation has done so, no one will dispute; that it will pass away like all its predecessors is surely probable. Even if it should not, what then? The race is doomed. Every race that comes into being in any part of the universe is doomed; for the universe, they tell us, is running down, and will sometime be a uniform infinity of homogeneous matter at a low temperature. All stories will come to nothing: all life will turn out in the end to have been a transitory and senseless contortion upon the idiotic face of infinite matter. If you ask me to believe that this is the work of a benevolent and omnipotent spirit, I reply that all the evidence points in the opposite direction. Either there is no spirit behind the universe, or else a spirit indifferent to good and evil, or else an evil spirit."

There was one question which I never dreamed of raising. I never noticed that the very strength and facility of the pessimists' case at once poses us a problem. If the universe is so bad, or even half so bad, how on earth did human beings ever come to attribute it to the activity of a wise and good Creator? Men are fools, perhaps; but hardly so foolish as that. The direct inference from black to white, from evil flower to virtuous root, from senseless work to a workman infinitely wise, staggers belief. The spectacle of the universe as revealed by experience can never have been the ground of religion: it must always have been something in spite of which religion, acquired from a different source, was held.

It would be an error to reply that our ancestors were ignorant and therefore entertained pleasing illusions about nature which the progress of science has since dispelled. For centuries, during which all men believed, the nightmare size and emptiness of the universe was already known. You will read in some books that the men of the Middle Ages thought the Earth flat and the stars near,

but that is a lie. Ptolemy had told them that the Earth was a mathematical point without size in relation to the distance of the fixed stars – a distance which one mediaeval popular text estimates as a hundred and seventeen million miles. And in times yet earlier, even from the beginnings, men must have got the same sense of hostile immensity from a more obvious source. To prehistoric man the neighbouring forest must have been infinite enough, and the utterly alien and infest which we have to fetch from the thought of cosmic rays and cooling suns, came snuffing and howling nightly to his very doors. Certainly at all periods the pain and waste of human life was equally obvious. Our own religion begins among the Jews, a people squeezed between great warlike empires, continually defeated and led captive, familiar as Poland or Armenia with the tragic story of the conquered. It is mere nonsense to put pain among the discoveries of science. Lay down this book and reflect for five minutes on the fact that all the great religions were first preached, and long practised, in a world without chloroform.

At all times, then, an inference from the course of events in this world to the goodness and wisdom of the Creator would have been equally preposterous; and it was never made.¹ Religion has a different origin. In what follows it must be understood that I am not *primarily* arguing the truth of Christianity but describing its origin – a task, in my view, necessary if we are to put the problem of pain in its right setting.

In all developed religion we find three strands or elements, and in Christianity one more. The first of these is what Professor Otto calls the experience of the *Numinous*. Those who have not met this term may be introduced to it by the following device. Suppose you were told there was a tiger in the next room: you would know that you were in danger and would probably feel fear. But if you were told “There is a ghost in the next room”, and believed it, you would feel, indeed, what is often called fear, but of a different kind. It would not be based on the knowledge of danger, for no one is primarily afraid of what a ghost may do to him; but of the mere fact that it is a ghost. It is “uncanny” rather than dangerous, and the special kind of fear it excites may be called Dread. With the Uncanny one has reached the fringes of the Numinous. Now

1 - *I.e.*, never made at the beginnings of a religion. *After* belief in God has been accepted “theodicies” explaining or explaining away, the miseries of life, will naturally appear often enough.

suppose that you were told simply "There is a mighty spirit in the room", and believed it. Your feelings would then be even less like the mere fear of danger: but the disturbance would be profound. You would feel wonder and a certain shrinking – a sense of inadequacy to cope with such a visitant and of prostration before it – an emotion which might be expressed in Shakespeare's words "Under it my genius is rebuked". This feeling may be described as awe, and the object which excites it as the *Numinous*.

Now nothing is more certain than that man, from a very early period, began to believe that the universe was haunted by spirits. Professor Otto perhaps assumes too easily that from the very first such spirits were regarded with numinous awe. This is impossible to prove for the very good reason that utterances expressing awe of the Numinous and utterances expressing mere fear of danger may use identical language – as we can still say that we are "afraid" of a ghost or "afraid" of a rise in prices. It is therefore theoretically possible that there was a time when men regarded these spirits simply as dangerous and felt towards them just as they felt towards tigers. What is certain is that now, at any rate, the numinous experience exists and that if we start from ourselves we can trace it a long way back.

A modern example may be found (if we are not too proud to seek it there) in *The Wind in the Willows* where Rat and Mole approach Pan on the island.

"Rat,' he found breath to whisper, shaking, 'Are you afraid?' 'Afraid?' murmured the Rat, his eyes shining with unutterable love. 'Afraid? of Him? O, never, never. And yet – and yet – O Mole, I am afraid.'"

Going back about a century we find copious examples in Wordsworth – perhaps the finest being that passage in the first book of the *Prelude* where he describes his experience while rowing on the lake in the stolen boat. Going back further we get a very pure and strong example in Malory², when Galahad "began to tremble right hard when the deadly (= mortal) flesh began to behold the spiritual things". At the beginning of our era it finds expression in the Apocalypse where the writer fell at the feet of the risen Christ "as one dead". In Pagan literature we find Ovid's picture of the dark grove on the Aventine of which you would say

2 - XVII, xxii.

at a glance *numen inest*³ – the place is haunted, or there is a Presence here; and Virgil gives us the palace of Latinus “awful (*horrendum*) with woods and sanctity (*religione*) of elder days”⁴ A Greek fragment attributed, but improbably, to Aeschylus, tells us of earth, sea, and mountain shaking beneath the “dread eye of their Master”.⁵ And far further back Ezekiel tells us of the “rings” in his Theophany that “they were so high that they were dreadful”:⁶ and Jacob, rising from sleep, says “How dreadful is this place!”.⁷

We do not know how far back in human history this feeling goes. The earliest men almost certainly believed in things which would excite the feeling in us if we believed in them, and it seems therefore probable that numinous awe is as old as humanity itself. But our main concern is not with its dates. The important thing is that somehow or other it has come into existence, and is widespread, and does not disappear from the mind with the growth of knowledge and civilisation.

Now this awe is not the result of an inference from the visible universe. There is no possibility of arguing from mere danger to the uncanny, still less to the fully Numinous. You may say that it seems to you very natural that early man, being surrounded by real dangers, and therefore frightened, should invent the uncanny and the Numinous. In a sense it is, but let us understand what we mean. You feel it to be natural because, sharing human nature with your remote ancestors, you can imagine yourself reacting to perilous solitudes in the same way; and this reaction is indeed “natural” in the sense of being in accord with human nature. But it is not in the least “natural” in the sense that the idea of the uncanny or the Numinous is already contained in the idea of the dangerous, or that any perception of danger or any dislike of the wounds and death which it may entail could give the slightest conception of ghostly dread or numinous awe to an intelligence which did not already understand them. When man passes from physical fear to dread and awe, he makes a sheer jump, and apprehends something which could never *be given*, as danger is, by the physical facts and logical deductions from them. Most attempts to explain

3 - *Fasti*, III, 296.

4 - *Aen.* VII, 172.

5 - *Fragm.* 464. Sidgwick's edition.

6 - Ezekiel 1: 18.

7 - Genesis 28: 17.

the Numinous presuppose the thing to be explained – as when anthropologists derive it from fear of the dead, without explaining why dead men (assuredly the least dangerous kind of men) should have attracted this peculiar feeling. Against all such attempts we must insist that dread and awe are in a different dimension from fear. They are in the nature of an interpretation man gives to the universe, or an impression he gets from it; and just as no enumeration of the physical qualities of a beautiful object could ever include its beauty, or give the faintest hint of what we mean by beauty to a creature without aesthetic experience, so no factual description of any human environment could include the uncanny and the Numinous or even hint at them. There seem, in fact, to be only two views we can hold about awe. Either it is a mere twist in the human mind, corresponding to nothing objective and serving no biological function, yet showing no tendency to disappear from that mind at its fullest development in poet, philosopher, or saint: or else it is a direct experience of the really supernatural, to which the name Revelation might properly be given.

The Numinous is not the same as the morally good, and a man overwhelmed with awe is likely, if left to himself, to think the numinous object “beyond good and evil.” This brings us to the second strand or element in religion. All the human beings that history has heard of acknowledge some kind of morality; that is, they feel towards certain proposed actions the experiences expressed by the words “I ought” or “I ought not”. These experiences resemble awe in one respect, namely that they cannot be logically deduced from the environment and physical experiences of the man who undergoes them. You can shuffle “I want” and “I am forced” and “I shall be well advised” and “I dare not” as long as you please without getting out of them the slightest hint of “ought” and “ought not”. And, once again, attempts to resolve the moral experience into something else always presuppose the very thing they are trying to explain – as when a famous psycho-analyst deduces it from prehistoric parricide. If the parricide produced a sense of guilt, that was because men felt that they ought not to have committed it: if they did not so feel, it could produce no sense of guilt. Morality, like numinous awe, is a jump; in it, man goes beyond anything that can be “given” in the facts of experience. And it has one characteristic too remarkable to be

ignored. The moralities accepted among men may differ – though not, at bottom, so widely as is often claimed but they all agree in prescribing a behaviour which their adherents fail to practise. All men alike stand condemned, not by alien codes of ethics, but by their own, and all men therefore are conscious of guilt. The second element in religion is the consciousness not merely of a moral law, but of a moral law at once approved and disobeyed. This consciousness is neither a logical, nor an illogical, inference from the facts of experience; if we did not bring it to our experience we could not find it there. It is either inexplicable illusion, or else revelation.

The moral experience and the numinous experience are so far from being the same that they may exist for quite long periods without establishing a mutual contact. In many forms of Paganism the worship of the gods and the ethical discussions of the philosophers have very little to do with each other. The third stage in religious development arises when men identify them – when the Numinous Power to which they feel awe is made the guardian of the morality to which they feel obligation. Once again, this may seem to you very “natural”. What can be more natural than for a savage haunted at once by awe and by guilt to think that the power which awes him is also the authority which condemns his guilt? And it is, indeed, natural to humanity. But it is not in the least obvious. The actual behaviour of that universe which the Numinous haunts bears no resemblance to the behaviour which morality demands of us. The one seems wasteful, ruthless, and unjust; the other enjoins upon us the opposite qualities. Nor can the identification of the two be explained as a wish-fulfilment, for it fulfils no one’s wishes. We desire nothing less than to see that Law whose naked authority is already unsupportable armed with the incalculable claims of the Numinous. Of all the jumps, that humanity takes in its religious history this is certainly the most surprising. It is not unnatural that many sections of the human race refused it; nonmoral religion, and non-religious morality, existed and still exist. Perhaps only a single people, as a people, took the new step with perfect decision – I mean the Jews: but great individuals in all times and places have taken it also, and only those who take it are safe from the obscenities and barbarities of unmoralised worship or the cold, sad self righteousness of sheer

moralism. Judged by its fruits, this step is a step towards increased health. And though logic does not compel us to take it, it is very hard to resist – even on Paganism and Pantheism morality is always breaking in, and even Stoicism finds itself willynilly bowing the knee to God. Once more, it may be madness – a madness congenital to man and oddly fortunate in its results – or it may be revelation. And if revelation, then it is most really and truly in Abraham that all peoples shall be blessed, for it was the Jews who fully and unambiguously identified the awful Presence haunting black mountain-tops and thunderclouds with “the *righteous* Lord” who “loveth righteousness”⁸.

The fourth strand or element is a historical event. ‘There was a man born among these Jews who claimed to be, or to be the son of, or to be “one with”, the Something which is at once the awful haunter of nature and the giver of the moral law. The claim is so shocking – a paradox, and even a horror, which we may easily be lulled into taking too lightly – that only two views of this man are possible. Either he was a raving lunatic of an unusually abominable type, or else He was; and is; precisely what He said. There is no middle way. If the records make the first hypothesis unacceptable, you must submit to the second. And if you do that, all else that is claimed by Christians becomes credible – that this Man; having been killed, was yet alive, and that His death, in some manner incomprehensible to human thought, has effected a real change in our relations to the “awful” and “righteous” Lord, and a change in our favour.

To ask whether the universe as we see it looks more like the work of a wise and good Creator or the work of chance, indifference, or malevolence, is to omit from the outset all the relevant factors in the religious problem. Christianity is not the conclusion of a philosophical debate on the origins of the universe: it is a catastrophic historical event following on the long spiritual preparation of humanity which I have described. It is not a system into which we have to fit the awkward fact of pain: it is itself one of the awkward facts which have to be fitted into any system we make. In a sense, it creates, rather than solves, the problem of pain, for pain would be no problem unless, side by side with our daily experience of this painful world, we had received what we think a good assurance that ultimate reality is righteous and loving.

8 - Psalm 11: 8.

Why this assurance seems to me good, I have more or less indicated. It does not amount to logical compulsion. At every stage of religious development man may rebel, if not without violence to his own nature, yet without absurdity. He can close his spiritual eyes against the Numinous, if he is prepared to part company with half the great poets and prophets of his race, with his own childhood, with the richness and depth of uninhibited experience. He can regard the moral law as an illusion, and so cut himself off from the common ground of humanity. He can refuse to identify the Numinous with the righteous, and remain a barbarian, worshipping sexuality, or the dead, or the life-force, or the future. But the cost is heavy. And when we come to the last step of all, the historical Incarnation, the assurance is strongest of all. The story is strangely like many myths which have haunted religion from the first, and yet it is not like them. It is not transparent to the reason: we could not have invented it ourselves. It has not the suspicious *a priori* lucidity of Pantheism or of Newtonian physics. It has the seemingly arbitrary and idiosyncratic character which modern science is slowly teaching us to put up with in this wilful universe, where energy is made up in little parcels of a quantity no one could predict, where speed is not unlimited, where irreversible entropy gives time a real direction and the cosmos, no longer static or cyclic, moves like a drama from a real beginning to a real end. If any message from the core of reality ever were to reach us, we should expect to find in it just that unexpectedness, that wilful, dramatic anfractuosity which we find in the Christian faith. It has the master touch – the rough, male taste of reality, not made by us, or, indeed, for us, but hitting us in the face.

If, on such grounds, or on better ones, we follow the course on which humanity has been led, and become Christians, we then have the “problem” of pain.

II

DIVINE OMNIPOTENCE

Nothing which implies contradiction falls under the omnipotence of God.

THOMAS AQUINAS. *Summ. Theol.*, I^a Q, XXV, Art. 4.

IF God were good, He would wish to make His creatures perfectly happy, and if God were almighty He would be able to do what He wished. But the creatures are not happy. Therefore God lacks either goodness, or power, or both.” This is the problem of pain, in its simplest form. The possibility of answering it depends on showing that the terms “good” and “almighty”; and perhaps also the term “happy” are equivocal: for it must be admitted from the outset that if the popular meanings attached to these words are the best, or the only possible, meanings, then the argument is unanswerable. In this chapter I shall make some comments on the idea of Omnipotence, and, in the following, some on the idea of Goodness.

Omnipotence means “power to do all, or everything”⁹. And we are told in Scripture that “with God all things are possible”. It is common enough in argument with an unbeliever, to be told that God, if He existed and were good, would do this or that; and then, if we point out that the proposed action is impossible, to be met with the retort, “But I thought God was supposed to be able to do anything”. This raises the whole question of impossibility.

In ordinary usage the word *impossible* generally implies a suppressed clause beginning with the word *unless*. Thus it is impossible for me to see the street from where I sit writing at this moment; that is, it is impossible to see the street *unless* I go up to the top floor where I shall be high enough to overlook the intervening building. If I had broken my leg I should say “But it is impossible to go up to the top floor” – meaning, however, that it is impossible *unless* some friends turn up who will carry me. Now let us advance to a different plane of impossibility, by saying “It is, at

9 - The original meaning in Latin may have been “power *over* or *in al*”, I give what I take to be current sense.