

III

DIVINE GOODNESS

Love can forbear, and Love can forgive... but Love can never be reconciled to an unlovely object... He can never therefore be reconciled to your sin, because sin itself is incapable of being altered; but He may be reconciled to your person, because that may be restored.

TRAHERNE. *Centuries of Meditation*, II, 30.

ANY consideration of the goodness of God at once threatens us with the following dilemma.

On the one hand, if God is wiser than we His judgement must differ from ours on many things, and not least on good and evil. What seems to us good may therefore not be good in His eyes, and what seems to us evil may not be evil.

On the other hand, if God's moral judgement differs from ours so that our "black" may be His "white", we can mean nothing by calling Him good; for to say "God is good," while asserting that His goodness is wholly other than ours, is really only to say "God is we know not what". And an utterly unknown quality in God cannot give us moral grounds for loving or obeying Him. If He is not (in our sense) "good" we shall obey, if at all, only through fear – and should be equally ready to obey an omnipotent Fiend. The doctrine of Total Depravity – when the consequence is drawn that, since we are totally depraved, our idea of good is worth simply nothing – may thus turn Christianity into a form of devil-worship.

The escape from this dilemma depends on observing what happens, in human relations, when the man of inferior moral standards enters the society of those who are better and wiser than he and gradually learns to accept *their* standards – a process which, as it happens, I can describe fairly accurately, since I have undergone it. When I came first to the University I was as nearly without a moral conscience as a boy could be. Some faint distaste for cruelty and for meanness about money was my utmost reach – of chastity, truthfulness, and self sacrifice I thought as a baboon thinks of classical music. By the mercy of God I fell among a set

of young men (none of them, by the way, Christians) who were sufficiently close to me in intellect and imagination to secure immediate intimacy, but who knew, and tried to obey, the moral law. Thus their judgement of good and evil was very different from mine. Now what happens in such a case is not in the least like being asked to treat as “white” what was hitherto called black. The new moral judgements never enter the mind as mere reversals (though they do reverse them) of previous judgements but “as lords that are certainly expected”. You can have no doubt in which direction you are moving: they are more like good than the little shreds of good you already had, but are, in a sense, continuous with them. But the great test is that the recognition of the new standards is accompanied with the sense of shame and guilt: one is conscious of having blundered into society that one is unfit for. It is in the light of such experiences that we must consider the goodness of God. Beyond all doubt, His idea of “goodness” differs from ours; but you need have no fear that, as you approach it, you will be asked simply to reverse your moral standards: When the relevant difference between the Divine ethics and your own appears to you, you will not, in fact, be in any doubt that the change demanded of you is in the direction you already call “better”.

Divine “goodness” differs from ours, but it is not sheerly different: it differs from ours not as white from black but as a perfect circle from a child’s first attempt to draw a wheel. But when the child has learned to draw, it will know that the circle it then makes is what it was trying to make from the very beginning.

This doctrine is presupposed in Scripture. Christ calls men to repent – a call which would be meaningless if God’s standard were sheerly different from that which they already knew and failed to practise. He appeals to our existing moral judgement “Why even of yourselves judge ye not what is right?”¹¹ God in the Old Testament expostulates with men on the basis of their own conceptions of gratitude, fidelity, and fair play: and puts Himself, as it were, at the bar before His own creatures-” What iniquity have your fathers found in me; that they are gone far from me?”¹²

After these preliminaries it will, I hope, be safe to suggest that some conceptions of the Divine goodness which tend to dominate our thought, though seldom expressed in so many words,

11 - Luke 12: 57.

12 - Jeremiah 2: 5.

are open to criticism.

By the goodness of God we mean nowadays almost exclusively His lovingness; and in this we may be right. And by Love, in this context, most of us mean kindness – the desire to see others than the self happy; not happy in this way or in that, but just happy. What would really satisfy us would be a God who said of anything we happened to like doing, “What does it matter so long as they are contented?” We want, in fact, not so much a Father in Heaven as a grandfather in heaven – a senile benevolence who, as they say, “liked to see young people enjoying themselves” and whose plan for the universe was simply that it might be truly said at the end of each day, “a good time was had by all”. Not many people, I admit, would formulate a theology in precisely those terms: but a conception not very different lurks at the back of many minds. I do not claim to be an exception: I should very much like to live in a universe which was governed on such lines. But since it is abundantly clear that I don’t, and since I have reason to believe, nevertheless; that God is Love, I conclude that my conception of love needs correction.

I might, indeed, have learned, even from the poets, that Love is something more stern and splendid than mere kindness: that even the love between the sexes is, as in Dante, “a lord of terrible aspect”. There is kindness in Love: but Love and kindness are not coterminous, and when kindness (in the sense given above) is separated from the other elements of Love, it involves a certain fundamental indifference to its object, and even something like contempt of it. Kindness consents very readily to the removal of its object – we have all met people whose kindness to animals is constantly leading them to kill animals lest they should suffer. Kindness, merely as such, cares not whether its object becomes good or bad, provided only that it escapes suffering. As Scripture points out, it is bastards who are spoiled: the legitimate sons, who are to carry on the family tradition, are punished.¹³ It is for people whom we care nothing about that we demand happiness on any terms: with our friends, our lovers, our children, we are exacting and would rather see them suffer much than be happy in contemptible and estranging modes. If God is Love, He is, by definition, something more than mere kindness. And it appears, from all the records, that though He has often rebuked us and

13 - Hebrew 12: 8.

condemned us, He has never regarded us with contempt. He has paid us the intolerable compliment of loving us, in the deepest, most tragic, most memorable sense.

The relation between Creator and creature is, of course, unique, and cannot be paralleled by any relations between one creature and another. God is both further from us, and nearer to us, than any other being. He is further from us because the sheer difference between that which has Its principle of being in Itself and that to which being is communicated, is one compared with which the difference between an archangel and a worm is quite insignificant. He makes, we are made: He is original, we derivative. But at the same time, and for the same reason, the intimacy between God and even the meanest creature is closer than any that creatures can attain with one another. Our life is, at every moment, supplied by Him: our tiny, miraculous power of free will only operates on bodies which His continual energy keeps in existence – our very power to think is His power communicated to us. Such a unique relation can be apprehended only by analogies: from the various types of love known among creatures we reach an inadequate, but useful, conception of God's love for man.

The lowest type, and one which is "love" at all only by an extension of the word, is that which an artist feels for an artefact. God's relation to man is pictured thus in Jeremiah's vision of the potter and the clay¹⁴, or when St. Peter speaks of the whole Church as a building on which God is at work, and of the individual members as stones.¹⁵ The limitation of such an analogy is, of course, that in the symbol the patient is not sentient, and that certain questions of justice and mercy which arise when the "stones" are really "living" therefore remain unrepresented. But it is an important analogy so far as it goes. We are, not metaphorically but in very truth, a Divine work of art, something that God is making, and therefore something with which He will not be satisfied until it has a certain character. Here again we come up against what I have called the "intolerable compliment". Over a sketch made idly to amuse a child, an artist may not take much trouble: he may be content to let it go even though it is not exactly as he meant it to be. But over the great picture of his life – the work which he loves, though in a different fashion, as intensely as a man loves a woman or a mother

14 - Jeremiah 18.

15 - 1Peter 2: 5.

a child – he will take endless trouble – and would, doubtless, thereby *give* endless trouble to the picture if it were sentient. One can imagine a sentient picture, after being rubbed and scraped and re-commenced for the tenth time, wishing that it were only a thumb-nail sketch whose making was over in a minute. In the same way, it is natural for us to wish that God had designed for us a less glorious and less arduous destiny; but then we are wishing not for more love but for less.

Another type is the love of a man for a beast – a relation constantly used in Scripture to symbolise the relation between God and men; “we are his people and the sheep of his pasture”. This is in some ways a better analogy than the preceding, because the inferior party is sentient, and yet unmistakably inferior: but it is less good in so far as man has not made the beast and does not fully understand it. Its great merit lies in the fact that the association of (say) man and dog is primarily for the man’s sake: he tames the dog primarily that he may love it, not that it may love him, and that it may serve him, not that he may serve it. Yet at the same time, the dog’s interests are not sacrificed to the man’s. The one end (that he may love it) cannot be fully attained unless it also, in its fashion, loves him, nor can it serve him unless he, in a different fashion, serves it. Now just because the dog is by human standards one of the “best” of irrational creatures, and a proper object for a man to love – of course, with that degree and kind of love which is proper to such an object, and not with silly anthropomorphic exaggerations – man interferes with the dog and makes it more lovable than it was in mere nature. In its state of nature it has a smell, and habits which frustrate man’s love: he washes it, house-trains it, teaches it not to steal; and is so enabled to love it completely. To the puppy the whole proceeding would seem, if it were a theologian, to cast grave doubts on the “goodness” of man: but the full-grown and full-trained dog, larger, healthier, and longer-lived than the wild dog, and admitted, as it were by Grace, to a whole world of affections, loyalties, interests, and comforts entirely beyond its animal destiny, would have no such doubts. It will be noted that the man (I am speaking throughout of the good man) takes all these pains with the dog, and gives all these pains to the dog, only because it is an animal high in the scale because it is so nearly lovable that it is worth his while to make it fully lovable. He

does not house-train the earwig or give baths to centipedes. We may wish, indeed, that we were of so little account to God that He left us alone to follow our natural impulses – that He would give over trying to train us into something so unlike our natural selves: but once again, we are asking not for more Love, but for less.

A nobler analogy, sanctioned by the constant tenor of Our Lord's teaching, is that between God's love for man and a father's love for a son. Whenever this is used, however (that is, whenever we pray the Lord's Prayer), it must be remembered that the Saviour used it in a time and place where paternal authority stood much higher than it does in modern England. A father half apologetic for having brought his son into the world, afraid to restrain him lest he should create inhibitions or even to instruct him lest he should interfere with his independence of mind, is a most misleading symbol of the Divine Fatherhood. I am not here discussing whether the authority of fathers, in its ancient extent, was a good thing or a bad thing: I am only explaining what the conception of Fatherhood would have meant to Our Lord's first hearers, and indeed to their successors for many centuries. And it will become even plainer if we consider how Our Lord (though, in our belief, one with His Father and co-eternal with Him as no earthly son is with an earthly father) regards His own Sonship, surrendering His will wholly to the paternal will and not even allowing Himself to be called "good" because Good is the name of the Father. Love between father and son, in this symbol, means essentially authoritative love on the one side, and obedient love on the other. The father uses his authority to make the son into the sort of human being he, rightly, and in his superior wisdom, wants him to be. Even in our own days, though a man might say, he could mean nothing by saying, "I love my son but don't care how great a blackguard he is provided he has a good time."

Finally we come to an analogy full of danger, and of much more limited application, which happens, nevertheless, to be the most useful for our special purpose at the moment – I mean, the analogy between God's love for man and a man's love for a woman. It is freely used in Scripture. Israel is a false wife, but Her heavenly Husband cannot forget the happier days; "I remember thee, the kindness of thy youth, the love of thy espousals, when thou wentest after Me in the wilderness."¹⁶ Israel is the pauper

16 - Jeremiah 2: 2.

bride the waif whom Her lover found abandoned by the wayside, and clothed and adorned and made lovely and yet she betrayed Him.¹⁷ “Adulteresses” St. James calls us, because we turn aside to the “friendship of the world”, while God “Jealously longs for the spirit He has implanted in us”¹⁸ The Church is the Lord’s bride whom He so loves that in her no spot or wrinkle is enduring.¹⁹ For the truth which this analogy serves to emphasise is that Love, in its own nature, demands the perfecting of the beloved; that the mere “kindness” which tolerates anything except suffering in its object is, in that respect, at the opposite pole from Love. When we fall in love with a woman, do we cease to care whether she is clean or dirty, fair or foul? Do we not rather then first begin to care? Does any woman regard it as a sign of love in a man that he neither knows nor cares how she is looking? Love may, indeed, love the beloved when her beauty is lost: but not because it is lost. Love may forgive all infirmities and love still in spite of them: but Love cannot cease to will their removal. Love is more sensitive than hatred itself to every blemish in the beloved; his “feeling is more soft and sensible than are the tender horns of cockled snails”. Of all powers he forgives most; but he condones least: he is pleased with little, but demands all.

When Christianity says that God loves man, it means that God *loves* man: not that He has some “disinterested”, because really indifferent, concern for our welfare, but that, in awful and surprising truth, we are the objects of His love. You asked for a loving God: you have one. The great spirit you so lightly invoked, the “lord of terrible aspect”, is present: not a senile benevolence that drowsily wishes you to be happy in your own way, not the cold philanthropy of a conscientious magistrate, nor the care of a host who feels responsible for the comfort of his guests, but the consuming fire Himself, the Love that made the worlds, persistent as the artist’s love for his work and despotic as a man’s love for a dog, provident and venerable as a father’s love for a child, jealous, inexorable, exacting as love between the sexes. How this should be, I do not know: it passes reason to explain why any creatures, not to say creatures such as we, should have a value so prodigious in their Creator’s eyes. It is certainly a burden of glory not only

17 - Ezekiel 16: 6-15.

18 - James 4:4, 5. Authorised Version mistranslates.

19 - Ephesians 5: 27.

beyond our deserts but also, except in rare moments of grace, beyond our desiring; we are inclined, like the maidens in the old play, to deprecate the love of Zeus.²⁰ But the fact seems unquestionable. The Impassible speaks as if it suffered passion, and that which contains in Itself the cause of its own and all other bliss talks as though it could be in want and yearning. "Is Ephraim my dear son? is he a pleasant child? for since I spake against him I do earnestly remember him still: therefore my bowels are troubled for him."²¹ "How shall I give thee up, Ephraim? How shall I abandon thee, Israel? Mine heart is turned within me."²² "Oh Jerusalem, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not."²³

The problem of reconciling human suffering with the existence of a God who loves, is only insoluble so long as we attach a trivial meaning to the word "love", and look on things as if man were the centre of them. Man is not the centre. God does not exist for the sake of man. Man does not exist for his own sake. "Thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created."²⁴ We were made not primarily that we may love God (though we were made for that too) but that God may love us, that we may become objects in which the Divine love may rest "well pleased". To ask that God's love should be content with us as we are is to ask that God should cease to be God: because He is what He is, His love must, in the nature of things, be impeded and repelled, by certain stains in our present character, and because He already loves us He must labour to make us lovable. We cannot even wish, in our better moments, that He could reconcile Himself to our present impurities – no more than the beggar maid could wish that King Cophetua should be content with her rags and dirt, or a dog, once having learned to love man, could wish that man were such as to tolerate in his house the snapping, verminous, polluting creature of the wild pack. What we would here and now call our "happiness" is not the end God chiefly has in view: but when we are such as He can love without impediment, we shall in fact be happy.

20 - *Prometheus Vincitus*, 887-900.

21 - Jeremiah 31: 20.

22 - Hosea 11: 8.

23 - Matthew 23: 37.

24 - Revelation 4: 11.

I plainly foresee that the course of my argument may provoke a protest. I had promised that in coming to understand the Divine goodness we should not be asked to accept a mere reversal of our own ethics. But it may be objected that a reversal is precisely what we have been asked to accept. The kind of love which I attribute to God, it may be said, is just the kind which in human beings we describe as “selfish” or “possessive”, and contrast unfavourably with another kind which seeks first the happiness of the beloved and not the contentment of the lover. I am not sure that this is quite how I feel even about human love. I do not think I should value much the love of a friend who cared only for my happiness and did not object to my becoming dishonest. Nevertheless, the protest is welcome, and the answer to it will put the subject in a new light, and correct what has been one-sided in our discussion.

The truth is that this antithesis between egoistic and altruistic love cannot be unambiguously applied to the love of God for His creatures. Clashes of interest, and therefore opportunities either of selfishness or unselfishness, occur only between beings inhabiting a common world: God can no more be in competition with a creature than Shakespeare can be in competition with Viola. When God becomes a Man and lives as a creature among His own creatures in Palestine, then indeed His life is one of supreme self-sacrifice and leads to Calvary. A modern pantheistic philosopher has said, “When the Absolute falls into the sea it becomes a fish”; in the same way, we Christians can point to the Incarnation and say that when God empties Himself of His glory and submits to those conditions under which alone egoism and altruism have a clear meaning, He is seen to be wholly altruistic. But God in His transcendence – God as the unconditioned ground of all conditions cannot easily be thought of in the same way. We call human love selfish when it satisfies its own needs at the expense of the object’s needs – as when a father keeps at home, because he cannot bear to relinquish their society, children who ought, in their own interests, to be put out into the world. The situation implies a need or passion on the part of the lover, an incompatible need on the part of the beloved, and the lover’s disregard or culpable ignorance of the beloved’s need. None of these conditions is present in the relation of God to man. God has no needs. Human love, as Plato teaches us, is the child of Poverty – of a want or lack; it is

caused by a real or supposed good in its beloved which the lover needs and desires. But God's love, far from being caused by goodness in the object, causes all the goodness which the object has, loving it first into existence and then into real, though derivative, loveability. God is Goodness.

He can give good, but cannot need or get it. In that sense all His love is, as it were, bottomlessly selfless by very definition; it has everything to give and nothing to receive. Hence, if God sometimes speaks as though the Impassible could suffer passion and eternal fullness could be in want, and in want of those beings on whom it bestows all from their bare existence upwards, this can mean only, if it means anything intelligible by us, that God of mere miracle has made Himself able so to hunger and created in Himself that which we can satisfy. If He requires us, the requirement is of His own choosing. If the immutable heart can be grieved by the puppets of its own making, it is Divine Omnipotence; no other, that has so subjected it, freely, and in a humility that passes understanding. If the world exists not chiefly that we may love God but that God may love us, yet that very fact, on a deeper level, is so for our sakes. If He who in Himself can lack nothing chooses to need us, it is because we need to be needed. Before and behind all the relations of God to man, as we now learn them from Christianity, yawns the abyss of a Divine act of pure giving – the election of man, from nonentity, to be the beloved of God, and therefore (in some sense) the needed and desired of God, who but for that act needs and desires nothing, since He eternally has, and is, all goodness. And that act is for our sakes. It is good for us to know love; and best for us to know the love of the best object, God. But to know it as a love in which we were primarily the wooers and God the wooed, in which we sought and He was found, in which His, conformity to our needs, not ours to His, came first, would be to know it in a form false to the very nature of things. For we are only creatures: our *rôle* must always be that of patient to agent, female to male, mirror to light, echo to voice. Our highest activity must be response, not initiative. To experience the love of God in a true, and not an illusory form, is therefore to experience it as our surrender to His demand, our conformity to His desire: to experience it in the opposite way is, as it were, a solecism against the grammar of being. I do not deny, of course, that on a certain level

we may rightly speak of the soul's search for God, and of God as receptive of the soul's love: but in the long run the soul's search for God can only be a mode, or appearance (*Erscheinung*) of His search for her, since all comes from Him, since the very possibility of our loving is His gift to us, and since our freedom is only a freedom of better or worse response. Hence I think that nothing marks off Pagan theism from Christianity so sharply as Aristotle's doctrine that God moves the universe, Himself unmoving, as the Beloved moves a lover²⁵. But for Christendom "Herein is love, not that we loved God but that He loved us."²⁶

The first condition, then, of what is called a selfish love among men is lacking with God. He has no natural necessities, no passion, to compete with His wish for the beloved's welfare: or if there is in Him something which we have to imagine after the analogy of a passion, a want, it is there by His own will and for our sakes. And the second condition is lacking too. The real interests of a child may differ from that which his father's affection instinctively demands, because the child is a separate being from the father with a nature which has its own needs and does not exist solely for the father nor find its whole perfection in being loved by him, and which the father does not fully understand. But creatures are not thus separate from their Creator, nor can He misunderstand them. The place for which He designs them in His scheme of things is the place they are made for. When they reach it their nature is fulfilled and their happiness attained: a broken bone in the universe has been set, the anguish is over. When we want to be something other than the thing God wants us to be, we must be wanting what, in fact, will not make us happy. Those Divine demands which sound to our natural ears most like those of a despot and least like those of a lover, in fact marshall us where we should want to go if we knew what we wanted. He demands our worship, our obedience, our prostration. Do we suppose that they can do Him any good, or fear, like the chorus in Milton, that human irreverence can bring about "His glory's diminution"? A man can no more diminish God's glory by refusing to worship Him than a lunatic can put out the sun by scribbling the word "darkness" on the walls of his cell. But God wills our good, and our good is to love Him (with that responsive love proper to creatures) and to

25 - *Mel.* XII, 7.

26 - 1 John 4: 10.

love Him we must know Him: and if we know Him, we shall in fact fall on our faces. If we do not, that only shows that what we are trying to love is not yet God – though it may be the nearest approximation to God which our thought and fantasy can attain. Yet the call is not only to prostration and awe; it is to a reflection of the Divine life, a creaturely participation in the Divine attributes which is far beyond our present desires. We are bidden to “put on Christ”, to become like God. That is, whether we like it or not, God intends to give us what we need, not what we now think we want. Once more, we are embarrassed by the intolerable compliment, by too much love, not too little.

Yet perhaps even this view falls short of the truth. It is not simply that God has arbitrarily made us such that He is our only good. Rather God is the only good of all creatures: and by necessity, each must find its good in that kind and degree of the fruition of God which is proper to its nature. The kind and degree may vary with the creature’s nature: but that there ever could be any other good, is an atheistic dream. George Macdonald, in a passage I cannot now find, represents God as saying to men “You must be strong with my strength and blessed with my blessedness, *for I have no other to give you.*” That is the conclusion of the whole matter. God gives what He has, not what He has not: He gives the happiness that there is, not the happiness that is not. To be God – to be like God and to share His goodness in creaturely response – to be miserable – these are the only three alternatives. If we will not learn to eat the only food that the universe grows – the only food that any possible universe ever can grow – then we must starve eternally.

IV HUMAN WICKEDNESS

You can have no greater sign of a confirmed pride than when you think you are humble enough.

LAW. *Serious Call*, cap. XVI

THE examples given in the last chapter went to show that love may cause pain to its object, but only on the supposition that that object needs alteration to become fully lovable. Now why do we men need so much alteration? The Christian answer – that we have used our free will to become very bad – is so well known that it hardly needs to be stated. But to bring this doctrine into real life in the minds of modern men, and even of modern Christians, is very hard. When the apostles preached, they could assume even in their Pagan hearers a real consciousness of deserving the Divine anger. The Pagan mysteries existed to allay this consciousness, and the Epicurean philosophy claimed to deliver men from the fear of eternal punishment. It was against this background that the Gospel appeared as good news. It brought news of possible healing to men who knew that they were mortally ill. But all this has changed. Christianity now has to preach the diagnosis – in itself very bad news – before it can win a hearing for the cure.

There are two principal causes. One is the fact that for about a hundred years we have so concentrated on one of the virtues “kindness” or mercy – that most of us do not feel anything except kindness to be really good or anything but cruelty to be really bad. Such lopsided ethical developments are not uncommon, and other ages too have had their pet virtues and curious insensibilities. And if one virtue must be cultivated at the expense of all the rest, none has a higher claim than mercy – for every Christian must reject with detestation that covert propaganda for cruelty which tries to drive mercy out of the world by calling it names