

LESSON 12

THE QUESTION OF EVIL

If the Divine Principle--the Godhead--is everywhere and in everything, and if man is divine in origin and nature, it may well be asked why man must go through a long process of evolution to reach perfection. Why should he fall into evil and sin at all? Why, if God is good, is there evil in man, who is said to be a microcosm, a reflection of the Macrocosm? The idea of an evil being called Satan, who can so often outwit an omniscient and omnipotent God, does not satisfy the awakened mind. Surely everyone who has thought at all has pondered this question of the meaning of evil and, perhaps more often than not, has been baffled by it.

First, it may be helpful to substitute the words incompleteness and imperfection for the word "evil." The theosophical philosophy postulates the Absolute, which in itself is unconditioned and unmanifest, but from which an objective, conditioned universe periodically manifests. This manifestation, being a limitation of that which is a partial expression of that which is without limitation, is necessarily imperfect.

In the objective universe, nothing happens except in relation to something else; there must be subject and object--in other words, duality, the principle of polarity. This principle is said to be established at the very beginning of manifestation. Therefore, everything has its opposite, not in an absolute sense, but as a condition of relationship. Evil, like good, does not exist in and by itself, but as an expression of some relativity.

It may be noted that the duality of God is clearly stated in the Bible, but for the most part this seems to be ignored. In Isaiah 45:7 we find the words "I form the light, and create darkness; I make peace, and create evil: I the Lord do all these things." Again, in Amos 3:6 "...shall there be evil in a city, and the Lord hath not done it?" These are only two of several passages which indicate duality in the universe, the pairs of opposites. It would seem, however, that good and evil grow out of action and attitudes and are not self-existent absolutes. To understand the theosophical explanation of the subject of evil, it is necessary to consider again that basic concept, evolution. It is necessary also to postulate that evolution is not a series of fortuitous circumstances but that it is a dynamic, onward-going process, with purposefulness at its core, the plan by which manifestation fulfills itself.

Eons ago, the human monads, as pure, unconscious "units of spirit," followed the "downward" path of involution, gained essential experience in the lower kingdoms of life, and finally reached the human kingdom. As man, the

NOTES

monads
are now
on their

homeward journey, a journey which brings about a constantly expanding consciousness and increasing awareness. As a condition of human awareness, man has the dangerous gift of choice; he has the ability to form judgments (ideally, to form increasingly “right” judgments), to distinguish between that which helps him on the upward path and that which keeps him from making progress. In the theosophical view, good is that which is harmony with the evolutionary purpose and that which aids man’s journey onward, and evil is that which works against it. Thus, evil is the misuse of one’s faculties, of the intelligence, of the divine powers inherent in man. In The Mahatma Letters to A.P. Sinnett we find the statement: “...no more than good is it (evil) an independent cause in nature. Nature is destitute of goodness or malice; she follows only immutable laws... The real evil proceeds from human intelligence and its origin rests entirely with reasoning man who dissociates himself from Nature.” The writer adds, “Evil is the exaggeration of good, the progeny of human selfishness and greediness.”

The logic of this last statement is obvious and underscores the modern psychological theory that anything pushed far enough become its opposite. Food, for instance, is essential to our physical well-being, but overindulgence in food is gluttony. Religion, in the true meaning of the term and not in the sense of dogma, is essential to our spiritual well-being, but pushed to “exaggeration,” it becomes fanaticism and bigotry.

We are well aware that what is considered evil in one culture is quite acceptable in another. If we try to look at the matter in any other way than as inherent in the involutionary and evolutionary process of manifestation, we come up against an impenetrable mystery. Viewing evil as whatever deters us on our onward journey puts the matter in clearer focus and makes it more easily identifiable for each of us individually. Also, it may help us to be less critical of the behavior of others.

When man (the ego) set out on his long journey he was innocent and ignorant; that is to say, he was incapable of making moral judgments; in fact, he had not yet been faced with the necessity for making moral judgments. In the figurative Garden of Eden, which signifies this state of unconscious innocence, he had no conception of the eonic task with which he was faced, nor any awareness of the factors which would help or halt his progress toward its accomplishment. But once he had “eaten of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” he “knew his nakedness”, the mythological symbolism for the birth of self-consciousness and the awakening to the awareness of the dualities between which he has ever since had to choose. He no longer had the shield of ignorance and innocence. This was a necessary and inevitable step. He was driven into the world of self-conscious experience, of toil and of learning through suffering. He left forever the paradise of unconscious bliss. Knowledge of the tree of life, of freedom from the rounds of birth and death, now lies in

the future; it is to be found in a new Eden, a “place” of conscious bliss, of paradise earned.

Indeed, the whole story of Adam and Eve (Genesis 2-4) is a symbolic account in which facts or principles of evolutionary life are dramatized as persons. The truth of this may be apparent if we consider the English equivalents of the names. Adam (Man, or Manas, the Thinker) represents the ego or soul in the drama of creation. Eve (Mother) is the mortal personality, which proceeds from the ego and in which conscious experience is gained. The serpent is the personification of the desire which tempts Eve, the personality, and indirectly through her, Adam, the ego, into activity and the seeking of experience and knowledge, and consequently into the loss of both innocence and ignorance. Abel represents the higher or spiritual side of the personality; Cain represents the lower, earthly aspect. In other words, the spirit, enmeshed in matter, finally is “slain” by the physical nature; the fall of man is reached. Cain, the lower nature, goes wandering and blundering in the Land of Nod, cut off in consciousness from spirit, to become a tiller of the soil. The root meaning of the name Cain is “craftsman,” thus symbolizing man’s task of molding physical matter into usefulness, building it into an instrument of destiny.

Now, Cain’s first-born son was named Enoch, which means dedication, or awareness. Only through limitation in matter does the spirit begin to become aware. Enoch’s son Irad, is “watchful.” With the awareness which comes from experience is born the ability to be on guard against moral weakness. The result is symbolized in the name of Irad’s son, Mahujael, “the disciplined one,” or “smitten of God.” His son is Mathusael, which translates into “man of God,” and Mathusael’s son, Lamech, symbolizes “strong” or “powerful.” Thus we see the allegorical meaning of the Genesis myth. Experience and awareness beget watchfulness; watchfulness begets self-discipline; and discipline produces the man of God who is the source of power. Is not this an accurate story of the soul’s evolution? The “original sin” is simply ignorance; the goal and the victory a return to the innate God-nature, the source of all power.

When we begin to understand the real meaning of evolution, good and evil become less mysterious. Good is all that works in harmony with the Great Law; evil is that which works against it. In the early stages of man’s evolution, the gratification of desire remains strong in him (a heritage from the animal kingdom reinforced by the mind’s cunning). Finding that gratification of the lower desires brings no lasting satisfaction, man learns gradually to conquer rather than to gratify them, or to transmute them into higher and higher forms until at last the thirst for spiritual reality becomes all-consuming. But throughout the entire process, by his very effort to satisfy his desires at whatever level, man has been developing strengths and capacities which aid him in his struggle toward his spiritual goal.

Thus, it
may be
seen that
what is
good at

one stage becomes a hindrance at a later stage; what is good for one individual may be a hindrance to another who needs a new and different type of experience. Aggressive qualities of avarice and selfishness, once helpful as a stimulus to the immature soul, become evil when they work against cooperation and unity, the characteristics of a later evolutionary stage. Selfishness has been compared to the scaffolding necessary during the construction of a building, but an ugly hindrance to the building's use once it is finished.

It is understandable that what we call evil may have another function. Could one develop courage in the absence of something feared? Physical strength is gained through using the muscles of the physical body against some kind of resistance. Similarly, moral fiber is strengthened by conquest of evil. The recognition of evil then becomes most important. Experience teaches us that pain results when we take a wrong action, and in this way we acquire the important virtue of discrimination. We learn that what is good in small doses becomes evil in larger ones. ("Evil is the exaggeration of good.") Thus, we acquire temperance in action and in the satisfaction of our desires, even those which are basically good unless they become stronger than our discrimination. Discrimination is said to be the first step on the Path, essential to our advancement. For what is discrimination but the ability to make the right choice between that which is right for the next step forward and that which would delay us?

Through the experience of pain, which comes not as punishment but as the inevitable consequence of the law of action and reaction, we learn many things. Pain is a stimulus to activity; it brings about effort on our part to eliminate that which causes pain. Hence it is also a purifier. The English poet, John Keats, once wrote, "Do not you see how necessary a world of pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a Soul?" Perhaps the most important thing to gain out of this lesson is the awareness that struggle is not a thing to be avoided, but to be acknowledged as the very root of existence in a world that is evolving. In all of us there are, to some extent, meanness, pride, aggression, contempt, intolerance, selfishness; but also there are generosity, humility, gentleness, tolerance, selflessness. Because the struggle is always toward identification with the Divine Center in ourselves, the inner conflict is unending; it is essential so long as we are incomplete. Sri Aurobindo wrote, "To create out of matter a temple of Divinity would seem to be the task imposed on the spirit born into the material universe."

Once we discover our true inner nature, evil is placed in perspective. Looking at our world today, we can become preoccupied with the evidences of evil, for we are seeing on a large scale the struggle that presents itself as a terrible world revolution. Society suffers from a deep sense of its own insecurity, as it observes the explosive forces of evil in action. Yet is this not a form of

outlawry
from the
spiritual
life which
is our
better

heritage? Tagore, the Indian poet and sage, once wrote, “We know that evils are, like meteors, stray fragments of life which need the attraction of some great ideal in order to be assimilated with the wholesomeness of creation.” When we look at the sky at night, do we not see how innumerable are the stars and planets that remain orderly, governed by natural laws? And do we not realize how few are the meteors which seem to break away and choose a wild course of their own? Yet even the meteors get drawn into the natural orbit of some law-abiding planet and are dissipated. Since we know ourselves to be in reality law-obeying citizens of the universe, can we not treat with the meteors, the evils in our own nature, as the temporary passengers they are and remain serenely confident in the natural goodness of the ego which knows how to deal with them?

The power of the soul within us is a tide which can rise to a great flood or be held captive and useless behind the barrier which we have erected and which we alone can break down. This is the freedom we are really seeking, and which every other human being, wittingly or unwittingly, also seeks. It is on this premise, basic to Theosophy, that we call evil the absence of good. The Vedanta affirms, “Do not think that good and evil are two separate essences, for they are one and the same thing appearing in different degrees and in different guises, and producing differences of feeling in the same mind.” Therefore we are led to believe that no desire, even in the worst of lives, is incapable of being converted into goodness.

Theosophy does not, then, concentrate in puritanical manner on the vileness of the sinner, but on the potentiality of the saint in every sinner. It suggests that rather than spending one’s time looking at one’s own worst nature, or trying to hide it from oneself, one should try to lift his consciousness to a level where that nature cannot express itself. In a world where struggle is inevitable, it is possible to live with an inner conviction that throws light on dark places and brings joy into saddened lives. Peace comes when we accept the nature of the world, the nature of the struggle, with a selfless sense of detachment, wanting love to win the victory, not for us as individuals, but for all humanity. Each man has his own victories to win, his own ignorance to dissipate, his own glimpse of light as the reward for continued right action until the battle of good and evil is resolved. For as we win small battles, competition turns to cooperation, avarice to love, and that which was once considered good but is now evil is transmuted into present good as an aid to further growth.

In conclusion, it might be well to recall the words of Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount: “Why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother’s eye, but perceivest not the beam that is in thine own eye?” (Luke 6:14)

References

*The
Technique
of the*

Spiritual Life, Clara Codd , Chapter 7

Modern Theosophy, Hugh Shearman, Chapter 9

Gods in Exile, J.J. Van der Leeuw, Chapter 1

A Study of Pleasure and Pain, Ernest Wood

Key to Theosophy, H.P.B. (Quest abridgment) Look up the references to “evil” in index.

The Conquest of Illusion, J.J. Van de Leeuw, Chapter 7. “The Phantom of Evil”.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

- 1) Discuss some points of difference between animal existence and human life, as related to the topic of good and evil.
- 2) Is a varying standard of right and wrong possible? Show how something good at an earlier stage is shown to be something evil at a later stage of evolution.
- 3) What is the use or purpose of temptation and adversity?
- 4) What are the uses and functions of pain? Illustrate from personal experience, if possible.
- 5) What should be a person’s attitude toward (a) evil conditions or surroundings, (b) evil people, (c) evil in himself?
- 6) Do you think any person ever deliberately does what he knows to be wrong?