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# The Elements of Pain and Conflict in Human Life, considered from a Christian Point of View

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imputing our actions to ourselves there is maintained, amid all changes of body and mind, the sense of personal identity. What other experience has any right to assail such a position? Is not the way to have any right knowledge of the world to accept all experiences and seek farther for their harmony, and not hastily to reject one experience because of its seeming conflict with another? Still less would it appear that we have any right to call in question any experience merely because it conflicts with a theory: for what is the worth of theories unless they are an explanation of all the facts?

In this conflict with theories of the universe, however, the real interest as well as the real opposition lies; and so grave and far-reaching are the issues that we must be prepared to meet the attitude of the cautious Northerner who would not admit that two and two make four till he knew what use was to be made of it; for beyond question the use is very large. If the sense of free-will is an illusion and our actions are the outcome of mechanical forces, there is little reason for going beyond a mechanical system of the world; while, if action is merely the outcome of fixed character and motive, we need not go beyond cosmic process and a determined scheme of reason. Only if there is in man a spirit that goeth upward, manifested in a power which acts freely and creatively, have we any reason for supposing that a kindred spirit is the ground of the world; whereas, if we can determine freely our own ideals and impose our values upon the world, it is impossible to believe that the world from which we spring is merely mechanical and determined.

## HUMAN FREEDOM

When we consider the grounds upon which our faith in human freedom rests, we may readily suppose that our freedom never would have been called in question except for the large inferences which have been drawn from it. What knowledge is derived more directly from experience, and what experience is so close and intimate? First, we have the consciousness of determining issues when we will; second, we have the sense of being responsible for what happens as if the disposal were within our control; finally, we endure remorse as if the issue might have been different. If, merely by willing, events happen; if our responsibility for them is the deepest and most persistent element in our personality; if only by sophistry can we rid ourselves of remorse or doubt that, as we knew to do good, we might have done it, what other knowledge can intervene between us and so close, so intimate an experience, and what argument has a right to override experience?

Psychology, moreover, depends more and more on the activity of will for all its explanations of mind. Our activity is the spring and remains the centre of consciousness; by the power to select from the world and set ourselves against its forces, we become conscious of self and of an objective world; by

Because of these grave issues, we must, therefore, prepare ourselves to bring our experience into dispute and set it face to face with the large questions of the nature of things, even though we may in our own minds still cherish the view that no mortal ever does know enough about the universe to justify him in setting up any theory against any fact of experience whatsoever, and, least of all, facts so personal and near.

On scientific, philosophical and religious grounds this experience of our freedom has been called in question.

Science, it is said, opposes to this idea of fluctuating voluntary action the idea of fixed mechanical law. As we progress in knowledge, this realm of unalterable law keeps encroaching on what, in our ignorance, we took to be the sphere of freedom and arbitrary action. Therefore, we are justified in expecting, that some day this latter sphere will be blotted out, and, meantime, we can believe that it only seems to exist because science has not advanced far enough to show its necessity. The real cause of willing is the fixed mechanical cause, and the sense of willing which accompanies the action is no more its cause than the striking of a clock is the cause of its moving to the hour. Thus willing only marks the hour, while an action is determined by other and mechanical causes.

The philosophical argument accepts the reality of will and its issue in actual happenings, but regards it as determined by motive and character. How can we act, we are asked, except on the strongest motive? And how is the strength of our motive determined, if not by our character? Rational action, therefore, can

be nothing save action upon our strongest motive as determined by our character. And if we could act in conflict with our strongest motive and unlike our characters, the result would be merely irrational.

The religious argument starts from the omniscience and omnipotence of God. If He determines all things in wisdom and power, how can we suppose that He either could or would permit casual interference in His perfect plan from finite beings acting freely after their own restricted vision and foolish desires? Is it not like supposing that Infinite Wisdom first made a perfect machine, and then allowed mischievous children to throw pebbles into it?

These difficulties have been emphasized by the war in acutely practical ways.

1. It has placed men within the power of vast forces of destruction, which leave them small, feeble creatures at the mercy of an unpersuadable might, in the grip of which they cease to be persons and become things.

2. Great masses of men are marshalled against each other, their side determined by broad, natural, unquestioned feelings of love of country, and they are under such drill and are moved by such external commands that all sense of individuality is submerged. Character counts, but in a simple, direct, unreflecting way, so that, to quote an apt description, "men in war are what they are, only more so."

3. Finally, war has always been a great breeder of fatalism, and in the crisis of its danger, every man's religion is apt to turn in that direction. Amid "the arrow that fieth by day and the terror that walketh

by night," dangers against which no purpose, foresight or skill avails, there is little choice between chance and destiny; and it is a great strength to be able to believe oneself safe till "one's number is up." Furthermore, the human causes of vast calamities are usually so inadequate that we seem driven to ascribe the evils to the inscrutable counsels of Omniscience, lest the world and all that is therein should seem to be at the mercy of evil and designing men. Is it not better to believe that a war like this is part of the Divine plan like the winter frost which is to issue in the crumbled soil with the bountiful gift of harvest?

Logically these arguments are mutually destructive. Mere physical law as the source of all action is not the same as action determined by motive and character; and neither is in accord with a fate fixed by Omniscience. Practically, nevertheless, and especially amid the forces of war, so vast, so destructive, so blind, they may be found confused together, and all dimly felt at one time, and reinforcing each other.

Much argument about freedom is the mere refutation of a view of freedom which is so wide that it refutes itself, a view, moreover, which no advocate of freedom ever defended. It is necessary, therefore, before attempting to deal with these difficulties, to determine more precisely the limits of the question. That we are free does not mean, as seems to be constantly imagined, that anyone, whatsoever his character, can do anything he likes, whatsoever his situation.

First, if freedom of will means power to determine our whole life in complete independence of the forces around us, we need only to consider how much there

is in this earth over which we have no more power than if it happened in the planet Jupiter, to find it refuted.

Second, if freedom mean that we can act as we would in utter independence of our character and the motives life puts before us, we need only to recall the confidence with which we rely on some and distrust others, to know that there is no room for discussion.

Third, if freedom mean that our destiny is wholly of our proposing and disposing, seeing how our birth, our training and influences, our opportunities, our capacities, our dispositions, are not of our determining, but are wholly appointed for us, there can only be one conclusion, for such freedom does not exist.

First, the question of freedom arises only regarding actions the issues of which we have power to determine. Though they form only a small section of life, they may involve vast consequences. Thus we can accomplish nothing by trying to push round the ship, but we can bring her round by applying ourselves to the helm. Moreover, even in respect of the many things which are beyond our power, we can maintain a freedom of spirit, an unconquerable soul, which may alter the significance of every event in life for us.

Second, choice is limited to a choice among the motives before us. Much discussion has taken place on the question of liberty of indifference. When we have two equally attractive roads to choose from, and we fix on one, are we not confident that it was equally in our power to choose the other? In some way at least quite equal choices are determined. The will cannot be held fixed in one place by equal motives as a needle by equal magnets. The famous problem of

Buridan's ass which stood between two equal and equidistant bundles of hay till it starved, does not exist even for an ass. Nevertheless, the real question of freedom concerns motives with great differences in value which are based upon reasons of different quality; and the vital question concerns the power to do what is right.

Thirdly, freedom can be exercised only within the limits of responsibility for the disposition and capacities with which we have been endowed. All our actions are in some way in accord with our character, and the only question is, How do we act upon our character so that by the right way it improves, and by the wrong it degenerates?

Finally, we are in the hands of a mightier power than our own wills, and freedom is not the ability to override its decrees with success. The supreme question regarding freedom is precisely the question concerning the Supreme Might. If it is of mere fixed force, our whole relation to it is to be moved with its movement by a fixed necessity. If, however, it be a power we can in some sense describe as a Father, because it deals with us as with children, desiring to see us directed by our own insight, our dependence may not be less, but it will be mediated otherwise than by compulsion. The question will not be whether our freedom can exist apart from the fountain-head, but whether that dependence is in freedom and for more freedom, or merely by constraint and identity of operation. Little is won in life by mere hard resolution and isolation, and much by hearing our call and discovering our true place; but the insight to find our

right relation to a free world would be the highest of all acts of freedom.

In discussing the Scientific, Philosophical and Religious difficulties we shall bear in mind, without further reference to the limitations, that freedom is confined to actions and attitudes of mind within the power of our conscious wills, is exercised by selection from motives according to the bent we give our characters, and can only exist if it is in accord with the powers of freedom with which we must keep ourselves in fellowship.

I. The Scientific Objection is that there is no room for freedom in a mechanically regular world.

With respect to this position, we can only stop to ask three questions.

(1) Is scientific law such an account of the real world, as could justify us in saying that the world is all of necessity? Law is merely a description of certain uniformities to which we must attend, not because they sum up all existence, but because our minds are finite and incapable of coping with infinite variety. It is more than abstraction, but more only as we might discover the signalling code from many messages not one of which we could replace merely from our knowledge of the code. To say there is nothing more than scientific law, no living, changing, feeling, willing world, is, in that case, as though we should say that, because the signalling system is mechanical, all its messages must be of machinery. On the contrary, were there not vital human interests concerned, there would be no more science than signalling. In the study of science we may rightly lose ourselves in the

pursuit, but to forget the conscious purposeful activity and living human values of the scientist and the ends of freedom he would serve in his discoveries of the uniformities of nature, is just as sensible as to omit the eye from the science of optics, because, in attending to other things, it does not see itself.

(2) Does even the mechanical order which science displays in any way justify the exclusion from the world of the uses of freedom? A world built up of hard, elastic atoms, which evolve order out of chaos by impinging upon one another according to Newton's laws, satisfied minds much occupied with neat mechanical methods. But the atom has now opened out into a world by itself, which is large and complex enough to have an individuality of its own, and regarding our knowledge of which nothing more can be said than that it seems to be a complex force of the nature of electricity which no one can imagine to be a picture of ultimate reality. At all events the new idea of the atom leaves measureless room for the possibilities of the universe.

(3) Even if we began with mere mechanism, why should we necessarily end with it? If it becomes something more than mechanism, ought we not simply to say that there were unknown powers in it we did not perceive? Should we deny the potentiality of a chicken in an egg, because to our eyes it was mere stuff for the breakfast table? Moreover, the whole idea of an organism as formed slowly by mechanical means and then working with more varied functions as it grew more complex, by which the mechanical conception of life was rendered plausible, has now fallen into disrepute. The humblest living creatures

choose amid their environment and on that choice they act; and organisation follows function and does not cause the functions to operate as a machine works after it is made. Hence life is of the nature of mind from its humblest manifestations. It acts on feeling and by knowledge however dim and confused, so that we ought even in the lowest forms of life to discern the possibilities of reason and purposeful choice, rather than deny the reality of the higher because it springs from the lower.

II. The Philosophical Objection is that there is no room for freedom in a system in which will is determined by motive the strength of which is determined by character. Though determination by motive and character is according to ideas and values set before us, and has no relation to material causation which is only some form of mechanical impact, the plausibility of the explanation is largely derived from its resemblance to mechanical necessity. It is, therefore, important to remember that the resemblance is only superficial, and that action on an idea is on a quite different plane from action on impact, and that the application of mechanical ideas is from first to last misleading.

This will appear if we distinguish between impulse and motive. The English language, it may be, does not distinguish so precisely between the words, but, if we would think with definiteness, we must often force an additional precision on common words. By impulse, then, let us understand the blind force of appetite or passion; and by motive the idea of some good we seek. For example, few drinkers get drunk on the

deliberate idea of the pleasure of being intoxicated. Usually they are driven by an unreflecting appetite to take one glass after another, till they are in a state which contradicts every idea of good they ever formed for themselves. By persistence in this course, they may cease to be moral persons, and become playthings of passion. But to act rationally upon any idea even of pleasure is not simply to go with the strongest impulse, as a boat is turned by the stronger oar, or the balance sinks with the heavier weight.

Even an impulse does not really act in that way, driving a man as a kick drives a ball, so long at least as he is a moral being. The drinker conceives himself, for the moment at least, happier drinking than sober and self-respecting. But action on motive still more clearly operates with some kind of idea of ourselves. Even if it be mere pleasure, it is not by any driving force from behind but on an idea of ourselves as pleased. If you decide between a cinema and a sermon, you, in the last issue, decide between ideas of yourself as being pleased or profited, in which case manifestly something quite different is at work from the preponderance of the strongest motive according to any mechanical operation.

This will be still more apparent if we go on to distinguish between our motives, especially between pleasure and duty. Some dim comparison of these motives may be possible, so that it might flash across our minds that we should be more miserable shirking our duty than doing it, but the essence of the imperative of duty is that it never should be weighed against any pleasure or profit. Loyalty to everything sacred

in the world and in our soul requires the repudiation of all such comparisons; whereas, if it were a mere question of the stronger motive, reason ought to require us not to omit any consideration however trifling or unworthy. Afterwards we may say a man has great happiness in doing his duty, but the point is not what happens afterwards. The question is, what is the actual motive before action which moves the will? Surely it is contrary to all experience to say it is what will please us most! The idea of happiness does not really enter on either side, but we feel ourselves between the ideas of being pleased with passion's vehement but fleeting suggestion and being worthy with duty's calm but absolute imperative, between which there is no common measure which could enable us to say, the stronger motive prevailed. If we act conscientiously, we enter upon no such comparison: and if we are persons of experience as well, we shall know that nothing is so dangerous for the eternal verities and obligations as any attempt to ask ourselves what is our strongest motive. If by the strongest motive we merely mean that the motive which prevails must in some sense have become strongest seeing it has prevailed, we cannot be refuted, but also we are not saying anything worth refuting; for if we have power to make a motive strong according to our idea of ourselves as pleased or worthy, we are free both for good and evil.

The special character of freedom will be still more evident if we draw a third distinction—that between regret and remorse. The Necessitarians usually help themselves out by confusing the difference. When we

think an action could have been different, we are told, that we imagine ourselves with our present experience and motives back at the point of time when, with other experience and other motives, we had to act. There are such regrets, and when we bethink ourselves, we know, if we followed our best light at the time, that they are vain regrets, and we often discover that our reasons for wishing we had acted otherwise are worldly reasons, and that the end would not have been peace. Such regrets may often be confused in our minds with remorse, but that is no justification for confusing in our investigations things wholly different in principle. Remorse only arises when, at the time, we knew to do good and did not do it; when duty stood before us as an absolute demand, and we made it a secondary temporal interest. Thus it is not a question of transferring our present experience to the past, but of a dividing of the ways which actually was before us. Perhaps there is no real question of freedom except between motives of duty which can be made absolute, and motives of pleasure which can be allowed to get out of hand.

But what does that depend on, we may be asked, if not on character? Here we must draw a fourth distinction—that between disposition and character.

For what, we are asked, have we remorse, except that our actions show us to be bad characters? The whole Necessitarian theory of responsibility indeed, is nothing more than that we are inevitably mixed up in our own doings, as for example a wife, though she cannot mend her husband's ways, feeling as if she had done wrong herself, is thoroughly ashamed, and

afterwards keeps nagging at him, not that she thinks anything could have been different in the past, but as another terror in wrongdoing to warn him off it in time to come. The long and argumentative expositions do not, in the end, come to more. But the question is not whether this confusion is often made. The question is whether it should be made. Should we not say there is no room for remorse, none even for regret unless we knew to do good, and are assured that we might have done it? No doubt our characters were at fault, but how?

When we talk in this way of action upon character, we ought to say action upon disposition, for it alone is given us and upon it alone do we act in that way of natural consequence. But it takes no great knowledge of life to discover how worthless the best natural endowment may be in face of temptation and trial. One man is born with a charming disposition, so that he delights in cherishing kindly relations with everyone; another is born somewhat of a boor, and his fellow-worms are continually squirming as he treads on their sensibilities. But your pleasant friend is not at your side in the storm of disapprobation or in the thick mist of suspicion. That requires, not a man of pleasant disposition but a man of character. But what is a man of character, if not a man who, through the exercise of his freedom, has established his life on principle and not on pleasure or prudence?

If our actions simply come directly out of what we are, where is the place for this distinction, the most vital of all differences? What is character, if not something formed by the exercise of freedom in the



teeth of our natural disposition, by doing our duty, not because we liked it, but because we ought? The heart of the whole problem of freedom lies in this that we can so act on our motives and disposition that we form character, that by every act our character improves, or that we may so act on our motives and disposition that in the end we have no character at all. We do not act merely passively out of character, as we might out of disposition. Such easy going with the strongest motive means submitting to the two greatest enemies of character—insincerity and unguilt loins. The qualities of freedom are sincerity and self-mastery, and the supreme question is, How do we so act upon our motives and disposition that sincerity and self-mastery increase in us or degenerate? Surely not by any kind of necessity we know. No doubt it is beyond our explaining, for, though we know how a dead thing is put together, we know nothing of how a living creature is made. Yet so far is it from being beyond our experience, that we should have no experience at all, unless we were conscious of ourselves as free persons standing up against both impact from without and impulse from within.

On that freedom alone our responsibility rests. But responsibility is the one unchanging element in our personality, making us from infancy to old age say, "I am I." Our bodies change, nothing remaining unaltered; our minds hardly recognise themselves after a few years; the disposition of youth has little resemblance to the character of old age. But, through all those changes, responsibility continues, springing from a freedom which abides in some deep

and permanent essence of the soul, which the acts of freedom alone can alter. Hence even for political freedom, men will die, because it may be a liberty necessary for the exercise of their responsibility; but surely that is a rational action only if the free soul of man is greater than all earthly good, because it dwells in another sphere than the blind earthly necessities.

III. The Religious Objection is that there is no room for freedom in the world of a wise Omnipotence.

On no subject has more dialectic been expended, generally of a type that has no contact with reality, and by which nothing in the realm of actuality ever was decided. God, it is argued, cannot commit any of His creative power to finite wills and remain omnipotent. But it might equally well be argued that, unless God can make free beings and still rule His world, His omnipotence is restricted to mere mechanical management of things. "Pericles," Hegel says, "enjoyed the greatest honour given to mortals, that he ruled men who had wills of their own." Why should a similar honour be denied Omnipotence? Might we not rather contend that Omnipotence alone, having the power always to gain His end, however much power He committed to others, could have been justified in entering upon the experiment of creating an order by way of freedom and not merely of an inerrant necessity?

Further, it is argued, that even if God wished to create us free, He, being Omnipotent, should have been able to do it without any risk of sin or failure. In answer it may be said that, even if we suppose that

Omnipotence does not include the power to make black white, or expose us to risk without any danger, we still leave a very practical omnipotence; or that, even if that were within His scope, there might be very good grounds for creating a world where white is white and black black, and risks real hazards. Omnipotence is the power to do things, not a dignity which, as it were, would tie God hand and foot. An Omnipotence which could only rule by fixed scheme, twirling the universe, as it were, round His forefinger, able to do nothing except as He directly did it Himself, would be a very poor kind of Omnipotence; for when He was done, He would not have a real world, with real children in it, but a mere Punch and Judy show, with puppets pulled by wires. As they are sensitive puppets, history would be simply a very bad nightmare. What are we to say, for example, of this war, fought out by mortal men enduring agonies of conflict and wounds and death, and women and children homeless wanderers on the earth, and bereaved mothers and desolate widows and fatherless children, if it is all a mere spectacle for a Deity who has pre-arranged all the issues, leaving nothing really dependent for ourselves or others, on the endurance of free men for righteousness' sake? Moreover, it is surely too much to expect even Omniscience to be for ever interested in such a puppet show, where nothing is ever uncertain, and nothing ever really accomplished.

"I cannot see," Dr McTaggart says, "what extraordinary value lies in the incompleteness of the determination of the will which should counterbalance

all the sin and the consequent unhappiness caused by the misuse of that will."

No one can see it, expressed in that way. Imperfect determination is no more a gain than a breakable thigh-bone. Yet such is the preference for a living thigh-bone over an unbreakable weldless steel tube that hundreds of men are willingly enduring pain to have their own bones patched up, however imperfectly, rather than have their limbs off and replaced by a less breakable substitute. Similarly the issue is not determination either perfect or imperfect, but a living freedom, whereby, at whatsoever pain and risk, we may attain to walking by our own insight after our own resolution; whereby in freedom, and not in slavery, we may in the end make truth our own and abide in a love our own hearts have chosen. Otherwise it is vain for us to talk of a real world, or to describe ourselves as the children of God. If, however, God has not only made us in His own image, but if, through the freedom we have, we must win greater freedom, if the truth of all necessity is freedom, if all freedom stands not by parliaments and other safeguards, but by the faithfulness of those who have discerned that freedom is greater than life, then we can see in all our struggles, not only the creation of God's children, but the creation of God's final order as something not imposed upon us, but as a truth accepted by our own insight and a love embraced by our own hearts. Then also we may see that freedom is not of mere hard resolution, but is the end towards which all God's appointments for us are directed.