

THE R. P. A. ANNUAL

FOR THE YEAR 1921

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THEISM

BY PROFESSOR J. B. BURY, Litt.D., LL.D.

SOME of us have been reading Mr. W. S. Godfrey's admirable pamphlet, *Theism Found Wanting*, in its new edition, in which he so effectually exposes the pretensions of the Theistic hypothesis. He shows that Theism does not satisfy the intellectual demand which is supposed to necessitate it; when we have assumed God in order to answer the question, How did the universe come to exist? we are only met by the same question over again, How did God come to exist? In fact, the ultimate question is, How did anything come to exist? and that is unanswerable, if it is not unmeaning. As for the moral side, he shows that the hypothesis of a personal God makes the problem of the origin of evil much more difficult, if it does not create it.

Yet the fact that so many able Rationalists have accepted and accept the doctrine makes it worth while to examine it a little further. The following remarks are a sort of footnote to Mr. Godfrey's pamphlet.

A thoughtful Theist might say something like this: "I fully admit that the problem of existence is not solved by the hypothesis that a conscious Will called the universe into being. I do not adopt it on the ground that a First Cause is necessary, and I admit quite candidly that it has not been proved. But it is a hypothesis which, for me at least, makes the universe more intelligible; for it provides a solution of one difficult problem, the existence of thinking beings, and it gives to the universe a value which it does not possess when it is conceived as a blind, witless congregation of forces."

Taking Theism, then, as a mere hypothesis, let us see what it involves. The attributes usually attributed to God are omnipotence, omniscience, and goodness. These may be reduced to two, for omnipotence includes omniscience; since a Being who is omnipotent can be omniscient if he chooses, or indeed it might be shown that he could not be omnipotent without being omniscient also. It need hardly be said that omnipotence does not imply the power to do self-contradictory things. To say that God can make $A = \text{not } A$, or $2 + 2 = 5$ (such claims have been made), is to say things that have no meaning.

Before he ascribes omnipotence and goodness to God, the Theist should make quite sure that they are compatible. Whatever was

his motive in creating the world, God, if he is omnipotent, could have created a world without suffering, and, since the world which he has created contains one corner at least in which pain is prevalent, he must either take pleasure in suffering or be indifferent to it, and in neither case is he good. Therefore omnipotence and goodness are incompatible, as Mr. Godfrey did not omit to point out, and the Theist must choose between them. He will choose goodness, because a bad omnipotent God would be of less use to him than no God at all. Moreover, he may reflect that the assumption of omnipotence is not justified by the data. For the hypothesis of a conscious author of the universe only entitles us to ascribe to him sufficient power to create the universe, and that power may fall far short of omnipotence. We may describe it as immeasurable, for we cannot measure it; but immeasurable power and omnipotence are not the same thing.

Intelligible Theism thus defines itself as the doctrine of a good Being, of limited powers, who created the universe. It has then to explain the fact that the history of sentient creatures in one part of the universe is "a scroll written over with lamentation and mourning and woe." There seem to be three possibilities:—(1) It might be God's nature to fabricate a universe, as it is a spider's nature to spin a web; he meant no harm, but could not help doing what it is his nature to do. (2) His powers being limited, he did not fully foresee the results of his act; he was unable to stop the machine which he set going, and is obliged to look on, a helpless spectator of his handiwork. (3) He created the world deliberately for the sake of its inhabitants; limited by the nature of the forces at his disposal, he could not exclude pain; but he hoped so to contrive that the unavoidable evil will be a means to ultimate bliss.

For the first two possibilities, for a spider God or an incompetent God, no Theist has any use; they are no improvement on the Lucretian theory. So we are left with the third, which implies that God, unable to create a perfectly good universe, chose to use evil means for a good end rather than abstain from creating anything. But does the hypothesis, reduced to this form, offer any reasonable satisfaction? We are asked to believe that, the creator being good, the universe will one day, in spite of all the pain, be pronounced worth while. But since God's power is limited, though his intentions may be ever so good, what guarantee have we that the process will actually work out to such a conclusion? The act of creation may have been a well-intentioned mistake. To suppose that his power is great enough to secure that the world will turn out so good in the end that the evil will seem negligible is to go beyond the data, which only require a power sufficient to create the universe as we know it. The original hypothesis has to be reinforced by an act of faith.

That God is aware of what goes on in the universe and knows what men do and suffer is a necessary implication of the hypothesis; an intelligence which made the world must know all about it. It follows that God, like us, perceives in time (*sub specie temporis*). For if he were not in time, he could not know what human life is for those who live it; he could not understand pain. What, then, is his mental attitude towards evil and pain? How do they affect him? Homer depicted Zeus as seated on high, "exulting in his glory" and watching the carnage of a battlefield as an interesting spectacle. That is not edifying. The anthropomorphism of the Theist must take a different form. Can he conceive God as enjoying supreme repose, unaffected by the miseries of men, somewhat as the Epicureans imagine their remote deities?

Nor sounds of human misery mount to mar
Their sacred, everlasting calm.

If he cannot adopt such a conception on the ground that it is inconsistent with the divine goodness, the alternative is a sympathetic God who feels sorrow for the sufferings which the laws of the universe disable him from abolishing, and therefore suffers himself. Thus Theism naturally leads to the idea of a suffering God, which occurs in several religious systems. In those systems his suffering is turned to account. An advanced Theism which does not allow any interference with the laws of nature can only postulate a sorrowful God who is perfectly helpless. That is anthropomorphic enough. But anthropomorphism is implicit in the original hypothesis. The idea of creation, of a world made by divine intelligence, cannot obliterate all traces of its derivation from the idea of things made by human brains and hands; and the idea of divine goodness is undisguisedly a mere superlative of human goodness. This cannot reasonably be urged as in itself an objection to the hypothesis. If we refused to think anthropomorphically, could we think at all?

Theism, then, when we press it, turns out to be the hypothesis of a well-intentioned Person who was powerful enough to create the world. But as there is no evidence to show that his power and knowledge will ensure in the end a satisfactory result for its inhabitants, the hypothesis is not valuable, if the Theist strictly confines himself to reasoned deductions from it. He must reinforce his hypothesis by an act of faith. And therefore Theism is not distinguished in principle from systems like Christianity which depend on faith and not on reason.