

THE SOLIPSISM OF RELIGION

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YES: Solipsism, that word of dread, despised and set aside until restored to its proper place, rehabilitated by the great bishop in his *Principles of Knowledge*. For Bishop Berkeley showed beyond all criticism that the doctrine of Solipsism was in the intellectual world when properly qualified the only philosophically sound position. The knowledge of himself and of his own internal state is all the indubitable knowledge vouchsafed man, all else is inference, conjecture, more or less assured. Descartes recognized the truth of the doctrine in his *Cogito ergo sum* that certified to a man his own existence by the only trustworthy evidence, his own consciousness.

Just as in the intellectual world so in the spiritual world—perhaps we should say *a fortiori*—are we shut in upon ourselves. All we really know is the condition of our own soul.

And is not that all we are required to know?

A failure to recognize this truth of Solipsism and its equally important qualification is at the root of all the intellectual difficulties of religious discussions. For Berkeley not only announced that all we know certainly is our internal state of consciousness, but he added the qualification that we can know nothing else with equal certainty, the certainty demanded by philosophy. The endless and fruitless discussions of God's dealing with men, of the inconsistencies of nominal Christians, of the thousand and one external facts that seem contradictory of our ethical notions of right and wrong all ignore this great and fundamental truth. For religion is not a matter of external happenings but of internal conditions, of the state of the soul. It might be said to be a matter of feeling, if that word "feeling" were not so vague and indefinite in its significance. It is this that constitutes what I have called the Solipsism of religion, the exclusive subjective nature of it which makes it so peculiarly and exclusively the man's inner self that no facts, no reasoning about it is pos-

sible, for reasoning always involves comparison, the passing of judgment which in such a case is impossible. The inner state of one man cannot be compared or judged by the inner state of the other. This is not to say that there is no relation between the state of the soul and external facts. The goodness of God, his nature, his love toward men, the existence of good and evil, the coming of Christ, his mission and message, all these facts concern the soul but its salvation is wrought not by the bare facts but by the soul's realization of the facts, by their reaction on the soul.

In religion, therefore, all attention is to be fixed on the condition of the soul, and this is refractory to any rationalizing treatment. The final test is not, do I correctly interpret God's acts, do I understand the why and wherefore of the transactions of God and can I reconcile them with the ethical standard which I hold, but this and only this, have I a certain inward peace with God and man, a state that I cannot define in intellectual terms, but only know by experiencing it.

Nor is this a peculiar characteristic of religion alone. It applies to all those moods or phases of the self which for want of a better term we call feelings, love, terror, happiness, misery, sorrow, vague indefinite expressions for states which defy reasoning or discussion but which we know immediately and with a reality that seems at the time the only reality possible to us.

The attempt to describe them in words puts us to all sorts of circumlocation. We say of the soul's state that it is reconciled with God, that it has attained peace, happiness, that God has taken up his abode in it.

Metaphor and symbolical language are our only refuge when we come to deal with our feelings which are truly mysteries to our intellectual comprehension, indescribable in any terms known to it. They are states of the Ego, they are the Ego itself for the time of their presence. How can such a state as Happiness or Love or Terror be expressed in words? They are untranslatable, to know them you must be them.

This becomes very evident when we examine the effort that has been made to express certain feelings. Such efforts are utterly inadequate to convey to one who has not experienced them any notion of what is meant. Take for example the feeling of love, how many poets have dealt with it, turned it this way and that, embroidered it with their fancies, striven to express all the reality and the joy of it, yet how plain it is that all they succeed in doing is to deal with

its external symptoms, kisses, caresses, beautiful thoughts of the beloved object which are only the outward manifestations just as virtuous actions, kind deeds are the outward manifestations of the saved soul.

Strive we never so hard we can never break into that sacred temple of the soul sealed to all but its indweller, the arcana of its secrets impossible of revelation to any stranger. Shut up within that impenetrable sanctuary the man can neither unfold its mysteries to another or open its gates to the entrance of his own reason. This is *a fortiori* true of that mystery of mysteries, religion and salvation.

Above all it cannot be reasoned about or told in words. It must be experienced to be known. So the Scriptures darkly hint when they tell us: "If any man will do his will he shall know of the doctrine." John vii. 17. It is a matter of personal experience.

This is not to say that there are no external facts which produce the states of the Ego, create fear, love, terror, salvation, nor that the external facts are not like all other similar facts subject to our reasoning faculties, cannot be examined, studied, criticized, their truth, their relation to other facts reasoned about. But no external facts can of themselves work these changes of condition in the soul. It is only when they are absorbed, assimilated in some inexplicable way that these conditions of love, terror, of salvation are created.

If it be conceded, as indeed it must, that salvation is a matter of the soul's condition indescribable but very real producing a happiness, a peace that many testify is utterly beyond words and if the external facts simply hold a relation to that state by reason of their assimilation in some inexplicable way so that they are made part of the soul by faith and belief it might be possible to put a hypothetical question very difficult to answer. Suppose this state of the soul to be established, a state established through belief, realization of certain external facts, and suppose again that it appeared these facts had no existence outside of the soul what if any would be the effect on that state of the soul: would that happiness, that peace and content previously established be destroyed by something entirely outside the soul and its beliefs and faith? Or would not the cry of Job uttered with a sublime ignoring of all external facts be the answer? "Though He slay me yet will I trust in Him." Job xiii. 15.

That state of soul once established is impervious to the assaults of external facts. It has become independent, taken up to a higher plane of faith and belief beyond and superior to all facts.

It may be said that this is a species of Agnosticism. On the contrary it is only drawing a sharp line of demarcation between what we know and what we are forbidden to know. It is by overstepping that line that all our difficulties regarding religion arise, our doubts about miracles, our questioning of God's government of the world, his failure to punish the wicked, his permitting all the evil which we see in the world and which conceding his omnipotence can only exist by his sufferance.

Once recognize the limitations of our intellectual powers and of our ethical perceptions and all these difficulties disappear. Clever thinkers studying the Universe and God's government thereof assume that whatever they behold must measure up to their understanding of it, that a world incomprehensible to their understanding is an impossible world. To exist reasonably it must be capable of an explanation to an intelligence like theirs, or as an able expositor Lord Chalmwood has put it, it ought at least to be "explained to a gentleman like me."

This is of course to assume first that we understand intellectually the transactions we contemplate and secondly that our ethical sense is adequate to pass a competent ethical judgment on them when understood. We must understand God's ultimate aims and purposes and we must be endowed with a knowledge of ethical principles applicable to his acts. It is not agnostic to say that our knowledge is strictly limited, our minds incapable of thinking beyond our practical needs.

In like manner on its ethical side our minds are not endowed with a knowledge of ethical principles except such as are adapted to our practical requirements, guides for our conduct toward God and our fellow man, but which only bewilder us when taxed beyond these requirements. Our ethical shortcomings parallel our intellectual shortcomings. A brief review of our intellectual limitations which in many ways seem to parallel our ethical limitations may enable us to see this more clearly. It was Kant who for all time defined in his *Critique of Pure Reason* these limitations, expounding the solipsism of the reason in all its strength and weakness; for he was the first to explain the certainty and the reason for the certainty of synthetic judgments *a priori* so that without empirical knowledge without and before experience we were perfectly sure of certain indubitable truths such for example as that a straight line is the shortest distance between two points. At the same time he showed the superior quality of such truth over truth

derived by induction from experience. Going a step further he gave distinct warning in his antinomies of the imbecilities of our thinking, our inability either to think a first Cause or a world beginning without a Cause, our inability to think God as free or as determined, etc., etc. These were Kant's important gifts to Philosophy.

As a further hint regarding our intellectual limitations there might be suggested the difficulty of thinking the fourth dimension of space—if there be such a thing—the relativity theory of Einstein, the possibility adverted to by John Stuart Mill of thinking twice two made five. We are given the power to know and to think necessary and appropriate for our work in the world. We have a practical intellect fitted to enable us to do what lies before us, but when we would apply it to spiritual matters to the soul of man to the Universe of God and his ways we find ourselves launching out upon an unknown sea without chart or compass. We are lost and bewildered for our minds are unequal to the adventure. We see before us looming large and threatening the "No trespass" sign which Kant erected when he laid down his Antinomies. Applying the same course of reasoning to the corresponding ethical sense we can readily see how it, too, is limited to the necessities of our life; indeed even for these it sometimes proves inadequate. We need not go to the volumes of Mediaeval Casuistry with their multitude of doubtful cases, Angelus, Pacificus, Amortis's Dictionary of Cases of Conscience, etc. One very common and often cited question will suffice. Reference is made to the problem whether it is ethically right in some circumstances to tell a lie, when for example an intending murderer or robber asks the road his prospective victim took. Is a lie then permissible? Or suppose an ill patient to whom the truth would be fatal, shall the physician speak it or lie?

If he cannot formulate an opinion in such a case with an assurance of its ethical rightness that will gain the assent of all or even a majority of mankind, how can we pass an ethical opinion upon God's government of a Universe so vast that it takes light thousands of years to travel from one end to the other? Only the other day a prohibition advocate presumably a good conscientious man admitted and justified his use of bribery and lies to further the cause of prohibition. If our ethical sense is so uncertain, so inadequate to a clear cut positive decision in such comparatively simple cases, is it not rank presumption for our "intellectuals" to think it

adequate for these deeper more complex questions that concern God and His Universe?

Suppose by way of experiment we make the actual trial of applying our human rules of ethics to God's conduct, not in a broad discursive way, but with some of the specific rules that are ours, say the ten commandments, those most concise rules of human conduct. Could anything be more fantastic and absurd than to cite the rule against stealing or covetousness or killing as applying to the Almighty power that has made and owns all things? If then it is inapplicable very obviously in this detailed way, is it not fair to presume that our attempt to apply our ethical rules to God's conduct in larger matters is equally inappropriate. How can we pronounce God unjust or cruel because according to our ideas of the world He might make a world free from suffering, exempt from sin with all men happy, all living creatures dwelling in peace and harmony with each other. Such a judgment assumes two things: first, that we fully understand intellectually the problem we study; secondly that our human ethical sense is adequate to it.

If intellectually we are limited in our thinking by natural inability is it to be wondered at that ethically we are even more limited that just as our minds are not gifted with the power to think God and his Universe in all its completeness, so our souls are not endowed with ethical sense to measure and judge God's government of the world.

For centuries men have struggled with this difficulty, from the time in fact when first men began to think, they were having these perplexing thoughts, were asking why God did not punish the wicked, why He permitted the righteous to suffer, why in His Almighty power He did not banish sin, create a perfectly happy world without pain or suffering, in fine why He did not comply in all his acts with the requirements of that ethical sense with which man was endowed. The inspired writings are filled with complaints of the inability of man to understand God's ways, His dealings with man. The great book of Job has this for its theme expressed in that exclamation: "Canst thou by searching find out God?" Job xi. 7. After its long discussion it leaves the tremendous question unanswered and unanswerable. St. Paul has added his testimony: "How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out." Romans xi. 33, and the great author of Isaiah: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts . . . so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts," Isaiah lv. 8-9.

Antinomies which might run somewhat in this wise:

Perhaps some Kant of the future may formulate the Ethical

Thesis

God is merciful; not willing that any should perish. He gave His son to save men.

Antithesis

God is just: out of Christ a consuming fire. He has created and maintains a world full of sin and misery.

Are we then to suppose that all the rules of our thinking, of our ethics are simply makeshifts, true for us but possessing no eternal universal truth? We cannot answer this question; but we know that God and the world exist although we cannot think intelligently how they came to exist, and that therefore there must be some intelligible account of how they exist or came to exist and so of the rules of ethics we are obliged to suppose that there is a satisfactory principle which, if we could comprehend it, would fully explain all the contradictions which distress us by reason of our limited apprehension of ethical principles when we contemplate God's dealing with the world.

There may be and probably there is a Universal Complete law of ethics and of thought of which our knowledge is only a part, a partial limited knowledge restricted to the practical requirements of our life here.

Just as our intellect cannot construe the Universe, cannot think it as either eternal or as having a beginning in time, cannot think of a first Cause or the absence of one and yet we feel that somewhere there is a higher intelligence than ours that reconciles all these contradictions that does think these truly and clearly so there must be some moral sense higher than ours that construes the right and wrong of the Universe without contradiction.

The foregoing considerations lead us not to a blank agnosticism but to certain positive and as it seems to me valuable conclusions exhibiting not only what we do not and cannot in the nature of things expect to know, but what we do know and the high assurance with which we do know what we know. We know our salvation by that mysterious knowledge vouchsafed to a man in his own soul incommunicable to others, unspeakable but sure beyond all possibility of doubt as no other knowledge is sure. It is an immediate

consciousness that surpasses all other certainties so that to doubt it is to doubt one's own existence.

It is a matter of immediate apprehension requiring no proof, no reasoning to establish itself, impossible of doubt, impervious to reason, superior in quality to all other degrees of knowledge, standing on the same plane as Descartes' *Cogito Ergo Sum*. Expressed in the language of Scripture it tells us that each man has the proof within himself. "He that believeth in the Son of God hath the witness in himself." I John v. 10. Or as elsewhere: The Kingdom of God is within you.

This is not to say that a man saves himself any more than it says that he is saved by some external mechanical operation that plucks him in spite of himself to safety and salvation. Neither of them is a true statement by itself any more than that a man thinks by himself. To think there must be the external stimulus without which there would be no thinking. The external stimulus does not create thinking, but it is the occasion of it. So with the coming of salvation to the soul, there must be the external impulse to be followed by the spiritual reaction, the transformation, which is sometimes called Conversion. This is a Divine work, dependent upon the man in one sense, yet independent of him in another. But the evidence of it, the assurance is only for the man's own private individual soul. No one has this knowledge but himself. He has this assurance within himself and if the question be asked: May he not be mistaken, be deceiving himself? we find ourselves confronted with that impassable barrier, our intellectual impotence. We cannot inquire into this any more than we can inquire into the validity of our thinking. We must accept both as given, just as we are compelled to think twice two make four. We cannot question the truth of it or consider the possibility whether under different laws of thought twice two might make five as John Stuart Mill suggests.

We are thus led to the positive conclusion that we have no means of knowing, still less of passing judgment on the spiritual conditions of others. Our business is with our own souls and for that we have ample power, but beyond that we are unable and have no occasion to go.

We are also made aware of the absurdity—to give it no harsher name—of men undertaking to conceive God intellectually or to apply ethical measure to his acts. We behold the spectacle of certain "intellectuals" suffering keen spiritual distress because God permits wars, because so many cruel and wicked deeds in their

judgment are perpetually occurring in God's world so that their moral sense is shocked and their faith and belief in God's love and goodness is shaken. How can they believe in a God who does or suffers such things to be done. Are men therefore never to use their reasoning powers with respect to God and his world? Far from it, it is not with too much reasoning but with too little that the fault lies. If the "intellectuals" would vigorously press their reasoning to its legitimate conclusions no difficulty would arise, for then it would be evident what the limits of their reasoning powers were and it would appear that all their distress was due not to their reasoning but to their lack of reasoning.

Thus Solipsism is the answer to that subtle propaganda against religion which is so much in evidence just now, a propaganda delicately suggested in novels and essays portraying the weakness and absurdity of many Christians, their inconsistencies, their hypocrisies, their subtle combination of God and Mammon. All these are no concern of the individual soul. It is not called upon to justify or condemn or to pass any judgment on them, nor is it affected by the truth or falsity of the accusations. Wholly independent, separate, each soul to its own Master standeth or falleth.