

SOME OF THE INABILITIES OF HUMAN THINKING

BY T. B. STORK

IT is the purpose of this paper to briefly review the powers of thinking, the reasoning capacity bestowed on the minds of men. And this with a view to ascertaining where these powers fall short or fail to satisfactorily function, and more especially to inquire into the exercise of these powers in a critical way upon what are somewhat loosely denominated religious subjects, the existence and nature of God, his government of the world, the relations of man and God, the credibility and authority of the Bible.

That the thinking of man plunges into a maze of intellectual difficulties the moment it passes beyond a certain fairly well defined limit will probably be conceded. If there be any doubts about it they may easily be resolved by reference to many instances where thinking fails to justify itself. The most common phenomena of daily life present problems which man while accepting them as facts of his life must simply pass over as perfectly refractory to his thinking. These puzzles of thought are so common that their very existence is ignored in practice. Take the simple fact so familiar to us all of Change, the transforming, let us say, of a plant from the dull earth into green foliage, bright flowers, luscious fruit. How and when did that marvellous—one might almost say miraculous—change take place, that metamorphosis of earth, air and sunlight into plant, blossom, fruit? To think the process is impossible. Even in the far less complicated change involved in the simple motion of a body from one place to another the difficulty is no less. Where is motion and how does it occur, is an unanswerable question. What starts a quiescent body into movement or are all bodies in a constant state of motion? Is there a universal and continual flux of all things? Is there a preordained order in this flux by which

one change succeeds another and so continues year after year, century after century? It is a fair statement to say that we cannot understand this, our reasoning power has here reached its limit.

Leaving this single example as an introduction to the more complicated questions of thinking, let us take up the limitations set forth by the philosophers. In this connection the names of Hume and Kant will naturally occur to the reader and we may for our purposes confine ourselves to them.

Hume as is well known has destroyed the validity of causality save as an intellectual conception. Causality is a figment of the mind to express his doctrine briefly. And to add a further argument to his brilliant indictment we may instance a subtler but none the less effective objection that when we come to think of the world we cannot apply the notions of causality to it. We cannot think it as either caused or as existing eternally uncaused. In spite of which we are compelled to think by the law of contradiction that either the one or the other alternative must be true, that in other words the world must be caused or uncaused.

A hyper critic might well ask what grounds we have for so declaring the world: is there no third possibility? And the answer would have to be that there may be a third, perhaps thirty other possibilities but they are possibilities beyond our ken, possibilities which we have no capacity to think. We get a hint of what these possibilities may be from the suggestive remark of Kant that while contradictions may be impossible to our thought yet in reality contradictions do actually exist. The law of contradiction as interpreted by him amounts simply to this that an intellectual affirmation cannot contain a negative. Nor does Hegel's famous union of contradictories shed much further light on the difficulty. That all contradictories must unite in a third element which is their truth may only make the darkness visible. To say that there is no truth in Being or Not-being but only in the Becoming serves once more to make us realize the disabilities of our thinking. That is to say the law of contradictories may be only another of our disabilities of thought. The mind commits a species of *Felo de Se*, an intellectual suicide, so to speak, when one figment of the mind destroy another, when the figment of non-contradiction impeaches the figment of causality.

Hume was, however, anticipated by Bacon when he made the deeply significant remark that we could not know whether the ex-

ternal world of reality corresponded with our conception of it: whether the unity which we thought into the world did truly exist there. This goes to the very heart of the discussion, the seriousness of its import cannot be exaggerated. It is a knife that cuts both ways with automatic impartiality. It does not spare the teleological proof of God's existence which depends on the doctrine of Causality, at the same time it cuts down all scientific truth, all knowledge of external nature to the dignity of a more or less probable guess. It is reassuring to find that later philosophers confirm this doctrine of the earlier men. Bertrand Russell declares in a recent essay on Science that: "Laws of nature have turned out to be in some cases human conventions," and again, "that best men of science as a result of technical progress have been led more and more to a form of skepticism closely analogous to Hume's;" he quotes Wittgenstein to the effect that "Superstition consists of belief in causality."

And latest of all, A. S. Eddington tells us that scientific men themselves look with suspicion on the doctrine of Causality. "The fact that a causal basis had been lost sight of in the new theories was fairly well known. Many regretted it and held that its restoration was imperative."¹

Perhaps a few more quotations from this treatise on science will emphasize as nothing else could the inability of even the highest type of scientific investigator to think the external world intelligibly. Referring to the study of the atom and the electron these remarkable words are used: "Something unknown is doing we don't know what."²

All this must put us on suspicion of our reasoning powers in other directions, directions of spiritual and religious truth far more subtle and difficult intellectually considered.

Perhaps this branch of our discussion may be sufficiently dwelt upon if we cite the famous and familiar instance of the inabilities of thinking known as the Kantian Antinomies. To enter upon them in detail is of course not feasible in a paper like the present, but it may be permitted to refer to their conclusions, namely, that the mind cannot think the world as caused or uncaused, cannot think that there are any simple substances or any composite substances, cannot think that there is any self-determination in the world or

¹ *The Nature of the Physical World*. (The Gifford Lectures for 1927) p. 294.

² *Ibid* p. 291.

that everything is determined by a fixed law of cause and effect. Man cannot think himself as free or as chained in an ineluctable series of causes and effects with no power of escape.

It is now possible to make practical application of these preliminary observations to the matter in hand, that is to the various and many sided criticisms that have been brought to bear on God's conduct of the world. We are now in short in a position to criticize the critics.

It is hard to realize the silliness of some of them. One for example arguing that there was no soul, brought forward the astonishing argument that there could be no soul, forsooth, because we cannot think the beginning of the soul in the human body. It never occurred to the wise gentleman, apparently totally ignorant of philosophical speculation, that it is impossible for the mind to think the beginning of anything. Of the Kantian antinomies he was either utterly ignorant or if informed failed to apply them. Many of these critics seem not to be aware that they are venturing into the realm of the subtlest and most abstract philosophical speculation. At every turn it behooves them to watch their steps if they would avoid pitfalls such as the one just mentioned.

Some critics formulate a rule of conduct for the Almighty in accordance with their notions of human conduct. The absurdity of this may be readily seen if we for example take the ten commandments and seek to apply them to the conduct of God, if God is enjoined from stealing, bearing false witness, etc., etc. It is not so evident, however, when we consider God in his character of a loving father and endeavor to understand how we can reconcile this with his allowing the suffering, disease and misery that is so prevalent on the earth: when we behold the entire animal creation at war with itself, so that it seems to be in accordance with the preordained design of the Creator that all animals should kill and devour each other from the great lions of the desert to the tiniest insects of our dwellings. If, however, our intellectual capacity is so strictly limited to our practical needs so that the moment we pass from them we are beset with unanswerable problems it is not unreasonable to suppose that in these spiritual and moral questions we are likewise restricted to the needs of our terrestrial life and quite unable to measure the conduct of the Almighty in the affairs of the Universe.

Conjectures we may have, it is hard indeed to avoid making

them, if we think at all. Perhaps all this welter of misery may be character forming, perhaps there are certain things to be attained of which we know nothing, of which we do not even dream and this misery is the appointed means to them. Sin, errors, misery, accidents may be the price of freedom. The power to err, to sin, to make mistakes and to suffer the penalties that follow may be the inevitable consequence of freedom, of the liberty of the individual to do as he will. This to be sure gets us very little farther, for back comes the ever recurring question, why should an Almighty all wise, all powerful, to whom all things are possible, be compelled to make use of these particular and painful methods. Could not the Almighty make all the world and all its inhabitants, human and brute, happy, peaceful, and free from suffering mental or physical?

That the human intellect cannot answer these questions satisfactorily to itself proves nothing with regard to the Almighty, but only testifies to a human incapacity similar to the incapacity already pointed out in respect to the physical facts of the world.

The criticism of the Bible is of a different sort: It questions the truth of the facts related. Here we are on surer ground: It is easy to demonstrate how little such criticism touches the essential truth of the Bible: for the Bible is a work of Art. To criticize a work of art for the truth of its facts has never, I think, been held legitimate. We do not fault Fra Angelico's frescoes because there is no evidence of the existence of his celestial angels, nor do we ask, supposing such exist, whether they possess the sweeping wings with which he endows them. I have never heard *Paradise Lost* questioned because there was no evidence of the facts alleged in that poem respecting God, Satan, or the Angels that are said to serve although they only stand and wait. Works of art are refractory to all such mistaken criticism. This must be at once apparent if we for a moment consider what a work of art purports to be and to do. It does not undertake to state facts, to furnish information, to deal with history, to detail statistics. Its mission is to transmit feeling, to inspire emotion from the artist to his recipient hearer or seer. Properly understood the Bible in its sacred character, apart from its narratives, its history, its legal pronouncements, is a work of art. Its purpose is to inspire certain feelings, to create spiritual conditions in men's souls. Looked at in the broad and large sense it appears as a book through which pours an unending

stream of spiritual inspiration. That it is made up of many writings by various and widely differing hands, that these writings were selected and endorsed by a great Church Council composed of learned, able, but still fallible clerics does not affect the matter one way or the other. The writings depend for their authority not on any official sanction but on innate power which they bear within themselves. They furnish their own credentials. They are genuine and authoritative as a picture or a poem is genuine and authoritative, because of the spiritual message they bring to men. Some of the books, Esther, Canticles, perhaps Revelation do not seem to modern thinkers very profitable spiritually or well calculated to furnish spiritual inspiration as effectually as some others. In like manner possibly other books that were excluded might have been included with advantage in the Canon. Again it is to be observed that this spiritual inspiration is conveyed through human interpreters, by prophets, priests, kings, inspired instruments yet coloring their utterances each with his own individual character. These are all to be accepted by those to whom they are addressed with due allowance for the human element in them.

In this sense as a work of art the Bible's purpose is to inspire feeling, to create in the soul a certain spiritual quality or condition and so to bring men into right relations with God, with their fellows, with the world, in short to reshape their souls.

If it be asked in what way it is possible to do this, by what process the Bible accomplishes its business, it must be conceded that like any other work of art it has to work by material means, by narrative, by statements of fact, exhortations, persuasion and the like. Only thus can it approach the soul. Music alone has power without these to create feeling, emotion in the soul. No one would think of calling for its facts or of censuring it for lack of truth. Its truth is of a different sort. Does it make me feel and are the feelings it creates right and good: this is its test of truth. So the Bible is one vast and mighty strain of music inspiring, teaching, educating men's souls.

Difficult it may be to define in words the process by which this work is done: how the story of a good man overcoming temptation, the tale of a noble deed, a virtuous act, instances of self-sacrifice, aspirations and petitions to God, all widely differing, setting forth of men's vicissitudes can have this effect on the soul. But every

one by reference to his own experience can gain some notion of the effect upon himself of the faith of the Hebrew youths in the fiery furnace, the courage of Daniel in the den of lions, the devotion of Abraham. It may be due in part to what is called the force of example: we naturally wish to be like our fellows, to follow their leadership in acts and in feeling. But there is much more than this in the transformation of character that the Bible creates. An evil man is transformed into a good man by a process that has for us much of the mystical in it. That we cannot think the process intellectually may be only another instance of our inability to think change of any sort. For it is a great fundamental change of soul that this outpouring of spiritual power is to create, the power shall we say of the Holy Ghost: although that but puts a name to the mystery, without enlightening us as to its real nature. Of its reality we see examples almost every day when, as the Scriptures tell us, we behold the "wicked man forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts."³ In this respect it is no more a mystery than the change of earth, air and sunlight into a plant, of which we also see daily examples.

In the education of youth we are familiar with similar processes. To give a boy fine impulses, create desirable features of character we cite to him the heroic stories of the past so moulding his character with them that he will have no mean or ignoble ideas. If the spirit conveyed by these stories is right and true and the boy has absorbed it, what matters about the truth of the facts that made that spirit known? The boy recognizes the vital truth of the spirit of the facts which is the real gift to him. He has the spirit and the ideas they gave him and that is the only important matter.

Thus is made to appear how futile all criticism of the truth of the facts of the Bible really is. It touches not at all the vital point of its inspiration. Whether the whale swallowed Jonah or Jonah swallowed the whale is of no consequence. Whether the world was made in six days or six centuries is not material nor does it concern us whether wine was made out of water at Cana or whether the five thousand were fed on the scanty loaves and fishes. The true vital criticism of the Bible must be upon its inspiration, on the quality of its teaching. So far as I am aware no such criticism has ever been made. It is a question of spirit to spirit, the Divine Spirit of the

³ Isaiah 55:7.

Bible, the human spirit of the man as they meet and unite, the man losing himself in the Divine, thus the work of the Bible fulfills itself. The happy harmonious condition of soul thus brought about is the final and only test of the truth of the Bible. That this is a purely personal, individual test may be objected by the critic, but in the last resort this personal test is the only test in all matters spiritual or purely physical.

To quote Eddington again we are told that "Mind is the first and most direct thing in our experience and all else is remote inference—inference either intuitive or deliberate."⁴

⁴ *Nature of the Physical World*. p. 281.

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