

NEW LIGHT ON THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

BY VICTOR S. YARROS

FROM time to time, the Agnostic of the school of Spencer, Huxley, Tyndall, Haeckel, *et al*, is impelled or compelled to restudy the so-called Problem of Evil. Liberal theologians and others continue to wrestle manfully with that perplexing problem, and when they succeed in saying anything original or thought-provoking it is incumbent upon the advanced skeptical thinkers fairly and earnestly to consider that contribution to an old, yet ever-new subject of the deepest possible interest.

Thus, Principal L. P. Jacks of Manchester, philosopher, metaphysician, editor, social radical and man of letters, has challenged attention among thoughtful persons by a series of lectures—published in book form—which he delivered some time ago at Oxford on the subject of “Religious Perplexities.” What Principal Jacks really discusses in this little volume is the problem of evil, and his point of view is that of an enlightened, unconventional, candid Christian.

Mr. Jacks never offers us dogma in place of ideas. He affects no confidence which he does not feel. He is humble and tentative in his conclusions, although those conclusions are of the utmost significance to him. Are they to other independent and liberal thinkers? And is Mr. Jacks' method of reaching them scientific or philosophical? These are the questions we shall try to answer.

First, however, let us call particular attention to the frank and courageous spirit in which Mr. Jacks approaches the problem of evil. He assumes, as it were, the full burden of proof. He attempts no arbitrary simplification. He avoids no difficulty which he is able to perceive and underestimates none.

For example, he disclaims any sympathy with those who have been saying that the great world war, from the disastrous effects of which we are making no haste to recover, has emphasized in a new or exceptionally tragic way the problem of evil. He observes with truth that that notion is a very shallow one. The war was a terrible calamity, but it raised no new moral or spiritual problems. To quote Mr. Jacks:

“We are sometimes told that the great war has enormously increased the religious perplexities of mankind. I cannot see that it has. All the problems it suggests, all the questions it raises, were equally contained in the lesser wars that went before it; and even if the great one had never occurred, there would still be enough suffering in the world to challenge the strongest faith. An age which has needed the great war to rouse it to a sense of tragedy must have been living in a fool’s paradise. Every problem suggested by the great war has been there, plain for all ages to see, since suffering and death, folly and wickedness, first came into the world. . . . All that the great war can mean was summarized long ago by the man who saw the ‘whole creation groaning and travailing in pain together till now!’”

Dealing more generally with the same interesting and important point—the utter lack of novelty in religious and moral perplexities—Mr. Jacks says further:

“Too much is being made of the special difficulties besetting religion at the passing moment—those, for example, connected with the progress of science and with the higher criticism—as though this were the age of religious difficulty par excellence. Surely that is a mistake. Religious belief has always required the full courage of the soul to sustain its high propositions. . . . What science and the higher criticism have done is to turn attention upon new points, to divert perplexities into new channels, but not to alter their essential character, not to change the stuff of which they are made. The fact of evil is no discovery of the present age; it has been challenging the faith of men for thousands of years; there is nothing more poignant to be said about it today than was said ages ago by the patriarch Job. Suffering and death, the agony of bereavement, the tragedies of blighted

hopes and shipwrecked lives—these are not things peculiar to the twentieth century.”

How true all this is, and how well said!

No; there is nothing new in the religious and moral perplexities of the thoughtful and candid men and women of this day and generation. But no generation is content to accept any solution of the problem of evil which does not satisfy its own mind, or hit the mark from its own particular point of view, or find expression in terms and accents which harmonize with its own habits of thought and its own vague *weltanschauung*. Mr. Jacks is a representative of the most progressive and broad-minded Christian element of our time. Since he faces the old and ever-new problem bravely and manfully, his attempt at a solution of it in new terms is, to repeat, calculated to arrest attention and provoke reflection.

To begin with, Mr. Jacks does not promise any release from *all* religious and moral perplexities, or any *complete* intellectual solution of the problem of evil. A religion worthy of the name, he says, may give release from *some* perplexities, perplexities that belittle us and place us on a level on which the better part of our nature feels uneasy and uncomfortable. Perplexities attributable to selfishness, timidity, meanness or envy vanish in the light and warmth of any rational religion or philosophy. But, on the other hand, a rational religion—to quote Mr. Jacks:

“Confronts us with perplexities on a higher level, where our finer essence finds the employment for which it is made. Instead of hiding the great crises, instead of banishing them, instead of giving us anaesthetics to make us unconscious of their presence, religion reveals them, makes us aware of them, sharpens our consciousness of their presence, but at the same time reveals us to ourselves as beings who are capable of overcoming them. If, on the one hand, it uncovers the pain of life, and makes us feel it with a new intensity, on the other it liberates the love that conquers pain, a power mightier than death and sharper than agony.”

Mr. Jacks, as a Christian, advances the claim that Christianity revealed us to ourselves in the person of Jesus, brought to light a side of our nature which the Old Testament and other great books had not sufficiently emphasized. This claim has been and will be challenged by many adherents of other religious systems, and by

Agnostics and Atheists as well, but this is not the place to deal with that purely incidental issue. The question of immediate interest to us is not whether Christianity in its essence is the most enlightened and purest of all religions. Let it be admitted that Mr. Jacks' Christianity is advanced, noble and pure as any religion professed by non-Christian sages and thinkers. The issue is whether any religion removes the higher and graver perplexities and supplies an intelligible and significant solution of the problem of evil.

To make Mr. Jacks' answer clear, we may quote a few more passages:

There is "that in all of us which stands above the perplexities of life and is more than a match for them; which sees evil with the clearest eye and at the same time overcomes it with the deepest love. At home in the bright hours of life, which grow brighter under the radiance it pours into them, the Christ within is always ready when the dark ones arrive. 'I am equal to that,' he cries. 'Through the power that is given me, through the fellowship I have with the heart of a divine universe, I can turn that evil into good, and transfigure that sorrow into joy, and draw the stream of a deeper life from the very thing that threatens to slay me. . . .

"On the surface of things there is discord, confusion and want of adaptation; but dig down, first to the center of the world, and then to the center of your own nature, and you will find a most wonderful correspondence, a most beautiful harmony, between the two—the world made for the hero and the hero made for the world."

I may note in passing that Mr. Jacks' solution coincides with that offered by Mr. Havelock Ellis in his chapter on religion in the new work rather paradoxically entitled, "The Dance of Life." Mr. Ellis tells us in that quite disappointing chapter the story of his own conversion to religious belief. He was an Agnostic in his youth and a self-complacent one. He had pondered the problem of evil and the patent want of adaptation on this earth and was disposed to accept the teachings of Huxley, Darwin, Tyndall and Spencer—particularly the affirmation that the finite human mind can never know what life is, or what the ultimate stuff of the universe is, or whether that stuff was created by some omniscient and omnipotent power, or what the destiny and purpose of the universe are. But the study of

a neglected or unappreciated book of James Hinton suddenly opened his eyes to the inadequacy and short-sightedness of Agnosticism, as well as to the momentous truth that the universe was not hostile or even indifferent to man—or, rather, to the best in man—but *distinctly friendly*. In other words, there is something in the universe which sympathizes with and responds to our better nature, our conscience, our sense of beauty, truth and goodness. To work with that power becomes a pleasure, a privilege and a joy—and that is the religious life and the law and prophets of sound religion.

Let us now candidly and critically examine the Jacks-Ellis solution of the problem of evil.

The first question that inevitably arises in the independent mind is one of fact—namely, *Is* the universe friendly to man at his noblest and best; *is* there the beautiful harmony discerned by Mr. Jacks between the heroic soul and the center of the universe—whatever and wherever that “center” is? Is it true that there is something in all of us which is capable of turning evil into good and transforming sorrow into joy?

It is but fair to point out that both Principal Jacks and Mr. Ellis appeal to general experience, to the average man—provided he is not a coward and prejudiced bigot—to “all of us,” in short, or to most of us. The claims of a few mystics or rare natures would, of course, possess no evidential value. Either the few exceptional natures would be treated as a privileged class, a group of supermen, living on a plane never attainable by the overwhelming majority of human beings, or else they would be simply disbelieved, suspected of self-deception, delusions of moral grandeur, or arrogant self-righteousness and offensive vanity. Religion is for all of us or it is for none capable of clear thinking and intelligent weighing of the evidence supplied by observation, self-examination and experimentation.

Messrs. Jacks and Ellis assure the average man, then, in effect, that if he will assimilate and apply the teachings of Christ as they are found in the new testament, his perplexities in connection with the problem of evil will fade away and vanish, and that harmony and beautiful adaptation will replace all apparent discord, maladjustment and heart-rending waste and woe. He will see that the universe is friendly, that evil can be turned into good and anguish into gladness.

Let us put ourselves in the shoes of the average man and consider certain concrete instances:

An early-morning fire destroys an orphan asylum, or a hospital for the insane, or a home for helpless cripples, and hundreds of lives are lost.

An earthquake suddenly wipes out thousands or tens of thousands of human and sub-human beings and inflicts misery and pain on other multitudes of human beings, besides turning hard-won wealth and capital into rubbish heaps.

A cyclone or tidal wave overwhelms a city and takes heavy toll of life—adult and infant.

Cancer kills hundreds of thousands of men and women of middle age—bread winners, mothers of families in need of care and protection.

Thousands of women in the most advanced communities die, despite the best medical and scientific ministrations, while giving birth to normal children.

Tens of thousands of infants die annually of "children's diseases" which are apparently unpreventable.

Here are perfectly familiar illustrations of evil and maladaptation. How will the most faithful observance of Jesus' teachings transform them into good, and draw life, inspiration, hope and joy from them? How does the friendly attitude toward the universe reconcile one to appalling waste and cruel suffering?

In vain will the anxious inquirer seek direct answers to these queries in Mr. Jacks' or Mr. Ellis' pages. The indirect answer he will glean is this: Lose yourself in service, forget your personal sorrow, work indefatigably for the physical and spiritual welfare of your unfortunate neighbors and fellowmen, and sooner or later peace, serenity and contentment will pervade your whole being. "Be ready"; be cheerful and stoical; be hopeful and your life will be worth living.

There is truth—vital and significant truth—in this indirect answer, but that truth *affords no solution of the problem of evil. Intellectually speaking, it is not really relevant to that problem.* Service, the losing of self in useful and beneficial work, charity and enlightened benevolence unquestionably yield more satisfaction than a selfish, sordid, loveless, life; but it does not turn evil into good, does not transfigure sorrow into joy, does not draw life from sources

of destruction and death. *Evil remains evil; waste remains waste; undeserved suffering and pain remain undeserving suffering and pain.*

Indeed, the effort to abolish evil, while worthy of all encouragement and commendation—even from the narrower point of view of Hedonism—and the will to make or support such effort *are themselves proofs that evil continues to be envisaged and felt as evil.* Otherwise, why work to abolish or diminish it?

It is far more logical to argue that, since the universe is friendly, and the ultimate Purpose behind it positive and beneficent, evil should be treated as disguised good, and accepted with absolute resignation, than it is to contend that, because the best in us is stirred by what appears to us to be evil and waste, and because there is inner satisfaction in service and altruistic conduct generally, therefore our perplexities are dispelled and the problem of evil is happily solved.

And this brings us to the second important point. Messrs. Jacks and Ellis offer us a *moral* solution of an *intellectual* problem. This is hardly legitimate. We ask them to explain evil on the theory of a friendly universe, a beneficent Purpose in creation, and they tell us that, if we devote our lives to service, to the overcoming and abolition of evil, the mystery is solved, the perplexity removed. How? Principal Jacks speaks of mere anaesthetics so often proposed by superficial theologians or conventional moralists as remedies for human ills; he fails to see that he lays himself open to the charge of doing precisely the same thing—of suggesting social service, active sympathy and charity, as a means of *escape* from religious and moral perplexities. He fails to perceive that the missionary, the settlement worker, the sincere reformer, the martyr only combat particular evils, and find solace in doing so, *without denying either to others or to themselves the fact or problem of evil!*

It should be borne in mind that the Pragmatist and Agnostic, who find *no* evidence of friendliness to man in the universe, or of comprehensible Purpose in creation, though perfectly willing to entertain the Jacks-Ellis hypothesis, provided adequate proof be furnished in its behalf, reach the same moral and practical conclusions as Messrs. Jacks and Ellis in their own way. The Agnostic and Pragmatist say that they can form no conception of Universal Pur-

pose, or of omniscience and omnipotence, and that all the available evidence of astronomy, geology, and other sciences points to cosmic indifference to poor humanity, or to organic life generally as known on this little planet. But they do not deny that the best in us is responsive to human and animal need of succor and sympathy, and that the happiest life, irrespective of creeds, beliefs and theories regarding ultimates, is the life of disinterested service, of pursuit of truth and promotion of justice and good will. The Agnostic and Pragmatist, taking a frankly human view of the human situation, affirm that, whether the universe be friendly, indifferent or hostile to man, our own experience and reason tell us that the way to inward peace and rational happiness lies through the realization of our evolved and evolving ideals of fraternity and mutual aid. Do Messrs. Jacks and Ellis imply that, but for the hypothesis of Purpose and friendliness in the universe, the good and noble life would be impossible for man, or futile, or irrational? One cannot think so; but, in that case, why assume the friendliness of the universe at all in dealing with a moral and practical question, the question of the best means of human fulfillment and self-realization, the question of getting the maximum out of life?

It is to be feared that neither Principal Jacks nor Mr. Ellis has faced the intellectual aspect of the problem of evil with the clear-sightedness and single-mindedness it requires. They are not called upon to supply mystical proof in support of the gospel of service and the good life; that gospel is amply fortified by universal experience. What they are called upon to do is to treat the problem of evil scientifically, to offer a solution of it, if they can, which shall be intellectually satisfactory and free from question-begging premises or gratuitous conclusions. Whatever we may disagree upon, we must all recognize that in dealing with so ancient a problem as that of evil, our first and last duty, as upright, self-respecting thinkers, is to eschew rhetoric and vague phrase-making, to reject pseud-ideas and to demand of one another real ideas, significant propositions, as well as the production of proper and sufficient evidence in support of any theory we may tentatively advance.

The present writer has no intention of asserting dogmatically that there is no solution of the problem of evil. There may be one, but if there is, it is scientific, not sentimental. Religion may furnish

such a solution, but that religion will itself be based on science and reason. So far, it is clear, science has offered no solution of the problem of evil. Religions and theological thinkers have too often offered verbal and superficial solutions. With such, serious and high-minded men and women cannot rest content. They eagerly welcome every honest attempt at a solution and are grateful for a hint, a ray of light, a working theory at all fruitful and based on tangible evidence.