

EVIL AND MRS KNIGHT

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THE remarkably violent storm which raged around the two talks broadcast last January by Mrs Margaret Knight¹ has now happily subsided and I do not want to start it again. Some of the attacks on Mrs Knight's views looked like simple manifestations of bad temper, if not of actual hysteria, and very few showed much real understanding of her position. Although there is rather more rhetoric than logic in some of what she says, it seems to me that on the whole her talks present an understandable and moderate non-Christian view.

One who believes that religion is an illusion could do very much worse than follow Mrs Knight's line of thought and action. She maintains, quite rightly, that it is inconsistent to ask your children to believe what you yourself think to be false. The Christian, of course, thinks it better that a non-Christian should sometimes be inconsistent in practice; just as a liberal humanist prefers a communist or fascist to act inconsistently with his principles, and rejoices to hear that children in Russian schools are brought up to respect ideals of scientific objectivity and intellectual honesty which a true communist might not accept. However one cannot expect a non-Christian to prefer to be inconsistent, one cannot blame Mrs Knight for wanting to be reasonable, and given that religion is an illusion it seems to me that her views are very reasonable. The question on which everything else turns is simply: Is religion an illusion or not?

'Religion', says Mrs Knight, 'is a system of belief. And a system of belief that is to be acceptable must satisfy the ordinary criteria of reason; the beliefs must be consistent with each other and not obviously in conflict with fact.' I think this is perfectly true, but she goes on to say 'Orthodox Christian beliefs . . . do not satisfy these criteria'.

To support this claim she instances that 'Orthodox Christian theology is inconsistent with the facts of evil'. Notice that this is given as an example of Christianity infringing the *second* criterion of reason (conflict with fact) and not the *first* (internal inconsistency). Mrs Knight herself believes that evil is a fact and finds this inconsistent with the doctrine that there is a wholly good and all-

1 'Morals without Religion', *The Listener*, January 13 and 20, 1955.

powerful creator. She firmly rejects the views of 'some Christians who . . . try hard to convince themselves that illness and pain and misery are not really evils'. Here again she is surely right; there really is a great deal of evil in the world.

Mrs Knight, however, in her statement of the problem has unfortunately mixed up two different questions. It is one thing to ask: Is it possible for a good all-powerful God to have created a world containing evil? It is a different thing to ask: Why should God have created a world containing evil? Even if we answer 'Yes' to the first question, the second one still demands an answer. I agree with Mrs Knight that unless we can answer 'Yes' to the first, Christianity is intellectually unacceptable; and I think, as she does, that this would make it absolutely worthless. But the second question is an altogether different matter. It confronts us with the mystery of suffering and evil that has faced poets, theologians, novelists and mystics from the author of the Book of Job onwards. To this question the Christian does not know the answer; we know nothing about God's intentions except what he himself has told us, and he has not told us this, we can only speak in hints and guesses. It is important to see that this second question is the real and profound problem of evil. In comparison with this the first question is bound to seem trivial and its answer merely a matter of dry logic-chopping, nevertheless unless we can answer the first question the second one cannot even arise.

In order to answer the first we need to examine rather more closely than Mrs Knight has done the way in which we use words like 'evil', 'bad', etc. Mrs Knight would maintain, apparently, that when we say of George who has cancer, (a) that he has cancer, and (b) that he is in an evil condition, we are making two different statements about George and both of them are true. They are *different* statements because she clearly believes that it is logically possible to assert one and deny the other. Thus she envisages 'some Christians' who would do just this, and she does not accuse them of self-contradiction, she argues by an appeal to experience that they are mistaken. She seems to refer to both (a) and (b) as 'facts': (b), I take it, is what she would call a 'fact of evil', and she might call (a) a 'fact of physiology'. I think she is absolutely right about this.²

² To assert this is, for St Thomas Aquinas, implicitly to assert that God exists. He said 'If evil is [in Mrs Knight's sense] God is.' The god that Mrs Knight explicitly rejects is not the almighty and infinitely good God of Christianity but an idol.

Although evil is real in the sense that 'This is bad' or 'This is an evil' frequently make true statements and do not merely express our emotions or our intentions, we must not be misled by their grammatical form into supposing that evil is a sort of stuff, or that it is a special property that some things have. Grammatically the sentences are similar to 'This is yellow' and 'This is an orange', but a little thought shows us how different they are from this.

When we say that George's condition is on the one hand cancerous and on the other hand evil, we do not assert that he is suffering from two ailments side by side, as though we had said that he had both cancer and a cold in the head. When we say that he has cancer we are saying that he is in a certain physiological condition; when we say that he is suffering an evil we are saying that he is in this very same condition and should not be so. To say that something is evil is to point to a lack of something that should be there; not a lack in the physiological sense—in fact, physiologically, to have cancer is to have too much rather than too little—but a lack of that health, wholeness, goodness or integrity that is due to the thing.

Thus an evil is an absence, but not just an absence, it is the absence of what should be present. 'This is bad' is not simply like 'This is not yellow,' for the latter merely indicates that a certain property is absent. It would be strange to say that there is a lot of 'not-yellowness' in the world, but it makes perfectly ordinary sense to say, as Mrs Knight does, that there is a lot of badness in the world; what it means is that a lot of things in the world are not as good as they should be.

Notice that this means that there cannot be anything that is purely and simply evil, just as there cannot be anything that is purely and simply defective, deformed, damaged or unsuccessful. In order for a dog to be in an evil condition (e.g. sick) it must first of all be a dog which makes certain demands on health and happiness, it is just because its condition of sickness does not satisfy these demands that we say that it is an evil condition. To say that its condition is an evil for the dog is logically to imply that its being a dog involves it in having certain demands which may or may not be satisfied. But at least some of these demands must be met in order for the dog to be there at all to suffer its evils. When we put a wounded animal out of its misery by killing it we are precisely making it impossible for it to suffer evil by removing all

its good. This is what is meant by saying that evil is always found in good. Something can be good without being in any way evil, but it cannot be evil without being in some way good. A defective photograph must be at least some sort of photograph, an unsuccessful expedition must be an expedition, a sick man must be alive.

We cannot quite say that a sick man is *better* than no man at all, because we normally use 'better than' to compare two grades of goodness, two degrees of fulfilment of the demands of a thing, whereas no-man-at-all has no demands and is neither good nor evil. Still less can we say that no-man-at-all is *worse* than a sick man, since we do not say that something is worse unless it is at least bad, and no-man-at-all cannot be bad since it is in no sense good. We can easily get muddled about this, for we all learnt at school that you can think of a scale of numbers going . . . -2, -1, 0, 1, 2, . . . and we think of 0 as being simply less than 1, and so it is for the purposes of certain mathematical calculations. But, as Professor Ryle has reminded us, it is dangerous to mix up the tone of voice in which you talk arithmetic with the tone of voice in which you talk about things. No apples is not a lesser quantity of apples than four apples, it just isn't any apples in any quantity, and no man at all is not a man who is rather worse off than a bald man, he just isn't there at all.

Now the Christian teaching is that God created the world out of nothing. There were no things 'before' creation, not an empty space, not even a time; and so we cannot say, for example, that it was *better* to create the world than not to have created it, even though once created the world is good. Nothing is *improved* by the creation, nothing in fact is changed, for 'before' creation there was no creature to be changed and God himself is not affected by his act of creating. Thus we cannot congratulate God on having made a good job of creation rather than botching it. When we say that God is good we do not mean that he has done well in creating us; he would be neither more nor less good if he had not created anything at all. It is true that if he had not created the good world we would not be able to know or to say that he is good; for one thing we would not be here to know or say it, but when we do say it we do not mean that his creation is good (still less that it is entirely good) we mean that he is good.

Thus we do not decide how good God is by estimating the goodness of the world. When we say that there is evil in the

world, i.e. that things are not as good as they should be, we do not mean that the work of creating has failed to fulfil certain demands (fortunately: for if this were so we could never remedy evils except by getting a new creation) for 'before' creation there could be no demands, there was nothing to have them.

When an artist or craftsman bungles his job and makes something ugly, inefficient, unsatisfactory or defective, we rightly say that he was either incompetent (if he couldn't do any better) or in some degree wicked (if he did it deliberately), and this is just because he is working within the world of better and worse, in which there are demands to be fulfilled. For such a man there is a context of demands and he either satisfies them or he does not. Mrs Knight conceives of the Christian God as being a human craftsman on a large scale, and she quite rightly refuses to believe in such a being. For certain purposes we can *imagine* that creating the world is like building a house or making a statue, and that God is an artist, but to suppose that God literally is this image we have invented is precisely what constitutes idolatry.

This same idol haunts her when she asks about the ultimate sanction of morals. She supposes that Christians believe in a large and rather dangerous being who is part of the world and who delivers arbitrary commands. So that, for her, to ask: Why should I do God's will? Why shouldn't I please myself? presents the same sort of poser as: Why should I consider others?

Mrs Knight, then, has shown that the real presence of evil in the world is inconsistent with the real presence of a perfectly competent and benevolent idol in the world. What she has not shown is that the reality of evil is inconsistent with the existence of God, who is not one among many other things in the world, but who brought the entire world into being out of nothing. Some people may feel that this makes God very remote and distant from us, but notice that we cannot, strictly speaking, say that God is *outside* the world any more than we can say he is *inside* it; on the contrary, it is just because God is *not* one among many things that he is intimately present to each one of his creatures.

To have said this is not, as has been suggested, to dispose of the problem of evil. There remains the mystery: Why should God have created such a world? Only God can tell us the answer to this and he has not told us directly; only by contemplating the mysteries of his purposes which he has revealed to us can we begin to

see dimly with the mystics that 'All things shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.'

Meanwhile Mrs Knight has destroyed one obstacle to the contemplation of the mysteries of God. To have repudiated and smashed the idol is an achievement, and it is a religious achievement, one which she shares with the saint whom she quotes. I would not be surprised to learn that she shares a great deal more than this with St Augustine, who cared for nothing but truth and who also began with an intense awareness of suffering and evil in the world.

TRY TO SAY WHAT HAPPENED IN YOUR OWN WORDS

The disappearance of time at the needle's point.
The intercalation of roses and laughter.

Summer was a voyage to find
Among the sun-enamelled pools
The cool heart of the afternoon.

At last we came upon its profound mystery,
Bathed in the silence of pomegranates,
Nestling with wings folded
In the angle of a sun-blind.

To become aware again of the moving seasons,
Between the lull of autumn and the crush of winter,
Was a grief like old letters or polished stones;
It was to feel
The tooth of winter in the flesh of spring.

ROGER SHARROCK