The fundamental ideas of Christianity

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The Fundamental Ideas of Christianity

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With a Memoir
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within the divine nature—to a will which wills at once that which is good and that which is evil? Can we conceive of God as absolutely perfect, and yet as the author of that which limits His power, wisdom, and goodness? The inadequacy of most of the theories to solve this apparent contradiction is traceable to the imperfect notions of the relation of God to the world which I have examined in former lectures; and the only adequate solution is that which is based on the Christian doctrine of that relation, or on the idea of God as revealing or manifesting Himself in nature and in the spirit and life of man.

In the first place, what has been called the negative or privative theory of evil is the natural or necessary outgrowth of a Pantheistic view of God’s relation to the world. According to this theory the introduction of a contradictory element into the nature of God, or the necessity of making God the author of evil, is met by a virtual evaporation of the existence of evil; in other words, by maintaining that what we call moral evil or sin, when closely examined, has no positive, essential reality; or, according to a modified form of the same theory, that it is involved in, or is only another name for, that imperfection which necessarily pertains to all finite being.
2. In the second place, it is only another form of the same theory of negation or limitation according to which the source of evil is supposed to lie, not simply in the finite, but more particularly in the sensuous nature of man, or in the conflict which necessarily arises between the flesh and the spirit, the sensuous and the rational elements of man's nature. Embodiment in a corporeal nature is the necessary condition of the individuality of each finite spirit; and, according to this theory, it is not the finite spirit simply as finite, but the relation of the finite spirit to its material or fleshly embodiment, which hinders it from becoming the pure organ of the divine or infinite spirit, and which creates that negative element in man's nature which is the essence of evil.

In the third place, the theory which, with various modifications, attempts to obviate the necessity of ascribing to God the causality of evil by tracing it simply to human freedom, owes its origin to that which we have designated the Deistic or abstractly Monotheistic conception of God's relation to the world. The possibility of sin, it is maintained, is involved in the very idea of moral agency. Virtue or goodness is obedience to an outward moral law or lawgiver; but
obedience, to have any moral value, must be that of a being who is capable of disobedience. Sin could only be prevented by such an interference with human freedom as would virtually destroy the nature of man as a moral agent.

Lastly, as, after a brief review of the more important of these theories, I shall attempt to show, the Christian doctrine of sin, in which lies the only adequate explanation of its nature and origin, springs out of that notion of God's relation to the world which, as we have seen, constitutes the fundamental principle of Christianity—the principle, namely, that God is essentially self-revealing, that it is of His very essence to manifest Himself in and to the finite world; in other words, that the finite spirit is the necessary organ of the being and life of God, and that this self-revelation implies in the finite spirit an element of distinction or difference, which contains in it at least the possibility of sin.

The first of the foregoing theories, that which resolves moral evil into negation or privation of being, meets us in the course of speculation, sometimes in a more superficial, sometimes in a more strictly reasoned and philosophical form; and in the latter, if not in the former, it is, as I have
said, the necessary outcome of a pantheistic view of God's relation to the world.

1. In its more popular form it attempts to avoid making God the author of evil by identifying moral evil with finitude, or with that imperfection which necessarily pertains to all finite being. It is a contradiction in terms to suppose that the Author of nature could create a world absolutely perfect; in other words, could impart His own infinitude to the finite. The Author of the world is the source of all that is positive or good in it, but He cannot be regarded as responsible for that imperfection or limitation which is the necessary character of any finite world. The cause or author of a being's existence is only the cause of what it is positively, but not of what it lacks or is not. The sculptor gives form and beauty to the marble, but he is not the cause of its lack of life. That the semi-transparent body is partially luminous is due to the source of light; that it is not perfectly luminous, to its own opaqueness. That the vessel in the stream moves at all is to be ascribed to the force of the current; that it moves with limited rapidity, to its own inertia. God is no more the cause of evil than the sun is the cause of darkness and coldness, or the painter or sculptor of the
absence of life and motion in the work of art. The amount of good communicated to any being is conditioned, not merely by the will and power of the giver, but by the nature of the receiver.

It is true that, in the case of human givers, the utmost which the giver chooses to bestow may fall far short of the receptivity of the object on which he operates. The benefactor who relieves the wants of the poor is not the cause of their remaining poverty; he is responsible for it only if his resources admit of a less stinted charity. But, in the case of the relation of the divine benefactor to man, it is not the goodness of the former but the nature of the latter that presents an insuperable obstacle to the removal of an imperfection, which is of the very essence of all finite being. God is the source of all the positive good that is in the world; the imperfection and evil are due to the inherent limitation of the finite.

To the theory of negation in the form in which I have now stated it, the objections are so obvious that the only wonder is that it should have imposed on some of the greatest minds in the history of human thought. The most cogent of these objections is, that it destroys the moral view of evil by identifying it with the metaphysical