

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON "THEISM, NON-THEISM AND MORALITY"

There is an essay entitled "Theism, Non-Theism and Morality" in Dr. R. C. Gandhi's book *The Availability of Religious Ideas*. In this essay the author has raised many important issues concerning the theistic and the non-theistic world-views. I have made in this paper a few observations on some of these issues which, I think, are of vital interest to the students of philosophy of religion. I have mainly argued for the following six theses: (1) The non-theist's attitude of moral neutrality towards the "fact" of unredeemable suffering does not weaken his position. (2) The problem of evil does not arise for the non-theist in the sense in which the author claims it arises or must arise for him. (3) The author's argument for the need to invoke God for the care of the dead and also for overcoming great crises in life does not appear to be cogent and convincing. (4) There is no need to invoke God for justifying our act of killing someone in self-defence or in the defence of others. (5) The author's version of theism is different from traditional theism and also appears to be weak and half-heartedly advocated. (6) Even this weak version of theism may have an undesirable social implication for those who sincerely believe in it that is, it may encourage a self-deception by making them wholly dependent upon an imaginary being.

I

In the first section of his essay the author says that the non-theist adopts an attitude of moral neutrality towards the "mere fact" of suffering; and this distinguishes his position from that of the theist who seeks for moral justification of all kinds of suffering. Contrary to the non-theist, the theist is fully convinced that "if only we could understand God's ways we would see that our sufferings are not or need not be in vain; we would see that they fulfil or could fulfil some secret purpose of God, and so are not morally unjustified."¹ Now it may be granted that the non theist, unlike the theist, regards the "fact" of humanly unredeemable suffering as morally neutral in the sense that he does not and

need not seek for its justification as the theist does. But this in no way weakens the non-theist's position, nor does it cause any logical embarrassment to him because, on his world-view, he is committed only to eliminating or reducing suffering as far as it lies in man's power to do so, and not to explaining or justifying the occurrence of suffering. It is true that, on the basis of his present limited knowledge regarding the laws of nature, he is unable to answer satisfactorily the question, why does such unnecessary and unredeemable suffering occur in the world? But this limitation of the non-theist need not and in fact does not, cause any obstacle in his sincerely willing and also making genuine efforts to eliminate or allay human or animal suffering. Thus, the non-theist's attitude of moral neutrality towards the "fact" of unredeemable suffering does not present any difficulty for his world-view.

But, on the other hand, the theist's conviction that no instance of suffering is without moral justification causes insurmountable difficulties for his position; and this fact is clearly recognized by the author when he says: "Human beings very often suffer for no fault of theirs—no it appears anyway—and also they suffer beyond endurance. Why does God break the human spirit in this fashion—even if he has the power to reconstruct it? Sensitive theists have worried about this problem, and they have given a name to this problem—'the problem of evil'."² It is thus quite obvious that the theist is necessarily confronted with the formidable problem of evil which, to my mind, admits of no satisfactory solution.

II

The problem of evil, however, does not arise for the non-theist in the sense in which the author claims it arises or must arise for him. The non-theist may accept the author's contention that every self-conscious human being must regard himself and all others as valuable persons who find themselves in an environment which is far from being wholly hospitable. But this by no means causes any embarrassment or difficulty for the non-theist, because he, unlike the theist, does not attribute any kind of teleology to nature. The theist always sees some definite purpose of God behind everything that exists in the world, for, on his view, God's creation cannot be without purpose. It is this teleological conception of the world that obliges him to explain and give justification for the occurrence of suffering. But the non-theist is not confront-

ted with this problem, because he is not committed to seeing any special purpose behind everything in the world. He may, without self-contradication, contend that unredeemable human or animal suffering is without any purpose whatsoever. So, the fact that human beings, who regard themselves as valuable persons, are not placed in a wholly hospitable environment does not cause any embarrassment or difficulty for the non-theist.

III

The argument which the author has advanced simply to "invoke" (and not to 'establish') the reality of God does not appear to be cogent and convincing. To put it very briefly, the argument runs as follows. I am under a moral obligation to regard all human beings as valuable persons who deserve my concern and caring attention. But sometimes a situation may arise when I am unable to do anything for a person who is in great pain and is suffering beyond endurance despite our provision of the best medical aid. I can, of course, "wish" him quick and complete recovery. But suppose this is ruled out by all competent medical authorities. Shall I then wish him death? But to wish him death would make it impossible for me and for everybody to regard him as the object of care and concern. I am, therefore, obliged to "invoke" perfectly good, omnipotent and omniscient being (God) who would either miraculously heal the man in this world or would render him self-conscious after his death and thus would take him in His care. In this way, by "invoking" the reality of God, "I would be spared the dilemma of either wishing the mad death or wishing him an insufferably painful life."³

The above argument to invoke God does not appear to be convincing because of the following three reasons. In the first place, there is nothing wrong in wishing death to a person whose unbearable suffering cannot be removed by all possible medical aid. To wish him death (and even to terminate his life by painless methods) in such a situation is not to regard him as less valuable than any other human being. On the contrary, this shows that we are not indifferent to his miserable plight, and by not letting him suffer unbearably for a long time we only exhibit our great concern for him. We cannot, however, be said to have any obligation to a dead person, because having an obligation to someone who does not exist is quite unintelligible and pointless.

It is therefore very difficult to agree with the author when he tells us that "the death of a person does not release us from the obligation to at least minimally care for him."⁴ In fact, we cannot even think of caring for someone who is non-existent. Thus, the dilemma posed by the author is unnecessary, and there is no need to invoke God in order to get rid of this spurious and imaginary dilemma.

Secondly, to invoke God simply for the sake of a dead person is nothing but our wishful thinking that he is in God's care and therefore all is well with him after his death. The author himself admits that our wish that the unbearably suffering person would be rendered self-conscious and would be cared for by God after his death cannot be called "hope", for "hope" must be supported by rational grounds which are not available to support our wish. Concerning our hope for survival after death the author himself raises the following question: "Can I say, 'there is hope that I will survive death?'". And answering this question, he clearly says: "I cannot. There is no science of supernature, or anything like a commonsense view of the 'other world' and its connection with this world, to enable me to adduce any sort of grounds for saying 'there is hope that I will survive death'".⁵ It is quite evident that the author himself seriously doubts the propriety of our hope to survive death. This clearly shows that our wish regarding the dead person being in the care of God is nothing but more wishful thinking unsupported by any rational grounds. It is hard to see how this irrational wishful thinking on our part differs from a self-deception which, for the sake of sincerity and honesty to ourselves, we must avoid. We must accept the fact of an individual's total extinction after his death, and this by no means lessens his value for us and our profound concern for him when he was alive. In short, there is no need and rational justification to invoke God simply for putting a dead person in His imaginary care.

Thirdly, if we invoke God for the care of the dead, we must presuppose the existence of the "other world" and also the possibility of the life after death. But as the author himself admits, there are no rational grounds for our belief in these religious hypotheses. In fact, these religious hypotheses are unnecessary for regarding all human beings as valuable persons and also for showing our profound concern for them. The non-theist can

certainly regard every living person as valuable and can also genuinely experience great concern for him. Thus, the non-theist does not have to depend upon invoking God or any other supernatural power for valuing all human beings.

IV

The author claims that it is necessary to invoke God with His resuscitating power for the care of the dead if we want to justify our act of killing someone in self-defence or in the defence of others without ceasing to regard him as a valuable person. We cannot be under a moral obligation to kill a human being whom we regard as a valuable person; and, according to the author, this difficulty can be overcome only by invoking God, since we know that God will care for such a person whom we had to kill because of our inability to change him and make him non-injurious to others by our power of love and wisdom. It is obvious that this argument is aimed at providing justification for the death penalty in some exceptional circumstances. But I do not find this argument to be cogent and convincing for the following reason. The author has presupposed that every human being must be regarded as a valuable person in all circumstances irrespective of what he does to others. This presupposition cannot, however, be accepted, because when a person ceases to value others by injuring or killing them, he has no right to be regarded as a valuable person. He has to be killed because by his own abominable acts he has lost his right to be valued and to remain alive. It is thus quite evident that there is no need to invoke God to put such a person in His care and to preserve his value after his death.

V

The author does subscribe to theism, but his version of theism is quite different from that of the traditional theists. He, unlike traditional theists, clearly admits that it is not possible to establish the reality of God and that we have no rational grounds for believing in His existence. We cannot even hope that God exists and that He would care for the dead. This is because "belief and hope are inductive concepts—some specification of 'grounds' for believing or hoping is always a legitimate demand."⁶ And, according to the author, it is not possible for us to meet

this legitimate demand so far as our belief in or hope for the existence of God is concerned. We can therefore only "wish" that God exists and that He cares of the dead ! This indeed, is a very weak and half-heartedly advocated version of theism which depends simply on our "wish" ! Now, it is not hard to see that my wish is a purely subjective phenomenon which cannot establish any objective reality. This means that God invoked by me is merely my own mental phenomenon having no objective reality at all. If this is the status of God invoked by the theist, the non-theist has nothing to dispute about it. But the crucial question, which inevitably suggests itself here, is: how can such a God be supposed to care for the dead? So far as I know, the author has not dealt with this question in his book. He, however, does anticipate and also tries to answer the following objection to his version of theism: " How can you invoke God when you have no grounds for believing in His reality? "

I think the author's answer to this objection is far from being satisfactory. Answering this objection he says : Where you have the notion of a communicative being, whose reality you have no grounds for believing in, you can look for him by seeking him communicatively. And to communicatively seek a communicative being is to invoke him. If you are supposed to be lost in a forest, although I have no grounds for believing that you are there, I can look for you by shouting out for you. This involves invoking you, affirming your reality, but not believing in your reality. "8 Now, there are in this passage two important points which call for explanation and clarification. In the first place, it is very hard to see how I can have the notion of a communicative being whose reality I have no grounds to believe in. Every notion or idea of something has ultimately to be based on my "experience" of it—taking the word " experience " in its broadest sense. Now if I have the experience of something, I do have some grounds for believing in its reality; and if something is absolutely beyond my experience, I can have no grounds to believe in its reality, and consequently I can have no notion or idea of it. Thus, I can have no notion of a so-called communicative being whose reality I have no grounds for believing in, and therefore I cannot look for such a being by seeking him communicatively. Secondly, it is clear from this passage that the author distinguishes between " invoking " or " affirming " one's reality

and "believing" in it. By this distinction he wants to assert that we can "invoke" or "affirm" somebody's reality without "believing" in it. This, indeed, is a very confusing assertion, because, to my mind, I logically cannot "invoke" or "affirm" anything's reality without having some grounds to believe in it. I can look for a man in a forest by shouting out for him when, and only when, I have sufficient reason to believe that he is lost somewhere in that very forest. Without this belief my looking for him in that forest would be absolutely pointless. In short, it is logically impossible for me to invoke or affirm the reality of any being unless I have sufficient grounds to believe in his existence; and this important fact seems to have been ignored by the author while pleading for the possibility of invoking God for the care of the dead. But, as I have pointed out earlier, the author himself concedes that there are no rational grounds for believing in the reality of God: and, to my mind, this clearly shows that we have no grounds to invoke God for any purpose whatsoever. It is therefore pointless to say that we are under a moral obligation to invoke God for the care of the dead.

VI

It is worth pointing out here that even this weak version of theism advocated by the author may have a serious and far reaching undesirable social implication which is as follows. By asking human beings to invoke God in the face of great difficulties and crises it may discourage them to make concerned efforts for overcoming these difficulties and crises by mutual help and co-operation. This undesirable social implication of theism can clearly be seen when the author emphatically tells us that "in our individual and social life, our biological existence, or private and public lives, there are impassable difficulties, crises, contradictions, the overcoming of which is manifestly beyond human power and wisdom and love. We are under a moral obligation to invoke God in the face of all these difficulties, and not merely in the face of death. And there is also simply a need to do so."⁹

I, however, see no need to invoke God even in the face of those difficulties or crises which we are unable to overcome either by our individual efforts or by the help and co-operation of others. I admit that in such a situation we may find ourselves utterly helpless and get very much frustrated. But I think invoking an

imaginary being is no remedy for getting out of this inevitable situation. We must rather learn to face with courage and fortitude such insurmountable difficulties or crises by striving to overcome them as far as it lies within our power to do so. And if we are completely unable to get out of these great crises, we must develop in ourselves sufficient courage and patience to put up with them. I think this realistic attitude towards life and the world is the only healthy and desirable way to face such great crises, for it alone can save us from a self-deception of invoking an imaginary being and from becoming totally dependent upon such a being. It is for this reason that the non-theist adopts this secular approach to human life and the world.

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NOTES

1. R. C. Gandhi, *The Availability of Religious Ideas*, Macmillan, London, 1976, p. 53.
2. *Ibid* p. 54.
3. *Ibid*, p. 63.
4. *Ibid*, p. 100.
5. *Ibid*, p. 103.
6. *Ibid*, p. 64.
7. *Ibid*, p. 64.
8. *Ibid*, p. 64.
9. *Ibid*, p. 65.