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IS CHANGE ULTIMATE?

THERE is no concept of greater importance in contemporary philosophy than the concept of change. Philosophy is generally regarded as a dull subject, which admits of no change, no variation in its assumptions or its aims. Yet after the scientific vogue of evolution, philosophy seems to have put on a new garb, and breaking away from the static concepts of old philosophy, has become more and more dynamic in character. From the days of Plato onwards in Europe, and the Upanishadic seers in India there has been a definite assumption in the minds of most philosophers, coloring all their thought, that what changes cannot be real. Hence the real was conceived as something that is changeless, something that is perfect. And the phenomenal world of change received the stamp of inferiority by being called *maya* or the world of mere appearance. Even the Hegelian conception of the Absolute has been interpreted by the most orthodox Idealists as being static, admitting of an infinite number of permutations and combinations among its parts, so long as these leave unaffected the Absolute itself in its immaculate perfection. Bergson's banner of revolt and his planting it at the very heart of reality has given rise to a new outlook on life and to new problems. Italian Idealism, rising as an off-shoot of Hegelianism, has joined hands with Bergsonism, and the question is whether this new philosophy helps to solve old problems, and can thus establish its claims to man's allegiance.

Approaching our subject from a definitely Idealistic standpoint we may take it as generally admitted that all our experience is finite and relational, and hence incomplete. Nothing in our finite experience can be self-complete, as it is dependent in all directions and is seen to form a part of larger and larger systems, till it is recognised to be a fragment in the ultimate unity of the Absolute. The Absolute is self-complete and self-contained in the sense that there is nothing outside it for it to be related to. The fragments within the Absolute continue in their eternal

dance of change and restlessness according to some law of ordered change, which we may speak of as evolution.

Regarding the Absolute, which is nothing if not the unity of its parts, but which has this evolutionary process going on within it, there arise two possible views:

1. Things evolve, but not the Absolute itself.
2. The Absolute itself evolves.

This second view is not popular with the orthodox Idealists of the type of Bradley and Bosanquet. To them a changing Absolute is a contradiction in terms. Yet if we ask why it should be a contradiction in terms, we only come across an old philosophic prejudice that what changes cannot be real. The difficulty is apparently heightened when it is asserted that the Absolute is perfect, for to say that it evolves or admits of progress is to deny its perfection. Here again it is the ghost of the old theistic ideas that is haunting the vestibules of philosophy. After centuries of superstition and groping for light, men had come to a monotheism of an exalted type, conceiving an all-perfect God, a God above all change. The difficulties of the theistic position have been the commonplaces of philosophy since the days of Kant. But it seems to have passed on its notions of perfection and changelessness to its philosophical successor: the Absolute. It is hardly necessary for us, however, at this stage of our philosophical development to repeat the Cartesian fallacy of deducing the existence of perfection from the idea of perfection. It would be merely a Cartesian dogma to believe that the idea of perfection suggests itself to us all by itself, for human experience clearly shows that it is our consciousness that things are not as they might be or as they ought to be, that gives rise to our consciousness of imperfection, and it is this in its turn, which generates in us the idea of perfection. This could be easily illustrated by the progressive evolution of the idea of God or the most perfect Being in the different religions, but it would take us too far afield to adduce these illustrations on the present occasion. It is certainly instructive that the idea of perfection has itself evolved, and that at every stage it has stood for something static, and yet in the face of prejudices it has insisted on moving. It is

palpably a vicious circle to argue that something is perfect, because it does not change; and that it cannot change, because it is perfect.

There is another reason and a more pressing one why the first view, which confines evolution only to phenomena, is unsatisfactory. It renders finite struggles a complete enigma. For what do we strive? What is our destiny? If it be self-realization, whether as complete absorption in *Brahman* or as individual immortality, is it a matter of utter indifference to the Ultimate? If the Absolute or *Brahman* is not affected by our success or our failure, our success itself is of no ultimate worth. If our finite struggles do not affect the Ultimate, the Ultimate itself will somehow fall outside us, leading us into a dualism, which destroys the unity of the Absolute or *Brahman*.

To put the same difficulty from another standpoint, we may refer here to the problem of evil. Nothing is of more practical importance to us than this, and it seems to us to constitute the very crux of a philosophical theory. Monism, whether of the Spinozistic or the Hegelian type, has again and again to meet the charge that it does not explain evil, and only succeeds in making out that it does not really exist. But nothing is more acutely felt than suffering, the most concrete form of evil. It is possible to show that it is merely a stage in the development of the good, that it is necessary for our spiritual development, and in this sense at least it would be real. That it has at least a phenomenal reality as great as or as little as our physical body, a tree or a river, can hardly be denied without being guilty of a meaningless paradox.

Our point is that this evil is not apart from the ultimate system of reality. If good as a phenomenon is a part of the Absolute, evil cannot be less so, and the whole significance of evolution is in a progressive preponderance of good over evil. Hence it follows that even the most partial success of good has a meaning for the ultimate reality. Just for purposes of illustration we may make use of theism as an analogy. God is conceived by theism as an omnipotent, omniscient Being, apart from Whom nothing can be and apart from Whose knowledge nothing can happen. Christianity goes so far as to assert that man can do no good without the

grace of God. It is notorious that the problem of evil is a hard nut to crack for all pure monotheisms. If God has nothing to do with the evil that men do, either of two alternatives will have to be accepted. Either there is an independent spirit, Angra-manyosh, Satan, or Iblis, who is responsible for all the evil, and in that case we have an ultimate dualism,—or man has a real power to be evil and so also to be good, thus limiting the power of God. Neither of these positions is acceptable to orthodox monotheism, though we may find now and then a Schweitzer asserting that all religion must be dualistic. Even granting that man can be good or bad by himself without making God responsible for his actions, surely in theism God should at least be conceived as taking a deep and an almost personal interest in the doings of His creatures, and in that case we shall have a God, who in the words of Mr. Pringle-Pattison “lives in the perpetual giving of himself, who shares in the life of his finite creatures, bearing in and with them the whole burden of their finitude, their sinful wanderings and sorrows, and the suffering without which they cannot be made perfect.” If theism is to hold at all as a philosophical creed, it must boldly hold some such conception as Mr. Pringle-Pattison’s, though it thereby parts company with the popular shibboleths of perfection, a changeless God, a God that is indifferent to, and is not affected by the improvement or the degeneration of mankind. If theism is to have any moral worth, it must conceive of a God, limited perhaps, but a God whose glory is enhanced by man’s each virtuous act, or whose glory is affected by man’s each sinful act. It is not at all our purpose to defend here any particular type of theism but it seems to us that a theism which is to be logically coherent and morally stimulating, will have to posit a God who is not static but dynamic, progressive, finding satisfaction in and partaking of the progress of His creatures.

To revert now to the discussion of the Absolute and its relation to the phenomenal world. If the Absolute is the whole system of the universe, and if the phenomena are part and parcel of that whole, it follows that the changes in the parts cannot but affect the whole. To say that the parts may change without affecting the whole is to say something that is impossible to conceive

except in one sense, and that sense is irrelevant to the question in hand. *E.g.*, it is true that all particular mango trees are undergoing a continuous change, and yet it is true that the mango tree as such—as a Platonic Idea—does not change. So too it may be argued that the Absolute cannot change. But this argument can refer only to the Idea of the Absolute: something that is conceived *in se*, *per se*, something that is self-complete, something that has nothing outside it. In this sense the Absolute never changes; in fact it cannot change. But this is only the Absolute that is conceived in abstraction. The Absolute we are concerned with is the concrete living system of things, and such an Absolute cannot but partake in the movement of its phenomenal parts. Phenomena are appearances of the Absolute, and unless they have an ultimate meaning, *i.e.* unless they share in the ultimate significance of the Absolute itself, they may as well not have happened at all.

Against this position it may be argued that etymologically and historically the word 'Absolute' has always been used in opposition to the relative, the changing. Perhaps it is so; we are not concerned to deny it. But it is an open question whether Hegel, with whom the concept of the Absolute came into vogue, necessarily meant by it something static, something above change. We are not sure that Hegel, who was an evolutionist before the days of Evolution, and who sought to discover the philosophy of history, necessarily conceived it in any sense opposed to our own. But even if he did, it would be most strange, if with the growth of our knowledge the significance of the idea were not to change. We do not see any logical absurdity in the conception of a changing Absolute. The genuine essence of the Absolute is that there is nothing outside it, and that at any moment it is complete within itself and yet continually transcending itself. Our conception of the Absolute fulfills this essential meaning, for if it changes, the change does not come from without. It rather springs from within the depths of its own being. A child is not apart from its parents, it is the manifestation of them. In the last resort everything that happens comes from the Absolute and is within it, and in its own humble way manifests the rich concreteness of the Absolute itself. In a profound sense it is true

that everything has its being in the Absolute, and that the Absolute lives in its parts, eternally partaking of their life and their freshness.

So far we have dealt with change as fundamental in a logical theism and a logical Absolutism. Before closing we may briefly consider the *Advaitic* position, which perhaps is the most formidable advocate of a changeless *Brahman*.

While the Absolute of European Philosophy is a system of things *i.e.* of relations, the *Advaitic Brahman* is essentially unrelational. The Absolute revels in its infinite number of concrete manifestations, the *Brahman* revels in its pure simplicity. A stock argument to prove the oneness and the onliness of *Brahman* is the analogy of things made out of gold or clay. Gold continues the same in all its forms, whether of bangles or buttons or plates. So too does clay in all the various forms it is given. Similarly *Brahman* is the same in all its forms, which are but its accidents, and the essence of knowledge is to see *Brahman* in everything and everything in *Brahman*. Everywhere and always *Brahman* continues the same. Change belongs to the world of *maya*. The relation of *Brahman* and *maya* is the most fruitful topic of discussion all over India. The dismissal of *maya* as not real has not failed to give rise to hostile reactions even in India, as *e.g.* in the philosophy of Ramanujacharya or Madhwacharya. Let us briefly see what part the idea of change can play in this system of thought.

It is admitted that in no sense of the term can *maya* be said to be the essence of *Brahman*. But it is equally admitted that it cannot be done away with. Its existence is also eternal. Now if it is, it can only be as an attribute of *Brahman*, for *ex hypothesi Brahman* alone is. If it is appearance, *ex hypothesi* it can only be an appearance of *Brahman*. The world of *maya* is always changing, but it is argued that this change cannot affect *Brahman*. The *Brahman* is conceived as being *nirguna* (qualityless). If this means that it has a nature indescribable and unknowable so far as our finite intellect is concerned, we have a position which is intelligible, though it has its own difficulties. If it means, however, that it has no nature, *i.e.* no qualities at all, we have a position which from a metaphysical point of view is nothing

better than the abstract Unknowable of Herbert Spencer. If it exists at all, it must have some nature, or else how can we even say it appears as *maya*? Of course it may be at once conceded that this nature, conceived by itself, *i.e.* apart from its concrete manifestations, cannot change any more than the Idea of a mango tree can change. But to conceive the *Brahman* thus in its abstraction—and it is so conceived by the *Advaitins* of the orthodox type at least—is to conceive it in its utter simplicity, as a sort of indispensable but entirely indifferent substratum for the world of *maya*; as devoid of all the rich and concrete significance of *maya*. The question resolves itself to this: has the world of *maya* any significance, any purpose, or is it a mere blind play of forces? If philosophy is a search for significance,—and what else can it be?—it is clear that it cannot accept the second alternative without committing suicide. If then the first alternative comes to be accepted, that significance cannot belong merely to phenomena, it must belong to the core of reality: *Brahman* itself. *Brahman* may not be conceived as a system of relations or related things. Let the things be ever so different from one another, they will all find their unity in *Brahman*, the fountain-head of their being and their activity. Its supreme purpose may be beyond human ken, but how can the reality of this purpose be totally denied without denying the reality—or the phenomenality, if you like—of everything else? This supreme purpose, unknowable as a whole, yet works itself out in time as evolution. Let us illustrate this from history. The grand panorama of human history discloses the ‘vanished’ glories of old civilizations, and it is pathetically asked: where are the glories of Egypt and Babylon, Greece and Rome? But let us not be deluded by rhetoric. Have these great civilizations really disappeared? Apart from ignorance, is it open to any serious student of history to believe so? In fact these great civilizations spread their culture. The old Babylonian and Persian religion left its indelible stamp on Judaism and through it on Christianity and on Mohammedanism. Nor was Greece left untouched by influences so pervasive as those of Egypt and Persia. And who but a tyro will say that Greece and Rome are dead, when more than half the structure of European civilization today rests broad-based on

Greek art and Greek philosophy, on Roman Law and Roman administration?

The whole universe too moves on in its great course of evolution, "ohne hast, ohne rast," as great Goethe put it. If all this be a mere pageant, which leaves *Brahman* untouched, surely we may say that not reason, but mockery stands enthroned in the universe, and we may ask why worry about life itself? The prize that is held out to the *gyani*, *moksha* itself, is not a prize that falls into the lap of every fool. It is a prize attained through a strenuous preparation extending over a series of births and deaths, through suffering and travail. Of what worth is all this, if change is of no ultimate worth, and time could be annihilated? If the aim of all human existence is absorption in *Brahman*, and if this aim is unattainable except through the portals of the world of *maya*, we submit that the end and the means cannot be divorced, and the reality of the end involves the reality of the means, though of course in a lesser degree.

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