

QUESTION OF THE POT

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In his *Rubiyat*, Omar Khayyam describes an imaginary talk that took place among the pots in a potter's house. Among the pots was one with a skewed neck, of which the pot was conscious, for the others were different and had no such disability. During the talk, it asked a naughty question, which was "Did the hands of the potter shake when its neck had to be made?". The question was indeed naughty for it raised a problem of great philosophical and religious significance. It brought to the forefront the problem of the reconciliation of the omnipotence and omniscience of God with the freedom and infirmities of Man.

A psychologist like Adler would explain away the question or at least dilute the strength of the objection by linking it to the doctrine of organ inferiority and finding in the 'naughtiness' an attempt at 'compensation'. The pot was indeed suffering from organ inferiority and the question may have cropped up because of that, but let it not be forgotten that the origin of a thing has nothing to do with its logical status and validity. The fact that the question arose from certain psychological feelings and urges is no sufficient ground for saying that the question is not pertinent or that it is not significant. There is a tendency among psychologists to dismiss a question altogether or to belittle its significance by tracing it to conscious or unconscious psychological factors, little realizing that the question has its own logic which is to be faced, and its psychological origin has no relevance to its truth or falsity.

A Logical Positivist would also jeer at the question of the pot. He would call it a non-sensical question, since its verification is not possible in the light of empirically established facts. What empirical evidence would, he says, confirm or disconfirm a transcendental reality and further, how can a significant question be asked when its truth or falsity cannot be determined by established methods and techniques of science? But a Logical Positivist in raising objections of this kind does not understand the limitations of his methodology, nor does he visualise the nature and significance of the experience which is non-scientific and is frequently called as religious or spiritual. The Principle of Verification which the Logical Positivist invokes to demolish the citadel of spiritualism, ethics and aesthetics has been criticised both by friends and foes and found to have no logical status whatsoever. The logic of question which it advocates, has also been discovered to lack the philosophical basis needed for such a theory. It seems that in their zeal to eliminate Metaphysics and to establish sciences on a firm foundation, the Logical Positivists have over-shot the mark and made claims on behalf of their doctrine which are much too much wild. The sensible among them have understood the untenability of their position. They have tried to revise the principle but the improvements or modifications that they have suggested are far from being satisfactory.

The question of the pot may have no significance from the psycho-analytical or logico-positivistic standpoint but it has deep significance to the person who suffers or has suffered. It brings no comfort to the afflicted to say that his disability is due to heredity over which he had no control. For he can ask, "why of all the persons alive should he be made the victim of a peculiar heredity?" Again it would bring no solace to the sufferer if it is said that there are hundred others with the same malady. For he can always reply by saying that there may be hundred others suffering like him, but he cares a hoot, he only wants to know why should he suffer? What is the ontological justification for his victimisation? And if he is told that he would raise a similar question had he been in any other state, that to say if he had been normal he could have asked, 'why should he be normal

when his brother is not normal?' The afflicted would be dumbfounded by the utterance and slip aside quietly thinking that he was not talking to a sane person. Logical Positivists say that the questions like, "why is the grass green?", are non-sensical, for had the grass been red, the same question could have been asked, though it would not be, "why is the grass green" but 'why is the grass red'. But I do not suppose that the question of the pot falls into this category. It is not a question about the colour of an inanimate object—a question altogether trivial from the point of view of the great realities of life. The question "why is my neck awry" cannot be held at par with the question "why is the colour of the grass green." The first question has a profound spiritual significance for the sufferer, while the second is a question of academic interest, with little or no relevance to the problems of human existence and its destiny.

By some people the question of the pot would be regarded as metaphysical and so condemned outright. It is a pity that in the Anglo-American world there is a strong prejudice against metaphysics and anything which savours of metaphysics is looked askance. It is said that a professor in an American university had a strong bias towards logical positivism and would not tolerate his students making direct or indirect reference to metaphysics. In the seminar classes, if any student appeared to make a metaphysical statement, he would say, "metaphysics, metaphysics". His students regarding these words derogatory requested the professor not to utter them in the seminar. The professor agreed and in future said "m, m" whenever he thought any student was talking metaphysics. The students once again approached their learned professor saying that the use of the word 'm' instead of metaphysics was simply a change in strategy or terminology and that this word was not to be used since it was as offensive as the former was. The great professor in the magnanimity of his heart agreed to students' demand and hence forward whenever he heard what he thought to be metaphysics, from his students, simply said, "hem, hem." From this the students concluded that their teacher was incorrigible and gave him up as a hopeless case.

Happily, in the East and particularly among the Islamic world there never has been a horror of metaphysics. Questions of transcendental import and significance have been frequently asked and also debated upon by religious and non-religious thinkers of great repute and standing. They realized that the questions of sciences to which the principle of verifiability has relevance differ fundamentally from questions which arise from the depths of one's being. The question of the pot did not concern the realm of objective, impersonal and cold world to which sciences address themselves. On the other hand it concerns that personal, non-shareable, intense and lively world of existence in which human beings move and have their being. That these two worlds are distinct and have their own specific problems remained and still remains the faith of the East.

What kind of question is the question of the pot? In the language of Marcel it is a mystery rather than a question in the scientific sense. A scientific question sets a problem to be answered affirmatively or negatively in the light of facts or deductions therefrom. Hence one can expect to have a scientific question answered one way or the other according as the evidence supports one side or the other. The answer however is not final for it can be rejected, if at any future date, a contrary evidence is available. Thus the scientific answers stand in constant peril. They are subject to revision and can be given up when new facts come to light. The history of science shows how theories in science have changed with the discovery of new facts. They have also changed with technological changes and new interpretations. But whatever be the fate of the scientific question and its answer, one essential feature of their's is that they concern the objective order of things and can be understood in reference to facts which in the empirical terminology are 'out' there.

The cult of objectivity has a long history. In a way it took its birth with the birth of man. In dealing with his material environments, no human being could afford to be unrealistic or shut his eyes to the objective order of things and their characteristics. Hence observation and experimentation, in how-so-ever small a degree it might be, has never been

ignored by any person. What is however characteristic of the modern age is that instead of delimiting the field within which objective methods and techniques can be successfully employed, it is thought that no area of human experience, no matter what its content or nature is, can afford to be non-objective. Unless an experience be objectively demonstrable, it can have no validity. In the field of Psychology, such an attempt is made by Behaviourism. In the field of values, such an attempt is considered desirable by Logical Positivists, for it is the lack of objectivity which makes them non-cognitive and hence non-sensical. Thus what was previously regarded as private, personal and unique is given up as unscientific and untrustworthy. This is, however unfortunate, Truth cannot be equated with objectivity, nor can falsity be equated with the absence of objectivity. A thing can be true without objectivity and a thing can be false in spite of objectivity. There is a story told by Sheikh Saadi of a person who searched his lost sewing needle on a roadside where a lamp was burning though the needle was lost in the house. On being asked as to why he searched the needle on the roadside and not at his house where the needle was actually lost, he replied, "There is no light in the house and here is a lamp burning". Precisely is this the state of affairs prevailing in the world of science today. Whatever is beyond the ken of technology or is inaccessible to it for some reason or another is condemned as absurd or at least regarded as suspect.

While the cult of objectivity has certain advantages which no person will deny, it has nothing to do with that experience which is specifically religious. Here I should like to distinguish between what John Dewey says, 'having a religion' and 'being religious'. Hosts of people have one religion or the other but very few of them are religious. Whether one has a religion can be ascertained objectively but whether one is religious can be known subjectively. "There is a saying attributed to a Muslim Sufi who is reported to have said that unless the Holy Quran is revealed to a person as it was revealed to the Holy Prophet, one cannot be a Muslim. The emphasis, according to the Sufi, is not on having a religion which one can have without having 'participation' in the great truths of religions, but on being

religious which is possible through direct encounter or contact, that is to say if the Quran is revealed to him as it was revealed to the Holy Prophet. 'Being religious' is a unique experience, essentially private and non-objective. It is that area where technology finds itself helpless. But this area is nonetheless equally valid. The Holy Quran reports a dialogue between God and Moses. The latter requested God to show Himself to him, so that he might see Him. To this God replied that it was not possible to see Him. The reply of God discloses the essential nature of God. God is not perceptible for He is not an objective 'something' to be perceived through senses. It is for this reason that human vocabulary fails in His case and no 'proof' for His existence is found to be adequate. 'Proofs' can be given of empirically grounded or formally established facts but not of verities which are neither empirical nor formal. God is a pure subjectivity and therefore all the so-called proofs for His existence have failed to convince anyone excepting the person who proffered them. An argument from subjectivity is needed in order to be convinced of the existence of God Who in His essence is nothing but subjectivity. Hence the Sufis say, 'One who understands his own self understands God. Now self of a person is subjectivity (for that reason Hume could not find it). If one realizes one's own subjectivity one can understand the nature of that All-comprehensive and Ever-creative Subjectivity which in religious language is called God'.

The question of the pot arises from subjectivity and requires justification, if any, in terms of subjectivity. To the arm-chair philosopher the question, "why is the neck of a pot awry?" is a question relating to something which belongs to the objective order of things and hence can be replied by means of biological laws of inheritance. But this type of explanation, ingenious as it might be, fails to convince the sufferer, for he can ask, 'why of all the persons should he be made the victim of the biological laws of inheritance' ?

A subjective question is always different from an objective one. Marcel has brought out the distinction in the case of love. To a psychologist who

has never fallen in love and has consequently never suffered the pangs of love, the question, 'what is love' ? is simply an academic question to be disposed off through statistical techniques, analysis of the heartbeat, blood, urine and stomach of the experiencer and also by the examination of certain behaviour-patterns which lovers ordinarily and normally exhibit. The observations as well as the result would be repeatable, for any investigator wishing to find out the veracity of the conclusions could reduplicate the conditions. But the same question can arise in the life of a person who has gone through the charms as well as the agonies of love. The question now assumes a different shape. It is not simply a question of scientific interest. It is, on the other hand a question that comes up from the very being of the lover and shall be answered in the light of the living experience of the questioner.

It seems to me that the question of the pot is an existential question for the pot, though when discussed by philosophers and religionists, it is nothing but a problem of theoretical interest, taken up with a view to presenting a neat and a tidy picture of the ultimate scheme of things. To the pot, the question arises from the depths of its being. For it the question is not of theoretic interest, for the pot finds its whole existence involved in the answer to the question.

Since the question arises from the peculiar situation in which the pot was placed, the question of the pot is addressed to no other person than the pot itself. In other words, an existential question is a question put to one's self. The pot is asking itself as to why its neck is not normal and the pot is seeking answer not from a scientist. It does not want an objective study of its supremely personal problem. The conditions of his existence and the unique situation in which it is placed cannot be reduplicated. Consequently the question of statistical analysis or of mathematical interpretation of facts does not arise. The pot should not have asked its fellow-pots as to why it had a deformity. The question should have been addressed to itself and the pot should have used its own resources to reply it in a manner which would be satisfying to it as an existential something.

Of course, by the subjectivity of the question and its reply is not implied that objective devices have to be spurned. While no spiritual literature would place credence in logical approaches, it would not at the same time look down upon them. The Holy Quran, for instance, has never offered rational proofs for unseen things—I mean, God, the life here-after, the soul etc. etc., yet it has never belittled reason and has never discouraged its use where-ever possible. It invites human beings to meditate over the workings of nature, for this study will present signs to indicate the existence of God, for example. Likewise in answering its own question the pot can legitimately take recourse to rational procedures, thinking them as cues for his problem. But the important point to remember in this connection is that it is not the rational methods and procedures that matter, but the subjective satisfaction which has behind it the sanction of one's own being.

The pot in asking a personal question has raised the problem of evil which exists in the world in various forms including of course the physical deformity from which the pot suffers. The pot recognizes the presence of evil which has been denied by some religionists. In asking an explanation of the evil which besets it, it tacitly recognizes the existence of evil and demands its justification. The explanation which the fellow-pots offer is in terms of an all-embracing design which God willed in the beginning. From this pre-ordained design, no departure is permitted. Consequently, all happenings, great and small, take place in accordance with the purpose of the All-mighty and All-knowing God Who willed at the start how the great drama of life had to be played. In that design was it written that the pot should have an awry neck and so the neck became awry. This answer is in terms of fatalism. Omar Khayyam seems to think that all things both normal and abnormal, deformed or well-formed come in accordance with the scheme drawn up by the Almighty Creator at the dawn of creation and that no alteration howsoever small or insignificant it might be, can ever be permitted in it. This seems to be the popular conception of Fatalism, which if true would present a determinism of the worst type. It would make the creatures simply puppets in the hands of the inexorable and unalterable Destiny and leave no scope for freedom, initiative and choices. But happily this is not the view

which one gets from a deeper understanding of the Holy Scriptures, which emphasise both the helplessness of man in some respects together with man's immense responsibility and his essential freedom to work out his own destiny. The Arabic word 'Taqrir' which is translated as 'Fate' has its root in 'Qadr' which means 'estimate'. The etymology of the word would suggest that what is implied by 'Taqrir' is not that there is an inexorable fate but that the Creator being omnipotent and omniscient, knows the 'estimate' that is to say the possibilities and limitations of each created thing.

Neither the fore-knowledge nor the omnipotence of God is in any way anti-thetical to the concept of human freedom. A psychologist makes predictions, a kind of fore-knowledge, on the basis of tests, administered to children. In doing so the psychologist neither determines the course of child's life nor limits the freedom of the child. Likewise God by His fore-knowledge does not impose anything from above or make His creatures show-pieces in the grand palace of His Will. The omnipotence of God can also be harmonised with the idea of human freedom. If God is All-powerful and can accomplish whatever He wills, then He may grant a certain measure of freedom to his creatures in the larger interests of life. Just as determinism can be a part of God's design, so can freedom be. It seems to me that if man accepted the 'trust of responsibility', as the Holy Quran says, 'at his own peril; it becomes necessary that he be granted freedom so that 'responsibility' should have a meaning for him. It would be a mockery if on the one hand God endows man with the 'trust of responsibility', but on the other hand does not grant him the moral and spiritual resources to fulfil the 'trust'. The idea of accepting a trust of responsibility at one's own peril brings one very close to Sartre's slogan that man is condemned to be free. But whereas Sartre's saying is very loose, and ambiguous, the Quranic statement is clear, for it also points to certain restrictions, which constitute limiting factors to human existence and have to be reckoned with in any sound scheme of life. Who can deny, for example such limiting factors as the incidence of birth and death, the responsibility and loneliness of life and also inherited and environmental pressures. The fate of a person

arises from such limiting factors while his freedom springs from the 'trust of responsibility' which he accepted at the dawn of creation.

The above explanation would not satisfy the 'pot', for the pot is not concerned with any metaphysical difficulty which might arise from the omnipotence of God on the one hand and the problem of human freedom on the other. His problem is personal and private. He wants an explanation of his own deformity and would not be satisfied even if all 'pots' be deformed like him. It would still ask, 'why should it be deformed, in spite of the fact that every other pot is deformed' ? To the bereaved family, the statement that all men are mortal, is hardly comforting. The suffering family does not bother itself with the mortality of the human race, they are concerned with the death of their dear and near one and want to know, 'why should he die' ? The pot is up against the problem of evil and demands an explanation of it.

There are three kinds of evil :—

1. Physical such as physical pain.
2. Moral evil *e.g.* wrong moral choices and the cultivation of immoral emotions.
3. Aesthetic evil *e.g.* ugliness in nature or the creation of man.

The first question is how does the problem of evil at all arise. Evil itself cannot present a problem any more than good itself. If the existence of evil is a problem, equally will the existence of good be a problem. The existence of both good and evil will, therefore, present a problem and that problem will relate to the origin and emergence of such notions as are associated with good and evil, nearly in the same way as the emergence of mind from nature.

If, however, we take a view of the universe according to which it becomes unlikely that there should be evil in the world we will have a specific problem as to the existence of evil. If *e.g.* we believe that the universe is controlled by a perfectly wise and good Being we will have to show why in such a universe evil does at all exist.

Many theists have solved the difficulty by limiting in various ways the power, wisdom, or goodness of God. Ward's view is an example. Such a limitation, however, has appeared to be contradictory to theism itself and the majority of theists seems to be quite unwilling to admit this.

Those who have granted the existence of a perfectly good and perfectly powerful God have tried to solve the problem in one of the two ways : 1. To deny the reality of evil altogether and to say that it is an illusion, though this is a step which only a few theologians and philosophers have taken. This, however, can be easily shown to be false. If a physical pain is not really painful it argues a certain defect in the universe that it should appear to be painful. In fact on this view the existence of evil instead of being removed is augmented in so far as we have to admit that besides the existence of pain we entertain the false belief that pain does exist. Also to deny the reality of moral evil will conflict with the distinction of good and evil, a distinction which is so important to ethics.

2. The second way of dealing with the problem is to argue that though there undoubtedly is physical, moral, and aesthetic evil ; the existence of such evil does not conflict with either the power or goodness of God. In this connection the most popular argument is to show that certain evils are necessary to the production of certain goods. The pain due to an incision in a boil is necessary to the healing of a boil, but this kind of argument will conflict with the omnipotence of God because the surgeon who inflicts pain in order to heal a boil does so because he has to work under physical, physiological and psychical laws over which he has no control. God being omnipotent could have made the healing of a boil entirely painless, had He shaped those laws suitably. He could have endowed things with different properties so that good would be had out of evil.

A more successful attempt to reconcile the existence of evil with the omnipotence of God is to say that while evil may not be causally necessary to the production of good, it is logically necessary for the production of good. What is logically necessary is quite distinct from what is causally necessary

and the notion of omnipotence requires God to endow the things. He creates with the best conceivable causal properties, but only those properties which it is logically possible for them to have.

It is possible to show that there are so many goods in the world for which it was logically impossible to come into existence without there being antecedent evils. For example :

1. Certain goods are complex, the value which they have by reason of their complexity would have been logically impossible without certain constituents being definitely evil. E.g. active sympathy with pain would be impossible without the first existence of evil. Similarly forgiving those who hate us would have been impossible without hatred—a moral evil first existing. Also, as Moors has pointed out, the good of the whole often exceeds the good of the parts and yet the whole would not be what it is except for the parts what they are and related to one another in the manner they are.

2. If all human beings be perfect, equal and self-sufficing many relations which are equally intrinsic could not have come into being. Benevolence, gratitude, reverence could not possibly be, unless there were individuals who were relatively unsatisfied in their needs and somewhat better and wiser than others. It is possible that the value which these relations have is more than the disvalue of those evils without which they could not be what they are.

3. Under ordinary circumstances character develops by exercising self-control and resisting temptations. These attempts on the part of the individual human being fail. It might be said, therefore, that an omnipotent God could have made every individual naturally perfect in every day conduct. Before we concede this point we have to remember that the struggle for moral effort has itself some intrinsic value. A world which is perfect from the very start would lack the present evil certainly ; but it will also lack the greater good which it otherwise come to have.

4. The fourth way in which evil is logically necessary to greater good is one which relates to the controversy of Freedom and Determinism. It

seems obvious that actions will not have moral value unless they were in some sense free. There could not be free agents unless there were beings capable of choosing bad actions as of choosing good actions. To create moral value, therefore, it was logically impossible for God not to have created beings who would sometimes use their will in evil ways. Moral evil therefore is logically necessary to greater good.

Of these four ways in which evil seems to be logically necessary to good, the first three can be more readily admitted than the fourth. The main reason for not admitting the fourth seems to be that even determined actions seem to some philosophers to have moral value. If this view of value is conceded it will be difficult to account for evil in the fourth way. We may conclude therefore that at least on the first three grounds a great deal of physical and moral evil is compatible with the existence of an omnipotent and perfect God interested in the welfare of individuals and helping the world to a progressively good world.

There have been philosophers to whom this explanation of evil would seem to be quite unsatisfactory. Among these is the English philosopher McTaggart. He interprets omnipotence as though it applied to a being who is capable not only of doing what to ordinary individuals is causally impossible but also of doing something which is logically impossible. He would say that an omnipotent God could enclose space by means of two straight lines. This interpretation of omnipotence is hardly necessary and has never formed part of the faith of any theist. The second reason why the explanation of evil seems to be unsatisfactory is that the distinction is made between evils which are causally but not logically necessary *e.g.* the pain inflicted by the surgeon's knife ; and evils which are logically but not causally necessary *e.g.* poverty and human inequality without which the virtue of active sympathy would be logically impossible.

Even after this explanation, the question remains whether the actual amount of evil in the world with all the variety which it has is justifiable on the grounds which we have urged for certain kinds of evil. Perhaps it is justifiable but it certainly is not obvious that it is so. There are cases of pain, for

example, which call forth no compassion and no benevolence. Example of such cases is pain in the animal world. Also a good many cases of actual cruelty and ingratitude, seem to have little justification even though some cruelty and ingratitude may seem to be logically necessary to, let us say, cases of fortitude and forgiveness. There is quite probably therefore a residue of evil which cannot be justified on any ground known to us. In regard to this residue the theist and the naturalist will adopt quite different attitudes. The naturalist will have to accept it as inevitable and understandable. The theist living on faith hopes that he will some day understand the significance of this residue of evil.

It seems that while a great deal of evil is logically necessary to greater good there is a residue of evil, the significance of which we do not understand at present, a significance however which the naturalist never hopes to understand but which the theist hopes to.

The excess of evil which cannot be shown to be logically necessary to the production of the greater good may include the personal misery to which the pot refers. As said above the pot does not bother itself with any metaphysical issue. Its problem is personal. It simply wants to know why its neck is awry? The explanations of philosophers and religionists leave it cold. No generality, however interesting and ingenious it might be, can ever touch the innermost cord of existence and therefore fails to remove the anguish which arises from there.

For personal problems of this nature two types of explanations have generally been offered by the great religions of the world. One is in terms of the life after death and the other is in terms of challenge and opportunity.

It is contended by many thinkers—both religious and non-religious that the injustices of the present world would be overcome in the world to come and that the sufferer would be amply rewarded for all his trials and tribulations. The pot was born with a handicap, because of which it suffered and could not perhaps compete with others. God, in His infinite mercy, will compensate it, in the next world. Thus if the pot would take a broader view of life, not

confining it to here and now, it will find that in the long run it would not be a sufferer at all. Hence it does not matter whether a person is deformed or otherwise, for there is a law of justice governing the universe which will work in favour of the pot, ultimately and finally. Considered in this light the deformities of body to which the pot points and of which it demands an explanation cannot be regarded as essentially evil. But to be fair to the pot, I believe that the pot is not bothering itself about the life to come. It simply wants to know when God is omnipotent, why should He not make its neck as good as of others ?

Let us examine the second alternative and see whether it satisfies the pot or not. The second alternative is in terms of challenge and opportunity. The pot should regard his skewed neck as presenting a challenge to its moral and spiritual resources and should try hard to make the best of the bad bargain. In this transaction the pot will find that the awry neck instead of proving a handicap turns out to be a source of inspiration. It enables it to carve out a scheme of life, much in consonance with the demands of its existence and supplies it the energy needed for the fulfillment of that scheme. Thus the disability is an opportunity to tap one's hidden resources and rise to the full heights of one's glory. The pot can exercise its freedom and make its existence worth living by creating a set of values which overshadow its deformity. Physical deformities do not matter so much as the attitude a person has with regard to them. If the pot thinks that the deformity is basic and nothing can be done with regard to it or that no good can come out of it, then it should better commit suicide. On the other hand if it thinks that the deformity is a challenge, it can release a great fund of energy lying dormant within it. The deformity would become a spring-board for the enrichment of life.

But if both the alternatives, one in terms of the after-life and the other in terms of challenge and opportunity fail to satisfy it, then the pot should either believe with Albert Camus that the world is absurd or become one with the religionists who in such cases refer to the 'inscrutable ways of God'.

