

“HAZARD” J.G. Bennett The Universe and God, Chapter 6- excerpts

“In this century, we cannot escape from the problem of massive evil, evil on a worldwide scale. We see great nations, wealthy, enjoying unprecedented material prosperity, amply fed, cared for, and educated. We also see vast areas of the world, and great parts of the world's population, deprived of these advantages, and not only of the advantages but condemned to live a miserable, half-human existence, starved and without even the barest necessities of life, while the rich—confronted with this—are not giving, even of their surplus, to help the poor unless it serves their self-interest. We have seen in our own lifetime mass killings that were intentional and directed toward aims of aggrandizement and power.

We see all these things, and no one can put them aside and say, "These are trivial matters. They are only physiological accompaniments of good or bad digestion or good or bad health." No, we have to answer the question of how, with a human nature constructed as ours, there can be such massive departures from what we would regard as a normal and human way of experience also, and we can multiply this billions of times over in the people of the world. No one can put away this question or leave it to the speculation of philosophers.

Just because it is so desperately hard to understand, we tend to put it out of our minds, do what little good we can, or simply forget about it on the grounds that we have, somehow or other, to manage to live our own lives. We even use such slogans as "Charity begins at home," "Duty is toward our own immediate dependents," and "We have to protect a way of life we regard as precious and necessary for the world, and in protecting this way of life we are obliged, wholly against our will, to destroy the lives and possessions of millions of people." When we have done all this, however, the problem still remains: How is it possible to have an acceptable world picture that faces the reality of evil?

First of all, let us note that such a world picture would not be a scientific world picture: There is no evil in science. Again, and again, it is said that science is indifferent to values; science seeks knowledge, it seeks power not only in the sense of man's power over nature, but it seeks to know and to do successfully. It does not seek any answer to the questions why we should know or what we should do, yet science does produce a world picture. It claims for that world picture an objective reality.

That world picture, the world picture of a universe governed by laws—any of the kinds of universe that we have been discussing—has no place for evil. Evil is not even describable in such a world. This causes great concern and anxiety to scientists, who feel they are torn between one side of their nature that cries out to find some way of combating evil and another side of their nature that tells them that evil cannot exist, it must be an illusion.

This rejection of evil as an illusion is a very ancient subterfuge. Repeatedly, in the past men have tried to get rid of the problem in this way or else they have spoken of evil as no more than the privation of good, thinking that this somehow explains something. As if the very idea of good could have some meaning if there were not a conflict of right and wrong in the world. If evil is the privation of good without there being any moral, voluntary significance attaching to the notion of evil, then, once again, good is nothing else but good health, which in turn means nothing else but a well-ordered world, in which case, the problem of good and evil simply reduces to the conflict of order and disorder, good being order and evil being disorder.

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“Then we have to ask ourselves whether it is possible, with beings who have free choice, to be plunged into a world of hazard without this hazard including the possibility of making wrong and harmful choices? The wrong choice may be made between two things that appear to be good at the moment of making the choice; it may be the choice of a lesser, evanescent good and the rejection of a greater and more permanent good; it may be the choice of good that concerns only the individual and the rejection of good that concerns a great number of people. In this case, the choice may be a deliberate one, and yet it is an evil choice.

Whether or not people choose evil deliberately, knowing it is evil and because it is evil, is another problem and really does not concern us here. We are concerned with seeing the place of hazard in a world in which man is able to choose—and this means that man is able to make an evil choice. If we look at it in cosmic terms and admit that hazard may be universal, that freedom may exist elsewhere than in man, that there may be higher and greater freedoms within the existing universe and, therefore, subject to hazard, then there may be wrong choices on a very much greater scale than we men are able to make or even conceive.”

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LECTURE:

THE DRAMATIC UNIVERSE: HAZARD 1971-10-19

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