Chapter XV

The Suprarational Good

We BEGIN to see, through the principle and law of our religious being, through the principle and law of our aesthetic being, the universality of a principle and law which is that of all being and which we must therefore hold steadily in view in regard to all human activities. It rests on a truth on which the sages have always agreed, though by the intellectual thinker it may be constantly disputed. It is the truth that all active being is a seeking for God, a seeking for some highest self and deepest Reality secret within, behind and above ourselves and things, a seeking for the hidden Divinity: the truth which we glimpse through religion, lies concealed behind all life; it is the great secret of life, that which it is in labour to discover and to make real to its self-knowledge.

The seeking for God is also, subjectively, the seeking for our highest, truest, fullest, largest self. It is the seeking for a Reality which the appearances of life conceal because they only partially express it or because they express it from behind veils and figures, by oppositions and contraries, often by what seem to be perversions and opposites of the Real. It is the seeking for something whose completeness comes only by a concrete and all-occupying sense of the Infinite and Absolute; it can be established in its integrality only by finding a value of the infinite in all finite things and by the attempt — necessary, inevitable, however impossible or paradoxical it may seem to the normal reason — to raise all relativities to their absolutes and to reconcile their differences, oppositions and contraries by elevation and sublimation to some highest term in which all these are unified. Some perfect highest term there is by which all our imperfect lower terms can be justified and their discords harmonised if once we can induce them to be its conscious expressions, to exist not for themselves but for That, as contributory values of that highest
Truth, fractional measures of that highest and largest common measure. A One there is in which all the entangled discords of this multiplicity of separated, conflicting, intertwining, colliding ideas, forces, tendencies, instincts, impulses, aspects, appearances which we call life, can find the unity of their diversity, the harmony of their divergences, the justification of their claims, the correction of their perversions and aberrations, the solution of their problems and disputes. Knowledge seeks for that in order that Life may know its own true meaning and transform itself into the highest and most harmonious possible expression of a divine Reality. All seeks for that, each power feels out for it in its own way: the infrarational gropes for it blindly along the line of its instincts, needs, impulses; the rational lays for it its trap of logic and order, follows out and gathers together its diversities, analyses them in order to synthetise; the suprarational gets behind and above things and into their inmost parts, there to touch and lay hands on the Reality itself in its core and essence and enlighten all its infinite detail from that secret centre.

This truth comes most easily home to us in Religion and in Art, in the cult of the spiritual and in the cult of the beautiful, because there we get away most thoroughly from the unrestful pressure of the outward appearances of life, the urgent siege of its necessities, the deafening clamour of its utilities. There we are not compelled at every turn to make terms with some gross material claim, some vulgar but inevitable necessity of the hour and the moment. We have leisure and breathing-time to seek the Real behind the apparent: we are allowed to turn our eyes either away from the temporary and transient or through the temporal itself to the eternal; we can draw back from the limitations of the immediately practical and re-create our souls by the touch of the ideal and the universal. We begin to shake off our chains, we get rid of life in its aspect of a prison-house with Necessity for our jailer and utility for our constant taskmaster; we are admitted to the liberties of the soul; we enter God’s infinite kingdom of beauty and delight or we lay hands on the keys of our absolute self-finding and open ourselves to the possession or the adoration of the Eternal. There lies the immense value of Religion, the
immense value of Art and Poetry to the human spirit; it lies in their immediate power for inner truth, for self-enlargement, for liberation.

But in other spheres of life, in the spheres of what by an irony of our ignorance we call especially practical life, — although, if the Divine be our true object of search and realisation, our normal conduct in them and our current idea of them is the very opposite of practical, — we are less ready to recognise the universal truth. We take a long time to admit it even partially in theory, we are seldom ready at all to follow it in practice. And we find this difficulty because there especially, in all our practical life, we are content to be the slaves of an outward Necessity and think ourselves always excused when we admit as the law of our thought, will and action the yoke of immediate and temporary utilities. Yet even there we must arrive eventually at the highest truth. We shall find out in the end that our daily life and our social existence are not things apart, are not another field of existence with another law than the inner and ideal. On the contrary, we shall never find out their true meaning or resolve their harsh and often agonising problems until we learn to see in them a means towards the discovery and the individual and collective expression of our highest and, because our highest, therefore our truest and fullest self, our largest most imperative principle and power of existence. All life is only a lavish and manifold opportunity given us to discover, realise, express the Divine.

It is in our ethical being that this truest truth of practical life, its real and highest practicability becomes most readily apparent. It is true that the rational man has tried to reduce the ethical life like all the rest to a matter of reason, to determine its nature, its law, its practical action by some principle of reason, by some law of reason. He has never really succeeded and he never can really succeed; his appearances of success are mere pretences of the intellect building elegant and empty constructions with words and ideas, mere conventions of logic and vamped-up syntheses, in sum, pretentious failures which break down at the first strenuous touch of reality. Such was that extraordinary system
of utilitarian ethics discovered in the nineteenth century—the
great century of science and reason and utility—by one of its
most positive and systematic minds and now deservedly discred-
ited. Happily, we need now only smile at its shallow pretentious
errors, its substitution of a practical, outward and occasional
test for the inner, subjective and absolute motive of ethics, its
reduction of ethical action to an impossibly scientific and quite
impracticable jugglery of moral mathematics, attractive enough
to the reasoning and logical mind, quite false and alien to the
whole instinct and intuition of the ethical being. Equally false
and impracticable are other attempts of the reason to account
for and regulate its principle and phenomena,—the hedonistic
theory which refers all virtue to the pleasure and satisfaction
of the mind in good or the sociological which supposes ethics
to be no more than a system of formulas of conduct generated
from the social sense and a ruled direction of the social impulses
and would regulate its action by that insufficient standard. The
ethical being escapes from all these formulas: it is a law to itself
and finds its principle in its own eternal nature which is not in
its essential character a growth of evolving mind, even though
it may seem to be that in its earthly history, but a light from the
ideal, a reflection in man of the Divine.

Not that all these errors have not each of them a truth behind
their false constructions; for all errors of the human reason are
false representations, a wrong building, effective misconstruc-
tions of the truth or of a side or a part of the truth. Utility is a
fundamental principle of existence and all fundamental princi-
pies of existence are in the end one; therefore it is true that the
highest good is also the highest utility. It is true also that, not any
balance of the greatest good of the greatest number, but simply
the good of others and most widely the good of all is one ideal
aim of our outgoing ethical practice; it is that which the ethical
man would like to effect, if he could only find the way and be
always sure what is the real good of all. But this does not help to
regulate our ethical practice, nor does it supply us with its inner
principle whether of being or of action, but only produces one
of the many considerations by which we can feel our way along
the road which is so difficult to travel. Good, not utility, must be the principle and standard of good; otherwise we fall into the hands of that dangerous pretender expediency, whose whole method is alien to the ethical. Moreover, the standard of utility, the judgment of utility, its spirit, its form, its application must vary with the individual nature, the habit of mind, the outlook on the world. Here there can be no reliable general law to which all can subscribe, no set of large governing principles such as it is sought to supply to our conduct by a true ethics. Nor can ethics at all or ever be a matter of calculation. There is only one safe rule for the ethical man, to stick to his principle of good, his instinct for good, his vision of good, his intuition of good and to govern by that his conduct. He may err, but he will be on his right road in spite of all stumblings, because he will be faithful to the law of his nature. The saying of the Gita is always true; better is the law of one’s own nature though ill-performed, dangerous is an alien law however speciously superior it may seem to our reason. But the law of nature of the ethical being is the pursuit of good; it can never be the pursuit of utility.

Neither is its law the pursuit of pleasure high or base, nor self-satisfaction of any kind, however subtle or even spiritual. It is true, here too, that the highest good is both in its nature and inner effect the highest bliss. Ananda, delight of being, is the spring of all existence and that to which it tends and for which it seeks openly or covertly in all its activities. It is true too that in virtue growing, in good accomplished there is great pleasure and that the seeking for it may well be always there as a subconscious motive to the pursuit of virtue. But for practical purposes this is a side aspect of the matter; it does not constitute pleasure into a test or standard of virtue. On the contrary, virtue comes to the natural man by a struggle with his pleasure-seeking nature and is often a deliberate embracing of pain, an edification of strength by suffering. We do not embrace that pain and struggle for the pleasure of the pain and the pleasure of the struggle; for that higher strenuous delight, though it is felt by the secret spirit in us, is not usually or not at first conscious in the conscient normal part of our being which is the field of the struggle. The action
of the ethical man is not motivated by even an inner pleasure, but by a call of his being, the necessity of an ideal, the figure of an absolute standard, a law of the Divine.

In the outward history of our ascent this does not at first appear clearly, does not appear perhaps at all: there the evolution of man in society may seem to be the determining cause of his ethical evolution. For ethics only begins by the demand upon him of something other than his personal preference, vital pleasure or material self-interest; and this demand seems at first to work on him through the necessity of his relations with others, by the exigencies of his social existence. But that this is not the core of the matter, is shown by the fact that the ethical demand does not always square with the social demand, nor the ethical standard always coincide with the social standard. On the contrary, the ethical man is often called upon to reject and do battle with the social demand, to break, to move away from, to reverse the social standard. His relations with others and his relations with himself are both of them the occasions of his ethical growth; but that which determines his ethical being is his relations with God, the urge of the Divine upon him whether concealed in his nature or conscious in his higher self or inner genius. He obeys an inner ideal, not an outer standard; he answers to a divine law in his being, not to a social claim or a collective necessity. The ethical imperative comes not from around, but from within him and above him.

It has been felt and said from of old that the laws of right, the laws of perfect conduct are the laws of the gods, eternal beyond, laws that man is conscious of and summoned to obey. The age of reason has scouted this summary account of the matter as a superstition or a poetical imagination which the nature and history of the world contradict. But still there is a truth in this ancient superstition or imagination which the rational denial of it misses and the rational confirmations of it, whether Kant’s categorical imperative or another, do not altogether restore. If man’s conscience is a creation of his evolving nature, if his conceptions of ethical law are mutable and depend on his stage of evolution, yet at the root of them there is something constant in
all their mutations which lies at the very roots of his own nature and of world-nature. And if Nature in man and the world is in its beginnings infra-ethical as well as infrarational, as it is at its summit supra-ethical as well as suprarational, yet in that infrarational there is something which becomes in the human plane of being the ethical, and that supra-ethical is itself a consummation of the ethical and cannot be reached by any who have not trod the long ethical road. Below hides that secret of good in all things which the human being approaches and tries to deliver partially through ethical instinct and ethical idea; above is hidden the eternal Good which exceeds our partial and fragmentary ethical conceptions.

Our ethical impulses and activities begin like all the rest in the infrarational and take their rise from the subconscious. They arise as an instinct of right, an instinct of obedience to an ununderstood law, an instinct of self-giving in labour, an instinct of sacrifice and self-sacrifice, an instinct of love, of self-subordination and of solidarity with others. Man obeys the law at first without any inquiry into the why and the wherefore; he does not seek for it a sanction in the reason. His first thought is that it is a law created by higher powers than himself and his race and he says with the ancient poet that he knows not whence these laws sprang, but only that they are and endure and cannot with impunity be violated. What the instincts and impulses seek after, the reason labours to make us understand, so that the will may come to use the ethical impulses intelligently and turn the instincts into ethical ideas. It corrects man’s crude and often erring misprisions of the ethical instinct, separates and purifies his confused associations, shows as best it can the relations of his often clashing moral ideals, tries to arbitrate and compromise between their conflicting claims, arranges a system and many-sided rule of ethical action. And all this is well, a necessary stage of our advance; but in the end these ethical ideas and this intelligent ethical will which it has tried to train to its control, escape from its hold and soar up beyond its province. Always, even when enduring its rein and curb, they have that inborn tendency.
For the ethical being like the rest is a growth and a seeking towards the absolute, the divine, which can only be attained securely in the suprarational. It seeks after an absolute purity, an absolute right, an absolute truth, an absolute strength, an absolute love and self-giving, and it is most satisfied when it can get them in absolute measure, without limit, curb or compromise, divinely, infinitely, in a sort of godhead and transfiguration of the ethical being. The reason is chiefly concerned with what it best understands, the apparent process, the machinery, the outward act, its result and effect, its circumstance, occasion and motive; by these it judges the morality of the action and the morality of the doer. But the developed ethical being knows instinctively that it is an inner something which it seeks and the outward act is only a means of bringing out and manifesting within ourselves by its psychological effects that inner absolute and eternal entity. The value of our actions lies not so much in their apparent nature and outward result as in their help towards the growth of the Divine within us. It is difficult, even impossible to justify upon outward grounds the absolute justice, absolute right, absolute purity, love or selflessness of an action or course of action; for action is always relative, it is mixed and uncertain in its results, perplexed in its occasions. But it is possible to relate the inner being to the eternal and absolute good, to make our sense and will full of it so as to act out of its impulsion or its intuitions and inspirations. That is what the ethical being labours towards and the higher ethical man increasingly attains to in his inner efforts.

In fact ethics is not in its essence a calculation of good and evil in the action or a laboured effort to be blameless according to the standards of the world, — those are only crude appearances, — it is an attempt to grow into the divine nature. Its parts of purity are an aspiration towards the inalienable purity of God's being; its parts of truth and right are a seeking after conscious unity with the law of the divine knowledge and will; its parts of sympathy and charity are a movement towards the infinity and universality of the divine love; its parts of strength and manhood are an edification of the divine strength and power. That is the
heart of its meaning. Its high fulfilment comes when the being of the man undergoes this transfiguration; then it is not his actions that standardise his nature but his nature that gives value to his actions; then he is no longer laboriously virtuous, artificially moral, but naturally divine. Actively, too, he is fulfilled and consummated when he is not led or moved either by the infrarational impulses or the rational intelligence and will, but inspired and piloted by the divine knowledge and will made conscious in his nature. And that can only be done, first by communication of the truth of these things through the intuitive mind as it purifies itself progressively from the invasion of egoism, self-interest, desire, passion and all kinds of self-will, finally through the suprarational light and power, no longer communicated but present and in possession of his being. Such was the supreme aim of the ancient sages who had the wisdom which rational man and rational society have rejected because it was too high a truth for the comprehension of the reason and for the powers of the normal limited human will too bold and immense, too infinite an effort.

Therefore it is with the cult of Good, as with the cult of Beauty and the cult of the spiritual. Even in its first instincts it is already an obscure seeking after the divine and absolute; it aims at an absolute satisfaction, it finds its highest light and means in something beyond the reason, it is fulfilled only when it finds God, when it creates in man some image of the divine Reality. Rising from its infrarational beginnings through its intermediate dependence on the reason to a suprarational consummation, the ethical is like the aesthetic and the religious being of man a seeking after the Eternal.