

Karma and Freedom

THE UNIVERSE in which we live presents itself to our mentality as a web of opposites and contraries, not to say contradictions, and yet it is a question whether there can be in the universe any such thing as an entire opposite or a real contradiction. Good and evil seem to be as opposite powers as well can be and we are apt by the nature of our ethical mind to see the world, at any rate in its moral aspect, as a struggle and tug of war between these eternal opposites, God and devil, Deva and Asura, Ahuramazda, Angrya Mainyu. We hope always that on some as yet hardly conceivable day the one will perish and the other triumph and be convinced of eternity; but actually they are so intertwined that some believe they are here always together like light and shadow and, if at all, then only somewhere beyond this world of action, in some restful and silent eternity is there a release from the anguish of the knot of their intertwining, their bitter constant embrace and struggle. Good comes out of evil and again good itself seems often to turn to evil; the bodies of the wrestling combatants get so mixed and confounded together that to distinguish them the minds of the sages even are perplexed and bewildered. And it would seem sometimes as if this distinction hardly existed except for man and the spirits who urge him, perhaps since he ate of that tree of dual knowledge in the garden; for matter knows it not and life below man troubles itself but little, if at all, with moral differences. And it is said too that on the other side of human being and beyond its struggles is a serenity of the high and universal spirit where the soul transcends sin, but transcends also virtue, and neither sorrows nor repents nor asks “Why have I not done the good and wherefore have I done this which is evil?”¹ because in

¹ Taittiriya Upanishad.

it all things are perfect and to it all things are pure.

But there is a yet more radical instance of the eventual unreality of opposites. For the sages make too an opposition of the Knowledge and the Ignorance, — *vidyā avidyā, citti acitti*, — on which this question of good and evil seems very intimately to hang. Evil runs behind an ignorant urge of the soul in nature, is itself an ignorant perversion of its will, and the partiality of good is equally an affliction of the Ignorance. But when we look closely into the essence of these two things, we find that on one side ignorance seems to be nothing else than an involved or a partial knowledge; it is knowledge wrapped up in an unconscious action or it is knowledge feeling out for itself with the tentacles of mind; and again on the other side knowledge itself appears to be at best a partial knowing and always to have something beyond of which it is ignorant, even its highest and widest splendour a golden outbreak of solar effulgence against the mass of blue-black light of infinity through which we look beyond it to the Ineffable.

Our mind is compelled to think always by oppositions, from the practical validity of which we cannot escape, but which yet seem always in some sort questionable. We get a perception of a law of Karma, the constant unavoidable successions of the acts of energy and its insistent stream of consequences and reactions, the chain of causality, the great mass of past causes behind us from which all future consequence ought infallibly to unroll itself, and by this we try to explain the universe; but then immediately there arises the opposite idea and the challenging problem of liberty. Whence comes this notion of liberty, this divine or this Titanic thirst in man for freedom, born perhaps of something in him by which, however finite be his mind and life and body, he participates in the nature of infinity? For when we look round on the world as it is, everything seems to be by necessity and to move under a leaden constraint and compulsion. This is the aspect of the unthinking world of Force and Matter in which we live; and even in ourselves, in man the thinker, how little is free from some kind of present constraint and of compelling previous necessity! So much of what we are and do

is determined by our environment, so much has been shaped by our education and upbringing, — we are made by life and by the hands of others, are clay for many potters: and, as for what is left, was it not determined, even that which is most ourselves, by our individual, our racial, our human heredity or in the last resort by universal Nature who has shaped man and each man to what he is for her blind or her conscient uses?

But we insist and say that we have a will which is aware of a however heavily burdened freedom and can shape to its own purpose and change by its effort environment and upbringing and the formations of heredity and even our apparently immutable common nature. But this will and its effort, is it not itself an instrument, even a mechanical engine of Nature, the active universal energy, and is not its freedom an arbitrary illusion of our mentality which lives in each moment of the present and separates it by ignorance, by an abstraction of the mind from its determining past, so that I seem at every critical moment to exercise a free and virgin choice, while all the time my choice is dominated by its own previous formation and by all that obscure past which I ignore? Granted that Nature works through our will and can create and change, can, that is to say, produce a new formation out of the stuff she has provided for her workings, is it not by a past impulsion and a continuous energy from it that the thing is done? That is the first idea of Karma. Certainly, our present will must come in as one though not by any means the sole element of the act and formation, but in this view it is not a free ever-new will, but in the first place a child and birth of all the past nature, our action, our present karma the result of an already formed shape of the force of that nature, swabhava. And in the second place our will is an instrument constantly shaped and used by something greater than ourselves. Only if there is a soul or self which is not a creation, but a master of Nature, not a formation of the stream of universal energy, but itself the former and creator of its own Karma, are we justified in our claim of an actual freedom or at least in our aspiration to a real liberty. There is the whole heart of the debate, the nodus and escape of this perplexed issue.

But here the critical negative analytic thinker, ancient nihilistic Buddhist or modern materialist, comes in to take away the basis of any actual freedom in our earthly or in any possible heavenly existence. The Buddhist denied the existence of a Self free and infinite; that, he thought, was only a sublimation of the idea of ego, an imposition, *adhyāropa*, or gigantic magnified shadow thrown by the falsehood of our personality on eternal Non-Existence. But as for the soul, there is no soul, but only a stream of forms, ideas and sensations, and as the idea of a chariot is only a name for the combination of planks and pole and wheels and axles, so is the idea of individual soul or ego only a name for the combination or continuity of these things. Nor is the universe itself anything other than such a combination, *saṅghāta*, formed and maintained in its continuity by the successions of Karma, by the action of Energy. In this mechanical existence there can be no freedom from Karma, no possible liberty; but there is yet a possible liberation, because that which exists by combination and bondage to its combinations can be liberated from itself by dissolution. The motive power which keeps Karma in motion is desire and attachment to its works, and by the conviction of impermanence and the cessation of desire there can come about an extinction of the continuity of the idea in the successions of Time.

But if this extinction may be called a liberation, it is yet not a status of freedom; for that can only repose upon an affirmation, a permanence, not upon a negative and extinction of all affirmations, and needs too, one would imagine, a someone or something that is free. The Buddha himself, it may be remarked, seems to have conceived of Nirvana as a status of absolute bliss of freedom, a negation of Karmic existence in some incognisable Absolute which he refused steadfastly to describe or define by any positive or any negative, — as indeed definition by any exclusive positive or widest sum of positives or any negative or complete sum of negatives would seem by the very fact of its bringing in a definition and thereby a limitation to be inapplicable to the Absolute. The Illusionist's Maya is a more mystic thing and more obscure to the intelligence; but we have at least

here a Self, a positive Infinite which is capable therefore of an eternal freedom, but only in inaction, by cessation from Karma. For the self as the individual, the soul in action of Karma is bound always by ignorance, and only by rejection of individuality and of the cosmic illusion can we return to the liberty of the Absolute. What we see in both these systems is that spiritual freedom and the cosmic compulsion are equally admitted, but in a total separation and an exclusion from each other's own proper field, — still as absolute opposites and contraries. Compulsion of ignorance or Karma is absolute in the world of birth; freedom of the spirit is absolute in a withdrawal from birth and cosmos and Karma.

But these trenchant systems, however satisfactory to the logical reason, are suspect to a synthetic intelligence; and at any rate, as we find that knowledge and ignorance are not in their essence absolute contraries but ignorance and inconstancy itself the veil of a secret knowledge, so it may be at least possible that liberty and the compulsion of Karma are not such unbridgeable opposites, but that behind and even in Karma itself there is all the time a secret liberty of the indwelling Spirit. Buddhism and Illusionism too do not assert any external or internal predestination, but only a self-imposed bondage. And very insistently they demand of man a choice between the right and the wrong way, between the will to an impermanent existence and the will to Nirvana, between a will to cosmic existence and the will to an absolute spiritual being. Nor do they demand this choice of the Absolute or of the universal Being or Power, who indeed cares nothing for their claim and goes on very tranquilly and securely with his mighty eternal action, but they ask it of the individual, of the soul of man halting perplexed between the oppositions of his mentality. It would seem then that there is something in our individual being which has some real freedom of will, some power of choice of a great consequence and magnitude, and what is it then that thus chooses, and what are the limits, where the beginning or the end of its actual or its possible liberty?

Difficult also is it to understand how unsubstantial Impermanence can have such a giant hold or present this power of

eternal continuity in Time, — there must surely, one thinks, be a Permanent which expresses itself in this continuity, *dhruvam adhruweṣu*; or how an Illusion, — for what is illusion but an inconsequent dream or unsubstantial hallucination? — can build up this mighty world of just sequence and firm law and linked Necessity; some secret self-knowledge and wisdom there must be which guides the Energy of Karma in its idea and has appointed for her the paths she must hew in Time. It is because of their persistence of principle in all the transiencies of particular form that things have such a hold on our mind and will. It is because the world is so real that we feel so potently its grasp on us and our spirits turn on it with this grip of the wrestler. It is often indeed too fiercely real for us and we seek for liberty in the realm of dream or planes of the ideal and, not finding it sufficiently there, because we have not the freedom nor can develop the mastery to impose our ideal on this active reality, we seek it beyond in the remote and infinite greatness of the Absolute. We shall do better then to fix on that other more generally admissible distinction, namely, of the world of Karma as a practical or relative reality and the being of the Spirit constant behind it or brooding above it as a greater supreme reality. And then we have to find whether in the latter alone is any touch of freedom or whether, as must surely be if it is the Spirit that presides over the Energy at work and over its action, there is here too some element or some beginning at least of liberty, and whether, even if it be small and quite relative, we cannot in these steps of Time, in these relations of Karma make this freedom great and real by dwelling consciously in the greatness of the Spirit. May not that be the sovereignty we shall find here when we rise to the top of the soul's evolution?

One thing we will note that this urge towards control and this impression of freedom are an orientation and an atmosphere which cling about the action of mind, and they grow in Nature as she rises towards mentality. The world of Matter seems to know nothing about freedom; everything there appears as if written in sibyllic laws upon tablets of stone, laws which have a process, but no initial reason, serve a harmony of purposes or at

least produce a cosmos of fixed results, but do not appear to be shaped with an eye to them by any discoverable Intelligence. We can think of no presence of soul in natural things, because we can see in them no conscious action of mind and a conscious active mental intelligence is to our notions the very basis and standing-ground, if not the whole stuff of soul-existence. If Matter is all, then we may very easily conclude that all is a Karma of material energy which is governed by some inherent incomprehensible mechanically legislating Necessity. But then we see that Life seems to be made of a different stuff; here various possibility develops, here creation becomes eager, pressing, flexible, protean; here we are conscious of a searching and a selection, many potentialities and a choice of actualities, of a subconscious idea which is feeling around for its vital self-expression and shaping an instinctive action, — often, though in certain limits, with an unerring intuitive guidance of life to its immediate objective or to some yet distant purpose, — of a subconscious will too in the fibre of all this vast seeking and mutable impulsion. But yet this too works within limits, under fetters, in a given range of processes.

But when we get out into mind, Nature becomes there much more widely conscious of possibility and of choice; mind is aware of potentialities and of determinations in idea which are other than those of the immediate actuality or of the fixedly necessary consequence of the sum of past and present actualities; it is aware of numberless “may-be”s and “might-have-been”s, and these last are not entirely dead rejected things, but can return through the power of the Idea and effect future determinations and can fulfil themselves at last in the inner reality of their idea though, it may well be, in other forms and circumstances. Moreover, mind can and does go still further; it can conceive of an infinite possibility behind the self-limitations of actual existence. And from this seeing there arises the idea of a free and infinite Will, a Will of illimitable potentiality which determines all these innumerable marvels of its own universal becoming or creation in Space and Time. That means the absolute freedom of a Spirit and Power which is not determined by Karma, but

determines Karma. Apparent Necessity is the child of the spirit's free self-determination. What affects us as Necessity, is a Will which works in sequence and not a blind Force driven by its own mechanism.

This is not, however, a binding inference and always there remain on this head arguable by the reason three main conceptions which we can form of existence. First, there is the idea, facile to our reason, of a blind mechanical Necessity of some kind, — and against or behind that nothing or some absolute non-existence. The nature of this Necessity would be that of a fixed process bound to certain initial and general determinations of which all the rest is the consequence. But that is only a first appearance of universal things, the stamp of phenomenal impression which we get from the aspect of the material universe. Then, there is the idea of a free infinite Being, God or Absolute, who somehow or other creates out of something or out of nothing, in reality or only in conception, or brings out of himself into manifestation a world of the necessity of his will or Maya or Karma in which all things, all creatures are bound as the victims of a necessity, not mechanical or external, but spiritual and internal, a force of Ignorance or a force of Karma or else some kind of arbitrary predestination. And, finally, there is the idea of an absolute free Existence which supports, develops and informs a universe of relations, of that Power as the universal Spirit of our existence, of the world as the evolution of these relations, of beings in the universe as souls who work them out with some freedom of the spirit as its basis, — for that they inwardly are, — but with an observation of the law of the relations as their natural condition.

This law would be in phenomenon or as seen in a superficial view of its sole outward machinery an apparent chain of necessity, but in fact it would be a free self-determination of the Spirit in existence. The free self and spirit would be there informing all the action of material energy, secretly conscient in its inconstancy; his would be the movement of life and its inner spirit of guidance; but in mind would be something of the first open light of his presence. The soul evolving in Nature, *prakṛtir jīva bhūtā*, would be an immortal clouded Power of him

growing into the light of the spirit and therefore towards the consciousness and reality of freedom. It would be bound at first in Nature and obey helplessly in all its action the urge of Karma, because on the surface the action of energy would be the whole truth of its kinetic being; the rest, the freedom, the origination is there, but concealed below, subliminal and therefore not at all manifest in the action. Even in mentality the action of Karma would be the main fact; everything would be determined by the nature of force of our active being working upon and responding to the influences of the environment and by the nature of quality of our active being which would colour and shape the character of these outputtings and responses. But that force is the force, that quality the quality of the soul; and as the soul grew aware of itself, the consciousness of Freedom would emerge, assert itself, insist, strive to grow into a firmly felt and possessed reality. Free in the spirit within, conditioned and determined in Nature, striving in his soul to bring out the spiritual light, mastery and freedom to work upon the obscurity and embarrassment of his first natural conditions and their narrow determinations, this would be the nature of man the mental being.

On this basis it becomes possible to come at some clear and not wholly antinomous relation between man's necessity and man's freedom, between his earthly human nature at whirl in the machinery of mind, life and body and the master Soul, the Godhead, the real Man behind whose consent supports or whose bidding governs its motions. The soul of man is a power of the self-existence which manifests the universe and not the creature and slave of a mechanical Nature; and it is only the natural instruments of his being, it is mind, life and body and their functions and members which are helpless apparatus and gear of the machinery. These things are subject to the action of Karma, but man in himself, the real man within is not its subject, *na karma lipyate nare*. Rather is Karma his instrument and its developments the material he uses, and he is using it always from life to life for the shaping of a limited and individual, which may be one day a divine and cosmic personality. For the eternal spirit enjoys an absolute freedom. This freedom appears to us no

doubt in a certain status, origin or background of all being as an unconditioned infinite of existence, but also it is in relation to the universe the freedom of an existence which displays an infinite of possibilities and has a power of shaping at will out of its own potentiality the harmonies of the cosmos. Man, too, may well be capable of a release, *mokṣa*, into the unconditioned Infinite by cessation of all action, mind and personality. But that is not the whole of the spirit's absolute freedom; it is rather an incomplete liberty, since it endures only by its inaction. But the freedom of the Spirit is not so dependent; it can remain unimpaired in all this action of Karma and is not diminished or abrogated by the pouring of its energies into the whirl of the universe. And one may say that man cannot enjoy the double freedom because as man he is an individual being and therefore a thing in Nature, subject to Ignorance, to Karma. To be free he must get away from individuality, nature and Karma, and then man no longer exists, there is only the unconditioned Infinite. But this is to assume that there is no power of spiritual individuality, but only a power of individuation in Nature. All is then a formation of a nodus of mental, vital and physical Karma with which the one self for a long time mistakenly identifies its being by the delusion of ego. But if on the contrary there is any such thing as an individual power of spirit, it must, in whatever degree of actuality, share in the united force and freedom of the self-existent Divinity; for it is being of his being.

Freedom somewhere there is in our being and action, and we have only to see how and why it is limited in our outward nature, why here I am at all under any dominion of Karma. I appear to be bound by the law of an outward and imposed energy only because there is separation between my outward nature and my inmost spiritual self and I do not live in that outwardness with my whole being, but with a shape, turn and mental formation of myself which I call my ego or my personality. The cosmic spirit in matter seems itself to be so bound, for the same reason. It has started an outward compressed action, a law and disposition of material energy which must be allowed to unroll its consequences; itself holds back behind and conceals its shaping touch;

but still its supporting assent and impulse are there and these come out more into the open as Nature raises herself in the scales of life and mind. Nevertheless, I have to note that even in mind and even in its phenomenon of a conscious will Karma is the first law and there cannot be for me there a complete freedom; there is no such thing as a mental will which is absolutely free. And this is because mind is part of the action of the outward Ignorance, an action which seeks for knowledge but does not possess its full light and power, which can conceive of self and spirit and infinity and reflect them, but not altogether live in them, which can quiver with infinite possibility, but can only deal in a limited half-effective fashion with restricted possibilities. An Ignorance cannot be permitted to have, even if in its nature it could have, free mastery. It would never do for an ignorant mind and will to be given a wide and real freedom; for it would upset the right order of the energy which the Spirit has set at work and produce a most unholy confusion. It must be forced to obey or, if it resists, to bear the reaction of the Law; its partial freedom of a clouded and stumbling knowledge must be constantly overruled both in its action and its result by the law of universal Nature and the will of the seeing universal Spirit who governs the dispositions and consequences of Karma. This constrained overruled action is in patent fact the character of our mental being and action.

But still there is here something which we may call a relative freedom. It does not really belong to our outward mind and will or that shadow of myself which I have put forth in my mental ego; for these things are instruments and they work in the roads of the successions of Karma. But they still feel a power constantly coming forth and either assenting to or intervening in the action of the nature, and that power they attribute to themselves. They are aware of a relative freedom in their disposition of action and of at least a potential absolute freedom behind it, and mixing these two things confusedly together mind, will and ego cry out in unison "I am free." But this freedom and power are influences from the soul. To use a familiar metaphysical language, they type the assent and will of the Purusha without which the Prakriti cannot move on her way. The first and the greater part

of this soul-influence is in the form of an assent to Nature, an acquiescence; and for good reason. For I start with the action of the universal Energy which the Spirit has set in motion and as I rise from the ignorance towards knowledge, the first thing demanded from me is to gather experience of its law and of my relations to the law and partly therefore to acquiesce, to allow myself to be moved, to see and to come to know the nature of the motions, to suffer and obey the law, to understand and know Karma.

This obedience is forcibly imposed on the lower ignorant creation. But thinking man who experiences increasingly from generation to generation and from life to life the nature of things and develops reflective knowledge and the sense of his soul in Nature, delivers in her a power of initiating will. He is not bound to her set actualities; he can refuse assent, and the thing in Nature to which it is refused goes on indeed for a time and produces its results by impetus of Karma, but as it runs, it loses power and falls into impotence and desuetude. He can do more, he can command a new action and orientation of his nature. The assent was a manifestation of the power of the soul as giver of the sanction, *anumantā*, but this is a power of the soul as active lord of the nature, *īśvara*. Then Nature still insists more or less on her old habitual way by reason of her past impetus or the right of previous sanctions and may even, in proportion as she is unaccustomed to control, resist and call in hostile powers, our own creations, the children of our past willings; then is there a battle in the house of our being between the lord and his spouse or between old and new nature and a defeat of the soul or its victory. And this is certainly a freedom, but only a relative freedom, and even the greatest mental self-mastery a relative and precarious thing at the best. This liberty when we look down at it from a higher station, is not well distinguishable from a lightened bondage.

The mental being in us can be a learner in the school of freedom, not a perfect adept. A real freedom comes when we get away from the mind into the life of the spirit, from personality to the Person, from Nature to the lord of Nature. There again

the first liberty is a passive power; it is of the nature of an assent; it is an observing and essential liberty in which the active part of the being is an instrument of the supreme Spirit and its universal action. But the assent is to the will of the Spirit and not to the mechanical force of Nature, and there is thrown on the mind the freedom of the spirit's light and purity and a right knowledge of relations and a clear detached assent to the divine workings. But if man would have too a freedom of power, of participation, of companionship as the son of God in a greater divine control, he must then not only get back from mind, but must stand, in his thought and will even, above the levels of mentality and find there a station of leverage, a spiritual *pou stō*,² whence he can sovereignly move the world of his being. Such a station of consciousness there is in our supramental ranges. When the soul is one with the Supreme and with the universal not only in essence of consciousness and spiritual truth of being, but in expressive act too of consciousness and being, when it enjoys an initiating and relating truth of spiritual will and knowledge and the soul's overflowing delight in God and existence, when it is admitted to the spirit's fullness of assent to self and its creative liberty, its strain of an eternal joy in self-existence and self-manifestation, Karma itself becomes a rhythm of freedom and birth a strain of immortality.³

² A "where to stand", the station of leverage from which Archimedes, could he only have found it, undertook to move the world.

³ *Sambhūtyā amṛtam aśnute*, "by birth he enjoys immortality."