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Good and Evil: A New Interpretation

[Dr. Alexander F. Skutch is an old friend whom readers will remember for many lucid and deeply thought-out articles. In the present essay he tries to put forward a basic ethical perspective. We draw readers' attention to the Theosophical note which appears after the article.—ED.]

THE HUMAN SPIRIT has been called infinite, an exaggeration that points to a truth. The spirit yearns toward infinity; it strains to reach infinity; perhaps only infinity, were it attainable, could quench this thirst and ultimately satisfy it. The outstanding characteristic of the human spirit, its highest attribute, is its expansiveness, its insatiable hunger to experience more widely, to know more broadly and profoundly, to cultivate friendly intercourse with the whole of Being. The noblest spirit is that which understands and loves the largest segment of the universe. This yearning for the infinite, for the All, often assumes the form of striving for union with God, the ideal being who knows and embraces all.

The surrounding world both encourages and represses the spirit's innate expansiveness. By the sublimity of the heavens, the grandeur of earth and sea, the beauty of living things, the joyousness of young creatures, the generous and kindly acts of men, it invites the spirit to expand and nurtures its capacity to love ever more widely and intensely. On the other hand, the ugliness, violence, and harshness so widespread in the living world, along with the cruelty, selfishness, and perfidy of men, cause the spirit to contract, to draw away from the surrounding world and take refuge within itself, like a mollusc tightly enclosed in its shell. Too wide an experience of the harsher and uglier aspects of the world, too much pain and too little joy, may cause us to hate rather than love the whole of which we are parts.

From this highest aspect of the human spirit, we might derive a new and more penetrating conception of good and evil and a more comprehensive morality. Good is that which is in accord with the spirit's natural tendency, causing it to expand more widely and love more inclusively; evil is that which opposes this natural tendency, causing the spirit to contract into itself and to hate.

The most widespread form of good is beauty, which above all invites the spirit to hold communion with the world and arouses love. Indeed, when we survey the vast and heterogeneous array of things that we call beautiful, we may conclude that the only property they have in common is their capacity to attract us, in a way that is often difficult to explain, and to excite our love or admiration. Beauty is our delighted awareness

that other things co-exist with us and we are not alone in the world. Although primarily applied to sensuous impressions, the adjective "beautiful" is quite properly extended to the conduct and even the invisible attitudes of men, when these are such that they make us proud to be human beings and to dwell among such fellow citizens.

The most widespread forms of evil are ugliness and harshness. The ugly object repels us by what it is in itself, its own peculiar appearance or organization, or perhaps more commonly by its lack of organization, the incongruity or disharmony among its several aspects or parts. One of the ugliest things in the world is the mangled corpse of any animal, for there, where we expect a high degree of coherence and symmetry, our shocked vision is greeted by incoherence and hideously distorted shapes. However, our first reaction to many living animals by no means lacking in symmetry and coherence is that they are ugly. This may be caused in part by their strangeness, their wide divergence from the forms of men and those animals most closely associated with us; but most frequently we regard them as ugly because they seem to menace us with fangs, stings, horns, or talons. They are ugly because they are harsh, or appear to be. By "harsh" I designate whatever injures or destroys any other creature, of its own or another kind. Cruelty is deliberate harshness, the infliction of pain or injury for the sake of the perverse pleasure that it gives to a twisted mind. Just as we call generosity and compassion beautiful, so we recognize that harshness and cruelty are ugly. Beneath every experience of ugliness there lurks, patent or concealed, resentment that the hideous thing shares the earth with us. If we cannot remove the ugly beyond sight and hearing, we try to flee from it.

The recognition that good is that which stimulates the spirit to grow, evil that which makes it contract, greatly amplifies the scope and relevance of our moral judgements. Visible beauty, nobility of character, kindly deeds, at whatever distance from me in time and space, are to me, if I know about them, a positive benefit; although they fail to affect me directly, they make my spirit expand in sympathy and strengthen its loyalty to the cosmos. Contrariwise, ugliness and harshness, wherever they occur, are harmful to me if I hear of them, for they make my spirit shrink into itself and alienate it from the Universe. The sight of one animal striking down another in the remote wilderness would be considered by many to be morally irrelevant to me; nevertheless, it hurts me personally, for I resent living in a world where such things occur and I tend to contract away from it. Similarly, the ill effects of one man's crime against another are by no means confined to the immediate victim but extend in some measure to every morally sensitive person who hap-

pens to learn about it; for the presence of wicked people among us diminishes our respect and love for mankind and makes us a little less happy to be members of the human family.

Likewise, crudeness and discourtesy are positive evils, for they alienate us from our fellow men; whereas gentility and courtesy draw us closer to them. Poverty is a great evil, because it pinches men in body and spirit; incessantly preoccupied with finding the means of subsistence, the undernourished poor have neither energy nor inclination to cultivate the spirit and foster its innate tendency to expand. Whatever discoveries or inventions ease the burden of living and free men to cultivate their higher faculties must be regarded as instrumental goods. But there is danger that the opulence which comes from agricultural and industrial proficiency may be as spiritually devastating as poverty; for too often it supports sensuality. The sensual person's spirit becomes deeply immersed in his own body, to the detriment of its responsiveness to the larger universe.

That which chiefly alienates us from inorganic nature is its occasional violence, in the form of volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, and other catastrophes that unfeelingly destroy myriads of living things along with some of man's grandest works. At greater distances, there are stellar explosions of inconceivable magnitude, which must vapourize any planets that revolve around these disintegrating stars; and we are told by astrophysicists that our Sun may also, ages hence, burst like a gigantic bomb, annihilating the planet Earth and all its life. The more we permit our minds to dwell upon these possibilities of disaster, the more we shrink away from the physical universe and recognize that it contains much evil. How can we feel any solidarity with a universe that appears so utterly indifferent to ourselves and all that we cherish? Yet if the inorganic universe can destroy us, we must also acknowledge that it created us, for we are the natural outcome of processes that were active aeons before life arose and culminated in conscious beings, including ourselves. From day to day, the physical universe, including the incandescent sun and the rain-washed earth, not only supports our life but enriches it with the beauty of the starry sky, sunrises and sunsets, snowy mountain peaks, and the heaving ocean. And doubtless, if we could penetrate more deeply into the hidden springs of the world process, we would discern that our presence here, with all our hopes and aspirations, is no accident, but a partial fulfilment of a *nisus* or striving that stirred in the heart of Being from its prime foundation. The contemplation of the physical universe reveals far more that invites the spirit to expand than that forces its contraction, far more good than evil.

Among the greatest of evils is senility. By causing the deterioration of the organs by which the spirit communicates with the larger world, old age inevitably hastens its contraction. This distressing process is to some extent offset by the greater understanding and sympathy that the years bring to a generously endowed mind. Memory substitutes for immediate experience; dim impressions from the environment may convey more meaning to the mature mind than vivid impressions to the callow one. But extreme senility too often causes the mind itself to decay and lose contact with reality.

If all that helps the spirit to expand is good and all that produces its contraction evil, it follows that the culminating evil is death. If death is what it appears to be, the extinction of consciousness, it is the spirit's contraction to zero, its utter annihilation. If there be any evil greater than this, it is the spirit's expansion on the negative side of this zero point, in hatred and destructive rage, as occasionally happens to a sick soul. Those philosophies and religions that taught that death, even when regarded as complete spiritual extinction, is no evil, reached this conclusion by concentrating attention upon all the pains, sorrows, and frustrations from which it would release us, while placing too low a value upon the rewarding experiences that life can bring. They regarded the spirit's freedom from grief and anxiety as more desirable, or at least more attainable, than its expansion toward infinity. But to those who recognize that the human spirit fulfils itself by expanding ever more widely in understanding and love, death is so great an evil as to be in a class by itself, a super-evil. Only if it be, not annihilation, but a critical point in a continuing process of spiritual growth and expansion, can death be regarded as other than a tremendous evil. If released from the body, the spirit expands more widely than before, death is not an evil but a blessing in disguise.