

I. THE PROBLEM OF LIFE'S PURPOSE

To the detached observer man is something of a curiosity. He lives in two worlds at once, and this not as a being who belongs to one world and has simply got tangled up in another, but as a being who belongs essentially to both of them. God, who alone exists in His own right, who is all-knowing and all-powerful, who exists without the shadow of limitation, made all things. Considering the beings God has made, we find two broad categories, spirit and matter.

Spirit is being which has the power of knowing and willing. Matter is being which has not these powers. There is a more obvious but less important distinction between them: matter can be perceived by the senses, spirit cannot.

Of God's creatures there are some that are pure spirits—angels—with no material part. There are some that are purely material—animals, plants, stones and the rest—with no spiritual part. Between them is man. In him alone spirit and matter are united: by his soul he is a spirit as the angels are: by his body he is part of the material universe.

And, as has already been said, he belongs to both

THE PROBLEM OF LIFE'S PURPOSE

worlds by his essence. He is not simply a spirit who is for the moment tied down to, or tied up in, a body. It is of his very nature to be a union of matter and spirit.

The soul of man is not more essentially a partner in the human compound than his body: but it is the more important partner. For in the first place it is the principle of life in the body: it remains with the body so long as the body is capable of being animated by it: the body corrupts whereas the soul continues in existence; and in the second place it knows and wills: that is, it has the two faculties of intellect and will by which it can enter into conscious and determined relationship with all that is.

Such a being, then, is man. It is life *as it concerns man* that is the business of this map.

We shall understand the map better if we grasp its universal necessity. A man may very well say that whether there is or is not a divine revelation as to the meaning of human life, it is at any rate only of academic interest, desired by none save the dwindling number who like things cut and dried and take comfort in the voice of authority.

For a man who reasons thus we must show that an acceptance of the revelation of God as to the meaning of life has a bearing not only upon holy living, but even upon sane living; that only those who believe in such a revelation can shape their own lives correctly or help their fellow-men. Those

who do not accept the revelation, even if they have the best will in the world (which not all men have), can neither direct their own lives aright nor help other men—save accidentally and within a very narrow field. From such men the world has little to hope and an immense amount to fear. And into their hands the world is tending more and more to fall.

In one word, the reason for their helplessness, both in relation to themselves and in relation to others, is that they do not know what a man is.

You do not truly know what anything is until you know what it is *for*. Knowing what a thing is made of, even knowing whom a thing is made by, these things are but scanty knowledge, impotent of themselves to lead to fruitful action. The complete knowledge demands a knowledge of purpose. A very crude instance may make this sufficiently obvious truth still more obvious. Suppose a man who has never shaved: and suppose that he suddenly discovers a razor. He does not know what it is, but he discovers that it cuts. Whereupon he uses it for cutting wood. He does not cut a great deal of wood and he ruins the razor, leaving it fit only for the scrap-heap. The point is that he has used it without knowing its purpose; and save by accident such use must always be misuse. And in the face of the general proposition that nothing can be used aright until its purpose is known, the man who uses anything at all without such knowledge is acting

THE PROBLEM OF LIFE'S PURPOSE

blindly. He may mean well, but well-meaningness is not a substitute for knowledge of purpose.

Obviously the perfect way to know the purpose of the thing is to find out from its maker: any other method leaves too many loopholes for error.

Apply this principle to man himself: we cannot use ourselves aright nor help any other man till we know what man is for: we can meddle with him, tinker with him, mean well to him, but save in a limited way we cannot help him.

Here we must make a short digression. There are only two ways in which anything can come to be. Either it is intentional or accidental: that is, either someone intended it or it merely chanced. The thing that is intentional has a purpose: accidents have no purpose. Humanity, like other things, must be either an accident and so purposeless, or else have been made with intent. Catholics know that man was made, and made by an intelligent Being who knew the purpose of His own action. Further, God who made us and knew what He made us for, has told us what He made us for. Accepting His Word, we know the purpose of our existence, and we can proceed to live intelligently according to it. Short of this knowledge, intelligent living is not possible for us.

For apart from God's own statement as to what He had in mind when He made us, we have no way of knowing. We cannot tell ourselves: the scientist can tell us what we are made *of*, or rather what our bodies

are made of, but he cannot tell us what we are made *for*: and by comparison with this altogether vital matter, what he has to say, interesting as it is, is but trivial.

In other words, short of *God* telling us, we cannot be told; and short of being told we cannot know. We can of course theorize—or in plain English, guess. There is one, and only one, colourable alternative to a revelation from God as a means of knowing the purpose of man's existence. We might simply take human nature as it is, study it, come to a full and accurate knowledge of it: we could then reason from man's nature as to the particular purpose for which a being of that nature must have been made: or, avoiding the idea of purpose altogether, we might reason as to the best use to which a being of those powers could be put.

This, I say, is a colourable alternative. Indeed, for one who is unaware of the revelation of God, it is the highest exercise of the intellect. With this method, had God not told us what was in His mind, we should have had to rest content.* Yet we may be glad that He did not so leave us, since it is liable to error in many ways, of which two are of capital importance:

(1) There may be error in the reading of human nature. Most of men's efforts to read human nature, and frame a system of life in accord with it, err by inability to seize the whole. One part of human

* See Chapter XII.

THE PROBLEM OF LIFE'S PURPOSE

nature is isolated, the rest ignored. Further, as between various uses to which powers might be put, there can be no deciding which is higher and which is lower, save in the light of the purpose of the whole being: those uses which serve the purpose are good, those which hinder it are bad.

(2) The second objection is far more important and is, indeed, fundamental to the understanding of the whole of what is to come. Even if human nature were fully understood with no shadow of error, the purpose of man's life could be deduced from it only if the purpose of man's life were contained in it—that is, if man's purpose simply meant the highest activity possible to his own nature. But supposing the purpose of human life is some activity or state *higher than* man's nature. Then we cannot find it simply by studying his nature. And God has in fact taught that He destines us not for something of which our nature is in itself capable (and which might, therefore, as I have said, be deduced from our nature) but for something to which He in His generosity chose to lift us; and this obviously cannot be deduced from any study of us: one may deduce the incidence of justice, but not of generosity.

Given, then, that apart from the revelation of God we cannot know with certainty what is the purpose of our existence as man, the only thing left for the one who does not believe, in such a revelation is to choose an object of life: to decide for himself what he will use his life for. But given the myriad possi-

bilities before every man, the chances are that he will choose the wrong one and so spoil his life: and if he is in a position to control the destinies of others, whether as a king or a dictator or simply as the father of a family, the disaster will be very great: and the more zealous and energetic he is, the greater will the disaster be. In no case is intelligent living—that is, living consciously for the true purpose of our being—possible to us unless we are told by God what the purpose is.

It is, therefore, the very highest act of our intellect thus to grasp the revelation of God, since this is knowledge that we must have, and knowledge that we must either be told or do without. It is foolish to stigmatize this acceptance as a denial of freedom or a form of intellectual suicide. The object of thought is truth: if a particular piece of truth is necessary, can be known with certainty by the teaching of another, and cannot be known otherwise, then a man is really acting suicidally in rejecting the truth merely because he did not find it for himself. He is preferring the exercise of the means to the attainment of the end. If a man knows what knowing means, he cannot even think he knows man's true purpose save through the revelation of God. And so he cannot direct his own life rightly. Nor can he help others.

Here the philanthropist might say: "I am a practical man doing the immediate job. Whether there is a God or not, here is a man suffering, here is a

THE PROBLEM OF LIFE'S PURPOSE

wrong to be righted": but this is not practical, this dashing at the job without the necessary preliminary theorizing. For if you do not know what men *are*—that is, are *for*—how do you know what is good for them? That thing is good for any being which helps it to achieve the true purpose of its nature. How can you help men to that, if you do not know what their true purpose is?

Nor should we be misled by the fact that there are certain obvious things that such a man can do. Principally he can relieve bodily suffering. But all his aid is "first aid": of profound, permanent, certain help to man he can do nothing. In fact the general effort of those who thus would help their fellow men with no thought of God is almost exclusively confined to bodily well-being, or the relief of bodily suffering.

And when they approach such questions as birth-control, divorce, the killing of the incurable, and a dozen others, it is beyond their power really to answer the question raised. For these things are right or wrong according as they help or hinder a man in the achievement of the purpose of his being: and it is not so much as possible to express an intelligent opinion on them save in the slight of a sure knowledge of what the purpose of life is. When the philanthropist is not merely unaware of God's revelation, but definitely convinced that man is only the matter of his body, his position is easier. If he has to decide upon the question of divorce, for

instance, then for him the only problem is whether an accidental collection of electrons and protons—called for convenience a man—will function more harmoniously with that second collection of electrons and protons which it is at present living with, or with some third collection of electrons and protons. Such a question is simple enough. Simple because it really does not matter. But if man is more than that—a being with a true purpose in life—then all that is said in ignorance of his purpose is quite irrelevant.

On all the moral teaching of those who have not the Catholic revelation, there lies this mark of superficiality: the only rule that appears to be of universal application is that suffering must always be relieved. But even this, one dare not call a principle, since it is not related to any true view of life. By good fortune, it is a rule that often works to the advantage of the sufferer; and in the one who exercises it, it bears witness to a true virtue: indeed the relief of suffering is one of the highest rules of the Christian life. But, apart from a right view of the purpose of human life, it is a blind rule, and there is no virtue in blindness. Carried too far, as our age is tending more and more to carry it, the rule can work immeasurable evil. For there are things that are worse than suffering.

Two questions, then, are to be asked of any religious or social teacher who offers some system of life for the acceptance of men:

THE PROBLEM OF LIFE'S PURPOSE

The first is: What, according to you, is the purpose of man's life?

The second is: How do you know?

When he answers the second, be very insistent. Unless he says "God has revealed it," then he is wasting time. If he says God has revealed it, then he must be prepared to show that God has done so. To both questions the Catholic Church has an answer. In this book I am concerned only with the first and with certain things that flow from it. Life, and all the things of life, have a meaning in relation to man, in themselves, in relation to one another. What the meaning is, God has told us: we need to know it: there is no other way of knowing. This book is simply an attempt to transcribe what God has said.

I. THE PROBLEM OF LIFE'S PURPOSE

Discussion Aids

Distinguish between spirit and matter. Classify the creatures of God in relation to spirit and matter. Where does man come in? What is the soul? Name the two great faculties of the soul. How can we know anything aright unless we know its true purpose? Give example. From what source can we know the purpose of a thing? From what *single* source can we find out the purpose for which man was made? Where is that information set down? What guess might be made as to the purpose of man's existence—if man's Maker had not revealed that purpose? Discuss two errors to which such a guess is liable. What disaster to one's own destiny results from ignorance of life's purpose? Does one's ignorance of life's purpose affect the destiny of others under one's control? What therefore is the highest act of the intellect? How can the problems of bodily suffering, birth control, divorce, mercy killing, etc. be solved without a knowledge of the purpose of man's existence?

What is the purpose of this book?

Practice: Meditate often on the necessity of living up to the purpose for which you were made.

II. THE PROBLEM OF LIFE'S LAWS

Discussion Aids

How do we know that there are laws governing our physical being? Does man invent such laws? Can we ever with impunity defy these laws? Can we alter them or free ourselves from them? Are there laws governing the soul? May we ignore them? May we ignore the laws governing the body? If we do, what is the outcome in each instance? Is the body more or less free when it obeys the laws governing it? Is the soul more or less free in obeying the moral law? Can the state change physical laws? the moral law? Give an example. If successful bodily life depends upon a knowledge of the laws of health, what about a successful spiritual life? Have men been infallible in discovering bodily laws? Are they not likely to err even more in trying to discover spiritual laws? Which laws, physical or spiritual, are more important? Why? Why did God, the Author of all law, reveal the moral law and not the physical? May the will and the intellect of man err, even though God has revealed the moral law? Discuss. Discuss the difference between freedom and doing as one likes. Discuss our dependence upon God and the rightfulness of it.

Practice: Put into more fruitful practice your knowledge of the difference between doing as you please and freedom.