

II. THE PROBLEM OF LIFE'S LAWS

THE argument of the first chapter went to show that the very minimum required for intelligent living—namely, the knowledge of the purpose of our life—is dependent upon a revelation from God: that without such a revelation we cannot know our purpose, and so cannot have any means of testing the value or the significance of anything that we do. As I have said, this is a minimum, and reflection on experience is sufficient to show that something more is needed from God than a bare revelation of what He made us for.

Very early in life man becomes aware that he is living in a world of laws: the series of happenings which lead him to the conclusion are nearly all unpleasant: but whether he ever formulates the idea or crystallizes it in a word, or whether he remains merely the practical man—in the usual sense of the unreflective man—he acquires the certainty that there is a whole series of conditions and results in the world which may fairly well be counted upon. This certainty becomes part of the very texture of his mind. Thus he discovers that fire burns, that hunger weakens, that rain wets, that bodies fall

towards the earth and not towards the sky; and so with a myriad other things. If he reflects at all upon these laws, he realizes that they are not of his choosing—in fact that, in many cases, they are the reverse of what he would have chosen—but that their power is in no way affected by his disapproval. There is no way in which he can get free of them. He can act as though they did not exist, in which case they damage or even destroy him. If he is a sane man he may dislike them, but he accepts them, and does his best to live in accordance with them. In any case there is no such thing as freedom *from* them: but only freedom *within* them. And freedom within them can be attained only by one who knows them. This knowing them is always a matter of discovery and not invention: in other words, one finds out what they are, one cannot in any way make them to be.

All this is obvious enough as applied to the body. Men, however, do not always make the application of precisely the same truths to the soul: yet the parallel is exact. As there are laws that govern the body so there are laws—in particular the moral law—which govern the soul. The moral law is no more made by man, or dependent on the approval of man, or in any way escapable by man than the material law. Man can *ignore* the moral law as he can ignore the material law, but the result in both cases is his own diminution or destruction. There is no freedom from the moral law: but as with the

material law there is freedom within it, the only freedom possible to man. And a condition of this freedom is the same as in the other case—namely, knowledge of what the law is.

In the light of all this it is possible to judge the extent of folly of those who talk of emancipation from the moral law, or from any particular article of the moral law: and because this talk has folly at its root, it runs to folly in every leaf and flower. To take only one instance: one hears the phrase that the modern man is no longer to be bound by the two-thousand-year-old law of marriage. It is as though one were to say that it was beneath the dignity of modern man to be bound by the even older law of gravity. For the question is not whether the law is old, but whether it is a law. A man might very well say that he would not be bound by the law of gravity: yet he would be well advised to keep his affirmation within the sphere of words. Let him push it to act, and he will no longer be a modern man but a corpse, part of that history which, in his newness, he so heartily despises.

Another category of this folly is the not uncommon assumption that this or that human *authority* may abrogate the law, even if the individual would be a little reckless in declaring it not binding upon himself. But the State—to take the most obvious example of all—cannot in any way affect the moral law.* The State declares that a man may—in

* Nor can the Church. See page 100.

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certain circumstances—leave his wife and marry another. But this is adultery. To assume that therefore adultery is no longer harmful to the soul is unduly optimistic. State action can no more make adultery harmless to the soul than it can make prussic acid harmless to the body. Men have come into a collision with the law of God: the law of God does not suffer from the collision.

The conclusion, then, is that we are living in a world of law, material law and spiritual law, and that successful living involves obedience to this law which, in its turn, supposes a knowledge of it. If it is asked how we are to know what the law is, experience suggests an answer. Since men were men, they have had their own bodies and the world of matter under their eyes, and they have been at work discovering what the laws are that govern matter. Yet on this most obvious ground, men are constantly changing their views, learning laws that till yesterday were not so much as suspected, discarding what all men before them had held to be laws, certain and irrevocable. So that it is clear enough that, left to themselves, men will make no more than a tolerably successful job of this discovering of the laws of matter. Much more, then, it is evident that left to themselves, men will fail to discover, with any fixity or certainty, the laws that govern the soul—since the soul is so much less obvious to man, so very much more inaccessible in its essential being. And failure in this sphere is far more serious than in the

other. For disaster to the body is the lesser evil, and is only an anticipation of the disaster that awaits all bodies inevitably. But disaster to the soul—because it is the nobler part of man, because disaster is not its inevitable destiny, because it is not only the nobler part but the decisive part—is a thing not to be faced. And, in fact, given that no one but the law-maker can know with certainty the text of the laws he has made, there is immense food for thought in this: that God, the author alike of the laws that govern matter and the laws that govern spirit, has left man very largely to discover—with an endless accompaniment of disaster—the laws that govern matter, as though the discovery of these were a trivial thing, not vital; but has revealed to man the laws that govern spirit because they are essential laws, whose breach is fraught with eternal catastrophe.

Thus, not only that man may know the *purpose* of his life, but also that he may know the *nature* of the life through which he must strive to his goal, a teaching from God is something vitally necessary. It does not follow that even with this knowledge a man will always act rightly. The *will* of man is capable of choosing a course of action contrary to what he knows to be right. And even if the will is right, the *intellect* may err in applying its knowledge of purpose and law to a particular set of circumstances. Where the law of God applies explicitly, there is no problem. But in a situation to which the law has not been applied by God in express

terms and it is a question of men applying a principle, then they may easily go astray, misled by custom or environment or inclination. Thus, for example, a Catholic might, with excellent intentions, support a bad social or economic or judicial system. But for all that he possesses the true principles and with these there is always the possibility of rectification. Without them there is none. So that right living, though not guaranteed by, is yet totally dependent upon, knowledge of purpose and law, and therefore upon God.

It may be well at this point, to say one thing further about freedom and about the dependence of man upon God. Freedom is usually defined as the power to do what one likes. Accepting the definition, one sees instantly that the power to do what one likes may be the goal, but doing what one likes is not necessarily the road to the goal. In the bodily order, eating what one likes, for instance, may very well be the very solidest hindrance to doing what one likes, and a certain prelude to suffering what one very much dislikes. It is only by doing as one ought, that one attains a condition in which one has true physical freedom, the uttermost freedom possible to the body. And the same truth applies exactly to the soul. Freedom, then, is not to be attained by doing what we like unless by chance we like what we ought: which brings us back to the true purpose of our being and the laws by which our being

may progress towards it. Apart from that is only loss.

It is true that this argues a very extreme degree of dependence upon God, a dependence to which not all men resign themselves easily. Yet no view of life will work—because no view of life is intelligent—which does not accept both the fact of our dependence upon God and the rightfulness of it—that God has no duty whatever to us, and we have no rights whatever against God. If a carpenter makes a chair, the carpenter owes nothing to the chair. The chair has no rights against him, and he may do as he pleases—sit upon it or set a match to it. But God made us and He made us more fully, so to speak, than any carpenter ever makes a chair. For the carpenter, at any rate, does not make the wood: and there is always the possibility that his rights over the chair may, to some extent, be limited by an unpaid bill for the wood. But God made us, using no material at all. Therefore we have no more rights against him than the chair has against the carpenter. Occasionally it seems to us that the fact that we have intelligence and free will does, in some way, make a difference, giving us some claim that the chair has not. But God gave us these gifts too: they are as much His creatures as we: and, therefore, they give us no claim against Him. God could not contract a duty towards us by giving us more. But though God has no duties towards us, yet He has a duty towards Himself, the duty of

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acting intelligently. Intelligent action means action with a purpose, and God who gave us intelligence and gave us free will, thereby put Himself under obligation so to speak, to treat us in accordance with that which He had given us. Our dependence, therefore, upon God, though total, absolute, and without any shadow of exception, is not the dependence of machines upon a mad mechanic or of slaves upon a mad king. It is the dependence of free men upon an All-Wise and All-Loving Creator, who knows their being more intimately than they know it themselves—who knows wherein the fulfilment of their being lies, and whose will it is that the fulfilment should actually be achieved. As we shall see, His will for them is even more than that—a fulfilment immeasurably beyond anything that the mere powers of their being would lead men to dare to hope, or even to conceive.

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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.