THE SIN AGAINST WONDER

By PAUL EDWARDS

The coach made its customary halt. At this point in the road the coincidence of a clearing in the woods with a gap in the low hills revealed the approaching range, whose massive, iron hard peaks climbed the afternoon sky, barbaric lords, indifferent to the pliant vassalage of the smooth foothills and the deep obeisance of the soft green valleys below.

The tourists, as always, stirred themselves, looked and exclaimed. Even their excitement seemed in its way to be a plebeian tribute offered by uncouth outlanders to the ancient dynasts of the skyline.

A loud, throaty voice sounded above the prattle and the hum. 'What', it wanted to know, 'have we stopped for?'

All the human contents of the coach focussed on him bewilderedly. 'The view!' they squeaked. 'The scenery! Look at those mountains!'

'Mountains!' The voice was full of raucous disgust. 'What's mountains?' I could make 'em meself, if I 'ad enough muck'.

THE THOUGHTS of youth are, long, long thoughts'. So says the poet. The boys I used to teach were adept at short cuts. I would earnestly outline one of the great problems of the philosophers and they would hand me a solution, much as they might hand you the almost instantly developed print from the back of a polaroid camera. I made attempts to bring them to grips with the problem of the beautiful. What do we mean when we say that one work of art is more beautiful than another? What is there in common between a piece of music, a painting, a poem, all of which we describe as beautiful? Is the scenery of a very remote, beautiful place beautiful even before any human eye has seen it? The lads dealt with this kind of thing quite briskly. Beautiful means you like to look at it, see it, or hear it, or smell it. That's all. The exquisite, undiscovered valley is not beautiful at all because there is nobody to like it. The shakespearian sonnet is only better than the birthday card verse because I like Shakespeare better. The roses on the chocolate box are more beautiful than anything Raphael ever did, if I prefer the chocolate box. I would try again. If there is no intrinsic superiority in Shakespeare why do we so painstakingly attempt to teach people to appreciate his works? Answer: We want

everyone to like what we like.

I tried on another occasion to discuss the mystery of the human conscience. I was cut short. 'Conscience is simply the pressure of society on you'. I pointed out that there have been men whose consciences have made them oppose contemporary society's standards; that some men have managed to change the conscience of the society in which they lived. Answer: Then they picked up their notions from some other society. Of course, this kind of glib universal assertion about society and the history of morals usually came from some not very promising student of science, who could barely distinguish Dante from Danton, or the jacobites from the jacobins.

Once I was more successful. Two very intelligent sixth formers were telling me that morality is wholly subjective, that if you think that a thing is wrong, it is wrong; if you think it morally right, it is right. After a great deal of profitless wrangling I remembered South Africa. Our judgements about apartheid are splendidly absolute. I put it to the boys that the practice of apartheid violates the rights of the african whether the white south african realizes it or not. Yes. They had to agree that apartheid violates the african's rights. Then there are human rights which others are wrong not to respect? . . . H'mm? The three of us split up to go to our tea an hour late.

These are painful memories. It is not only my pedagogical ineptitude that rankles. It is not just chagrin that the boys chose to be subjectivists while I am committed to the opposite camp. Their entire approach was wrong. Their glib subjectivism existed only at the surface. The boy who told me that Bach was not intrinsically superior to any single dance tune, born today and forgotten tomorrow, was a devoted and competent musician. Boys who told me that Shakespeare's sonnets were in themselves no better than a birthday card verse, often had quite a feel for literature. The pair that told me that a thing was morally right or wrong only because you thought it was, had high moral standards, one of them quixotically so.

But they were wholly unwilling to explore beneath the surface of their appreciation. They sensed the depth, the obscurity which lay beyond. They were dimly aware of the baffling nature of the problems raised, of the complicated evidence that would have to be assessed, of the necessary tentativeness involved in any genuine attempt to find a solution. They saved themselves the trouble. They did not want to brood and ponder and feel uncertain. They did not want the humiliation of pitting their immature minds and puny store of information against such intractable difficulty. They wanted

things simple. They wanted things manageable. They wanted a position of easy superiority for their minds over reality. Therefore reality must be seen as shallow so as to be easily comprehended; it must be rendered unimpressive, lest it overawe. Let things have neither height, nor depth, nor breadth, or we shall become proportionally insignificant. Let us reduce all things to our own dimensions or even less; let us subject all things to our limitations and even more; then we can bestride like colossi the world which we have made so narrow.

I have made rather a large meal out of those poor boys, whose 'A-level' training was not designed to develop the philosopher in them. Their examination syllabus, their teenage predicament, presented them with enough problems. They are not to be censured for shrugging off the metaphysical conundrums of a middle-aged pseudo-Socrates. I have used them for a parable.

I will tell you another. I am very grateful to a former rector of mine who had an enthusiasm for gothic architecture. He taught me never to go into a building until I walked right round the exterior, seeing it from every angle, seeing the building as a whole. And I learned from him to stand and gaze down the nave of a cathedral, to look near and far, to see both the great lines of a building and the detail of the decoration. An obvious lesson, you may think. I have since learned to watch my fellow tourists and to observe how few of them ever look at the outside of a building, how few of them seem to see anything but a few monstrous tombs, a particularly colourful window and a couple of dull inscriptions.

I remember with respect and gratitude another jesuit. This was a frenchman who used to run a *colonie de vacance* in the mountains of Lozère for children from the slums of Montpelier. Once on the eve of an 'excursion', which meant a whole day's walking in the mountains, he addressed us, the *dirigeants*, on our responsibilities. It was not enough, he said, to lead one's *équipe* on a long vigorous walk. It was not enough to see that they got their lunch and that they came back in time for the evening meal. We must help them to see. 'They do not see. For them a magnificent landscape is just a lot of countryside. In their eyes an ancient castle is only a heap of rubble'.

I said that I would tell another parable. I have told two, both on the subject of unseeing. I think that there is a difference between the unseeing child and the unseeing adult. The small child does look. He is forever exploring. And like any explorer he has to go from known to unknown territory. The boys of the *colonie* were by no

means toddlers. But they could not be expected to make much of a ruined castle. They lacked the knowledge and imagination to rebuild the fallen stones into battlements and to see the battlements manned in defence. Growing up in crowded houses and narrow streets, our charges were physically unaccustomed to looking over distant views and sweeping panoramas. They needed to be helped, but it was easy to help them.

'There is none so blind as they that won't see'. The child is willing to see. He is not afraid of being belittled by his discoveries, because he accepts his own littleness as one of the principal facts of his existence. He is not afraid that there will be still more unexplained territory beyond what he is so laboriously exploring now. He has not learned to compromise with his own curiosity in order to economize in energy. He is not afraid of discovering more than he can manage. For him the world is not a very manageable place, anyway.

A forty year old volume of '*Punch*' has a drawing of a very young etonian, presumably at the Eton versus Harrow match, watching with dismay the gusto with which his sister is tackling her icecream. 'I say, need you be so dashed keen? I enjoy an ice cream as much as anyone, but I don't show it'. To be enthusiastic about something is not to be superior to it. And we become very concerned as we grow up about being superior to things. We have to prove that we have grown up by finding the world small and unimpressive. The wide-eyed wonder of the child must be put aside if we are to belong to the adult world. It is not so much lost as deliberately sloughed.

We do lose the energy of the child, its capacity for appreciation, its willingness to absorb the new. We do not want to stand poised on the brink of the unknown; we want to sit down in the midst of the familiar. We do not want to be frontiersmen and pathfinders. We want to be suburbanites, and house our emotions in a comfortable little 'semi-detached'; we want to be commuters, whose minds go for short runs on predictable tracks, according to schedule. So we forget the limitless plains and mow the lawn. We close our minds to the eternal problems and select tonight's viewing. We harbour affection like keeping a hamster in a cage and hope that love, the greatest of the carnivores, never comes again to crunch human heart and entrails. Let verities be small and handy like sixty-watt bulbs. Choose your wall paper with taste and your carpeting and curtains with discretion, and pray that beauty does not come and show you your dingy and anaemic self.

Growing up we lose the child's zest and the child's unconscious

humility and we learn something – to be afraid. Truth, beauty and love sound like something from the Third Programme, highbrow and harmless, edifying and emollient, stately and sanctified. They might well be represented by three dignified marble statues, ambiguously godesses, nymphs, graces, virtues or muses. They are gods; not serene greek deities, but unappeasable primitive powers demanding human sacrifice. They ignore prosperity, shatter contentment and banish peace.

The experience of beauty comes like a deep stab. It brings something suddenly to life inside one and simultaneously hurts it. Something from an alien sphere has invaded one, something from a wholly superior world where one will never be at home, something whose intensity searingly overloads one's feeble powers of perception. Truth, when we glimpse its depths beyond depths, overwhelms us with vertigo; its accumulation of fine gradations strains the judgment to exhaustion. Its paradoxes induce a sickening confusion. Moreover, truth not merely demands to be known, to be understood and assimilated, but requires us to judge, to act, to direct our lives. What comfort, what security can there be for us when we try to build on the unfathomable and take our alignment from a turmoil of complexity? And love is the most terrible of the three. Love makes us vulnerable; love will stretch out that vulnerability as far as it can and bring it to a new peak of sensitivity. Love destroys all our stability by shifting our point of gravity outside ourselves.

To enter into the territory of truth is to know oneself as almost irredeemably ignorant. To come into the domain of beauty is to see oneself revealed as a Caliban, but meaner, duller and of less dramatic value. And love strips one at its frontiers of all pride, of all sense of self-preservation, and in exchange invests one with an endless capacity for receiving hurt.

Perhaps by instinctive knowledge, perhaps by sharp experience, the adult knows the implacable cruelty of these three powers. How sensible of him, then, to shrink from them, to find some comfortable corner where he can protect his little certainties, his precious self-respect, and his emotional security! Who wants to be a victim of the unquenchable thirst for truth, to become an aching void in the presence of beauty, to have his inward parts devoured daily and daily restored for further rendings by the force so utterly misrepresented by that single, soft syllable, love?

So let us preserve ourselves. Let me preserve my firm, hard, polished grain of seed. Do not expose it to soil and moisture. It will

lose its shape; it will lose its hardness; it will be exposed to unbearable tensions, part of it reaching down further into the soil, part dragging itself upwards to the sun. And the sun will complete the destruction of the seed with light and warmth, bringing it to dissipate itself finally in flowering. Yes, soil, water and sun spell the distension, the distortion, the destruction of the seed.

I should like to leave the seed there, preserving its integrity in the dark, dry crevice of some rock. But there are some applications of what I have been saying which call for further consideration.

An explorer makes a map. With his map other men come to the source of the Nile, or to the Grand Canyon, or climb the peak in Darien. He and they can use his map for further sorties into the as yet unexplored. In an analogous way we often try to analyse our experience of beauty. And love has its verbal and physical expression. Yet I would be a great fool if I thought that I knew the earth because I possess and often consult an excellent atlas. How much poetry and drama strike through the pages of a handbook of english literature? How much is there of love in a manual on human reproduction or a text book of pediatrics?

A map is a worthy object. A good one is very useful. And surely it is always right to attempt to organize our experiences, to categorize them, to relate them in an intelligible pattern. But the map, the formula, the classification, have they very much reality? Have they any? There are two immense distances. The first is between the symbol and the experience expressed in the symbol. The second is between our knowledge of the thing and that thing in its full reality. When I place the letters w, a, t, e, r, together, do I express the stream, the pond, the lake, the river, the waterfall, the fountain, the ocean, and the difference between an arid desert and a fertile alluvial plain?

But it is tempting to play with the word, the symbol, the formula, and conveniently forget that it is only faintly valid. Reduce reality to thin mental counters and it is no longer awesome. The counter, after all, owes more to us who created it than to the reality which it is supposed to represent. We begin with a world which belittles us and we finish with a world which we mentally manipulate. We have progressed from fear to *hubris*.

Perhaps I am taking this over-dramatically. To become forgetful of the inadequacy of the word, of the concept, does not require an epic pride, a Lucifer-like rebellion against one's own contingency. It can happen through sheer lack of reflection, from dullness of mind

rather than hardness of heart. Yet the offence has the nature of blasphemy. It is an outrage, a crime of *lèse-majesté* against reality, a naive but immense impertinence in the face of the universe. And what manner of offence is it when we play this game with God, when we complacently assemble our theological counters and presume to play intellectual games with them! Theologians with a rich mixture of unimaginativeness, insensitivity and inspissated presumption, formulate questions about God . . . and sometimes they even go on to supply answers! The Jews showed better judgement when they abstained from any attempt to portray the divinity, when they became increasingly hesitant to write or speak the word for God.

Am I saying that all theology is blasphemy? I must answer very gradually. Let us go back to the map. There is a great gap between the explorer's map and the explorer's experience. There is a gap between the explorer's experience and the full reality of the territory he has travelled. Can the second gap ever be closed? Concerning the material world I am ill-equipped to speak. How near does a scientific account of a piece of iron come to fully describing that piece of iron? The iron can be accurately measured. Its molecular structure and sub-molecular structure can be described. Does this comprehend the whole? I do not know. But I do know that when the scientist is explaining the sub-atomic structure he is not normally facile or glib. The profundity of the subject compels its own kind of reverence.

Concerning people, I have no doubt (which, of course, proves nothing) that it is always wrong to think that we understand them thoroughly. It is wrong in the sense of being inaccurate, because I am never going to have a total comprehensive understanding of any individual. And I suggest that it is morally wrong; it is an affront to a person's individuality, to his incommunicable uniqueness. Not to leave a man an unknown inner core is to leave him no privacy, to deny his strict individuality, to deny the ultimate freedom of his will.

Sad to say, the claim to know someone thoroughly is often based on a claim to love them. But it really springs from insecurity. I want to think that I know somebody 'through and through' because I do not want to be taken by surprise. I want to think that I have the whole situation – and them! – 'wrapped up'. And I do not want to feel excluded even from their inmost thoughts – if I will allow them to have any. This is a selfish form of love. It is often, and rightly, resented. Religious superiors, though not from motives of 'love', can also be tempted to think that they know their subjects thoroughly. Such imagined 'knowledge' underpins their 'superiority', and pro-

vides their actions towards their subjects with a comfortable guarantee of practical infallibility. This, too, is rightly resented.

To think that I have mapped out some person thoroughly is to deny them complexity and real inward depth and their ultimate freedom. And surely these are the constituent factors of a personality. To deal with someone as a person is to hold in respect, I might say reverence, I might even say awe, the unplumbed part of them: the uncharted depths, the unanalysed and, indeed, unanalysable. Love, I think, is in great part a tender perception of this depth in another; we sense it; we enter into it; we come in a way to know and understand it, and we are simultaneously aware that we cannot plumb it, or chart it. It is this aspect of love which is outraged when we claim to know someone 'through and through', to 'understand them perfectly'.

No-one who is not mad is going to claim to know God 'through and through'. But we do have some sort of map to guide us in our relationship with him. There are the faint tracings which natural reason can hazard, and these are overlaid by the great data of revelation. We can abuse this map as we abuse other symbols and formulae, and for the same reasons. We are unhappy with the unknown, we want the security of certainty, and comprehensive certainty. So we want the detail drawn into the map and the whole thing rendered easily apprehensible. To change the metaphor, we want nothing to do with the great ocean; we wish to exchange it for a neat, shallow, man-made pond on which we can safely sail the little cargoes which are our lives. The catechisms, the one volume – slim, pocket volume – summary of catholic doctrine can be a useful little sketch map. But don't let's think that we have submitted the infinite and the eternal to microphotography and scaled him down to our minds.

I suppose that it is natural to want answers to the questions which occur to one, even if the subject is God, and to say, 'Why does God . . ?' I also suppose that the pious men and women who proffer answers 'Because he wishes us to . . .' do so in goodwill. And I ought to want them to be forgiven for their macrocosmic impertinence. But I cannot help feeling that if a few of those people who are willing to play guide to the ins and outs of the creator's mind were to be shrivelled up by fire from heaven, it would be both just and salutary.

And there is a contrary attitude which is also wrong. It consists of a misunderstanding and abuse of the word 'mystery'. The pagan mystery cults normally wrapped their rites in secrecy. In this way

they were mysterious. But the performance of those rites was meant to put the performer in contact with the deep, underlying realities of existence, which, because they are deep and underlying, were also, in our sense of the word, 'mysterious'. The mysteries were practised because they offered contact and some species of integration with the primal forces of vitality, fecundity and renewal. The mystery offers a break-through to them. In christianity a mystery is something unknown, even in a sense unknowable, by man, but which has been revealed to him. It is a break through made by God. It is for man to enter into it as best he can. So it is wrong to say 'The Trinity! Oh! That's a mystery', and, as it were, turn our backs, think about the matter no more, and return to the paddling-pool of shallower truths. We have been called into the depths and it is not for us to refuse to go. We shall not feel at home there. We have no chart and can take no soundings. But revelation provides the occasional beacon, the indispensable buoy, and we need not be engulfed.

Whether we are dealing with things, with men, or with God, it is quite wrong to imagine or pretend, whether it be from arrogance or insecurity, that we have any easy mental mastery, that our maps are both accurate and comprehensive. It is also wrong to shirk the unknown, and even the unknowable. Perhaps the material world is in principle entirely knowable. But the human being is not, and God infinitely less so. Persons are mysteries in both senses of the word. There is in them a dimension beyond our seeing. And there can come from them an invitation to move into the dark, to walk uncertainly, where they gently guide. To shirk the invitation is to refuse to love and to be loved, for revelation is offered out of love.