Chapter 5

The Depth of the Distinction

The world, and man in particular, is in the depths of its being divine. This conviction colours the whole of the modern outlook, even in those forms which appear to reject this optimistic tenet of universal religion. It is all very well for a thinker like Schopenhauer to utter biting phrases about the wickedness of the world and all the utter stupidity of his fellow-men—he can do this because he is sure that he at least, and a few other wise men as well, know the truth; they are aware of the only path that an intelligent man can tread. In the last resort his pessimism is actually based upon an (aristocratic) religious metaphysic, that is, upon the general Idealist conception of Immanence. With prophetic wrath Nietzsche may condemn reason, and man as he now is: yet he believed that, through a certain inner faculty—"reason" in Christian terminology—it is possible for man to be trained for a higher development until he reaches the stature of the super-man; hence Nietzsche believes that humanity possesses the germ of development. Nietzsche's philosophy is perhaps the most daring form of human self-assertion, the most daring that has ever existed, daemonically bold, because, more deeply than many others, he was aware of the existence of the contradiction.

The modern spirit is the spirit of the self-assertion of man in face of the contradiction of existence; thus it means the denial of this contradiction, consequently above all it constitutes the denial of the existence of evil.

For the acknowledgment of the existence of evil would destroy this self-assurance. Even the intellectual philosophical self-assurance of the modern man is, from the very outset, an absolute moral fact, it is belief in the goodness of his own nature. It is therefore not surprising that the modern mind has always avoided the problem of evil with meticulous care; indeed, it has evaded this problem more sedulously

than any other—with the possible exception of the problem of death—and has contributed practically nothing to its solution. To the extent in which the modern mind has been concerned with this question at all, it has been intent on the endeavour to explain it away as far as possible. If the admission of the irrational character of existence excludes any idea of a system—since a system presupposes, if not rationality, at least the possibility of being made rational, the ultimate possibility that through thought the irrational may be overcome—so, only far more, does the admission of the existence of evil as the primary irrational element in life exclude any idea of system at all. If we admit that evil exists, we must once for all renounce all hope of conceiving life on systematic lines. For every system in which evil would be acknowledged would automatically transform evil into a concept, which would be to deny it, because it would mean turning something which is anti-rational into something which is less rational.[8] The great philosophical systems of the modern period all end by denying evil. A philosophical system, and the admission of the presence of evil in the world, are mutually exclusive. Either we possess a philosophical system, or we admit the existence of evil. It is profoundly interesting to note that on the threshold of the closing phase of the German Idealist movement, when the Christian faith in revelation was once more considered as a possibility, the reappearance of the problem of "evil" in the later works of Schelling

8. Certainly the Theosophical systems seem to constitute an exception. In reality they have done great service by continually calling attention to the problem of Evil, whereas systematic philosophy has ignored this most weighty problem. All later German Theosophy from Boehme, via St. Martin, down to Baader and Schelling, is characterized by penetrating reflection on the problem of Evil. To the extent, however, in which this Theosophy itself became a system, and the question of Evil was thus absorbed into a connected whole, it once more became rationalized, above all through being derived from the "Nature" of God. On the other hand, not only for Schelling did attention to this problem and a closer acquaintance with it, become a reason for a closer approach to the Christian faith—but we ought never to forget that all the philosophers who are more closely connected with Boehme are at the same time conscious that they are building on a scriptural foundation.

constituted the turning-point. Schelling's treatise on freedom, his most brilliant piece of work, which is really a dissertation on the problem of evil, heralds the decline of Idealism and the approach of Christian ideas. Twenty years earlier Idealism had approached this problem—only to glance off again in passing—when Kant in his *Religion within the Limits of Mere Reason* developed his doctrine of radical evil. If Kant, in the second part of this work, had not taken back what he said in the first part of the book (see p. 129), the break with Idealism, and hence the breakdown of modern thought in general, would have been inevitable.

The phenomenon of evil—let us call it this at present—has been the helpless victim of every kind of misrepresentation. Those who possess real vision can only protest very strongly against the forcible distortion of reality when an unspeakably shallow psychology, which calls itself "empirical," explains evil as the product of primitive thought, as the relic of an atavistic consciousness, as the result of a wrong system of education, etc. Even when it is pointed out that this naturalistic explanation of evil must destroy, at the very root, all power of moral judgment, this only produces a fresh misinterpretation. Here again the issue is clear: either we must admit that evil is natural, and then it does not exist as a moral fact at all; or we must admit that it is a moral factor, and then it must be confessed that it is inexplicable.

All attempts to explain evil end in explaining it away; they end by denying the fact of evil altogether. It is of the nature of evil, as it is of moral freedom, of responsible decision, that it should be inexplicable.

It is, of course, quite obvious that all speculative systems, in the narrower sense of the word—such as those of Spinoza, Leibniz, Fichte, Hegel, and Schopenhauer—throw no light on the problem of evil at all, and indeed they are incapable of doing so.[9] It is

9. Apart from materialistic and sense theories—which cannot even see that here any problem exists—naturally Pantheism goes furthest in denying the existence of Evil. To Spinoza Evil means privation of energy, and is only judged to be evil, that is, as something which ought not to be, by the finite, limited intelligence; thus Evil is not real at all. Evil is illusion. Leibniz sees somewhat further below the surface; but his concern with theodicy also prevents him from

not that they do not see the fact which the moral sense calls "evil." But they all interpret it in a different sense. They cannot do otherwise. If they were to admit the reality of evil, all their systems would crumble into dust. The systematic philosopher is bound to assert that no contradiction in the world can be real; to those whose thought is not sufficiently profound even evil can only be a seeming contradiction. This contradiction can be removed by right thinking. Only on this assumption can a philosophical system exist. Evil is only an apparent contradiction, a mere illusion. That which men call evil cannot be denied, however, but we can deny that it constitutes an insuperable contradiction, that is, that in the last resort it is really evil at all. Rather, so they argue, so-called "evil" is a necessary stage of development, a stage in which the Spirit has not yet come fully into existence, it is the raw material of sense out of which Spirit has not yet developed, it is the raw material of nature, immediacy, instinct, which is still waiting to be worked up into something higher by Spirit.

Speaking generally, this represents the treatment of the problem of evil which, in very varying forms, we find in all speculative systems. It belongs to the very nature of speculative thought to interpret evil in this way. For such an interpretation alone makes speculative self-confidence possible. The position is rather different in the two other forms in which the modern spirit of self-assertion is expressed: in mysticism and in moralism. It would be going too far to say that the mystic absolutely denies the existence of evil. It is true that there are forms of mysticism where this happens quite obviously, where the moral struggle has been renounced both in theory and in practice, but such an attitude does not belong to the essence of mysticism. Mysticism admits the preliminary contradiction between God and the world of sense, between the state of union with God and that

taking Evil seriously. To Fichte likewise Evil is something negative: laziness, lack of will. Hegel tackled the problem of Evil seriously, and his system nowhere contains so many inconsistencies as at this point. But essentially Hegel's view of Evil may be summed up thus: Evil is the Being-not-yet-Spirit of that which is destined to be Spirit, the raw immediacy of existence. On this point, cf. J. Muller, *Die Lehre von der Sünde*, I, pp. 371-573.

of being enmeshed in the toils of this earthly existence. At least it asserts that it does know this.

But in its fundamental conception it denies it: the fact that the relation between man and God is continuous excludes it; "at bottom" man is divine, indeed he is one with God. Thus here there is no real contradiction; here also the conception of evil simply means that man is still undeveloped. Here also evil means to be entangled in the things of sense, to be tied to the creature, to images, to illusions, to the "surface of existence," but it is not opposition to the will of God; it simply means that man stands outside the sphere ruled by the will of God. The belief in the mystic way is based upon the fact that ultimately the problem of evil is not taken seriously. Since evil is only "superficiality," it is possible, by sinking down into the depths of one's being, to reach the Divine Reality, and thus to become one with God.

Evil is therefore a lack of the divine, or separation from God. Hence a continuous approach is always possible; it means the same as the process of retreating from the surface of life. It is an emptiness; hence it contains the possibility of becoming increasingly "full" of the divine. Evil is not guilt and sin, it is not a hostile will, nor is it a break with the divine order. There is nothing "between" God and man save distance, and this man can overcome. Therefore there is a "Way," a continuous upward movement which leads finally to the goal, which is God Himself. For the mystical type of mind this process of approximation, which expresses itself in comparatives, is characteristic: the more you detach yourself from the world the nearer you come to God. Thus here also evil is only the lowest rung in a ladder; it is a passing phase, it is not a contradiction.

The question of evil receives by far the most serious attention where the moral will is regarded as the centre of the personality, and the fundamental fact in the interpretation of the world. The more purely the moral consciousness understands itself, that is, the more clearly "practical" reason is distinguished from "theoretical" reason, and the theoretical interpretation of the world, the clearer becomes the recognition of evil as a fact. In this respect the difference between Kant and Fichte is characteristic. To the extent in which Fichte is more speculative than Kant, to the extent in which he has a more fully developed system, he modifies the phenomenon of evil. Fichte regards evil as inertia, that is, as the border-line between a