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A Few Words on Pantheism

Arthur Schopenhauer

Translated by T. Bailey Saunders, M. A.

From book "Essays of A. Schopenhauer", A. L. Burt Company, New York, 1902

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The controversy between Theism and Pantheism might be presented in an allegorical or dramatic form by supposing a dialogue between two persons in the pit of a theatre at Milan during the performance of a piece. One of them, convinced that he is in Girolamo's renowned marionette-theatre, admires the art by which the director gets up the dolls and guides their movements. "Oh, you are quite mistaken," says the other, "we're in the Teatro della Scala; it is the manager and his troupe who are on the stage; they are the persons you see before you; the poet too is taking a part."

The chief objection I have to Pantheism is that it says nothing. To call the world "God" is not to explain it; it is only to enrich our language with a superfluous synonym for the word "world." It comes to the same thing whether you say "the world is God," or "God is the world." But if you start from "God" as something that is given in experience, and has to be explained, and they say, "God is the world," you are affording what is to some extent an explanation, in so far as you are reducing what is unknown to what is partly known (*ignotum per notius*); but it is only a verbal explanation. If, however, you start from what is really given, that is to say, from the world, and say, "the world is God," it is clear that you say nothing, or at least you are explaining what is unknown by what is more unknown.

Hence, Pantheism presupposes Theism; only in so far as you start from a god, that is, in so far as you possess him as something with which you are already familiar, can you end by identifying him with the world; and your purpose in doing so is to put him out of the way in a decent fashion. In other words, you do not start clear from the world as something that requires explanation; you start from God as something that is given, and not knowing what to do with him, you make the world take over his role. This is the origin of Pantheism. Taking an unprejudiced view of the world as it is, no one would dream of regarding it as a god. It must be a very ill-advised god who knows no better way of diverting himself than by turning into such a world as ours, such a mean, shabby world, there to take the form of innumerable millions who live indeed, but are fretted and tormented, and who manage to exist a while together, only by preying on one another; to bear misery, need and death, without measure and without object, in the form, for instance, of millions of negro slaves, or of the three million weavers in Europe who, in hunger and care, lead a miserable existence in damp rooms or the cheerless halls of a factory. What a pastime this for a god, who must, as such, be used to another mode of existence!

We find accordingly that what is described as the great advance from Theism to Pantheism, if looked at seriously, and not simply as a masked negation of the sort indicated above, is a transition from what is unproved and hardly conceivable to what is absolutely absurd. For however obscure, however loose or confused may be the idea which we connect with the word "God," there are two predicates which are inseparable from it, the highest power and the highest wisdom. It is absolutely absurd to think that a

being endowed with these qualities should have put himself into the position described above. Theism, on the other hand, is something which is merely unproved; and if it is difficult to look upon the infinite world as the work of a personal, and therefore individual, Being, the like of which we know only from our experience of the animal world, it is nevertheless not an absolutely absurd idea. That a Being, at once almighty and all-good, should create a world of torment is always conceivable; even though we do not know why he does so; and accordingly we find that when people ascribe the height of goodness to this Being, they set up the inscrutable nature of his wisdom as the refuge by which the doctrine escapes the charge of absurdity. Pantheism, however, assumes that the creative God is himself the world of infinite torment, and, in this little world alone, dies every second, and that entirely of his own will; which is absurd. It would be much more correct to identify the world with the devil, as the venerable author of the *Deutsche Theologie* has, in fact, done in a passage of his immortal work, where he says, "Wherefore the evil spirit and nature are one, and where nature is not overcome, neither is the evil adversary overcome."

It is manifest that the Pantheists give the Sansara the name of God. The same name is given by the Mystics to the Nirvana. The latter, however, state more about the Nirvana than they know, which is not done by the Buddhists, whose Nirvana is accordingly a relative nothing. It is only Jews, Christians, and Mohammedans who give its proper and correct meaning to the word "God."

The expression, often heard now-a-days, "the world is an end-in-itself," leaves it uncertain whether Pantheism or a simple Fatalism is to be taken as the explanation of it. But, whichever it be, the expression looks upon the world from a physical point of view only, and leaves out of sight its moral significance, because you cannot assume a moral significance without presenting the world as means to a higher end. The notion that the world has a physical but not a moral meaning, is the most mischievous error sprung from the greatest mental perversity.