

“With God all things are possible”¹

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THE existence of our universe, in its fullest extension in space and in time and with all that it contains both quantitative and qualitative, proves that it is among the things that are possible with God. It is perfectly gratuitous to assume that nothing else is possible with God simply because nothing else is at present accessible to us. Our universe is governed by certain conditions, the chief of which are form, number, time, space and mass or energy, and our faculties are adapted to these conditions and not to any others. If we choose to assume that no other conditions exist or are possible, we are simply assuming that there is nothing beyond what is, in fact or in principle, within the grasp of human perception and powers of deduction; and that, if you come to think of it, is a curiously presumptuous thing to do, since it makes human limitations the measure of the power of God. It is also curiously naïve to behave as if the mind of man, without the help of anything to raise it above its inherent and obvious limitations, could be supposed to be in principle capable of comprehending (in the double sense of enclosing and understanding) not only all that is, not excepting its own self, but also all that is possible. The power of God, as our text states so clearly, comprehends all possibility, and all possibility is infinitely more than all actuality and we can never perceive more than a small fraction even of actuality, let alone of possibility.

The word "infinitely" has just been used, but not carelessly or conventionally, because, once one has abandoned the idea that possibility is limited by the conditions of our terrestrial experience, there is no conceivable reason to assign any limit to it whatsoever. This is exactly what our text says in apparently very simple words; and here, as always, the simplest wording is the least restrictive and the best adapted to convey a highly comprehensive and far-reaching conception. By reason of its very simplicity it contains in potentiality more than any prolonged explanatory statement could convey.

A true statement made in theological terms, as this one is, necessarily corresponds to a truth that can be stated in metaphysical terms; in this case that truth could be called the illimitation of all-possibility. The choice of terms is a matter of opportunity alone. The metaphysical conception of all-possibility and its illimitation is fundamental; once it is grasped it does not matter so much what it is called, since all terms are limitative, and here it is a question of an absence of limits. This conception is in fact logically inescapable, for if possibility were limited it would have to be limited by something, and that something would itself be a possibility, for if it were not a possibility, it would be pure nothingness, and so could not be the cause of a limitation or of anything else. The conception cannot be grasped at all unless the mind can be freed, at least to some extent, from habits of thought arising from its confinement within the body, which tend to limit its range to the phenomena of terrestrial experience. Language in particular, the means whereby we communicate our thoughts, is derived entirely from our terrestrial experience, and for that reason no verbal statement of the metaphysical theory of all-possibility can convey its full content, or can be intrinsically complete and unequivocal. That fact by no means

invalidates the theory, it is only a consequence of its comprehensiveness.² Nevertheless, a little further explanation must be attempted.

Every identifiable or definable possibility, whether simple or complex, that is to say, every object, every event and every combination of the two, is limited by the fact that there are other possibilities distinct from it and external to it. If that were not so, it would be in no way distinguishable in itself. By definition no possibility is external to all-possibility, which is therefore not limited by any possibility. It might however be thought that impossibility, being as it were the opposite of possibility, must be distinct from all-possibility and external to it, or in other words that possibility ends where impossibility begins. But impossibility does not begin anywhere; it is another word for "nothing," a mere conception, purely negative, denying everything that has been or is or could be. Entities have beginnings and ends, total non-entity has neither. If impossibility has no beginning, possibility has no end. Definable entities, in so far as they are considered as existing in their own right, by virtue of what they seem to be rather than by virtue of what they obviously are not, can be regarded as so many limitations of all-possibility. From that point of view their existence represents a sort of departure from all-possibility, as it were a step in a "descent" towards impossibility, which however can never be reached, as the word itself implies. Such a point of view is admissible, and can be useful provided that it is recognised as partial and provisional. It is no more than that because nothing exists in its own right, but only by virtue of its participation in all-possibility. In the last analysis, all-possibility, being limited neither by possibility nor by impossibility, is limitless. As such it is neither definable nor imaginable, since there is nothing outside it to supply either the likeness or the contrast on which identification depends.

For these or similar reasons many people, especially those who pride themselves on being practical or up-to-date, would say that the conception of all-possibility is unnecessary, or at least that it is a purely mental conception embodied in a play of words having no relevance to the solution of current problems, and that therefore the question of its inescapability or otherwise is purely academic. Yet if the conception corresponds to a truth that is fundamental to an understanding of the nature of existence it cannot be negligible; on the contrary, it is vital that it should be grasped by all who are capable of doing so, at least to some extent and in one form or another, whether metaphysical or religious. One of its religious forms is that enshrined in our text. Moreover, since the conception cannot be fully grasped by the mind alone, but involves the whole man, heart as well as mind, the simplicity and directness of that text is very significant.

The physical universe that affects our senses can be regarded as a single complex possibility, that is to say, as a system that can be identified and in principle described. We spend a lot of time trying to formulate its laws, which amounts to defining its limits as precisely as we can. Independently of how far we succeed, the simple fact that the universe is subject to laws, and that its possibilities are limited by those laws, proves that it does not coincide with all-possibility, that is to say that it is not infinite and not alone, and that there is something external to it. That being so, what can be conceived as being external to it other than the infinity of possibilities postulated by the theory of all-possibility? Any other assumption is arbitrary; this one has an impregnable logical foundation. It is true that it cannot be verified by observation; but neither can any other more limited assumption, since nothing outside our universe can be accessible to observation by us, who, for so long as we rely exclusively on our powers of observation and deduction, are looking at the universe from within and can by no means survey it from without.

Yet man, and man alone, can recognise the fact that the universe he knows is subject to laws. He fails to make the right deductions from this fact, and so tends to identify the universe with all-possibility, and he is tempted to do so more and more as the extent of his knowledge of its observable features increases. Surely it is evident that more ancient views of the nature of the universe, such as would usually be called "religious" or "traditional," although on the physical side less extensive and often less accurate, were really much more comprehensive. At least they took into account possibilities far more extensive than those comprised in our terrestrial state; and it must not be forgotten that all our means of communication are derived from our common terrestrial experience, so that the nature of those possibilities can only be conveyed symbolically and never descriptively; the various images made use of to represent them could not therefore be expected to coincide formally. In short, though modern scientific knowledge reveals much that was previously unknown, yet in fact it hides or supplants much more. In aiming at completeness in one aspect of the picture it suppresses the picture as a whole.

Man's awareness of the limitations of his universe implies that there is something in him that can penetrate beyond its bounds, that is to say, beyond the world of phenomena, although his powers of observation can never do so, however well developed they may be. It may be mentioned in parenthesis that phenomena such as are sometimes called "paranormal" are still phenomena, and as such they are of this world, and, as with normal phenomena, their outward form is one thing and the interpretation of its significance is another. It is just this possibility of seeing the limitations of this world that marks the uniqueness of man and enables him to rise above his terrestrial limitations. When he fails to take advantage of that possibility by neglecting or rejecting the divine revelations which alone can shed light on the mystery of existence—a mystery which is beyond the reach of his natural or unaided mind and senses—he becomes no more than a thinking animal, subject to the same laws as the animals, and having no superior rights save those arising from his superior ingenuity. Hence the universal concern of religious doctrines with a certain detachment from the world as a necessary condition for the realisation of man's true destiny.

Our universe, being subject to definable laws, excludes anything that is incompatible with those laws. It can be regarded as a system of mutually compatible possibilities, or "compossibles" as they can conveniently be called. The compossibles constituting a system such as our universe are not assembled by chance nor by any arbitrary choice, they simply constitute a system because they are what they are. The number of possible systems is indefinite, not only because the number of possibilities that can be assembled into systems is indefinite, but also because any given possibility can form part of a plurality of different systems, each of which is defined by a unique set of conditions, and has its own relative internal unity, and its own relative reality; all its reality is however derived entirely from its participation in all-possibility, which alone is absolutely real and wholly itself. Whatever else may be or may not be all-possibility cannot not be; the one thing that is inconceivable is its limitation. All the rest follows. It is vain to seek to formulate the ultimate reason why things are what they are; they are what they are because it is possible that they should be so, and therefore impossible that they should not be so; and they are in a particular system—our own universe for instance—because they are compatible with the conditions that define that system. In theological terms one could say that they are what they are and where they are because God made them so and gave them their place. That sounds a bit old-fashioned, but it is much better sense than a good deal that is said today about the origin and nature of our universe.

All this is scarcely as much as a sketch of the theory of all-possibility. It may however be just enough to convey by contrast some idea of the complete inadequacy of the modern scientific outlook and of the insignificance of its results. In equating what he can see and know distinctively with the whole of reality, and in attributing a sort of absolute validity to this outlook and its results, scientific man is not only taking a fraction of a fraction to be unity, but at the same time he is making himself insignificant, a mere trivial accident in the evolutionary process of an apparently arbitrary and purposeless mechanism. For so long as he continues to try to squeeze reality into the miserably inadequate vessel of his own brain he will continue to become himself more and more insignificant.

A living terrestrial being, a human being for example, can, like the universe itself, be regarded as a coherent system of compossibles, an assemblage of inter-related potentialities, manifested in a mode which accords with the conditions that characterize this universe. The potentialities in question constitute an individual being distinct from all others because they are what they are and for no other reason; as in the case of the universe, their assembly is in no sense fortuitous or arbitrary; and they remain for ever what they are, whether manifested or not. They can be manifested under a variety of conditions without losing their cohesion, their individuality, because its source is in their intrinsic nature and is not external thereto. Their manifestation under particularized conditions, for instance those peculiar to our universe, realizes only such potentialities as are concordant with those conditions, but not others, so that it appears both as a realization and as a limitation. The total being in all its potentiality is not realized, but only as it were one possible aspect of it. A different aspect, perhaps less limited, perhaps more so, must characterize its manifestation under other conditions, but the total being must remain what it was and is. Only in a total release from all the limitations inherent in manifestation can the being realize its full potentiality. In other and more familiar words, man has an immortal soul capable of perfection, and its sojourn on this earth is but a partial and passing phase. On this earth we have a body, but it is not ourselves, it belongs to this universe, wherein it reflects potentialities inherent in our being. At death we leave this universe and are therefore parted from our bodies, but this does not affect our real being and its potentialities, which can, and must, be then reflected in some other "universe" in a new mode, according to whatever conditions may prevail. These may include some kind of duration and extension, corresponding to, but not identifiable with, our time and space, as well as something corresponding to the "materiality" which conditions our bodies; but such possibilities are far beyond the range of our imagination. St. Paul says of our bodies, "It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. There is a spiritual body and a natural body."³ The doctrine of the resurrection of the body gives rise to many doubts and difficulties, even in the minds of believers. It need not do so, since the possibilities manifested in the body cannot be annihilated.

In our present state we are involved in time and space, wherein possibilities are manifested in succession and in extension; but they can equally well be considered as co-existing in a non-temporal and non-spatial state, although this does not come naturally to us because of our present involvement in time and space. Our present point of view is not for that reason false or distorted, but it is particularized in a special way. The fact that a more generalized conception can be reached, at least by some people, is direct evidence of our situation on the central and "vertical" axis connecting the whole hierarchy of possible states, each of which can be envisaged as a "horizontal" expansion of a point on this axis. Such a picture of our situation is evidently symbolical; as such, its content is virtually inexhaustible.⁴ Meanwhile, it is perhaps helpful to think of the present as permanent and as alone wholly real. In it alone can we act or be acted

upon; it summarizes the past and conditions the future; it alone is always with us; it is stationary while events move past it; it will still be when everything else has gone; it is the container, events are its ever-changing content. Comparably, space is spherical, and a sphere is defined by the relation of its parts to its centre; it may revolve or expand or contract, but always by reference to its centre, which contains and regulates all its potentiality. The present is eternal, the centre is ubiquitous. In the terrestrial state the symbol—the likeness—of eternity is the present, and the symbol of infinity is the dimensionless centre, the point. Eternity is not a very long time, nor is infinity a very capacious space. And in the last analysis eternity and infinity are not two, but one, and all-possibility is one of the names of that indivisible Unity.

Let us return again to theology and consider what religion teaches. Being concerned with humanity alone, for the good reason that humanity represents the central and only fully conscious element in the universe, religion is only indirectly concerned with the multiple states of being as they affect non-human entities, animate or inanimate. All living beings "have the same religion as ours" as Black Elk says of the birds,⁵ that is to say, they express their dependence on God each in its own way, in their forms and their behaviour, (see also for example Psalms 19 vv. 1-3, and 104 v. 21). Having little or no consciousness of their individuality they are not tempted to the sort of presumption of independence that beguiles us; they have therefore not only no capacity for, but also no need for, anything corresponding to the external forms of religion as we know them.

The doctrines of the great religions are formulated in many different ways and expressed through a very varied imagery, but integral to them is always the idea that the human being has an essential and immortal part which passes through a plurality of states, of which this present life is one. The "monotheistic" religions teach, for instance, that man has an immortal soul, given to him by God, and destined after its earthly death, in which it is separated from the body, to pass on to Paradise, purgatory or hell, the choice depending on what it has done during its sojourn on earth. This no doubt is a great simplification of the situation in its entirety; nevertheless, it expresses the metaphysical truth adequately, and in a manner adapted to the needs and capacities of the people who are called upon to accept it, for whom it is unnecessary to know more than this. It is however vital for the state of their souls that they should not know less than this, and that they should order their lives accordingly, that is to say, as a preparation for an inevitable change of state. At death we drop all our terrestrial characteristics, all bodily and mental forms, for they are but the temporary manifestation of the possibilities inherent in and characteristic of the immortal centre which is our real being and that real being takes on another form, reflecting its proper nature in its new surroundings.

While subject to terrestrial conditions, or to any others, the individual being does not become something other than it is in principle or in potentiality, but it is passing through a phase of limitation, as it has done before and will do again. It will be a different phase every time; it has been said that "we pass this way but once," and this is necessarily true; the timeless co-existence of all things in all-possibility excludes any repetition, simply because two identical possibilities are not two but one. That is why religion treats the judgment that faces all beings after death as final, for so it is from the point of view of terrestrial existence, which is what a terrestrial religion is primarily concerned with. Religion could not, however, present the truth without taking account of non-terrestrial states: in the monotheistic religions they are referred to as paradises, purgatories and hells, and are situated symbolically "above" or "beneath" this world.

It will have become clear that within a given set of conditions, or compossibles, in other words, in a particular universe, every possibility compatible with those conditions must be manifested, the universe in question being a manifestation of all-possibility in a particular mode. Therefore possibilities of distinction, of contrast, of definition, also of opposition, contradiction and negation, and even of a sort of apparent negation of itself, cannot be excluded. Manifestation consists precisely in this kind of throwing into relief of one possibility by its separation from another, or by the possibility of its apparent negation, without which everything would remain in the permanent indistinction and non-manifestation of all-possibility itself; but if things were to remain in that state, all-possibility would not be all-possibility, since the possibilities of distinction and opposition, that is to say, of manifestation, would be excluded, and that is impossible. White is manifested through its contrast with black; similarly with good and evil, beauty and ugliness, truth and untruth. In the non-manifestation of all-possibility there is no separateness and no negation (for negation implies a separation) there is only the unimaginable perfection of totality—but we have already passed far beyond what words alone can convey. This is the only complete answer to people who say, "If all things are possible with God, why does not He eliminate evil and ugliness and pain?" There are other answers of course, some good and some bad, but they are all vulnerable in one way or another. If God were to eliminate these things, there would be no manifestation, no world and no salvation; but more than that, there would be no completion, no perfection, no fulfilment.

St. Paul says that "all things work together for good to them that love God."⁶ This is a comprehensive statement of the metaphysical truth in theological terms. We read too in the Book of Genesis⁷ that, from the third day of the creation, when the distinctively manifested features of this universe begin to appear, God saw that each of them was good. Finally, he "saw everything that he had made, and, behold, it was very good." As in the case of our text, the simplicity and directness of these words confers on them a power and a range that would be diminished by any dialectical expansion or elaboration. And as it is with fundamental statements of truth such as these, so it is with faith. A simple and direct faith is stronger and more far-reaching than a faith justified or sustained mainly by philosophical or quasi-philosophical considerations. In so far as the latter is of the brain alone it is peripheral and mobile; the simple faith is of the heart, it subsists at the centre and illumines the whole being, brain and all. With it, philosophy can live; without it, philosophy is a dead thing.

As limited beings, we cannot know all-possibility, still less imagine or visualise it in any way, since it cannot be compared or contrasted with anything, nothing being outside it or separable from it; and yet at the same time the universe we can know is nothing but a reflection or refraction of all-possibility, and derives all its qualities and all its reality therefrom. St. Paul said, "Now we see through a glass, darkly ..."⁸: and only if we look upon the universe as a partial refraction of all-possibility, and not as if it were itself identifiable with all-possibility, can we "see God in all things"; for it is just in this sense that He is "in all things," and that all things subsist only "in God" and not in themselves; and at the same time that all things, to the extent that their appearance is taken for the reality, play the part of so many veils hiding the Presence of Him with whom all things are possible.

¹ Matt. 19: 26 and Mark 10 27. This is what we mean, or ought to mean, when we speak of the omnipotence of God, or refer to Him by His Name "the Almighty." It corresponds closely to the words "*wa Huwa 'ala kulli shay'in qadir*" which occur frequently in the Koran, meaning "and He has power over all things."

² For an exposition of the theory of all-possibility, the reader must be referred to two works by René Guénon: *Le Symbolisme de la Croix* and *Les Etats multiples de l'Erre* (Paris, Les Editions Véga, 1931 and 1947 respectively). As the titles of these works suggest, their author approaches his subject, which is inexhaustible, from several different points of view, none of which is valid to the exclusion of the others.

³ I Cor. 15:44.

⁴ *Le Symbolisme de la Croix* (see note (2)) is mainly concerned with the development of this symbolism.

⁵ "*Black Elk Speaks*," by John G. Neihardt, page 199. William Morrow and Co. New York, 1932. Reprinted, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1961.

⁶ Rom. 8: 28

⁷ Genesis 1: 9 to 31. I Cor. 13:12.

⁸ I Cor.13:12