

CORRESPONDENCE

TO THE EDITOR OF *Philosophy*

MY DEAR EDITOR,

It is with the greatest interest, but also with some surprise, that I have read Professor Campbell's article on *Reason and the Problem of Suffering*, published in your April number. The point which Professor Campbell emphasizes is the apparent negation of justice involved in unmerited suffering. A man deserves, or merits, to suffer only for his bad will and deeds (apart from any disciplinary value which the suffering may have). And it is this which Professor Campbell calls justice.¹ We might, however, take another view of the qualifications for suffering: Instead of conceiving the universe as a place for the apportionment of praise and blame we might think of it as the birth-place of whatsoever things are good.

If we do this, we find that our conception of justice and merit change, and we come to the conclusion that he merits to suffer who can do something with his suffering. Our sense of justice now demands that he who can incorporate the value given in a whole situation, and turn suffering and despair, fear and hatred into joy and trust and love, should be granted the opportunity to do so. The difference between the lower and higher levels of values is surely that the higher level includes suffering, ugliness, and error, while the lower one does not—we may compare the innocent happiness of the child with the happiness of Christ on the Cross. It seems only reasonable that the strong and the wise should suffer for the weak and the foolish, and not be kept in a state of placid contentment, in a world empty of real happiness, wide-eyed endurance, and supreme love.

If we accept this view, I think we may even go further and say that there is some proportion between merit and actual suffering. A dog, we know, suffers in a different way from a man, and men differ in the doglikeness of their suffering. We cannot measure the suffering of a dog, but we can measure and compare the suffering of our own lesser and better moments. When we accept suffering patiently and unthinkingly, we suffer dumbly like the dog; mental anguish is excluded, but so is also the wider reference. The suffering will run its own course, becoming relieved partly through finding physical expressions, and partly through our nature adapting itself to the new conditions (madness, even death, we must remember are forms of adaptation).

If we suffer in the above way, we may retain our trust in the goodness of God, but we do so in spite of our suffering; and have we not then failed to find the higher values? These seem to be discovered only by him who enters fully into the suffering, who recognizes it as evil, and by recognizing it as such prepares the path for its assumption into a larger whole. True, recognition involves more pain than acceptance; but it is also the symptom of the strength which can go through the suffering and overcome it.

Whenever we see suffering thus overcome our judgment of God's justice and omnipotence change.

If souls of a finer fibre *do* find the world endurable: if they do preserve through all an imperishable faith in the Perfection of the Supreme Being upon whom all things depend: then it can only be, surely, because this Supreme Being, as He is made known to them through religious experience, is felt so to transcend our finite comprehension that any attempt on our part to grasp and pass judgment upon His universe is repudiated as palpably absurd; if not indeed, as bordering upon the impious.

¹ See especially the following sentence: "No one, I imagine, experiences any difficulty in reconciling with God's Perfection the existence of suffering that is *deserved*, and is roughly proportionate to desert. This, we should say, is but justice: and justice is a virtue. It is the existence of so much apparently *unmerited* suffering that engenders our doubts. "How can a just God let such things be?" we ask, confronted by some peculiarly heart-breaking spectacle of this kind.

PHILOSOPHY

I should have thought that our comprehension was widened, that at last we understood a little better what is meant by divine strength and omnipotence; that, in fact, our trust in God was no longer based on blind faith, but on sight and reason meeting each other, and saying, "God in us can overcome this suffering and evil; therefore He can also overcome this and this and this."

The problem of suffering should not be minimized. But that problem, as I see it, is caused not by unmerited suffering, but by wasted suffering: The agony of the child who does not know how to handle its pain and sorrow, whose mental anguish is far in advance of the resources available to it at the moment; the rabbit which is caught in a trap; the waste of those who break under their sufferings, and who might have lived happy and useful lives in lesser conditions. All these constitute problems which we cannot as yet solve; we may summarize them by saying that we do not know whether God can overcome the suffering in which He is not present.

GRETHE HJORT.

GIRTON COLLEGE,
CAMBRIDGE,
June 10, 1935.