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ON
THE NATURE
AND THE
EXISTENCE OF GOD.



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NATURE AND THE EXISTENCE OF GOD.

IT is impossible for those who study the deeper religious problems of our time to stave off much longer the question which lies at the root of them all, "What do you believe in regard to God?" We may controvert Christian doctrines, one after another; point by point we may be driven from the various beliefs of our churches; reason may force us to see contradictions where we had imagined harmony, and may open our eyes to flaws where we had dreamed of perfection; we resign all idea of a revelation; we seek for God in Nature only; we renounce for ever the hope (which glorified our former creed into such alluring beauty) that at some future time we should verily "see" God, that "our eyes should behold the King in his beauty" in that fairy "land which is very far off." But every step we take onwards towards a more reasonable faith and a surer light of Truth leads us nearer and nearer to the problem of problems, "What is THAT which men call God?" Not till theologians have thoroughly grappled with this question have they any just claim to be called religious guides; from each of those whom we honour as our leading thinkers we have a right to a distinct answer to this question, and the very object of the present paper is to provoke discussion on this point.

Men are apt to turn aside somewhat impatiently from an argument about the Nature and Existence of the

Deity, because they consider that the question is a metaphysical one which leads nowhere; a problem the resolution of which is beyond our faculties, and the study of which is at once useless and dangerous; they forget that action is ruled by thought, and that our ideas about God are therefore of vast practical importance. On our answer to the question propounded above depends our whole conception of the nature and origin of evil, and of the sanctions of morality; on our idea of God turns our opinion on the much-disputed question of prayer, and, in fact, our whole attitude of mind towards life, here and hereafter. Does morality consist in obedience to the will of a perfectly moral Being, and are we to aim at righteousness of life *because* in so doing we please God? Or are we to lead noble lives because nobility of life is desirable for itself alone, and because it spreads happiness around us and satisfies the desires of our own nature? Is our mental attitude to be that of kneeling or standing? Are our eyes to be fixed on heaven or on earth? Is prayer to God reasonable and helpful, the natural cry of a child for help from a Father in Heaven? Or is it, on the other hand, a useless appeal to an unknown and irresponsible force? Is the mainspring of our actions to be the idea of duty to God, or a sense of the necessity of bringing our being into harmony with the laws of the universe? It appears to me that these questions are of such grave and vital moment that no apology is needed for drawing attention to them; and because of their importance to mankind I challenge the leaders of the religious and non-religious world alike, the Christians, Theists, Pantheists, and those who take no specific name, duly to test the views they severally hold. In this battle the simple foot soldier may touch with his lance the shield of the knight, and the insignificance of the challenger does not exempt the general from the duty of lifting the gauntlet flung down at his feet. Little care I for personal defeat, if the issue of the conflict should enthrone more firmly the radiant figure of Truth. One

fault, however, I am anxious to avoid, and that is the fault of ambiguity. The orthodox and the free-thinking alike do a good deal of useless fighting from sheer misunderstanding of each other's standpoint in the controversy. It appears, then, to be indispensable in the prosecution of the following inquiry that the meaning of the terms used should be unmistakably distinct. I begin, therefore, by defining the technical forms of expression to be employed in my argument; the definitions may be good or bad, that is not material; all that is needed is that the sense in which the various terms are used should be clearly understood. When men fight only for the sake of discovering truth, definiteness of expression is specially incumbent on them; and, as has been eloquently said, "the strugglers being sincere, truth may give laurels to the victor and the vanquished: laurels to the victor in that he hath upheld the truth, laurels still welcome to the vanquished, whose defeat crowns him with a truth he knew not of before."

The definitions that appear to me to be absolutely necessary are as follows:—

Matter is used to express that which is tangible. *Spirit* (or *spiritual*) is used to express those intangible forces whose existence we become aware of only through the effects they produce.

Substance is used to express that which exists in itself and by itself, and the conception of which does not imply the conception of anything preceding it.

God is used to represent exclusively that Being invested by the orthodox with certain physical, intellectual, and moral attributes.

Particular attention must be paid to this last definition, because the term "atheist" is often flung unjustly at any thinker who ventures to criticise *the popular and traditional idea* of God; and different schools, Theistic, and non-Theistic, with but too much facility, bandy about this vague epithet in mutual reproach.

As an instance of this uncharitable and unfair use of

ugly names, all schools agree in calling the late Mr. Austin Holyoake an "atheist," and he accepted the name himself, although he distinctly stated (as we find in a printed report of a discussion held at the Victoria Institute) that he did not deny the possibility of the existence of God, but only denied the possibility of the existence of that God in whom the orthodox exhorted him to believe. It is well thus to protest beforehand against this name being bandied about, because it carries with it, at present, so much popular prejudice, that it prevents all possibility of candid and free discussion. It is simply a convenient stone to fling at the head of an opponent whose arguments one cannot meet, a certain way of raising a tumult which will drown his voice; and, if it have any serious meaning at all, it might fairly be used, as I shall presently show, against the most orthodox pillar of the orthodox faith.

It is manifest to all who will take the trouble to think steadily, that there can be only one eternal and underived substance, and that matter and spirit must therefore only be varying manifestations of this one substance. The distinction made between matter and spirit is then simply made for the sake of convenience and clearness, just as we may distinguish perception from judgment, both of which, however, are alike processes of thought. Matter is, in its constituent elements, the same as spirit; existence is *one*, however manifold in its phenomena; life is one, however multiform in its evolution. As the heat of the coal differs from the coal itself, so do memory, perception, judgment, emotion, and will, differ from the brain which is the instrument of thought. But nevertheless they are all equally products of the one sole substance, varying only in their conditions. It may be taken for granted that against this preliminary point of the argument will be raised the party-cry of "rank materialism," because "materialism" is a doctrine of which the general public has an undefined horror. But I am bold to say

that if by matter is meant that which is above defined as substance, then no reasoning person can help being a materialist. The orthodox are very fond of arguing back to what they call the Great First Cause. "God is a spirit," they say, "and from him is derived the spiritual part of man." Well and good; they have traced back a part of the universe to a point at which they conceive that only one universal essence is possible, that which they call God, and which is spirit only. But I then invite their consideration to the presence of something which they do not regard as spirit, *i.e.*, matter. I follow their own plan of argument step by step: I trace matter, as they traced spirit, back and back, till I reach a point beyond which I cannot go, one only existence, substance or essence; am I therefore to believe that God is matter only? But we have already found it asserted by Theists that he is spirit only, and we cannot believe two contradictories, however logical the road which led us to them; so we must acknowledge two substances, eternally existent side by side; if existence be dual, then, however absurd the hypothesis, there must be two First Causes. It is not I who am responsible for an idea so anomalous. The orthodox escape from this dilemma by an assumption, thus: "God, to whom is to be traced back all spirit, *created* matter." Why? am I not equally justified in assuming, if I please, that matter created spirit? Why should I be logical in one argument and illogical in another? If we come to assumptions, have not I as much right to my assumption as my neighbour has to his? Why may he predicate creation of one half of the universe, and I not predicate it of the other half? If the assumptions be taken into consideration at all, then I contend that mine is the more reasonable of the two, since it is possible to imagine matter as existing without mind, while it is utterly impossible to conceive of mind existing without matter. We all know how a stone looks, and we are in the habit of regarding that as lifeless

matter; but who has any distinct idea of a mind *pur et simple*? No clear conception of it is possible to human faculties; we can only conceive of mind as it is found *in* an organisation; intelligence has no appreciable existence except as residing in the brain and as manifested in results. The lines of spirit and matter are not one, say the orthodox; they run backwards side by side; why then, in following the course of these two parallel lines, should I suddenly bend one into the other? and on what principle of selection shall I choose the one I am to curve? I must really decline to use logic just as far as it supports the orthodox idea of God, and arbitrarily throw it down the moment it conflicts with that idea. I find myself then compelled to believe that one only substance exists in all around me; that the universe is eternal, or at least eternal so far as our faculties are concerned, since we cannot as some one has quaintly put it, "get to the outside of everywhere;" that a Deity cannot be conceived of as apart from the universe, pre-existent to the universe, post-existent to the universe; that the Worker and the Work are inextricably interwoven, and in some sense eternally and indissolubly combined. Having got so far, we will proceed to examine into the possibility of proving the existence of that one essence popularly called by the name of *God*, under the conditions strictly defined by the orthodox. Having demonstrated, as I hope to do, that the orthodox idea of God is unreasonable and absurd, we will endeavour to discover whether *any* idea of God, worthy to be called an idea, is attainable in the present state of our faculties.

The orthodox believers in God are divided into two camps, one of which maintains that the existence of God is as demonstrable as any mathematical proposition, while the other asserts that his existence is not demonstrable to the intellect. I select Dr. McCann, a man of considerable reputation, as the representative of the former of these two opposing schools of thought; and

give the Doctor's position in his own words:—"The purpose of the following paper is to prove the fallacy of all such assumptions" (*i.e.*, that the existence of God is an insoluble problem) "by showing that we are no more at liberty to deny His being, than we are to deny any demonstration of Euclid. He would be thought unworthy of refutation who should assert that any two angles of a triangle are together greater than two right angles. We would content ourselves by saying, 'The man is mad'—mathematically at least—and pass on. If it can be shown that we affirm the existence of Deity for the very same reasons as we affirm the truth of any geometric proposition; if it can be shown that the former is as capable of demonstration as the latter,—then it necessarily follows that if we are justified in calling the man a fool who denies the latter, we are also justified in calling him a fool who says there is no God, and in refusing to answer him according to his folly." Which course is a very convenient one when you meet with an awkward opponent whom you cannot silence by sentiment and declamation. Again: "In conclusion, we believe it to be very important to be able to prove that if the mathematician be justified in asserting that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles, the Christian is equally justified in asserting, not only that he is compelled to believe in God, but that he *knows* Him (*sic*). And that he who denies the existence of the Deity is as unworthy of serious refutation as is he who denies a mathematical demonstration." ('A Demonstration of the Existence of God,' a lecture delivered at the Victoria Institute. 1870, pp. 1 and 11.) Dr. McCann proves his very startling thesis by laying down as axioms six statements, which, however luminous to the Christian traditionalist, are obscure to the sceptical intellect. He seems to be conscious of this defect in his so-called axioms, for he proceeds to prove each of them elaborately, forgetting that the simple statement of an axiom

should carry direct conviction—that it needs only to be understood in order to be accepted. However, let this pass: our teacher, having stated and “proved” his axioms, proceeds to draw his conclusions from them, and as his foundations are unsound it is scarcely to be wondered at that his superstructure should be insecure. I know of no way so effectual to defeat an adversary as to beg all the questions raised, assume every point in dispute, call assumptions axioms, and then proceed to reason from them. It is really not worth while to criticise Dr. McCann in detail, his lecture being nothing but a mass of fallacies and unproved assertions. Christian courtesy allows him to call those who dissent from his assumptions “fools,” and as these terms of abuse are not considered admissible by those whom he assails as unbelievers, there is a slight difficulty in “answering” Dr. McCann “according to his” deserts. I content myself with suggesting, that they who wish to learn how pretended reasoning may pass for solid argument, how inconsequent statements may pass for logic, had better study this lecture. For my own part, I confess that my “folly” is not, as yet, of a sufficiently pronounced type to enable me to accept Dr. McCann’s conclusions.

The best representation I can select of the second orthodox party, those who admit that the existence of God is not demonstrable, is the late Dean Mansel. In his ‘Limits of Religious Thought,’ the Bampton Lectures for 1867, he takes up a perfectly unassailable position; the peculiarity of this position, however, is that he, the pillar of orthodoxy, the famed defender of the faith against German infidelity and all forms of rationalism, regards God from exactly the same point as does a well-known modern “atheist.” I have almost hesitated sometimes which writer to quote from, so identical are they in thought. Probably neither Dean Mansel nor Mr. Bradlaugh would thank me for bracketing their names, but I am forced to confess that the

arguments used by the one to prove the endless absurdities into which we fall when we try to comprehend the nature of God, are exactly the same arguments that are used by the other to prove that God, as believed in by the orthodox, cannot exist. I quote, however, exclusively from the Dean, because it is at once novel and agreeable to find oneself sheltered by Mother Church at the exact moment when one is questioning her very foundations; and also because the Dean's name carries with it so orthodox an odour that his authority will tell where the same words from any of those who are outside the pale of orthodoxy would be regarded with suspicion. Nevertheless I wish to state plainly that a more "atheistical" book than these Bampton Lectures—at least in the earlier part of it—I have never read, and had its title-page borne the name of any well-known Free-thinker, it would have been received in the religious world with a storm of indignation.

The first definition laid down by the orthodox as a characteristic of God is that he is an Infinite Being. "There is but one living and true God . . . of *infinite* power, &c." (Article of Religion, 1.) It has been said that *infinite* only means *indefinite*, but I must protest against this weakening of a well-defined theological term. The term *Infinite* has always been understood to mean far more than indefinite; it means literally *boundless*: the infinite has *no* limitations, *no* possible restrictions, *no* "circumference." People who do not think about the meaning of the words they use speak very freely and familiarly of the "infinite" of God, as though the term implied no inconsistency. Deny that God is infinite and you are at once called an atheist, but press your opponent into a definition of the term and you will generally find that he does not know what he is talking about. Dean Mansel points out, with his accurate habit of mind, all that this attribute of God implies, and it would be well if those who "believe in an infinite God" would try and realise

what they express. Half the battle of free thought will be won when people attach a definite meaning to the terms they use. The Infinite has no bounds; then the finite cannot exist. Why? Because in the very act of acknowledging any existence beside the Infinite One you limit the Infinite. By saying, "This is not God" you at once make him finite, because you set a bound to his nature; you distinguish between him and something else, and by the very act you limit him; that *which is not he* is as a rock which checks the waves of the ocean; in that spot a limit is found, and in finding a limit the Infinite is destroyed. The orthodox may retort, "this is only a matter of terms;" but it is well to force them into realising the dogmas which they thrust on our acceptance under such awful penalties for rejection. I know what "an infinite God" implies, and, as apart from the universe, I feel compelled to deny the possibility of his existence; surely it is fair that the orthodox should also know what the words they use mean on this head, and give up the term if they cling to a "personal" God, distinct from "creation." Further—and here I quote Dean Mansel—the "Infinite must be conceived as containing within itself the sum, not only of all actual, but of all possible modes of being. . . . If any possible mode can be denied of it . . . it is capable of becoming more than it now is, and such a capability is a limitation." (The hiatus refers to the "absolute" being of God, which it is better to consider separately.) "An unrealised possibility is necessarily (a relation and) a limit." Thus is orthodoxy crushed by the powerful logic of its own champion. God is infinite; then, in that case, everything that exists is God; all phenomena are modes of the Divine Being; there is literally nothing which is not God. Will the orthodox accept this position? It lands them, it is true, in the most extreme Pantheism, but what of that? They believe in an "infinite God" and they are therefore necessarily Pantheists. If they

object to this, they must give up the idea that their God is infinite at all ; there is no half-way position open to them ; he is infinite or finite, which ?

Again, God is "before all things," he is the only Absolute Being, dependent on nothing outside himself ; all that is *not* God is relative ; that is to say, that God exists alone and is not necessarily related to anything else. The orthodox even believe that God did, at some former period (which is not a period they say, because time then was not—however, at that hazy "time" he did), exist alone, *i.e.*, as what is called an *Absolute* Being : this conception is necessary for all who, in any sense, believe in a *Creator*.

"Thou, in Thy far eternity,
Didst live and love alone."

So sings a Christian minstrel ; and one of the arguments put forward for a Trinity is that a plurality of persons is necessary in order that God may be able to love at the "time" when he was alone. Into this point, however, I do not now enter. But what does this "Absolute" imply ? A simple impossibility of creation, just as does the Infinite ; for creation implies that the relative is brought into existence, and thus the Absolute is destroyed. "Here again the Pantheistic hypothesis seems forced upon us. We can think of creation only as a change in the condition of that which already exists, and thus the creature is conceivable only as a phenomenal mode of the being of the Creator." Thus once more looms up the dreaded spectre of Pantheism, "the dreary desolation of a Pantheistic wilderness ;" and who is the Moses who has led us into this desert ? It is a leader of orthodoxy, a dignitary of the Church ; it is Dean Mansel who stretches out his hand to the universe and says, "This is thy God, O Israel."

The two highest attributes of God land us, then, in the most thorough Pantheism ; further, before remarking on the other divine attributes, I would challenge

the reader to pause and try to realise this infinite and absolute being. "That a man can be conscious of the infinite is, then, a supposition which, in the very terms in which it is expressed, annihilates itself. . . . The infinite, if it is to be conceived at all, must be conceived as potentially everything and actually nothing; for if there is anything in general which it cannot become, it is thereby limited; and if there is anything in particular which it actually is, it is thereby excluded from being any other thing. But again, it must also be conceived as actually everything and potentially nothing; for an unrealised potentiality is likewise a limitation. If the infinite can be" (in the future) "that which it is not" (in the present) "it is by that very possibility marked out as incomplete and capable of a higher perfection. If it is actually everything, it possesses no characteristic feature by which it can be distinguished from anything else and discerned as an object of consciousness." I think, then, that we must be content, on the showing of Dr. Mansel, to allow that God is, in his own nature—from this point of view—quite beyond the grasp of our faculties; *as regards us he does not exist*, since he is indistinguishable and undiscernable. Well might the Church exclaim "Save me from my friends!" when a dean acknowledges that her God is a self-contradictory phantom; oddly enough, however, the Church likes it, and accepts this fatal championship. I might have put this argument wholly in my own words, for the subject is familiar to everyone who has tried to gain a distinct idea of the Being who is called "God," but I have preferred to back my own opinions with the authority of so orthodox a man as Dean Mansel, trusting that by so doing the orthodox may be forced to see where logic carries them. All who are interested in this subject should study his lectures carefully; there is really no difficulty in following them, if the student will take the trouble of mastering once for all, the terms he employs. The book was lent to

me years ago by a clergyman, and did more than any other book I know to make me what is called an "infidel;" it proves to demonstration the impossibility of our having any logical, reasonable, and definite idea of God, and the utter hopelessness of trying to realise his existence. It seems necessary here to make a short digression to explain, for the benefit of those who have not read the book from which I have been quoting, how Dean Mansel escaped becoming an "atheist." It is a curious fact that the last part of this book is as remarkable for its assumptions, as is the earlier portion for its pitiless logic. When he ought in all reason to say, "we can know nothing and therefore can believe nothing," he says instead, "we can know nothing and therefore let us take Revelation for granted." An atheistic reasoner suddenly startles us by becoming a devout Christian; the apparent enemy of the faithful is "transformed into an angel of light." The existence of God "is inconceivable by the reason," and therefore "the only ground that can be taken for accepting one representation of it rather than another is, that one is revealed and the other not revealed." It is the acknowledgment of a previously formed *determination* to believe at any cost; it is a wail of helplessness; the very apotheosis of despair. We cannot have history, so let us believe a fairy-tale; we can discover nothing, so let us assume anything; we cannot find truth, so let us take the first myth that comes to hand. Here I feel compelled to part company with the Dean, and to leave him to believe in, to adore, and to love that which he has himself designated as indistinguishable and undiscernable; it may be an act of faith but it is a crucifixion of intellect; it may be a satisfaction to the yearnings of the heart, but it dethrones reason and tramples it in the dust.

We proceed in our study of the attributes of God. He is represented as the Supreme Will, the Supreme Intelligence, the Supreme Love.

As the Supreme Will. What do we mean by "will?" Surely, in the usual sense of the word, a will implies the power and the act of choosing. Two paths are open to us, and we *will* to walk in one rather than in the other. But can we think of power of choice in connection with God? Of two courses open to us one must needs be better than the other, else they would be indistinguishable and be only one; perfection implies that the higher course will always be taken; what then becomes of the power of choice? *We* choose because we are imperfect; we do not know everything which bears on the matter on which we are about to exercise our will; if we knew everything we should inevitably be driven in one direction, that which is the *best possible course*. The greater the knowledge, the more circumscribed the will; the nobler the nature, the more impossible the lower course. Spinoza points out most clearly that the Divinity *could not* have made things otherwise than they are made, because any change in his action would imply a change in his nature; God, above all, must be bound by necessity. If we believe in a God at all we must surely ascribe to him perfection of wisdom and perfection of goodness; we are then forced to conceive of him—however strange it may sound to those who believe, not only without seeing but also without thinking—as without will, because he must always necessarily pursue the course which is wisest and best.

As the Supreme Intelligence. Again, the first question is, what do we mean by *intelligence*? In the usual sense of the word intelligence implies the exercise of the various intellectual faculties, and gathers up into one word the ideas of perception, comparison, memory, judgment, and so on. The very enumeration of these faculties is sufficient to show how utterly inappropriate they are when thought of in connection with God. Does God perceive what he did not know before? Does he compare one fact with another? Does he draw con-

clusions from this correlation of perceptions, and thus judge what is best? Does he remember, as we remember, long past events? Perfect wisdom excludes from the idea of *God* all that is called intelligence in *man*; it involves unchangeableness, complete stillness; it implies a knowledge of all that is knowable; it includes an acquaintance with every fact, an acquaintance which has never been less in the past, and can never be more in the future. The reception at any time of a new thought or a new idea is impossible to perfection, for if it could ever be added to in the future it is necessarily something less than perfect in the past.

As the Supreme Love. We come here to the darkest problem of existence. Love, Ruler of the world permeated through and through with pain, and sorrow, and sin? Love, mainspring of a nature whose cruelty is sometimes appalling? Love? Think of the "martyrdom of man!" Love? Follow the History of the Church! Love? Study the annals of the slave-trade! Love? Walk the courts and alleys of our towns! It is of no use to try and explain away these things, or cover them up with a veil of silence; it is better to look them fairly in the face, and test our creeds by inexorable facts. It is foolish to keep a tender spot which may not be handled; for a spot which gives pain when it is touched implies the presence of disease: wiser far is it to press firmly against it, and if danger lurk there to use the probe or the knife. We have no right to pick out all that is noblest and fairest in man, to project these qualities into space, and to call them God. We only thus create an ideal figure, a purified, ennobled, "magnified" Man. We have no right to shut our eyes to the sad *revers de la médaille*, and leave out of our conceptions of the Creator the larger half of his creation. If we are to discover the Worker from his works we must not pick and choose amid those works; we must take them as they are, "good" and "bad." If we only want an ideal, let us by all means

make one, and call it *God*, if thus we can reach it better, but if we want a true induction we must take *all* facts into account. If God is to be considered as the author of the universe, and we are to learn of him through his works, then we must make room in our conceptions of him for the avalanche and the earthquake, for the tiger's tooth and the serpent's fang, as well as for the tenderness of woman and the strength of man, the radiant glory of the sunshine on the golden harvest, and the gentle lapping of the summer waves on the gleaming shingled beach.*

The Nature of God, what is it? Infinite and Absolute, he evades our touch: without human will, without human intelligence, without human love, where can his faculties—the very word is a misnomer—find a meeting-place with ours? Is he everything or nothing? one or many? *We know not. We know nothing.* Such is the conclusion into which we are driven by orthodoxy, with its pretended faith, which is credulity, with its pretended proofs, which are presumptions. It defines and maps out the perfections of Deity, and they dissolve when we try to grasp them; nowhere do these ideas hold water for a moment; nowhere is this position defensible. Orthodoxy drives thinkers into atheism; weary of its contradictions they cry, “there is *no* God;” orthodoxy's leading thinker lands us himself in atheism.

* “I know it is usual for the orthodox when vindicating the moral character of their God to say:—‘All the Evil that exists is of *man*; All that God has done is only *good*.’ But granting (which facts do not substantiate) that man is the only author of the sorrow and the wrong that abound in the world, it is difficult to see how the Creator can be free from imputation. Did not God, according to orthodoxy, plan all things with an infallible perception that the events foreseen must occur? Was not this accurate prescience based upon the inflexibility of God's Eternal purposes? As, then, the purposes, in the order of nature, at least preceded the prescience and formed the groundwork of it, man has become extensively the instrument of doing mischief in the world simply because the God of the Christian Church did not choose to prevent man from being bad. In other words man is as he is by the ordained design of God, and therefore God is responsible for all the suffering, shame, and error, spread by human agency.—So that the Christian apology for God in connection with the spectacle of evil falls to pieces.”—*Note, by the Editor.*

No logical, impartial, mind can escape from unbelief through the trap-door opened by Dean Mansel: he has taught us reason, and we cannot suppress reason. The "serpent intellect"—as the Bishop of Peterborough calls it—has twined itself firmly round the tree of knowledge, and in that type we do not see, with the Hebrew, the face of death, but, with the older faiths, we reverence it as the symbol of life.

There is another fact, an historical one, still on the destructive side, which appears to me to be of the gravest importance, and that is the gradual attenuation of the idea of God before the growing light of true knowledge. To the savage everything is divine; he hears one God's voice in the clap of the thunder, another's in the roar of the earthquake, he sees a divinity in the trees, a deity smiles at him from the clear depths of the river and the lake; every natural phenomenon is the abode of a god; every event is controlled by a god; divine volition is at the root of every incident. To him the rule of the gods is a stern reality; if he offends them they turn the forces of nature against him; the flood, the famine, the pestilence, are the ministers of the avenging anger of the gods. As civilisation advances, the deities lessen in number, the divine powers become concentrated more and more in one Being, and God rules over the whole earth, maketh the clouds his chariot, and reigns above the waterfloods as a king. Physical phenomena are still his agents, working his will among the children of men; he rains great hailstones out of heaven on his enemies, he slays their flocks and desolates their lands, but his chosen are safe under his protection, even although danger hem them in on every side; "thou shalt not be afraid for any terror by night, nor for the arrow that flieth by day; for the pestilence that walketh in darkness; nor for the sickness that destroyeth in the noon-day. A thousand shall fall beside thee, and ten thousand at thy right hand; but it shall not come nigh thee. . . .

He shall defend thee under his wings, and thou shalt be safe under his feathers." (Ps. xci., Prayer-Book.) Experience contradicted this theory rather roughly, and it gave way slowly before the logic of facts; it is however, still more or less prevalent among ourselves, as we see when the siege of Paris is proclaimed as a judgment on Parisian irreligion, and when the whole nation falls on its knees to acknowledge the cattle-plague as the deserved punishment of its sins! The next step forward was to separate the physical from the moral, and to allow that physical suffering came independently of moral guilt or righteousness: the men crushed under the fallen tower of Siloam were not thereby proved to be more sinful than their countrymen. The birth of science rang the death-knell of an arbitrary and constantly interposing Supreme Power. The theory of God as a miracle worker was dissipated; henceforth if God ruled at all it must be as *in* nature and not from *outside* of nature; he no longer imposed laws on something exterior to himself, the laws could only be the necessary expression of his own being. Laws were, further, found to be immutable in their working, changing not in accordance with prayer, but ever true to a hair's breadth in their action. Slowly, but surely, prayer to God for the alteration of physical phenomena is being found to be simply a well-meant superstition; nature swerves not for our pleading, nor falters in her path for our most passionate supplication. The "reign of law" in physical matters is becoming acknowledged even by theologians. As step by step the knowledge of *the natural* advances, so step by step does the belief in *the supernatural* recede; as the kingdom of science extends, so the kingdom of miraculous interference gradually disappears. The effects which of old were thought to be caused by the direct action of God are now seen to be caused by the uniform and calculable working of certain laws,—laws which, when discovered, it is the part of wisdom implicitly to obey. Things

which we used to pray for, we now work and wait for, and if we fail we do not ask God to add his strength to ours, but we sit down and lay our plans more carefully. How is this to end? Is the future to be like the past, and is science finally to obliterate the conception of a personal God? It is a question which ought to be pondered in the light of history. Hitherto the supernatural has always been the makeweight of human ignorance; is it, in truth, this and nothing else?

I am forced, with some reluctance, to apply the whole of the above reasoning to every school of thought, whether nominally Christian or non-Christian, which regards God as a "magnified man." The same stern logic cuts every way and destroys alike the Trinitarian and the Unitarian hypothesis, wherever the idea of God is that of a Creator, standing, as it were, outside his creation. The liberal thinker, whatever his present position, seems driven infallibly to the above conclusions, as soon as he sets himself to realise his idea of his God. The Deity must of necessity be that one and only substance out of which all things are evolved under the uncreated conditions and eternal laws of the universe; he must be, as Theodore Parker somewhat oddly puts it, "the materiality of matter, as well as the spirituality of spirit;" *i.e.*, these must both be products of this one substance: a truth which is readily accepted as soon as spirit and matter are seen to be but different modes of one essence. Thus we identify substance with the all-comprehending and vivifying force of nature, and in so doing we simply reduce to a physical impossibility the existence of the Being described by the orthodox as a God possessing the attributes of personality. The Deity becomes identified with nature, co-extensive with the universe; but the *God* of the orthodox no longer exists; we may change the signification of God, and use the word to express a different idea, but we can no longer mean by it a Personal Being in the orthodox sense, possessing an individuality which divides him from the

rest of the universe. I say that I use these arguments "with some reluctance," because many who have fought and are fighting nobly and bravely in the army of free-thought, and to whom all free-thinkers owe much honour, seem to cling to an idea of the Deity, which, however beautiful and poetical, is not logically defensible, and in striking at the orthodox notion of God, one necessarily strikes also at all idea of a "Personal" Deity. There are some Theists who have only cut out the Son and the Holy Ghost from the Triune Jehovah, and have concentrated the Deity in the Person of the Father; they have returned to the old Hebrew idea of God, the Creator, the Sustainer, only widening it into regarding God as the Friend and Father of all his creatures, and not of the Jewish nation only. There is much that is noble and attractive in this idea, and it will possibly serve as a religion of transition to break the shock of the change from the supernatural to the natural. It is reached entirely by a process of *giving up*; Christian notions are dropped one after another, and the God who is believed in is *the residuum*. This Theistic school has not gained its idea of God from any general survey of nature or from any philosophical induction from facts; it has gained it only by stripping off from an idea already in the mind everything which is degrading and revolting in the dogmas of Trinitarianism. It starts, as I have noticed elsewhere, from a very noble axiom: "If there be a God at all he must be at least as good as his highest creatures," and thus is instantly swept away the Augustinian idea of a God,—that monster invented by theological dialectics; but still the same axiom makes God in the image of man, and never succeeds in getting outside a human representation of the Divinity. It starts from this axiom, and the axiom is prefaced by an "if." It assumes God, and then argues fairly enough what his character must be. And this "if" is the very point on which the argument of this paper turns.

"If there be a God" all the rest follows, but *is there*

a God at all in the sense in which the word is generally used? And thus I come to the second part of my problem; having seen that the orthodox "idea of God is unreasonable and absurd, is there any idea of God, worthy to be called an idea, which is attainable in the present state of our faculties?" (P. 10.)

The argument from design does not seem to me to be a satisfactory one; it either goes too far or not far enough. Why in arguing from the evidences of adaptation should we assume that they are planned by a mind? It is quite as easy to conceive of matter as self-existent, with inherent vital laws moulding it into varying phenomena, as to conceive of any intelligent *mind* directly modelling matter, so that the "heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament showeth his handy-work." It is, I know, customary to sneer at the idea of beautiful forms existing without a conscious designer, to parallel the adaptations of this world to the adaptations in machinery, and then triumphantly to inquire, "if skill be inferred from the one, why ascribe the other to chance?" We do not believe in *chance*; the steady action of law is not chance; the exquisite crystals which form themselves under certain conditions are not a "*fortuitous* concurrence of atoms;" the only question is whether the laws which we all allow to govern nature are immanent in nature, or the outcome of an intelligent mind. If there be a law-maker, is *he* self-existent, or does he, in turn, as has been asked again and again by Positivist, Secularist, and Atheist, require a maker? If we think for a moment of the vast mind implied in the existence of a Creator of the universe, is it possible to believe that such a mind is the result of chance? If man's mind imply a master-mind, how much more that of God? Of course the question seems an absurd one, but it is quite as pertinent as the question about a world-maker. We *must* come to a stop somewhere, and it is quite as logical to stop at one point as at another. The argument from

design would be valuable if we could prove, *à priori*, as Mr. Gillespie attempted to do,* the existence of a Deity; this *being proved* we might then fairly argue deductively to the various apparent signs of mind in the universe. Again, if we allow design we must ask, "how far does design extend?" If some phenomena are designed, why not *all*? And if not all, on what principle can we separate that which is designed from that which is not? If intellect and love reveal a design, what is revealed by brutality and hate? If the latter are not the result of design, how did they become introduced into the universe? I repeat that this argument implies either too much or too little.

There is but one argument that appears to me to have any real weight, and that is the argument from instinct. Man has faculties which appear, at present, as though they were not born of the intellect, and it seems to me to be unphilosophical to exclude this class of facts from our survey of nature. The nature of man has in it certain sentiments and emotions which, reasonably or unreasonably, sway him powerfully and continually; they are, in fact, his strongest motive-powers, overwhelming the reasoning faculties with resistless strength; true, they need discipline and controlling, but they do not need to be, and they cannot be, destroyed. The sentiments of love, of reverence, of worship, are not, as yet, reducible to logical processes; they are intuitions, spontaneous emotions, incomprehensible to the keen and cold intellect. They may be laughed at or denied, but they still exist in spite of all; they avenge themselves, when they are not taken into account, by ruining the best laid plans, and they are continually bursting the cords with which reason strives to tie them down. I do not for a moment pretend to deny that these "intuitions" will, as our knowledge of psychology increases, be reducible to strict laws; we call them instincts and

* 'The Necessary Existence of Deity.'

intuitions simply because we are unable to trace them to their source, and this vague expression covers the vagueness of our ideas. Therefore, intuition is not to be accepted as a trustworthy guide, but it may suggest an hypothesis, and this hypothesis must then be submitted to the stern verification of observed facts. We are not as yet able to say to what the instinct in man to worship points, or what reality answers to his yearning. Increased knowledge will, we may hope, reveal to us* where there lies the true satisfaction of this instinct: so long as the yearning is only an "instinct" it cannot pretend to be logically defensible, or claim to lay down any rule of faith. But still I think it well to point out that this instinct exists in man, and exists most strongly in some of the noblest souls.

Of all the various sentiments which are thus at present "intuitional," none is so powerful, none so overmastering as this instinct to worship, this sentiment of religion. It is as natural for man to worship as to eat. He will do it, be it reasonable or unreasonable. Just as the baby crams everything into his mouth, so does man persist in worshipping something. It may be said that the baby's instinct does not prove that he is right in trying to devour a match-box; true, but it proves the existence of something *eatable*; so fetish-worship, polytheism, theism, do not prove that man has worshipped rightly, but do they not prove the existence of something *worshipable*? The argument does not, of course, pretend to amount to a demonstration; it is

*"Is there in man any such Instinct? May not the general tendency to worship a Deity, everywhere be the result of the influence gained by Priests over the mind by the play of the mysterious Unknown and Hereafter upon susceptible imaginations? Besides, what are we to say of the immense number of philosophical Buddhists and Brahmins, for whose comfort or moral guidance the idea of a God or a hereafter is felt to be quite unnecessary? They cannot comprehend it, and consequently acts of worship to God would be deemed by them fanatical. It is traditionalists who either do not think at all, or think only within a narrow, creed-bound circle, that are most devoted to worshipping Deity; and if so, may not the whole history of *worship* have its origin in superstition and priestcraft? In that case, the theory of an instinct of worship falls to the ground."—*Note by the Editor.*

nothing more than the suggestion of an analogy; are we to find that the supply is correlated to the demand throughout nature, and yet believe that this hitherto invariable system is suddenly altered when we reach the spiritual part of man? I do not deny that this instinct is hereditary, and that it is fostered by habit. The idea of reverence for God is transmitted from parent to child, it is educated into an abnormal development, and thus almost indefinitely strengthened, but yet it does appear to me that the bent to worship is an integral part of man's nature. This instinct has also sometimes been considered to have its root in the feeling that one's individual self is but a "part of a stupendous whole;" that the so-called religious feeling which is evoked by a grand view or a bright starlight night is only the realisation of personal insignificance, and the reverence which rises in the soul in the presence of the mighty universe of which we form a part. Whatever the root and the significance of this instinct, there can be no doubt of its strength; there is nothing rouses men's passions as does theology; for religion men rush on death more readily and joyfully than for any other cause; religious fanaticism is the most fatal, the most terrible power in the world. In studying history I also see the upward tendency of the race, and note that current which Mr. Matthew Arnold has called "that stream of tendency, not ourselves, which makes for righteousness." Of course, if there be a conscious God, this tendency is a proof of his moral character, since it would be the outcome of his laws; but here again an argument which would be valuable were the existence of God already proved, falls blunted from the iron wall of the unknown. The same tendency upwards would naturally exist in any "realm of law," although the law were an unconscious force. For righteousness is nothing more than obedience to law, and where there is obedience to law, Nature's mighty forces lend their strength to man, and progress is secured. Only by obedience to law can advance be made, and this

rule applies, of course, to morality as well as to physics. Physical righteousness is obedience to physical laws; moral righteousness is obedience to moral laws; just as physical laws are discovered by the observation of natural phenomena, so must moral laws be discovered by the observation of social phenomena. That which increases the general happiness is right; that which tends to destroy the general happiness is wrong. Utility is the test of morality. But a law must not be drawn from a single fact or phenomenon; facts must be carefully collated, and the general laws of morality drawn from a generalisation of facts. But this subject is too large to enter upon here, and it is only hinted at in order to note that, although there is a moral tendency apparent in the course of events, it is rather a rash assumption to take it for granted that the power in question is a conscious one: it *may* be, and that, I think, is all we can justly and reasonably say.

Again, as regards Love. I have protested above against the easiness which talks glibly of the Supreme Love while shutting its eyes to the supreme agony of the world. But here, in putting forward what may be said on the other side of the question, I must remark that there is a possible explanation for sorrow and sin which is consistent with love. Given immortality of man and beast, and the future gain may then outweigh the present loss. But we are bound to remember that we can only have a *hope* of immortality; we have no demonstration of it, and this is, therefore, only an assumption by which we escape from a difficulty. We ought to be ready to acknowledge, also, that there *is* love in nature, although there is cruelty too; there *is* the sunshine as well as the storm, and we must not fix our eyes on the darkness alone and deny the light. In mother-love, in the love of friends, loyal through all doubt, true in spite of danger and difficulty, strongest when most sorely tried, we see gleams of so divine, so unearthly a beauty, that our hearts whisper to us of an universal heart pulsating

throughout nature, which, at these rare moments, we cannot believe to be a dream. But there seems, also, to be a vague idea that love and other virtues could not exist unless derived from *the Love*, &c. It is true that we do conceive certain ideals of virtue which we personify, and to which we apply various terms implying affection; we speak of a love of Truth, devotion to Freedom, and so on. These ideals have, however, a purely subjective existence, they are not objective realities, there is nothing answering to these conceptions in the outside world, nor do we pretend to believe in their individuality. But when we gather up all our ideals, our noblest longings, and bind them into one vast ideal figure, which we call by the name of God, then we at once attribute to it an objective existence, and complain of coldness and hardness if its reality is questioned, and we demand to know if we can love an abstraction? The noblest souls *do* love abstractions, and live in their beauty and die for their sake.

There appears also to be a possibility of a mind in Nature, although we have seen that intelligence is, strictly speaking, impossible. There cannot be perception, memory, comparison, or judgment, but may there not be a perfect mind, unchanging, calm, and still? Our faculties fail us when we try to estimate the Deity, and we are betrayed into contradictions and absurdities, but does it therefore follow that He is not? It seems to me that to deny his existence is to overstep the boundaries of our thought-power almost as much as to try and define it. We pretend to know the Unknown if we declare Him to be the Unknowable. Unknowable to us at present, yes! Unknowable for ever, in other possible stages of existence?—We have reached a region into which we cannot penetrate; here all human faculties fail us; we bow our heads on “the threshold of the unknown.”

And the ear of man cannot hear, and the eye of man cannot see;

But if we could see and hear, this Vision—were it not He?

Thus sings Alfred Tennyson, the poet of metaphysics :
“if we could see and hear;” alas! it is always
an “if.”

We come back to the opening of this essay : what is the practical result of our ideas about the Divinity, and how do these ideas affect the daily working life? What conclusions are we to draw from the undeniable fact that, even if there be a “personal God,” his nature and existence are beyond our faculties, that “clouds and darkness are round about him,” that he is veiled in eternal silence and reveals himself not to men? Surely the obvious inference is that, if he does really exist, he desires to conceal himself from the inhabitants of our world. I repeat, that if the Deity exist, he does not wish us to know of his existence. There may be, in the very nature of things, an impossibility of his revealing himself to men; we may have no faculties with which to apprehend him; can we reveal the stars and the rippling expanse of ocean to the sightless limpet on the rock? Whether this be so or not, certain is it that the Deity does *not* reveal himself; either he cannot or he will not. And the reason—I am granting for the moment for argument’s sake his personal existence—is not far to seek; it is blazed upon the face of history. For what has been the result of theology upon the whole? It has turned men’s eyes from earth, to fix them on heaven; it has bid them be careless of the temporal, while luring them to grasp at the eternal; it has induced multitudes to lavish fervent sentiment upon a conception framed by Priests of an incomprehensible God, while diverting their strength from the plain duties which Humanity has before it; it has taught them to live for the world to come, when they should live for the world around them; it has made earth’s wrongs endurable with the hope of the glory to be revealed. Wisely indeed would the Deity hide himself, when even a phantom of him has wrought such fatal mischief; and never will real and steady

progress be secured until men acquiesce in this beneficent law of their nature, which draws a stern circle of the "limits of Religious Thought" and bids them concentrate their attention on the work they have to do in this world, instead of being "for ever peering into and brooding over the world beyond the grave."

"*What is to be our conception of morality, is it to base itself on obedience to God, or is it to be sought for itself and its effects?*" When we admit that God is beyond our knowing, morality becomes at once necessarily grounded on utility, or the natural adaptation of certain feelings and actions to promote the general welfare of society. As no revelation is given to us as one "infallible standard of right and wrong," we must form our morality for ourselves from thought and from experience. For example, our moral nature, as educated under the highest civilisation, tells us that lying is wrong;* with this hypothesis in our minds we study facts, and discover that lying causes mistrust, anarchy, and ruin; thence we lay down as a moral law, "Lie not at all." The science of morality must be content to grow like other sciences: first an hypothesis, round which to group our facts, then from the collected and collated facts reasoning up to a solid law. Scientific morality has this great advantage over revealed, that it stands on firm, unassailable ground; new facts will alter its details, but can never touch its method; like all other sciences, it is at once positive and progressive.

"*Is our mental attitude to be kneeling or standing?*" When we admit that the Deity is veiled from us, how can we pray? When we see that law is inexorable, of what use to protest against its absolute sway? When we feel that all, including ourselves, are but modes of Being which is one and universal, in which we "live

* All men do not think lying wrong, e.g. Thugs and old Spartans. Therefore it is not our *moral nature* that intuitively tells us this, but our moral nature as instructed by the moral ideas prevailing in the society in which we happen to be living.—*Note by the Editor.*

and move," how shall we pray to that which is close to us as our own souls, part of our very selves, inseparable from our thoughts, sharing our consciousness? As well talk aloud to ourselves as pray to the universal Essence. Children *cry* for what they want; men and women *work* for it. There are two points of view from which we may regard prayer: from the one it is a piece of childishness only, from the other it is sheer impertinence. Regarding Nature's mighty order, her grand, silent, unvarying march,—the importunity which frets against her changeless progress is a mark of the most extreme childishness of mind; it shows that complete irreverence of spirit which cannot conceive the idea of a greatness before which the individual existence is as nothing, and that infantile conceit which imagines that its own plans and playthings rival in importance the struggles of nations and the interests of distant worlds. Regarding Nature's laws as wiser than our own whims, the idea which finds its outlet in prayer is a gross impertinence; who are we that we should take it on ourselves to remind Nature of her work, God of his duty? Is there any impertinence so extreme as the prayer which "pleads" with the Deity? There is only one kind of "prayer" which is reasonable, and that is the deep, silent, adoration of the greatness and beauty and order around us, as revealed in the realms of non-rational life and in Humanity; as we bow our heads before the laws of the universe and mould our lives into obedience to their voice, we find a strong, calm peace steal over our hearts, a perfect trust in the ultimate triumph of the right, a quiet determination to "make our lives sublime." Before our own high ideals, before those lives which show us "how high the tides of divine life have risen in the human world," we stand with hushed voice and veiled face; from them we draw strength to emulate, and even dare struggle to excel. The contemplation of the ideal is true prayer; it inspires, it strengthens, it ennobles. The other part of prayer is work: from

contemplation to labour, from the forest to the street. Study Nature's laws, conform to them, work in harmony with them, and work becomes a prayer and a thanksgiving, an adoration of the universal wisdom, and a true obedience to the universal law.

"Is the mainspring of our actions to be the idea of duty to God, or the idea of loyalty to law and to man's well-being?" We cannot serve God in any real sense; we are awed before the Unknown, but we cannot serve it. For the Mighty, for the Incomprehensible, what can we do? But we can serve man, aye, and he needs our service; service of brain and hand, service untiring and unceasing, service through life and unto death. The race to which we belong (our own families and kinsfolk, and then the community at large) has the first claim on our allegiance, a claim from which nothing can release us until death drops a veil over our work.

Surely I may claim that my subject is not an unpractical one, and that our ideas of the Nature and Existence of God influence our lives in a very real way. If I have substituted a different basis of morality for that on which it now stands, if I have suggested a different theory of prayer, and offered a different motive for duty, surely these changes affect the whole of human life. And if one by one these theories are denied by the orthodox, and they reject them because they sever human life from that which is called revealed religion, is not my position justified, that the ideas we hold of God are the ruling forces of our lives? that it is of primary importance to the welfare of mankind that a false theory on this point should be destroyed and a more reasonable faith accepted?

Will any one exclaim, "You are taking all beauty out of human life, all hope, all warmth, all inspiration; you give us cold duty for filial obedience, and inexorable law in the place of God"? All beauty from life? Is there, then, no beauty in the idea of forming part of the great life of the universe, no beauty in conscious har-

mony with Nature, no beauty in faithful service, no beauty in ideals of every virtue? "All hope?" Why, I give you more than hope, I give you certainty: if I bid you labour for this world, it is with the knowledge that this world will repay you a thousand-fold, because society will grow purer, freedom more settled, law more honoured, life more full and glad. What is your hope? A heaven in the clouds. I point to a heaven attainable on earth. "All warmth?" What! You serve warmly a God unknown and invisible, in a sense the projected shadow of your own imaginings, and can only serve coldly your brother whom you see at your side? There is no warmth in brightening the lot of the sad, in reforming abuses, in establishing equal justice for rich and poor? You find warmth in the church, but none in the home? Warmth in imagining the cloud-glories of heaven, but none in creating substantial glories on earth? "All inspiration?" If you want inspiration to feeling, to sentiment, perhaps you had better keep to your Bible and your creeds; if you want inspiration to work, go and walk through the east of London, or the back streets of Manchester. You are inspired to tenderness as you gaze at the wounds of Jesus, dead in Judæa long ago, and find no inspiration in the wounds of men and women dying in the England of to-day? You "have tears to shed for him," but none for the sufferer at your doors? His passion arouses your sympathies, but you see no pathos in the passion of the poor? Duty is colder than "filial obedience?" What do you mean by filial obedience? Obedience to your ideal of goodness and love, is it not so? Then how is duty cold? I offer you ideals for your homage: here is Truth for your Mistress, to whose exaltation you shall devote your intellect; here is Freedom for your General, for whose triumph you shall fight; here is Love for your Inspirer, who shall influence your every thought; here is Man for your Master—not in heaven but on earth—to whose service you shall consecrate every faculty of your being.

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Inexorable law in the place of God? Yes: a stern certainty that you shall not waste your life, yet gather a rich reward at the close; that you shall not sow misery, yet reap gladness; that you shall not be selfish, yet be crowned with love, nor shall you sin, yet find safety in repentance. True, our creed *is* a stern one, stern with the beautiful sternness of Nature. But if we be in the right, look to yourselves: laws do not check their action for your ignorance; fire will not cease to scorch, because you "did not know."

We know nothing beyond Nature; we judge of the future by the present and the past; we are content to work now, and let the work to come wait until it appears as the work to do; we find that our faculties are sufficient for fulfilling the tasks within our reach, and we cannot waste time and strength in gazing into impenetrable darkness. We must needs fight against superstitions because they hinder the advancement of the race, but we will not fall into the error of our opponents and try to define the Undefinable.

