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# CREED OF A SECULARIST.

“Nec tardum opperior nec præcedentibus insto.”

*Horace' Epistles, Bk. i., Ep. ii. 71.*



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THIS little tract was written for the members of the Belfast Secular Society. It was read at their meeting held on the 19th of April 1876, and was agreed to as setting forth their views on the subject of Natural Religion. It is only by arguments grounded on those views that we

“ May assert Eternal Providence  
And justify the ways of God to men.”

## CREED OF A SECULARIST.

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SO long ago as the time of Epicurus, B.C. 310, it was perceived that the universe need not be assumed to be a creation, but might be eternal and self-existent. This view was, however, opposed to the almost universal opinion of mankind, not only in those times, but in all ages since. That opinion was, and is, that the material universe is the production of a personal power. In this tract we propose to examine the arguments urged in support of this opinion and the doctrines founded on it.

Here, at the outset, it may be observed that the limits of a tract cannot contain a complete examination of a subject which is of the most supreme importance, and on which a vast amount has been written. But it is better to give the arguments on this subject in their most condensed form, as a manifesto of our belief, rather than that Secularists should remain in silence under the imputation that they do not believe anything. Therefore, we shall commence by giving the principal reasons on which Secularists generally ground their opinions in these days. And we shall conclude by stating what at present may be safely regarded as the Creed of a Secularist.

Each paragraph in these pages might be expanded into a volume, without exhausting what might be profitably written on the subject. At the same time, it is doubtful whether the generality of men, in the present state of their education and habits, would read or listen to a lengthened statement on this subject, to

understand which requires so much reasoning power and attention.

An erroneous impression is very widely spread, against which it is necessary to guard the honest inquirer. This wrong impression is that the burden of evidence lies with those who deny the validity of the proofs offered for the existence of a personal Deity and a future life. In a valuable work written lately by Professor Stanley Jevons, on the principles of science, he makes the following remarks in the preface :—

“Fears have been expressed that the progress of Scientific Method must [therefore] result in dissipating the fondest beliefs of the human heart. Even the utility of religion is seriously proposed as a subject for discussion. It seems to be not out of place in a work on Scientific Method to allude to the ultimate result and limits of that method. I fear I have very imperfectly succeeded in expressing my strong conviction that before a rigorous logical scrutiny, the Reign of Law will prove to be an unverified hypothesis,—the uniformity of nature an ambiguous expression,—the certainty of our scientific inferences to a great extent a delusion. . . . Our mental powers seem to fall infinitely short of the task of comprehending and explaining fully the nature of any object. I draw the conclusion that we must interpret the result of Scientific Method in an affirmative sense only.”

By this paragraph, Professor Jevons evidently thinks he has saved the Christian faith from its enemies.\* But the real fact is that he quite misunderstands the true position of Secularists. He thinks, as many eminent men think, that if they can prove that our scientific knowledge is only *probable*, though in a very high degree, they have overcome all objections to Christianity. It is right, therefore, to explain that such proofs would not, in any way, concern Secularists.

\* Professor Jevons is not singular. This piece of rhetoric is a favourite among those who publish *Assumptions without Philosophy*.



We are offered, for our belief and guidance, a great many different systems of theology and of morals. It is not enough for each of those persons, who call upon us to believe what they assert on such subjects, to threaten us with eternal damnation if we hesitate to assent to their doctrines. They are bound to give us reasons for the belief they ask us to accept, and not merely to say, "you are not omniscient, and therefore cannot prove that this doctrine is false. Therefore you must admit it is true." We are not reasonably called upon to prove absolutely that their doctrine is impossible. Our duty, and our desire, is to examine any evidence they offer in its favour, either on authentic testimony or on logical grounds. If this evidence be in open conflict with all the knowledge it is possible for men to obtain on any subject, it would be the height of folly to accept the doctrine as true, simply because all our knowledge is imperfect. If all our knowledge on any subject is only probable, why should we be required to admit any system of theology as absolutely true and not to be denied, or even examined, under the severest penalties?

But there are many reasons for believing that all our knowledge is not of the doubtful character attributed to it by Professor Jevons. And he shows an inconsistency, which he would be the first to detect in a work on science, but which seems to be inseparable from theological argument, when he asserts in one place (in the extract above) that all our scientific conclusions are affirmative only, and in another (Vol. I., p. 53), that "between affirmation and negation, there is [accordingly] a perfect balance or equilibrium. Every affirmative proposition implies a negative one, and vice versa."

Moreover, there are strong arguments for believing that many of our conclusions are absolutely certain. Our feelings are absolutely true. Because *what we feel we feel*. However erroneous our *inferences*, drawn from our feelings, may be, yet *the feelings are absolutely*

*true.* About this proposition there cannot be any doubt or uncertainty whatever. It is as true in dreaming and in mania as in the highest intellectual life. All our other knowledge consists in formula, constructed so as to declare that changes in our feelings are produced as if they were caused by certain objects which are supposed to be perceived as accompanying certain changes in the feelings, in some respects alike, and in some respects different. These objects have only an abstract existence; and they exist only in relation to the mind that feels the effects produced by their qualities. Every proposition could be put in a form which would contain certain truth about the relations of these objects to feeling, if it were worth while to incumber our phraseology with limitations, which, when remembered, are equally effectual when stated once for all.

It is by overlooking the fact of this relativity of knowledge that men persist in asking after the absolute, or the nature of the thing in itself. Everyone can see the futility of an inquiry about the distance of any point without referring to some other point from which the distance is to be measured. They forget that it is equally absurd to ask for the absolute nature of that which is found only *in relation to feelings*. And yet, one of the reasons for asserting that our knowledge is uncertain, is founded on the impossibility of answering such a question!

*We claim absolute certainty for our knowledge of relations of phenomena to feeling; the phenomena themselves being abstractions, and assumed because they account for feeling.* By observation of such relations and the aid of a first postulate—that nature is uniform,—we arrive at the furthest conclusions of science by the use of deductive logic. But here, again, the certainty of this postulate is denied, and on this hangs the whole question.

Now it will be admitted that the proposition known

as the law of identity, namely, "whatever is—is," is a certain truth. And it is equally true that "whatever is—will be, unless the conditions be changed." Because *the conditions themselves are part of what is*. And all our knowledge is composed of formula of what is. That is, what changes in feeling are observed as co-existing. Where error occurs, as it frequently does, it is in the practical application of our knowledge. We may not observe that the conditions are changed, and may make mistakes in supposing them to be the same as those before observed. But this does not diminish the certainty of the knowledge of which we thus make a wrong use.

All knowledge, traced to its ultimate source, is a classification of feelings. Feelings are not merely alike and different. There are many feelings which are partly alike and partly different. In fact the degree of likeness or difference may vary to any amount. Feelings are classified by their likenesses, and distinguished by their differences. If the classification be correctly performed, the knowledge so obtained is true without any uncertainty; *for all feelings are exactly what they are felt to be*. But it is necessary to guard against the error of supposing that when we have decomposed two feelings so as to separate the like from the unlike parts, that those like parts, though classified together and named, have any other than an abstract existence. It is useless to ask for their properties, further than those which belong to the parts of the feelings which are known to be alike. As only complete feelings are felt, parts of feelings must be abstractions. All feelings are complex, for they are the integrated effects of present perception and past association. We give names to these parts of our feelings for the sake of classification and communication; but it has been the great drag upon philosophy that men will consider these abstractions as objective, real and absolute, and without necessary relation to those feelings of which they form part. Matter

and motion, and force and mind, are all abstractions of this kind. Each of them may, with absolute truth, be described as that part of certain feelings which is alike. Any proposition concerning them that keeps this distinctly in view is true, without any mixture of uncertainty. To inquire what they are without reference to the feelings is to ask what is motion in itself without anything moved, or what is the nature of the number nine without anything to reckon or to divide into parts. In fact, so far as human knowledge is concerned, *feeling is the only concrete*, the only real thing. Any name given to what is not a complete state of feeling, is an abstract name. We can know the nature of these abstractions by knowing the likenesses in the feelings for which they stand, and we cannot know them in any other manner, because they are only abstractions: that is, each is only part of a feeling. But the conclusion to be drawn from this is that we do know them perfectly when we confine ourselves to the consideration of what they represent; and that we cannot know them at all without so confining ourselves. If our fancy endow them with an objective nature which does not truly belong to them, it is not wonderful that a definition cannot be given of their objective properties. We might as well ask what muscles we use when we fly in a dream. We have not any right to say our knowledge is uncertain because we cannot answer a question put in acategorematic terms, or, in other words, in language which has not any logical meaning.

But we have here come upon some of the most disputed points in the most difficult of inquiries, and we cannot hope that in the space at our command we can produce conviction in anyone holding an opinion different from that above expressed. Nor is it necessary to an inquiry into the validity of a belief tendered for our acceptance. For theological propositions must be exposed to at least as much doubt as can be proved to be inherent in all propositions of whatever kind. Natural

religion professes to examine these questions on scientific methods, and it is not for those using these methods to try to discredit their own witness.

Revelation demands assent on other grounds, but even here the evidence of authenticity must be examined by scientific methods, and if we be asked to admit that the Reign of Law is an unverified hypothesis, because of the uncertainty of all knowledge, what are we to say about assertions of inspiration made at remote times in out-of-the-way places, and in phraseology the meaning of which is constantly disputed? The truth is, as Bacon expressed it ("Novum Organum," i. sec. 49):—"The human understanding resembles not a dry light, but admits a tincture of the will and passions, which generate their own system accordingly; for man always believes more readily that which he prefers."

Discipline and subordination to a personal ruler are more essential to the well-being of a primitive community than they are in an advanced civilization. Obedience is cultivated as one of the prime virtues, and, when this becomes an habitual feeling, it prepares the mind for belief in a personal Deity.

So well as we know the theology of ancient nations, the qualities which they attributed to the personal power supposed to have produced the material universe, and to which we may give the general name of "Supreme Deity," have varied according to the *ethics* of the people who believed in his existence. The qualities which every people attribute to their god are those which they would most admire in their king. If they have a conception of a future life, their heaven will offer the delights they desire in this life and their hell the tortures they would willingly inflict on their enemies.

Thus the Grecian Zeus is an Olympian Agamemnon. He is not in every respect better than any other God, but like Agamemnon, who rules the combined armies of Greece before Troy, so Zeus presides perpetually at the council of the gods. Again, the Jewish idea of a



Jehovah was that of a chief priest who was also at the head of the State. The idea of the gods among the Romans was more republican. Their gods were so many consuls, with power to make a temporary dictator when occasion required. While the Christians represented the Creator as a being like the Bishop of Rome in his love of prayer, consisting partly of fulsome flattery, partly of insincere self-depreciation, joined with suggestions as to the best way of managing the world. He was also likened to the Pope in his love of gorgeous ceremonial, vows of asceticism, declared celibacy, fasting, and self-scourging. He could be coaxed into giving an unjust preference by the intercession of a favourite saint, male or female. And, above all, that men should be correct in their opinions as to his own nature, and that of the other two persons of the trinity, very obscurely indicated in revelation (as the numbers of heresies show), he was supposed to consider a matter of much more importance than that men should act for their own happiness and that of their fellow-men.

According to their own savage ideas the early Jews represented the deity as vindictive, jealous, and reserving all justice and favour for his chosen people, and extending it to them only so far as they kept the covenant, which, their traditions told them, had been made between him and Abraham, the founder of the race.

According to their own love of pleasure the ancient Greeks supposed that Zeus, their supreme deity, possessed qualities which we now consider wholly unworthy of a being who is to be worshipped and obeyed. The later Greeks, after the time of Plato, had indeed a higher idea of the qualities to be attributed to the ruler of the universe ; but as they were very reticent on this subject we cannot give any exact account of their beliefs on it, which indeed were confined to the educated.

When the members of the organised Christian church

proceeded to define the Supreme Deity, they were destitute of science and very imperfectly skilled in logic. Without regarding the imperfections of nature, or what they styled creation, they proceeded to flatter the Deity. It is true they believed that there existed inspired truth in the Jewish books which attributed to him actions of the most unjust, cruel, and abominable character; but they did not venture to form a moral estimate of those actions. At the same time, they inconsistently exalted the attributes of the Deity, so as to endow him with infinite wisdom, power, and goodness; and this is the view which all the theists in Christian nations, of whatsoever sect, take of their supreme deity.

It is our present object to examine the proofs that are offered to maintain the existence of such a Supreme Deity. But before entering upon that examination we shall show how the conception arose, of which the proofs were afterwards offered.

One great difficulty in dealing with this subject is the well-known fact that there are so few whose greatest desire is to know the truth. Æschylus ("Prometheus Bound," 248-50), speaks of the vain hopes that Prometheus or Foresight gave to men as a remedy for the disease of despair; and the great majority of mankind (although they would scarcely acknowledge it in explicit terms) would rather believe an agreeable falsehood than learn unpalatable truth. Bacon says "a mixture of a lie doth ever add pleasure," and Gray says "Where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise." An eminent writer speaking of education, says "Every man who rises above the common level has received two educations—the first from his teachers, the second, more personal and more important, from himself." Unfortunately the great mass of mankind never receive the second education.

Therefore it is hard to get men to examine the evidences of Natural Religion without prejudice, or even

with patience. They are afraid that the truth would abolish hopes that have now become customary, hereditary, respectable, and that a change would affect their honour. The truly wise man is he who does not fear anything so much as running the risk of believing that which is false. It has been said correctly that the most profound infidelity is that which fears lest the truth should be evil.

In every healthy man there is a strong instinctive fear of death. Such a fear is necessary to the continuance of the species. A race of men who had it not would necessarily perish before those in whom it was strong. But the effect of such a fear on the mind is to breed a hope that death is not a termination of existence, but the portal to another life. This hope, combined with certain experiences in dreams, reveries, and hallucinations, during which the primitive man believes he sees and converses with the dead, and the evident fact, namely, that death destroys the human body, gives rise to a belief that man is composed of two parts, a body and a soul; and that the soul has eternal life, while the body decays in the grave. This belief did not involve any obvious absurdity so long as the soul was imagined to be material. The name for the soul or spirit of man in Greek was *πνεῦμα*, in Hebrew *ruach*; and its nature was considered to be that of air. The writers of Genesis vi. 17, vii. 5, 22, the Septuagint translators of those passages, and the writer of Revelation xi. 11, called it "the breath of life." The Romans called it *animus*, which is akin to the Greek *ἄνεμος*, and to the Sanscrit *an* "to breathe." It is only by comparatively recent refinements that the soul has been considered to be immaterial, and until very lately there was a plausible analogy for such an existence, in the class of what chemists, forty years ago, called the "imponderables." Now that these imponderables have been shown to be only forces or functions of matter, the analogy which gave some probability to this conception of an immaterial



soul points to the conclusion that the so-called soul is merely a function of organised matter.

As soon as thought and power and capacity for sensation and feeling are conceived as possible, apart from a material body, there is not any reason for questioning the possibility of a personal spiritual deity. Among primitive races the powers above are believed to be the souls of departed heroes, whose power has been exaggerated by tradition.

All men suffer more or less pain in this world, and they see their neighbours suffering all around them. They do not always feel that their own sufferings are merited, and they know, so far as observation can teach them, that the pains of others are not at all proportionate to their misconduct. When civilization has so far advanced that justice is considered a duty, there is a strong desire to find results analogous to our ideas of human justice in the working of nature. Since such results in nature cannot be found in this life, man naturally desires to believe in a deity infinite in wisdom, power, and goodness, who will rectify in a future life the inequalities of this life—punishing the guilty, rewarding the virtuous, lowering the successful and proud, and raising the humble.

In modern times, when human sympathies have been so far extended as to include remote posterity, there is a strong desire for the progress of the human race ; and until lately it was believed that there was not any guarantee for such progress other than the guidance of a benevolent deity. There is now reason for believing in human progress as a result of natural causes ; but before these reasons were apparent, there were many who asserted that the human race was deteriorating, physically and mentally, and could be restored to its primitive vigour and virtue only by divine aid.

For such reasons an overwhelming majority of mankind were ready to accept joyfully any evidence of the existence of a deity with the attributes of infinite wisdom,

power, and goodness. To those so ready to believe, an assertion of the fact, authoritatively made by any very able man who said, and may have believed, he had a supernatural revelation of the truth, was sufficient to obtain a number of enthusiastic disciples who, confident in the goodness of their intentions, added accounts of miracles performed by their teacher, the more readily to allay the doubts or countervail the opposition with which their assertions of revelation were frequently met. Many such revelations have been believed in by different bodies of men. When miracles were believed to be of frequent occurrence, the truth of the miracles claimed by rival sects was not denied; but they were attributed to the devil.\* And although the believers in each supposed revelation, claim it as an exception, and believe their own miracles, yet all will admit the substantial truth of this account of the rise of the rival systems.

It is beyond the scope of the present tract to refute the claims which any body of believers may think they possess for believing they have a teacher who has been the receiver of a direct and supernatural revelation. In the present day miraculous stories do not add much to the authority of any creed, and, in the absence of miracles, how can a man know certainly that the communication which he has received, either as vision or as voice, and which he believes to be a supernatural revelation, is not a mere delusion? An eminent writer said, "If one assert that God spoke to him in a dream, it is only another way of saying he dreamed that God spoke." In fact many eminent divines, feeling that proof by revelation is scarcely convincing of itself, have offered arguments in favour of the existence of such a deity as we have described, on other grounds.

\* We may here refer to a remarkable fact ("Phases of Faith," chapter ii.), namely, that the Mahommedans have a current notion that the four Gospels contained in our New Testament are spurious narratives of late date.

Such proofs are all founded on what is known as the law of causality, which is acknowledged as true by all.

But there are two different opinions—each held by able and eminent men—as to the grounds of the belief in the law of causality. Those who believe in innate ideas think that we have an intuitive knowledge that there cannot be any effect without a cause armed with power adequate to produce the effect. Those who reject the doctrine of innate ideas consider that our belief is warranted only by invariable experience; and until very lately they have denied that the term cause includes the idea of power, and have asserted that it is simply a recognition of the fact that every effect has, under the same circumstances, an unvarying antecedent called its cause, and every cause under the same limitation an invariable consequence called its effect. It is now held by men of science that the amount of energy in the material universe is never increased or diminished in the least degree. This theory, known as “the conservation of energy,” enables us to give greater precision to our conception of causality.

Cause and effect consist in two successive states of matter, of which the preceding is the cause, the succeeding the effect. All phenomena imply an arrangement of matter in space called the conditions and a change of this arrangement. The word “cause” is sometimes understood as including the arrangement, but is now more frequently confined to the dynamic cause. Every change of state implies a transfer of energy between the parts of a definite arrangement of matter. The conditions of the change consist of this arrangement. The cause is the energy possessed by the matter before the transfer. The effect is the new distribution of matter and energy after the transfer. The energy transferred may be of three forms—either motion of one portion into an equivalent amount of motion in another portion, or motion into strain, or strain into motion. The idea of power is thus restored

to the term cause, with the advantage that the amount of power can be measured, and that the cause and effect being often interchangeable, are found in all such cases to be equal in energy, including both actual and potential.

This, in effect, is the same doctrine as that of the Intuitionists, though held under a different warrant. Both schools are agreed that the cause must be adequate to produce the effect, and both accept the effect as a measure of the cause. Indeed, causes are continually measured by their effects, and cannot be measured by anything else. An amount of heat is measured by the quantity of ice it will melt—a degree of heat by the expansion it causes of the mercury in a thermometer—and the strength of the will by the amount of temptation it will overcome. Now, as all our experience on this subject consists in perceiving transfer of a *limited* amount of energy—which, as it can be conceived to be increased, is certainly not infinite—it is a hopeless attempt on the part of either Intuitionist or Experientialist to prove an omnipotent creator or infinite power from the existence of finite effects, by means of the law of causality, which measures power by its effect.

As for omniscience, it is hard to reconcile this attribute with thought at all. Because, according to our experience of thought, it is essentially mutable—fluctuating—uncertain; and without these qualities it should not be called thought. We think only when we are in doubt or difficulty. Those actions which we have learned to perform without difficulty we perform without thought. Those conclusions which were at first formed with difficulty, and received with doubt, become instinctive when they become habitual. The child expends intense thought upon remembering the multiplication table; the practised accountant writes down the result without thought. But if there be not any sufficient reason for believing that the governing power has

any attribute analogous to what we know as mind, then it is needless to prove that the hypothesis that there is such a thing in nature as omniscience involves a self-contradiction. Psychology is now able to account for all changes of feeling on the hypothesis which physiology confirms—namely, that changes of feeling are always preceded or accompanied by motion in the grey matter partly composing the nerves; and changes of feeling, together with past feelings, recalled by association, constitute the whole of what we call mind. Hence there is not any mental action which may not be accounted for by motions of matter within or without the human organism. This does not leave any room for supposing there is an entity called mind, soul, devil, angel, spirit, goblin, fairy, witch, demon, leprechaun, banshee, ghost, or, in short, any sort of intellect which can exist without an organised system of nerves in a material body.

That there is a necessary connection between mind and body is further proved by what is called in logic the method of concomitant variations. We find that the mind alters with the body, that it grows with its growth, and that it strengthens with its strength. As the body grows old and approaches its end, the mind decays. In disease or fatigue of body, the mind is less powerful than when the body is in health and in a state of vigour. When health is restored, or repose has reinvigorated the body, the mind resumes its power. Further, by acting on the body with drugs, we can cause at will variations of mental power and mental state. The ego, or personality, consists in continuity. The human body is constantly changing, but so long as its power of waste and repair remains continuous, the individuality and identity remain. It is on the same principle of continuity that a river remains the same although the water of which it is composed is always changing. When the continuity of the body is destroyed after death—when the continual waste of the



cells which compose the tissues, caused by their death, is not replaced—the body loses its personality. There is not any longer an organized system of nerves preserving the traces of past feelings, and whereby the past ideas can be incorporated with present feelings. Consequently the continuity of mental states ceases with the dissolution of the body, and the personality of the mind is at an end.

In fact the belief that the Creator has a mind is usually defended only by the application of human analogy to the notion of final causes. It is asserted that the universe shows such proofs of design, in its orderly arrangement, that its present state can be accounted for only on the supposition that the universe was preconceived and all the means by which its condition at any time was to be reached predetermined in the mind of the Creator or Supreme Deity.

This argument to account for the existing order in matter supposes a self-existent order in mind. But it would be valid only if there were any sufficient reason for believing that order is more probably a property inherent in mind than in matter. There is not any such reason. We really have not any experience of order in mind, which does not arise from order in matter. And, on the other hand, we have some substantial indications that matter may contain within itself a principle of order.

This indication that there is a principle of order inherent in matter, and the natural forces acting on it, is to be found in the doctrine of development. For a long time this doctrine was discredited; but now since Darwin pointed out the reach and bearing of the law of natural selection, that doctrine has been received by all the most eminent foreign thinkers, and by a daily increasing number of our own more conservative countrymen. Darwin applied his own theory only to organized matter. On that point there is not any one whose knowledge is superior to his, and with scientific

caution he restricted his inferences to his special subject. But the doctrine has been shown to be much more generally applicable to the explanation of the nature and changes of the universe, in the works of Herbert Spencer, who traces the possible genesis of all the present forms of the ordered universe from the necessary action of known forces on such a distribution of matter as science has shown to have been most probable.

To state the scope of his arguments here, in a manner that would do them justice, is simply impossible. The main point is that such arrangements of matter as are more in harmony with the surrounding forces, must have greater relative permanence than those which are less so; and as all arrangements are sooner or later deranged or broken in pieces there must ensue a continually increasing harmony among the groups of atoms which form individual objects, at first inanimate, later becoming organized, and, in the highest development yet reached, possessed of thought.

It is not necessary for the purpose of our present inquiry to admit that any of the details given by Herbert Spencer are true. It is enough to show that matter may be conceived to contain in itself a principle of order, and that this conception is in harmony with known facts. While on the other hand it is impossible to adduce any facts in support of the opinion that any mind untaught by experience (that does not, in other words, reflect the observed order in matter) does contain such a principle of order.

All the minds of which we have any experience have gained their ideas of order from observation of the phenomena of matter. The faculty which enables them to observe with advantage is itself inherited from many generations of ancestors. So far, therefore, our experience goes to show that order in matter is not the effect of preconceived order in mind, but that order in mind is the effect of unvarying laws acting on matter, and

thus producing order in that matter which is reflected in the mind capable of perceiving it and drawing conclusions from it.

Thus, experience is utterly at variance with the theory of final causes, which professes to be founded on human analogy.

But the law of causality is in itself sufficient to overthrow the argument from final causes. The whole arrangement of matter at any one time is the result of the arrangement of the preceding instant, each atom acting with the motions or energies it then had. That preceding arrangement, again, is the result of what preceded it. And so the series of states may be traced backwards.

The present condition of the universe is the *necessary* result of every preceding state. Were the universe to be replaced in the same state as it was millions of years back, and subject to the same forces, it would of *necessity* pass through exactly the same series of states which it has done and arrive at the same result. The same men acted on by the same motives, would do as they have done. It is impossible that any variation could arise from any supposed action of choice or free will. *Everything that takes place in the universe is the result of unvarying forces.*

Two of the greatest results of modern science are that matter and energy are each constant in amount; so that unless we are prepared to put an arbitrary limit, in time past, on the action of present laws, we must find, at the furthest term in the series to which we have patience to follow it, that the matter and the energy were the same as now. In fact *we have the same grounds for believing that matter and energy have existed from eternity that we have for believing that space is infinite.* In the one case we cannot find that after as many steps as our imagination can make we come any nearer an end. In the other case, after an equal number of steps we are unable to perceive any sign of a beginning.



If matter and power have been eternal there cannot be any cause for their existence ; for a cause involves a priority in time, and there cannot be any priority when the series to be accounted for has been eternal.

In truth the argument from final causes halts on every foot. Because from the existence of an ordered universe to prove the existence of a Supreme Deity who is infinite in wisdom, power, and goodness, it is necessary to prove that the universe in question is as perfect as its assumed creator.

It is scarcely possible that any disputant will be so hardy as to assert the perfection of this world. Those who are most earnest in asserting their belief in the existence of a deity with such attributes are most emphatic in their denunciations of sin. Do they deny that sin is an evil ? Or do they reprobate that which they do not believe to exist ?

In short, the old dilemma of Epicurus has never yet received an answer. Can the deity overcome evil and will he not ? Then he is not benevolent. Would he do so but cannot ? Then he is not omnipotent.

Theology has been singularly unfortunate in the attempt to overcome the fear of death by the immortality it promises. The conception of a possible hell is enough to increase rather than mitigate the fear of death ; and thoughtful people find it hard to believe that any good man could be happy in a promised heaven while a number of his fellow-creatures were suffering most horrible and eternal torments. And thus the conceptions of a future life and a Supreme Deity have lost for ever a portion of that weight which they once possessed among mankind.

As an act of justice, or vengeance, the punishment of the wicked is not any longer looked upon with the same satisfaction that it was when man's passions were more uncontrolled. Most of those persons who think on these subjects would be better pleased that the ill-doers should be wiped out of society, and simply prevented

from doing any more mischief, than that they should suffer eternal torments. There is not any thoughtful and benevolent man who has any sympathy with those who believe that part of the happiness of Lazarus, lying in the bosom of Abraham, was derived by Lazarus from his beholding the sufferings of Dives.

All men act from the strongest motives and cannot act otherwise. Consequently to prove that the punishment in a future existence of what was inevitable in this life could be an act of justice, is simply impossible. Evil-doers here must be restrained or destroyed if the race is to advance. But such restraint or destruction is to be inflicted for the same reasons that any other immediate obstacles to human advancement are to be removed. This is the justification of human punishment, which crushes the venomous serpent without believing in its moral guilt. But it does not justify unnecessary torture. Guilt should be punished: but the guilty person should not be subjected to protracted torments, here or hereafter.

Lastly our hope of improvement in the condition of living beings does not any longer appear to depend wholly on the hypothesis that there is a Deity infinite in wisdom, power, and goodness. We see that the tendency of natural forces is to bring all organisations more into harmony with each other, and to disintegrate the inharmonious elements altogether. A CONTINUANCE OF THIS ADJUSTMENT IS ITSELF PROGRESS.

These arguments, (to which might be added many others equally cogent) are sufficient to prove that from what we know of the material universe, there is not sufficient reason for accepting the doctrine that it has or ever had a first cause outside itself, or, if it had, that such cause was infinite in wisdom, power, and goodness. There is not any necessity for believing that there is a cause for the existence of matter or energy. Because these are as likely to have been eternal as space is likely to be infinite. And the argument might

be left here if the phenomena of the universe could be accounted for by matter and transfer of motion alone. But it will have been observed that this is not our statement. We have distinguished between two forms of energy. One consisting of matter in motion, the other of matter in a state of strain owing to forces of attraction and repulsion inherent in it. Science tends more and more to show that these forces are only different modes whereby one force is manifested.

This force, then, must be considered the Eternal Cause of which we are in search. This force is the ultimate cause to which and to which only we can ever refer all phenomena. There is not the least advantage in seeking further or supposing a cause for this cause. *So long as we can refer a particular effect to a general cause we are increasing our knowledge.* When we suppose a cause that is not more general than its supposed effect, we are guilty of having recourse to the exploded method of explanation, ridiculed by Molière. For instance, the explanation that Opium produced sleep because it had a *virtus dormativus*. To assume a cause for the forces inherent in matter, would be to seek a cause not in the least more general than the effect to be accounted for. Because all phenomena can be expressed in terms of matter and force. Since matter is eternal it does not need a cause. It follows that *there cannot be any cause more general than force*; because force is all that remains of phenomena when matter has been accounted for.

But there is not any present warrant for endowing these forces with the attributes of personality, such as thought and the moral qualities of justice and benevolence. Power they have. But this power is far from being infinite. The fact that in many cases the amount of this power can be very accurately measured proves that it is finite.

There is a favourite speculation with some theists that the universe may be arranged in a manner

analogous to the brain of a thinking being, and there are some plausible arguments for this speculation. If the law stated by Herbert Spencer be correct, namely, that in any arrangement of matter, motion which has already passed through any line will be more easily produced in the same line, then associated motions will be reproduced together; and as this is believed to be the action which accompanies and is a feeling, it is not an unreasonable inference that the universe may possess feeling. The reasons against admitting this doctrine may be stated here in a very brief form. The experience of such a mind of the universe as that speculation involves would be complete. It would include all preceding phenomena. There would be an immediate and instinctive response to every new excitation, and we know from our invariable experience of mind that in such cases consciousness is absent. When we have practised writing we are not conscious of the process by which the muscles of the fingers are governed. In the case supposed the actions of the universe would all be of the same instinctive nature; and therefore devoid of consciousness.

In conclusion, it may be stated that a Secularist can have a creed as well as any other man. Of course the creed of a Secularist must vary according as human knowledge advances. But it is not any part of our belief that it is our duty either to relinquish inquiry after truth through despair, nor do we wish to have the appearance of knowing more than we do, or more than any other people. On the contrary, we reserve to ourselves the right of suspending our judgment until we perceive sufficient reason for believing any particular truth. The maxim of Horace is here strictly applicable:—

“For him that’s slow I do not wait,  
Nor those before me emulate.”

In short, whatever may be the state of human know-

ledge the creed of a Secularist must always be a creed which does not conflict with facts as we know them. It is needless, and it is unjust to represent Secularists as merely the destroyers of received opinions ; especially as secularists have a faith which those who read what follows will perceive to be perfectly definite, and, in so far, the very antipodes of scepticism.

For we believe in one Deity, or controlling power over the universe, who manifests himself as energy. He is unchangeable in quantity and amount. *He governs according to fixed laws*, and he has not any known beginning or ending. His will is written in his works, and has been partly understood and explained to man by a series of prophets from Thales, Aristotle and Epicurus to Huxley, Tyndal and Darwin. A revelation of his will, but not a supernatural one, is constantly being made more and more complete. To learn this, to know and obey it, is to acquire happiness for ourselves and our descendants. To be careless of it or disobedient to it, leads to punishment inevitable, without mercy and without resentment, *but strictly according to law*. The father's sins of neglect or disobedience are visited on the children ; and the ultimate result is death to the family. "The wages of sin is death." Those who have learned and followed the law are nature's aristocracy and continue their lives through their offspring and live as a race for ever. Our Deity does not require any praise or flattery. Prayer will not alter his actions : nor does he require or punish any love or hatred. Knowledge of his will and active obedience to it "is the whole duty of man." His will, like the will of man, is the result of the various forces and their actions, *strictly according to law*. The end is progress ; because those who are the fittest to live are those who survive. Those who rebel and those who follow false gods are alike punished. Repentance, followed by knowledge and obedience may redeem the race :—



“Ignorance is the curse of God  
Knowledge the wing wherewith we fly to heaven.”

But the punishment which lies in the consequences of disobedience must be borne, and will bear fruit for ever, or at least, so long as the continuity of the family exists.

We believe that the life of the obedient will be continued through succeeding stages of improvement, not in their own persons, but in those of their descendants who inherit their faculties and habits. The continuity of life will thus transmit the integrated effects of all previous conduct. But there is not any such continuity of consciousness or of feeling. The material representative of this everlasting life, whether suffering or enjoying the effects of the actions which have made him what he is, has not any memory of those actions which occurred before his birth, nor will he be conscious of their effects when they occur after his death.

