

THE
EXISTENCE OF GOD ;

OR,

QUESTIONS FOR THEISTS.

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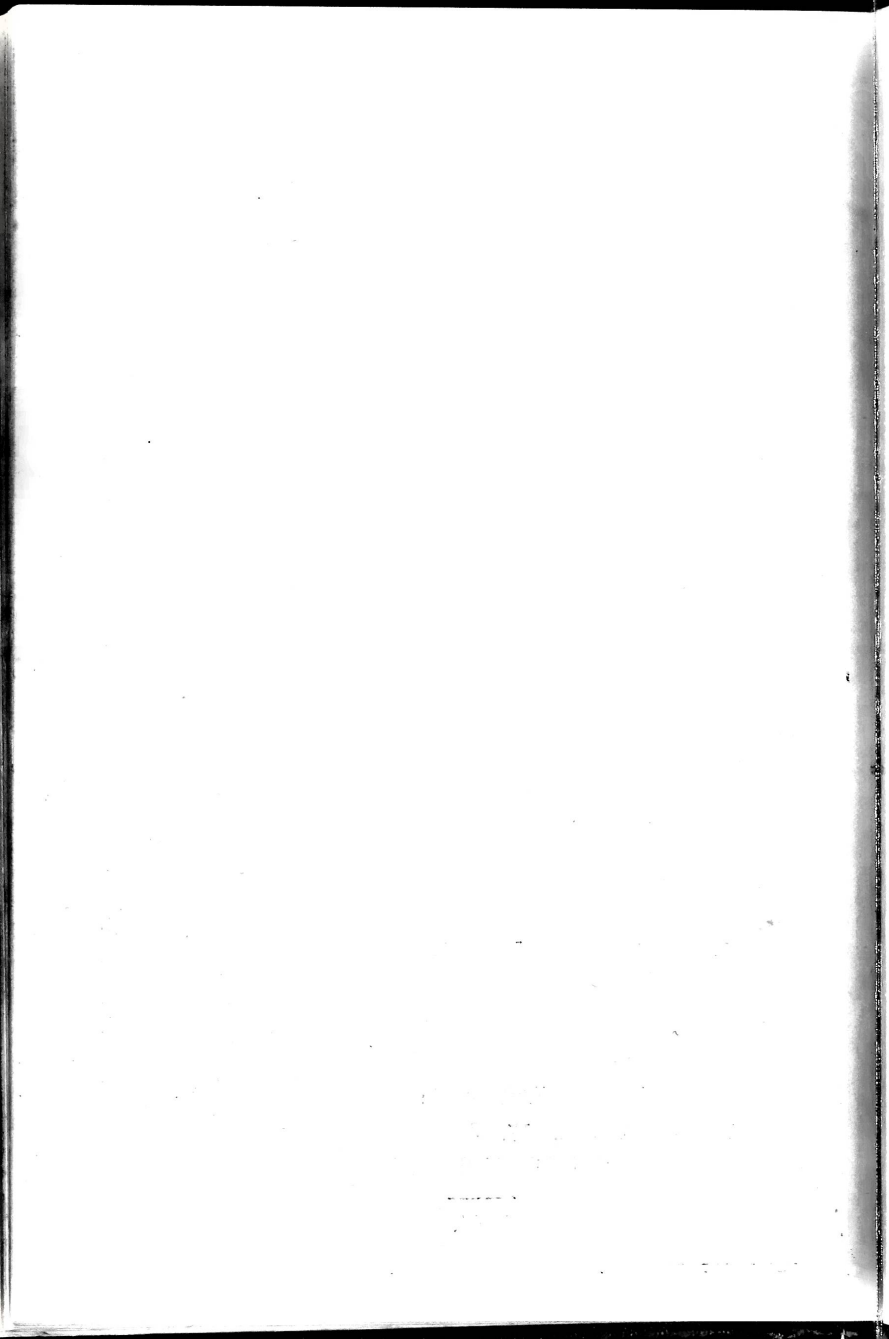
CHARLES WATTS

(Vice-President of the National Secular Society).

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THEISTS of marked intellectual ability persistently avoid any attempt to defend the Christian's notion of their God as he is delineated in the Bible. The reason, no doubt, of this is that the character given to the deity by the "inspired writers" is so contradictory and repulsive that no amount of reasoning will harmonise it with modern ideas of justice, purity, and morality. Now is it not inconsistent upon the part of Christians to preach to credulous congregations about the virtues of God, while they dare not endeavor to defend, in public discussion, the same Being before a critical audience? Surely orthodox exponents, to be consistent, should, when they undertake to prove the "existence of God," confine their attention to the God of the Old and New Testaments. If they feel that they cannot do this, it is their duty to say so; and further, to be honest, they should inform their followers that the character of the "Heavenly Father," as depicted in the Bible, cannot be defended by reason and ethical science. Is it not a sham and a delusion to profess to believe in a being whose nature and conduct are indefensible?

Feeling their utter inability to argue in favor of the Christian deity, Theists shelter themselves behind some metaphysical creation of their own, which they call "An Infinite, All-powerful, and Intelligent Being distinct from the material universe." Now, supposing there is such a being, where is the proof of his existence? Do not the varied and contradictory conceptions that are alleged to obtain as to his nature and attributes show that no idea of such a being really exists? It occurs to us that, if there be a God who is all-powerful and infinite in intelligence, he must know

that the human race have no knowledge of him. Moreover, if he wishes us to have this knowledge, he, being all-powerful, could impart it. But he has not imparted it; therefore are we not justified in believing one of two things—namely, either that this supposed Being lacks the knowledge of our ignorance of him, or that he has not the power to make himself known? In either case he could not be a God of infinite power and wisdom.

What is called "Advanced Theism" is but a metaphysical abstraction. It has been said that from metaphysics almost anything can be apparently proved. We are told that metaphysics treat of the "inner secret, or logic of thought," and as persons differ in their thoughts as to what lies hidden in the "inner secret," most of what persons say upon the matter is but little more than individual speculation. Metaphysics have always appeared to us to cover a certain amount of intellectual jugglery. Karl Pearson, in his *Grammar of Science*, writes: "Now one of the idiosyncrasies of metaphysicians lies in this: that each metaphysician has his own system, which, to a large extent, excludes that of his predecessors and colleagues. Hence, we must conclude that metaphysics are either built on air or on quicksands—either they start from no foundation in fact at all, or the superstructure has been raised before a basis has been found in the accurate classification of facts. . . . The metaphysician is a poet, often a very great one, but, unfortunately, he is not known to be a poet, because he clothes his poetry in the language of apparent reason, and hence it follows that he is liable to be a dangerous member of the community." Avoiding, as much as possible, this disguised poetry, let us take a practical view of the difficulties surrounding the allegation: "That there exists an Infinite, All-powerful and Intelligent Being distinct from the material universe." Before this allegation is proved certain evidence must be produced, and important questions must be satisfactorily answered. Now, there are three kinds of evidence: that which is derived from the senses; that which is relied upon from testimony; and that which we obtain from the deductions of reason. While assumption is sometimes permissible, bare assumption cannot justify the Theist's affirmation. The term, "an intelligent Being," implies a form of exist-

ence that manifests the knowing faculty. "A Being," as Mill, in his *Logic*, observes, is one who excites feelings and possesses attributes. By the "material universe" we understand the totality of existence, with all its attributes, properties, and forces. All the evidence in reference to the said intelligent Being and to the universe should be drawn from one or more of the three kinds of evidence above mentioned. Further, every formulated thought, every true cognition, should possess three characteristics—namely, relation, likeness, and difference. Any analysis of thought that reveals the absence of any one of these three characteristics indicates that we have no certain conception of what may be expressed in words. For instance, the terms "creation," "annihilation," and "the infinite," as used by theologians, convey to us no definite and logical meaning.

Putting aside the theory that divides existence into spiritual and material, for which we fail to see, as Professor Huxley does, any justification in nature, what is affirmed by eminent writers to-day? We are told of the persistence of force, the continuity of motion, and the indestructibility of matter; that law prevails throughout all nature, and that the materials of which different bodies are composed can be identified by their similarity. Again, we regard every thought as being conditioned; to think, as Hamilton puts it, is to limit. Therefore, apart from physical causes, we are unable to think, to lay down a boundary beyond which we can say nothing is. Every conclusion implies that there is something beyond. To affirm that there is an "infinite, intelligent Being apart from the universe" is to distinguish it *from* the universe, and to contend for two existences. Before, however, this can be done successfully it has to be proved that nature is limited. To *assume* a limit to the universe is not *evidence*, because no proof has been given of its limitations. To postulate an "infinite, intelligent Being" distinct from the universe vitiates the law of thought to which we have referred, inasmuch as the definition does not express likeness, and it negates relation. Of course, we do not assert there is no such intelligent Being, but only that we have no evidence of his existence.

Our position is that nature is; that, so far as we can ascertain, it is destructible only in its various forms. Is it

not, therefore, possible that this nature is the "something" of which endless existence may be affirmed? An endless "intelligent Being" is that which does not possess a likeness to any known existence. All intelligent beings, as we know them, must begin and end, or they cannot be thought of. The senses or testimony fail to afford us evidence of the existence of such a being as the Theists contend for. We are, therefore, unable to see how, from reason, any evidence can be adduced to prove that of which we can form no conception. It is clear, that, if there is such a being, he is limited in the extent of his power, for this reason—as a "Being" his power must be limited, and as he exists apart from something else, he is not the whole of existence. Everything to be thought of must exist in some place and in some relation to other existences, and therefore to speak of one being apart from all else is the annihilation in thought of that one. Besides, how can a Being who is distinct *from* the universe manifest his power *in* the universe? While distinct he is non-related, and cannot affect it. If he does influence nature, it is only when he becomes a part thereof, and then he is no longer distinct from it. If God is infinite, in the sense of being everywhere, he is in the universe. If he is not in the universe, his sphere is limited and finite. In that case, where does his superior power, to that possessed by nature, commence, and where is it made visible to us? How are we to distinguish between natural power and God power? Further, if he be distinct from nature, where is he? And what exists between his dwelling-place and nature? That is, are the two—nature and God's abode—connected? If yes, by what? If by nothing, what is that?

Before the Theist can make good his assertion, that there exists "an infinite, all-powerful, and intelligent Being distinct from the universe," he should be able to satisfactorily answer the following questions: (1) Can the universe be limited by human thought? (2) Can we conceive of a time when the universe was not? (3) How is it possible for God, if he be distinct from nature, to control and regulate it? (4) Have we any proof that the power of nature is acquired and limited? (5) Where is the evidence that God's intelligence is different from, and superior to, that of man? (6) Supposing God exists, has

his intelligence always been used for the benefit of the human family? (7) Is the world governed upon the principles of justice, goodness, and mercy? It occurs to us that, before the Theist should positively allege that he knows a God exists, a reasonable reply should be given to these queries. If it is admitted that no logical answer can be given to them, is not that very admission a proof that Theism is a belief without adequate evidence?

Remembering the difficulties that these questions suggest, it is not surprising that Dr. Knight, in his recent work, *Aspects of Theism*, should write thus: "The God of the logical understanding, whose existence is supposed to be attested by the necessary laws of mind, is the mere projected shadow of self. It has, therefore, no more than an ideal significance. The same may be said, with some abatements, of the Being whose existence is inferred from the phenomena of design. The ontologist and the teleologist unconsciously draw their own portrait; and, by an effort of thought, project it outward on the canvas of infinity." In reference to design, an able American writer puts the following pertinent question: "Did God design the universe? If so, his plans must be eternal—without beginning, and therefore uncaused. If God's plans are not eternal; if from time to time new plans originate in his mind, there must be an addition to his knowledge; and, if his knowledge admits of addition, it must be finite. But if his plans had no beginning; if, like himself, they are eternal, they must, like him, be independent of design. Now, the plan of a thing is as much evidence of design as the object which embodies the plan. Since the plans of deity are no proof of design that produced them (for they are supposed to be eternal), the plan of this universe, of course, was no evidence of a designing intelligence that produced it. But since the plan of the universe is as much evidence of design as the universe itself, and since the former is no evidence of design, it follows that design cannot be inferred from the existence of the universe."

Again, if it be contended that an intelligent power can and does control matter and force from outside the universe, it should be shown how this outside power can be separated in thought from matter and force, and yet, at the same time, be a perceptible existence. At the most this can only

be inferred. Matter being infinite (that is, unlimited) in extension and duration, the "non-matter" cannot exist apart from it. Neither can it be ascertained how far (if there be any relation) the one is independent of the other, or how the presence of "non-matter" can be even inferred, except by its influence on matter. Is it possible to conceive of the universality of both matter and non-matter? The Theists speak of an "intelligent Being" who rules the universe and regulates the destiny of man. But intellect implies a power capable of exercising reason and judgment. We have no evidence of intellect existing by itself. Perception is a function of an organism; all intellect, as we know it, is attended by living organised matter, and the one is always related to the other, not apart from it.

We fail to see how the human mind can conceive an idea of an "intelligent Being" apart from, or independent of, matter, for the same reason that we are incapable of forming an idea that motion can exist separately from matter. In order to establish the existence of a Being distinct from matter, it is necessary to assume that matter is limited in extent and in time, and that it is destitute of all the properties that we claim it now possesses, except that of mere existence. But even then we should require evidence that any mind could have produced everything out of nothing, and have endowed it, under certain forms, with powers to live, feel, and think. If it is assumed that all physical forces that are manifested in nature, which exhibit skill, will, intention, and purpose, are qualities of mind, and not of matter, then the question arises, By what mode of action does an "intelligent Being apart from them" exercise will, intention, and purpose, through such forces? If we do not know, why should we assume that we do?

But if all unverified assumptions are accepted, or are assumed, as necessary to explain phenomena, the evidence of them can be found only in the very nature that they are supposed to explain. Moreover, the assumption of an "intelligent Being" existing outside of nature can only be a deduction from manifestations inside of nature, where it is admitted that he is not present. This is a contradiction, for it implies that action is caused by a power

that is not there to act. We can only assume nature and its properties as being capable of partial explanation, or even cognition; and, although we cannot fully account for them, we do but multiply impossibilities of thought by attempts to explain their ultimate nature, origin, and purpose. Is it not self-evident that—(1) Every part of existence, the All, must be related to every other part? (2) That the whole of existence can have no relation to any other whole? (3) That only the one whole contains self-knowledge, self-will, and self-intention? (4) If the universe, which to us is the whole, had intelligence imparted to it from without, when, where, and how was it imparted? (5) How could an intelligent person manifest intelligence, without the conditions being present which we know to be necessary for its manifestations?

Every intelligent being, whatever attributes he may be endowed with, must be a person having identity; he must also be distinguishable from every other intelligent being. The material world is full of such distinct intelligent beings, and therefore they must stand in some relation to any other being who may exist. We repeat, that a being, to be thought of at all, must be characterised by relation, likeness, and difference, which cannot be affirmed of an abstraction apart from the universe or separate from the All. Now, it may be fairly alleged that the very thought of personality is inconsistent with infinity. Experience teaches us that a being who feels, thinks, and reasons is limited by an organism that is acted upon, and that responds to the movements of an external world. From experience we also learn that no intelligent being can exercise his intellectual powers without food and air. We do not mean that thought is the direct product simply of food and air, any more than are muscular action and animal heat; but we do mean that we have no knowledge of living beings in which these three manifestations are not dependent upon food and air. Now, the question for Theists to endeavor to answer is, If the sources of these energies are not in the universe, where are they? Why should we attempt to rob nature, of whose power we know something, of that potency which is displayed on every hand, and ascribe it to a source of which nothing is known, whatever is believed upon the subject?

Further, to logically affirm the existence of an "intelligent Being" apart from the universe, not only must the universe be deprived of many of its properties, but it must be assumed that this supposed "intelligent Being," who is said to exist distinct from the universe, could operate from without, and at the same time be within the universe. Now, here is a difficulty. How could a person operate where he was not? If he is distinct from the universe, he is not in it; and if he is not there, how could he control and regulate that with which he is not connected? If it is said God is infinite, then in that case he is in the universe, and not apart from it. This may not be the perplexing metaphysical view of the matter, but we regard it as being the more reasonable and practical one.

We have had quite enough of mysticism associated with this question. Hence, Agnosticism upon this subject appears to us to be the more reasonable position to take. Agnostics, refusing to profess a knowledge they cannot command, aim to differentiate the knowable from the unknowable, and then devote their time and energies to widening the sphere of that within human gnosis. Whatever else is possible, it is certain that we can never extend the domain of the known by indulging in wild flights of the imagination respecting the unknown, and to us the unknowable. As Socrates observes: "Fancies beyond the reach of understanding, and which have yet been made the objects of belief—these have been the source of all the disputes, errors, and superstitions which have prevailed in the world. Such national mysteries cannot be made subservient to the right use of humanity."

There is another consideration in reference to this subject, which appears to us to be important. Upon the hypothesis that an intelligent Being exists distinct from the universe, the following queries may be submitted: Did he form the rocks for the builders? Animals and plants for breeders and horticulturists to experiment upon and produce varieties? Did he arrange mountains and valleys, seas, and rivers for geographical and navigating purposes? The Theist will doubtless answer that he did produce all these things, and for the objects named. But, before such a position is proved, it must be shown that there was a time when these things were not, which, except in the case

of animals, it would be very difficult to do ; and, further, it must be demonstrated that this "Being" really did produce all that now exists. What, however, does this assume? Why this: that there was a place where there was no place. But then the question would arise, How could a "Being" be nowhere, and produce rocks, animals, plants, etc., out of nothing? These things could not possibly have been an emanation from the Being himself, inasmuch as he is alleged to be distinct from all of them. If it were possible to prove this Theistic assumption, then the discoveries in the various sciences of energies, causes, and sequences of recognised natural forces would be nothing more nor less than fictions of the human brain. "Thus," as Dr. Toulmin, in his *Eternity of the Universe*, exclaims, "must it most evidently appear that every step we advance beyond the universe is relinquishing a sublime, an infinite, and certain existence in search of an existence removed from the evidences of our senses. . . . For again let me observe that the uncaused existences which could produce the universe, itself infinitely splendid, superb, and intelligent, must—were it possible—be still more wonderful and superb than the universe or Nature, which they are said to have produced ; and consequently there is greater difficulty in conceiving them self-existent than in conceiving the unbounded universe self-existent."

The Theist's position further assumes that the universe and man are incapable of producing that which we know to exist, and that the present "order of things" could not be the result of certain molecular movements of the elements in nature. Therefore, it is argued that a belief in a "powerful and intelligent Being distinct from the material universe" is necessary to account for things as they are. Now, this assumption is based upon a still further assumption—namely, that we are acquainted with the extent of nature's power. But who has been enabled to fathom such a mystery? Where is the man who has either penetrated into the depths of the earth below, or soared into the regions above, and there sufficiently grasped the extent of natural force to justify him saying "this or that event is beyond the power of nature to produce"? Before we can, with reason, dogmatise upon what nature cannot do, we must know all that she can do, and that

is a knowledge that we have yet to learn that any one possesses.

No man can fix a limit to the possibilities of the potency in nature. Why, then, should the power of the universe be limited by man, when he has never known that power to be exhausted? Do diseases or epidemics afflict and desolate society? Nature affords the advantages of science to alleviate the one, and to get rid of the other. If political wrongs curse a nation, and despotism strives to crush the freedom of its people, the heroism in man is at once stimulated, and his love for liberty aroused, so that he nobly and persistently toils to remedy the former, and to maintain the latter. If social inequalities keep men in a false and unfair position in life, the natural yearning which all men have more or less for the improvement of their position in the world stimulates them to try to break down the barriers to social equity and mutual enjoyment. The inspiration to these useful actions springs from natural impulses, and not from any imaginary supernatural agency. Nature has already done a thousand things which our forefathers would have declared to be impossible, and she will doubtless, in the future, under further discoveries and advances in science, do much more which, to us, appears impossible to be accomplished. Whatever, therefore, comes through nature must be natural, for the very reason that it comes to us in that manner. Therefore, upon nature we rely, believing her to be the fountain from which all that is has been derived. We have faith in her capabilities, for we feel assured that "Nature never did deceive the heart that loved her."

But does the Theist, in any way, settle the question by supposing the existence of an "intelligent Being distinct from the universe"? We think not. Taking things and events with which we are familiar, we ask, Are they such as may be ascribed to such a Being? There are thousands of creatures born into this world, of whom only few survive, while others appear under such conditions that they prematurely perish; there are thousands also of organisms who live in and upon each other. One half of all animal life consists of parasites—that is, animals that fasten themselves to the bodies of other animals, and live by sucking their blood. Those which prey upon man are mentioned by Herbert

Spencer in his work upon *The Principles of Biology*. These parasites are adapted to their peculiar mode of life, and are the cause of great pain and suffering to the organisms upon which they feed. Besides this, throughout all past time there has been a constant preying of superior animals upon inferior ones—a perpetual devouring of the weak by the strong; and the earth has been a scene of universal carnage. Now, this supposed intelligent Being either did, or did not, provide that these things should take place as they have done. If he did so arrange, his intelligence, to say the very least, was not put to a good purpose; if, on the other hand, he did not arrange these things, then, in that case, there was a power in the universe that acted in despite of him. If all that is, and all that happens, are not such as an intelligent man would devise, we cannot reasonably ascribe such work to any other intelligent Being, particularly if he be superior to man.

Contemplating the cruelty and the injustice by which we are surrounded—the success of crime, the triumph of despotism, the prevalence of starvation, the struggles for many to get the means of mere existence, the appalling sights of deformity in children who are born into the world so diseased, so decrepit, that the sunshine of happiness seldom, if ever, gladdens their lives; remembering the existence of these evils and woes, we cannot believe that a good God dwells “on high,” who could, and yet would not, remedy this most lamentable state of things. As Dr. Vaughan, in his work, *The Age and Christianity*, declares: “No attempt of any philosopher to harmonise our ideal notions as to the sort of world which it became a Being of infinite perfection to create, with the world existing around us, can ever be pronounced successful. The facts of the moral and physical world seem to justify inferences of an opposite description from benevolent.”

Again, if this alleged power distinct from nature is responsible for some events, why is he not responsible for all? If he control the universe, then he is responsible for earthquakes that swallow up entire villages, destroying the lives of thousands of helpless creatures; for the lightning that kills people, sometimes even when they are at prayers; for storms at sea, which cause good and bad to find a watery grave; for individual organisms that are im-

perfect and blighted by monstrosities, and for the existence of ferocious wild beasts and poisonous plants. What is the answer of Theists to this grave indictment against their supposed God of infinite goodness? We fail to see any reason for attributing these blots on nature to any intelligence that is superior to man's; for if any intelligence but that which is associated with natural organisms exist and cause these evils, it must be inferior to ours, inasmuch as human intelligence, if it had the power, would prevent such catastrophes.

Finally, as our knowledge is only of phenomena, the laws of which can be directly perceived as operating in nature, we cannot conceive of such phenomena in the absence of matter and force. It is no answer to say "we do not know what matter is." Rightly or wrongly, we hold that what are termed matter and law are co-extensive with knowledge, and that knowledge includes thought, feeling, and action. We cannot imagine a shadow of a man without the man, and other causes that contribute to its appearance. Neither is it possible for us to conceive intelligence without the causes which we know are necessary for its production and maintenance. True, we are confronted with mysteries on every hand; but so long as they are mysteries we refuse to dogmatise upon them ourselves, or to accept what others say concerning them as being more than mere conjecture.

As we regard Secularism as the true philosophy of life, it is desirable that its attitude towards Theism should not be misunderstood. Personally, we have always considered that in the present state of dogmatic theology what is termed destructive work is a necessary part of Secular advocacy. But we never fail to urge the important fact that in attacking the errors of our opponents we should be dignified, and deal only with principles and opinions, not with men and personal character. Still, we must not submit to wrong, inasmuch as, unlike Christ, we do not counsel people to "resist not evil." On the contrary, we urge that to quietly submit to wrong of any kind is to offer a premium to despotism, and to sacrifice the independence of our nature. We may be compelled to listen, sometimes, to false arguments and daring assertions; but bad temper, vituperation, and imputation of inferiority should always

be firmly resented. We must claim equality, and do our best to vindicate the right to hold and to express our opinions as freely as our opponents do. While paying due respect to the feelings and views of others, we claim the same justice and consideration for our own. This should be the attitude of all Secularists in their intellectual combats, whether in defending Secular principles or in attacking the assumptions of theology. We ask Theists, and all orthodox believers, to consider if this is not the correct course to pursue in this age of freedom of thought and mental discrimination?

Perhaps the most marked difference in modern times, between the exponents of Freethought and the advocates of theology, is that the former desire open and fair discussion upon all subjects of public interest, while the latter frequently condemn the debating of religious questions. To us, nothing appears more fruitful in eliciting truth, and better calculated to promote a healthy state of mind, than the practice of listening to a rational statement of both sides of a question. It was through ignoring this serviceable element in public advocacy that many of our religious predecessors repudiated the claims of all new truths, and denounced their discovery as being inimical to the welfare of mankind. On most subjects the only conclusions deserving of our serious attention are those arrived at after free and calm discussion. In fact, it does not appear to us possible to arrive at a satisfactory conclusion otherwise. It would be a different matter if all questions that are submitted to us were as clear as the sun is at noonday; but they are not, and particularly the perplexed question of the existence of God; and, therefore, it is an evidence of weakness to shrink from debate, and to urge that it disturbs the serenity of the philosophic mind. In most cases we have to rely upon probable truth, and the best way to learn upon which side the probability lies is by a thorough examination of the *pros* and *cons* of any given subject. It, therefore, seems clear to us that Secularists ought to continue to question the pretensions of theologians, and to expose the errors of existing faiths, for the reason that many theological claims delude the unwary and hinder the recognition of truth.

Our desire is that the proper attitude of Secularists

towards theology should be perceptible to the general public, in order that it may be known what our real position is. Too long have we been misunderstood and misrepresented, and consequently denounced, not upon our merits or demerits, but upon a false presentation of our principles and methods as set forth by those who never gave themselves the trouble to ascertain what our objects and aims really are. For instance, take the subject of what is called Supernaturalism. Secular philosophy is not concerned with what lies behind phenomena, and, therefore, it neither affirms nor denies the existence of God. And the fact that even those who profess to believe in something beyond the natural cannot make up their minds as to what that something is justifies our attitude upon the subject. Equally undecisive are God believers as to their reasons for their belief. Revelation, Design, and Intuition are all advanced by different classes of Theists to prove their claims; but the particular method relied upon by one class of Theists is entirely repudiated by the others. Surely, then, when we find that Theists themselves are not agreed, either as to what their God is or the kind of evidence that is necessary to justify a belief in his existence, it is more reasonable and useful to confine our attention to what is known and knowable, and to devote our energies to what we are all agreed upon—namely, the mundane improvement of the human race, than to waste our time in dogmatising upon what can be only mere speculation.

The attitude of Secularism towards Theism, then, is this: Refusing to dogmatise about the existence of a Being of whom we are, and must necessarily remain, quite ignorant, Secularists confine their attention to the known and knowable facts of life. They regard all forms of Theism only as theological conjectures and vain attempts to solve problems that, with our present limited knowledge, appear to be incapable of solution. Secularists prefer endeavoring to make the most of what can be recognised by our senses, upon which reason can exercise its prerogative, and to which experience can lend its valuable aid. At the same time, Secular teachings do not preclude Theists from exercising their fullest rights in advocating their claims. With us, as Secularists, the utmost freedom of thought is welcomed.