

AGNOSTICISM AND CHRISTIAN THEISM :

Which is the More Reasonable ?

By **CHARLES WATTS.**

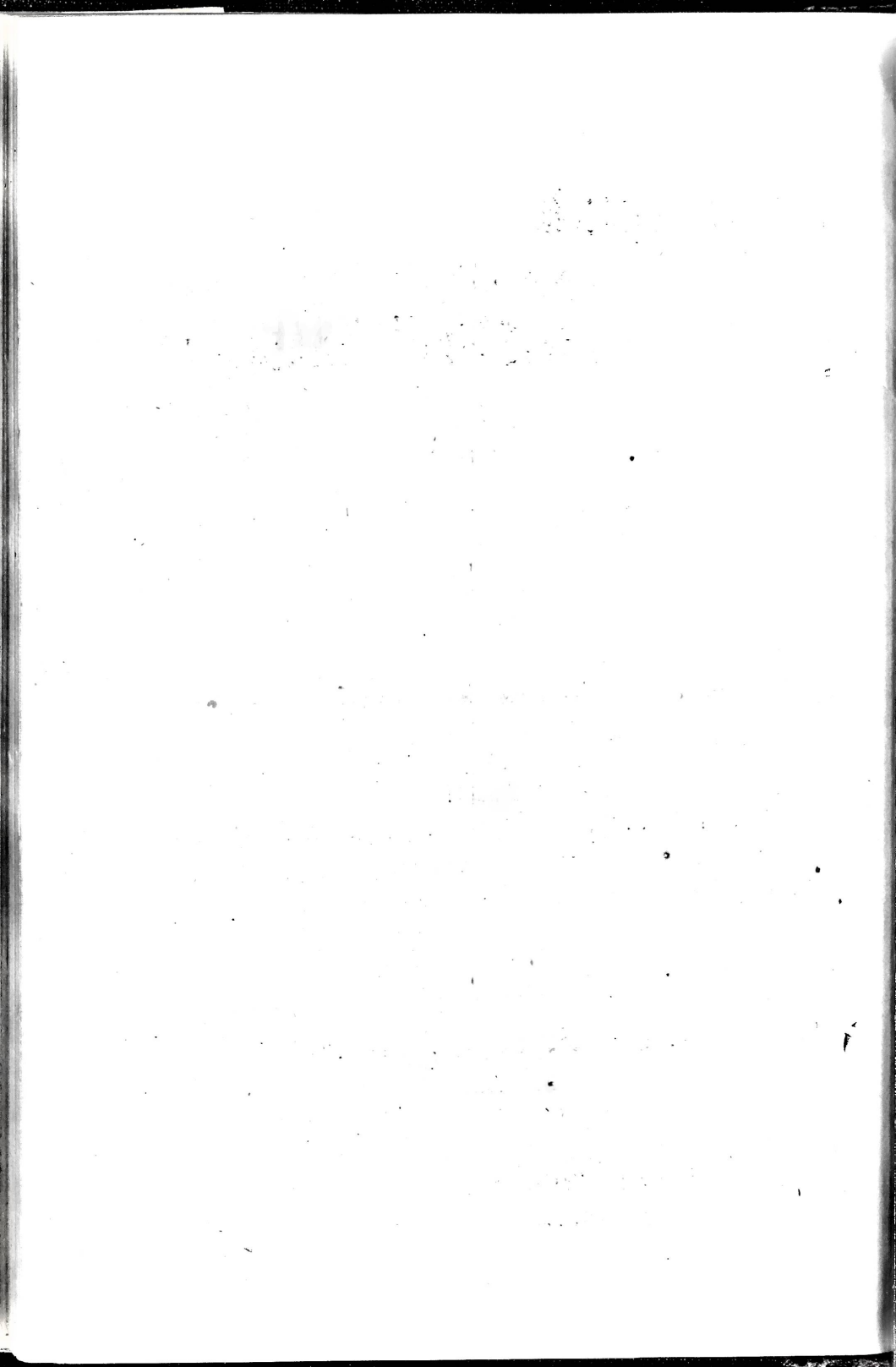
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AGNOSTICISM & CHRISTIAN THEISM :

WHICH IS THE MORE REASONABLE ?

I.

WHAT IS AGNOSTICISM ?

THIS is pre-eminently a critical age, when the right to examine teachings submitted for our acceptance is more than ever recognized. In the light of modern thought, no subject is too sacred for honest criticism, and no opinion too ancient for reasonable investigation. Reason is now rapidly taking the place of blind belief, and serfdom to authority is yielding to the influence of mental freedom.

Christian Theism as taught by the Churches has been so long regarded by its adherents as being the embodiment of absolute truth, that to in any way question its pretensions has been condemned as almost an unpardonable sin. Every new philosophy that has challenged the positive claims of Theism has been avoided and misrepresented apart from its pertinency and value. This has been the case particularly with the philosophy of Agnosticism. It will, therefore, be interesting to inquire, What is this Agnostic phase of thought? In answering this question, the reply will be classified under three divisions—(1) What is Agnosticism? (2) Its relation to the Universe and Christian Theism; and (3) Is it sufficient to satisfy man's intellectual requirements?

What is Agnosticism? The word is one that has become tolerably familiar to a large section of society in sound, if not in its strictest philosophical signification. It has come into use within the last few years, and has achieved a great popularity. Friends and foes alike employ it—the former to approve it and the latter to condemn it, and both to describe a certain phase of thought which is recognised as being very extensive. Like most technical phrases, the term is derived from the Greek, and signifies “not knowing.” An Agnostic, therefore, is one who confesses that he has no knowledge upon those subjects to which his Agnosticism is applicable.

Although the word Agnostic is comparatively new, that which it represents is as old as humanity. Men are not now for the first time discovering that there are questions which lie altogether beyond their gnosis or knowledge. That discovery was made at the dawn of human thought. A knowledge of his own ignorance was one of the qualities which Socrates boasted that he possessed, and which distinguished him in such a marked manner from his wily antagonists, the Sophists ; and at Athens, two thousand years ago, St. Paul is said to have found an altar, the remaining one of many, dedicated to an "Unknown God." The limits of human knowledge have been recognized by the foremost men of the race in all lands and in every age. Before the mighty mysteries of the universe the greatest thinkers have stood awe-stricken, aghast and dumb. The intellect has again and again been paralyzed in its ineffectual attempts to read the riddles of existence, before which those of the Sphinx are lost in their insignificance ; and no *Œdipus* has yet been found competent to the task of furnishing the solution. "All things," said the schoolmen, "run into the inscrutable,"—a thought equivalent to one to be found in Professor Tyndall's "Belfast Address." Therein that eminent scientist says : "All we see around and all we feel within us.....have their unsearchable roots in a cosmical life..... an infinitesimal span of which is offered to the investigation of man." Thus it will be seen that Agnosticism is an old friend with a new name, and perhaps a few additional qualities. We meet with it under certain forms in the pages of the history of every age. The profoundest intellects have been familiar with its character, and have not felt themselves ashamed to confess to the attitude of mind which it represents.

It should be distinctly understood that Agnosticism is not to be in any way confounded with ignorance as that phrase is used in every-day life. Herein consists one of the errors into which our orthodox opponents are continually falling. They use the words Agnosticism and general ignorance as if they were synonymous, which is misleading, to say the least of it—that is, unless the latter term be employed as the direct antithesis of omniscience. No one pretends to know everything, and the knowledge of many persons is considerably less than they in their own opinion imagine. It is stated that an admirer of Dr. Johnson began on one occasion to praise him for the great extent of his knowledge. "Pooh," said Johnson, "you would say I had great knowledge even though you did not think so." "And," rejoined the admirer, "you would think so even though I did not say it." The fault of

over-estimating our own knowledge is very common, and frequently begets an egotism of a very dangerous nature. Invariably, the less a man knows the more dogmatic he becomes, and the weaker the evidence upon which his convictions are based the more positively will he assert them to be true. It should require no extensive self-examination to convince the careful thinker that, even if he knew all that can be known upon every subject within the range of human gnosis, still then the domain into which his knowledge does not extend would be infinitely large compared with that small sphere which his information has covered. In that larger province he is an Agnostic, and it would be very unfair to designate him an ignorant person on that account. Therefore, although Agnosticism means "not knowing," it is in no way the equivalent of general ignorance.

The word Agnostic, however, in its philosophical sense, has a still broader meaning. An Agnostic is not simply a person who is professedly ignorant concerning many subjects upon which other persons pretend to have an extensive knowledge; but he maintains that there are problems the solution of which by man is impossible at the present stage of his mental development. Further, an Agnostic is one who limits the human mind by the measure of its capacity. That the finite can never become infinite is probably a matter about which there can be no difference of opinion, inasmuch as such a statement is a self-evident truth, or as axiomatic as a proposition of Euclid. On the other hand, a mind which is less than infinite cannot possess all knowledge. The consequence is, that there must always remain a wide field beyond the range of the human faculties. In relation to that field every man must be Agnostic, for the simple reason that his knowledge cannot penetrate therein. Even the most orthodox believer proclaims his Agnosticism, in a sense—that is, he admits that there are subjects which he not only does not know, but which, from their very nature, he can never know, since they relate to that which lies outside the sphere of thought. As Herbert Spencer observes: "At the utmost reach of discovery there arises, and must ever arise, the question, What lies beyond?" ("First Principles.") And that beyond does not diminish, but rather widens, as knowledge increases; for, the more we know, the more we discover we have to learn. "The power which the universe manifests to us," remarks the same writer, "is utterly inscrutable." Why should there be any hesitation in admitting this truth? No one looks upon it as derogatory to human nature to admit that his power is limited, and

that there are things which he cannot do. Why, therefore, should it be considered humiliating to confess that man's *knowledge* is limited, and that there are topics which he does not and cannot know? Not simply that he has not advanced sufficiently in intellectual research to grapple with them, but that they lie completely outside his sphere of thought. In nature we can never know more than phenomena; and yet these very phenomena involve the necessity of the existence of something which is their ground and support—that something being to us unknowable. The unknown is postulated in the very terms we are compelled to use when speaking of the unknown. "The senses," as Lewes observes, "perceive only phenomena; never noumena" ("History of Philosophy"). This opinion is not of modern origin, since Anaxagoras maintained it, and Plato gave it his support. Thus it will be seen that Agnosticism is not only not synonymous with what is generally termed ignorance, but that it is compatible with the very highest and most profound knowledge of which the human mind is capable.

Agnosticism being a philosophical, or certainly a quasi-philosophical, question, must be judged of in the same manner as any other subject of philosophy. Dogmatism is out of place in regard to it, and those who accept its teachings must be content to practise humility and to lay aside all arrogant assumptions of their great superiority to other men whose views may not be identical with their own. As the ancient philosopher observed: "We are never more in danger of being subdued than when we think ourselves invincible." The object of the whole Agnostic system is to learn, as far as possible, the limits of the human mind in reference to the acquisition of knowledge, and, having done this, to use every effort to effect improvement wherever it is possible, and to leave the useless and impracticable labour of sowing the wind to those who seek to know the unknowable and to perform the impossible. Wesley, in one of his hymns referring to the death of Christ, says: "Impassive he suffers, immortal he dies"—that is, incapable of suffering, he did suffer; incapable of dying, he did die. Now, is not this the very height of absurdity? And yet, in reality, it is not a whit more absurd than much that is put forth by those who claim a knowledge of matters which lie beyond the sphere of human reason. 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 into the unknown by indulging in wild flights of the imagination respecting the unknowable, As Socrates wisely observes : " Having searched into all kinds of science, we discover the folly of neglecting those which concern human life and involving ourselves in difficulties about questions which are but mere notions. We should confine ourselves to nature and reason. 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 notional mysteries cannot be made subservient to the right use of humanity."

" Fear not to scan
 The deep obscure or radiant light.
 Heed not the man
 Who draws old creeds to keep thee tight.
 Examine all creeds, old and new :
 Test all with reason through and through."

II.

THE RELATION OF AGNOSTICISM TO THE UNIVERSE AND TO THEISM.

AGNOSTICISM maintains that the teachings of theology relative to the origin and nature of the universe, the existence of God, and immortality are simply questions of speculation, and that reason, science and general knowledge do not support their dogmatic claims. The theologian, on the other hand, contends that sufficient is known upon these teachings to entitle them to our credence. In the face of these two contentions, it will be profitable to ascertain as far as possible which is the correct one. When the truth upon the matter is made manifest, the wisdom of confining ourselves to the known and knowable of existence will probably be more readily recognized. What, then, are those subjects which are dogmatized upon by the theologian, and to which our attitude is purely Agnostic ?

THE ORIGIN OF THE UNIVERSE.

This is a question which, to us, is involved in *absolute mystery*. Not only can it not be fathomed by the human mind, but no approach can be made towards the solution of the problem by the mightiest efforts of the human intellect. We may go back millions of years in imagination,

but even then we are no nearer to a beginning than we were before. Indeed, the possibility of such a beginning at all cannot be thought—in other words, is not thinkable. As Mr. Mansel observes, “Creation is, to the human mind, inconceivable.” Precisely the same with the other alternative, of an external existence, whether of matter or spirit. It presents no idea that we can deal with intellectually, because it resembles nothing of which we have had, or can have, the smallest possible experience. Something must have existed from all eternity ; that is a necessary truth, from which there is no escape. And yet the how of that eternal existence lies utterly beyond the sphere of human thought. To waste time in trying to comprehend it, to say nothing of making it the subject of discussion, much less of dogmatism, is the supremest folly. Nor can we have the slightest idea as to what was, or is, the eternal existence. The dogmatic Theist ascribes it to God, and the positive Atheist declares it to be matter ; but what in reality either the one or the other means, in the strictest sense, by the terms used, neither of them knows. For what is God, and what is matter ? Are they the same, or are they two different existences ? The Materialist, of course, denies the existence of spirit, and hence by matter he means something other than spirit,—but what ? Matter is simply a name given to that which originates in us sensations. But all that is known of this is phenomenal, and phenomena, as before pointed out, cannot exist by themselves, but must be supported by something which underlies them. What that something is, however, no one knows, since it lies completely outside the sphere of sensation. Besides, modern science has clearly shown that the existence of which alone we can be said to have any knowledge is not matter, but force. But, then, force can only make itself manifest by motion, and where there is motion something must be moved. Say that this moving body is matter, as it probably is, and then comes the question, Which was the eternal existence, force or matter, or both ? If force, how could it exist as motion when there was nothing to be moved ? And, if matter, how could there be motion—and we have no conception of matter without motion—in the absence of force, which is the cause of motion ? If it be contended that both—matter and force—were eternal, then have we not two absolute and infinite existences, which is a contradiction ? The Theist postulates spirit ; but that only adds a fresh difficulty, as will be seen presently. Here Agnosticism at once declares the whole subject to be outside of our gnosis, and, therefore, one which does not concern us, and of which

nothing is known, or can be known. Mr. Herbert Spencer remarks that, on the origin of the universe, three hypotheses only are possible:—1. That it is self-existent (Atheism). 2. That it is self-created (Pantheism). 3. That it is created by an external agency (Theism). Mr. Spencer has, at very considerable length, examined each of these theories, and shown them all to be unthinkable. His position is, that a self-existent universe, which is a universe existing without a beginning, is inconceivable. We cannot even think clearly of "existence without beginning." And, if we could, it would afford no kind of explanation of the universe itself. The first theory, therefore, is untenable. But no less so is the second—that of a created universe. To hold this, it is necessary, in Mr. Herbert Spencer's words, to "conceive potential existence passing into actual existence." Is it possible, however, to form a conception of potential existence except as something which is, in fact, actual existence—the very thing which it is not? It cannot be supposed as "nothing," for that involves two absurdities—(1) That nothing can be represented in thought; (2) That some one nothing is so far separated from other nothings as to be capable of passing into something. Again, existence passing from one state to another without some external agency implies a "change without a cause—a thing of which no one idea is possible." A self-created universe is, consequently, inconceivable. There is still left the third theory—that the universe was created by some external agency. But here a difficulty arises in the attempt to think of "the production of matter out of nothing." Moreover, there is still greater difficulty if we suppose the creation of space. If space were created, then there was a time when it was non-existent, which is also utterly inconceivable. But suppose all these difficulties overcome, there is yet another, the greatest of all. What is the external agency referred to? And how came it into being? These are questions to which no satisfactory answers have been or can be given. Thus the origin of the universe belongs to a region into which no human mind can enter, and therefore Agnosticism is the only possible attitude of thought we can consistently take with regard to the matter.

THE NATURE OF THE UNIVERSE.

In connection with this question we encounter speculations in abundance; but demonstrative facts are nowhere to be discovered. Herbert Spencer has shown that every sensation we experience compels us, whether we will or not, to infer a cause, and this

idea of causation drives us irresistibly to a First Cause. And yet the moment we have reached it we are landed in all kinds of contradictions and absurdities. For instance, is this First Cause infinite or finite? If infinite, it is beyond our comprehension, outside the sphere of our knowledge; and if finite, then there must be something beyond its bounds, and it is no longer the First Cause. The Duke of Argyle, in his "Reign of Law," observes:—"We cannot reach final causes any more than final purposes; for every cause which we can detect there is another cause which lies behind; and for every purpose which we can see, there are other purposes which lie beyond." By holding that the Universe is infinite, to use the words of Spencer himself, "we tacitly abandon the hypothesis of causation altogether." The First Cause must also be either independent or dependent. But if independent, we can have no idea of it at all, because everything we know and think of is dependent. If, however, the First Cause be dependent, then it must, being dependent, depend on something else, and that something else becomes the First Cause, to which the same argument will apply. In a similar manner, this cause must be absolute, and yet, as Mansel has shown, "A cause cannot, as such, be absolute; the absolute, as such, cannot be a cause." The reason of this is very obvious; the cause, as a cause, exists only in relation to the effect. But the absolute must be out of all relation, or it would cease to be absolute. But, in truth, we cannot conceive of the absolute at all. It lies beyond the reach of finite faculties to grapple with; hence, we are compelled to relegate the entire matter to the domain of the unknowable. The power which manifests itself in the universe is utterly inscrutable, and therefore we are driven to Agnosticism to find in it a solid resting-place in reference to the origin and nature of the universe.

THE EXISTENCE OF GOD.

This is another question which, as already demonstrated, lies beyond the reach of finite powers. Let us glance at some of the various methods that have been pursued—indeed, are still resorted to—to prove the existence of God. The object in doing this, be it observed, is not to attempt the foolish impossibility of proving the *non*-existence of God. That would not be Agnosticism; but the desire here is to indicate that the question of the existence of God is a subject upon which man, to be logical, must, from the very nature of the case, be Agnostic. Demonstration of the existence of God will hardly

be contended for, except perhaps by the advocates of the *a priori* method, and that need not be noticed here, since few representative Theists resort to it, and fewer still have any idea what it really means. The kinds of proof that are conceivable to be relied upon in this matter are as follows :—

(a) *The Senses*.—These, however, can never furnish an argument to prove the existence of God, inasmuch as our organs of sense have no power to perceive anything that does not belong to the mere phenomenal part of matter, and, hence, can never show us the noumenon underlying appearances, much less an existence which is said to be in no way material. If God has given a revelation, such revelation may be seen or heard ; but this, of itself, can only prove the revelation, not God. Suppose we heard a voice, in tones of thunder which shook the earth and reached every human ear, declare “ There is a God,” it would prove nothing but the voice—not the God proclaimed. The senses would perceive a sound, to which a very definite meaning might be attached ; but the sound would not be God. It will not be denied by any intelligent Theist that God can never become an object of sense, and, therefore, that method of proof may be dismissed as totally unavailing in the case.

(b) *Scientific Research*.—“ Canst thou by searching find out God ? ” is a question that was asked some thousands of years ago, and only one answer has ever been, or probably ever can be, given, and that is a negative one. Science, mighty and potent as it is for good, much as it has done to ameliorate the condition of mankind, and great as its triumphs are likely to be in the future, can never transcend sense knowledge. All its processes are of a material character ; its instruments, together with the subjects which they explore, are material, the phenomena with which it deals are material, and all its discoveries are reported to the bodily organs of sense. Beyond the physical domain of appearances no scientific investigations can ever go ; no telescope or microscope can show us a trace of spirit ; nor, in fact, of that, whatever it may be, which underlies phenomena. Scientific facts may lead up to philosophical generalizations ; but such generalizations are reached by ratiocination (process of reasoning), and are no longer exclusively scientific—in fact, are in a sense altogether independent of science. A scientific fact and the interpretation of the fact are totally different things. We may use science as a means for reading the riddles of nature ; the reading, however, is not science, but philosophy ; and

science has but helped us to the facts which process that is not scientific has to explain. The Theist tells us, with Newton, that science leads up to God ; but it will be seen that the upward road has ceased to be within the domain of science long before its termination is reached.

(c) *Logical Reasoning.*—Here, of course, it will be argued by the Theist that we start on firm and solid ground. A moment's reflection, however, will show that this is by no means the case. Our starting point and the conclusion at which we seek to arrive lie so far apart that by no process of logic can we pass from one to the other. There is, in truth, a great gulf between them, and we do not and cannot possess the means of bridging it over. In all mathematical reasoning we start from some axiom or necessary truth, which we find in our minds, and which, by a law of our mentation, cannot be got rid of. This we make the basis of all our reasoning and the foundation of the entire superstructure that we desire to erect. In geometry, in arithmetic, and in logic this is equally the case. Now, all these starting points, whether they be axioms relating to space, notions regarding quantity, or mental conceptions, lie in our own minds, and are only known to us by the fact that we find them there. From these we may reason, forming a long chain of logical links, until, at the end, we reach some truth of a marvellous and startling character, which is as easy of demonstration as the concept or axiom with which we started. In this way Theists endeavour to reason up to God. But it requires no very profound thought to show that the process must break down before it reaches that point. For instance, there is the fact that the conclusion must be of the same quality as the starting point. If the primary truth with which we commenced be internal to our minds, so must the conclusion be at which we arrive. Beginning with ourselves, we must continue and end with ourselves, and by no possibility can we reach anything that is exterior to us. If, therefore, we reason up to a concept to which the name of God is given, we shall be as far as ever from a demonstration of his actual being. We shall still be dealing with an idea which exists simply in our own minds, and may or may not—for here demonstration ceases and the logical argument breaks down—be a measure of some real existence. But there is another reason why this logical process must fail. The attributes ascribed to God are of that character about which we cannot reason. However exalted the conception at which we arrive, it must be finite, relative, and condi-

tioned, while God is said to be infinite, absolute, and unconditioned. It is, therefore, impossible that God can be the last term of a logical induction. Of course, this does not furnish conclusive proof that the absolute and unconditioned has no existence; it does, however, prove that we cannot know everything of it, since it transcends all our powers and faculties. It belongs to a sphere to which we have no access. Hence, in all our research, investigation, and thought, we halt when we approach the domain of the unknowable, bow our heads and unfurl the banner of Agnosticism.

For a person to assert positively that he knows that a God exists, who is an infinite personal being, is, in the face of the present limitation of human knowledge, to betray an utter disregard of accuracy of expression. With the majority of orthodox believers, the term God is a phrase used to cover a lack of information.

Persons behold certain phenomena; the why and wherefore they cannot explain; and because to them such events are mysterious, they pause at the threshold of inquiry, and to avoid what appear to be inscrutable difficulties, allege that such phenomena are caused by God. Dr. Young, the Christian Theist, in his "Province of Reason," says:—"That concerning which I have no idea at all, is to me nothing, in every sense nothing. . . . To believe in that respecting which I can form no notion is to believe in nothing; it is not to believe at all." This represents the position of Christian Theism. Although a person may picture an object in his mind from an analogous subject, it has yet to be shown how an idea can be formed of that upon which no knowledge exists, either analogous or otherwise. All notions that have been entertained of Gods have been but reflexes of human weaknesses, human desires, and human passions, and therefore do not represent an infinite personal Being. Xenophanes is reported to have said, that "If horses and lions had hands, and should make their deities, they would respectively make a horse and a lion." Luther, too, remarked: "God is a blank sheet, upon which nothing is found but what you yourselves have written." Schiller also stated: "Man depicts himself in his Gods." The history of the alleged God-ideas justifies the truth of those statements; hence, we find that in different nations, at various times, the most opposite objects have been adored as deities. The sun, moon, and stars, wood, and stone, and rivers, cows, cats, hawks, bats, monkeys, and rattlesnakes, all have had their worshippers. Even now the professed ideas of God in Christendom are most discrepant. The

God acknowledged by "Advanced Theists" is not the same Being in many respects as the one depicted by Talmage and his school. Neither does the object worshipped by the Deist correspond with the "Supreme Power" of the Pantheist. Then, if we go to the Bible, we discover very different notions of God therein recorded. He is there described as material, and then as immaterial; first as all-wise, and then again as betraying a lack of wisdom; in one place as being all-powerful, and in another as being exceedingly weak; at one time as being loving, merciful, and unchangeable, at another as being revengeful, cruel and fickle in the extreme. Surely, to rely on such absurd and contradictory descriptions of a Being as these is more unreasonable than to frankly admit that, if God exist, he is and must be unknown to us. This is not a denial, but an honest confession that mentally no more than physically can we perform the impossible.

It is alleged that the "God idea" is firmly rooted in the human mind. What folly! What is meant in this instance by an idea? A mental picture of something external to the individual. But where is that "something" corresponding with the many and varied representations of a God? The truth is, this supposed "idea" is no reality whatever, but simply a vague "idea" of an "idea," of which, in fact, no idea exists.

Besides, the term "Infinite Personal Being" is a contradiction. Personality is that which constitutes an individual a distinct being. This definition implies three requisites: First, that the person shall be a personage; second, that he shall be distinct from other things; and thirdly, that he shall be bounded, that is, limited. But a bounded, limited being is a finite being, and, therefore, cannot be an infinite personal being. Is the assumed personality of God different from mine? If so, where is the difference? Furthermore, is my personality a part of God's personality? If it is, my personality is "divine;" if it is not, then there are two personalities, neither of which can possibly be infinite, for where there are two each must be finite. Furthermore, personality is only known to us as a part of a material organization. If, therefore, God is material, he is part of the universe. If he be a part, he cannot be infinite, inasmuch as the part cannot be equal to the whole. Personality involves intelligence, and intelligence implies: 1. Acquisition of knowledge, which indicates that the time was when the person who gained additional information lacked certain wisdom. 2. Memory, which is the power of recalling past events; but with the

infinite there can be no past. 3. Hope, which is based on limited perception, and which shows the uncertain condition of the mind wherein the aspiration is found. Now, if God possesses these imperfect faculties he is finite; while, on the other hand, if they do not belong to him, he is not an intelligent being.

Neither does the Theistic definition of God, as being infinite, harmonize with our reasoning faculties. Reason is based upon experience, but an Infinite Being must be outside the domain of experience; reason implies reflection, but we cannot reflect upon infinity, because it is unthinkable; reason implies comparison, but the Infinite Being cannot be compared, for there is nothing with which to compare him; reason implies judgment, but the finite is totally incompetent to judge of the infinite; reason is bounded by the capacity of the mind in which it resides, but the mind to conceive the infinite must be unbounded; reason follows perception, but we have no faculties for perceiving or recognizing the infinite. Therefore, is not the Agnostic position of silence as to the unknown the more reasonable? If it be urged that it is no part of Agnostic philosophy to consider these Theistic assumptions, the answer is, that if such notions are well founded on demonstrated facts, there is no reason for the Agnostic attitude towards them. It is the proving that Theistic allegations are unsupported by observed truths which renders Agnosticism logical and justifiable. Let it be distinctly understood that it is not against the existence and nature of a God, *per se*, that exception is here taken—of that we know nothing, but against the positive claims urged in reference to these subjects. To these our indictment is directed.

The Orthodox notion of the "innate consciousness of God's existence" does not strengthen the position of the Christian Theist, for the reason that it is groundless in fact. No doubt the error upon this point has arisen with many persons through their regarding consciousness as a separate faculty of the mind, whereas James Mill, Locke, Brown and Buckle have shown it to be a condition of the mind produced by early training and surrounding associations. George Grote, in his "Review of J. S. Mill's Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy," aptly remarks: "Each new-born child finds its religious creed ready prepared for him. In his earliest days of unconscious infancy, the stamp of the national, gentle, phratric God, or Gods, is imprinted upon him by his elders." Thus it happens that what are too frequently but the consequences of youthful impressions and subsequent

tuition are regarded as veritable realities. If this "God idea" were innate, is it not reasonable to suppose that all persons would have it? But there are thousands of persons who are ready to acknowledge that they have it not; and those who profess to have it are unable to explain what it is. Probably, if a child never heard of God in the morning of life, it would have no fancies concerning him in its mature age. It is to be feared that these Theistic pretensions arise from an inadequate acquaintance with the now admitted natural forces. There is, however, this hope, that as knowledge still more advances, dogmatism will proportionately disappear, priestcraft will yield to mental freedom, and work in controlling Nature and reliance on her prolific resources will more than ever take the place of supplicating for, and dependence on, alleged supernatural help.

The once favourite argument drawn from design in the Universe affords no justification for the positive allegations of Theism. As Professor Taylor Lewis admits:—

"Nature alone cannot prove the existence of a Deity possessed of moral attributes." Has it ever occurred to Theists that at the very most the God of the design argument can only be a finite being, for nowhere amongst what are supposed to be the marks of design in Nature is an infinite designer indicated? Now, a God that is finite is neither omniscient, omnipotent, nor eternal. The design argument, moreover, points to no unity in God. According to natural theology, there may be one God or hundreds of Gods. The Rev. S. Faber fairly observes:—"The Deist never did, and he never can, prove without the aid of Revelation that the Universe was designed by a single designer," Paley's well-known comparison of the eye and the telescope proves the very opposite of that for which it was used. It should be remembered that, but for the imperfection of the eye, the telescope had not been required. Plainly, the argument may be stated thus:—Designer of the telescope, man; designer of the eye, God; telescope imperfect, hence its designer was imperfect; the eye more imperfect, since the telescope was invented to improve its power; *ergo*, God, the designer of eyes, was still less perfect than man, the designer of telescopes.

Dr. Vaughan, in his work "The Age and Christianity," declares: "No attempt of any philosopher to harmonize 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 suc-

cessful. The facts of the moral and physical world seem to justify inferences of an opposite description from the benevolent." The Rev. George Gilfillan, in his "Grand Discovery of the Fatherhood," noticing the horrors and the evils that exist around us, asks: "Is this the spot chosen by the Father for the education of his children. or is it a den of banishment or torture for his foes? Is it a nursery, or is it a hell? there is no discovery of the Father in man, in his science, philosophy, history, art, or in any of his relations."

If nothing else rebuked the dogmatic assumption of the Christian Theist, the existence of so much misery, evil, and inequality in the world, should do so. What man or woman having the power, would hesitate to use it to alleviate the affliction, to cure the wrong, and to destroy the injustice which cast such a gloom over so large a portion of society? Let the many records of the world's benevolence, devotion, and kindness give the reply. To lessen the pain of the afflicted, to assist the needy, to help the oppressed, are characteristics of human nature which its noblest sons and daughters have ever felt proud to manifest in their deeds of heroic self-denial. Contemplating the success of crime, the triumph of despotism, the prevalence of want, the struggles on the part of many to obtain the mere means of existence, the appalling sights of physical deformity—beholding all these wrongs this sadness and despair, who shall dogmatically exclaim, "All Nature proclaims a Fatherhood of ~~of~~ God!"

The question of immortality scarcely belongs to the same class of subjects as the others which have here been discussed; nevertheless, even upon this subject, the Agnostic position appears to me to be the correct one. Personally, I refuse to dogmatise either one way or the other; and the question, after all, is but of little consequence. Our business, for the present at all events, is with this world; and the affairs of the next may be left until we land upon its shores, if such shores there be. To ignore the teachings said to refer to another life is not necessarily to deny the existence of that life. One thing is certain, and that is our present existence. Furthermore, experience teaches us that time is too short, duties too imperative, and consequences too important to justify us in wasting our resources and displaying a disturbing anxiety about, to us, an unknown future.

"Life's span forbids us to extend our cares,
And stretch our hopes beyond our years."

DOES AGNOSTICISM SATISFY MAN'S INTELLECTUAL REQUIREMENTS ?

There are two objections frequently urged against the Agnostic position which with some people have considerable force. The first is, that Agnosticism robs man of the great consolation and incentive imparted by the belief in the certainty of the existence of a "Heavenly Father" and a future life. In the second place, it is contended that Agnosticism fails to satisfy the demands of the human intellect. Let us examine these objections, with a view of ascertaining whether or not they possess any weight bearing upon the present question.

The first objection supposes that without Theism and its teachings there is no adequate comfort and peace for the human race ; that this life of itself is but little more than "a vale of tears," alike destitute of the sunshine of joy and the power of imparting happiness in everyday life. Persons who entertain these gloomy ideas regard existence as being necessarily full of trouble, and think that mankind are incapable with mere natural resources of enjoying a high state of felicity, and that true bliss is only to be secured by believing in God and entertaining the hope of pleasure in another world. Such morbid notions are born of a dismal faith, and find no sanction in the real healthy view of life's mission. Existence is not a mere blank ; its condition depends largely upon the use mankind make of it. To some the world may be as a garden adorned with the choicest of flowers, and to others as a wilderness covered with worthless weeds. Life of itself is not destitute of beauty, glory, solace and love. True, it is sometimes darkened with clouds, but it is also enlivened with sunshine ; it is degraded by serfdom, and elevated by freedom ; it is shaded by isolation, and illuminated by fellowship ; it is chilled by misery and persecution, and warmed by kindness and affection ; it is blasted by poverty and want, and invigorated by wealth and comfort ; it is marred by shams and inequalities, and glorified by realities and equity ; it is humiliated by unequal and excessive toil, and dignified by fair and honest labour ; it has its punishments through wrong and neglect, but it has its rewards in right and correct action. The lesson of experience teaches us unmistakably that life is worth having even if Theism and the teachings in reference to a future existence be nothing more than emotional speculations. In the language of the Rev. Minot J. Savage, in his work, "The Morals of Evolution," "I believe there is not a healthy man, woman, or child

on earth who will not join me in saying that life is worth living simply for its own sake, to-day, whether there ever was a yesterday or there ever will be a to-morrow. Have you ever stood, as I have, on a mountain summit, with the broad ocean spread out at your feet on the one side, a magnificent lake or bay on the other, the valley dotted with towns, with growing fields of greenness, or turning brown with harvest? Have you ever looked up at the sky at night, thick with its stars, glorious with the moon walking in her brightness? Have you listened to the bird-song some summer morning? Have you stood by the sea, and felt the breeze fan your weary brow, and watched the breakers curling and tumbling in upon the shore? Have you looked into the faces of little children, seen the joy and delight they experience simply in breathing and living, beheld the love-light in their eyes, heard their daily prattle, their laughter, their shouts of joy and play? Have you, in fact, ever tasted what life means? Have you realized that, with a healthy body, in the midst of this universe you are an instrument finely attuned, on which all the million fingers of the universe do play, every nerve a chord to be touched, every sense thrilling with ecstasy and joy? No matter where I came from, no matter where I am going to, I live an eternity in this instant of time. Is it not a mistake, in the face of facts like these, to say that life is not worth living unless it is supplemented by a heaven?"

"Tell me not, in mournful numbers,
Life is but an empty dream."

As to the second objection, it is said that man is born to inquire; his whole nature is bent in the direction of discovery; curiosity to pry into the secrets of nature and being forms one of his leading characteristics; therefore, Agnosticism, which places a barrier to his further investigation, must be objectionable, because it fixes the limits beyond which he may not go. This allegation, if worth anything, must be urged, not against Agnosticism, but against the limit of human powers. To tell man that there are subjects which he can never master, not for lack of time to look into them, but because they lie in a domain to which, by the very nature of the case, he can gain no access, should certainly not be calculated to stop his inquiry with regard to matters upon which knowledge is to be obtained. The Theist believes that he can never fully comprehend God; but does that prevent him from

endeavouring to learn what he can? Agnosticism has not placed limits to the human mind, but only defined them; it has not erected the barrier beyond which the human intellect cannot pass, but only described it; it has not invented the line which has separated the knowable from the unknowable, but only indicated its position. The mind of man is, therefore, free to inquire to the utmost extent of its powers, and the complaint that it cannot do more is foolish in the extreme.

Agnosticism is sufficient for all the purposes of life, and more than that cannot surely be needed. There is no human duty that it is not compatible with, no human feeling that it does not allow full play to, and no intellectual effort that it would attempt to place restrictions upon. It leaves man in possession of all his mental force, seeking only to direct that force into a legitimate channel where it may find full scope for its use. In a beautiful passage in his Belfast address, Professor Tyndall remarks:

“Given the masses of the planets and their distances asunder, and we can infer the perturbations consequent upon their mutual attractions. Given the nature of disturbance in water, or ether, or air, and from the physical properties of the medium we can infer how its particles will be affected. The mind runs along the line of thought which connects the phenomena, and from beginning to end finds no break in the chain. But when we endeavour to pass, by a similar process, from the physics of the brain to the phenomena of consciousness, we meet a problem which transcends any conceivable expansion of the powers we now possess. We may think over the subject again and again, it eludes all intellectual presentation.”

These words present a great truth, indicating, as they do, the proper scope of man's intellectual activity. The Agnostic does not fail to carry on his investigations into Nature to the utmost extent of his ability. He seeks to wring from her secrets hidden through all the ages of the past; he pushes his inquiries from point to point, and learns all that can be known of the marvellous processes of life and mind, and only stops when he confronts the unknowable, beyond whose barrier he cannot pass. His are the fields, the groves, the woods, the sea, and all the earth contains; the starry sky, too, is his domain to explore. All nature, with its majestic varieties, lies before him, presenting subjects of the keenest interest. In these he revels with delight; but the

incomprehensible he seeks not to comprehend, the unknowable he does not make the idle attempt to know. In a word, he is a man, and he aims not at the impossible task of becoming a God. Is not this course more courageous, more dignified, and more candid than that adopted by the dogmatic theologian, who, yearning for a knowledge of the absolute, and yet failing to discover it, lacks the courage to avow his inability to achieve the impossible?

“ Know then thyself, presume not God to scan ;
The proper study of mankind is man.”

NATURE AND THE SUPERNATURAL.

THERE have been a large number of books written on this subject, some of them by men of eminence in their respective departments of thought. It has been dealt with from very different standpoints, and therefore exceedingly conflicting arguments have been brought to bear upon it. Two able American writers, Dr. Bushnell and Dr. McCosh, have discussed it with considerable learning ; but one has to put down their works with a great degree of dissatisfaction, since nothing like clear definition is to be found in their pages. In England the subject has been made the theme of several large works, of hundreds of magazine articles, and of thousands of pulpit discourses, and yet the whole subject is enveloped in the densest darkness. There must be some cause for this, and the cause, I think, is not far to seek. The natural we know ; but the supernatural, what is that ? Of course, as its name implies, it is something higher than nature—something above nature. But, if there is a sphere higher than nature, and yet often breaking through nature, nature itself must be limited by something, and the question that at once arises is, By what is such limitation fixed, and what is the boundary line which marks it off and separates it from the supernatural ? And this is just what no two writers seem to be agreed upon. But, further supposing such a line to be discovered, and to be well known, so that no difficulty could arise in pointing it out, a still more difficult problem presents itself for solution—namely, how man, who is a part of nature,

and able only to come into contact with nature, can push his knowledge into that other sphere which, being non-natural, cannot be at all accessible to a natural being? If the supernatural region be synonymous with the unknowable, it cannot clearly concern us, simply because we have no faculties with which to cognize it, and no powers capable of penetrating into its profound depths. In this case, as far as we are concerned, there is practically no supernatural, for none can operate on that sphere in which man lives and moves and displays his varied and in some respects very marvellous powers.

According to many writers, the physical is the supernatural, because it is not under the control of natural law. But why? If man be partly a spiritual being, why should not natural law extend into the sphere of his spiritual nature? Indeed, an able writer on the Christian side, whose work has been enthusiastically received by all religious denominations—Professor Drummond—has maintained this position, the very title of his book stating the whole case: "Natural Law in the Spiritual World." The great German philosopher, Kant, calls nature the realm of sensible phenomena, conditioned by space, and speaks of another sphere as a world above space, depleted of sense, and free from natural law, and therefore supersensible and supernatural. But this is to make the supernatural spaceless and timeless—in fact, a mere negation of everything, and therefore nothing. Now, the only light in which we can look at this subject, with a view to obtain anything like clear and correct views, is that of modern science. By her the boundary of our knowledge has been greatly enlarged, and through her discoveries we have been enabled to obtain more sound information regarding the laws of the universe than it was possible for our fathers, with the limited means at their disposal, to possess.

If there be a sphere where the supernatural plays a part and exercises any control, it must clearly be in some remote region, of which we have, and can have, no positive knowledge; and the forces in operation must be other than those with which we are conversant upon this earth. Science cannot recognize the supernatural, because she has no instruments which she can bring to bear upon, and no means at her disposal for, its investigation. She leaves to the theologian all useless speculations regarding such a region, contenting herself with reminding him that he is, in all such discussions, travelling outside the domain of facts into a province which should be left to poets and dreamers, and

which belongs solely to the imagination. All law is and must be natural law; from a scientific standpoint, because we can have access to nature, and to nature only. It is impossible to get beyond her domain, even in imagination.

The supernatural, if it exist, must reveal itself through nature, for in no other way can it reach us so as to produce any impression upon the human mind. But, if it come through nature, then how can it be distinguished from the phenomena of nature? It will be quite impossible to differentiate between them. We are quite precluded from saying, Nature could not do this, and is unable to do that. No man can fix a limit to the possibilities of power in nature. She has already done a thousand things which our forefathers would have declared impossible, and she will doubtless in the future, under further discoveries and advances in science, do much more which would look impossible to us. Whatever, therefore, comes through nature must be natural, for the very reason that it comes to us in that way. And the business of science is to interpret in the light of natural law. Even if she should prove herself incompetent to the task, it would only show that some phenomena had been witnessed which had for a time baffled explanations, not that anything supernatural had occurred. And the business of science would be to at once direct itself to the new class of facts, with a view to finding the key with which to open and disclose the secret of the power by which they were produced.

But what is nature? Of course every man knows what is meant by nature, in part at all events; and the only difference in opinion or definition that can arise will be as to its totality. There are a thousand facts lying all around us, and a thousand phenomena of which we are every day eye-witnesses, that all will agree to call nature. The question, however, does not concern these, but others, real or imaginary, which differ somewhat from them, and which are supposed, therefore, to be incapable of being classed under the same head. Those who desire to obtain a clear and accurate idea of nature cannot do better than read carefully Mr. John Stuart Mill's excellent essay on the subject, published after his death. He gives two definitions, or rather two senses, in which we use the word in ordinary, every-day language. The first is that in which we mean the totality of all existence, and the other that in which we use the term as contradistinguished from art—nature improved by man. But it must be borne in mind that this is

still nature. Nature improved by man is only one part of nature modified by another ; for man is as much a portion of nature as the earth on which he treads, or the stars which glow in the midnight sky over his head. Nature, therefore, as I understand it, and as Mill defines it in his first sense, is everything that exists, or that can possibly come into existence in the hereafter—that is, all the possibilities of existence, whether past, present, or future. If I am asked on what ground I include in my definition that which to-day does not exist, but may come into existence hereafter, I reply : Because that which will be must be, potentially at least, even now. No new entity can come into being ; all that can occur is the commencement of some new form of existence, which has ever had a being potentially anyhow. No new force can appear, some new form of force may. But, then, that, when it comes, will be as much a part of nature as the rest—is indeed even now a part of nature, since it is latent somewhere in the universe.

Man's beginnings were in nature ; his every act is natural, his thoughts are natural, and in the end the great universe will fold him in its embrace, close his eyes in death, and furnish in her own bosom his last and final resting-place. Beyond her he cannot go. She was his cradle, and will be his grave ; while between the two she furnishes the stage on which he plays his every part. And more, she has made him, the actor, to play the part. Nature is one and indivisible. She had no beginning, and can have no end. She is the All-in-all. Combined in her are the One and the Many which so perplexed the philosophers of ancient times.

CHARLES WATTS.

