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NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

*By the same Author,*

"Life and Times of C. C. Cattell." One Penny.  
"Perils of Genius" (Illustrious Men who suffered in times past). Published at 1s., post free, 7d., of C. Cattell, "Emerson," Boscombe Park, Bournemouth.

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# Agnosticism :

AN EXPOSITION AND A DEFENCE.

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*Selected from leading authorities by*

CHARLES COCKBILL CATTELL.

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## *Introduction.*

Long before I heard of Huxley, or Agnosticism, I held that whatever was presented to the intellect demanding assent, must have reasonable grounds for its acceptance—rational proof. In forming a judgment on any subject, faith or authority must never be permitted to usurp the place of facts. We find ourselves living among incessant changes called "causes and effects," interminable in time and space. These changes have been observed to occur in a certain order ; and such are named "Laws of Nature." Hence we are led to believe in universal causation—a first or a last cause having no meaning.

As to why there is one existence we call "Nature," or why there is any existence at all—Who can tell? The idea of one existence includes all that is and all that is necessary for all that happens.

Science in some measure explains how things now existing became what they are ; the conditions of existence appear to determine the duration of their varying qualities and forms. These conditions must have been adequate to produce these effects, or the earth in our time would not supply the varied forms and manifestations of life. But why all this has taken

place—Who can tell? Spencer teaches that the power manifested in nature is inscrutable. Those who do not accept the idea of a power indescribable operating in nature, resort to the alternative of an external power. This much we know—that all the changes observable take place *in* the nature we know; hence, a power assumed external to it explains no more than a power assumed to operate within it. As to the durability of Nature, the indestructibility of matter points to unlimited time, an everlasting existence.

Our only scope of inquiry is, therefore, clearly Nature and its laws; the latter term being a name for observed changes, and not in any sense implying causes, such use of the term being misleading, although very common. Law is not a cause, an agent, or an instrument, but merely the name of the path or way along which forces travel to phenomena.

The subject may be made clear by recalling the fact that while the Theist may affirm a God infinite and eternal, and the Atheist may affirm the same of Nature, Agnostics maintain that these terms do not admit of being thought of at all. At most, they convey the idea of *indefinite* extent in space and time, while every thought implies a boundary, a limit, something definite.

Some perverse people insist that "Agnostic" stands for Ignorance, and others contend it is adopted through want of courage to avow what we really are. I hold the name is a fitting title to distinguish one who finds it beyond his mental powers to believe in things that have no relation to common knowledge.

In formulating a thought about anything, we discover it implies likeness, relation, and difference, which cannot apply to the terms "infinite" or "eternal"—no such thought is possible; they have no likeness, relation or difference, although no words are more commonly heard in the religious world. The Agnostic's position is governed by limits found to rule our intellect in forming conclusions. An examination of the formulation of consciousness about the infinite will reveal the fact that parts of known things have been used in its formation.

A popular writer maintains that he can grasp all the ideas which the Agnostic deems beyond our powers to grasp, such as self-existence, eternity, infinity, "although it is only by consciousness, by feeling that we know."

But no explanation is given as to how finite consciousness (and there is none other) can feel infinite self-existence.

Although in former years I wrote at length on this subject, I leave the following extracts to represent my views on the present occasion.

The term Agnostic and Agnosticism arose as follows:—

"I took thought and invented what I conceived to be the appropriate title of Agnostic. It came into my head as suggestively antithetic to the 'Gnostic' of Church history, who professed to know so much about the very things of which I was ignorant. To my satisfaction the term took; and when the *Spectator* had stood godfather to it, any suspicion in the minds of respectable people that knowledge of its parentage might have awakened was, of course, completely lulled. That's the history of the terms.

"And it will be observed that it does not quite agree with the confident assertion of the Rev. Principal of King's College, that 'the adoption of the term Agnostic is only an attempt to shift the issue, and that it involves a mere evasion; in relation to the Church and Christianity. . . . The people who call themselves 'Agnostics' have been charged with doing so because they have not the courage to declare themselves 'Infidels,' have adopted a new name to escape the unpleasantness which attaches to their proper denomination. . . . Agnosticism is not properly described as a 'negative' creed, nor, indeed, as a creed of any kind, except in so far as a principle which is as much ethical as intellectual. The principle may be stated in various ways, but they all amount to this: that it is wrong for a man to say that he is certain of the objective truth of

any proposition unless he can produce evidence which logically justifies that certainty. That is what Agnosticism asserts, and, in my opinion, it is all that is essential to Agnosticism. That which Agnostics deny and repudiate as immoral, is the contrary doctrine, that there are propositions which men ought to believe, without logically satisfactory evidence; and that reprobation ought to attach to the profession of disbelief in such inadequately supported propositions. The justification of the Agnostic principle lies in the success which follows its application, whether in the field of natural or in that of civil history; and in the fact that, so far as these topics are concerned, no sane man thinks of denying its validity. Agnosticism is the essence of science, whether ancient or modern. It simply means that a man shall not say he knows or believes that which he has no scientific grounds for professing to know or believe. Agnosticism says that we know nothing beyond phenomena.

. . . . As to the interests of morality, I am disposed to think that if mankind could be got to act up to this principle in every relation of life, a reformation would be effected such as the world has not yet seen; an approximation to the millenium, such as no supernaturalistic eligion has ever yet succeeded, or seems likely ever to succeed in effecting.”—*Huxley*.

“That which persists<sup>1</sup> unchanging in quantity, but ever changing in form, under the sensible appearances which the universe presents to us, transcends human knowledge and conception, is an unknown and unknowable power, which we are obliged to recognise as without limit in space, and without beginning or end in time. This is in its highest form, the philosophy of Agnosticism. . . . If we ask how came the atoms into existence, endowed with marvellous energy, we can only reply in the words of the poet: ‘Behind the veil, behind the veil.’ We can only form metaphysical conceptions, or I ought rather

to call them the vaguest guesses. One is, that they were created and endowed with their elementary properties by an all-wise and all-powerful creator. This is Theism. Another, that thought is the only reality, and that all the phenomena of the universe are thoughts and ideas of one universal all-pervading mind. This is Pantheism."

"Or, again, we may frankly acknowledge that the real essence and origin of things are 'behind the veil,' and not knowable or even conceivable by any faculties with which the human mind is endowed in its present state of existence. This is Agnosticism. Agnostics do not deny that, in the course of evolution, certain feelings and aspirations have grown up which find a poetical expression in the ideas of God and immortality. They simply deny that we have, or can have, any certain, definite and scientific knowledge respecting these mysteries."—*Laing*.

"The Agnostic is one who asserts—what nobody denies—that there are limits to the sphere of intelligence. He asserts, further, what many theologians have expressly maintained, that these limits are such as to exclude at least what Lewes called 'metempirical' knowledge. But he goes further, and asserts, in opposition to theologians, that theology lies within the forbidden sphere."

"'Trust your reason,' we have been told until we are tired of the phrase, 'and you will become Atheists or Agnostics.' What right have you to turn round and rate us for being a degree more logical than yourselves? You say, as we say, that the natural man can know nothing of the Divine nature. That is Agnosticism. Our fundamental principal is not only granted but asserted. . . . Dr. Newman's arguments (in 'Grammar of Assent') go to prove that man, as guided by reason, ought to be an Agnostic, and that at the present moment, Agnosticism is the only reasonable faith for, at least, three-quarters of the race. . . . The race collectively is Agnostic,

whatever may be the case with individuals. . . . There is not a single proof of natural theology of which the negative has not been maintained as vigorously as the affirmative. You tell us to be ashamed of professing ignorance. Where is the shame of ignorance in matters still involved in endless and hopeless controversy? Is it not rather a duty."—*Sir Leslie Stephen.*

"The Agnostic neither believes nor disbelieves in a Superior Existence, from lack of satisfying evidence to warrant affirmation or denial. He is neutral, not because he wishes not to believe, or desires to deny, but because language should be measured by proof of conviction. Huxley's wise, useful, and honest word 'Agnostic' has done more to teach theologians to think, and incite in them discrimination and tolerance, than any other word which has been added to the nomenclature of controversy this century."

"Is it 'dodging' to refuse to identify yourself with the preposterous presumption of the Theist or the Atheist? Is it not imposture in any one to adopt a term which implies all-penetrating knowledge, when you know you have it not? Nature is too illimitable to be conceived, and the past is beyond all human experience. The Agnostic neither decries nor disparages them [Theist and Athiest], but frankly says he is not of their way of thinking. Many now see no distinction between Agnosticism and Atheism. It is the wide distinction between knowing and not knowing. Agnosticism means scrupulousness and truth."—*G. J. Holyoake.*

"The contest between Theology and Agnosticism is like that between a man in a balloon and one on the solid ground. The balloon man shouts down to his enemy, 'Come up here and I will give you a good beating.' The reply is 'No; I cannot leave the solid ground of fact. I cannot float myself with the gas of sentiment and imagination. But, if you come down to *terra firma*, I will very soon test the strength of your

balloon. If your silk can stand the sharp edge of my knife—scientific criticism—well and good, you will continue to float above the earth. But if not, and a rent is made, you and your balloon will collapse into nothingness. The balloon man shouts down that his antagonist is a coward, throws some dust into the eyes of the spectators, and so ascends into the heavens. The theologian, so long as he remains in the region of emotion and imagination, is safe from any attack on the part of the scientist ; but the moment he touches the ground of fact he must prepare for hostilities ; and it is well that he should understand that such things as miracles, the inspiration of the Bible, etc., are subject to criticism, and will be vigorously combatted.”—*John Wilson, M.A.*

“ If after devoting our best energies and highest endeavours to the investigation of the arguments of Maratheism, Dualism, Polytheism, Pantheism, and Atheism, we find none entirely convincing, there is no cowardice involved in the admission. On the contrary, it becomes our highest duty to confess that all our labour has been without fruit or reward. Though we have fervently sought we have failed to find. We are sceptics or agnostics, and recognise the fact that, even should one or other of these five interpretations of the mystery of existence be accepted as its true solution it is but a proximate solution and thus but removes the essential mystery but a step further back.”—*Constance E. Plumpton.*

“ We get rid of the accursed spirit of condemnation, and the setting open wide—as wide as humanity itself—the gates that lead to truth and human progress. For the Agnostic is no narrow pale, on one side of which stand the saved and the other the lost ; and no ascription of certain social experiments to a corrupt imagination and an evil heart.. . . .

“ We know nothing of the hereafter—absolutely nothing. But, freed as we are from the trammels of superstition and the strangulation of fear, we

deny the eternal Hell, and the omnipotent Devil formulated by old-world ignorance and terror. For us the life of man is emphatically his life in the present, and his merits or demerits are determined by his relations to others. He has, in a word, got rid of night and its dreams, and has come out into the light of waking day of which he does not presume to foretell the state of the evening, or the conditions of the night that follows after. All he knows is that there must come this evening, when strength will wane and the light will wax dim; and that then will steal down the night—into which he cannot peer. Whether that night is to be starless, or brilliant with these “many mansions” of light, must be left to time to settle. No, the Agnostic does not waste his time in these speculative futilities. He works for the present and in the present, and he leaves the undiscovered future to take care of itself.—*Mrs. Lynn Linton.*

“The essential principles of Agnosticism were known and recognised before the name was invented; but the introduction of a definite name arrested the attention of the reflecting classes. . . . Their attention once fixed on the subject, people began to say this was what they always thought. The unseen and unknown presents an ample field for speculation, and by contemplative minds must always be viewed with reverence and awe. A consciousness that the sphere of known and knowable phenomena, when expanded to its utmost limits, is very far from embracing the whole universe, very far from exhausting the possibilities of thought and feeling, while the Beyond is, to the upright man and pure in heart, an unfathomable abyss into which he looks with much ground for hope and very little for fear.—*Dr. Bithell.*”

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London: W. Stewart & Co., 41, Farringdon Street, E.C.

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