

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

AGAINST AGNOSTICISM.

BY

“HUMANITAS.”

Author of “Is God the First Cause?”, “Follies of the Lord’s Prayer Exposed”, “Thoughts on Heaven”, “Jacob the Wrestler”, “Mr. Bradlaugh and the Oaths Question”, “How the British House of Commons treated Charles Bradlaugh, M.P.”, “Charles Bradlaugh and the Irish Nation”, “Socialism a Curse”, “A Fish in Labor: or, Jonah and the Whale”, “God: Being also a Brief Statement of Arguments Against Agnosticism”, “Against Socialism”, &c.

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AGAINST AGNOSTICISM.

THIS pamphlet was originally written as a portion of my larger one on "God"; but considering it to be complete in itself—as against Agnosticism—I determined to publish it, in a separate form, hoping thereby to reach many who might not be inclined to buy the larger one.

The observations I have made, and the arguments I have endeavored to advance, are made and advanced with great respect and with much diffidence: respect for the opinions of those who, from their longer and closer application to the question, and better means of studying it, are more capable of forming a correct opinion than myself: and diffidence, because I know the conclusion at which I have arrived is at variance with that opinion. Yet having arrived at it, I must needs express myself; but I do so in the spirit of enquiry, and because what I shall endeavor to put forward seems to me to be real difficulties.

If I should appear to be dogmatic, or wanting in respect for greater thinkers, it will be by reason of experiencing a difficulty in finding a method of expressing the thoughts I wish to convey.

In my pamphlet on God, of which this forms a part, I have said that God is not, nor could not be. And it is upon the wisdom or unwisdom of thus distinctly denying the existence of God, that I wish to make a few observations.

I believe it is *held* by all Atheists—no matter how it is put—that God does *not* exist. And it is true that the whole tone and meaning of this paper is a denial of his existence. And so in reality are all Atheistic writings.

But I think I see very marked signs of what may be considered a decay of this robust and thorough Atheism.

Leading Freethinkers, it would appear do not now take up this position, but what is considered the safer and more moderate one of Agnosticism; which would seem to mean that man does not *know* God. I believe it is also taken to mean that, constituted as man is, he cannot know him; and that therefore he should neither affirm nor deny his existence. I am only now putting that portion of Agnosticism which applies directly to God, as contrasted with Atheism, which certainly does deny his existence. Mr. Laing, as I understand him, takes the above view of Agnosticism; for, in his now famous "articles¹ of the Agnostic creed and reasons for them", he holds that, if we cannot prove an affirmative respecting the mystery of a first cause, and a personal God; equally, we cannot prove a negative; and adds: "There may be anything in the Unknowable". But he qualifies this statement by further saying: "Any guess at it which is inconsistent with what we really do know, stands, *ipso facto*, condemned". I would here remark that the qualification—certainly for all practical purposes—goes very near to, if not quite, annulling the statement. But he further holds that if the existence of such places as heaven and hell (using them of course to illustrate the idea he is expounding) be asserted in a general way, without attempt at definition, the possibility of the correctness of the assertion should be admitted. Well but, if anything and everything is possible in the Unknowable, is it possible that there may exist an uncaused cause of all things? If it, as well as the existence of (I presume) a soul, of heaven, hell, etc.,—which be it remembered, those who believe in them, do so on *faith*, not professing to prove them—is possible, is not three parts of the Christian Theists' position conceded? It would however appear to me, reasoning from Mr. Laing's position, that although anything may be possible in the Unknowable, yet any statement concerning it which is inconsistent with ascertained facts stands condemned, the possibility of the existence of God stands condemned. If anything which is inconsistent with what we really

¹ Those which he drew up at the request of the Right Hon. W. E. Gladstone.

know stands, *ipso facto*, condemned; then the idea of a beginning, the existence of an uncaused cause—*i.e.*, God—stands so condemned. And it follows naturally, that a term which embodies that meaning (*viz.*, that what cannot be is not) is more logical than one which either admits of the possibility of the impossible, or evades the direct issue.

The position created by Agnosticism, as put by Mr. Laing—and it is the generally accepted one¹—on the face of it, not only appears contradictory but unnecessary. One would seem to have to accept the existence of God—or five thousand Gods for the matter of that—as possible, till tested by the only means we have of testing it, when it is, as a mere matter of course, to be held impossible; the non-possibility actually and practically, and also curiously, forming a part of the Agnostic position. In theory it grants the possibility of the existence of God, in practice it denies it.

Again, if Agnosticism permits one to declare impossible that which, if tested and found to be so by the ordinary methods of reasoning aided by what we really know, then it is, so far Atheism: because the Atheist does but say what is possible or impossible, judged by what is cognisable, by what is really known, he could do no other. Thus Agnosticism would seem superfluous. At best it can but be (as I think) a something to suit the extreme palate of the—I would almost say—over-logical epicure; a kind of luxury for the hair-splitter, the hypereritic who will not, physically speaking, say that what cannot be, is not, but who will, in order to escape the mere suspicion of illogicalness, drop his physical condition to admit the possibility of something about the *Unknowable*; although that admission involves the possibility—the *may-be* of propositions superbly ridiculous.

Agnosticism would seem to me to be Atheism, plus the possibility of what both practically say is impossible.²

¹ I notice that "D" (of the *National Reformer*) takes exception to the idea of Agnosticism being a *creed*, but I do not think that affects the general view of Agnosticism as in reference to God.

² R. Lewins, M.D., in a letter to the *Agnostic Journal* of March 30th, remarks: "I cannot see the difference—other than academical, over which we might split hairs for ever—between Atheism and Agnostic-

It would appear to me that what is unknowable is not. Hence the superfluity of Agnosticism. It is possible there may be some points and niceties about it which pass my comprehension, but of this I feel convinced, there are some very serious difficulties in its way. If you hold that all things are possible in what is termed the Unknowable, an individual may—as indeed is done—assert the most extraordinary rubbish imaginable, and knock you down with what I will call the Agnostic Closure: “How can you prove to the contrary?” Of course one could shake one’s head, and venture a doubtful smile, and even go to the extreme of saying the thing is very improbable; but the closure will come in again with quite as much force against the improbable as it did against the impossible, when used in reference to the Unknowable.

It is doubtless a wise and judicious proceeding to hold a prisoner innocent till he is proven guilty. But surely it ought not to be necessary to hold that anything, no matter how completely idiotic, if only stated in a general way, is possible and might be true, because it is outside the possibility of being tested. Of course I comprehend the difficulty: I may be asked how I know it is foolish or idiotic since I cannot test it: my reply is that the thing spoken of simply *is not*, and hence the folly of holding that it *may be* this, that, or the other. The whole idea seems to be over and above and beyond reality—entirely wide of the mark. It would appear to me that, practically, no theory nor statement can be made or set up which shall be completely outside or free from considerations which

ism. An Agnostic who doubts of God is certainly Godless, and Atheism is no more.”

Whilst holding that Atheism is more definite and goes further than Agnosticism, and therefore disagreeing with Dr. Lewins, I am startled to find the Editor of the *Agnostic Journal* stating, by way of reply, that “‘God’ is just the one fact of which the Agnostic is assured. ‘God’, with the Agnostic, is the ontological and cosmic basis and *fons et origo*, just as the ego is with Dr. Lewins.”

With great respect, I would remark that it would perhaps be difficult to find a better definition of what God is to the Theist; and if it be a correct one, Agnostics are something very like Theists, God being the basis, fountain, and origin of both cults.

If we go on at this rate, and it be true that Agnosticism is the better and more correct form of Atheism, we shall soon have Atheists who believe in God.

are in connexion with the universe, or which are not based upon what we know or is knowable. (Therefore Agnosticism is out of court.) And in coining a word which assumes that you can so speak or set up theories—or, what is much the same thing, that assertions and theories so set up may be true—you are but helping to obscure, rather than to throw more light upon what is already sufficiently difficult.

As far as I can comprehend Agnosticism, and its teachings and bearings, I do not and never did like it. This may look presumptuous on my part, possibly it is presumptuous; but rightly or wrongly I cannot but regard it as a kind of half-way house between Atheism and Theism. I regard it as a reversion into the vicinity of the temples we have deserted, and which (as I thought) we had got to look upon as temples of myths and impossibilities. Of course much depends upon the starting point. The Theist becoming doubtful will possibly evolve into Agnosticism, or the *may-be* stage; tiring of this, he will naturally evolve further into Atheism, which says God is not. On the other hand, if the starting point be Atheism, or that the Atheist has evolved from something else into Atheism, which says *no*, and evolves from it into Agnosticism, which says *perhaps*; he will in all probability continue the evolution till he arrives at Theism, which says *yes*.

Agnosticism being, as I have said, a half-way house between the two extremes, there will at all times probably be a few—possibly many, who will find shelter in it. It will possibly form an asylum for the doubtful of Theism, and the timid or hypercritical of Atheism. It may become a common ground upon which the weary and wavering of faith and the weary and wavering of no faith will for a time find rest. But it is only a transition stage, being neither yes nor no; and will only satisfy those whose minds are not made up either way. It may be regarded as a kind of intellectual landing stage for passengers who are either going forward or returning, as the case may be.

In the observations which follow I will endeavor to further explain myself, and to point out why I think an Atheist ought logically to be able to say there is no God.

I was recently much struck by the similarity of Mrs. Besant's definition of Secularism in her debate with the Rev. W. T. Lee, and the definition of Agnosticism quoted

from the "New Oxford Dictionary of the English language", by the Rev. H. Wace, D.D., in his paper read at the late Church Congress at Manchester. It would appear to me that this adoption of Agnosticism, and discarding of Atheism, coupled with the hesitation which naturally follows, of saying point blank there is no God, is not only a very weak position, but goes a long way towards justifying the boast made by many, that there is no living person who really believes there is no God. Of course this boast may be a very silly and unfounded one; but when they see an actual avoidance of the direct denial by those whose teachings and professions, if they mean anything, mean that "God" *is not*, they may, I think, be excused to a very great extent in making it. If the case were reversed, and if Christians and Theists generally, whilst holding and teaching that God did exist, yet declined upon some kind of logical (?) ground to plainly say so; we Atheists would, I think, be much inclined to put our finger upon it as a weak spot. We cannot, then, be surprised if they do a similar thing. At the same time, I wish it to be borne in mind that I would not relinquish a position, nor hesitate in taking up a new one, simply because I thought it gave the enemy a *seeming* advantage. I hold that a position should be occupied by reason of its inherent strength and logical soundness, altogether irrespective of side issues, which may contain no principle.

The question then arises which is the most logical position, that of declaring in direct fashion the ultimate end and meaning of your teaching, or of halting at the last gate by refraining from making such direct declaration?

At the outset I would ask—and I think the main part of the question hinges upon the answer given—why may not an Atheist logically and in set terms declare what his name implies—nay, actually *means*, viz, *one who disbelieves in the existence of God*? The Theist asserts there is a God. Shall not the Atheist controvert that assertion? Must he remain dumb? And if he does controvert it how shall he do so without denying it? And if he denies the proposition or assertion (which the Agnostic formula "we do not and cannot know him", really, though lamely, does) does he not in reality say "there is no God"? If you venture as far as denying the evidence of his existence, do you not

logically and actually deny that he exists, or do you mean that, in spite of the evidence of his non-existence, perhaps after all he does exist? Why is it rash—which the hesitation denotes—to give an unequivocal verdict? It appears to me that it is really a matter of evidence; and I do not quite see why, because it is a question of God, the common and consequent result of investigation should not be put into the usual yes or no, the same as in any other enquiry. If the result of the investigation be that we cannot form a decided opinion either way, and that we must therefore give an open verdict, by all means give an open one; but in that case we should not call ourselves Atheists. But is that really the true position of Atheists of to-day? Is Atheism dead or deserted, and are those who professed it on their road back to Theism? I hold that neither to affirm nor deny the existence of God is, notwithstanding niceties of logic, virtually to admit the possibility of his existence; which, taken in conjunction with the genuine Atheistic contention that there is no room for him in nature, becomes, to say the least, most contradictory. If it be alleged that Agnosticism does not assume the possibility of God's existence in nature, but only in supernature, *i.e.*, the unknowable, I reply that you cannot assume anything as to supernature. It is not; therefore its God or Gods are not. If this position be not conceded then the most far-fetched ravings as to supernature that ever came from brain of madman must be held as possible. If you venture one whit further in the shape of denial than the agnostically orthodox *perhaps* or *may be*, the extinguisher is clapped upon you, and you are simply put out, to the great delight of those who have *faith*, and who do not hesitate to give direct form to what they hold to be true.

I have said that the existence or non-existence of God is a matter of evidence, and ought to be treated as such. And that a man ought not to be held to be rash or illogical for giving direct form to his verdict, or result of his investigation. I presume a person who upon the evidence of his purse declared it contained no money, would not be held to be illogical or rash; but if he, adopting the Agnostic principle, doubtfully declared he saw no evidence that it contained money, but would not venture upon saying outright that it did not—thereby inferring that perhaps it

did, the evidence notwithstanding—he would go very near being considered both rash and illogical.¹ And bear in mind that if this collateral inference is not to be drawn, and if the statement is to be taken as shutting out all possibility of it, I am entitled to ask in what consists the wisdom of discarding the direct statement, and substituting an equivocal, or less direct one? Where the use in dropping one term and picking up another, which, whilst being less direct, finally means the same thing? If it does not mean the same thing, then it can only mean one other thing: the possibility of the existence of God, which, as I understand it, is a direct contradiction and denial of Atheism.

Some years ago, Dr. E. B. Aveling advocated—or I think I should be more correct in saying, he stated with approval—that Darwin, in a conversation which he had with him, advocated Agnosticism in preference to Atheism, as being the safer course or term. This struck me at the time, and does so still, as pointing directly to the *perhaps* to which I have drawn attention; or if not, why *safer*? But it is very like saying it is safer to hold the possibility of what cannot be possible. If not, then it can but mean that it is safer not to deny what may after all be a fact; thus conceding almost the entire position claimed by the Theist. The possibility of super-nature being once conceded, the road is laid open for a belief in Gods, devils, ghosts, goblins, and all the rest of the unreal phantoms with which the regions of supernature are peopled.

I regard Agnosticism as a going out of one's way to admit of a *may-be*, which the whole universe proclaims *may not be*; a leaving-behind of nature to worse than uselessly say "it is safer to hold there may be something beyond it". I think those who deal in myth, especially those calling themselves Christians, will have much to be grateful for if this really becomes the Atheist's position. It is certainly more difficult to argue against a position the possible correctness of which you have already

¹ It is likely to be urged that nothing of the kind is asserted of a purse, but only of what we can know nothing. But it seems to me that the admission as to the Unknowable, *i.e.*, supernature is an admission which, although most contradictory in its nature, is still an admission that perhaps it (supernature) is; to the shutting out of the more reasonable and direct teaching of Atheism.

conceded, than against one whose correctness you entirely repudiate.

It would seem to me there is a tremendous contradiction in what appears to be the principle of Agnosticism quite savoring of the old belief in God, which I must repeat is not compatible with the principles of Atheism—and, as I thought, of Secularism. It is all very well to say that Agnosticism is safer because it tells you neither to affirm nor deny in a matter of which you have no possible means of judging. But Atheism, if I read it aright, tells you there can be no possibility of such a thing existing. If that be so, to talk of withholding your judgment becomes nonsense. If the universe says no, why should I say perhaps yes? Do I then doubt, or half believe? What logical nicety could carry me beyond the cognizable into myth? What logical necessity could carry me beyond Nature into supernature? None. I cannot so much as think it, and to admit it would be equal to the non-admission of the existence of nature. Supernature with its Gods, or its millions of Gods, is not.

The "New Oxford Dictionary", to which I have alluded, and as quoted by the Rev. Dr. Wace, states that "an Agnostic is one who holds that the existence of anything behind and beyond natural phenomena is unknown, and, as far as can be judged, is unknowable, and especially that a first cause are subjects of which we know nothing". This, taken alone, might be good enough for the Secularistic standpoint, and might be sufficient warrant for neither affirming nor denying, except that it still allows the possibility of a God, and therefore is not Atheism. Of course if we are going to sink Atheism, well and good; although it would certainly place us in the disadvantageous position of not being logically able to oppose the Theist in a thorough manner. Dr. Wace further points out that the name was claimed by Professor Huxley for those who disclaimed Atheism, and believed with him in an unknowable God or cause of all things.¹ Quoting again from the late

¹ Since writing the above I see by "D's." articles in the *National Reformer* that he entirely doubts the accuracy of this statement. The correctness of this doubt would seem to be confirmed if the following quotation, given in the *Agnostic Journal* as Prof. Huxley's definition of the word, be correct: "As the inventor of the word, I am entitled to say authentically what is meant by it. Agnosticism is the essence

bishop of the diocese in which he was speaking, he said that "the Agnostic neither affirmed nor denied God". He simply put him on one side. Of course a Secularist, nor, indeed, an Agnostic or Atheist, is not bound to take a bishop's rendering of the term, although for my own part I take it as being fairly correct. And it must, I think, be admitted that the statements quoted are compatible with the position now apparently assumed by leading Secularists. I certainly think all these statements taken together, whilst being contradictory in their ultimate meaning, go a very considerable distance in the belief in the existence of a God. If there be wisdom and safety in this, I am bound to think that neither dwells in Atheism. But in my humble opinion such is not the case. To neither deny nor affirm simply shirks the point; it is, at best, withholding your opinion; it is to halt between the two theories; and to my mind it certainly does not demonstrate the folly of an Atheist saying "there is no God". It only demonstrates the folly of an Agnostic doing so.

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." That, so far, certainly is in direct opposition to what Dr. Wace would have us infer Huxley to have meant by the word. If it means anything in reference to God, it means that man has no scientific grounds for believing in the existence of God, and that therefore he ought not to state such belief. So far it is Atheistic; but if it further means that man has no scientific grounds for disbelieving in his existence, and ought not therefore to state his disbelief, then it is not Atheistic. And if meaning both these things, it is equivocal and contradictory. If it means that we have no evidence either way and should be silent, then it drops Atheism and the evidence upon which it is built, and goes half way in support of Theism. Professor Huxley's definition as here given, and taken alone, would seem to mean that a scientist should not state that he knows what he cannot scientifically prove. But Secularists and others seem to have placed upon it a wider meaning (which of course it is contended logically follows), and allege that it also means that he should not deny what he cannot scientifically prove non-existent; and that therefore he ought not to deny the existence of God, but should refuse (conditionally) to discuss him. Whilst thinking Atheism teaches that the non-existence of God is scientifically proved, I would point out that the other view is open to the objection that if the existence of forty thousand Gods, with their accompanying devils, were asserted we should not be in a position to deny. The same being true of any other absurdity, say, for instance, the *Trinity*.

It would appear to me that Agnosticism is at least illogical, if not altogether untenable, inasmuch as that, while it directly affirms that man can know nothing outside natural phenomena, nor of the first cause—which is the primary meaning of God—it yet admits that he may exist. Thus, by its direct teaching, man ought to act as though he is not; and by its indirect teaching, as though he possibly is. In other words, you must (and this would seem to be getting fashionable) profess Agnosticism and act Atheism.

I am aware that it is held by authorities for whom we are bound to have great respect, that the word God, undefined, has no meaning; and that it would be the work of a fool to reason against a term which conveys no idea, or argue against a nonentity. To the latter, I will remark that, if it were not a nonentity, there would be no reason in arguing against its existence; and if it is a nonentity, where the folly or danger in saying so? But is it quite true that the word God conveys no meaning? It is doubtless defined differently by different creeds. It is said to mean the Creator, the Maker of heaven and earth, the Supreme Being, the Sovereign Lord, the Beginning and the End, and many other things. But the cardinal meaning which pervades all definitions is the supreme cause or maker of the universe. Surely there is meaning in this. I do not quite see how an Atheist, knowing what is broadly meant and held as to God by those who believe in his existence, can quite fairly say the word has no meaning to him—or rather, that it conveys no meaning to him. Does it not convey the meaning, or can you not take it as conveying the meaning it is intended to convey?¹ Of course I may be asked how a person can know the meaning intended to be conveyed, unless defined. I recognise the difficulty; but reply: Would an Atheist subscribe to a belief in God under any, or all the ordinary—I think I might say—known definitions? If he would not, I think the difficulty is removed, and that there is no

¹ I am not here contending against the necessity of having words defined for the proper and expeditious discussion of the ideas they are intended to convey. I am simply contending that this particular word does carry a sufficiently definite meaning—especially as put forward by Christians in general—to justify a thinker in either accepting or rejecting the theory of his existence.

inconsistency in denying his existence when spoken of, or asserted in general terms. Words generally have meaning only in conjunction with the ideas they are intended to convey. This word conveys the idea, or is intended to convey the idea, of the existence of a supernatural intelligent and supreme being, whom those who assert his existence believe to have been the creator or cause of the universe. It appears to me that it is not a question as to whether an Atheist could convey any thoughts or theories of his own in the same language; but is rather a question of what the person who uses it intends to convey. As a matter of fact, I, for my own part, do think the meaning is sufficiently clear and understood as to enable an Atheist to say yes or no to such general meaning.

If what I am endeavoring to explain—by which I mean the import of the term God—had not been sufficiently clear, we should not now have in our language, (and I presume in every scientifically arranged language in the world) the terms Theist, and Atheist, and their derivatives, nor would Atheists themselves have existed. If then, the term does convey an idea, or conclusion arrived at either rightly or wrongly by Christians and Theists generally, that a maker or cause of all nature, and therefore of all natural phænomena, called God, does exist; and thus distinctly—or even indistinctly if you will—put it forward. May not the Atheist who (even allowing room for variations of definition) holds that he does *not* exist say as much without coming under the ban of folly? I venture to think that if he may not give direct form to his words and state what he holds not to exist, is not, then he is in a false position, and a false restraint is put upon him. I presume in any other matter, an Atheist may without doing violence to consistency declare that, what is not, is not. Where then the crime or folly in this particular case? Is it so serious and awful a one that he must not venture upon making the logical and consequent avowal which his disbelief upon one hand, and his convictions upon the other, force upon him? It would appear upon the very face of it, to be the height of reason to affirm the non-existence—or perhaps I had better say, to deny the existence—of a nonentity, especially when its existence is forced upon you with such lamentable results. It appears to me that it is not only logical to do so, but that

it becomes an absolute duty, therefore a logical necessity. I say that, if God is, it is right to say so, and if he is not, it is equally right to say so. If a thinker has not formed an opinion either way, or has come to the conclusion that he cannot form an opinion, then I take it, he is not an Atheist and some other term may be found to better interpret his position.

I could understand taking up the position that, because we have not all-knowledge, therefore we cannot say what *might*, or *might not* be, what is absolutely *possible* or impossible: and contenting ourselves with the words, probable and improbable; although I should be strongly tempted to transgress therefrom. There are some things which I should consider beyond the improbable and to be impossible. But this circumscribing should apply all-round and include all questions, and not be confined to that of the existence of a God, or Gods: I do not see the utility or wisdom in drawing the line at him or them. To my thinking it is illogical as well as giving color to a pretended lurking fear, or belief put upon Atheists. The God concept is, I presume, like any other, a matter of evidence. I think an Atheist should find no more difficulty in giving expression to his conviction that God is not, than in giving expression to his conviction that a moon made of green cheese is not. An Atheist is one who is set down as being "one who disbelieves in the existence of a God, or supreme intelligent being". Atheism is, shortly, this stated disbelief, and is put in opposition to Theism. It will thus be observed that Atheism goes altogether beyond "neither affirming nor denying": it is the embodiment of denial and disbelief. Of course one may retreat from it into another position; but in the meantime, I must again say that it does seem unreasonable upon the very face of it that an Atheist may not logically and in set terms declare the non-existence of the thing in whose existence he disbelieves, such disbelief being signified by his very name, and it must be borne in mind that, whether he so states it or not, his life, if he be consistent, and his writings and teachings practically proclaim it, and are, so far, in opposition—at least to a great extent—to what I consider the weak avowal he makes when he says "the Atheist does not say there is no God". The Atheistic school—if I may so term it—is actually founded upon reasoned-out conclusions

based upon facts affirmed and attested by science. It stands upon a plan and theory which does not admit of God; there is no room for him in it; or, in other words, he cannot be. If it were otherwise based, it would not be Atheism. Yet strangely enough, Atheists now hesitate to say he is not: and adopt a term which may with much reason be regarded as a loop-hole.

But the curious point to me is, are we to continue to thus practically preach and teach Atheism, proclaiming in a hundred ways the non-existence of God, and yet evade the open declaration? If we are, and in future are to be, careful to write and state merely that we do not know God—and forgive me if I once more say—thereby inferring that perchance he does exist; we ought, I think, in the name of consistency, to abolish, or allow to become obsolete by disuse, the term Atheist, and all its derivatives; and substitute such Agnostic or other terms as shall better define our position. In that case we ought no longer to call ourselves and our literature Atheistic. If we do, it should at least be stated that the term is not to be taken in the generally, and hitherto accepted sense, but in that of the recently revived Agnostic one.

For my own part, rightly or wrongly, foolishly or otherwise, I have no hesitation in asserting that, so far as I can think, weigh and judge, there is no God. Otherwise, I could not be an Atheist.

Since writing the foregoing, I have read "D.'s" articles in the *National Reformer*, "In Defence of Agnosticism". They are, as indeed are all his articles, ably and profoundly written. I do not here profess to reply to them. But I feel bound to state that, so far, they seem to have confirmed me in some of my opinions and objections to Agnosticism. In his concluding article he says that an Atheist—and I now presume a Secularist—may not argue the existence of God, nor anything relating to him when considered as a supernatural being; "any such question" being "mere vanity and vexation of spirit". But he further says that *some* argument is admissible when he is taken in conjunction with the world; or as he puts it: "Some assertions may be made respecting God, which it is possible *negatively* to verify", because, as he goes on to explain, such assertions include statements with regard to the order of nature; as, for instance: "We may argue

from the existence of evil, the impossibility of the existence of an omnipotent, omnipresent, and omni-beneficent God". This is doubtless the result of very close reasoning, but to my mind savors a little of hair-splitting, and appears to leave the person awkwardly situated, who does not believe in the existence of God. All the while a Theist puts his God forward as being supernatural only, and as having nothing to do with nature, one must not reply, but be dumb; or limit one's reply to a refusal to discuss; at most, giving reasons for such refusal. But if it is put forward in conjunction with our phænomenal universe (as indeed when is he not?), and that we are thereby enabled to verify what he is not, we may, so far, discuss him. But suppose it were possible in like manner to verify what he is, or, as "D." would put it: to verify affirmatively, might it then be discussed? And how shall we know which way it can be verified, or whether it can be verified either way without full discussion? And why should it be permissible to discuss one side and not the other? Are you to assume that God is not, and only discuss such portion of the question as supports that view? And finally, is that Agnosticism?

But apart from this, it appears to me to somewhat evade the manner in which the God idea is usually put forward. For my own part, I do not know that it is ever advanced except in conjunction with nature and in the sense of authorship, either supernaturally or otherwise. God is generally held to be supernatural, and at the same time the cause and author or creator of the universe and of all things. That, to my thinking, is the position anyone who does not hold it ought to be able to argue, and the enabling position, above all others, I take to be that of Atheism. If an Agnostic held to the first portion of the statement only, discussion upon the question of God would be well-nigh impossible for him; because all Churches and most creeds hold him to be a supernatural being. But the qualification comes in as a kind of saving clause, and permits the Agnostic to discuss the question to a limited extent, thus showing at once the weakness of Agnosticism, and admitting that even by its aid the question cannot be entirely shut out of the arena. God may be discussed in part, but only negatively. Taking the world as your witness, you may say,

"a good and almighty God does not exist", but you must not say, "no God exists". You may only say you do not know him. This, to my thinking, is a lame and unsatisfactory state of affairs, and is evasive, as indeed is Agnosticism generally. For instance, and having some of "D.'s" further illustrations in my mind, I cannot but think, when a Christian states that "three times one God are one God"; or "that God was three days and three nights in the bowels of the earth between Friday night and the following Sunday morning", that it would be quite as logical, and certainly more forcible, to say I deny the possibility, as to say "the subject matter is beyond the reach of my faculties, and that the assertion itself conveys no distinct meaning to my mind". These seem to be quite distinct statements, and to convey distinctly impossible ideas; and I urge that it would be no more illogical to give direct form to my verdict—in fact less so—than to weakly profess not to understand what is intended to be conveyed.

I make these remarks with "much fear and trembling", but feel bound to say that I am surprised to be told that an Agnostic, or indeed anyone professing to rely upon common sense and science, "does not, or needs not, deny" the statement that God, *i.e.*, Christ, remained three days and nights in the earth, between Friday evening and the following Sunday morning. "D." himself admits that if the doctrine of the trinity, viz, that three times one are one, "were asserted of apples", he would disbelieve it; but being asserted of Gods he will neither believe nor disbelieve; or, if he does do either, the result must be hidden under the Agnostic formula of neither affirming nor denying.

The ideas on Agnosticism to which I have endeavored to give form have been in my mind for a considerable period, and I have taken the present opportunity of putting them together, although in rather a hurried and, perhaps, in an insufficiently considered manner. But I put them more in the spirit of inquiry than in any other.

The subject is a vast one, and has engaged the minds of some of the greatest thinkers of all ages. In the small space here at my command I have not been able to much more than touch it. I have made no reference to learned works, and but small reference to learned writers. I do but profess to have given such thoughts and ideas as

occurred to myself whilst thinking upon the subject. My observations are possibly better calculated to induce the ordinary individual to think, to ponder these matters, and to look for larger and more complete investigations than they are to do battle with the mighty of intellect and the great of learning.

The universe, the raw material, lies before us all. We can all but deal with it according to our capabilities and our opportunities. I can only hope that my rough method and manner, whilst being accepted only for what they are worth, will yet do a small share in the work of regenerating humanity, and building up a people who shall consider their most sacred duty consists not only in free inquiry, but free and open assertion of the fruits of such inquiry, rather than blind and ignorant submission to churches and creeds, whose interest it is to stifle thought.
