Phases of Atheism,

DESCRIBED, EXAMINED, AND ANSWERED.

BY

SOPHIA DOBSON COLLET.

"An Atheist by choice is a phenomenon yet to be discovered, among thousands who are Atheists by conviction."—*The Reasoner*, July 31, 1859.

"Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our heart is restless till it resteth in Thee."—*St. Augustine's Confessions*, Book I., s. 1.

1860.

LONDON:

JOHN WATTS, PRINTER, 147, FLEET STREET, E.C.

PREFACE.

THE following Essay is reprinted, with revisions and additions, from the American *Christian Examiner* for November, 1859. Its original form as a magazine article will explain its limitation to the writings of a few authors only. My object has been to show—first, that the purely Secular view which, regarding religion as a mere *intellectual uncertainty*, endeavours to avoid that uncertainty by virtually eliminating the spiritual element from daily life, misses the richest and highest influences that life can receive, and cramps the full and natural development of the human soul. Secondly, that the more ideal Atheism which escapes this error, does so only to fall into another equally serious. Preserving the religious sentiment, and alive to all the intuitions of ideality and devotion, yet unable to link them with any source of personal trust beyond the reach of human frailty, "Religious Atheism" struggles at every step under the impossible attempt to make the finite human conscience and the frail earth-bound affections meet the infinite claims made upon both by the tasking realities of life; and under the perpetual, haunting sense of grief and failure thence resulting, is driven to question —and most justly so—whether the absence of a Divine Helper from the world of moral conflict, does not virtually amount to the Supremacy of Evil.

Those who have the happiness to believe in the God of Conscience as the Life of their life, ever leading them on through tempest and calm, humiliation and conquest, to a deeper sympathy and a completer self-surrender to His infinite goodness, are surely bound to do all that in them lies to lift aside the obstacles which cast these shadows of Atheism on the minds and lives of their fellow-creatures. No one can be more sensible than myself to how small a share in such a work this brief Essay can pretend. But if only a few of the suggestions here made should lead any of my Atheist readers but a single step nearer to the God whom, under the names of "Truth" and "Duty," they may already have unconsciously sought and served, these pages will not have been written in vain.

London, January, 1860. S. D. C.

PHASES OF ATHEISM.

—o—

1. *The Life and Character of Richard Carlile.* By George Jacob Holyoake. 1849.
2. *The Last Trial by Jury for Atheism in England; a Fragment of Autobiography.* By George Jacob Holyoake. 1851.
3. *The Case of Thomas Pooley.* By G. J. Holyoake. 1857.
4. *The Trial of Theism.* By G. J. Holyoake. 1858.
5. *Shadows of the Past.* By Lionel H. Holdreth. 1856.
6. *The Affirmations of Secularism; in Seven Letters to G. J. Holyoake.* By L. H. Holdreth. Published in the *Reasoner* for 1857.
7. *Conscience and Consequence. A Tale for the Times.* By Lionel H. Holdreth. Published in the *Reasoner* for 1858. London: Holyoake and Co.

Among the many signs of the times which demand the study of religious thinkers, few are so little known in proportion to their importance as the recent developments which Atheism has assumed among the working-classes of England. These developments are in many respects widely different from those which were current about thirty or forty years ago. There is no less a chasm between the Deism of Thomas Paine and the "Natural Religion" of Theodore Parker, than between the crude "infidelity" of Richard Carlile and the devout Stoicism of Lionel Holdreth. We do not thoroughly appreciate any form of religion till we know what are the classes of minds that reject it, and what sort of principles they accept in preference. And when the rejection of religion is itself tinged with a religious spirit, we may safely predict, not only that the current creed is too narrow for the age, but that a wider and deeper faith is already striking its roots in the hearts of men.

The popularization of Atheism in the working-class mind of England owes its first impulse to the labours of Richard Carlile, the editor of "The Republican." Untutored, antagonistic, and coarse, but brave, devoted, and sincere, he initiated and sustained a twenty years' struggle for the free publication of the extremest heresies in politics and religion, at the expense of nine years' imprisonment (at different times, ranging from 1817 to 1835) to himself, and frequent incarcerations of his wife, sister, and shopmen. This movement, though vigorous to the point of fanaticism, was not widely supported, and it virtually died out, as a sort of drawn game between the government and the heretics. A somewhat milder revival of it took place in 1840-1843, when "The Oracle of Reason" was set on foot by a few energetic young Atheists, and several prosecutions took place. It

was this movement which first introduced to the public the name of George Jacob Holyoake, who, having served his apprenticeship to propagandism by a six months' imprisonment, rose in a few years to be the acknowledged leader of the sect. Under his influence, it has not only increased immensely in numbers, but has passed into a far higher stage of character, both moral and intellectual. This is strikingly illustrated in the case of Thomas Pooley, a poor, half-crazed Cornish labourer, who was in 1857 sentenced to a long imprisonment for "blasphemy." Fifteen years previously, Mr. Holyoake's own imprisonment excited but little notice beyond a small circle, and not one petition was presented to Parliament for his release. But by the time that Pooley's case occurred, the Freethinking movement was strong enough to reach the sympathies of liberal men in all sects, and thus to effect the reversal of an iniquitous sentence.* This event also illustrates the progress of Freethought in another direction. The coarse language for which the poor labourer was indicted—language only too frequent in the pre-Holyoake era—found no defenders among the Secularists who petitioned for his release, but was unanimously objected to, as degrading to Freethought. And this double change, bringing both parties one step nearer to each other, is, there can be no doubt, mainly owing to the good sense, rectitude, and devotedness of George Jacob Holyoake.

But Mr. Holyoake's influence is not the only one observable in the Atheist party. Like many others, that party now possesses its right, left, and centre. For the improvement which took its rise from the establishment of the *Reasoner*, in 1846, has gradually come to tell upon the mixed elements of the Freethinking party; and in 1855 a sort of reactionary "split" took place, and the ultra-Atheistic Secularists set up a rival journal, the *Investigator*,† for the avowed purpose of returning to the old traditions of hatred and ridicule, in opposition to Mr. Holyoake's more catholic and fraternal policy. The utterly shameless spirit in which the *Investigator* habitually treats of the human side of religion is quite sufficient to stamp its incapacity for touching what pertains to the Divine; and its malignant and calumnious enmity towards Mr. Holyoake is a sufficient indication of the divergence between his advocacy and that of "Old Infidelity," as it is expressively termed. Counting this reactionary party as the lowest development of English Atheism, we next come to the party of the centre, namely, that party which is represented by Mr. Holyoake. This is much the largest of the three. Its idea may be stated in Mr. Holyoake's words,—"that the light of duty may be

* Pooley was sentenced to twenty-one months' imprisonment. He was pardoned at the end of five months, most of which was spent in the county lunatic asylum, to which it soon became necessary to remove him. He was so judiciously treated there, however, that on the receipt of his pardon he was restored to his family.

† Defunct in August, 1859.

seen, that a life of usefulness may be led, and the highest desert may be won, though the origin of all things be hidden from us, and the revelations of every religious sect be rejected;"* in short, that Life, Nature, and Morals are self-sufficient, and *independent* of religion. Beyond this aspect of Atheism is yet another, numbering at present no definitely attached adherents besides its enthusiastic propounder, but evidently received with pleasure by many listeners during the last three years. This new Gospel owns to the paradoxical title of Religious Atheism, and is put forth by Mr. Lionel Holdreth, the most cultivated and coherent thinker of whom the Atheist party can boast. He does not, in fact, belong to the working-classes either by birth or education, although his sympathies with them are of the warmest. A little volume of poems, entitled "Shadows of the Past," is the only separate volume he has published; and all his other communications to the Freethinking public have been made through the columns of the *Reasoner*. The reactionary "infidels" *hate* religion: Mr. Holyoake wishes to be *neutral* to it: Mr. Holdreth desires to *re-incarnate* it in another form. Such are the three phases of the Atheistic party in England,—the central body shading off into the two others at either extremity. Passing by the first section, as presenting mere hollow word-controversy, untinged by any real passion for Truth, we propose to examine the second and third sections at some length.

The disintegrated state of Theology in the present day has given rise to the necessity for preaching the Gospel of Free Utterance, wholly distinct from any decision as to *what* is to be uttered. To preach this Gospel has been, in the main, Mr. Holyoake's vocation. But now that the right to speak has been so largely won, the question arises, "What have you to say?" and the metaphysical and spiritual bearings of the subject come into prominence. To this question Mr. Holyoake has endeavoured to give some coherent reply in his recent work, "The Trial of Theism," in which he has reprinted and revised the chief papers on theological subjects which he had written during the previous ten years, with other matter here first published. It is a singular book; utterly destitute of anything like systematic thought, and scarcely less deficient in any arrangement of its materials; painfully unequal, both in substance and tone. Frequently we come upon noble, earnest, manly writing, which indicates real intellectual power, and fine perception; then comes some passage so puerile, so weak, so indiscriminating, as to cause quite a revulsion of feeling in the reader's mind. What makes this frequently-recurring contrast more singular is, that those chapters which are reprints of former papers are mostly revised with minute care, the alterations often indicating delicate discrimination and real expansion of mind. (Chapter 27, which is a reprint of "The Logic of Death," is an instance of this.) Yet the entirely new matter is often of quite inferior quality, both in

* Cowper Street Discussion, p. 221.

thought and expression. It would seem inexplicable how a writer who could give us the better portions of this book could endure to put forth some other parts of it, were not this inequality a phenomenon of such frequent recurrence in literature as to be one of its standing anomalies. Intellectual harmony is almost as rare as moral consistency, and men of even the finest genius too often cultivate one side of their nature to the positive neglect of others. The prominent side of Mr. Holyoake's nature is the moral and practical. He belongs to the concrete world of men, rather than to the abstract world of ideas. The best parts of his book are the delineations of character, some of which are very felicitous. Chapter 14, on Mr. Francis Newman, and Chapter 29, on "Unitarian Theism," give the high-water mark of his religious character-sketches. A man who could thus appreciate the leading ideas of his opponents might (one would think) do great things in theological reform. But note the limiting condition of his power;—he can appreciate these ideas when incarnated in another human mind, but it is mainly through his *human* sympathies that he does so. Neither the religious instincts nor the speculative intuitions are sufficiently magnetic and passionate in his own nature to force their way to an independent creative existence. Whenever he turns to the region of abstract thought, his power seems to depart from him. And this book, which deals almost exclusively with speculative themes, is a marked illustration of it. It manifests all the weaknesses, and but very little of the best strength, of his mind. Thus it affords no clue to the real benefits which, in spite of grave errors, his movement has produced for many among the working classes; while it shows plainly the barriers which must ever limit any movement, however sincere, which excludes religion from the field of human life.

We ought not, however, to quit this point without quoting the author's apology for some of the imperfections of his work:—

"If anything written on the following pages give any Theist the impression that his views, devoutly held, are treated with dogmatism or contempt, the writer retracts the offending phrases. Theological opinion is now so diversified, that he has long insisted on the propriety of classifying, in controversy, the schools of thought, and identifying the particular type of each person, so that any remarks applied to him alone shall not be found 'at large' reflecting upon those to whom they were never intended to apply. If just cause of offence is found in this book, it will be through some inadvertent neglect of this rule.

"The doctrine is quite just, that crude or incomplete works ought to be withheld from publication; and the author reluctantly prints so much as is here presented. If this book be regarded, as it might with some truth, as a species of despatch from the field of battle, the reader will tolerate the absence of art and arrangement in it. The plan contemplated—that of taking the authors on the side of Theism

who represented chronological phases of thought—required more time than the writer could command. From these pages, as they stand, some unfamiliar with the present state of Theistical discussion may obtain partial direction in untrodden paths. Hope of leisure in which to complete anything systematic has long delayed the appearance of this book, after the writer had seen that many might be served even by so slender a performance. At length he confesses, in a literary sense (if he may so use words which bear a spiritual meaning),—

'Time was he shrank from what was right,
From fear of what was wrong:
He would not brave the sacred fight,
Because the foe was strong.

'But now he casts that finer sense
And sorer shame aside;
Such dread of sin was indolence,
Such aim at Heaven was pride.'—*Lyra Apostolica*." *

In seeking for the central pivot of the movement which Mr. Holyoake represents, we find it in *the Independence and Self-sufficiency of Ethics*,—their independence of Theology, their sufficiency in themselves to the needs of man. This doctrine is a compound of several elements, some of which are doubtless valuable truths, while others are serious errors. To disentangle these from each other is now our task. The following passages sufficiently sketch Mr. Holyoake's position. The first is from an early number of the *Reasoner*, the second will be found in the "Trial of Theism:"—

"Anti-religious controversy, which was originally, and ever should be, but a *means* of rescuing morality from the dominion of future-world speculation, became an end,—noisy, wordy, vexed, capricious, angry, imputative, recriminative, and interminable.

"To reduce this chaos of aims to some plan, to discriminate objects, to proportion attention to them, to make controversy just as well as earnest, and, above all, to rescue morality from the ruins of theological arguments, were the intentions of the *Reasoner*. It began by announcing itself 'Utilitarian in Morals,' and resting upon utility as a basis. In all reforms it took unequivocal interest, and *only assailed Theology when Theology assailed Utility*. The *Reasoner* aimed not so much to create a party, as to establish a purpose. It threw aside the name of 'Infidel,' because it was chiefly borne by men who were disbelievers in secret, but who had seldom the honour to avow it openly. It threw aside the term 'Sceptic' as a noun, as the name of a party, because it wished to put an end to a vain and cavilling race, who had made the negation of Theology a profession, and took advantage of their disbelief in the Church to disbelieve in honour and truth."†

"Let any one look below the mere surface of pulpit declamation,

* Preface to "The Trial of Theism." † "Reasoner," No. 57.

and ask himself two questions: What has even Atheism, on the whole, meant? What has it, on the whole, sought, even in its negative and least favourable aspect? It has, in modern times, disbelieved all accounts of the origin of nature by an act of creation, and of the government of nature by a Supreme Being distinct from nature. It has felt these accounts to be unintelligible and misleading, and has suggested that human dependence and morals, in their widest sense, should be founded on a basis independent of Scriptural authority; and it has done this under the conviction, expressed or unexpressed, that greater simplicity, unanimity, and earnestness of moral effort would be the result. This is what it has meant, and this is what it has sought. The main popular force of speculative argument has been to show that morals ought to stand on ground independent of the uncertain and ever-contested dogmas of the churches."†

Now this desire to sever life and ethics from "the dominion of future-world speculation," is not without its true side. When the great synthetic conceptions of life which arose out of deep religious impulses are breaking up through the imperfections of the doctrinal forms in which they are incarnated, it is necessary to deal with each element separately, before the general mind can reach the point at which it becomes possible to recast the whole. And in these periods of transition, we often see special teachers whose vocation seems to be the preaching of those supplementary truths which are needed to *bridge the chasms*—to detach moral realities from the crude doctrinal form in which they were no longer credible, and so to prepare us for a completer view, in which they shall hold a truer position. The connection of Morals with Theology has hitherto been frequently taught on an incomplete basis—namely, that the ground of duty was *only* to be found in God's command. Thus whatever was held to be God's command was exacted from men as duty; and any criticism of the supposed command, as violating conscience or reason, was at once condemned as rebellion—God's will being represented as the only criterion of right. In early and unreflective stages of development, the errors of this doctrine were mostly latent; but when the moral and intellectual elements in spiritual life arrive at a distinct and separate existence, a fuller and more discriminating estimate of the truth becomes imperative. That Moral Obligation is inherently sacred, and that the sense of this obligation does not necessarily imply belief in a Person who claims our obedience, is true; and it is a truth which needs to be clearly recognised, and which *is* recognised by many of the most religious thinkers of the day. It is also true that a common possession of moral truth forms a *positive* ground of union for its votaries; and this, too, is important in an age when so much difference exists between good men on religious subjects. So far as Mr. Holyoake has preached the independent foundation and positive nature

† "Trial of Theism," p. 135.

of Ethics, he has been working on solid ground, and his work has been productive of useful results, which may long outlive their polemic environment. But when he proceeds to erect these doctrines into a basis of *neutrality to religion*, he enters new ground. He does not actually say that Ethical Truth is the only supersensible reality attainable by man; but he implies that it is so to himself, and he evidently believes it to be so for an increasing majority of mankind. That his Atheism is suspensive rather than dogmatic, is indubitable from many touching passages scattered throughout his writings;* but the fact remains, that he deems this suspensive position capable of being incorporated as a permanent element in the philosophy of life, not only for himself, but for human creatures in general—that he studiously cultivates neutrality to religion as a principle of action. Baffled by the difficulties which obstruct his *intellectual comprehension* of the universe, he has no *spiritual apprehension* of its fundamental realities sufficiently vivid to fall back upon; and although "in hours of meditation he confronts with awe the great Mystery," his "baffled speculation returns again to the Secular sphere,"† and he deems it possible and desirable to divide the secular from the spiritual with a sharpness that can entitle the former to support a whole philosophy of life. Now such a philosophy is quite conceivable on the supposition that the spiritual does not and cannot exist; and for thoroughly materialised Atheists such a philosophy is consistent and right. This is the ground taken by the reactionary "Infidels." But Mr Holyoake evidently means something different from this: he means that a man may pass through life as satisfactorily as man can, without being thoroughly convinced of the truth of either Theism or Atheism; that the chief part of human life is *independent* of religion; that to the Secularist's aspirations "the idea of God is not essential, nor the

* "I see the influence men can exert on society, and that life is a calculable process. But WHY is it so? THERE my curiosity is baffled, and my knowledge ends. In vain I look back, hoping to unravel that mysterious destiny with which we are all so darkly bound. That is the channel through which all my consciousness seems to pass out into a sea of wonder; and if ever the orient light of Deity breaks in on me, it will, I think, come in that direction. The presence of law in mind is to me the greatest fact in nature."—"Trial of Theism," p. 69.

"When pure Theists, as Mazzini and Professor Newman, explain their fine conception of God as the Deity of duty, or of moral aspiration, the imagination, borne on the golden wings of a reverence untinged by terror, soars into the radiant light of a possible God. But the Possible is not the Actual. Hope is not proof. . . .

"Had I been taught to conceive of Deity as either of the writers just named conceive of Him, I think it likely that I should never have ceased to hold Theism as true: and if it were not misleading to one's self to covet opinion, I could even wish to be able to share their convictions. But having once well parted from my early belief, I am free to inquire and resolute to know, and I seek for evidence which will not only satisfy my present judgment, but evidence with which I can defy the judgment of others. He who can supply me with this can command me."
—Ibid., pp. 115, 113.

† Ibid., p. 115.

denial of the idea necessary."* "What help has the Theist which the Atheist has not also?"† he asks, evidently unaware how the perception of religious reality modifies the whole of life, altering its proportions, and often even reversing its purposes. Take, for instance, the subject of death. How widely different are the feelings with which we must regard the vicissitudes and problems of life, on the supposition that our career is *not* ended by death, from those feelings which are forced upon us by the supposition that it *is* so terminated! This is a case in which the reality must lie either with the one alternative or the other: either we shall, or we shall not, survive our present existence; and except in those cases where excessive misery or mental torpor has produced a state of abnormal indifference to life altogether, a neutral feeling on the subject is scarcely possible. Our affections, hopes, pursuits—the whole conduct and tone of our lives—must inevitably be influenced to an incalculable extent by the conclusion which we adopt. It is quite true that Duty is equally *binding* on us, whether our term of life be mortal or immortal. But the absence of a futurity must alter the *line* of our duty in an infinity of directions, and it is unavoidable that we *act* from one hypothesis or the other. Even suspensive Atheism, though not shutting out the chance of a futurity, is obliged to act on the other theory. Mr. Holyoake, though far more open to spiritual influences than his party generally, is obliged to base his world on the Secular *alone*. His superiority on these points is purely individual, and is constantly overborne in party and polemic life by the inevitable tendency of his principles. There is an instinctive feeling in men's minds that religion is either a great reality or a great mistake, but that it cannot be a matter of indifference. And this perception is beginning to show itself in the Secularist party. They are dividing more and more visibly into positive and negative sections,—the one *repudiating* religion, the other *reapproaching* it more or less distinctly.‡ For human nature is so constituted that men cannot for ever rest at the parting of the ways. Individuals there have always been, to whom a peculiar combination of temperament and culture renders a decision on the great problems of life less easy to the intellect, and perhaps less imperative to the character, than to the generality of mankind; but, whatever other services to human welfare such minds may render, they cannot aid in the development of those primary spiritual intuitions which have formed the deepest basis of human life in all ages.

But Mr. Holyoake may plead that it is quite legitimate to prefer one of two influences without absolutely pronouncing against the other, if the one be certain and the other uncertain,—the one close at hand and the other afar off. And this is his view of the Secular as contrasted with the Spiritual. He does not presume to say that God

---

* "Trial of Theism," p. 175. † Ibid., p. 121. ‡ See Appendix A.

does not exist;* but he holds that, whether God is or is not, the course of human affairs is left to humanity alone,—that human effort is the only practical agency which it is of any use to invoke. Take the following passages, for instance, from "The Two Providences."

"It is said we are without God in the world; but remember, if it be so, that it is not our fault. We would rather that the old theories were true, and that light could be had in darkness, and help in the hour of danger. It better comports with human feebleness and harsh destiny that it should be so. But if the doctrine be not true, surely it is better that we know it. Could the doctrine of Divine aid be reduced to intelligible conditions, religion would be reinstated in its ancient influence. For a reasonable certainty and an unfailing trust, men would fulfil any conditions possible to humanity. Faith no longer supplies implicit confidence, and the practical tone of our day is impatient of that teaching which keeps the word of promise to the ear, and breaks it to the hope.

"Could we keep before us the first sad view of life which breaks in upon the working man, whether he be a white slave or a black one, we should be able to see self-trust from a more advantageous point. We should learn at once sternness and moderation. Do we not find ourselves at once in an armed world where Might is God and Poverty is fettered? Every stick and stone, every blade of grass, every bird and flower, every penniless man, woman, and child, has an owner in this England of ours no less than in New Orleans. The bayonet or baton bristles round every altar, at the corner of every lane and every street. Effort, in its moral and energetic sense, is the only study worth a moment's attention by the workman or the slave. . . . .

"Now it is not needful to contend that prayer never had any efficacy,—it may have been the source of material advantage once; but the question is, Will it bring material aid now? It is in vain that the miner descends into the earth with a prayer on his lips, unless he carries a Davy lamp in his hand. A ship-load of clergymen would be in danger of perishing, if you suffer the Amazon once to take fire. During the prevalence of a pestilence an hospital is of more value than a college of theologians. When the cholera visitation is near, the physician, and not the priest, is our best dependence, and those whom medical aid cannot save must inevitably die. Is it not, therefore, merciful to say that science is the Providence of life? . . . Science represents the available source of help to man, ever augmenting in proportion to his perspicacity, study, courage, and industry. We do not confound science with nature. Nature is the storehouse of riches, but when its spontaneous treasures are exhausted, science enables us to renew them and to augment them. It is the well-

* "Does the most absolute Atheism do more than declare the secret of nature to be unrevealed?"—"Trial of Theism," p. 143.

devised method of using nature. It is in this sense that Science is the Providence of Man. It is not pretended that Science is a perfect dependence; on the contrary, it is admitted to be narrow, and but partially developed; but though it should be represented as a limited dependence, we must not overlook the fact that it is the only special dependence that man has; and however infantine now, it is an ever-growing power." *

But in what respect is it needful that the study of Nature, and the methodising of its agencies for the material benefit of man, should be regarded as invalidating the existence of a Divine purpose in Nature? Surely nothing can be more congruous with Theism than that Nature and Man should be found in harmony with each other. In exploring our relation to the home in which we are placed, and in utilizing every material within our reach, we are in no sense turning away from the Author and Animator of Nature, but rather acquainting ourselves with His infinite resources of power and beauty. The real question between the Theist and the Atheist lies far deeper down; it is, whether we have any means of reaching the Power displayed in the Universe *beyond* that which we gain from the study of Nature,—whether that power is a Conscious Soul, with which we can commune, and whence we can derive help and guidance when the visible world ceases to afford us aid,—whether, when "Nature" is dumb, *He* will speak,—whether, when all "material advantage" shall have been reaped by material science, the affections and the conscience must yet be left entirely to themselves, possessing no power of contact with any Personal Reality beyond that of erring fellow-mortals. Yet, if such contact *be* possible, it must affect our moral life to an incalculable extent; and the moral life of those who do not cherish any relation to that Personal Reality must miss one of its most important elements. In contrast, therefore, to the Secularist theory, on the one hand, which holds that Ethics *as a whole*, both in theory and practice, is attainable without Religion,—and to the orthodox theory, on the other hand, which maintains that the unassisted human mind can neither know nor do anything in Morals without the conscious recognition of Religion,—we hold that Conscience and Faith are, each of them, primary sentiments in man; that each may arise independently of the other, and may grow up separately, to a certain point of development,—a point varying relatively to the temperament and culture of each individual,—but that beyond that point *each tends to call forth a need of the other, and deteriorates if that need be not supplied.* He in whose glowing heart spiritual love precedes the strong sense of duty becomes a bigot or a dreamer, if his idea of God long fails to suggest a free and reasonable standard of conscience. And he who finds his purely human conscience really all-sufficient to his needs, can scarcely have much fulness of moral life requiring to

* "Trial of Theism," Chap. XXII.

be guided. And here it is to the point to remark, that the absence of any reliance on such higher Personality has a visibly cramping effect on the minds of Ethical Atheists. There are innumerable cases in life where human sympathy and reciprocation *must* fail; nay, where the very fact of virtue implies the renunciation of sympathy. In such cases it may too often be seen that the Atheist is thrown back upon himself, in a way which tempts him either to yield the point for the sake of sympathy, or to hold by the point in a way which is apt to overstrain his sense of duty done. In Atheistic defences we frequently see a recapitulation of facts brought forward to demonstrate the rectitude of the party, or of its champions, which even generous minds cannot save from a tone of "self-righteousness," while to commonplace speakers the danger is not even perceptible. Now it is fatal to the healthiness of virtue to look back in this way at its own achievements. The love of Goodness is kept safe and sound by being constantly directed to that which is before, and not behind it. Otherwise, it is apt to sink into self-complacency with *having been* virtuous, and rather to test its aspirations by its performances, than to feel that the only good of its performances is derived from the aspirations which they but imperfectly realise. Broadly speaking, there is a certain climate of tendency observable in different communions—a gravitation of influences towards certain levels, —which determines the tone of average minds, and which the higher thinkers only escape by lying open to other inlets of thought and feeling. The Secularistic idealisation of human duty as the *only* source of moral life, must ever give rise to the tendency to glory in "merits." It is inevitable that this temptation should come to minds vividly conscious of honest and faithful purpose, and anxious to defend that purpose against coarse and base aspersions, but *not* conscious of receiving, from an Infinite Source above them, far more than the most devoted of human lives can ever re-express, and whose human fatigues and disappointments are thus unrefreshed by that repose and re-invigoration which are essential to the elasticity of the highest human endeavour.

Now this strain on the nobler faculties which results from the absence of Divine sympathy, must necessarily vary greatly according to the need of sympathy in different minds. Many upright, unimpulsive men, in whom conscience scarcely rises into affection, do not feel it at all. Others, of generous and affectionate natures, are yet so far free from the disturbing influences of passion as to be able to live habitually from a sense of duty alone. To observers at a little distance, the benumbing effect of a merely Secular faith may be visible in such natures, confirming their constitutional defects, and cutting them off from rousing influences; yet the Secularist's own mind may not be distinctly conscious of the want. But now and then comes a passionate soul, that feels the need of the Divine with a keenness that *cannot* be suppressed. The mind may be entirely per-

suaded of the untenability of Theism; but the intellectual conviction in such cases is at war with the whole bent of the soul. To such a nature, the needs of the affections must be recognised *distinctly*, whether for satisfaction or abnegation: they are primary realities which cannot be passed by in any accepted theory of human life. And here does Ethical Atheism culminate in the religious sentiment, not only virtually, but avowedly, as we shall find by passing on to the latest development of Atheism, as propounded by Mr. Lionel Holdreth.

With Mr. Holdreth the relation of Ethics to Theology takes an altogether different aspect from that which it assumes in Mr. Holyoake's system. Mr. Holdreth utterly eschews all neutrality; his Atheism is far more decisive than that of his friend. His Secularism is confessedly based on the rejection of Spiritualism, and he is fully aware of their essential incompatibility. But, on the other hand, his natural feelings toward religion are of a very different nature from those manifested by Mr. Holyoake. The latter can *respect** the religious sentiment, but he does not appear to have ever been deeply conscious of it in himself, since the unreflecting period of his boyhood; all the realities of life which take hold of him most strongly, bring no irrepressible longing for anything beyond humanity. But with Mr. Holdreth the religious sentiment is woven into his very nature, and the intensity of his Atheism makes this only the more apparent. The first specimens we shall present of his writings are two passages which, taken together, strike the key-note of his whole conception of life and faith.

"In advocating the claim of Secularism to rank among religions, and in asserting its inherent superiority to all other forms of religion in point of truth, purity, and directness, I had in view, not merely the assertion of a fact, but the attainment for Secularism of a position, without which I do not conceive it possible that it can maintain its ground. I wish to render it stable by defining and consolidating its principles; I wish to weaken the enemy by depriving them of the monopoly of that principle—the religious—which always must exercise a paramount influence over the minds of men. Human nature is not a mere bundle of faculties, under the direction of a supreme and infallible intellect; if it were, then we might rely solely upon the intellect, not merely to teach men what is right, but to compel them to follow its teaching. But as things are constituted it is only the first of these points which the intellect can achieve; we have to look for some other motive influence which shall induce men to do what they know to be right. This can only be found in their emotions or affections. It is on these that the religious sentiment has its hold, and therefore, apart from the religious sentiment,

* He calls Mr. Newman's work on "The Soul" "a book conceived in the highest genius of proselytism, which must COMMAND respect for the religious sentiment wherever it is read."—"Trial of Theism," p. 60.

you can rarely hope to find steady and thoroughgoing virtue in any life; never, except in minds peculiarly well balanced by nature, and well disciplined by the education of life and action, of teachers and of circumstances. Here and there, it is true, you may find a man or woman who does right by habit or by impulse; but these are motives which can hardly be relied upon to resist the pressure of strong temptation. For the strength here needed we must look to a principle which can exercise complete control over the affections, and wield their whole power in such a struggle; a commander-in-chief of the faculties of our moral nature. Such a principle is that of Religion, and such is no other. This principle is embodied in the faith of the Christian and the Deist, of Socrates and of Paul, of Isaiah and of Mazzini, of Plato, ay, and of Paine. None of these were or are Atheists; they write and speak of a God in tones of reverence and adoration; and it is in this religious sentiment which is embodied in their creed that they find consolation in sorrow, and strength in the hour of conflict. Such a strength and such a consolation must be found in any faith which is ever to attain an empire over the hearts of men; such a principle of power must there be in a creed, call it philosophical or religious, on which our morality is to be based, and by which our life is to be directed, or we shall be sure to find it fail us in our hour of need. And I maintain that, as a fact, Secularism, as taught by Mr. Holyoake, and as accepted by myself, does contain such a principle, in its religious sense of duty; a duty derived from natural principles, and referable to natural laws; a duty binding on men as fractions of mankind, and on mankind as a portion of the cosmic whole."*

"I believe in no true, honourable, virtuous life but in this religion; and in proportion as the supernatural creeds have contained this essential religious element, have they been useful and saving faiths. Christianity had far more of it than Paganism, Theism than Christianity; but pure Secularism is the pure religion—faith in a grand principle its sole guide of life, its sole source of strength, unalloyed by timid dependence on a Father's arm, unpolluted by selfish thoughts of a reward hereafter. To this Religion of Duty—the ONE TRUE FAITH, the one true principle giving life and spirit to the bodies of false doctrine wherein it hath been incorporated—do I look for all strength for each of us, all guidance for all men, all progress for mankind."†

In this remarkable declaration there are three main propositions:—

First. That "any faith which is to attain an empire over the hearts of men" must contain "*a principle which can exercise complete control over the affections, and wield their whole power in the struggle.*" No truer ideal of faith could be laid down than this.

Second. "That Secularism does contain such a principle, in its religious sense of duty."

---

* "Reasoner," No. 600.

† "Reasoner," No. 579.

Third. That Secularism is "superior to all other forms of religion in truth, purity, and directness," because it holds this sense of duty unalloyed by any dependence on a Father, or any hope of a hereafter.

Now that "Secularism, as taught by Mr. Holyoake, and accepted by Mr. Holdreth, does contain a religious sense of duty," may be readily granted. Mr. Holdreth elsewhere says, that "Sacrifice for the sake of others, not in the hope of future reward, is a principle which, though glimpses of it were occasionally visible through the mists of the future to Prophets and Apostles, waited for its full recognition until a faith arose which knew nothing of an eternal retribution."* And there is a truth in this which should not be forgotten. The absence of any settled hope of futurity does throw into keener relief the absolute disinterestedness of virtue; and although there have been Theists, as well as Atheists, who leave the question of immortality as an insoluble problem, yet it is the noblest characteristic of Ethical Atheism to have preached, deliberately and fearlessly, that virtue is a *present* rectitude, utterly irrespective of pleasant "consequences," whether in this world or in any other. The popularization of this truth is one of the most valuable contributions that Secularism has made to the moral education of Free Thought. But it is one thing to assert that Moral Obligation is a primary element of our nature, "derived from natural principles, and referable to natural laws;" and it is quite another thing to maintain that no extra-human Personality exists, of whose parental relation to us, those natural laws are but an outward visible expression.† It is one thing to assert that the idea of virtue excludes, *per se*, the very notion of reward; and it is quite another thing to maintain that our sentient existence cannot extend beyond our life in this visible planet. The connection between ethical truth and cosmical fact is one that cannot be thus assumed *a priori*. Moreover, although the ethical truth on which Mr. Holdreth bases his whole system is one which can scarcely be over-estimated in its own place, it is clearly incapable of fulfilling *all* the requirements of the ideal which he previously sketched as essential to a complete Faith. Is Duty, as a matter of fact, "a principle that can exercise complete control over the affections, and wield their whole power in the struggle?" We apprehend that no mortal soul, however saintly, could answer "Yes." It is true that almost any amount of self-sacrificing heroism may be gradually attained by a dutiful nature, even to a degree that would at first appear incalculably beyond the power of human nature to support. Let the capacity for "service and endurance" be granted to the full, untainted by any notion of "reward," either in earth or heaven. But the province of effort, which is *active* and *voluntary*, is distinct from the province of affection, which is *receptive* and *involuntary*. Duty may, indeed, be taught to exercise control over the

* "Reasoner," No. 596.

† See Appendix B.

affections, in the sense of coercing them; but that is clearly not the sort of control of which Mr. Holdreth is here speaking. The controlling principle that he desiderates is one that shall "*wield the whole power of the affections in the struggle.*" It must therefore respond to their fullest longings, and dominate them by an Objective Reality that can rightly command them. But how is this possible if the object loved be an unconscious one? Only a person (in the sense of a conscious mind) can wield the whole power of the affections, for only a person can reciprocate them—and what affection ever comes to its full maturity until it is reciprocated? And what person can wield that complete control over our highest and purest affections which is here sought, but One who shall be above us all—the realisation of Infinite Perfection? The admission of the affections into the "religious sense of duty" naturally implies the idea of an Object on which to repose them; and the absence of any such object in Mr. Holdreth's theory is an incongruity somewhat like that exhibited by Tycho Brahe, who admitted that the planets revolved round the sun, but maintained that the sun and the planets together revolved round the earth. In the same way, Mr. Holdreth holds that all our faculties should be under the complete control of religion, but that religion itself is only dependent upon man—that is, upon the very being who needs the control. Perhaps he would reply with the heroic but most melancholy saying of Spinoza, "He who loves God aright must not expect that God should love him in return;" an idea which implies that the power of loving has been, in some mysterious way, monopolised by mortals, and is the only quality for which the Great Cosmos has no capacity. Now if the affection we receive from our fellow-creatures were in itself perfectly satisfying, and always at our command when deserved, there would be much plausibility in the theory that we have no concern with any other affection. But that such is not the case in human life, it would be superfluous to prove. Moreover, if there be one feature of Mr. Holdreth's writings more characteristic than the rest, it is the keenness and distinctness of his desire after an Infinite Object of affection.* It is therefore to the point to discover the estimate he himself takes of this desire. The fullest notice he has taken of it, as an argument for Theism, is as follows:—

"Some have urged that, since in Nature is found no want without a satisfaction, no appetite but for a purpose, it were contrary to nature to suppose man's natural instinct of worship, and—so to speak—desire of Deity implanted only to be balked. But to this it

* Many critics of his poems were misled by this characteristic to under-estimate the reality of his Atheism—a very easy mistake to arise in the minds of those who see the religious instinct, and who do not see the complicated intellectual difficulties which may coexist with it. We have frequently heard the remark, "Mr. Holdreth will not long remain an Atheist." But the question remains, Why is he an Atheist NOW?

may be replied, that for artificial desires Nature provides not always gratifications; nor for all natural needs, except to those who have the capacity to seek their satisfaction aright. Accordingly, it is nowise to be accounted an anomaly in Nature, if she provide not a personal object of worship, such as shall satisfy the artificially excited imaginations and feelings of men and women, educated from youth to worship; or if she yield no gratification to those whose neglected intellect and uncultivated conscience can reverence naught that is not personal, and love only where they expect reward for loving. But for so much of this devotion as is natural in minds sound and healthily trained, there is a sufficient object in the Order, the Truth, the Beauty of Nature herself—in the Duty which springs from Law, and in the authority which belongs to Conscience."*

Such is Mr. Holdreth's theoretical conviction. But what are the utterances of his natural feeling? Scrupulously passing by all such passages as he might possibly reject or modify now, we will illustrate this point by a few quotations. The first is from the opening of a lecture delivered in 1856, entitled "Theism the Religion of Sentiment."

"Stern indeed and strong must that heart be—if indeed it be not utterly callous and insensible—that has not at times, at many times, sighed after such a comfort. The strongest spirit has its hours of weakness, the most hopeful and elastic nature its moments of deep and hopeless depression. What comfort is theirs who in these moments can cast themselves on the ever-present arm of an Eternal Father, in calm reliance on his unfailing power and inexhaustible kindness! In the hours of loneliness and melancholy, when the heart feels itself as it were alone amid a deserted universe, how enviable is their state who feel that they are *not* alone—that with them and around them is a Friend who sticketh closer than a brother—a very present help in time of trouble. To the labourer whose twelve hours' toil can barely suffice to earn bread for his suffering wife and his sickly children; to the slave who sees before him no rest, no mercy, no escape but in the grave; to the lonely student on his solitary couch of sickness; to the starving and sorely tempted seamstress in her fireless and foodless garret; to the martyr of conscience in his dismal prison, or yet more dismal liberty; to the patriot exile, inclined almost to despair of the cause for which he has given all that was dear in life—what happiness to turn from the harshness and the misery of earth to the Father which is in heaven!

"And, on the other hand, how hard seems their fate who have no such hope and no such comfort—who must endure through life the hardships of poverty, the sorrows of obscurity, the misery of unbefriended loneliness, and must at last pass to their graves with the bitter thought, that they have lived in vain for others, and worse

* "Reasoner," No. 629.

than in vain for themselves. Truly, it is no light, no easy matter to be, much more to become, an Atheist."*

(How much, by the way, is implied in that parenthesis,—"*much more to become* an Atheist.") The next passage we quote appeared considerably later, and occurred in a review of the "Eclipse of Faith." After quoting the only passage in that book which can be said to contain "any indication of an insight into the real feelings and position of a true Sceptic," Mr. Holdreth remarks on it thus:—

"I presume that there is no thoughtful mind, which has ever been truthful and honest enough to enter earnestly upon the quest of truth, that has not very early in its career passed through the Slough of Despond that is here described. But this is assuredly not the language of a matured and deliberate scepticism; it is that of a mind which has floundered about in the quicksands into which it first plunged on quitting the barren rocks of Christianity, and which has never succeeded in reaching the shore beyond. Those who have gone *through* this state do not speak in this tone. They are satisfied either that there is no God, or that there is, or that we cannot tell whether there be or no. At any rate, they remain satisfied: if there be no God, the crying after him is childish and unmanly; if we cannot know him, it is futile and absurd; in either case experience soon teaches us that what we cannot in course of nature expect to have can be naturally dispensed with. It is only during the first stage of mental progress, while still enfeebled by the habit of dependence, still unaccustomed to love Truth as Truth, to pursue Duty as Duty, to repose confidence in Law as Law, independently of a God and a Lawgiver, that we hear these echoes of the bitter cry, 'My God, my God! why hast thou forsaken me?'"†

Thus it is evidently felt by the writer, that the crying after God would not necessarily be childish and unmanly if He *did* exist; and that it is only because we *cannot have* Divine sympathy, that we must learn to do without it. Still further, our Atheist acknowledges that it is only after a painful process that the heart weans itself from this affection, and learns to cease "sighing after such a comfort." This is resignation, but not satisfaction; it is the manly endurance of a harsh necessity, but it is not a faith "which can exercise complete control over the affections, and *wield their whole power in the struggle*."

How such a theory as Mr. Holdreth's would work in actual life, is a question which naturally suggests itself; and towards this we have a partial approximation in his novelette of "Conscience and Consequence," designedly written to show what life would be to a genuine Atheist. Our author has here endeavoured to realize his faith in duty and his disbelief in God, side by side, in all their bearings, and the result is so unique as to demand special analysis.

* "Reasoner," No. 535. † Ibid., No. 603.

The plot of the story is a bold interpolation into the history of religious opinion in England. The hero, Ernest Clifford, is expelled from Cambridge for Atheism; his father disinherits him in consequence, and he joins an Atheist propaganda in London, the leader of which, Francis Sterne, is the model Atheist of the tale, and the life and soul of a movement which would certainly not have been forgotten if it had ever existed. The date of the story is about the period of the passing of the Catholic Emancipation Bill (1829). At that time the Carlile agitation was going on, and it certainly contained many such adherents as the Hatherley and Carter whose coarse but genuine earnestness Mr. Holdreth has here depicted; but the Free-thinking newspapers of that day could boast of no such editor as "Arthur Clayton, the Melancthon of Atheism," nor did they possess among their contributors any such men as Francis Sterne or Ernest Clifford. The whole tale is an arabesque, in which all the combinations of circumstance are nearly impossible. As the author must be perfectly aware of this, we attribute to him the intention of aiming at coherence merely in ideal respects. Conceding to him this liberty, however, we see, by the elements of which he builds his world, which are the points in the relation of theology to life that have most importance for him, either in feeling or observation.

In the first place, it should be remarked that, although the romance has great faults as a work of art, it displays one characteristic which many works of greater finish do not possess. It is a genuine attempt to paint from life, rather than to construct from mere fancy or theory. Although the dialogue is very defective in easy, natural flow, the conception and description of character indicate close observation and delicate perception. Especially does the writer's attention seem to have been given to the varying styles of character among Free-thinkers. Nearly all the *dramatis personæ* are Atheists, yet all differ from each other as people do in real life; they are not sketched from their creed, inwards, but from their character, outwards. Perhaps Sterne is an exception to this rule; but Ernest, Clayton, Seaton, Louis, Arnott, and the rest, are clearly drawn from observation, and not from theory,—and this is no small merit in a tale written to exemplify a theory. It is a merit, too, in a deeper sense than at first appears. For this endeavour to paint men as they are, under the creed of Atheism, has thrown a light upon the effects of that creed which no Atheist ever gave us before. The author has laid bare the weak points of his own faith with the candour of one who has no purpose to serve but the perfect truth. We have not space to illustrate this as fully as we could wish, and must confine ourselves to the more salient points alone.

The first "consequence" which the "conscience" of the Atheist entails upon him is, of course, the external loss of friends and position; but this is plainly subordinate in the author's view to the internal consequences resulting from the change. It is not only the

human affections that Ernest is called upon to renounce,—he has to part with hopes that had outsoared death, and to forsake the peace with which

> "the heavenly house he trod,
> And lay upon the breast of God."

"He regretted keenly the old hymns of the Church, in which he could never join again, as formerly, with simple, heart-felt faith. He regretted the Incarnate God, dear for His human love, and still dearer for His human sorrow, who had gradually dwindled before his eyes into a man, of the common stature of men, or at least less than the greatest. He regretted the Bible he had trusted so implicitly, but could never take up now without lighting on some page defiled by blood or blotted with error and ignorance. He regretted the atoning martyr, whose dying pardon to his enemies, and dying promise to the penitent thief, had been the delight of his early meditations. He regretted the Heaven which his friend had resolved into its cloud-elements; that beautiful *Fata Morgana* of Christianity,—or more truly of Spiritualism,—where it is promised us that we shall meet hereafter the loved and lost on earth. *Above all, he regretted the God who was vanishing into thin air* before the opened eyes of his reason; God, the avenger of human suffering, the Redressor of human wrong, the Consoler of human sorrow; God, whose wisdom can never err, and whose love shall never fail. . . . . We must not blame Ernest Clifford too severely, therefore, if, in the first bitterness of this disappointment, when finding the most cherished visions of his heart fade from the clear light of reason, *he was hardly conscious that there was aught left behind to make life worth living*."*

Nor does the author give us to understand that this grief was merely the dark transition-period leading to a happier, fuller, and richer faith. The only growth of character which he depicts as resulting from Atheism is a development of the power of endurance. In his view, the allegiance to Truth not only entails many painful consequences in its progress to a nobler life, but it is the inlet to a whole world of suffering, unrelieved by any gleams of sunlight; it excites the active impulses, but tortures the receptive side of our nature with cruel starvation.† We must give some illustration of this from Ernest's history. Expelled from his home, he is forced to part from his sister, without any hope of a future meeting.

---

* "Reasoner," No. 632. The italics here and elsewhere are our own.

† Those who know Keats's Life and Letters may be here reminded of his beautiful parable of human life (Vol. 1. p. 140), where the keen vision of the world's misery first assails the young soul,—"whereby this Chamber of Maiden-Thought becomes gradually darkened, and at the same time on all sides of it many doors are set open,—but all dark,—all leading to dark passages. We see not the balance of good and evil; we are in a mist, we are in that state, we feel the 'Burden of the Mystery.' . . . Now if we live, and go on thinking, we too shall explore these dark passages."

"A heavy weight lay on Ernest's heart, which all the courage given by a clear conscience, all the resolution of martyrdom, all the strength of despair, barely sufficed to endure. He could say but little to his darling sister; but the child knew the mood, and was content to lie on his arms, dreaming not of the most terrible trouble she had known, which was to come from those lips that had never breathed anything but tenderness and peace to her. . . . . 'And now, dear Alice, farewell. May you be happy, my darling, my treasure, my first and last hope in life!'

"*How one misses, on such an occasion, the old Saxon 'God bless you!' which consigns the loved one to a higher and stronger care, yet one as tender as our own!* He strained the child to his breast for one long embrace. Then he unclasped her little arms from his neck, kissed her once more, and was gone. . . . . 'Farewell!' he repeated, bitterly. 'And all this misery comes of doing my duty. Certainly, then, there *is* no God!'"*

"But if Duty lead to destruction, what matters it? Soldiers sworn into allegiance to that sacred name, whither she commands, thither are we bound to march; ay, to Hell, if need should be.

'Ours not to make reply;
Ours not to reason why;
Ours but to do or die.'

There is more of martyrdom still in this world than the world dreams of. Every step in advance that mankind makes, is made not only over the bodies of fallen defenders of the ancient Evil. The road is paved with the noblest, the truest, the bravest hearts that have struggled or suffered in the good cause: and it is by trampling on our wounded brethren that we advance to victory. It is the law; who shall gainsay it? Ask of the Almighty God, if there be one, why he constructed the world so clumsily. Remember that Nature, working ever by fixed rules, and with imperfect instruments, can only attain the final happiness of the Many by constant sacrifices of the Few. And will the Few complain of this sacrifice? If they do, it will be neither wisely nor justly. *Pre-eminent sorrow is the price of pre-eminence;* . . . the finest, noblest, loftiest minds of every age have it as their assigned destiny—as the finest bull or ram was slain before the gods of olden time—to be sacrificed at the altar of Progress. The hemlock of Socrates, the cross of Jesus, the scaffold of More, are not strange and unnatural accidents in the career of benefactors of mankind, but only extreme and marked examples of the natural fate of those whose moral and intellectual pre-eminence renders them prominent marks for the hostility of the 'powers of darkness.' 'Serve and enjoy,' is Nature's commandment to mankind; those whom she deigns to honour with a special mandate are charged to serve and endure."†

* "Reasoner," No. 639.

† "Reasoner," No. 635.

This is the first mention in Mr. Holdreth's writings of "the powers of darkness,"—but it is not the last. In the following chapter of "Conscience and Consequence," we hear that Superstition is "the worst and most terrible of all the emanations of the Evil Principle; the spirit on whom alone no holy name seems to have power, whom no exorcism can cast out, and with whom no spiritual strength can grapple."* And at length we come to the following plain statement of the terrible alternative. Ernest is speaking to a Sicilian patriot, who has been expressing his fervent faith in God.

"But may we not ask, Signor, if there be a God, why are you here, and Francis the poltroon on the throne of the Two Sicilies? Is this God's world, or the Devil's? Must we not rather say—when we look to the men who fill the thrones of Europe on the one side, and to those who crowd her dungeons on the other—when we think of the darkness that broods over the souls and minds of her millions of inhabitants, and remember that here we have the best and highest forms of human life—*whether or no there be a Devil, assuredly there is no God!*"†

Thus our author's keen sense of Moral Evil leads him to regard its wide-spread existence as invalidating the reality of a Divine Purpose in the world. That this bitter "fountain of tears" is the central source of his Atheism, is evident from the whole tenor of his writings. It will, however, be useful here to quote the exact form in which he has summed up his view of the subject as a whole. We quote from a letter of Sterne's to Ernest.

"Let me point out to you our arguments as against God's existence.

"First: evil exists. God, being omnipotent, *could* crush evil without diminishing good—that is, without causing any moral deterioration on our part for want of something to contend against, or the like. God, being utterly good, would do so. But it is not done; evil is allowed to exist; therefore God either does not exist, or is deficient either in power or goodness. If in the former, we cannot trust Him, since we know not the limits of His power; and if in the latter, we decline to worship an imperfect Being.

"Second: God's foreknowledge, being *absolute*, is incompatible with Man's free will.

"But the Atheist's grand argument is that the Theist has none. There is no credible evidence whatsoever that God exists, and the burden of proof rests with those who affirm that He does."‡

Every phase of disbelief must be viewed in relation to that belief which it negatives. We see here what is the sort of Theism to which Mr. Holdreth enters so decided an opposition. It is the faith

* "Reasoner," No. 637. This is said, not by any person in the story, but by the narrator himself. We have carefully avoided quoting any passages as illustrative of the author's views, which are not clearly meant to be so understood.

† Ibid., No. 648.

‡ Ibid., No. 626.

in an Autocratic Power, who is capable of creating good and evil by an arbitrary fiat of volition,—a Power whose absolute and all-pervading personality excludes all free and self-modifying existence in all His creatures. No wonder that such a faith should strain and break down under the pressure of life's realities. This sort of Theism is a compound of two elements,—the Despot-God of Calvinistic Orthodoxy, and the Law-God of physical science. The essentially immoral and unphilosophical nature of the former conception renders superfluous any argument against it on our part; but the latter idea contains a partial truth. Inorganic nature indubitably bears the impress of Cosmic Law. The stars in their orbits, the plants in their growth, express rather than obey the changeless rules of Nature. Unconscious of pain, undisturbed by temptation, their beautiful life is the incarnation of an Orderly Force, whose movements we can (within small, but yet widening limits) calculate beforehand. Fascinated by this great and apparently benevolent Power, philosophers have worshipped the God of Nature as the Supreme. But when this conception of Deity is carried into the regions of the human will, it is utterly inadequate to interpret the most important of phenomena; it is dumb concerning all those moral problems which are specially characteristic of human life, and distinguish it from the inorganic or irrational departments of nature. Some thinkers, like Mr. Buckle, fall back on the notion that the fluctuations of good and evil in the history of individual man are of small importance, and that the only permanent interests of humanity consist in what can be generalised and classified. Not so Mr. Holdreth: he stands fast by the moral realities of individual life, as being far more important to us than mere general laws, and he has the courage to maintain that, although, to him, all sight of a Divine Purpose has vanished *from the world*,—though the Ordinances of Nature ruthlessly crush the weak, and wrong the innocent,—yet still, virtue and sin *in man* are now, as ever, infinitely opposed; and that, even under the half-diabolic Shadow which saddens an imperfect Universe, we should fight to the death for the sacredness of Good.*

But now, starting from the point of Man's Free Will, in which Mr. Holdreth vehemently believes,† why should this exclude the possible existence of a God? Is no other conception of Him possible than the mere Law-God of Science, or the Arbitrary Despot of Orthodoxy?

* Nor is it only an external warfare that he urges; he speaks of moral conflict as one who knows the meaning of temptation, and who has recognised the need felt by every sensitive conscience of coercing internal as well as external foes. And it is from this point that his ideal of a faith is conceived, as may be seen in the first extract we have given from his writings.

† "The doctrine of Necessity is contradictory to instinct, to reason, to experience. It is a renunciation of morality, a blasphemy against duty, an Atheism to Nature. . . . My instinct revolts against such degradation. I feel that I am free, as I feel that I think, that I move, that I exist," etc.—"Theism the Religion of Sentiment," "Reasoner," No. 537.

To merely speculative intellects, who care only to hold "views" of theology, no satisfying insight into the truth is attainable. But to those in whose minds, as in Mr. Holdreth's, moral action forms an essential part of that life of which speculative thought is but the exponent, there is a vision possible, which we will attempt (however imperfectly) to indicate.

1. We believe that God, by giving us Free Will to use or misuse our faculties, has put into our hands a large amount of independent power, which precludes His possession of that absolute foreknowledge of our individual course which many popular theories attribute to Him. But by confining our capacities to a certain range in relation to the other forces of the universe, He has insured that our individual aberrations shall never pass beyond a preordained limit, after which the compensations of nature restore the general equilibrium. With respect to our capacity, therefore, we are governed by the necessity of God's ordinances; with respect to the use we make of our capacity, He leaves our individuality in our own hands. What He seeks from us, there, is not the mechanical acquiescence of a plant or a bird, that *must* obey the laws of its nature; but the *free* service of the Eternal Right, the unconstrained love of the Infinite Goodness. Now such freedom *cannot* be given without the power to choose wrongly. What *is* virtue? Not the mere absence of Evil, but the preference of Good, —the devotion to Good *as* Good. Were there no distinctive differences between right actions and wrong ones, no perception of excellence could exist. Were there not in man a capacity for choosing and following evil, no struggle of the will could arise at all: the very existence of the idea of Duty—the *Ought*—implies that there is a course which we *ought not* to follow. Some thinkers maintain that this doctrine implies the subjection of God to an extraneous Fate; but surely such thinkers overlook the true state of the case. Can we conceive of God as creating a square circle, or as causing rain to fall and not to fall at the same time and place? These are self-contradictory requirements in physics, and the inability to combine them does not imply any want of power. And is it not our greater inexperience in Morals which alone renders it possible to us to conceive of *them* as not amenable to fixed consistencies, and capable of being moulded at pleasure by the caprice of an arbitrary Will? "If Wisdom and Holiness are historical births from His volition, they are not inherent attributes of His being."* To resolve the conception of God into the single attribute of volition, is to lose the substance of Deity for an impossible phase of Omnipotence. For if we imagine Him to be without a consistent manner of existence, we lose all that makes Him the Object of our reverence and trust. "Let Him precede good and ill, and His Eternal Spirit is exempt alike from the one and from the other, and recedes from our aspirations into perfect moral indifference."†

2. God has *established a limit* to the "powers of darkness." Beyond

* "Prospective Review," November, 1845. Review of Whewell's "Elements of Morality."

† "Prospective Review," ut supra.

a certain point, crime leads to the destruction of its agents; the contact with nature and reality is fatal to evil in the long run. Death and Birth perpetually tend to restore the balance of things, by removing the incurably corrupt, and filling the world with new life, capable of healthier development. Thus much God grants to us as "general law;" more complete salvation we cannot have without our own individual exertions. Now, that mankind have in many directions gone very near the limit of human capacity to do evil, there can be no doubt. The state of the Roman Empire for several centuries, the horrors of religious persecution in all ages, the present state of American slavery, are all testimonies to the awful capacity in man for deliberate and consummate wickedness. But however wide may be the shadow which human guilt can cast, *it can never exceed the measure of those faculties which occasion it, and consequently it must always be* POSSIBLE *for the right exercise of those faculties to attain an equally wide development.* It may be replied, that to do wrong is easier than to do right; or, in other terms, that our powers of action and enjoyment tend to an over-selfish degree of gratification. That they have such a tendency is most true; but we have another tendency, of an opposite nature. "It is not more true that the flesh lusteth against the spirit, than that the spirit lusteth against the flesh."* And it is this power of choice between the lower and the higher tendency, that makes us moral beings. The perennial alternative is, whether we will cultivate our faculties for the sake of self alone, or whether we will train them to be ministers in the service of that Pure Goodness which can alone set our hearts free. And that there *is* an impulse in man which seeks the pure, unselfish service of Goodness and Right, and that this impulse ought to be the ruling authority of man's heart, is no secret to the best Atheists; indeed, it forms the acknowledged groundwork of Mr. Holdreth's faith. What is required for the salvation of mankind is this,—that the souls of men should love the Right above all else, and promote it personally and publicly, with all their strength and mind and heart. Of *individual* heroism and holiness the experience of the race already affords many bright examples; but these qualities have yet to be developed in *social* forms. Something of this has been approached when a great moral enthusiasm has communicated itself to a large body of men, animating them with one common sentiment, burning up their littlenesses, and developing them into a new life. Partial and incomplete as such results have been, they have sufficiently manifested the fact that mankind are capable of a *social conscience*, in the development of which individual excellence may attain its ripest fulness. And "if" (as Mr. Holdreth says) "we were all now to begin to do our duty,"—if every single individual who is troubled by the shadow of moral evil were to exert himself to the utmost to assail it,—the combined efforts of so many workers would assuredly, before the lapse of many generations, visibly diminish the

* Francis W. Newman, "The Soul," Chap. III. "The Sense of Sin."

extent of that shadow. It is Action that we want,—moral devotedness to realise what moral and intellectual study have shown to be the true needs of man.

3. Now comes the question, what light would such combined social action throw upon the problem of the Universe? We believe it would reveal much. For, although discouragements abound, from the stubbornness of sin and the waywardness of passion, yet there is an under-current of hope which persistent and faithful souls can scarcely miss. There is, underneath the accumulated refuse of past errors, a real thirst in human nature for right, and truth, and goodness, which gradually becomes visible to genuine explorers, and which is capable of infinite expansion. For we are so constituted that, however long we may wander in darkness and falsehood, we can only *thrive* in light and reality. The world is based on truth. Good and Evil are not coequal powers, but Goodness, because it *is* Goodness, is the mightier of the two when once fairly fledged. Evil may indefinitely delay the advent of Good in the rebellious human heart; but directly we turn to clasp and serve the Good in real earnest, we gain some of its own power in addition to our own—a power which, if we are faithful, will increase in us ever more and more, freeing us from the bondage of selfish desires, and inspiring us with strength, peace, and blessedness.

4. But, asks Mr. Holdreth, why should the consequences of guilt be allowed to fall upon the guiltless?

> "We that have sinned may justly rue,
> Sin grows to pain in order due—
> Why do the sinless suffer too?"*

Without assuming to fathom the whole depth of the difficulty, we would reply, that there is one obvious reason for this ordinance. The tie of a common sensibility is the necessary postulate of social life, which could not even exist, if the pains and pleasures of separate individuals did not extend beyond themselves. If our actions affected ourselves alone, what would become of all the relations of family, friendship, country, and race? We might as well be dwelling in solitary and separate worlds. And it is not, in the nature of things, possible that we should receive joy from our human sympathies, without being also capable of receiving sorrow from them. The same constitution which makes us open to improvement from the influences of virtue, renders us liable to contagion from the contact of vice. Is this an immoral doctrine? Far from it. By testifying to the greatness of social influences, it indirectly suggests how widely they may minister to human improvement. Like all other extensions of our sensibility and capacity, *its consequences for good only demand our co-operation to outweigh* INFINITELY *its consequences for evil.* One of the first incitements that can move a sympathetic nature to self-discipline, is the perception that his failures in virtue *cannot* injure himself alone, but must inevitably bring mischief and misery upon others also. To

* "Shadows of the Past," p. 36.

see the untamed evil in their own hearts reflected back upon them in the marred lives of the innocents whom they love, is a punishment which may recall many self-willed natures, who, in the recklessness of passion, care but little for such consequences as only affect themselves. Even the best of us continually need to see the right and wrong of our actions illuminated by the well-being or injury of the human creatures around us, in order to realise the full responsibility imposed by that just and awful law, "Whatsoever thou sowest, that also shalt thou reap."

And when guilt seems to have passed beyond the human chances of redemption, when long courses of evil-doing have hardened vice and crime into "established institutions," then is it not our pity for the victims that moves us to seek redress? Probably the tyrants of power, in all cases, are more fearfully injured by sin, than their victims by suffering. Yet, clearly as we may perceive the degradation caused by slavery and tyranny to the oppressing races or rulers, human nature is not so constituted that this perception can act as a sufficient motive-power on the general heart of man to induce the reformation of the offenders. It is our *pity for the innocent* that moves us to overthrow the oppressor. True, the arresting his career is the best service we can do for him; but it is not for his sake that we do it. He has, by wilful persistence in evil, put himself beyond the pale of *direct* human service; it is only indirectly that we can benefit him, by destroying his power to do evil. That indirect service, however, shows that the tie of human brotherhood still remains, and the blow which breaks the chain of the sufferer restores the balance of the world, and gives another chance even to the oppressor. The "Innocents" were said to be the earliest of Christian martyrs, and their place is yet sacred in the roll of the world's benefactors.

When, therefore, we see that the power to distinguish and choose between Good and Evil is essential to the perception and service of Good, both in the life of individuals and in the wider sensibilities of social existence; when we see that, however terribly our choice of Evil may injure ourselves and others, we have, all of us, chance upon chance of redemption offered, and natural limits placed to our capacity for evil-doing; when we see that the service of Good is capable of being made as wide as the service of Evil has too often been, and moreover that the inherent vitality of Good excels that of Evil, in being capable of an infinite expansion and development *in harmony with nature, instead of in discord with it*—surely, however much is still hidden from us on this subject, we see enough to reassure us that the Great Mystery is not a maleficent one.*

* Probably it requires Infinite Perfection to formulate the whole truth concerning Good and Evil. The humblest efforts of conscience enable us to see clearer in morals than the most acute intellect can ever penetrate without them; and it may well be, that, as moral insight increases with moral worth, it can only be complete where Goodness and Intellect are both entire and coequal, in the mind of the Only Perfect One.—See Appendix C.

Here it is necessary to take up Mr. Holdreth's conception of "Nature" from another point, and to examine his reason for maintaining that cosmical harmony does not imply a Personal Unity. Mr. Holdreth adopts Mr. Holyoake's doctrine on this point, which he thus briefly re-states:—

"The Atheist looks to the universe, under the guidance of the divine; and the divine points to the traces of law, and cries, 'There you behold the finger of God.' The pupil asks why this is known to be a finger-mark of Deity; and the reply is, when reduced to a logical form, 'Fitness proves design, design an intelligent author—and this author we name God.' Objects his auditor, 'Then the fitness of God proves an author of God?' 'Not so.' 'Then how came you to say that the universe must have an author?' 'How else comes it to exist?' says the theologian. 'How comes God to exist?' is the natural retort. 'An eternal universe is as easy of conception as an eternal God.'"*

In this argument there is a mixture of truth and error which requires to be carefully disentangled. The Theist does not, or at any rate should not, affirm that the mere fitness or perfection of any object indicates its design from another hand. What he maintains is this: that when we see *the exercise of Force in the direction of a purpose*, we, by an inevitable inference, attribute the phenomenon to *some* conscious agent. You may call this an assumption, if you will, but it is the necessary postulate of all our conceptions of consciousness. What other test of consciousness can we imagine but this? And how can we dissever the perception from the inference? Now when the purpose attained by any existence is clearly *not* resultant from forces consciously exerted by it—as in the motions of the stars, the growth of plants from their seeds, the propagation and support of animal life from the exercise of blind instincts, etc.—we say that such results must have been intended by some Intelligence extraneous to the objects themselves. And when we see such exercise of purposeful force pervading the Universe with a coherent harmony which implies an unmistakable Cosmical Unity, we cannot but attribute to that force a *consciousness of the results which it produces.* In spite of their rejection of this inference, Atheists perpetually speak of "Nature" as a causal source, both of force and order. Mr. Holdreth does this most markedly, as may be seen in the following passages from his "Affirmations of Secularism:"—

"To be saved from perdition, moral and material, we must have faith in the laws by which Nature has provided for our deliverance, and upon that faith we must act. . . . Nature demands from us that we should believe in her, obey her; and she will not fail to enforce belief by moral penalties, and to punish disobedience by material sufferings. . . . Nature's government is a despotism,

* "Reasoner," No. 627.

with the eternal *accident heureux* of a beneficent ruler. And I, for one, am glad that it is so. I, for one, have more faith in the order and harmony of Nature than in the justice or wisdom of men, and am rejoiced that it is not left to the latter to arrange the politics of the ethical world at their will."*

Mr. Holdreth is, however, far from being consistent on this point. The foregoing passage implies the attribution of a higher and firmer morality to Nature than is to be found in man; but elsewhere our author maintains that "the one appalling fact stands every day more and more clearly visible before the eyes of every thoughtful inquirer, that Nature is not governed on principles of moral equity; that good is only attained through evil, and that the justice which is exacted from just men is not dealt to them; in a word, that the Author of Nature, if there be one, is not a Moral Governor, but a stern and ruthless Machinist."†

Being pressed with this discrepancy by a Theistic correspondent of the *Reasoner*, Mr. Holdreth gave the following explanation:—

"The Cosmist sees in Nature a machine, which works according to definite laws which it did not create, and which were not created, but which it cannot violate. . . If the machine crushes his child or maims himself, he blames but his own folly, or pities his own misfortune, but still recognises the value and beneficence of the mechanism. The Theist, believing Nature an instrument in the hands of a conscious Being, must see in her workings the designed operations of that Being, and the evidence of His character. And since those workings often operate injustice and cruelty in individual cases, he ought to suppose that Being careless of justice and benevolence, or unable to execute His own will. Seeing a disregard of morality (which the Cosmist considers the consequence, not the cause of natural law) in Nature's operations, he is bound to believe the operator devoid of moral character."‡

Thus, then, we come to this point. The *general* laws of Nature are "ever active and ever beneficent;" but, as we see the welfare of *individuals* perpetually sacrificed to that of the whole, we must "believe the operator devoid of moral character," unless we resort to the darker theory that the individual injustice was itself planned by a Designing Devil—an idea which certainly seems to present itself occasionally to Mr. Holdreth's mind, though it would scarcely appear that he actually believes it. In contrast to these theories, we have endeavoured to show that the capacity for individual sin and suffering is the indispensable postulate of all our virtue and happiness—the material out of which all sensitive and active life is moulded, and through which alone we can attain the truest good of which our nature is capable. Moreover, we believe that those apparently exceptional phenomena of our lives, which to the human judgment

* "Reasoner," No. 583. † Ibid., No. 594. ‡ Ibid., No. 607.

appear most inexplicable and distressing, are often the very means of leading us into nobler and richer fields of life, not otherwise attainable. If we faithfully meet the new trouble in a spirit of obedience and trust, it gradually unfolds its hidden meaning, and reveals to us beyond our bounded imaginations and imperfect efforts, the presence of One whose Reality transcends our highest ideals, and who, in His exhaustless love, is ever seeking our perfection, and pleading with us for the free devotion of our hearts to His service. Among the earliest tokens of this filial relationship are our longings after an inexhaustible Source of love and truth, who shall guide and respond to us where man's help must stop short. There are some striking illustrations of this tendency in Mr. Holdreth's novelette. One of the most prominent is the depiction of the way in which the hero partially fills up the void in his heart caused by the loss of his religion, with an intense devotion to his "Master," Sterne, who does, in fact, take the place of a God to him. He accepts the whole responsibility of Ernest's life, for which Ernest gives, in return, an almost childlike obedience. Thus, such comfort as he *does* find is gained by reposing on a higher and stronger will than his own. Any such need in Sterne's own character is obviated by the coldly-calm temperament ascribed to him. "Having no passionate love for any other object than his sister, having no cause to serve in whose success his soul was absorbed, and serving the cause of Atheism simply from a quiet, unimpassioned conviction of its truth and necessity, he felt no need of any assistance or protection from without. He was sufficient to himself, and his conscience was sufficient to him."

Yet, with a perceptiveness which singularly contrasts with the author's admiration for his ideal Atheist, he has painted Sterne's inability to train his wayward sister Annie, with a verisimilitude that is only too painfully real. The need of influences beyond humanity to solve such problems of character as hers is so clearly manifested in this little episode of Atheist life, that we must extract enough to show its main features. Sterne is the guardian of his two orphan sisters. A scene of contention with the elder child has just taken place, in which Sterne has tried in vain to bring her to reason.

"The child understood; that much, at least, was clear. But she would not seem to feel. And Sterne bit his lip, and turned away sadly to take the hand of his favourite, as she danced into the room. . . . . Annie sat by the window, where she could see them depart, and notice her brother's tenderness towards the tiny creature, who in the midst of her laughter, was even then murmuring a word of pity for 'poor Annie,'—more needed than Emily could know. The sullen girl bowed her head on her hands, and gave way to a passionate burst of grief and vexation. 'How he loves her! and I—no one loves me! Well, I won't care; I *hate* them;'—but the word was sobbed forth with an intensity of rage which belied it; and it was long ere Annie could resume her usual quiet and sullen behaviour. Pity that her

brother had not seen those tears, and heard that bitter cry of desolation, 'No one loves me.' *He who knows no Father in heaven is doubly bound to be tender toward the fatherless on earth.* Sterne knew and felt this. He had done his duty by his sisters nobly and kindly; and Annie would have had no reason to complain, were it possible for Duty to command love, despite all the faults and unloveliness of its object. Sterne did his duty; and here his task ended. He could not love one so thoroughly unamiable."—Chap. VI.

"She returned to her seat (after doing a kindness to Emily), not unnoticed by her brother, whose conscientious vigilance seldom missed a single trait of character in either of his wards. 'Thank you, Annie,' he said, in a tone of more gentleness, and even tenderness, than it was his wont to use towards the wayward and vexatious child. What a pity that the shadow of the fireplace screened the light of the candle from Annie's face, and forbade her brother to notice the glow of momentary pleasure which illumined it. It was but for a moment; then came the thought, 'If it had been his favourite, he would have said, Thank you, *darling*,' and all the sullenness returned to her face and her demeanour, as she resumed her old attitude and her solitary musings. It is a fearful power that the words and tones of one human being exercise over the mind of another; a power so inevitable and yet so incalculable that it is hard for him or her who wields it to have the slightest clue to its right use. Indeed, it is perhaps as well that we have in general so little ability to direct our use of this influence; for one who could calculate beforehand the effect his every word and gesture would produce might be a despot of no common kind. Yet it is grievous to think that an accidental variation of phrase or tone, which we could not possibly remember or foresee, should affect so fatally the peace or the character of another. A single word of affection then spoken might have saved years of discomfort, sorrow, and self-reproach; yet could Sterne have known that it was wanted, or would be felt, it had certainly not been withheld."—Chap. VIII.

It would be impossible to depict more clearly the inadequacy of the bare sense of Duty to compass all the work which is given us to do. What Sterne needed was to break up the ice round his sister's heart, by penetrating to the human feeling underneath her pride and waywardness. And what could have enabled him to do this so well as a faith in an Infinite Causal Love beyond, within, and around them both? Failing this, all the most delicate and tender growths of affection are (as our author sees) at the mercy of the slightest physical accident, and continually liable to waste away in aimless wanderings, or to fester in morbid pride. Yet in one of the few cases where the novelist has allowed an Atheist to love happily, we see that even when affection is mutual and satisfying, it can never be relied upon by an Atheist as a permanent and integral part of his being. In the touching chapter entitled "The Valley of the Shadow," narrating the

death of Emily Sterne, we see the point from which the author endeavours to deal with this poignant grief of eternal separation, from the principle supplied by "the Religion of Duty."

"Ernest could not leave his friend in this great sorrow, and his presence was evidently a diversion to Sterne's melancholy, and a pleasure to the dying child. For dying she certainly was,—fading away from life like a gathered rose-bud, but slowly and quietly, herself half conscious but fearless, sorrowful only for the misery which all her adored brother's self-command could not conceal from her loving eyes. And she would make him sit close beside her, and clasp her little hand in his, while his thoughts were darkened by the shadow of the coming day, when he should never clasp that loving little hand again. Few of us know what is the anguish of the meaning he had uttered in those bitter words, 'my all in life.' She —this beautiful and innocent little one—was the object of *all* his care, *all* his labour, *all* his hope. When she should be gone from him, what would he have left but a dreary, dark, cheerless path to a goal of utter nothingness? In those hours of torture, few could have seen further than this, even of men less capable of passionate love, filling the inmost recesses of existence; but Sterne was of a few. Men of his mould are not to be found in the every-day walks of life, though one or two such there are on earth, perhaps, if we but knew where to seek them when we want heroes to lead us and martyrs to die for us. Dark and waste and dreary indeed his after-life must be, but it might be trodden boldly and faithfully; for the darkness was not all. Even amid that long and cruel agony he remembered the work that lay before him; and knew that he would not do it the less bravely and constantly, because he had no other love on earth, no other hope on earth or in heaven. For him Duty was God and Nature was His prophet; and though the God's mandates were hard, and the prophet prophesied no smooth things, Sterne was not one to lose hold of his faith because of tribulation, nor to fling it aside in madly clasping at a staff which, in the utmost need of those who lean thereon, cannot but prove a broken reed. . . . . .

"'What advantageth it us, if the dead rise not? Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die.'

"Sterne sat by the side of his sleeping sister, who, lulled to rest for a short time by heavy opiates, was not to be roused by their low-toned conversation. He was bending over her, and his face was hidden. But as his proselyte spoke these bitter words, he looked up; and the first harsh sentence Ernest had ever heard him speak was his reply.

"'Ernest Clifford, look at your own life, and at mine; look *here*, where all I have to love or hope in the universe is passing away from me; and remember that I, in this utter desolation, have never forgotten that I have no right to die with my work undone. It may be, when you have known what such wretchedness as this is, that you

will learn a better faith than that borrowed Epicureanism of Paul, and bethink you that those who have so much to do before they die to-morrow have need to make the utmost use of to-day.'

"Ernest was somewhat abashed, yet could not but recognise the justice of the rebuke. If this man did not sink into utter despair, what right had *he* to murmur?"

Thus, one by one, fade the stars of love and hope from the Atheist's sight, and he is left alone, with nothing but the work which Duty prescribes. "He would not do it the less bravely and constantly, because he had no other love on earth, no other hope on earth or in heaven." But if it be possible for all love and hope on earth or in heaven to be thus destroyed, what work remains possible, and what objects remain to be worked for? What is then the value of life—not merely its relative value to this or that sufferer, but its absolute value to man as man? How can such a mutilated and benumbing conception of duty "*exercise complete control over the affections, and wield their whole power in the struggle?*" "Nature" must be not only "devoid of moral character,"—she must be absolutely Diabolical, if she condemns her truest children to this terrible crushing of their noblest yearnings. The universal heart of man refuses to believe in such an anomalous dissonance, and, springing to the embrace of the Infinite Goodness, echoes the cry of St. Augustine,—"Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our heart is restless till it resteth in Thee!"

Here we must close our remarks, although we have but touched the mere outline of the subject. Our aim has not been to furnish a short and easy guide to the mysteries of this infinite Universe, but simply to indicate a few of the clues to the great underlying Reality, which no worshipper can ever wholly comprehend, but which unfolds itself ever more and more to wise and patient hearts. That Reality must be sought by each soul singly and alone. That such a mind as Mr. Holdreth's cannot seek it in vain, we feel assured. It may be nearly impossible for any one to help such seekers in solving a problem which so largely depends on the individual experience of life. But our task will not have been valueless if we have succeeded in showing that there is, in these recent forms of Atheism, a faith in truth and in virtue which commands the sympathy of religious thinkers, and which is in itself a hopeful sign of the times. "When people assume that an Atheist *must* live without God in the world," † says an able and generous writer, "they assume what is fatal to their own Theism." And those who recognise in *all* human goodness the sustaining hand of the Creator, will hold fast to the faith that no genuine truth-seeker can ever be forsaken by the tender care of Him of whom it is said that *the pure in heart shall see God.*

R. H. Hutton - National Review, No. 3. "Atheism."

APPENDIX.

—o—

THE RELATION OF SECULARISM TO THEISM.

Note A, page 8.

I. In illustration of this, it may be mentioned that in July, 1857, a Society of Materialists was formed, "for a union of Freethinkers for a more definite object than appeared possible under the diffusive principles which were represented under the name of Secularism."* In the first meeting called to consider the proposal, all the speakers in favour of the new Society lamented the admission of "persons of spiritualistic tendencies" into the Secular body, as a drag upon the efforts of Freethinkers. Soon afterwards, Mr. Holyoake and "Iconoclast" held some discussions on the position of Secularism, in which "Iconoclast" "denied that there was any middle standing between Atheism and Theism," and maintained "that Secularism was impracticable when separated from Atheism, urging that the plan of Secularism was essentially Atheistic."† To the same class of views belong the well-known "Religious Confessions" of Mr. Joseph Barker, who, from having been successively a Methodist, an Unitarian, and a Theistic Secularist, became an Atheistic Secularist, holding Secularism "as the sole concern and business of mankind," and blending it inextricably with Atheism, which, according to him, "occupies the position of positive science, and is a mighty reformatory principle."‡ On the other hand may be quoted the numerous articles of Mr. Holdreth, who has always maintained that "it is both better and easier to win for Secularism a front place among religions, than to obtain respect or tolerance for irreligion:"§ and who has lately (since the first edition of this Essay was sent to the press) withdrawn himself from the public advocacy of Secularism, because "his views of it differ so widely from those which have determined the aspect it has recently assumed."‖

II. Mr. Holyoake, however, still believing in the possibility of a neutral faith, has lately published a little pamphlet, entitled "Principles of Secularism," in which he endeavours to define and consolidate his own position. He there maintains the following points.

1. That Secularism is a "synonym of Freethought," in harmony with "the hereditary characteristics of Freethinking" (p. 4); that "Secularism is the name given to a series of principles of Positivism, intended for the guidance of those who find Theology indefinite, or inadequate, or deem it unreliable" (p. 7).

2. That a Secularist "concerns himself with present time and materiality, neither ignoring nor denying the future and spiritual, which are independent questions" (p. 6).

3. That, "occupying, as Secularism intends to do, the ground of Nature, it may refuse to engage itself with Atheism, Theism, or Biblicism. So long as he [the Secularist] chooses to remain within the sphere of his own principles, he simply ignores all outlying sectarian systems, and is no more to be put down as opposed to any such views than the geologist is to be cried down as the enemy of music, or the chemist as the opponent of geometry, because he ignores those subjects, and confines his attention to his own. Honour those who advisedly, and for the public good, compromise themselves; only take care that associates are not affected by this conduct of others. And this will never take place so long as the simple and pure profession of common principles is kept intrinsically independent and unassailably neutral" (p. 18).

But this is precisely what the Secularists have never done. It is as a "synonym of Freethought," *i.e.*, of unfettered speculative inquiry, that the very name of Secularism is put forth: and not only are five-sixths of the

* "Reasoner," No. 582. † Ibid, Nos. 584, 591. ‡ Ibid, Nos. 646, 649
§ Ibid., No. 584. ‖ Ibid, No. 690, August 14, 1859.

Secularists thorough-going Atheists, but by far the greatest amount of their activity *as a party* is given to the discrediting of religion. It is even one of Mr. Holyoake's own definitions of Secularism, that its principles "are intended for the guidance of those who find Theology indefinite, or inadequate, or deem it unreliable." How, then, can Secularist principles be ever regarded as intrinsically independent, and unassailably neutral? How can a Secularist claim that he is no more to be put down as opposed to religion, than the geologist is to be cried down as the enemy of music, or the chemist as the opponent of geometry? The researches of the geologist in no way assail the theories of the musician, nor does the chemist discredit the principles of the geometer. But Secularism, if it does really "neither ignore nor deny the future and the spiritual," *and claims Theistic adherents on that ground*—must be in direct opposition to Atheism, by which the affirmations of religion are necessarily either ignored or denied.

III. Is it, then, impossible for Theists and Atheists to combine together for purposes of practical usefulness which both may have equally at heart? God forbid. It is only impossible when a speculative theory is made the condition of union. The Association for the Promotion of Social Science may be regarded as a happy instance of a true Secular Society, in the only sense in which that term can be accepted by both parties, *i.e.*, its standpoint is *the importance of earthly work*, NOT *the doing it from merely earthly motives*. Consequently, the Association exacts from its members no definition of the relation of work to faith, nor of this world to the next, but leaves the human and the Divine to find their natural and ever-varying proportions in the mind and life of each individual. Mr. Holyoake's Secularism, on the other hand, "draws the line of separation between the things of time and the things of eternity;" "selects for its guidance the principle that 'human affairs should be regulated by considerations purely human,'" and regards the beliefs of religion as "supplementary speculations."* Now there are stages of suspensive Atheism and of imperfect Theism† with which these declarations may consist; and it is important that such intermediate stages of belief should be clearly distinguished from dogmatic Atheism. But, nevertheless, the views held by these intermediate thinkers are not those of a mature and consistent Theism. To a true Theist, the Being of God is no "supplementary speculation," but the underlying Reality of the Universe; and so far from seeking to regulate human affairs by considerations purely human, he regards the life of humanity as perpetually needing to be interpreted by the light of the Divine. And while the Secularist "inculcates the practical sufficiency of natural morality, apart from" any spiritual basis, the Theist holds that that "natural morality" only exists by virtue of His existence who is the fountain alike of nature and of grace. But, on the other hand, a consistent Theist will never deny that a man may himself be morally estimable and reliable who does not hold this belief. For Character and Speculation are by no means co-ordinate in their development, and a man's character is *the man himself*, while his speculations only give us the conscious programme adopted by him. Frankly should we say to those Atheists who command our respect, "We will work with you wherever we can agree, because, believing in God as the source of all human goodness and truth, we recognise every good impulse and true thought in you as coming from Him, and therefore as equally sacred with our own." But

* "Principles of Secularism," pp. 6, 7.

† See an interesting letter, signed "Truth-Seeker," in "Reasoner," No. 588, from a correspondent who professes himself to be "a believer (at least provisionally) in the being of a God and the immortality of the soul," and who earnestly contends that Mr. Holyoake's Atheism does not assume any certainty of negation. See also, the criticisms of some Theistic Secularists ("Reasoner," Nos. 650, 651, 659, 668) on Mr. Barker's Confessions.

this is essentially different from giving our adherence to a system which regards the main foundations of our faith as "supplementary speculations," "indefinite, inadequate, or unreliable."

I am especially anxious to clear up this point, because it is one upon which there has been considerable misapprehension on both sides. Many Theists have hesitated to give full scope to their natural liberality of feeling, from the fear lest they should, in some sense, be obscuring their fidelity to religion by co-operating with Atheists, even in matters involving no profession of disbelief. Surely, where such a fear exists, the true difference between Theism and Atheism cannot have been clearly discriminated, still less can the true relation between Theists and Atheists have been explored in all its fulness of light and shadow. The true difference between the Theist and the Atheist (to borrow the words of one of the most spiritual of living preachers*) "is not that the one *has* God and the other has Him not, but that the one *sees* him and the other sees him not." Our charge against speculative Atheism is not that it necessarily cuts men off from the teaching, still less from the tenderness, of God; but that it prevents them from *consciously seeking and cherishing* that teaching and tenderness, and thus confines the *voluntary* range of character to that growth alone which can be self-evolved.† But we can never bring the question up to this point, which is the real heart of the matter, until we have, by word and deed, made unmistakably plain that the goodness which we seek for ourselves is essentially one with that to which right-minded "Freethinkers" also aspire, and that when we decline to subscribe the creed of the Secularist, it is in allegiance to a faith which can never prohibit our human fellowship with the Atheist.

Note B., page 14.

Upon this point, I cannot forbear from quoting the following suggestive passage from a review of Theodore Parker's "Theism, Atheism," etc., which appeared in the *Inquirer* for Nov. 12th, 1853. by the R. H. Hutton.

"It is a favourite maxim with physiologists and Secularists, that no physical conditions of health and strength can be disregarded without causing the pain which always indicates that something is wrong. It is clear that such pain, not being self-caused, but being forced upon us by those rules of our bodily constitution which we have no power to alter, is a sign that physical tendencies within us are checked or thwarted, that constant forces are not allowed their normal play. Keep the body bound in one position, and violent pain soon ensues. Of what is that pain the sign? It indicates that physical impulses tending to motion and change of posture are disregarded and restrained—that a vital force, *not under our own control*, is asking for its natural liberty, and is denied it. So far the Atheist concurs. He says that so it is, but that the vital force, not under

* "I never can believe that God retires from a man who is perplexed and unable to discover Him. Is a man deserted by his God because he cannot find Him? For my own part, I believe there is a secret grace of God in the heart of every man, and that God is there, whether he sees Him, or whether he sees Him not. The difference between a Christian and an unbeliever is not that the one has God and the other has Him not, but that the one sees Him and the other sees Him not." Speech of the Rev. James Martineau at Stourbridge, reported in the "Inquirer" for Nov. 6, 1858.

† See an earnest and able paper on Self-knowledge (entitled "A True Prophet") in "Reasoner," No. 683,in which the writer maintains that "Self-knowledge is to the Secularist what grace is to the Christian." He does not take into account that self-knowledge is only an intellectual pre-condition of moral progress, and that its value in any case wholly depends upon the moral use to which it is put, and especially on the power of self-coercion or self-surrender to the desired ideal. Now "grace" not only shows us our errors and dangers, but *leads us out of them* by pouring into us a new life, and uniting us to an All-conquering Love.

our control, is a development of the eternal, blind, dead forces of the universe. But apply the same reasoning to our moral constitution. Let a man try to descend from his own conceptions of right to a lower moral level. What is the result?—that a moral misery, the sense of a moral resistance, *not under our own control*, not of ourselves, immediately results, checking us in our own efforts to do wrong. Now, what is the meaning of saying that such a resisting force is part of ourselves? We have no means of getting rid of it, we cannot ignore it, we cannot cause it. It is in us, but not of us; it is a force eating into our nature, and yet it is a *moral* force, it cannot be identified with mere physical tendencies, it must be from a mind, for matter could not plead with us, and rivet our gaze to the sin we are committing. We are in actual conflict with a *power*, which it is mere self-contradiction to call a material power, and which yet we know to be other than our own will. If it be replied that it is one part of our nature contending against the other, still here are two powers, both of them moral and spiritual, one subject to our control, and one not so subject, of which we call the former, ourself; what, then, are we to call the other which we recognise as intruding its suggestions upon us from sources we cannot fathom? *This is but the very essence of the meaning which a Theist expresses by the word 'God.'*"

Of course, all our ideas of duty are necessarily relative rather than absolute, and it is only a *comparative* goodness that can be suggested, even by God Himself, to creatures of limited and progressive capacity. But were all our ideas of right merely self-evolved, without contact (more or less conscious) with a Higher Personality, we could not experience this sensation that, in wilful wrong-doing, we are resisting the pleadings of an Infinite Moral Being. (See this theme treated at length in Mr. F. W. Newman's "Theism," Book I., Sect. 5. "God in Conscience.")

Note C., page 27.

Since this Essay was sent to the press, Mr. Holdreth has published a short paper on "The Existence of Evil,"* stating that "after mature consideration, he feels called upon to qualify" his argument on that subject. "It is (he says), logically conceivable that matter may have an independent existence and laws of its own, of which it was as impossible for the Creator to make a perfect world, as it would have been for Him to make two and two equal to five. Therefore, all that is really proved by the argument from the suffering and sin around us, is, that the world was not formed by a Creator *at once* perfect in power, and perfect in beneficence —it is not shown that it might not have been framed by a God of perfect goodness but limited power. . . . Of course, this in no way affects the grand argument of Atheism—the total absence of evidence of Creation."

What is here meant by "creation" is not clear, and in none of Mr. Holdreth's writings has he done more than touch the subject incidentally. I therefore confine myself to remarking that the theory which he does accept, under the name of Cosmism, appears to stop short of Theism for a *moral* reason only. It is because the Cosmist sees "a disregard of morality in Nature's operations," that "he is bound to believe the operator devoid of moral character." But if it be granted that, in the very nature of things, it may have been "as impossible for the Creator to make a perfect world, as it would have been for Him to make two and two equal to five," that moral objection becomes sensibly diminished. It cannot, however, disappear entirely, until it be also granted that the moral perfection which God could not *make* in the human world, He can, and does enable us to approximate to more and more for ever, by the joint action of *our free will in accord with His grace.*

THE END.

* "Reasoner," No. 686.