



## A Plea for Atheism

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This essay is issued in the hope that it may succeed in removing some of the many prejudices prevalent, not only against the actual holders of Atheistic opinions, but also against those wrongfully suspected of Atheism. Men who have been famous for depth of thought, for excellent wit, or great genius, have been recklessly assailed as Atheists by those who lack the high qualifications against which the malice of the calumniators was directed. Thus, not only have Voltaire and Paine been, without ground, accused of Atheism, but Bacon, Locke, and Bishop Berkeley himself, have, amongst others, been denounced by thoughtless or unscrupulous pietists as inclining to Atheism, the ground for the accusation being that they manifested an inclination to push human thought a little in advance of the age in which they lived.

It is too often the fashion with persons of pious reputation to speak in unmeasured language of Atheism as favouring immorality, and of Atheists as men whose conduct is necessarily vicious, and who have adopted Atheistic views as a desperate defiance against a Deity justly offended by the badness of their lives. Such persons urge that amongst the proximate causes of Atheism are vicious training, immoral and profligate companions, licentious living, and the like. Dr. John Pye Smith, in his “Instructions on Christian Theology,” goes so far as to declare that “nearly all the Atheists upon record have been men of extremely debauched and vile conduct.” Such language from the Christian advocate is not surprising, but there are others who, while professing great desire for the spread of free thought and having pretensions to rank amongst acute and liberal thinkers, declare Atheism impracticable, and its teachings cold, barren, and negative. Excepting to each of the above allegations, I maintain that thoughtful Atheism affords greater possibility for human happiness than any system yet based on, or possible to be founded on, Theism, and that the lives of true Atheists must be more virtuous—because more human—than those of the believers in Deity, the humanity of the devout believer often finding itself neutralized by a faith with which that humanity is necessarily in constant collision. The devotee piling the faggots at the ‘auto da fe’ of a heretic, and that heretic his son, might notwithstanding be a good father in every other respect (see Deut. xiii. 6-10). Heresy, in the eyes of the believer, is highest criminality, and outweighs all claims of family or affection.

Atheism, properly understood, is no mere disbelief; is in no wise a cold, barren negative; it is, on the contrary, a hearty, fruitful affirmation of all truth, and involves the positive assertion of action of highest humanity.

Let Atheism be fairly examined, and neither condemned—its defence unheard—on the ‘ex parte’ slanders of some of the professional preachers of fashionable orthodoxy, whose courage is bold enough while the pulpit protects the sermon, but whose valour becomes tempered with discretion when a free platform is afforded and discussion claimed; nor misjudged because it has been the custom to regard Atheism as so unpopular as to render its advocacy impolitic. The best policy against all prejudice is to firmly advocate the truth. The Atheist does not say “There is no God,” but he says: “I know not what you mean by God; I am without idea of God; the word ‘God’ is to me a sound conveying no clear or distinct affirmation. I do not deny God, because I cannot deny that of which I have no conception, and the conception of which by its affirmer, is so imperfect that he is unable to define it to me. If, however, ‘God’ is defined to mean an existence other than the existence of which I am a mode, then I deny ‘God,’ and affirm

that it is impossible such 'God' can be. That is, I affirm one existence, and deny that there can be more than one." The Pantheist also affirms one existence, and denies that there can be more than one but the distinction between the Pantheist and the Atheist is, that the Pantheist affirms infinite attributes for existence, while the Atheist maintains that attributes are the characteristics of mode—i.e., the diversities enabling the conditioning in thought.

When the Theist affirms that his God is an existence other than, and separate from, the so-called material universe, and when he invests this separate, hypothetical existence with the several attributes of personality, omniscience, omnipresence, omnipotence, eternity, infinity, immutability, and perfect goodness, then the Atheist in reply says I deny the existence of such a being"; and he is entitled to say this because this Theistic definition is self-contradictory, as well as contradictory of every-day experience.

If you speak to the Atheist of God as creator, he answers that the conception of creation is impossible. We are utterly unable to construe it in thought as possible that the complement of existence has been either increased or diminished, much less can we conceive an absolute origination of substance. We cannot conceive either, on the one hand, nothing becoming something, or on the other, something becoming nothing. The words "creation" and "destruction" have no value except as applied to phenomena. You may destroy a gold coin, but you have only destroyed the condition, you have not affected the substance. "Creation" and "destruction" denote change of phenomena; they do not denote origin or cessation of substance. The Theist who speaks of God creating the universe must either suppose that Deity evolved it out of himself, or that he produced it from nothing. But the Theist cannot regard the universe as evolution of Deity, because this would identify Universe and Deity, and be Pantheism rather than Theism. There would be no distinction of substance—no creation. Nor can the Theist regard the universe as created out of nothing, because Deity is, according to him, necessarily eternal and infinite. Gods existence being eternal and infinite precludes the possibility of the conception of vacuum to be filled by the universe if created. No one can even think of any point in extent or duration and say: Here is the point of separation between the creator and the created. It is not possible for the Theist to imagine a beginning to the universe. It is not possible to conceive either an absolute commencement, or an absolute termination of existence; that is, it is impossible to conceive beginning, before which you have a period when the universe has yet to be; or to conceive an end, after which the universe, having been, no longer exists. The Atheist affirms that he cognizes to-day effects; that these are, at the same time, causes and effects—causes to the effects they precede, effects to the causes they follow. Cause is simply everything without which the effect would not result, and with which it must result. Cause is the means to an end, consummating itself in that end. Cause is the word we use to include all that determines change. The Theist who argues for creation must assert a point of time—that is, of duration, when the created did not yet exist. At this point of time either something existed or nothing; but something must have existed, for out of nothing nothing can come. Something must have existed, because the point fixed upon is that of the duration of something. This something must have been either finite or infinite; if finite it could not have been God, and if the something were infinite, then creation was impossible: it is impossible to add to infinite existence.

If you leave the question of creation, and deal, with the government of the universe, the difficulties of Theism are by no means lessened. The existence of evil is then a terrible stumbling-block to the Theist. Pain, misery, crime, poverty confront the advocate of eternal goodness, and challenge with unanswerable potency his declaration of Deity as all-good, all-wise, and all-powerful. A recent writer in the 'Spectator' admits that there is what it regards "as the most painful, as it is often the most incurable, form of Atheism—the Atheism arising from a sort of horror of the idea of an Omnipotent Being permitting such a proportion of misery among the majority of his creatures." Evil is either caused by God or exists independently; but it cannot be caused by God, as in that case he would not be all-good; nor can it exist hostilely, as in that case he would not be all-powerful. If all-good he would desire to annihilate evil, and continued evil contradicts either God's desire, or God's ability, to prevent it. Evil must either

have had a beginning or it must have been eternal; but, according to the Theist, it cannot be eternal, because God alone is eternal. Nor can it have had a beginning, for if it had it must either have originated in God, or outside God; but, according to the Theist, it cannot have: originated in God, for he is all- good, and out of all-goodness evil cannot originate; nor can evil have originated outside God, for, according to the Theist, God is infinite, and it is impossible to go outside of or beyond infinity.

To the Atheist this question of evil assumes an entirely different aspect. He declares that each evil is a result, but not a result from God nor Devil. He affirms that conduct founded on knowledge of the laws of existence may ameliorate each present form of evil, and, as our knowledge increases, prevent its future recurrence.

Some declare that the belief in God is necessary as a check. to crime. They allege that the Atheist may commit murder, lie, or steal without fear of any consequences. To try the actual value of this argument, it is not unfair to ask: Do Theists ever steal? If yes, then in each such theft the belief in God and his power to punish has been insufficient as a preventive of the crime. Do Theists ever lie or murder? If yes, the same remark has again force—Theism, failing against the lesser as against the greater crime. Those who use such an argument overlook that all men seek happiness, though in very, diverse fashions, ignorant and miseducated men often mistake the true path to happiness, and commit crime in the endeavour to obtain it. Atheists hold that by teaching mankind the real road to human happiness it is possible to keep them from the by-ways of criminality and error. Atheists would teach men to be moral now, not because God offers as an inducement reward by and by, but because in the virtuous act itself immediate good is ensured to the doer and the circle surrounding him. Atheism would preserve man from lying, stealing, murdering, not from fear of an eternal agony after death, but because these crimes make this life itself a course of misery.

While Theism, asserting God as the creator and governor of the universe, hinders and checks man's efforts by declaring God's will to be the sole directing and controlling power, Atheism, by declaring all events to be in accordance with natural laws—that is, happening in certain ascertainable sequences—stimulates man to discover the best conditions of life, and offers him the most powerful inducements to morality. While the Theist provides future happiness for a scoundrel repentant on his death-bed, Atheism affirms present and certain happiness for the man who does his best to live here so well as to have little cause for repenting hereafter.

Theism declares that God dispenses health and inflicts disease, and sickness and illness are regarded by the Theists as visitations from an angered Deity, to be borne with meekness and content. Atheism declares that physiological knowledge may preserve us from disease by preventing us from infringing the law of health, and that sickness results not as the ordinance of offended Deity, but from ill-ventilated dwellings and workshops, bad and insufficient food, excessive toil, mental suffering, exposure to inclement weather, and the like—all these finding root in poverty, the chief source of crime and disease; that prayers and piety afford no protection against fever, and that if the human being be kept without food he will starve as quickly whether he be Theist or Atheist, theology being no substitute for bread.

It is very important, in order that injustice may not be done to the Theistic, argument, that we should have—in lieu of a clear definition, which it seems useless to ask for—the best possible clue to the meaning intended to be conveyed by the word “God.” If it were not that the word is an arbitrary term, maintained for the purpose of influencing the ignorant, and the notions suggested by which are vague and entirely contingent upon individual fancies, such a clue could probably be most easily, and satisfactorily obtained by tracing back the word “God,” and ascertaining the sense in which it was used by the uneducated worshippers who have gone before us, and collating this with the more modern Theism, qualified as it is by the superior knowledge of to-day....

Finding that philology aids us but little, we must endeavour to arrive at the meaning of the word “God” by another rule. It is utterly impossible to fix the period of the rise of Theism amongst any particular people; but it is, notwithstanding, comparatively easy, if not to trace out the development of Theistic ideas, at any rate to point to their probable course of growth

amongst all peoples.

Keightley, in his "Origin of Mythology," says: "Supposing, for the sake of hypothesis, a race of men in a state of total or partial ignorance of Deity, their belief in many Gods may have thus commenced: They saw around them various changes brought about by human agency, and hence they knew the power of intelligence to produce effects. When they beheld other and greater effects, they ascribed them to some unseen being, similar but superior to man." They associated particular events with special unknown beings (Gods), to each of whom they ascribed either a peculiarity of power, or a sphere of action not common to other Gods. Thus, one was God of the sea, another God of war, another God of love, another ruled the thunder and lightning; and thus through the various then known elements of the universe, and the passions of human-kind.

This mythology became modified with the commencement of human knowledge. The ability to think has proved itself oppugnant to, and destructive of, the reckless desire to worship, characteristic of semi-barbarism. Science has razed altar after altar heretofore erected to the unknown Gods, and has pulled down Deity after Deity from the pedestals on which ignorance and superstition had erected them. The priest, who had formerly spoken as the oracle of God, lost his sway just in proportion as the scientific teacher succeeded in impressing mankind with a knowledge of the facts around them. The ignorant, who had hitherto listened unquestioning during centuries of abject submission to their spiritual preceptors, at last commenced to search and examine for themselves, and were guided by experience rather than by church doctrine. Today advancing intellect challenges the reserve guard of the old armies of superstition, and compels a conflict in which human-kind must in the end have great gain by the forced enunciation of the truth.

From the word "God" the Theist derives no argument in his favour; it teaches nothing, defines nothing, demonstrates nothing, explains nothing. The Theist answers that this is no sufficient objection that there are many words which are in common use to which the same objection applies. Even if this were true, it does not answer the Atheist's objection. Alleging a difficulty on the one side is not a removal of the obstacle already pointed out on the other.

The Theist declares his God to be not only immutable, but also infinitely intelligent, and says: "Matter is either essentially intelligent or essentially non-intelligent; if matter were essentially intelligent, no matter could be without intelligence; but matter cannot be essentially intelligent, because some matter is not intelligent, therefore matter is essentially non-intelligent; but there is intelligence, therefore there must be a cause for the intelligence, independent of matter—this must be an intelligent being—i.e., "God." The Atheist answers: I do not know what is meant, in the mouth of the Theist, by "matter."

"Matter," "nature," "substance," "existence," are words having the same signification in the Atheist's vocabulary. Lewes used "matter" as the symbol of all the known properties, statical and dynamical, passive and active; i.e., subjectively, as feeling and change of feeling, or objectively, as agent and action"; and Mill defined "nature" as "the sum of all phenomena, together with the causes which produce them, including not only all that happens, but all that is capable of happening." It is not certain that the Theist expresses any very clear idea to himself when he uses the words "matter" and "intelligence"; it is quite certain that he has not yet shown himself capable of communicating this idea, and that any effort he makes is couched in terms which are self-contradictory. Reason and understanding are sometimes treated as separate faculties, yet it is not unfair to presume that the Theist would include them both under the word intelligence. Perception is the foundation of the intellect. The perceptive ability differs in each animal; yet, in speaking of matter, the Theist uses the word "intelligence" as though the same meaning were to be understood in every case. The recollection of the perceptions is the exercise of a different ability from the perceptive ability, and occasionally varies disproportionately; thus, an individual may have great perceptive abilities, and very little memory, or the reverse; yet memory, as well as perception, is included in intelligence. So also the comparing between two or more perceptions; the judging and the reflecting; all these are subject to the same remarks, and all these and other phases of the mind, are included in the word intelligence. We answer



then, that “God” (whatever that word may mean) cannot be intelligent. He can never perceive; the act of perception results in the obtaining a new idea, but if God be omniscient, his ideas have been eternally the same. He has either been always, and always will be, perceiving, or he has never perceived at all. But God cannot have been always perceiving, because, if he had, he would always have been obtaining fresh knowledge, in which case he must at some time have had less knowledge than now; that is, he would have been less perfect; that is, he would not have been God. He can never recollect nor forget; he can never compare, reflect, nor judge. There cannot be perfect intelligence without understanding; but following Coleridge, understanding is the faculty of judging according to sense.” The faculty of whom? Of some person, judging according to that person’s senses. But has “God” senses? Is there anything beyond “God” for God to sense? There cannot be perfect intelligence without reason. By reason we mean that phase of the mind which avails itself of past and present experience to predicate more or less accurately of possible experience in the future. To God there can be neither past nor future, therefore to him reason is impossible. There cannot be perfect intelligence without will; but has God will? If God wills, the will of the all-powerful must be irresistible; the will of the infinite must exclude all other wills.

God can never perceive. Perception and sensation are identical. Every sensation is pleasurable or painful. But God, if immutable, can neither be pleased nor pained. Every fresh sensation involves a change in mental and perhaps in physical condition. God, if immutable cannot change. Sensation is the source of all ideas, but it is only objects external to the mind which can be sensed. If God be infinite there can be no objects external to him, and therefore sensation must be to him impossible. Yet without perception where is intelligence?

God cannot have memory nor reason—memory is of the past, reason for the future, but to God immutable there can be no past, no future. The words past, present, and future imply change: they assert progression of duration. If God be immutable, to him change is impossible. Can you have intelligence destitute of perception, memory, and reason? God cannot have the faculty of judgment—judgment implies in the act of judging a conjoining or disjoining of two or more thoughts, but this involves change of mental condition. To God the immutable, change is impossible. Can you have intelligence, yet no perception, no memory, no reason, no judgment? God cannot think. The law of the thinkable is, that the thing thought must be separated from the thing which is not thought. To think otherwise would be to think of nothing -- to have an impression with no distinguishing mark would be to have no impression. Yet this separation implies change, and to God, immutable, change is impossible. In memory, the thing remembered is distinguished from the thing temporarily or permanently forgotten. Can God forget? Can you have intelligence without thought? If the Theist replies to this, that he does not mean by infinite intelligence, as an attribute of Deity, an affinity of the intelligence found in a finite degree in humankind, then he is bound to explain, clearly and distinctly, what other “intelligence” he means; and until this be done the foregoing statements require answer.

The Atheist does not regard “substance” as either essentially intelligent or the reverse. Intelligence is the result of certain conditions of existence. Burnished steel is bright—that is, brightness is the characteristic of a certain condition of existence. Alter the condition, and the characteristic of the condition no longer exists. The only essential of substance is existence. Alter, the wording of the Theist’s objection: Matter is either essentially bright, or essentially non-bright. If matter were essentially bright, brightness should be the essence of all matter; but matter cannot be essentially bright, because some matter is not bright, therefore matter is essentially non-bright; but there is brightness therefore there must be a cause for this brightness independent of matter—that is, there must be an essentially bright being—i.e., God.

Another Theistic proposition is thus stated “Every effect must have a cause; the first cause universal must be eternal: ergo, the first cause universal must be God.” This is equivalent to saying that “God” is “first cause.” But what is to be understood by cause? Defined in the absolute the word has no real value. “Cause,” therefore, cannot be eternal. What can be understood by “first cause”? To us the two words convey no meaning greater than would be conveyed by the phrase “round triangle.” Cause and effect are correlative terms—each cause is the effect of

some precedent; each effect the cause of its consequent. It is impossible to conceive existence terminated by a primal or initial cause. The “beginning,” as it is phrased, of the universe is not thought out by the Theist, but conceded without thought. To adopt the language of Montaigne: “Men make themselves believe that they believe.” The so-called belief in Creation is nothing more than the prostration of the intellect on the threshold of the unknown. We can only cognize the ever-succeeding phenomena of existence as a line in continuous and eternal evolution. This line has to us no beginning; we trace it back into the misty regions of the past but a little way, and however far we may be able to journey there is still the great beyond. Then what is meant by “universal cause”? Spinoza gives the following definition of cause, as used in its absolute signification: “By cause of itself I understand that, the essence of which involves existence, or that, the nature of which can only be considered as existent.” That is, Spinoza treats “cause” absolute and “existence” as two words having the same meaning. If this mode of defining the word be contested, then it has no meaning other than its relative signification of a means to an end. “Every effect must have a cause.” Every effect implies the plurality of effects, and necessarily that each effect must be finite; but how is it possible from finite effect to logically deduce a universal—i.e., infinite cause?

There are two modes of argument presented by Theists, and by which, separately or combined, they seek to demonstrate the being of a God. These are familiarly known as the arguments ‘a priori’ and ‘a posteriori’.

The ‘a posteriori’ argument has been popularized in England by Paley, who has ably endeavoured to hide the weakness of his demonstration under an abundance of irrelevant illustrations. The reasoning of Paley is very deficient in the essential points where it most needed strength. It is utterly impossible to prove by it the eternity or infinity of Deity. As an argument founded on analogy, the design argument, at the best, could only entitle its propounder to infer the existence of a finite cause, or rather of a multitude of finite causes. It ought not to be forgotten that the illustrations of the eye, the watch, and the man, even if admitted as instances of design, or rather of adaptation, are instances of eyes, watches, and men, designed or adapted out of pre-existing substance, by a being of the same kind of substance, and afford, therefore, no demonstration in favour of a designer alleged to have actually created substance out of nothing, and also alleged to have created a substance entirely different from himself.

The illustrations of alleged adaptation or design in animal life in its embryonic stages are thus dealt with by the late George Henry Lewes: “What rational interpretation can be given to the succession of phases each embryo is forced to pass through? None of these phases has any adaptation to the future state of the animal; they are in positive contradiction to it, or are simply purposeless; many of them have no adaptation, even in its embryonic state. What does the fact imply? There is not a single known organism which is not developed out of simpler forms. Before it can attain the complex structure which distinguishes it, there must be an evolution of forms which distinguish the structures of organisms lower in the series. On the hypothesis of a plan which prearranged the organic world, nothing could be more unworthy of a supreme intelligence than this inability to construct an organism at once, without making several tentative efforts, undoing to-day what was so carefully done yesterday, and repeating for centuries the same tentatives and the same corrections in the same succession. Do not let us blink this consideration. There is a traditional phrase which is in vogue amongst Anthropomorphists—a phrase which has become a sort of argument—‘the Great Architect.’ But if we were to admit the human point of view, a glance at the facts of embryology must produce very uncomfortable reflexions. For what shall we say to an architect who was unable—or, being able, was obstinately unwilling—to erect a palace, except by first his materials in the shape of a hut, then pulling them down and rebuilding them as a cottage, then adding storey to storey, and room to room, not with any reference to the ultimate purposes of a palace, but wholly with reference to the way in which houses were constructed in ancient times? Would there be a chorus of applause from the Institute of Architects, and favourable notices in newspapers of this profound wisdom? Yet this is the sort of succession on which organisms are constructed. The fact has long been familiar; how has it been reconciled with infinite wisdom?”

The 'a posteriori' argument can never demonstrate infinity for Deity. Arguing from an effect finite in extent, the most it could afford would be a cause sufficient for that effect, such cause being possibly finite in extent and duration. Professor Flint in his late work in advocacy of Theism concedes that "we cannot deduce the infinite from the finite." And as the argument does not demonstrate God's infinity, neither can it, for the same reason, make out his omniscience, as it is clearly impossible to logically claim infinite wisdom for a God possibly only finite. God's omnipotence remains unproved for the same reason, and because it is clearly absurd to argue that God exercises power where he may not be. Nor can the 'a posteriori' argument show God's absolute freedom, for as it does nothing more than seek to prove a finite God, it is quite consistent with the argument that God's existence is limited and controlled in a thousand ways. Nor does this argument show that God always existed; at the best, the proof is only that some cause, enough for the effect, existed before it, but there is no evidence that this cause differs from any other causes, which are often as transient as the effect itself. And as it does not demonstrate that God has always existed, neither does it demonstrate that he will always exist or even that he now exists. It is perfectly in accordance with the argument, and with the analogy of cause and effect, that the effect may remain after the cause has ceased to exist. Nor does the argument from design demonstrate one God. It is quite consistent with this argument that a separate cause existed for each effect, or mark of design discovered, or that several causes contributed to some or one of such effects. So that if the argument be true, it might result in a multitude of petty Deities, limited in knowledge, extent, duration, and power; and still worse, each one of this multitude of Gods may have had a cause which would also be finite in extent and duration, and would require another, and so on, until the design argument loses the reasoner amongst an innumerable crowd of Deities, none of whom can have the attributes claimed for God.

The design argument is defective as an argument from analogy, because it seeks to prove a Creator God who designed, but does not explain whether this God has been eternally designing, which would be absurd or, if he at some time commenced to design, what then induced him so to commence? It is illogical, for it seeks to prove an immutable Deity, by demonstrating a mutation on the part of Deity.

It is unnecessary to deal specially with each of the many writers who have used from different stand-points the 'a posteriori' form of argument in order to prove the existence of Deity. The objections already stated apply to the whole class; and, although probably each illustration used by the Theistic advocate is capable of an elucidation entirely at variance with his argument, the main features of objection are the same. The argument 'a posteriori' is a method of proof in which the premises are composed of some position of existing facts, and the conclusion asserts a position antecedent to those facts. The argument is from given effects to their causes. It is one form of this argument which asserts that a man has a moral nature, and from this seeks to deduce the existence of a moral governor. This form has the disadvantage that its premises are illusory. In alleging a moral nature for man, the Theist overlooks the fact that the moral nature of man differs somewhat in each individual, differs considerably in each nation, and differs entirely in some peoples. It is dependent on organization and education; these are influenced by climate, food, and mode of life. If the argument from man's nature could demonstrate anything, it would prove a murdering God for the murderer, a lascivious God for the licentious man, a dishonest God for the thief, and so through the various phases of human inclination. The 'a priori' arguments are methods of proof in which the matter of the premises exists in the order of conception antecedently to that of the conclusion. The argument is from cause to effect. Amongst the prominent Theistic advocates relying upon the 'a priori' argument in England are Dr. Samuel Clarke, the Rev. Moses Lowman, and William Gillespie.

An important contribution to Theistic literature has been the publication of the Baird lectures on Theism. The lectures are by Professor Flint, who asks: "Have we sufficient evidence for thinking that there is a self-existent, eternal being, infinite in power and wisdom, and perfect in holiness and goodness, the Maker of heaven and earth?"

"Theism," he affirms, "is the doctrine that the universe owes its existence, and continuance

in existence, to the reason and will of a self-existent Being, who is infinitely powerful, wise, and good. It is the doctrine that nature has a Creator and Preserver, the nations a Governor, men a heavenly Father and judge.” But he concedes that “Theism is very far from coextensive with religion. Religion is spread over the whole earth; Theism only over a comparatively small portion of it. There are but three Theistic religions—the Mosaic, the Christian, and the Muhammadan. They are connected historically in the closest manner—the idea of God having been transmitted to the two latter, and not independently originated by them. All other religions are Polytheistic or Pantheistic, or both together. Among those who, have been educated in any of these heathen religions, only a few minds of rare penetration and power have been able to rise by their own exertions to a consistent Theistic belief. The God of all those among us who believe in God, even of those who reject Christianity, who reject all revelation, is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. From these ancient Jewish fathers the knowledge of him has historically descended through an unbroken succession of generations to us. We have inherited it from them. If it had not thus come down to us, if we had not been born into a society pervaded by it, there is no reason to suppose that we should have found it out for ourselves, and still less that we should merely have required to open our eyes in order to see it.”

If “Theism is the doctrine that the universe owes its existence to the reason and will of a self-existing Being who is infinitely powerful, wise, and good,” then it is a doctrine which involves many difficulties and absurdities. It assumes that the universe has not always existed. The new existence added when the universe was originated was either an improvement or a deterioration on what had always existed; or it was in all respects precisely identical with what had therefore always existed. In the first, if the new universe was an improvement, then the previously self-existent being could not have been infinitely good. If the universe was a deterioration, then the creator could have scarcely been all-wise, or he could not have been all-powerful. If the universe was in all respects precisely identical with the self-existent being, then it must have been infinitely powerful, wise and good, and must have been self-existent. Any of the alternatives is fatal to Theism. Again, if the universe owes its existence to God’s reason and will, God must, prior to creation, have thought upon the matter until he ultimately determined to create; but, if the creation were wise and good, it would never have been delayed while the infinitely wise and good reasoned about it, and, if the creation were not wise and good, the infinitely wise and good would never have commenced it. Either God willed without motive, or he was influenced; if he reasoned, there was—prior to the definite willing—a period of doubt or suspended judgment, all of which is inconsistent with the attributes claimed for deity by Professor Flint. It is hard to understand how whole nations can have been left by their infinitely powerful, wise, and good governor—how many men can have been left by their infinitely powerful, wise, and good father—without any knowledge of himself. Yet this must be so if, as Professor Flint conceives, Theism is spread over only a comparatively small portion of the earth. The moral effect of Christian and Muhammadan Theism on the nations influenced was well shown in the recent Russo-Turkish War.

Every Theist must admit that, if a God exists, he could have so convinced all men of the fact of his existence that doubt, disagreement, or disbelief would be impossible. If he could not do this, he would not be omnipotent, or he would not be omniscient—that is, he would not be God. Every Theist must also agree that, if a God exists, he would wish all men to have such a clear consciousness of his existence and attributes, that doubt, disagreement, or disbelief on this subject would be impossible. And this, if for no other reason, because that out of doubts and disagreements on religion have too often resulted centuries of persecution, strife, and misery, which a good God would desire to prevent. If God would not desire this, then he is not all good—that is, he is not God. But as many men have doubts, as a large majority of mankind have disagreements, and as some men have disbeliefs as to God’s existence and attributes, it must follow that God does not exist, or that he is not all-wise, or that he is not all-powerful, or that he is not all-good....

Every child is born into the world an Atheist, and, if he grows into a Theist, his Deity differs with the country in which the believer may happen to be born, or the people amongst whom



he may happen to be educated. The belief is the result of education or organization. This is practically conceded by Professor Flint, where he speaks of the God-idea as transmitted from the Jews, and says: "We have inherited it from them. If it had not come down to us, if we had not been born into a society pervaded by it, there is no reason to suppose that we should have found it out for ourselves." And, further, he maintains that a child is born "into blank ignorance, and, if left entirely to itself, would, probably, never find out as much religious truth as the most ignorant of parents can teach it." Religious belief is powerful in proportion to the want of scientific knowledge on the part of the believer. The more ignorant the more credulous. In the mind of the Theist "God" is equivalent to the sphere of the unknown; by the use of the word he answers, without thought, problems which might otherwise obtain scientific solution. The more ignorant the Theist, the more numerous his Gods. Belief in God is not a faith founded on reason. Theism is worse than illogical; its teachings are not only without utility, but of itself it has nothing to teach. Separated from Christianity with its almost innumerable sects, from Muhammadanism with its numerous divisions, and separated also from every other preached system, Theism is a Will-o'-the-Wisp, without reality. Apart from orthodoxy, Theism is the veriest dreamform, without substance or coherence.

What does Christian Theism teach? That the first man, made perfect by the all-powerful, all-wise, all-good God, was nevertheless imperfect, and by his imperfection brought misery into the world, where the all-good God must have intended misery should never come; that this God made men to share this misery—men whose fault was their being what he made them; that this God begets a son, who is nevertheless his unbegotten self, and that by belief in the birth of God's eternal son, and in the death of the undying who died as sacrifice to God's vengeance, men may escape the consequences of the first man's error. Christian Theism declares that belief alone can save men, and yet recognizes the fact that man's belief results from teaching, by establishing missionary societies to spread the faith. Christian Theism teaches that God, though no respecter of persons, selected as his favourite one nation in preference to all others; that man can do no good of himself or without God's aid, but yet that each man has a free will; that God is all-powerful, but that few go to heaven, and the majority to hell; that all are to love God, who has predestined from eternity that by far the largest number of human beings are to be burning in hell for ever. Yet the advocates for Theism venture to upbraid those who argue against such a faith.

Either Theism is true or false. If true, discussion must help to spread its influence; if false, the sooner it ceases to influence human conduct the better for human kind. This Plea for Atheism is put forth as a challenge to Theists to do battle for their cause, and in the hope that, the strugglers being sincere, truth may give laurels to the victor and the vanquished; laurels to the victor, in that he has upheld the truth; laurels which should be even more welcome to the vanquished, whose defeat crowns him with a truth he knew not of before.

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Charles Bradlaugh. "A Plea for Atheism." 1864.

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