

THE UNBELIEF OF AN UNBELIEVER

BY T. B. STORK

THIS paper is suggested by a recent article, "Why I am an Unbeliever."¹ The writer avows a disbelief in God, Immortality, the Divine inspiration of the Scriptures. Unfortunately while intimate, frank, and even engaging in his naïvete he fails to specify exactly what he means by disbelief. If his disbelief is no more than a statement of our ignorance of any material physical proof of these truths probably most of the thinking world including many commonly known as believers would agree with him. For of course there is no material physical proof to establish these truths. It might well be asked what competent physical proof would be possible. For my own part I cannot conceive the sort of physical proof that would suffice, nor can I conceive any capacity in myself to weigh such proof were it produced. The article seems to proceed on the assumption that the invisible is non-existent reminding one of the half educated Yokel who declared he would believe nothing that he could not see, to whom his Quaker friend made gentle retort, "Hast ever seen thine own brains?" Perhaps this is too flippantly smart for a serious discussion, however. Bacon's remark seems more fitting for so grave a theme: "My first admonition (which was also my prayer) is that men confine the sense within the limits of duty in respect of things divine; for the sense is like the sun which reveals the face of earth but seals and shuts up the face of heaven."²

The true philosophical attitude on the subject is well stated by Charles Bradlaugh, the English statesman: "The Atheist does not say there is no God but says I do not know what you mean by God. * * * I do not deny God because I cannot deny that which I have no conception of." This simply emphasizes the intellectual incapacity

¹In *The Forum*, December, 1926.

²Preface to *Novum Organum*.

of the human mind to conceive that dread all powerful being who governs the Universe. It does not declare that on the spiritual side there is no God nor any knowledge or evidence of his existence.

The difficulty of the unbeliever lies in his point of view. Assuming that these truths are of a material physical sort he demands material physical evidence of them, although as just remarked, it would be impossible for him to specify exactly what he means by such evidence. Spiritual truths call for spiritual proof, they are only spiritually discerned. This means that we must look for our proofs in an entirely different direction. In our own souls we must find what we can never discover in the external world of matter. There are a great many such truths both intellectual and spiritual whose only voucher is ourselves.

They may be called intellectual and spiritual compulsions that are impressed on us entirely independent of our own volition. We must accept them, to disbelieve them is impossible, such are the axioms, nothing comes from nothing (*nihil ex nihilo fit*), a straight line is the shortest distance between two points, twice two is four, and the like. Spiritual compulsions like intellectual compulsions prove themselves, they stand in no need of demonstration but are examples of the immediate apprehension of truth. Indeed it is hard to see how anything could ever get proved if there were no such self-proving propositions which afford a basis for the proof of others less self-evident. The process of proof must always start with some admitted truth. A universal skeptic could never prove anything. I cannot prove that twice two makes four, or that nothing comes from nothing, any more than I can prove that the idea of God comforts and satisfies my soul. If anyone denies these truths, there is nothing to be said, there is no possibility of proving them, they are examples of the immediate apprehension of truth.

Apart from these spiritual compulsions there are certain intellectual compulsions concerning God which deserve consideration, for God holds two aspects for the Ego, on the side of emotion, feeling, the spiritual side, there is the felt need of his care and omniscient supervision of our life. The idea of God answers the spiritual craving after something above and beyond ourselves to whom to look for comfort, help, in our perplexities and troubles, in fine to give us a reason for our life here, a life to the thoughtful full of mystery, pregnant with problems that are only solvable in God. The most pronounced Atheist would hardly deny the existence of this craving,

this compulsion of the soul, although he might not be able to find any external physical evidence of God's existence. It is not a question of external existence but of internal truth. To deny this craving is to deny the man's own existence, for these compulsions are the man himself, they are he, he is they. Whether externally true or not he is compelled to think twice two make four. While he cannot prove either of them by any external evidence, they are true for him and that is all we know or can know.

In a like manner were I asked to prove the inspiration of the Scriptures what more can be said than that they inspire me? What other proof in the nature of things could be adduced? I cannot otherwise prove my delight in a melody of Mozart or justify my enjoyment of a poem of Keats or Tennyson: they are quite inexplicable on any external physical basis of proof. Prove that Mozart never existed or that Keats was a mere invention of his publisher: it does not touch my emotions which for me are their truth. What other proof of their truth could the most radical unbeliever demand? He might deny that they produced these emotions in himself but that would not affect their truth as regards myself, that he got nothing from them is his loss, it does not affect me or their truth for me. The moment the unbeliever is pinned down to concrete practical details such as these the absurdity of his contention becomes apparent: for all these carry their credentials within themselves, they require nothing more. The coming of an angel or some other supernatural voucher would add nothing to their spiritual truth, nor can I imagine what sort of credentials could be expected from such messengers, credentials that would certify their authenticity, nor what criterion I possess for judging those credentials.

The intellectual compulsion is distinct from this. It requires us by the laws of our thinking to think a God, not an exclusively human conception,—that conception belongs to our spiritual compulsion which demands for our emotions an anthropomorphic conception—but as some mighty incomprehensible power, not in this aspect necessarily human, what is called philosophically, the Absolute, the Whole, of which men and all things are but parts bound together, united in it in some mysterious way of which we can form no intelligent conception. Man is thus compelled to think all things including himself as an organized whole governed by law informed with intelligence. It is impossible to think them as coming spontaneously out of nothing. Something must have caused them and must hold

them together and prescribe rules for their action. This instinct of unity as it might be called is universal in some shape with all men, civilized or savage. It is a thought of the Ages, this thought of some over-ruling power that holds all men under its rule and care. It is both a spiritual and an intellectual compulsion that takes many forms, the details varying with the spiritual and intellectual capacity of the thinker. The endeavor to think it has given us gods without number, Baal, Ashtaroth, Osiris, Jupiter, all expressions, different forms, of the underlying compulsion. The needs of the savage and the civilized, the ignorant and the educated vary spiritually and intellectually in details, but not in fundamentals. The spiritual truths that satisfy the Esquimaux or the African may not be in details the truth that a Philip Brooks or a Newman crave, but in essentials they are the same. The intellectual compulsions that rule the mind of an Einstein or a Newton probably would not be understood by a school boy, yet there lies latent in the mind of all three the compulsions that would compel all to think alike when they developed the capacity to think at all and to find satisfaction in precisely the same mathematical truths. These truths are entirely independent of their personal individual will, they are imposed upon that will by the over-ruling power that governs them and all things; they are the common property of all thinking beings. Observe, however, that this universality gives them no additional validity; that is derived solely from the individual personal compulsion of the mind itself, as something imposed upon it by a power beyond its control, something wrought into the constitution of the mind itself, an actual part of it. I am aware of the statement of the inspired writer: the fool has said in his heart there is no God, but he was an unmetaphysical fool, or he would have found in the constitution of his own mind these intellectual compulsions that demanded the existence of God as a prerequisite to their own validity and truth.

Even those consolations of our own unbeliever in his picture of the somewhat meagre pleasures of his life, truth and courage, have no meaning apart from God. How simple minded must that man be who rejoices in the words truth and courage without defining them or realizing that they have as much life and reality as an Indian Totem once you take away the belief in God. Such unbelief is the record of a confused mind that does not make the proper distinctions intellectually. For if he were to define these terms, truth and courage, he would see at once that they hark back in the last

analysis to God, the Absolute, the Whole. The core of all virtue is the subordination of the individual, the part, to the Whole, the Absolute, which we call God. It is this that makes virtue virtue, it is the virtue of all virtues. There is no meaning in virtue or in virtuous actions save as thus interpreted. It is the existence of God, undefined, impossible of human comprehension intellectually, and his relation to all created things that constitutes good and evil. And the first and only fundamental principle of this relation is the law that the individual, the part, must serve the Whole; in that service lies the meaning of his existence, the ultimate reason and end of his life. This service is at once the sacrifice and the salvation of the individual. To quote an eminent philosopher: "The mere individual nowhere exists, he is the creature of a theory * * * * the individual self in other words does not exist."³ What makes courage a virtue, therefore, is its sacrifice of self to the Whole, the setting aside of individual safety, pleasure, life, for the sake of the Whole represented, by a man's country, his friend, his family. A man might sacrifice these for his own selfish gratification by jumping into a raging torrent; that would be silly and meaningless, not the virtue of courage but the vice of madness. If he did it to save another's life the act would show true courage, it would be a service of the Whole at the sacrifice of self. Without God each individual exists only for himself; there is no obligation upon him toward any other man or thing for it is only by the bond which God creates that there is any relation between the individual parts and the Whole. Every man is his own law and it is a law of perfect absolute selfishness.

Even truth itself disappears, for truth,—assuming that scientific truth is meant by our undefining unbeliever—exists by reason of the assumption that the world is governed by law, that there is a fixed relation of all things to all things, which of course implies God as the Almighty power that prescribes that law. Our knowledge can never compass God; that exceeds our intellectual capacity. We cannot even imagine what that great mysterious power is that encompasses the Universe and that we call God, but we must think him in some shape if we think law into the apparent chaos of the world of phenomena.

Like the man who talked prose all his life without knowing it, our unbelieving friend has been talking in terms of God when he

³Pringle Patterson, *The Idea of God*, pp. 258-9.

talked of truth and courage, as I have been trying—very imperfectly I fear—to show.

Far be it from me to decry a wise skepticism, an intelligent unbelief that asks for proofs before yielding faith, such a skepticism is a great tool of human progress. It is the skepticism of Huxley who gave us the useful word Agnostic, of Bacon who made the distinguished but disturbing suggestion that possibly the uniformity of Nature was simply an imposition of the human mind on chaotic phenomena without any sufficient warrant. But a sweeping indiscriminating skepticism, a blind unbelief of all things is neither helpful nor justifiable of reason. Such a skepticism is well characterized by Mr. George H. Bonner in the 19th Century for January, 1927. "Atheism, Agnosticism and skepticism are not as sometimes imagined signs of intellectual maturity, but of intellectual adolescence. Spiritual realities are more real and, therefore, more certain than any particular thing or isolated fact. Our doubts * * * * have arisen not because our intellectual attainments are superior to those of the ancients but because we have not yet reached their level."

Such a skepticism leaves but a bleak world for the man who says to himself there is no God, when I die I shall die like a dog, the sublime message of the old prophets for me have no meaning, all that remains for me is to live and die like the animal I conceive myself to be; there is nothing for me but like the fool of the Scriptures, eat, drink, and be merry for to-morrow I die. My life is a little higher than the pig, an endless repetition of eating and drinking, the gratification of animal appetite until by reason of age they lose their zest and come to the blank nothing of extinction in all the hopelessness of age and decrepitude. When God disappears all the beauty and significance of life disappears with Him. It leaves a world bleak and drear as when at the going down of the sun all the brightness and color of the world fades away to sombre darkness. Art and all the higher joys of life take their significance from God. What is left of Greek tragedy, of the Iliad, of the Aeneid, of any of the great works of art, ancient or modern, if the sense of some mighty over-ruling power is taken away, if the world is only a huge go-as-you-please, a come-by-chance without rhyme or reason, with no law, no spiritual values established by a supreme law giver?

In spite of ourselves, fight as we may against them, spiritual truths, ideas of God, of immortality, permeate every moment of our lives, color our acts often without our conscious knowledge, spring-

ing upon us when we least expect from some hidden difficulty or trouble.

“ * * how can we guard our unbelief, make it bear fruit to us?—
the problem here.

Just when we are safest, there's a sunset touch,
A fancy from a flower bell, some one's death,
A chorus ending from Euripides,—
And that's enough for fifty hopes and fears
As old and new at once as Nature's self.”

Browning's *Bishop Blougram's Apology*.