

THE FAITH OF AN ATHEIST

BY ROBERT P. RICHLARDSON

IT is an old adage that half the world does not know how the other half lives. Equally true would it be to say that half the intellectual world does not know how the other half thinks. An illustration of this is afforded by an article, *The Unbelief of an Unbeliever*, in *The Open Court* of November, 1927. The author, T. B. Stork, though doubtless endeavoring to be fair, shows himself quite unable to understand a point of view, that of Atheism, diametrically opposed to his own. This is perhaps not surprising, since the title "Atheist" is most frequently made use of either as a term of reproach or as a gesture of defiance. Those who use it in the latter way, upholding Atheism merely in the spirit of bravado, are hardly competent to give adequate account of that philosophical position, and it may be of service to set forth this as it appears to one who considers the matter dispassionately and adopts the name "Atheist" merely as a descriptive title.

To accept Atheism is, of course, to take the view that there is no God, and this is definite denial, not the "doubt" which some of our opponents attribute to us. Those who so misapprehend us will hardly contend that every assertion not believed is to be "doubted" unless it is a direct contradiction in terms, and yet it is only in such a sense that an Atheist can be said to "doubt" any theistic affirmation. There is no logical contradiction in saying that the earth is flat, but who has any doubts as to the falsity of that assertion? Likewise there is no local contradiction in saying there exists a being corresponding to certain conceptions of God, but the Atheist finds the evidence of this on a par with reasons for affirming the flatness of the earth.

The theistic conceptions which are most satisfactory as regards self-consistency are however precisely those which appeal the least

to the ordinary Theist. Such is the conception of a personal God of strictly limited powers and perhaps limited knowledge. It is these limitations alone which make it possible to regard Him as "good" in the sense in which this adjective is used by any decent man or woman. Of this character was the God of John Stuart Mill (in whose opinion however the "appearances in nature" while indicating a Creator, "absolutely contradicts the idea of a perfectly good maker") and the "Invisible King" plays a like part in the Theism of H. G. Wells who regards him as a strongly marked and knowable personality, loving, inspiring and lovable. The Atheist, while he cannot agree with them, has the greatest respect and sympathy for those whose faith is in a Prince of the Power of Goodness, a supernatural leader of mankind in the struggle for right. But as man makes God in his own image, those who hold this belief are not numerous, the common herd preferring a more ignoble object of adoration and usually describing their Deity as all-wise and all-powerful. True, it is probable that many believers of this type ascribe omnipotence and omniscience to their God only in a Pickwickian sense. This is the traditional attitude carried down from savages who fawned upon and flattered a superhuman being whom they feared. Their characterization of Him as all-powerful and all-knowing meant no more than the stock phrases of adulation addressed to a petty Oriental despot by his subjects. Taking however the customary phraseology at its face value, the Atheist must file a decisive caveat in the name of both logic and morality against the orthodox conception of God. Omnipotence, if it means anything at all, means the ability to do whatever does not involve a contradiction. An omnipotent God could not make a three-sided quadrilateral. Nor could He, while leaving mankind freedom of the will, prevent a human being from deciding to kill another. But he could make a world in which the shortest path between two points was not along a Euclidean straight line but along a Lobatchevskian geodesic, and in which two parallel lines, instead of being everywhere equidistant were asymptotic. And unquestionably he could always paralyse the arm of the would-be murderer and prevent the accomplishment of the crime. This means that an omnipotent God, if he exist, must be held responsible for all the evils of the universe. All misery, all crime, everything that is base and vile, exists because he suffers it. To accept such a Deity has as logical consequence the

destruction of all morality—it means taking His pleasure, evinced by nature “red in tooth and claw”, as the standard of right and wrong, and saying that whatever is is right. And the Atheist not only rejects the evidence brought forward for the existence of the orthodox personal God, but fails to find anything worthy of respect in this conception.

As time goes on conceptions of personal Gods find less favor with the Theists of the intellectual type. These believers of to-day usually pin their faith upon a God who is decidedly lacking in personality, not to say individuality. None the less Theists indulge in the misnomer of designating this God by the masculine pronoun “He.” Their “He” is however wrapped in mystery, and Mr. Wells not unaptly describes Him as “The Veiled Being” comprising the “ultimate mysteries of the universe.” This being whom we are called upon to worship is, we are given to understand, the Supreme Ruler of the Universe, a Mighty Incomprehensible Power, the First Cause of all that happens and of all that exists, the Essence or Ultimate Ground of all things, etc. etc. It is in reference to such phrases that it is sometimes said that the Atheist does not deny the existence of God but merely declares he does not know what Theists mean when they speak of Him. Misunderstanding is however prone to arise from this way of putting the matter, and it would be more to the point to say that the Atheist feels he knows only too well what the phrases in question mean and that in most cases they mean nothing; they are nonsense. It is indeed precisely this stand which distinguishes the true Atheist from the Agnostic. For the latter, with Herbert Spencer, whose philosophy has been well said to have a “recognizable Theistic tendency” listens in reverence and awe to the stock phrases of Impersonal Theism and proceeds to invent one of his own, “The Unknowable”, before which he prostrates himself.

The controversy here, of course, is one of philosophy, and Atheism, in the proper sense of that term, being a philosophical doctrine is the natural product of a certain school of philosophical thought. Whether one turns to the side of Theism and its ally Agnosticism or to that of Atheism depends in the last analysis on the philosophy he adopts. And the philosophy of Empiricism or Phenomenalism (as opposed to Institutionalism and Realism or Noumenalism)—the philosophical spirit which distinguished Aristotle from Plato, and Occam from Duns Scotus and Aquinas, and

which in modern times inspired such thinkers as Hobbes, Locke, Berkeley, Hume and Mill—this is unquestionably the high road to Atheism. Those who have steadfastly kept on this road will not admit an Unknowable but will concede only the possibility of many unknowns—things unknown, that is to say, to us. For in the Empirical philosophy existence and perceptibility go hand in hand, and what could not be perceived by some sentient being, properly located, is *ipse facto* non-existent. Perceivability is, of course, sometimes hypothetical, that is we say something exists although not actually perceived because we are convinced it would be perceived were it accessible to observation. And moreover due account is taken of the possibility of something being perceived by more gifted percipients where human beings perceive nothing. Thus there need be no hesitation in admitting as possible the existence of things we cannot perceive, a possibility which would pass into a probability were we to meet with a race of persons who, claiming ability to perceive where we do not, showed themselves to be superior to normal human beings in the way the latter are superior to the blind.

Positing such contingencies the Atheist contends that while there may be unknowns which are unknowable to him there can assuredly be no absolute Unknowable. To assert existence where there is no possibility of perceiving anything is nonsense. And to take as object of worship the unknowable as such, appears to the Atheist the height of folly. A shadow is unknown and unknowable to a blind man but who would say he ought to accept it as his God?

Like the shibboleth of Agnosticism the banal phrases of Impersonal Theism fail to survive the scrutiny of the Empirical Philosophy. A "supreme ruler" either denotes a person or is a phrase devoid of sense. The "cause" of the ancient philosophy vanished into thin air under the keen scrutiny of Hume, leaving causation nothing more than an observed reoccurrence of events of one type when events of another type reoccur. This empirical relation has no necessity about it, and the alleged need for a first cause is thrown out of court at once. There is no justification whatever for assuming that everything must have a cause, still less for asserting that every event is a link in a chain of causation which when traced back far enough must have, as a link common to every other chain, a first and uncaused cause. Causes moreover being

merely commonplace events, the fact that a certain event was the first in the universe would not justify setting it up as an object of adoration. It is not impossible that billions of years ago the universe came to a beginning through the springing into existence of material bodies—that is, matter and space and with them time. But this event would have no more claim to be worshipped than a fall of meteors to the earth. Such an event is not a prime mover of the universe, nor would its priority to all other events justify assuming there to have been a prime mover behind it. Similarly such words as “Ground,” “Power,” “Mysteries” etc. fail to move the Empirical philosopher to thoughts of things divine. They are intelligible when properly used, but in theistic parlance seem merely to serve as interjections expressive of emotions of awe and bewilderment arising from considering the universe as a whole. If an interpretation beyond this is attempted the words are found to denote something one knows not what, located no one knows where. And what is merely something but is nothing in particular—which lacks aliquidity, to use an old scholastic phraseology which might well be revived—is outside the pale of thought, still more of belief.

To the Atheist then the “intellectual compulsion” to faith in an incomprehensible God is nil. Nor does he find any emotional urgings towards such belief. He cannot find in a pseudo-conception which under philosophical analysis is resolved into a meaningless phrase the comfort which history tells us a certain old lady took in “the blessed word Mesopotamia.” As to the orthodox personal God, an all-powerful Being who has under full control all the suffering and evil in the world but will not lift a finger to right human wrongs, the thought, if taken seriously, would be a veritable nightmare. The Invisible King theory, that of God, Limited, is, on the other hand, in the view of the Atheist, a pleasant dream. But enjoyable as a dream may be, when taken as such, there is grave danger in attempting to put dream life on a par with real life. Cravings for a dream-world existence full of glorious illusions can be satisfied by hashish even more efficaciously than by illogic, but he who addicts himself to either is ill-advised.

To the Theist, apparently, the greatest consolation of religion is the promise of a life hereafter, and this again makes no appeal to the Atheist. Passing in review all the heavens promised to true believers by the various faiths the Atheist finds none of them to his

taste. As he mentally inspects each he is constrained to murmur: This is no place for a gentleman! Quite manifest is the lack of attraction in the orthodox heaven where eternity is spent in giving praise to a superhuman being who is actually supposed to enjoy this incessant adulation. As to survival in the Buddhist Nirvana where all desire and indeed all activity, mental and physical ceases, this would simply be life from which has been taken all that makes life worth while. Who would desire future existence as a jelly fish? The Spiritualist "Summerland" is the worst of all, for here, according to reports that reach us, you sink to the level of an imbecile. Shakespeare composes doggerel unworthy of a schoolboy, and Aristotle, giving up the search for truth which was his dearest interest in life babbles inanities about the happiness of the dwellers in Summerland and tells old women where they can find lost thimbles. And considering the possibilities of life beyond the grave in all its aspects the Atheist is inclined to echo the sentiments of that great philosopher, John Stuart Mill, who said: "The belief in life after death without any probable surmise as to what it is to be would be no consolation but the very king of terrors. A journey into the utterly unknown—the thought is sufficient to strike with alarm the firmest heart. . . . It is well, therefore, that all appearances and probabilities are in favor of the cessation of our consciousness when our earthly mechanism ceases to work."¹

Theists, looking at Atheism from the outside, have a curious habit of assuming that in this philosophy of life there is no room for morality. The contention is that ethics requires some superhuman sanction, and that without this human beings, abandoned to their own inclination, will let selfishness run riot, each individual taking as sole motive of action the attainment of pleasure for him or herself. And hence virtue, declares the Theist, is dependent on belief in God and cannot exist without it. Thus speaks the Theist, and those who care more for catchwords than for logical conclusions may accept his *ipse dixit*. Those however who rank logic above rhetoric will prefer first of all to examine the facts. And the truth is that with man and all the animals above a certain low level, attainment of selfish pleasure is *not* what is paramount in moving the individual to action. What really reigns supreme in nature is care for the

¹ See *Letters of John Stuart Mill*, edited by Hugh Elliott, London, 1910, V. II, p. 380.

welfare of the offspring. And self-sacrifice to that end, not sterile self-gratification, is the law of life. This fact stares us in the face, manifest to all not blinded by their pre-conceptions. Altruism then, which we find can and does extend beyond one's own family and even beyond the human race, is a fact, and the morality based on this fact has and needs no other sanction than that of the human conscience—individual and collective. Indeed to seek other sanctions for virtue is to destroy it at its very roots. As Archbishop Whately said: "Honesty is the best policy, but he who acts upon that principle is not an honest man." Atheists admit they cannot force a man to be virtuous by promises of heaven or threats of hell. If a man tells us he is a complete egotist having his own pleasure as his sole aim in life, we have no way of convincing him that he ought to feel otherwise. But we do know for a certainty that under natural conditions—conditions which, alas, have been much denatured through religious influence—the men who live for themselves alone will be gradually weeded out of the racial stock. We know also that branches of the race in which each man cares solely for the welfare of himself and his own progeny will not survive in the struggle for existence. A tribe cannot survive in intertribal competition unless it is imbued with a certain amount of the spirit of solidarity by which an individual is willing in case of necessity to sacrifice himself for the sake of the community.

The Atheist, then, is far more sanguine than the Theist as regards the possibilities of purely human virtue. And believing it to be of the utmost importance that the development of these possibilities be helped instead of being hindered, he feels that the world has need of Atheism. It has need, that is, of looking facts in the face and not being misled by sonorous phrases and maudlin sentimentality. It must resolve that the meet and not the meek shall inherit the earth. If there is to be progress, moral, intellectual or physical, in the human race, it must forget the Sermon on the Mount and contemptuously reject the Socialistic demand for "equality of opportunity." Preferential treatment and preferential reproduction of the most fit must be the corner stone of the social edifice. We must not put forward as an ideal the much vaunted Golden rule which, as has been well said, would wreck any race that seriously tried to apply it. We may not spare the life of a murderer or of a man-eating tiger merely because if we were in his predicament we would desire

to be spared. The community must disregard the customary cant about "the sanctity of life" and "lack of moral responsibility" in dealing with a criminal, that is with a man or woman in whom egotism prevails over innate virtue to the extent of producing an aggression upon a fellow citizen. Human weeds must be destroyed that fair flowers may bloom in the garden of life.

On the other hand we must guard against degenerating into a race which can live only in a moral or physical nursery. And hence we must bear in mind that, as Mr. Wiggam remarks (in *The New Decalogue of Science*) "vice purifies a race because it kills its victims. It thus leaves the strong, the robust and virtuous to hand the torch of heredity to the man unborn." We must not be too anxious to shield a fool from the consequences of his folly. The state must not endeavor to "suppress vice" or to enforce prohibitory laws designed to deter a man from doing something that harms him alone. It must raise its revenue, as far as possible, not by taxing the earnings of the industrious but by licensing at a high tariff the vices of their degenerate fellow citizens. On the positive side we must cultivate pleasure, not eschew it, and must regard as a gain to humanity every enjoyment not injurious or degrading. We must endeavor to practice and to preach all the manly virtues without forgetting to cherish those more particularly feminine. Priestly virtues indeed we must disdain: a rational philosophy of life has no place for meekness, asceticism, alienation from the world, the flesh and the bath tub. But whatever is good and wholesome we shall applaud: integrity, sincerity, fidelity to one's engagements, kindness (towards the lower animals as well as toward our own kind), chivalry toward the weak, courage (though not the foolhardiness so much in favor which risks life for no worthy end), industry, initiative, self-reliance, staunch defence of one's rights coupled with respect for those of others, love of the good and hatred of evil (the former being impossible without the latter)—all these in the community of the future will be honored by every organ of public opinion. Press and pulpit will have as their aim the focusing of attention upon vital truths and noble deeds, and will no longer be devoted to making heroes of buffoons and criminals and to expounding the platitudes of impossible sociological and religious creeds. Thus and thus only can man make his Utopia a reality.

And with this perspective—a theory of life and progress more hopeful, more inspiring and more beautiful than anything Theism has to offer—the Atheist may say with the poet:

“And by that light, now, mark my word, we’ll build the Perfect Ship.
I’ll never last to judge her lines or take her curve not I,
But I have lived and I have worked”—no thanks to aught on high.