

**ON THE NATURE
AND THE EXISTENCE
OF GOD**

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On the Nature and the Existence of God by Anonymous

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ON THE
NATURE AND THE EXISTENCE OF GOD.

IT is impossible for those who study the deeper religious problems of our time to stare off much longer the question which lies at the root of them all, "What do you believe in regard to God?". We may controvert Christian doctrines, one after another; point by point we may be driven from the various beliefs of our churches; reason may force us to see contradictions where we had imagined harmony, and may open our eyes to flaws where we had dreamed of perfection; we resign all idea of a revelation; we seek for God in Nature only; we renounce for ever the hope (which glorified our former creed into such alluring beauty) that at some future time we should verily "see" God, that "our eyes should behold the King in his beauty" in that fairy "land which is very far off." But every step we take onwards towards a more reasonable faith and a surer light of Truth leads us nearer and nearer to the problem of problems, "What is THAT which men call God?" Not till theologians have thoroughly grappled with this question have they any just claim to be called religious guides; from each of those whom we honour as our leading thinkers we have a right to a distinct answer to this question, and the very object of the present paper is to provoke discussion on this point.

Men are apt to turn aside somewhat impatiently from an argument about the Nature and Existence of the

Deity, because they consider that the question is a metaphysical one which leads nowhere; a problem the resolution of which is beyond our faculties, and the study of which is at once useless and dangerous; they forget that action is ruled by thought, and that our ideas about God are therefore of vast practical importance. On our answer to the question propounded above depends our whole conception of the nature and origin of evil, and of the sanctions of morality; on our idea of God turns our opinion on the much-disputed question of prayer, and, in fact, our whole attitude of mind towards life, here and hereafter. Does morality consist in obedience to the will of a perfectly moral Being, and are we to aim at righteousness of life *because* in so doing we please God? Or are we to lead noble lives because nobility of life is desirable for itself alone, and because it spreads happiness around us and satisfies the desires of our own nature? Is our mental attitude to be that of kneeling or standing? Are our eyes to be fixed on heaven or on earth? Is prayer to God reasonable and helpful, the natural cry of a child for help from a Father in Heaven? Or is it, on the other hand, a useless appeal to an unknown and irresponsible force? Is the mainspring of our actions to be the idea of duty to God, or a sense of the necessity of bringing our being into harmony with the laws of the universe? It appears to me that these questions are of such grave and vital moment that no apology is needed for drawing attention to them; and because of their importance to mankind I challenge the leaders of the religious and non-religious world alike, the Christians, Theists, Pantheists, and those who take no specific name, duly to test the views they severally hold. In this battle the simple foot soldier may touch with his lance the shield of the knight, and the insignificance of the challenger does not exempt the general from the duty of lifting the gauntlet flung down at his feet. Little care I for personal defeat, if the issue of the conflict should enthrone more firmly the radiant figure of Truth. One

fault, however, I am anxious to avoid, and that is the fault of ambiguity. The orthodox and the free-thinking alike do a good deal of useless fighting from sheer misunderstanding of each other's standpoint in the controversy. It appears, then, to be indispensable in the prosecution of the following inquiry that the meaning of the terms used should be unmistakably distinct. I begin, therefore, by defining the technical forms of expression to be employed in my argument; the definitions may be good or bad, that is not material; all that is needed is that the sense in which the various terms are used should be clearly understood. When men fight only for the sake of discovering truth, definiteness of expression is specially incumbent on them; and, as has been eloquently said, "the strugglers being sincere, truth may give laurels to the victor and the vanquished: laurels to the victor in that he hath upheld the truth, laurels still welcome to the vanquished, whose defeat crowns him with a truth he knew not of before."

The definitions that appear to me to be absolutely necessary are as follows:—

Matter is used to express that which is tangible. *Spirit* (or *spiritual*) is used to express those intangible forces whose existence we become aware of only through the effects they produce.

Substance is used to express that which exists in itself and by itself, and the conception of which does not imply the conception of anything preceding it.

God is used to represent exclusively that Being invested by the orthodox with certain physical, intellectual, and moral attributes.

Particular attention must be paid to this last definition, because the term "atheist" is often flung unjustly at any thinker who ventures to criticize *the popular and traditional idea* of God; and different schools, Theistic, and non-Theistic, with but too much facility, bandy about this vague epithet in mutual reproach.

As an instance of this uncharitable and unfair use of

ugly names, all schools agree in calling the late Mr. Austin Holyoake an "atheist," and he accepted the name himself, although he distinctly stated (as we find in a printed report of a discussion held at the Victoria Institute) that he did not deny the possibility of the existence of God, but only denied the possibility of the existence of that God in whom the orthodox exhorted him to believe. It is well thus to protest beforehand against this name being bandied about, because it carries with it, at present, so much popular prejudice, that it prevents all possibility of candid and free discussion. It is simply a convenient stone to fling at the head of an opponent whose arguments one cannot meet, a certain way of raising a tumult which will drown his voice; and, if it have any serious meaning at all, it might fairly be used, as I shall presently show, against the most orthodox pillar of the orthodox faith.

It is manifest to all who will take the trouble to think steadily, that there can be only one eternal and underived substance, and that matter and spirit must therefore only be varying manifestations of this one substance. The distinction made between matter and spirit is then simply made for the sake of convenience and clearness, just as we may distinguish perception from judgment, both of which, however, are alike processes of thought. Matter is, in its constituent elements, the same as spirit; existence is *one*, however manifold in its phenomena; life is one, however multiform in its evolution. As the heat of the coal differs from the coal itself, so do memory, perception, judgment, emotion, and will, differ from the brain which is the instrument of thought. But nevertheless they are all equally products of the one sole substance, varying only in their conditions. It may be taken for granted that against this preliminary point of the argument will be raised the party-cry of "rank materialism," because "materialism" is a doctrine of which the general public has an undefined horror. But I am bold to say

that if by matter is meant that which is above defined as substance, then no reasoning person can help being a materialist. The orthodox are very fond of arguing back to what they call the Great First Cause. "God is a spirit," they say, "and from him is derived the spiritual part of man." Well and good; they have traced back a part of the universe to a point at which they conceive that only one universal essence is possible, that which they call God, and which is spirit only. But I then invite their consideration to the presence of something which they do not regard as spirit, *i.e.*, matter. I follow their own plan of argument step by step: I trace matter, as they traced spirit, back and back, till I reach a point beyond which I cannot go, one only existence, substance or essence; am I therefore to believe that God is matter only? But we have already found it asserted by Theists that he is spirit only, and we cannot believe two contradictories, however logical the road which led us to them; so we must acknowledge two substances, eternally existent side by side; if existence be dual, then, however absurd the hypothesis, there must be two First Causes. It is not I who am responsible for an idea so anomalous. The orthodox escape from this dilemma by an assumption, thus: "God, to whom is to be traced back all spirit, *created* matter." Why? am I not equally justified in assuming, if I please, that matter created spirit? Why should I be logical in one argument and illogical in another? If we come to assumptions, have not I as much right to my assumption as my neighbour has to his? Why may he predicate creation of one half of the universe, and I not predicate it of the other half? If the assumptions be taken into consideration at all, then I contend that mine is the more reasonable of the two, since it is possible to imagine matter as existing without mind, while it is utterly impossible to conceive of mind existing without matter. We all know how a stone looks, and we are in the habit of regarding that as lifeless