

## ARTICLE III.

## THEISM AND ETHICS.

BY REV. THOMAS HILL, D.D., LL.D., FORMERLY PRESIDENT OF HARVARD COLLEGE.

THE question has been recently debated with much interest whether any form of ethics is possible under an atheistic philosophy. Of course it is granted that atheistic philosophy does not immediately destroy ethical instincts in the man who adopts it; the question in debate is, whether his philosophy can justify and explain those instincts so as to build a science upon them. By an atheistic philosophy is meant that view of the universe which makes it consist wholly of matter in motion, so that our thought is but a vibration of the brain, and consciousness is simply the highest result of the movement of matter; while theism declares that conscious thought antedates the very existence of matter and motion.

The great difficulty in discussing the relation between theism and ethics arise from the difficulty of defining the terms. Under whatever aspect we look toward God we must acknowledge his infinite greatness, and it is impossible to comprehend his attributes; but it is impossible to define sharply our apprehension of that which we cannot comprehend. Ethics also is a broad science, covering many of the relations of personal beings to each other; but we cannot define sharply what a personal being is, nor what relations of personal beings are included in the sphere of ethics. The difficulty is therefore apparent, it amounts to an impossibility of arriving at conclusions which will be universally admitted in regard to the connection between ethics and theism.

It is also not to be forgotten that theology and ethics may

be, at least in imagination, connected in a variety of ways; so that their mutual independence in one way may not be inconsistent with their interdependence in another. It was, forty years ago, the fashion to speak frequently of the distinction between logical and chronological dependence; and that distinction is important here. We may inquire whether the sense of obligation and the existence of duty logically imply the existence of God, or of a belief in God; and we may inquire whether the sense of obligation, the acknowledgment of duty, have historically been actually produced by a belief in God. The two inquiries are very distinct. It is generally admitted, in regard to the second inquiry, that there is a historical connection between theology and ethics; that among all nations moral duties have been enforced, to a greater or less extent, by religious sanctions. In the corrupt state of the Roman empire, it is true, the connection between religion and morality was exceedingly slight, as is strikingly set forth by Huidecoper, so that monotheism was practically necessary to give vigor and efficiency to conscience. Yet both Grecian and Roman literature give us abundant testimony that in the earlier days the gods were supposed to be the avengers of the injured, and to punish at least certain kinds of crime. Among my classmates at Leicester Academy was a Chinese youth who in boyhood had thrown off the idolatrous polytheistic fables held for truth by illiterate neighbors, and he was very emphatic in affirming that the first effect of this religious scepticism upon his mind was to destroy, for many months, all sense of the obligation to filial obedience or any other duty.

But although the historical connection between ethics and theology has been so constant, and the chronological dependence of morality upon religion is well nigh universal, it does not follow that there is a logical dependence. The logical connection can be discovered only by psychological and metaphysical analysis of the problem, not by mere historical induction. There are many who at the present day seem to deny that there is any logical connection; but, in

order to make this denial, they first eviscerate both sciences. It is easy to make any relation, or no relation, hold between ethics and theology, if you are permitted first to mutilate the two sciences at your pleasure. A little ingenuity in adding to either, or taking away from either, will enable one to bring them into such relation to each other as may have been determined beforehand. If our philosophy has first declared that the only knowledge possible to man is the knowledge of his own sensations; that he cannot know his own existence, but only his feelings; that the existence of other men, of matter, of force, of motion, of time, of space, or of God, are all unsupported hypotheses; the only facts known to man being the feeling of his own sensations; it is evident that ethics and theology have both become to us the merest shadows of what they are to our fellow-men.

Ethics, as it is generally understood, is a science dealing with certain relations of persons to persons; namely, with those relations that involve reciprocal rights and duties. It is therefore manifest that the denial of personality to the human being — the reduction of the man to a series of motions, wholly determined by mechanical contact; the denial of any power in him of self-determination, of freedom — takes away the possibility of reality in ethics. A science dealing with rights and with duties implies the perception of obligation, and the simultaneous perception of free, self-determined personality in ourselves and in others. It imperatively demands the recognition of moral freedom; it necessarily deals with man as with an entelechy of high order, containing in himself the power of originating action and of determining its end.

But this admission that the human being has a self-determining power — this admission of the veracity of the delivery of conscience and consciousness that we are independent persons — leads at once to the truth that, in a still higher sense, the whole universe, in its totality, is still more completely under control of a Being, free, self-originating, and self-determining in his action. The logical necessity of this con-

clusion has been abundantly shown by the greatest thinkers of all ages. Aristotle, getting his first conception of monotheism possibly from the Jewish acquaintance with whom he is said to have experimented upon dreams, led the way in this justification of faith at the bar of reason; and the long line of Christian philosophers has repeatedly verified his conclusions, both by repetition of his processes and by opening new paths to the same point. It is as certain as any conclusion can be, that the admission of a real, substantial personality in man involves the necessity of admitting a still higher personality in God; the admitting that his knowledge is infinite, his love boundless, his freedom absolute. The existence, therefore, of a true ground for ethics implies the existence of a true ground for theism. Conversely, the admission of personality in God instantly, by the very definition of ethics, makes religious duties the most important of all duties; so much the most important that ethics instantly becomes subordinate to theology. The grand conclusions of Aristotle and of Christian philosophers set the whole matter where prophets and apostles have set it,—that our first duty is to love God, and that the duty of justice and mercy toward man is a corollary for that first duty.

On the other hand, the denial of personality in God, the denial that he is spirit, involves the denial of real being to man. It involves the conclusion that the sum total of the universe is matter in motion; that consciousness does not involve being in the conscious agent, but is merely a local mode of motion; that the relation between conscious agents is therefore nothing more than a very refined and complicated variety of mechanical relation. Under this view all our moral sentiments and moral intuitions are a species of illusions; and yet there is no being in existence to be deluded. The man who holds that the whole universe is only matter in motion has in fact assumed the self-contradictory, unthinkable position of his own non-existence, yet of his ability to perceive the existence of matter; to perceive, also the ability of matter to deceive him, a non-entity, into

a belief of his own existence. The positive philosopher has not plunged into that absurdity; he simply does not know whether he exists or not, nor whether matter exists or not. He only affirms that, although he may be non-existent, he perceives motions, where, however, it may be a non-existent thing that is moving. In other words, he does know whether he exists, he only knows that he sees; he does not know that he sees anything, but he knows that he sees it move, although it may be nothing moving.

Under either of these systems, then, materialist or positivist, the foundations for a real, substantial ethics are completely swept away. An apparent ethics remains, but it is only a branch of social statics; a consideration of some of the most delicate and intricate motions of which matter is capable—the motions of human brains. Moral science is then a branch of animal mechanics; a part of physiology, not in T. Sterry Hunt's broad meaning of that word, but in the narrow meaning of a knowledge of the human body.

All the moral sentiments and feelings, inwrought into all human consciousness, uttering themselves in all languages, embodying themselves in all institutions, among the most savage and the most enlightened people, are double witnesses to the personality of the Infinite Creator and to the fact that man is made in the image of that personality. This was the "impregnable position" of Socrates, of Plato, and of Aristotle, in opposition to the mechanical atheism of Democritus and Aristippus; they argued from the actual existence of reason, intelligence, and moral aspirations in the human mind to the necessary existence of moral attributes in the Creator of man; "merely physical agencies," matter and motion, could "never have evolved a moral being, seeking moral ends."

Another point, the connection of morality with the doctrine of a future life, is more or less involved in this discussion. There have not been wanting during the last decade men professing Christian faith in human immortality who have nevertheless said that the rejection of that doctrine would

not necessarily weaken the sentiment of obligation to duty nor relax the sanctions of the moral law. If this life were the whole of our being, they say, it would only be the more incumbent on us to make it noble and get the most from it that we could. This has a generous sound ; it does credit to the moral character of those who utter it ; but persistence in maintaining it might have a different effect on their intellectual reputation. The brevity of life, to a man thoroughly convinced that death is the extinction of being, would indeed tend to make him seek to enjoy to the utmost its fleeting hours, but not to make him select one kind of happiness above another. The conviction of annihilation at death might, indeed, lead a man already filled with noble sentiments to still nobler efforts ; but it would with greater certainty and force lead the majority of men to indulge themselves in whatever chanced to be their ruling passion. The Anacreontic odes and their Roman imitations are full of the expression of what was the actual — and in our opinion the natural, logical — effect of Epicurean philosophy. It weakened the moral sentiment, and increased the strength of the passions, appetites, and desires.

It is, however, objected that every appeal to the sanctions of a future state implies the selfish theory of morals ; and in confirmation of this objection John Locke is quoted as saying that Christianity gave virtue the advantage over sin by throwing eternal happiness into the scale on the side of virtue. But the objector forgets that the consequences of an act are always to be taken in account by an intelligent actor. There are certainly vast differences in this present life between the effects of a sinful course and a righteous course of life. The punishment which sin draws on the offender and the harm which it does to others are always to be taken into account on any theory of morals, and the remembrance of a future life simply gives new weight to the account. Rewards and punishments are only secondary agencies in producing moral righteousness, and remain only secondary agents even when they are seen to be eternal in their dura-

tion. Hope and fear are powerful to draw the attention, but they do not constrain a noble action; indeed, the majority even of worldly-minded men are too noble to be thus governed. Love and hatred are incomparably more powerful than hope and fear; love alone has power to create enthusiasm and to inspire holiness. St. John gives us the true genesis of righteousness. We love God, because he first loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins; melted by that evidence of his love, we love him, and manifest our love by our endeavor to keep his commandments.

In order to see more clearly what is the real connection between ethics and the doctrine of human immortality, let us revert for a moment to some fundamental truths of philosophy. What do we know about the universe and its origin? First of all we cannot picture to ourselves something coming out of nothing. Nor is this, as some have asserted, a mere weakness of the understanding; the error of so considering it arises from the negative form given to the statement. But probe the thought to its depths, and you shall find that it is a positive intuition, or act of sight in the soul, which makes us say that every change which takes place must have had an antecedent cause. Moreover, it is a positive intuition which makes us see that all finite being is dependent; but that the primal cause of all change is also the absolute, independent Being on whom all beings depend. This absolute, independent Being is of course eternal, without beginning and without end; because beginning and end belong only to the dependent. But in this primal Cause of Being must be contained the essential attributes of being; the real cannot arise out of the unreal.

What are, then, the essential attributes of being? The only being whose existence a man cannot doubt is himself. My own existence is avouched to me by every act of consciousness; every fact that is learned proves thereby the learner's existence. But what are the attributes of this conscious being whose own existence is thus proved to him in every act of his consciousness? The attributes are testified

to, with the same frequency and the same emphasis as the existence, by every thought and feeling and determination; they are the powers of conscious personality. That is what a man knows about himself; that he is, that he has thoughts, feelings, desires, intentions; that he endeavors to carry them out. These are his essential attributes which make him a man; deprived of them he ceases to be a conscious being, and no longer knows his own existence. His being as he absolutely knows it, is a conscious personality; the possession of a body receiving sense-impressions is but an inference, and is explained away by idealists; the possession of a conscious mind cannot be explained away or denied without absurdities such as we have already pointed out.

The primal Cause of Being must possess all the essential attributes of being, and the essential attributes of the only being whom we absolutely know are the powers of conscious personality. These, therefore, are possessed in an infinite degree by the First Cause. He is a Being of infinite knowledge, inexhaustible love, almighty power, free to act in any way consistent with unerring wisdom and absolute holiness.

The moment that we are awakened to see clearly the fact that all real being is found in personality; that God alone is; that he upholds the phenomenal world by the very word which called it into being; that he sustains our dependent being upon his independent power, we perceive also a sacred order in the scale of things, of phenomena, and of beings. Matter, altogether determined from without, stands lowest; because it is the most complete antithesis to free personality, which is highest, and in the highest. Plants depend almost entirely on external forces for their movements, yet have a feeble entelechy, whereby they guide the motion of atoms to the building of specific vegetable forms, and in a very slight degree even to the selection of external ends; therefore they stand in rank above mere matter. Thirdly, animals having conscious ends in view, and capable in general of free locomotion, approach much nearer to being truly self-determined persons, — they have a recognizable amount of free-

dom. Yet there is no satisfactory evidence that the animal, however highly gifted, ever rises into the perception of a generality ; into the region of abstraction, speculation on the infinite ; of reasoning on morality ; of the sentiment of duty. These are reserved for the fourth order in the scale of being, in which is included man. Man alone has a language capable of preserving the experience of the race ; of dividing and intercommunicating, unimpaired, to each individual of the race the inheritance and life of the whole. In himself, then, he finds the image of God.

The objection that this relativity of knowledge to himself renders the knowledge untrustworthy is not valid. We discover that the earth rotates on her axis, and wheels about the sun ; the fact that we are on the planet, and unable to detect its motion by direct sensation, or by observations taken from any other position than on the surface of the rolling ball, does not hinder us from taking flight by reason, which transcends imagination, into the central sun, or even into the midst of the immovable ether, and there demonstrating with all the clearness of direct vision every movement of the rotating and revolving planet on which our bodies remain. In like manner the relativity of man's spiritual knowledge, the impossibility of his seeing anything except as it appears to him, whirling in the tumults of sense and passion, does not prevent his flight by reason to the central throne of the universe, or into the midst of immovable, infinite Being, and there demonstrating the relations of man to the central orb of righteousness. The assertion that my knowledge of God is untrustworthy and my conception of the Divine Being unworthy implies that the speaker has worthier views and sounder knowledge on the subject of the infinite than I ; if he has, I rejoice that a brother man can attain such heights of religious knowledge, even although he paradoxically calls it ignorance. It shows that, at all events, man does grapple with problems concerning the infinite and the eternal ; and this shows that the personality within us is akin to that Infinite Person who creates, upholds, and guides the universe toward some far off, high, moral end.

And immediately the argument of the Lord Jesus in his rebuke of the Sadducees enters in full force. How, he asks, can you admit that God calls himself the God of individual patriarchs, and yet suppose that he suffered them to die? God is not the God of the dead, — he would not enter into personal relations with mortal, perishable beings. It may be that the Sadducees felt the force of the argument the more because of the peculiarity of the tongue in which the conversation with Christ was held, which modifies the form of the thing possessed, and not of the possessor; but the argument was not built on the construct case of the Hebrew Elohim, nor on the passage "At the Bush" alone; its force lies deep in the nature of man and of God; and he who knew what was in man, and who also knew the Father, gave us in this appeal to the Sadducees one of the strongest of all foundations for our hope of immortality. We who are made by our possession of moral and intellectual freedom in the likeness of God, who are permitted to apprehend his being, to inquire into his will and purposes, to feel the sense of obligation towards him, — we are not perishable beings, we are made in the image of God's eternity. God is our God; he answers our reverent inquiries into the law and mode of his action; he breathes his peace into our hearts when we are penitent and humble before him; all the records of science, all the grateful hymns of saints, are witnesses that he has vouchsafed to manifest himself to men through all ages as the God of those who have the faith of Abraham, and are thus spiritual sons of Israel. But every witness that we are his children, and that he is our God, is a witness that we live to him and in him, and that he will never suffer us to be destroyed. This likeness of the human soul to the Divine Spirit was Aristotle's ground for faith in the immortality of man; it can stand the assaults of all inferior men and be unshaken.

The infinite fulness of the Divine Love in making us partakers of immortal blessedness having become manifest to us, all our relations to God assume a new aspect. Our obligation to love and serve him becomes so strong that all other

obligation becomes nothing in comparison with it. The sense of obligation is, however, swallowed up in love; we long to do right, and strive to do right, not from a sense of duty, but in the grateful desire to please God. Whether the nature of duty is altered by this fact of immortality or not, this is certain, that the sanctifying power of love and gratitude toward God, as a motive to duty, is vastly enhanced by it.

The connection between future retribution and present duty is not so direct, but is equally real. Pain and pleasure may in themselves seem to have no moral quality. Yet a sentient being desires happiness and avoids pain; therefore a moral being is bound to promote happiness and avoid giving pain. The exercise of any faculty is accompanied by pleasure, its hinderance by pain; this pleasure and pain is the usual impulse to action. It is the immediate impulse, but not the rational end; and it is a sinful degradation of our moral nature to make it the voluntary end. This is true, not only concerning the pleasures of bodily appetite and aesthetic tastes, but concerning the highest pleasures also. They are, indeed, impulses and incitements to action; but they are not the rational ends of action. The Christian religion does not hold forth the happiness and misery of the life beyond the grave as ultimate reasons for doing that which is right; but only as incentives and aids to the weakened, enfeebled human will. Our Saviour is emphatic in declaring duty to be the ultimate end, in reminding us that no man can do more than his full duty. He is equally clear and strong in setting forth love toward God, and charity toward man, as the noblest incentives and motives to enforce and invigorate the commands of duty. But there are those who are foolish, erring, and spiritually benumbed, who can be brought to their senses and led to feel the power of these holier motives only by the fear of chastisement or the hope of reward. And since every man's observation shows him that sin often goes apparently unpunished and virtue apparently unrewarded, this fear and hope can be awakened only by an appeal to the inward conviction of immortality, and by the assurance that there is in

that world beyond more to be hoped than was ever rationally hoped, more to be feared than was ever rationally feared. Our Lord appeals to fear and to hope reaching into eternal life, not as to ultimate motives, but as to the means of awakening attention to higher motives. Nor can there be a shadow of doubt that the fear of hell and the hope of heaven have been practically the means of bringing thousands and tens of thousands to serious reflection, to earnest endeavor, to solemn resolve and fervent prayer, and through the answer to prayer, into that perfect love which casts out the fear of pain and the hope of happiness, and loses itself in a perfect acquiescence in the Divine Will, and in a longing to be God's instrument in bringing others into the peace that passeth understanding.

In either aspect of the doctrine of a future life, it is therefore manifest that it is, like the fundamental truth of the being of God on which it rests, a powerful support to conscience in maintaining the awful sanctity of the moral law, the solid reality of ethical truths. The ordinary duties of our daily life, the ordinary services whereby we are each daily doing our part towards supplying the needs and wants of our fellow-men, acquire new dignity, beauty, and grandeur in proportion to the view which we take of the character and destiny of those whom we are attempting to serve. If men are merely the highest of the animals, having no immortal hopes, and kindred to nothing higher than themselves, the cares and labors of the present world are petty and vain. But if we are "born to rise through endless states of being"; if this world is a school wherein we are "all taught of God"; if we are children of the Infinite Creator, who has testified his own love to us in the mission of his Son, through whom we may regain our forfeited inheritance of eternal life; then every scene of life, and every service of our fellow-men, however trifling, becomes invested with sacred dignity, with new and immortal value.