

ART. III.—MR. BALFOUR'S "FOUNDATIONS OF BELIEF."

THE appearance of Mr. Balfour's work on the "Foundations of Belief" in a new and revised edition revives interest in the book, and suggests its reconsideration. The first part of the volume is critical and destructive. It is brilliant and epigrammatic, and makes its points with precision. The second is apologetic, and rather plaintively so. It does not pretend to prove the Faith true, but it offers some cogent pleas for not abandoning it until it is proved to be false. The effect, perhaps, reminds one of Descartes' "*Morale par provision.*" The illustrious father of modern Rationalism was prepared to submit himself to the laws and religion under which he was brought up, while stripping himself to the skin of all beliefs unproved. We must remember, however, that Descartes started with a profound conviction that God and himself had a real existence. To-day both self and God are thrown into the midst for discussion, and a provisional belief in either is scarcely compatible with any but the most superficial conformity to our religion. If any man, however, have a firm belief otherwise derived, it may not be superfluous to have somewhat to say on its behalf when plagued by argumentative worldlings. Mr. Balfour's pleas will be of service indeed to believers of any and every faith, provided only that they do not make it themselves, and do not know whence it comes. In these provisos, nevertheless, it well may be that every faith perishes but the faith in God, and in making cosmogonies who shall say that to believe nothing that can be proved is not at least as good an axiom as to believe nothing until it is?

The form of unbelief that Mr. Balfour criticises has many names. Rationalism, Empiricism, Naturalism, Materialism, Sensationalism, Agnosticism are the commonest, and express variously its principles, methods, and results. As Rationalism it doubts till it has proved; as Empiricism it uses the methods of inductive science; as Naturalism it finds for every fact and event in nature "a cause in nature," and, with that working hypothesis run wild, leaps from Darwin to Democritus; as Materialism it pronounces the universe a material mechanism, the body a machine, man an automaton, thought an excretion, and consciousness a superfluous accompaniment of some of the machine's activities; as Sensationalism it is a theory of knowledge. In this it asserts, first, that all our ideas and knowledge are derived by evolution from simple sensations derived themselves from the sensible world; secondly, it asserts that we know only sensations, feelings, thoughts, or

modes of consciousness, but nothing of any external world or matter, and nothing of any causalities connecting them, neither anything of any entity called mind or self; finally, it passes into Critical Idealism, which is, if Professor Huxley may be believed, its legitimate outcome. Agnosticism is its last word, and Agnosticism is not the confession that we cannot know "God as He is," but the assertion that we cannot know that He is. We have no knowledge of an *external world*, or of *self*, or of *God*, and can have none, either by nature or revelation.

At first sight this Agnosticism seems likely to favour the cause of Faith, for if the three faiths are rationally on a par, the plain man is likely to switch the one which he very often lacks on to the two to doubt which he counts lunacy. That we "walk by faith" in walking on our feet has been a rather too common text of late. Mr. Balfour, however, is not *quite* easy in his mind. The two are "inevitable"; the third is plainly not so. The two are universal; the third, he pleads, comes down to us with the authority of the *best* of men; it is therefore only inevitable to those who live "in the spirit," as the other two are to those who live "in the flesh." This, perhaps, is the cause that philosophers' gods are so precarious—here to-day and gone to-morrow—and that Rationalism runs so much in a circle. The "inevitable" two are again liable to go the way of many predecessors as soon as the plain man discovers that the Agnostic gives him a *quid pro quo*, and allows a phenomenal world and a phenomenal self as good for all practical purposes as the real ones taken away.

Mr. Balfour presents the inconsistencies of the polyonymous monster he assails with much force. In the main the contradictions are between Materialism and Sensationalism or Idealism. Professor Huxley, the metaphysician, explained that his postulates of the existence of matter, of a law of causation in nature, and so on, were postulates for use in the laboratory. "Materialism is shorthand Idealism" is his formula; in much the same way he talks of final causes, and credits Nature with design; to do otherwise would necessitate cumbersome paraphrases. One would like, indeed, to see his physiology of the sensations translated into the language of Idealism, or a version even of such a single expression as "movements in the matter of the brain." On the other hand, Professor Huxley, the physiologist, bases his Agnosticism itself on an insuperable gulf between matter and consciousness, which no wit of man can ever explain; and when in that frame of mind, Materialism and Sensationalism set limits, each upon the other, for him. Neither can account for the other, and neither by itself for the universe. It follows that

no account can be given, and we should content ourselves with a quiet ignorance.

In fact, Materialisms never have found God; Idealisms have, but have never been able to keep Him. They stumbled over matter. They became Gnostics, and imagined emanations sinking imperceptibly into the accursed stuff. Professor Huxley determined not to be a Gnostic.

Mr. Balfour lays less stress than one would expect on the emancipation of these systems from the canons of evidence, which they print in their prospectus. That which is proved by them of Evolution would scarcely fill a nutshell, and the proved is unproved so often that to keep up with the variations is difficult. The fashionable "Christian" accommodation "*evolves*" man after the flesh, but not man "after the spirit." Mr. Balfour appears to go further, and to accept an evolution of the Idea of God in "the advanced guard of Humanity." An evolution *in* the Idea of God, which we recognise, is not, however, an evolution of the Idea of God to which we demur.

On consequences, that *facilis materia*, Mr. Balfour speaks with force. The considerations nevertheless which he urges are secondary, his complaints and fears those of the politician or the man of culture, rather than the bitter cry of, or for, the soul whose light is being withdrawn. This follows, perhaps, from the character of the audience whom he is addressing.

Morality, "he pleads," would suffer from the loss of a theory of origins from above. He does not assert that the keystone of the arch would be missing, so much as that a halo and glory would be gone. We should travel actually into the land of the sophists, without worship, without reverence, without ideals. Perhaps one might argue that the more probable issue would be a considerable invention of idols.

Of Beauty he thinks Naturalism has no standard or measure. Here the author is at his best. Professor Huxley, as we know, thought the difference between Beethoven's Sonatas and "Cherry Ripe" clear and distinguishable by the natural man, who has, or may have, not merely a perception of difference, but a perception of values. Ruskin tells us that we build ugly houses because we are godless. There are others, like the author of "Nature for her own Sake," who find Beauty in her, without thought of her origin or even in the thought of her self-origination. If Beauty and the Infinite hang together, the practical eternity and infinity of Nature, the Vastness of her activities, provide practically enough of Infinity for Art. Naturalism inspired a great poem.

Of course the only convincing form of the argument from

consequences is that the consequences are incompatible with facts. Without the idea of a Living God the morality of Theism would be impossible. If the first has no foundation the last goes with it. The question whether a morality purely finite in its conception and outlook would not suffice for finite man leads us into regions of prophecy on the one side, and debates on the nature of man on the other.

The object of the discussion thus far is to discredit indirectly the original principle of Rationalism, by the use of which the results have been attained. That principle was to doubt everything until we have proved it by the "method of Zedig." Mr. Balfour proceeds to discuss the principle itself. He distinguishes between the reasons and causes of Belief, and dwells upon the commonplace that Belief may follow on bad reasoning or no reasoning. Authority is of course the alternative plank. Under Authority are included not only authority of kings and priests, promulgating decrees and dogmas, but public opinion, habit, and ultimately indeed the imperative of the nature into which without reasoning we have grown. The paradox emerges that it is this very authority which commands us to reason, and points to "belief with the understanding" as an indispensable condition of believing rightly. On the other hand, again, the original authority has been unwilling or unable to prevent us reasoning badly, and these bad reasonings have been taken up into and blended with authority itself. If, then, we admit that we are by nature under a Law and subject to Categorical Imperatives, there are so many of these, and these so conflicting, that one knows not which to obey. Is there among them any one Categorical Imperative that stands out from the rest, and gives us a *point d'appui* while we reason? Rationalism gives us one. "Thou shalt doubt," and by doubting thou shalt come to understand. Faith gives us another: "Thou shalt believe, and by believing thou shalt understand." It is speculatively an insoluble problem, and so far the verdict is against speculation. "The morale *par provision*" is plainly inapplicable. Authority provisionally believed in collapses as a "cause of faith." The only question is whether the recognition of Categorical Imperatives in any form is not the very *point d'appui* we seek, and whether "I am the Lord thy God" is not an implicit assertion in each of them.

Certainly in our religion the ventures of reason are subject to an obedience and guided by Faith.

There is much interesting matter, many fertile suggestions, in this last half of the volume. The writer has seen many things with open eyes; he puts what he has seen clearly, without extravagance, with courtesy and moderation and

humility, yet with firmness, and we know not where we shall find the pleas for Religion more convincingly put for the circle and from the point of view of the general reader. "General reader" we take in this case to mean, not one ignorant, or unversed, or superficial, but one not necessarily distressed at the loss of his Lord (that Rationalism threatens), with the special and peculiar distress of him from whom is being taken away the *bonum quo non majus aliud*. For him there is another and a different voice. "Why weepest thou?" "Whom seekest thou?"

Those who are troubled not about the deeper verities of the Faith, but minor points, may find much to help them in Mr. Balfour's suggestions. That words are ambiguous, that the meaning of propositions changes, that formulæ have other uses than to express thought, that the submission of the intellect is good for the intellect itself, that the strength of faith is to sit still, all these are excellent maxims, sceptical perhaps in their tendency until examined a little in detail, but useful. We know not where they are more conveniently discussed than in this volume, and in an age in which the growth of knowledge so incessantly assails old landmarks and dogmas the discussion is forced upon us. Mr. Balfour treats them as a statesman and a man of letters, rather than as either a metaphysician or a theologian. He would be the first to admit that, without very considerable limitations, the line of reflection which he pursues may very well end even politically in disaster. No party, much less the Church, can live by a form of words alone, possessing by them alone its identity and unity. The Church requires a fundamental unity in essential faith. Ambiguity as a bond of comprehension fails if it touch the essential, or if, while touching the essential, it be anything more than a temporary suspension of judgment.

It is, on the whole, such a temporary suspension of judgment of which Mr. Balfour is the advocate. He shows cause, on the one hand, why Naturalism should be sent back for revision before acceptance; he shows cause, on the other hand, why the Christian Faith may still be retained on rational principles. We should say that the effect of the line of reasoning followed would be an indulgent toleration for all kinds of idolatries as equally rational and equally irrational.

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