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STUDIES IN NINETEENTH CENTURY ENGLISH AGNOSTICISM

by

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy in the Australian National University.

(ii)

I alone am responsible for the text of
this thesis and the views maintained
in it.

Dania W. Dockrell
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Preface

This thesis is an essay in the history of ideas. It is an attempt to characterize in detail some of the main features of agnosticism - the intellectual movement gathered around T.H. Huxley, H. Spencer, J. Tyndall, L. Stephen, and W.K. Clifford, during the last four decades of the nineteenth century. General accounts of this movement already exist - for example, A.W. Benn, The History of English Rationalism in the Nineteenth Century, R. Metz, A Hundred Years of British Philosophy - and there are good studies of some of the individual figures - for example, H. Petersen, Huxley: Prophet of Science, N. Annan, Leslie Stephen, but, as far as I know, no one has produced a detailed historical study of the agnostics as a group, particularly as a group of philosophers. This work is an attempt to meet this need.

Obviously, an historical account of an intellectual movement must not only provide expositions of its distinctive doctrines, it must also place the school generally in the context of its age. The 'Introductory' section is concerned with this latter aim. It may appear, at first, to be out of proportion to the rest of the work, but in view of what has been written about agnosticism it has been necessary to go

beyond a general exposition of agnostic doctrines and their roots to consider in what sense the agnostics can be called by that name, and to explain how agnosticism differs from empiricism - J.S. Mill, A. Bain, G. Croom Robertson - and positivism - R. Congreve, F. Harrison, J.H. Bridges - two other Victorian intellectual movements.

In the first section the following points are made. The pattern of agnostic theory is based on three doctrines: that there are necessary limits to knowledge, and the objects of metaphysical speculation fall outside these limits; that the methods of science are the only rational and moral means by which knowledge is to be gained; the groundlessness of the Christian faith. Examination of what Huxley and his contemporaries have to say on the nature of agnosticism shows that the word was often used to designate this pattern of belief.

The origins of agnosticism are found in three deeply rooted nineteenth century British intellectual tendencies: a distrust of metaphysical speculation, faith in the power of science, and dissatisfaction with Christian orthodoxy. In different ways each of these tendencies gain expression in agnosticism, positivism, and empiricism. Of these three movements agnosticism

was the last to appear. But while it owes a certain amount to both movements, particularly empiricism, it did not, like positivism, accept Comte as its prophet, and unlike empiricism it found in the concept of evolution as used in Darwin's On the Origin of Species a way of understanding nearly all aspects of the universe. Basically, these are the points which separate agnosticism from positivism and empiricism.

The remaining sections of the work expound the agnostics' doctrines. The organization of the material is based on two principles: one is that the main elements in the pattern of agnostic belief should be set out; the other is that attention ought to be paid to the particular stresses in their system of thought. As the agnostic rejection of Christianity is based on their theories of ignorance and the nature of science and morality there is not a separate section dealing with their anti-christian position, but there is one which deals with agnostic theories of the limits of knowledge, particularly as they bear upon theological matters - 'Learned Ignorance' - and another dealing with agnostic theories of science.

In 'Learned Ignorance' the theories of H.L. Mansel are examined in some detail because his work, despite its Christian purpose, exercised a strong influence upon the agnostics, as is seen by the use Spencer and

Stephen make of his doctrines in recommending their anti-christian positions. In the next section, 'The Nature of Science', the differences between Clifford and the other agnostics over the nature of science are discussed, particularly with reference to the criticism their theories received from Christian apologists who wished to deny that there is any real conflict between science and religion.

'The Science of Ethics' is the final section of the work. From one point of view this section is a development of the preceding one; for the agnostic claim that science alone provides sure knowledge means that they had to be able to show how science can provide knowledge of the foundations and superstructure of morality. They took to this task with great seriousness; the most elaborate products of the agnostic movement deal with this problem. Here the leading figures are Clifford, Spencer, and Stephen, with Huxley joining hands with those Christian and non-christian critics who claimed that moral obligation could not be completely explained in scientific terms. On the question of moral responsibility and determinism, the agnostics present a solid front against those who assert that the two are incompatible. Because of the extent of agnostic ethical writings it has seemed

best to consider them in a separate section.

In the 'Conclusion' the significance of the agnostic movement is discussed. Three points are made: firstly, that philosophically the products of agnosticism are not of much intrinsic worth; secondly, that their writings are important for the influence, often a negative influence, they had upon philosophers of greater stature - for example, H. Sidgwick, W. James, S. Alexander, J. Ward; thirdly, the movement is of importance if we are to understand the change that came over the Victorian frame of mind between 1860 and 1900, for while it is difficult to assess causes in such a matter it does not seem unlikely that the agnostics played some part in producing this change.

.....

This thesis was prepared under the supervision of Professor John Passmore. I am deeply indebted to him for his help and encouragement in writing it.

INTRODUCTORY

It is a mistake to suppose that intellectual history is valuable only if it reveals forgotten masterpieces, just as it is a mistake to suppose that archaeologists are wasting their time unless they uncover works of art for exhibition in the great national collections.

W. Kneale.

Chapter One

T.H. Huxley and the Meaning of 'Agnosticism'.

Any attempt to determine the nature of agnosticism must first of all consider what T.H. Huxley has written on this matter, for it was he who coined the words 'agnostic' and 'agnosticism'. Furthermore, he was regarded by his contemporaries as one of the chief spokesmen for the position designated by 'agnosticism'. These two facts alone are sufficient to recommend Huxley as a guide to the meaning of the word as it was understood in nineteenth century England, though unfortunately, as it shall appear, Huxley does not merit the faith which his qualifications suggest we ought to have in him.

The situation which led Huxley to coin the word in 1869 was his membership of the Metaphysical Society. This society, which came into being in 1869, was formed so that some of the most prominent thinkers in England could meet together to discuss the nature of scientific and theological theories, and to determine, amongst other things, whether there was any conflict between the methods used in their construction.¹ In this company Huxley found that his position, viz., that many, if not all, metaphysical problems are insoluble because in order to resolve them

¹ For an account of this society see A.W. Brown, The Metaphysical Society (N.Y. 1947); the aims of the society are found on p.26.

it would be necessary to go beyond the necessary limits of human knowledge, was nameless; so he coined the word 'agnostic' to distinguish it from other positions.

In an article, 'Agnosticism' (1889), twenty years later, Huxley describes his frame of mind at the time when he introduced the word: 'When I reached intellectual maturity and began to ask myself whether I was an atheist, a theist, or a pantheist; a materialist or an idealist; a Christian or a freethinker; I found that the more I learned and reflected, the less ready was the answer; until at last, I came to the conclusion that I had neither art nor part with any of these denominations, except the last. The one thing in which most of these good people were agreed was the one thing in which I differed from them. They were quite sure that they had attained a certain "gnosis," - had, more or less successfully, solved the problem of existence; while I was quite sure I had not, and had a pretty strong conviction that the problem was insoluble. And with Hume and Kant on my side, I could not think myself presumptuous in holding fast by that opinion.' In the same article Huxley tells how in order to remedy his being 'without a rag or a lable to cover himself with' he coined the word 'agnostic': 'It came into my head', he writes, 'as suggestively antithetic to the "gnostic" of Church history, who professed to know so much about the very things of

which I was ignorant; and I took the earliest opportunity of parading it at our Society, to show that I, too, had a tail, like the other foxes.²

According to this account, agnosticism is the view that certain, if not all, metaphysical problems are insoluble. The reasons for this position are not stated, though the reference to Hume and Kant suggests the types of argument that Huxley has in mind. We are not left in the dark, however, about these reasons; in some of his other writings around this period Huxley develops his case for agnosticism.³ Briefly stated, his defence is based on the claim that all our knowledge is restricted to what we are aware of in consciousness. Now as the matters dealt with in metaphysical speculation fall outside the scope of consciousness we are, consequently, unable to decide whether or not such objects actually exist. Huxley uses this argument in quite odd ways. For example, in his Hume he argues that to say that mental events depend upon material events for their

2 T.H. Huxley, 'Agnosticism', (1889) Collected Essays: Vol.5, (Lond. 1894) pp.237-239. Each volume in his collected essays has its own title, for which see the bibliography.

3 Cf. Huxley's 'On the Physical basis of Life' (1868), 'On Descartes' "Discourse Touching the Method of Using One's Reason Rightly and of Seeking Scientific Truth"' (1870), 'On the Hypothesis that Animals are Automata, and Its History' (1874): Collected Essays: Vol.1, (Lond. 1893), and 'Hume with Helps to the Study of Berkeley' Collected Essays: Vol.6, (1894).

existence is not to admit the truth of materialism, since all this assertion amounts to is the claim that one set of mental phenomena known as matter invariably precede another set of mental phenomena known as consciousness.

'If we analyse the proposition that all mental phenomena are the effects or products of material phenomena,'

Huxley writes, 'all that it means amounts to this: that whenever those states of consciousness which we call sensation, or emotion, or thought, come into existence, complete investigation will show good reasons for the belief that they are preceded by those other phenomena of consciousness to which we give the name of matter and motion.'⁴ The materialist position, viz., that matter is the ultimate reality and consciousness is but an epiphenomenon of material existence, is not involved in the claim that the existence of mental events depend upon material events. This latter statement concerns the relation between mental phenomena, whereas the materialist position is a statement about the relation between mental and non-mental phenomena. There is no way, Huxley contends, of deciding the truth of the materialist position because it concerns matters beyond the limits of our knowledge, since 'our knowledge of matter is restricted to those feelings of which we assume it to be the cause.'⁵

4 T.H. Huxley, Collected Essays: Vol.6, p.95

5 ibid., p.95.

Materialism cannot be shown to be either true or false. If we accept it or reject it, then we have made an assumption which we can never justify.

Bearing Huxley's reasons for agnosticism in mind, we can state his (alleged) 1869 definition as follows: agnosticism is the theory that certain, if not all, metaphysical problems cannot be solved, because in order to do so man would have to transcend the necessary limits of his knowledge or consciousness. Huxley does not, however, restrict himself to one definition of agnosticism. In the same article, 'Agnosticism', which was written as a reply to three other attempts to state the nature of agnosticism - by Henry Wace, Frederic Harrison, and S. Laing - Huxley puts forward another and separate account of the agnostic position.⁶ Whereas the first account (the one we have been considering) is designed to rebut Wace's claim that agnosticism is merely another name for infidelity to the Christian faith by showing that the word was first used to describe a certain

6 H. Wace, 'On Agnosticism: A Paper Read at the Manchester Church Congress, 1888', reprinted in H. Wace, Christianity and Agnosticism, (Edin. & Lond., 1895); Frederic Harrison, 'The Future of Agnosticism', Fortnightly Review, 45, 1889; the other paper is by S. Laing, but I have been unable to find it. L. Huxley states that it, like Harrison's article, followed upon Wace's address; Life and Letters of Thomas Henry Huxley (2 vols., Lond. 1900), Vol. 2, p. 221. Laing's article is also mentioned in T. Vincent Tymms 'Agnostic Expositions', Contemporary Review, 55, 1889, p. 697.

theory about metaphysical enquiry;⁷ the second is an attempt to refute Laing's view (which in one particular point resembles those of Wace and Harrison)⁸ that agnosticism is a negative creed over and against the positive creeds of religious systems. In reply to Laing, Huxley claims that agnosticism is not a creed, but consists rather in adherence to a certain methodological rule, the agnostic principle. 'Agnosticism, in fact,' he writes, 'is not a creed, but a method, the essence of which lies in the vigorous application of a single principle.'⁹

7 Wace claims that agnosticism is both a doctrine of the limits of human knowledge and a denial of the truth of Christianity. The point of difference between an agnostic and a Christian, Wace claims, 'lies not in the fact that he has no knowledge of these things [such as the Last Judgment], but that he does not believe the authority on which they are stated. He may prefer', Wace continues, 'to call himself an Agnostic, but his real name is an older one - he is an Infidel, that is to say an unbeliever.' op.cit., p.6. For Huxley's aim in giving the first account of agnosticism see (Collected Essays: Vol.5, pp.235 & 239-40).

8 The point of resemblance is that agnosticism in all three accounts is a theory over and against Christianity. 'The true Agnostic,' Harrison writes, 'puts forward his ignorance as the central result of his views about religion' op.cit., p.145. Huxley believes that his refutation of Laing (and Wace?) tells also against Harrison; cf. op.cit., p.250.

9 T.H. Huxley, op.cit., p.245.

The principle is, in positive terms, that 'In matters of the intellect, follow your reason as far as it will take you, without regard to any other consideration;' whilst, stated negatively, it is that 'In matters of the intellect do not pretend that conclusions are certain which are not demonstrated or demonstrable.'¹⁰ A more forceful and succinct statement of the agnostic principle is given in 'Agnosticism and Christianity' (1889); the principle, Huxley writes, is that 'it is wrong for a man to say that he is certain of the objective truth of any proposition unless he can produce evidence which logically justifies that certainty.'¹¹

In claiming that agnosticism is not a creed but a method, Huxley is not thereby denying that the agnostic principle, its justification and application, is capable of theoretical treatment, or that we can regard agnosticism as the theory of the agnostic method.¹² He is merely asserting that the subject matter of

10 ibid.

11 T.H. Huxley, 'Agnosticism and Christianity', op.cit., p.310.

12 The following statements provide some confirmation for this view. Huxley writes: 'Agnosticism is not properly described as a "negative" creed, nor indeed as a creed of any kind, except in so far as it expresses absolute faith in the validity of a principle, which is as much ethical as intellectual;' and, further on,

agnostic theory is different from the subject matter of 'creed' type theories; agnosticism, as a theory, is concerned with the reasons for adopting the agnostic

'Agnosticism is not, and cannot be, a creed, except in so far as its general principle is concerned.' (op.cit. p.310). It might be objected that these passages really falsify my interpretation, since Huxley states that agnosticism in its theoretical aspect is a creed with one article. The contrast above between agnosticism ~~as~~ a different type of theory from the various creed type theories cannot then be drawn. My reply to this objection is that it seems to me that the word 'creed' is used with two different senses in Huxley's writing. When he is arguing against Laing and Wace (cf. op.cit. pp.245 & 310-11) the word 'creed' refers mainly to religious type creeds; e.g., he writes, Laing's creed is 'a body of negative propositions which have so far been adopted on the negative side as to be what the Apostle's and other accepted creeds are on the positive.' (op.cit. p.245). Agnosticism, Huxley here contends, is not a creed. Similarly against Wace in 'Agnosticism and Christianity' - though not in 'Agnosticism', since Huxley gives the account of the origin of 'agnostic' to refute Wace, and the view that agnosticism is not a creed to refute Laing - Huxley uses his claim that agnosticism is not a creed to refute Wace's charges that agnosticism is infidelity. When, however, he describes agnosticism as a creed what he has in mind is that the theory of the agnostic method can be summed up in one point. The word 'creed' is being used in a non-religious sense. This is shown in part by the fact that this description occurs after he has made the point that agnosticism is not a religious or anti-religious creed. What the passages quoted at the beginning of the footnote do show is that Huxley did not feel that a knowledge of the theory of the method is as important as the act of grasping the principle of agnosticism and applying it. Though a knowledge of the theory is not important, or as important as the practice of agnosticism, still there is a theory, and Huxley himself goes on to state some of its rudimentary parts e.g. the reasons for being an agnostic.

principle and the rules governing its application; 'creed' type theories deal with the subject matter of religious and metaphysical enquiry. It follows then that agnosticism cannot be compared with the Christian creed, as Wace attempts to, or identified with the agnostic creed as put forward by Laing, simply because its subject matter is not the same as these other theories. 'Agnosticism,' Huxley writes against Harrison's account, 'has no more to do with it [religion] than it has to do with music or painting.'¹³ The neutrality of agnosticism with respect to 'creed' type theories, as well as its distinguished past, is brought out in Huxley's statement of the history of the agnostic principle. 'It is', he writes, 'as old as Socrates; as old as the writer who said, "Try all things, hold fast by that which is good;" it is the foundation of the Reformation, which simply illustrated the axiom that every man should be able to give a reason for the faith that is in him; it is the great principle of Descartes; it is the fundamental axiom of modern science.'¹⁴ But though agnosticism does not compete with creeds such as Christianity in the sense that it denies any of the propositions maintained in the

13 F.H. Huxley, op.cit., p.250.

14 ibid., pp.245-6.

creed, it does conflict with them whenever the method used to establish and form the creed is opposed to the agnostic principle. For this reason agnosticism inevitably conflicts with 'Ecclesiasticism' or theology which is based on Newman's dictum, 'Let us maintain before we have proved.'¹⁵ But there is no conflict, Huxley argues, between agnosticism and the work of the scientific theologian for he 'admits the Agnostic principle, however widely his results may differ from those reached by the majority of Agnostics.'¹⁶

The fact that in the one article Huxley puts forward two accounts of agnosticism is surprising; what is even more so is that he does not recognize that he has given two accounts. At no stage in either 'Agnosticism' or 'Agnosticism and Christianity' (or in any of his other writings for that matter) does Huxley explain the relation between his two statements of the nature of agnosticism. On two occasions he brings his two agnostic positions together, but only to highlight certain features involved in the second account of agnosticism. The first time is in 'Agnosticism' when he discusses the application of the agnostic principle. The principle, he claims, can be applied only within a

15 Quoted by Huxley, op.cit. p.312 ft.nt.

16 ibid., p.313

certain field, the boundaries of which - 'the only negative fixed points' - 'will be those negations which flow from the demonstrable limitations of our faculties.'¹⁷ The fact that in the same article he has already claimed, against Wace, that agnosticism is the theory of these 'negative fixed points' is not recognized or taken into account. Despite the bringing together in the first article of both his agnostic views, Huxley is not so sure in 'Agnosticism and Christianity' that his earlier views about the limits of human knowledge are correct. The uncertainty comes out in the following quotation: 'The extent of the region of the uncertain, the number of the problems the investigation of which ends in a verdict not proven, will vary according to the knowledge and the intellectual habits of the individual Agnostic. I do not care very much to speak of anything as "unknowable." What I am sure about is that there are many topics about which I know nothing; and which, so far as I can see, are out of reach of my faculties. But whether these things are knowable by any one else is exactly one of those matters which is beyond my knowledge, though I may have a tolerably strong opinion as to the probabilities of the case.'¹⁸ This statement about the limits of knowledge

17 T.H. Huxley, op.cit., p.246.

18 T.H. Huxley, op.cit., p.311.

is obviously at odds with his earlier view that man qua man is prevented from knowing the solutions to certain problems because in order to do so he would have to transcend the natural limits of his knowledge. His position as given above is that he can describe only his own limitations, and not those which apply, if there be any, to all men. Huxley has not, however, entirely deserted his former views; whilst he cannot assert that all men share the same necessary ignorance about certain philosophical and theological matters, he still feels that they do in fact suffer under the same restrictions. The strength of this feeling emerges quite forcefully when in the same article he breaks off from listing the problems which he cannot solve in order to launch into a description of the uselessness of philosophic indeavour of the more speculative sort. 'Generation after generation', he writes, 'philosophy has been doomed to roll the stone uphill; and just as all the world swore it was at the top, down it has rolled to the bottom again.'¹⁹ Further on he writes that this view of philosophy is not novel: 'Hume saw this; Kant saw it; since their time, more and more eyes have been cleansed of the films which prevented them from seeing it; until now the weight and number of those who refuse to be the prey of verbal mystifications

has begun to tell in practical life.'²⁰ These sentiments and the authorities Huxley cites in their support do not go together with his claim that all he is sure of is his own inability to solve metaphysical and religious disputes. On the contrary, his statements about the uselessness of philosophical speculation fit in with what he claims to be his 1869 view of agnosticism, and indeed, allowing for their polemical nature, they could be regarded as shorthand expressions of that position. At the same time, we must note that the general tenor of his statements in 'Agnosticism and Christianity' is to cast doubt on the set of views he had originally described as agnostic and to stress the doctrine that the agnostic is one who believes in a certain method.

Before we consider the relationship between Huxley's two accounts of agnosticism, and to work out precisely, if it is possible, what Huxley might have understood by agnosticism, there is another article to consider; for Huxley's attempts to explain the meaning of the word do not end with 'Agnosticism and Christianity'. Huxley was forced into one more serious attempt by Arthur Balfour's claim in The Foundations of Belief that 'naturalism' could be used to describe the system of thought which was variously known, with differing degrees

of accuracy, as agnosticism, or positivism, or empiricism. According to Balfour, naturalism or agnosticism can be summed up in two statements: the first is that 'we may know "phenomena" and the laws by which they are connected, but nothing more'; the second is that there may exist something beyond or above phenomena and the laws which govern them, but that if 'it exists we can never apprehend it.'²¹

The main burden of Huxley's reply is that agnosticism and naturalism are two distinct positions and should by no means be regarded as identical. The distinction between them, Huxley argues, is not brought out by Balfour because he fails to give a correct account of naturalism. "'Naturalism'", Huxley writes, 'is a well known and perfectly understood technical form of philosophy and applies to all systems of speculations from which the supernatural is excluded whether it be merely ignored or expressly denied.'²² Agnosticism, on the other hand, Huxley argues, differs from naturalism in that it neither implies a denial or affirmation of the

21 A.J. Balfour, The Foundations of Belief (2nd Ed. Lond. 1895), p.7.

22 T.H. Huxley, 'Mr. Balfour's attack on Agnosticism' Nineteenth Century, 37, 1895, p.533. Huxley's reply was to have been in two articles but he died before the time came for publishing the second article. It is printed as an appendix in H. Peterson, Huxley, Prophet of Science (Lond. 1932).

existence of something beyond or above nature. The agnostic is forced to leave this question undecided; he knows no way of ever settling it, and he 'does not believe we shall ever have the means of knowing.'²³ At the same time, Huxley insists, our inability to settle the question does not mean that there is or is not something beyond nature, anymore than our inability, both now and in the future, to decide whether there are any beings on Saturn helps us to determine whether there are Saturnians.

To reinforce his claims about the nature of agnosticism, Huxley provides another account of the way in which he arrived at the agnostic position. In this version of his early views he stresses the importance of Sir William Hamilton's article, 'On the Philosophy of the Unconditioned.' According to Huxley, Hamilton expressed the agnostic position with a force and clarity unsurpassed in the past sixty-six years. The key passage for Huxley - 'the weighty words, which for some fifty odd years have had their echo in my mind and have determined the nature of philosophy ... which, for me, is Agnosticism'²⁴ is as follows: 'Loath to admit that our science is at best the reflection of a reality we cannot know, we strive to penetrate to existence in itself; and what we have laboured intensely to attain, we at last fondly believe we have

23 T.H. Huxley, op.cit., p.533

24 ibid., p.534.

accomplished. But like Ixion, we embrace a cloud for a divinity.... It is the powerful tendency of the most vigorous minds to transcend the sphere of our faculties, which makes a "learned ignorance" the most difficult achievement - perhaps, indeed, the consummation of knowledge.'²⁵

The general impression conveyed by Huxley's writings on the nature of agnosticism is one of confusion. This darkness in his work is caused by two inconsistencies: one concerns his views on the limits of human knowledge, the other his treatment of the nature of agnosticism. For our purposes, and in terms of Huxley's own thought, the former, though it arises out of the latter, is comparatively unimportant, since his claim in 'Agnosticism and Christianity' that he cannot say what are the necessary limits of knowledge is more than matched by the large number of statements - in, e.g., Hume, 'Agnosticism', and 'Mr. Balfour's attack on Agnosticism' - which affirm that the range of man's mind is necessarily restricted, and that metaphysical matters fall outside its scope. The second inconsistency is more troublesome. The difficulty is not merely that Huxley gives two different accounts of agnosticism, but that he gives two accounts both of which are said to describe the essence of agnosticism. If we follow Huxley then the chief characteristic of agnosticism

²⁵ I have slightly abbreviated the quotation as Huxley gives it.

varies with each definition: sometimes, against Wace and Balfour, it is a certain type of epistemological theory, on other occasions, against Laing, Wace and Harrison, it is a certain type of methodological theory. If agnosticism has but one single characteristic - and Huxley writes as if it has - then it is not possible without inconsistency to provide another account citing a different feature as the distinguishing note. The chief characteristic or the characteristic of agnosticism may be a certain theory of knowledge, or it may be a certain theory of method, but it cannot be both. Huxley's difficulty - though not every commentator has observed it²⁶ - is that he attempts to have it both ways. Because of this confusion it is not possible to rest an account of the meaning of 'agnosticism' in the nineteenth century simply on the basis of Huxley's statements; before we can provide an account we have to work out how to relate Huxley's accounts. Two obvious possibilities confront

26 For example, cf., P. Chalmers Mitchell, Thomas Henry Huxley: A Sketch of His Life and Work (Lond. 1900), pp.242,244; E. Clodd, Thomas Huxley (Lond. 1902), pp.187-90; J.R. Ainsworth Davis, Thomas H. Huxley (Lond. 1907), pp.205-209; E.W. MacBride, Huxley (Lond. 1934), p.125; E.A. Burtt, Types of Religious Philosophy (N.Y. Revised Ed. 1951), pp.230-1; C. Bibby, T.H. Huxley: Scientist, Humanist, and Educator (Lond. 1959), Ch.3. H. Peterson, whose Huxley: Prophet of Science (Lond. 1932) is the best discussion of Huxley's agnosticism in relation to his age, notes the complexity of theories designated by 'agnosticism' but does not try to explain how this came about; see chs. 6 and 8.

us: we have to decide whether to treat his inconsistency seriously, in which case we must reject one account - most likely the second - or whether to neglect the inconsistency and attempt to view his two accounts as testimonies which happen to be stated in a rather misleading way, to different aspects of agnostic theory.

A general knowledge of the mid- and late-Victorian period might incline us to the first view, since Huxley's account of agnosticism as an epistemological theory has abundant confirmation in contemporary sources, whilst there is no clear evidence that agnosticism was ever viewed as the theory or the practice of the scientific method.²⁷ Considerations of this nature seem to have determined the interpretation of Huxley's views provided by R. Flint, A.W. Benn, and, more recently, N. Annan,²⁸ (though their knowledge of nineteenth century thought should not be described as general.) These writers claim

27 For example The New English Dictionary (subsequently The Oxford) had in 1884 defined 'agnostic' as 'One who holds that the existence of anything beyond and behind material phenomena is unknown and (so far as can be judged) unknowable, and especially that a First Cause and an unseen world are subjects of which we know nothing.' Cf. also the material brought forward in Section II.

28 R. Flint, Agnosticism (Edinb. & Lond. 1903), pp.40-44; A.W. Benn, The History of English Rationalism in the Nineteenth Century (Lond. 1906) 2 vols, Vol.2 pp.451-454; (W. Irvine seems to follow Benn; see his Apes, Angels and Victorians: Darwin, Huxley and Evolution (Meridian Ed. N.Y. 1959) p.322); N. Annan, Leslie Stephen (Lond. 1951) p.170

that we must accept the first account in 'Agnosticism' as the most accurate guide to the nature of agnostic theory; the second account, they contend, has to be rejected, for not only does it fail to even hint at what is obviously the keynote of agnostic theory, viz., the doctrine of the limits of human knowledge, but it is so vague that, even if it was not misleading, it could not serve, as indeed it must, to distinguish agnosticism from other positions. 'A definition so elastic', Benn writes of the second account of agnosticism, 'that it might easily be made to include Plato, Spinoza, Paley, and F.D. Maurice among the agnostics, while at the same time possibly excluding Herbert Spencer, is valueless on the face of it; and this definition has the additional drawback of not necessarily covering what Huxley himself had put forward as the chief note of agnosticism when he first professed it, which is that the reality behind appearance, if any, neither is nor can be known.'²⁹

This type of interpretation, however, is not supported by a close examination of some of the more important presentations and definitions of agnosticism

in the Victorian period.³⁰ At the same time this survey does not lead us to regard Huxley's two accounts as partial interpretations of the one thing. Rather, a third possibility is forced upon us: viz., that while Huxley's inconsistency cannot be dismissed nor explained away, we are unable, for various reasons, to accept one account and reject the other. What this interpretation of Huxley involves and the reasons for it are the burden of the next two sections.

30 This is the most serious objection to the Flint, Benn, Annan, interpretation; but their accounts possess two other disquieting features. Firstly all three fail to mention or consider the fact that Huxley presents his two opposed accounts side by side in 'Agnosticism'. It seems a little odd to assume without more detailed investigations than they give, that one account is reliable and the other unreliable. Secondly, their explanations of Huxley's inconsistency are not convincing. Annan thinks that Huxley's second account results from a change of views (op.cit., p.170) but this explanation obviously relies too much on 'Agnosticism' and 'Mr. Balfour's Attack on Agnosticism'. A.W. Benn explains it as a piece of polemical irresponsibility (op.cit., vol.2 p.453) but he fails to mention that the correct account is found alongside the irresponsible account. Benn's comments on agnosticism are not all consistent and have to be treated warily; e.g. compare the statements vol.1 p.13 with vol.2 p.453. Flint offers no explanation; a fact which is symptomatic of his general approach to attempts to define agnosticism: 'Any definition of agnosticism which will satisfy an agnostic must of necessity fail to satisfy a non-agnostic. The agnostic cannot clearly or honestly express what he means by agnosticism except in terms which are at least, implicitly, eulogistic, nor the non-agnostic his conception of it otherwise than in terms which are, at least implicitly, dyslogistic' (op.cit., p.18).

II

"Agnosticism", Frederic Harrison wrote in 1889, 'is a vague and elastic phrase.'³¹ A survey of nineteenth century accounts of agnosticism indicates the justice of this charge; and points to the fact that Huxley's contemporaries were by no means agreed in their understanding of agnosticism.³² The main differences in interpretations of agnosticism can be reduced to two, more or less, unrelated points.³³ The first is the nature of the agnostics' belief in the limits of human knowledge, a belief which most accounts regard as an essential feature of agnosticism; the second concerns the range of beliefs that are designated by the word 'agnosticism.'

31 F. Harrison, op.cit., p.144

32 This survey is not exhaustive.

33 Since the aim of this discussion is to outline the main contemporary understandings of agnosticism there has been no need to investigate many other interesting but not significant variations; to take one example: many of Huxley's contemporaries viewed agnosticism as an anti-Christian theory, but gave different accounts of the main area(s) of conflict between the two systems. J.B. Dalgairns finds it in the agnostics' assertion that man cannot know God ('Is God Unknowable?' Contemporary Review, 20, 1872, p.615); whilst H. Wace locates it in the agnostics' rejection of the authenticity of the New Testament portrait of Christ (H. Wace, op.cit., p.6); and Wilfrid Ward thinks that the agnostic combination of evolutionary views of nature and moral obligation together with a Humean epistemology accounts for their disbelief. (W. Ward, William George Ward and the Oxford Movement [Bond. 1889] 7, p.381).

Almost from the first use of 'agnosticism' two theories of the limits of human knowledge were regarded as expressing the agnostic doctrine. On one hand there was T.H. Huxley's position; on the other, Herbert Spencer's theory as expressed in his First Principles (1862). The two theories came to be associated under the one name partly as a result of an unawareness of the differences between them, and partly because the originator of the word was not prepared to protest against this confusion. Reasons why they were confused can be readily seen; the close personal association of Huxley and Spencer, their shared convictions about science and the errors of orthodox religion, and their insistence upon the fact that human knowledge is necessarily limited, would have made it easy to assume that they were agreed on the nature of the limits of knowledge. As well as these points there is the fact that Huxley's theory did not receive systematic expression until 1879 with the publication of his Hume, whilst Spencer's exposition of the doctrine had been current since 1862. It is not surprising, therefore, that the positions of Huxley and Spencer were confused, nor is it surprising that Spencer's position came to be regarded in some circles as the official statement of the agnostic doctrine.³⁴ To

³⁴ [7] 'The Sources of Modern Agnosticism' The Month, 45, 1882, p.324. The writer describes Spencer as the 'Coryphaeus of agnosticism.'

give one example of this confusion: 'In what I have further to say upon the [agnostic] school which I venture to criticise,' J.B. Dalgairns wrote in 1872, 'I shall henceforth principally use the works of Mr. Herbert Spencer. It is true that a man downright and earnest, as is Professor Huxley, leaves no doubt as to his meaning, yet he does not draw out the theory so much at length as that writer.'³⁵ Dalgairns must have misunderstood Huxley's meaning, for there is no doubt that his position differs quite seriously from Spencer's.

The core of Spencer's agnostic position is that the reasons for belief in the limits of human knowledge - limits which are necessarily imposed upon us by our nature - also compel belief in the existence of realities beyond the scope of our knowledge, and, more particularly, they command belief in the existence of a Reality or Power or Ultimate Cause of all things whose nature must remain forever unknown. 'Common Sense,' Spencer writes, 'asserts the existence of a reality; Objective Science proves that these realities cannot be what we think it; Subjective Science shows why we cannot think of it as existing; and in the assertion of a Reality utterly inscrutable in nature, Religion finds an assertion essen-

tially coinciding with her own.³⁶ A more summary statement of his position is that 'the reality existing behind all appearances is, and must ever be, unknown.'³⁷

Obviously, this account of the limits of human knowledge differs from Huxley's. According to Huxley, agnosticism - when considered as an epistemological theory - is the view that metaphysical problems are insoluble because of man's necessary limitations. 'Whether there is an ultimate reality lying behind appearances?' or 'Whether there is an ultimate cause of all things?' are questions which Huxley's type of agnostic regards as unanswerable, whereas the Spencerian agnostic believes that his reasons for claiming that there are necessary limits to human knowledge also involve the further assertion that, there is a reality behind appearances.

Dalgairns was not the only one to neglect or fail to see the differences between Huxley and Spencer. A writer in The Spectator rebuking Leslie Stephen's account of agnosticism reveals the same confusion: '"Agnostic"',

36 H. Spencer, First Principles (1862; 6th Ed. Lond. 1900), p.84 Spencer also calls this Reality, the 'Incomprehensible Power' (p.85), 'the Ultimate Cause of things,' (p.97) and the 'Ultimate Reality lying behind Appearances' (p.107).

37 H. Spencer, op.cit., p.57.

he writes, 'was the name demanded by Professor Huxley for those, who disclaiming Atheism, believed with him in an "Unknown and Unknowable" God - or, in other words, that the ultimate origin of things must be ascribed to a cause "unknown and unknowable."³⁸ Others, including Huxley, were not so confused on this issue. 'I have long been aware,' Huxley wrote in 1889, 'of the manner in which my views have been confounded with those of Mr. Spencer, though no one was more fully aware of our divergence than the latter. Perhaps I have done wrongly in letting the thing slide so long, but I was anxious to avoid a breach with an old friend.... Whether the Unknowable or any other Noumenon exists or does not exist, I am quite clear I have no knowledge either way.'³⁹ Whatever the reason, Huxley's failure to protest at the confusion meant that the word 'agnosticism' took on a more complex meaning than the one he had, presumably, intended in 1869.

The other main point on which nineteenth century accounts of agnosticism show an important variation concerns the range of beliefs referred by the word. Some writers

38 /~R. Hutton?/ 'Militant Agnosticism' The Spectator, 49, 1876, p.763.

39 Quoted in E. Clodd, op.cit., pp.220-1 from a letter written to F. Gould in 1889 and made public in the Literary Guide, Jan. 1902. Cf. also Huxley's statements in L. Huxley op.cit., 1, p.242 & 2, p.398. One writer who was aware of the distinction between Huxley's and Spencer's positions was David Masson. See his Recent British Philosophy (1865, 3rd Ed. Lond. 1877) pp.278-80.

use the expression, more or less exclusively, to designate some form or forms of the doctrine of the limits of human knowledge. David Masson, for example, describes Huxley's and Spencer's position as 'A Correct Cosmology, accompanied by Metaphysical Agnosticism.'⁴⁰ And Huxley, in his Hume, writes of the relationship between Hume and Kant and 'that more modern way of thinking, which has been called "agnosticism", from its profession of an incapacity to discover the indispensable conditions of either positive or negative knowledge, in many positions, respecting which, not only the vulgar but philosophers of the more sanguine sort, revel in the luxury of unqualified assurance.'⁴¹ Other writers use the word in a wider fashion to designate a loosely related group of beliefs about the futility of metaphysical speculation, the universal reach of scientific method, and, more or less arising out of these beliefs, the inadequacy and groundlessness of the Christian faith. Bishop C.J. Ellicott, for example, in an address to his clergy in 1876 states that agnosticism or nescience is 'the most prevalent form of unbelief' and is characterized

40 D. Masson, op.cit., pp.278-9

41 T.H. Huxley, Hume, in Collected Essays vol.6, pp.70-1.

by a willingness 'to believe nothing except what can be definitely proved, and to regard everything else as opinionable.'⁴² A more elaborate statement of agnosticism in this sense is found in Leslie Stephen's article, 'An Agnostic's Apology.'⁴³ 'Agnosticism...', Stephen writes, 'seems to imply a fairly accurate appreciation of a form of creed already common and daily spreading. The Agnostic',

42 C.J. Ellicott, Modern Unbelief; Its Principles and Characteristics. (Lond. 1877), p.123.

43 L. Stephen, 'An Agnostic's Apology,' Fortnightly Review, 19, 1876; republished in L. Stephen, An Agnostic's Apology and Other Essays, (Lond. 1893). When Stephen first published the article he was not aware, so it seems, of the origin of 'agnosticism.' The article in 1876 starts as follows: 'An attempt has recently been made to attain currency for the new nickname - Agnostic. Protests against nicknames are foolish; foolish because unavailing, and foolish because nicknames are always harmless. A protest in this case would be especially foolish; for the nickname in question seems to indicate a distinct advance in the courtesies of controversy.' Fortnightly Review, 19, 1876, p.840. When he republished the article in 1893, he changed this opening, possibly as a result of Huxley's claim that agnosticism has nothing to do with religion, and commences the article with the statement that he is using the word in a wider sense than that given it by Huxley: 'The name Agnostic, originally coined by Professor Huxley about 1869, has gained general acceptance. It is sometimes used to indicate the philosophical theory which Mr. Herbert Spencer, as he tells us, developed from the doctrines of Hamilton and Mansel. Upon that theory I express no opinion. I take the word in a vaguer sense and am glad to believe that its use indicates an advance in the courtesies of controversy.' An Agnostic's Apology and Other Essays, p.1. Stephen's review of L. Huxley's biography of his father 'Thomas Henry Huxley', Nineteenth Century, 48, 1900, throws no light on Stephen's attitudes towards Huxley's view of agnosticism.

he continues, 'is one who asserts - what no one denies - that there are limits to the sphere of human intelligence. He asserts, further, what many theologians have expressly maintained that those limits are such as to exclude at least what Lewes called "metempirical" knowledge. But he goes further, and asserts in opposition to theologians, that theology lies within this forbidden sphere.'⁴⁴ Then, after arguing at length to show that theology lies outside the range of human knowledge, Stephen concludes with a passage on the agnostic's belief that soundly based knowledge can be attained only by the use of scientific methods. 'Amidst all the endless and hopeless controversies,' he writes, 'which have left nothing but bare husks of meaningless words, we have been able to discover certain reliable truths. They don't take us very far, and the condition of discovering them has been distrust of a priori guesses, and the systematic interrogation of experience.... Here we shall find sufficient guidance for the needs of life, though we renounce for ever the attempt to get behind the veil which no one has succeeded in raising; if indeed, there be anything behind.'⁴⁵

44 L. Stephen, op.cit., p.1.

45 L. Stephen, op.cit., p.40.

Needless to say these two roughly distinct views of agnosticism give rise to different accounts of its course in the nineteenth century. When agnosticism is taken to be simply a doctrine about the necessary limits of human knowledge it becomes possible to include amongst the exponents of agnostic theory such philosophers as Sir William Hamilton, H.L. Mansel, J.S. Mill, and F.H. Bradley, as well as T.H. Huxley, H. Spencer, J. Tyndall, W.K. Clifford, and L. Stephen, who called, themselves or were known as agnostics.⁴⁶ Masson, for example, describes the major philosophical conflict of the 1860's as having been between 'Hamilton's System of Transcendental Realism plus a Metaphysical Agnosticism relieved by strenuous Faith and Mill's System of Empirical Idealism plus a Metaphysical Agnosticism relieved by a slight reserve of possibility for

46 Of these thinkers only Tyndall and Clifford, as far as I can find out, did not call themselves agnostics. They were, however, regarded as members of the agnostic school, though Clifford was also regarded as an atheist. See E.S. Purcell, Life of Cardinal Manning: Archbishop of Westminster (2 vols, 2nd Ed., Lond. 1896) 1.2, p. 513; L. Stephen, The Life of Sir James Fitzjames Stephen. (Lond. 1895), p. 361; W. Ward, William George Ward and the Catholic Revival (Lond. 1893), pp. 299-300. L. Huxley, op.cit., 1, pp. 314-5. As well as the fact that they were known as agnostics, an examination of their writings justifies their inclusion in the agnostic school of thought. It is not clear when Spencer first described himself as an agnostic, but that he did is certain; Cf. H. Spencer, 'Retrospective Religion' Nineteenth Century, 16, 1884, p. 7.

Paley after all.⁴⁷ In fact on this view it is possible, and indeed, correct, to view Hamilton, Mansel and Mill as the important figures of nineteenth century agnosticism, and to regard Huxley and Spencer, and their agnostic colleagues, as comparatively minor figures. And this, at least, was how some contemporaries saw the matter. According to Frederick Maurice, Henry Mansel was the man who originated agnosticism: 'The name "Agnostic"', he writes, 'was first assumed about 1869 by Mr. Huxley, but the leading Agnostics have never hesitated to affirm that for the origin of the modern form of the sect it is necessary to refer to an earlier date. In 1858 Mr. Mansel, afterwards Dean of St. Paul's, preached the Bampton Lectures of the year.'⁴⁸ Another writer described Mansel as the choragus of agnosticism and Spencer as the coryphaeus.⁴⁹ W.G. Ward, on the other hand, thought J.S. Mill to be responsible for the agnostic position, and directed his efforts towards the destruction of his epistemology.⁵⁰ But irrespective of where the honours lie, the history of nineteenth century

47 D. Masson, op.cit., p.296.

48 F. Maurice, The Life of Frederick Denison Maurice (2 vols, Lond.1884), 1, p.327.

49 [7] 'The Sources of Modern Agnosticism' The Month, 45, 1882, pp.323-4.

50 Cf. W. Ward, op.cit., ch.13 'The Agnostic Controversy.'

agnosticism on this view runs from Hamilton's work early in the century until its close by which time F.H. Bradley and his followers were the most important exponents of the theory that human knowledge is necessarily limited.⁵¹ Put another way, agnosticism, on this view, is a persistent tendency in nineteenth century philosophical thought.

The history of agnosticism when it is considered as a combination of beliefs about the futility of metaphysical speculation, the universal scope of science, and the inadequacies of the Christian faith does not, unlike agnosticism when viewed as an epistemological theory, range from one end of the century to the other. Its course, in fact, is limited to the period between the 1860's and the end of the 1880's. Agnosticism, in this sense, is the creed of a movement which emerged in 1862 with the publication of Spencer's First Principles, gained widespread and popular acceptance in the controversies of the late 1860's and 1870's and began to fade as a vigorous intellectual movement in the 1880's, its demise being marked by the controversies surrounding the meaning of 'agnosticism.' To describe agnosticism as the creed of a widespread and

51 William James commented: 'If criticism of our human intellectual constitution is needed, it can be got out of Bradley to-day better than out of Spencer.' 'Herbert Spencer's Autobiography' (1904) in his Memories and Studies (Lond.1911), pp.128-9.

popular movement may, at first sight, seem somewhat extravagant, but this was the way in which many contemporary thinkers thought of it. For Ellicott agnosticism is 'the most prevalent form of unbelief';⁵² for Stephen 'agnosticism' is the name 'of a creed already common and daily spreading';⁵³ and John Tulloch, writing in 1884, describes the agnostics' rejection of spiritual entities, of metaphysics, and of religion, as 'the drift of the modern spirit - the "Zeitgeist," as it is called. It has penetrated philosophy, literature, religion itself; and men and women, in numbers, are trying everywhere to satisfy themselves with theories spun out of the naturalistic web supposed not merely to confine life but to constitute it.'⁵⁴ The leaders of this

52 C.J. Ellicott, op.cit., p.123.

53 :I. Stephen, op.cit., p.1.

54 J. Tulloch, Modern Theories in Philosophy and Religion. (Edinb. & Lond. 1884), p.vi; note also A.W. Homerie's statement: 'The spirit of agnosticism is in the air. The reviews are full of it. Popular lectures are everywhere insisting upon it. We meet it in novels, and even in poetry. At the universities it is the predominant creed among the undergraduates and the younger dons.' (Agnosticism: Sermons preached in 1883-4, 4th Ed., Edin. & Lond. 1891/ pp.8-9.) See also F. Harrison, op.cit., p.144. Not everyone, however, called this movement of thought by the same name. Tulloch prefers to call it by the name of 'Positivism': 'The naturalistic or agnostic principle is especially identified with 'Positivism,' and has been launched on its modern career by Auguste Comte more than by any other thinker.' (op.cit., p.vi.) Those who view agnosticism simply as a certain type of epistemological theory describe the creed of this movement as follows: 'A correct Cosmology accompanied by Metaphysical Agnosticism.' (D. Masson, op.cit., pp.278-9); or, 'scientific agnosticism'

modern way of thought are Huxley and Spencer, and their colleagues Tyndall, Clifford and Stephen. Hamilton, Mansel and Mill, the important figures in the development of theories about the necessary limits of knowledge occupy a less prominent place - but still an important one - as background figures in the short history of the

(F. Maurice, op.cit., v, p.609); or, 'naturalism and agnosticism', J. Ward, Naturalism and Agnosticism, Gifford Lectures, 1896-8 /3rd ed., 2 vols. Lond. 1896/, pp.vii-viii), or, 'Agnosticism with a strong material bias' (J. Milne, 'Agnosticism considered from a moral and spiratual point of view' in J. Milne and H.T. Burgess, Frazer Prize Essays on Agnosticism /Syd. & Melb. 18867, p.141). Huxley on occasions called it 'scientific Naturalism' (Collected Essays vol.5, p.39); and in 1895 A.J. Balfour pointed out in The Foundations of Belief that 'Agnosticism, Positivism, Empiricism, have all been used more or less correctly to describe this scheme of thought.' (p.6). He then goes on: 'But whatever the name selected, the thing itself is sufficiently easy to describe. For its leading doctrines are that we may know 'phenomena' and the laws by which they are connected, but nothing more. "More" there may or may not be; but if it exists we can never apprehend it : and whatever the World may be "in its reality" (supposing such an expression to be otherwise than meaningless), the World for us, the World with which alone we are concerned, or of which alone we can have any cognizance, is that World which is revealed to us through perception, and which is the subject matter of the Natural Sciences. Here, and here only, are we on firm ground. Here, and here only, can we discover anything which deserves to be described as Knowledge. Here, and here only, may we profitably exercise our reason or gather the fruits of wisdom.' (pp.6-8) Cf. also A.W. Benn, op.cit., vol.2 p.198; N. Annan, op.cit., p.160. The question of the relations between agnosticism, positivism, and empiricism is taken up in Chapter 3.

agnostic movement.⁵⁵

In view of what Huxley has written about the origin of 'agnosticism' it may seem that the wider use of the word to describe the creed of a movement of which he was one of the leaders represents a serious departure from what he originally intended. This may well be so. But even if this use of the word is not the one originally intended by Huxley, it appears that both he and Spencer are partly, though perhaps indirectly, responsible for its gaining currency. There is such a close connection in their writings between their theories of human ignorance and their beliefs about the universal range of science and the groundlessness of the Christian faith that it is difficult to consider one aspect of this complex of beliefs in isolation from the others. It does not seem unlikely that this difficulty forms part of the explanation of the wider use of the word. A brief consideration of their writings will illustrate this point.

In 'The Unknowable', the first part of the First Principles, Spencer sets out his doctrine of the necessary limits of human knowledge to explain certain

⁵⁵ In Ch.2 section II there is a discussion of the pattern of agnostic theory. The role of figures such as Hamilton and Mill is briefly mentioned in section I on Mill see also Ch.3.

aspects of his attempt to reconcile science and religion. 'We have to discover,' he writes of his aim in 'The Unknowable,' 'some fundamental verity which Religion will assert with all possible emphasis in the absence of Science; and which Science, with all possible emphasis, will assert in the absence of Religion.'⁵⁶ In the course of discovering this verity - the fact that there is an Unknowable Reality - Spencer sets out his views on science and religion. Of science he writes: 'To ask the question ... whether Science is substantially true? - is much like asking whether the Sun gives light.'⁵⁷; and, 'Science must be judged by itself; and so judged only the most perverted intellect can fail to see that it is worthy of all reverence. Be there or be there not any other revelation, we have a veritable revelation in Science - a continuous disclosure of the established order of the Universe.'⁵⁸ At the same time Spencer is anxious to stress that while science is substantially true, the basic concepts or ideas of science, such as space, time, matter, are, like the basic ideas of religion - atheism, pantheism, and theism - 'representative of realities that

56 H. Spencer, op.cit., p.17

57 ibid., p.16.

58 ibid., p.15.

cannot be comprehended.⁵⁹ Science, according to Spencer, despite its achievements in understanding the universe ultimately points to an impenetrable mystery surrounding the field of its successful operations. And it is in the acknowledgement by science of this mystery that a basis is found for the reapproachment of science with religion. At first, Spencer points out, it may seem odd to argue in this way, for religious systems seem to hide their belief in the ultimate mystery of the universe by asserting the existence of a host of anthropomorphic entities. Still, he cautions, 'however gross the absurdities associated with them, however irrational the arguments set forth in their defence, we must not ignore the verity which in all likelihood lies hidden within them.'⁶⁰ At the end of his argument this tentativeness is gone; 'May we not affirm', he asks, 'that a sincere recognition of the truth that our own and other existence is a mystery absolutely beyond our comprehension contains more of true religion than all the dogmatic theology ever written?'⁶¹

59 ibid., p.55.

60 ibid., p.13.

61 ibid., p.96. For further expressions of his views on religion see: 'Religion: A Retrospect and Prospect' Nineteenth Century, 15, 1884; and 'Retrospective Religion' Nineteenth Century 16, 1884.

It is in the midst of his arguments about the nature of science and religion that Spencer advances his theory of knowledge in order to show more clearly the nature of the ultimate mystery of the universe and to explain further why science and religion can never hope to penetrate it.

The same closely related pattern of beliefs about epistemology, science, and religion is also found in Huxley's writings. In his paper, 'On the Physical Basis of Life', Huxley expounds the theory that all life is ultimately derived from physical or material elements. Many people, he points out, are distressed by this and related scientific theories because they see in them a denial of the significance and independence of the mental and spiritual features of man. 'Anyone who is acquainted with the history of science', Huxley writes, 'will admit, that its progress has, in all ages meant, and now, more than ever means, the extension of the province of what we call matter and causation, and the concomitant gradual banishment from all regions of thought of what we call spirit and spontaneity.'⁶² Yet, Huxley argues, the fears which many feel about this development are completely unjustified. The fact that science is based upon

materialistic assumptions and consistently strives to interpret the world in a mechanistic fashion does not mean that materialism is true. The scientific thinker must ever keep in mind that the materialistic assumptions of modern science can never be shown to be either true or false; the necessary limits of our knowledge prevents us from ever deciding the issue. Huxley's position is that: 'The fundamental doctrines of materialism, like those of spiritualism, and other "isms," lie outside "the limits of philosophic enquiry," and David Hume's great service to humanity is his irrefragable demonstration of what these limits are.'⁶³ Still, materialism is an extremely important theory, for though it cannot be shown to be true or false, it alone provides the basis upon which modern science can operate. And, Huxley claims, 'there can be little doubt that the further science advances, the more intensively and consistently will all the phenomena of Nature be represented by materialistic formulas and symbols.'⁶⁴ But while this is so, the scientific thinker has to effect in thought a 'union of materialistic terminology with the repudiation of materialistic philosophy.'⁶⁵

63 ibid., p.163.

64 ibid., p.164.

65 ibid., p.155; cf. also p.165.

Whatever this union may involve, it is clear that Huxley is not doubting the value and achievements of 'materialistic' science and its methods, nor is he denying the anti-theological or anti-spiritual character of the assumptions upon which science is based. If anything, the purpose of this union seems to be to protect his materialistic views from criticism, rather than to minimise their importance; one is reminded of Lenin's statement that Huxley's 'agnosticism serves as a fig-leaf for materialism.'⁶⁶

Huxley's article on Descartes' Discourse on Method (1870) exhibits in another way the same close connection between his views on the anti-theological character of modern science and the doctrine of the limits of human knowledge.⁶⁷ His chief point is that modern developments in science and philosophy stem from the systematic application of Descartes' principle that we should believe only that for which the evidence is clearly decisive.⁶⁸ (Later on in 1889 he called this maxim the agnostic principle, and, in 1893, he claimed that it was

⁶⁶ Quoted in C. Bibby, op.cit., p.63 from V.I. Lenin, Materialism and Empirio-Criticism (English Ed. 1939).

⁶⁷ The title of the article is, 'On Descartes' "Discourse Touching the Method of Using One's Reason Rightly and of Seeking Scientific Truth."

⁶⁸ Huxley's statement of Descartes' principle is: 'give unqualified assent to no proposition but those the truth of which is so clear and distinct that they cannot be doubted', (Collected Essays:vol.1, p.169).

the principle of scientific naturalism.)⁶⁹ After examining the developments in science and philosophy since Descartes, Huxley concludes: 'Of the two paths opened up to us in the "Discourse Upon Method," the one leads, by way of Berkeley and Hume, to Kant and Idealism; while the other leads by way of De La Mettrie and Priestley to modern physiology and Materialism.'⁷⁰ The agnostic theory of the nature and scope of knowledge and modern scientific materialism are, it appears, but different expressions of the one intellectual movement.

Another reason too which partially explains the wider use of the word is that the main drive in agnostic theory - that is, the theory supported by people such as Huxley, Tyndall, Clifford - during the 1870's, the period in which 'agnosticism' passed into popular use, was largely centred on the agnostics' theory of scientific method (the basic principle of which is summed up in the agnostic

69 See p. ; Cf. also the statement: 'It is important to note that the principle of the Scientific Naturalism of the latter half of the nineteenth century, in which the intellectual movement of the Renaissance has culminated, and which was first clearly formulated by Descartes, leads not to the denial of the existence of any Supernature; but simply to the denial of the validity of the evidence adduced in favour of this or of that, extant form of supernaturalism'; ('Prologue' /-1892/ Collected Essays:vol.5, p.39.)

70 T.H. Huxley, Collected Essays:vol.1, p.190.

principle) particularly as it bore upon the issues raised by claims for historical revelations of God, and the foundations of morality. Altogether then, the use of 'agnosticism' to describe the views of those who were known as agnostics on such subjects as epistemology, science, and religion is not surprising, even though it is, perhaps, a departure from Huxley's intended meaning. If it is a departure then it can best be understood as a ramification of the word's initial meaning rather than the arbitrary grafting on or another and unwarranted sense.

III

To return to our consideration of Huxley as a guide to the meaning of 'agnosticism': the survey in section II does not provide any easy solutions to the problems thrown up by Huxley's treatment of the nature of agnosticism. Three points, however, can be made about Huxley's accounts as a result of the survey. Firstly, that they lack two important features; secondly, that Huxley's view of agnosticism as a method is not empty of content; thirdly, that Huxley's two accounts correspond, in a rough fashion, to the two main types of understanding of the range of agnostic theory current amongst his contemporaries.

The two matters that Huxley's discussion

ignores or, at least tries to pass over, are the importance of Spencer's views as an expression of agnosticism, and the real relation between agnosticism and Christianity. In view of Spencer's prominence as an agnostic and his important divergence from Huxley in his theory of the limits of human knowledge, any account of nineteenth century agnosticism should make some reference to him, but Huxley limits this mention, and then not by name, to a footnote.⁷¹ Secondly, Huxley's treatment of the relation between Christianity and agnosticism is unsatisfactory because he equivocates on its nature; sometimes he claims that agnosticism has no bearing whatever on Christian theology, and at other times he argues as if it was an alternative position to Christianity, whereas it is fairly certain that his agnosticism, no matter how we interpret it, was from the start a position over and against Christian theology.⁷² Apart from any

71 As a footnote to his statement in 'Agnosticism and Christianity': 'I do not very much care to speak of anything as "unknowable"'. The footnote added in 1893 reads: 'I confess that, long ago, I once or twice made this mistake; even to the waste of a capital "U".' Collected Essays: vol. 5, p. 311.

72 Cf. his account of the coining of the word quoted on p. . Compare also the following statements: agnosticism 'has no more to do with it [religion] than it has to do with music or painting.' (op. cit., p. 250); and in 'Agnosticism and Christianity' when he is discussing Newman's theories: 'He believes that his arguments led either Homeward, or to what ecclesiastics call "Infidelity",

other confusions these two failings seriously limit the usefulness of Huxley's accounts of agnosticism.

The second point is that when we consider Huxley's view of agnosticism as a method against his essay on Descartes and the 'Prologue' to Essays upon Controverted Questions, as well as the agnostic disputes of the 1870's, it becomes clear that this theory of agnosticism is not, as Flint, Benn, and Arman believe, empty of content. For Huxley agnosticism on this view is identified particularly with the movement of scientific and philosophic thought which dates from the work of Descartes, and which has reached its culmination in the scientific and philosophic theories of the latter half of the nineteenth century. More precisely, agnosticism is the theory of the method which has given rise to 'the scientific Naturalism of the latter half of the nineteenth century, in which the intellectual movement of the Renaissance has culminated.'⁷³ As a theory, agnosticism on this view will include an incredibly wide range of matters but it will include amongst other things an account

and I call Agnosticism.' (op.cit., p.345). See also W.H. Mallock, 'Cowardly Agnosticism' in his Studies of Contemporary Superstition (Lond. 1895), esp. p.57.

73 T.H. Huxley, 'Prologue', op.cit., p.39.

of the general rules governing the application of the principle, as well as discussions of the way the principle has been applied to give rise to the doctrines of scientific naturalism.⁷⁴ But another way, the theory of agnosticism as a method includes discussions of much the same material as Ellicott and Stephen have in mind when they use the word; for the scientific naturalism to which the agnostic principle has given birth is but another name for the complex of theories which Ellicott and Stephen describe as agnosticism. Admittedly, Huxley's stress upon the method which has produced this set of beliefs gives a somewhat different emphasis to agnostic theory than (say) is found in Stephen's account (where the main emphasis is upon the doctrine of the limits of knowledge), but whilst the difference is not unimportant, it does not alter the fact that Huxley's second view of agnosticism amounts, in rough outline at least, to much the same type of thing that some of his contemporaries understood as the meaning of 'agnosticism'.

This interpretation of agnosticism as a method leads to the third point, viz., that Huxley's two accounts

74 E.A. Burt (op.cit., p.232) correctly links Huxley's view of agnosticism as a method with W.K. Clifford's material on the ethics of belief. See ch.2 section II for a brief mention of Clifford's views and chs.2.

represent the two types of view about the scope of agnosticism current in the nineteenth century. Once we have made this point we are faced with the original problem, for though the survey has revealed more clearly the nature of Huxley's accounts, it has not provided any way by which they can be reconciled. Huxley, it seems, provides inconsistent accounts of the nature of agnosticism - that is, if we take his accounts at face value. The most puzzling feature of this inconsistency is that Huxley is unaware of it. The reason for this may be, as his article on Descartes suggests, that he sees such an intimate connection between agnosticism as a method and agnosticism as a certain epistemological theory arising out of the application of the agnostic principle, that he fails to see any inconsistency in his double use of the word. Yet, even if the two accounts can be thus twisted into agreement, it is still very odd that Huxley should coin a word to describe the theory of the limits of knowledge and then apply it to the method of the movement of thought which has produced this theory along with other theories about science and religion.

Apart from the other inadequacies and confusions already noted, the fact of this inconsistency means that Huxley is not a very useful guide to the meaning of 'agnosticism'. Instead of finding in his writings a clear headed discussion of the nature of agnosticism or a

rationalisation of the various meanings of the word, we find a loose, confused and inconsistent treatment which creates more problems than it solves. At best it can be said that Huxley presents in rough outline the two major views about the range of beliefs designated by 'agnosticism.' In the rest of this work the word 'agnosticism' will be used as the name of the creed of the intellectual movement which appeared for the first time in the early 1860's.

Protestantism took away the saints who once were invisibly all about us, and now Agnosticism has taken away Providence as death takes away the mother from the child, and leaves us forlorn of protection and love.

Mark Pattison.

Chapter Two

The Origin and Pattern of Nineteenth Century Agnosticism.

Agnosticism can be considered in many ways, but from the point of view of its background it can best be regarded as the coming together in a particular form of three nineteenth century intellectual tendencies. These three tendencies are: a distrust of speculative reason; a faith in the achievements and future of science; and a critical attitude towards Christian orthodoxy. Later in this chapter the form, or to be more accurate, the forms, taken by these tendencies at the hands of the agnostics will be considered; for the present a brief sketch of some of the expressions of these tendencies in the years preceding 1860 will indicate the intellectual environment out of which agnosticism emerged.

The distrust of the reasoning faculty in religious and metaphysical matters took many forms in the first half of the nineteenth century. At the most popular level the distrust was little more than the product of a vulgar anti-intellectualism,¹ but in more sophisticated circles it received the support of the major theological and

1 For a discussion of Victorian anti-intellectualism see W.E. Houghton, The Victorian Frame of Mind 1830-1870 (New Haven, 1957), ch.5. For a contemporary statement on the prevalence of the distrust of reason in religious circles see J.D. Morell, An Historical and Critical View of the Speculative Philosophy of Europe in the Nineteenth Century. (2 vols., 2nd ed., Lond. 1847), vol.2, p.620.

philosophical movements. In the established church the Oxford Noetics - E. Copleston, E. Hawkins, R. Whately, and R.D. Hampden - and their antagonists, the Tractarians, both, for different reasons, cast doubt upon the ability of unaided human reason to arrive at truth in matters of religion.² The Noetics used their belief in the limits of human reason to bolster their claim for greater freedom in the discussion and expression of Christian dogma. Revelation, they argued, tells us of matters beyond the reach of our minds, but the knowledge thus communicated is not designed to provide the basis of a science of theology, but to guide and regulate our thoughts and practice with respect to God. Richard Whately, for example, in the Bampton Lectures for 1822, The Use and Abuse of Party Feeling in Matters of Religion, argues that we should not attempt too fine a precision in formulating religious truths, for 'though enabled by revelation to know what reason could not discover, - and though we ought to have the most undoubting confidence in the truth of God's word, - in the certainty of what is thus made known to us, yet we now "know but in part;" we see indeed many of the wonders

2 For a brief account of the Noetics and their conflict with the Tractarians see G. Faber, Oxford Apostles: A Character Study of the Oxford Movement (1933; Revised Edition, Harmondsworth 1954).

of divine providence; but we "see in a glass darkly." Nor is God revealed to us as He is in Himself, but as He is relatively to ourselves. And even the relations in which he stands to us are but imperfectly developed, though as far perhaps as our present faculties can comprehend them.'³ The most striking use by a noetic of their belief in the impotence of human reason in theological matters is found in R.D. Hampden's 1832 Bampton Lectures, The Scholastic Philosophy Considered in its Relation to Christian Theology. According to Hampden the limits of human reason are such that we cannot develop any coherent or systematic theology since 'about things Divine we can know nothing, beyond what God has been pleased to reveal to us.'⁴ In theology, theory has the negative role of clearing away the hypotheses and doctrines with which the facts of revelation have been confused or connected; the true task of theological theorising is to negate 'all ideas imported into religion beyond the express sanction of

³ R. Whately, The Use and Abuse of Party Feeling in Matters of Religion (1822; 3rd Ed. Lond. 1833), p.189.

⁴ R.D. Hampden, The Scholastic Philosophy Considered in Its Relation to Christian Theology (1832; 3rd Ed. Lond. 1848), p.xlviii.

Revelation.'⁵

The Noetics' concern for greater freedom in theological thought and their disparagement of the authoritative and scientific character of the creeds of the Church provoked a vigorous reaction from the Tractarians, who held the facts of Scripture and the elaboration and systematisation of such facts in the creeds to be equally binding upon the minds of men. But while the Tractarians were certain that human reason, in the providence of God, could attain to precise answers in questions of dogma, they also taught a 'strong' doctrine of the impotence of reason in religious matters. The simple unaided use of human reason, they argued, will never lead to the conviction that the fundamental claims of the Christian faith are true. W.G. Ward, one of the two leading philosophical thinkers in the movement - the other was J.H. Newman - put this case strongly in his The Ideal of a Christian Church; in this book, his son writes, he maintains 'that intellectual inquiry, pure and simple, gives no sufficient assurance of any religious truth - not even of the exist-ence of God;'.⁶ The only basis upon which belief in God can be safely grounded is in the

5 ibid., p.377.

6 W. Ward, William George Ward and the Oxford Movement (Lond. 1889) p.251.

teachings of the correctly formed conscience: 'If conscience be not on all moral and religious subjects paramount,' Ward writes, 'then it does not really exist; if it do not exist we have no reason whatever, nay, no power whatever, to believe in God ...'⁷

Theologians and churchmen were not the only thinkers to teach doctrines of the impotence of human reason in certain matters; the two leading philosophers of the period, Sir William Hamilton and John Stuart Mill, both taught in their different ways that there are matters completely and necessarily outside the reach of reason.⁸

7 Cited from W.G. Ward, The Ideal of a Christian Church in C.C.J. Webb, Religious Thought in the Oxford Movement (Lond. 1928), p.70. A similar distrust of the ability of pure reason to arrive at Christian truth characterises Newman's account of religious belief in Fifteen Sermons Preached Before the University of Oxford (1843; New Ed., Lond. 1887). Faith, he writes, 'is an act of Reason, but of what the world would call weak, bad, or insufficient Reason;' (p.204) and, 'Faith is a moral principle' (p.191). The nature and extent of Newman's scepticism is, however, no easy question; cf. J.M. Cameron, 'The Night Battle: Newman and Empiricism' Victorian Studies, 4, 1960; and C. Chadwick, The Mind of the Oxford Movement (Lond. 1960), pp.42-46.

8 A fact noted by contemporary historians of philosophy; see G.H. Lewes, The History of Philosophy from Thales to Comte (2 vols., 5th ed., Lond. 1880), 2, pp.754-5; D. Masson, Recent British Philosophy, p.296.

According to Hamilton, in his influential article 'On the Philosophy of the Unconditioned', the fact that we can know only that of which we are conscious means, upon analysis, that there are two types of object which we are forever precluded from knowing: they are objects as they are in themselves independently of our being aware of them; and objects such as the Infinite and the Absolute, if there are any such entities, whose very nature prevents them from entering any relation. Yet the fact that we can never be conscious of the Unconditioned does not justify disbelief in its existence, or the belief that we can never determine whether it does exist. In fact, Hamilton contends, there are strong reasons for believing in the existence of the Unconditioned being, but the limits imposed upon us by the nature of our consciousness prevent us from ever being able to construct a science of the Unconditioned; the end of philosophical speculations on such matters can only be a 'learned ignorance.'⁹ 'We are thus taught the salutary lesson', Hamilton writes, 'that the capacity of thought is not to be constituted into the measure of existence, and are warned from recognizing the domain of our knowledge

9 'On Philosophy of the Unconditioned' Edinburgh Review October, 1829; reprinted in Sir William Hamilton, Discussions on Philosophy, and Literature, Education and University Reform (Edinb. 1852), p.37.

as necessarily co-extensive with the horizon of our faith.'¹⁰ J.S. Mill, unlike Hamilton and his chief English disciple, H.L. Mansel, does not make the doctrine of learned ignorance central to his philosophy. In broad outlines, however, he agrees with their doctrine that much, if not all, metaphysical speculation is doomed to failure because of the necessary limits of human knowledge; 'it is necessary to remark,' Mill writes, 'that on the inmost nature (whatever he meant by inmost nature) of the thinking principle, as well as on the inmost nature of matter, we are and, with our faculties must always remain, entirely in the dark.'¹¹

Confidence in the achievements and future of science is another marked feature of intellectual life in the decades before the advent of agnosticism. Few who had any sympathy with scientific work would have disagreed with William Whewell's aphorism: 'Man is the interpreter of Nature, Science the right interpretation.'¹² But while many had a 'high' view of science, there were important disagreements about the nature and scope of scientific

10 *ibid.*, p.15

11 J.S. Mill, A System of Logic; Ratiocinative and Inductive (1843). Abridged version of 8th Edition, Edited by E. Nagel, John Stuart Mill's Philosophy of Scientific Method (N.Y. 1950), pp.48-9.

12 W. Whewell, The Philosophy of the Inductive Sciences (2 vols., Lond. 1840), vol.1 p.xvii.

activity. In very broad terms, the main difference, from the viewpoint of later developments, concerned the relation of theology to science: more particularly, the relation of theology to the palaetiological sciences.¹³ On one side of the conflict were those who found in the study of natural history various evidences for the existence of a divine being, whose active intervention in the course of nature was postulated to explain certain otherwise inexplicable events. On the other side were those who believed that while science pointed to the existence of God, the use of theological explanations in the study of natural history represented a confusion of theology and science. Discussions of this question before the appearance of agnosticism did not settle the conflict for once and for all, but they provided the materials on which the agnostics were to put forward their own naturalistic theory of science.

In geology the conflict reached its profoundest heights in the period between 1820 and 1850. During this

¹³ My account of the relation between theology and the palaetiological sciences is drawn from C.C. Gillispie, Genesis and Geology: A Study of the Relations of Scientific Thought, Natural Theology, and Social Opinion in Great Britain, 1790-1850 (1951, Harper Torchbook Edn. N.Y. 1959); and A. Ellegard, Darwin and the General Reader: The Acceptance of Darwin's Theory of Evolution in the British Periodical Press, 1859-1872. (Goteborg 1958). A discussion of the precise logical relations between the various developments in geology and biology is given in R. Hooykaas, Natural Law and Divine Miracle: A Historical-Critical Study of the Principle of Uniformity in Geology, Biology and Theology (Leiden 1959), chs. 1 and 2.

time two rival schools of geological thought, the catastrophists and the uniformitarians, came into conflict over the method to be used in studying the geological history of the earth. The catastrophists, led by William Buckland, argued that the earth's structure showed that in times past forces, extraordinary in their scope and intensity, had operated on the earth's surface; these forces, which are no longer operative, are to be attributed, they contended, to the direct and providential working of God. Charles Lyell, whose Principles of Geology (1830-33) provided the main statement of the uniformitarian position, controverted the catastrophist's doctrine when he argued that a scientific account of the workings of the universe is possible only if we accept the view 'that all former changes of the organic and inorganic creation are referrible to one uninterrupted succession of physical events, governed by the laws now in operation.'¹⁴ According to Lyell, if geology is to be a science it must be based on the methodological principle that the past history of the earth's structure is to be explained in terms of causes now operating. What is more, the uniformitarians argued, it is quite possible to give a naturalistic account of the earth's geological history in terms of existing causes; there is no need to have recourse to any catastrophic type explanations. On this view geology

teaches nothing about the providence of God; theology and geology are separate studies not to be confused with one another.

The gradual acceptance of uniformitarianism in geology, however, did not settle the question of the place of theology in the palaeontological sciences. Uniformitarians, their critics argued, if their approach to natural history is to be accepted, must show how in the past the marked transition from one set of living things to a completely new set came about; if they cannot, then we are justified in regarding these discontinuities in the history of living things as the result of divine intervention. 'We conceive it undeniable,' Whewell writes, '(and Mr. Lyell would probably agree with us,) that we see in the transition from an earth peopled by one set of animals, to the same earth swarming with entirely new forms of organic life, a distinct manifestation of creative power, transcending the known laws of nature; and, it appears to us, that geology has thus lighted a new lamp along the paths of natural theology.'¹⁵ If not geology,

15 Cited by C.C. Gillispie, *op.cit.*, p.146. W. Cannon has challenged the use made of this quotation by Gillispie (whose interpretation is followed in my account) on the ground that 'since in contemporary scientific usage the term "creative power" merely means whatever unknown power has produced species and did not imply the supernatural, Whewell had not as yet allied himself with the miraculous.' ('The Problem of Miracles in the 1830's,' *Victorian Studies*, 4, 1960, p.8 & ft.nt.5.) His point, however, seems to be refuted by the fact that he

then it still appeared that the history of biological and zoological forms showed the existence of God and his providential care.

Between 1840 and 1860 two events occurred which shook, if they did not shatter, the case for theological explanations within biology: they were the publication of Robert Chamber's Vestiges of Creation (1844) and Charles Darwin's On the Origin of Species (1859). Chambers, whilst acknowledging that the existence of law in the universe pointed to an intelligence behind the universe, attempted to give a naturalistic account of the development of all living things; his attempt, because of its lack of empirical justification, was not particularly successful: it caused more upset to those who considered that science justified their belief in divine providence, than positive satisfaction to those who wished to see science freed from the burden of natural theology.¹⁶ This burden

does not consider the complete quotation: his own citation of the passage leaves out the section which follows on '... transcends the known laws of nature:...', and this section indicates that Whewell has miraculous creative acts in mind.

16 For example, Darwin wrote to J.D. Hooker in 1844: '... I have also read the "Vestiges" but have been somewhat less amused at it than you appear to have been: the writing and arrangement are certainly admirable, but his geology strikes me as bad, and his zoology far worse.', Francis Darwin, The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin (1888, Basic Books N.Y.1960 2 vols.), vol.1 pp.301-2; and Huxley writes: 'As for the "Vestiges", I confess that the book simply irritated me by the prodigious ignorance and thoroughly unscientific habit of mind mani-

was not lifted until the end of the 1850's when the appearance of Darwin's work provided (or so it seemed to some) a naturalistic and empirically based account of the origin and development of living things by the mechanism of natural selection. The last refuge of theological explanations within science was taken; the hypothesis of special creation, Huxley wrote in 1860, 'marks the youth and imperfections of the science. For what is the history of every science but the history of the elimination of the notion of creative, or other interferences, with the natural order of the phenomena which are the subject matter of that science?'¹⁷ Not everyone agreed with Huxley - for instance, the members of the Victoria Institute¹⁸ - but the way was now clear for the development of a theory of science completely independent of theological conceptions.

festated by the writer. If it had any influence on me at all, it set me against Evolution.', 'On the Reception of the "Origin of Species" in F. Darwin, op.cit., 1, p.542. For the religious reaction to The Vestiges of Creation see C.C. Gillispie, op.cit., ch.8, and J.D. Morell, op.cit., 2, p.568.

17 T.H. Huxley, 'The Origin of Species' (1860) Collected Essays: vol.2, p.58.

18 The Victoria Institute or Philosophical Society of Great Britain, which was established in 1866 to defend Christian doctrine, was not officially committed to catastrophic type theories of science, but many of its members subscribed to such views; see, for example, the reactions to G. Warrington's paper, 'On the Credibility of Darwinism' Journal of the Transactions of the Victoria Institute, or Philosophical Society of Great Britain, 2, 1867.

The third tendency in the first half of the century which exerted a marked influence on the intellectual life of the period after 1860 was the growing attitude of criticism towards the cardinal doctrines of the various Christian orthodoxies. Three major areas of criticism can be singled out. Firstly, there was criticism of traditional patterns of belief on moral grounds. 'The doctrine of the Atonement,' Benjamin Jowett writes, 'has often been explained in a way at which our moral feelings revolt. God is represented as angry with us for what we never did; He is ready to inflict a disproportionate punishment on us for what we are; He is satisfied by the sufferings of His Son in our stead. The sin of Adam is first imputed to us; then the righteousness of Christ. The imperfection of human law is transferred to the Divine; or rather a figment of law which has no real existence.'¹⁹ For Jowett and his colleagues in the Broad Church party the immediate task was clear: doctrines of original sin, the atonement, eternal punishment, and so on, should be purified of their morally primitive trappings

19 B. Jowett, The Epistle to the Thessalonians Galatians and Romans (1855; 2nd Ed. Lond. 1859 2 vols), 2, p.547. The reception accorded to the first edition led Jowett to tone down some of his vigorous statements on the doctrine of the atonement. Cf. E. Abbott and L. Campbell, The Life and Letters of Benjamin Jowett, M.A.: Master of Balliol College, Oxford (2 vols. Lond. 1897), 1, pp.233-5, p.251.

and their spiritual nature made manifest; others, such as F.W. Newman, J.A. Froude and Mary Ann Evans, with perhaps sounder sense, took another line: since the essential doctrines of Christianity are immoral in content, Christianity is not to be revised but rejected.²⁰

Secondly, the orthodox view of the accuracy and authority of the Bible came under fire because of the various scientific inaccuracies found in the Scriptures; a literal interpretation of Genesis, for example, could not not easily be squared with the facts of geology. For some this was no problem: the Bible, they argued, was designed to teach moral and religious truth, not the facts of science;²¹ others, such as the Bampton Lecturer for 1833, saw the religious and scientific accuracy of the Bible as one issue: 'The sacred legislator, it is admitted, addresses us in a religious, not in a philosophical character; but in demanding our assent to communi-

20 For a brief account of their reaction see H.R. Murphy, 'The Ethical Revolt Against Christian Orthodoxy in Early Victorian England' American Historical Review, 60, 1954-55.

21 For example, J.H. Newman writes: 'This opposition between Faith and Reason takes place in two ways when either of the two encroaches upon the province of the other. It would be an absurdity to attempt to find out mathematical truths by the purity and acuteness of the moral sense. It is a form of this mistake which has led men to apply such Scriptural communications as are intended for religious purposes to the determination of physical questions.' (op.cit., pp.58-9). See also C.C. Gillispie, op.cit., pp.223-26.

cations, as delivered by inspiration, we have some right to expect, that as far as they extend they should maintain their pretensions to infallibility.'²² This latter view, the popular theory of the Bible, did not stand up well to critical scrutiny. Closely related to scientific criticisms of the Bible was the more damaging contention, and one less easily dodged, that the Scriptures when judged by the standards of critical history were doubtful records of many of the events they recorded. The effect of such criticism was to cast doubt upon the historicity of the central events of the life of Israel, the ministry of Jesus, and the development of the early church.²³

Thirdly, the growth of scientific and technological knowledge during the first six decades of the century contributed to the critical attitude towards Christian belief, because it led to ways of thinking about the world which were out of sympathy with accepted doctrines of providence and the supernatural.²⁴ At the theoretical

22 F. Nolan, The Analogy of Revelation and Science, pp.44-5. Quoted by H.D. McDonald, Ideas of Revelation: An Historical Study A.D.1700 to A.D.1860, (Lond.1959), p.124

23 V.F. Storr, The Development of English Theology in the Nineteenth Century 1800-1860 (Lond.1913) Provides an account of Biblical criticism in England. Cf. chs. 9,10,11.

24 A fact recognized by both Christian and non-Christian thinkers: for example, J.H. Newman, op.cit., p.194; R. Whately, Essays on Some of the Dangers of the Christian Faith (2nd Ed. Lond. 1847), p.78 & p.86; J.D. Morell, op.cit., 2, pp.586-7; J. Tyndall, 'Reflections on Prayer and Natural Law' (1861) Fragments of Science (6th Ed. Lond. 1879 2 vols.), I.

level this divorce between the theological and scientific view of the world is reflected in the conflicts over the method to be used in the palaeontological sciences, and later, during the sixties and seventies, in the conflicts surrounding miracles and the efficacy of prayer.

Towards the end of the 1850's three books were published which exercised a considerable influence on future expressions of the three intellectual tendencies we have been considering; and this influence extended particularly to the shape given these tendencies by the agnostics. The three books are H.L. Mansel's The Limits of Religious Thought (1858), Darwin's On the Origin of Species (1859), and the collection Essays and Reviews (1860). Mansel's book provided one of the most sustained and popular Victorian expositions of the limits of human knowledge and the futility of transcendental metaphysics; Darwin's work in effect destroyed the last link between faith in the achievements and future of science and the belief that science provides evidence for the tenets of natural theology; and Essays and Reviews brought into striking prominence the dissatisfactions that many within the Church of England felt towards orthodox patterns of religious belief. Of the three works only Mansel's made a direct contribution to agnostic theory; the other two made possible the development and spreading abroad of agnosticism but they did not directly contribute

to it. Because of Darwin's work the agnostics were able to press on with their naturalistic version of the nature and scope of science; whilst the writers of Essays and Reviews made it possible for all who were critical of Christian theology, such as the agnostics, to speak their minds with greater freedom.

II

The agnostics all subscribed to some theory of the limits of human thought, but only two of them, Spencer and Huxley, attempted to state their theories in any detail. In their attempts both these writers were influenced, though in different ways, by certain sections of Mansel's The Limits of Religious Thought, the Bampton Lectures for 1858.²⁵ The main aim of Mansel's work is to undercut

25 Mansel's influence upon the agnostics was widely recognized in the nineteenth century; see, e.g., L. Stephen, 'An Agnostic's Apology', op.cit., pp.8-9; [] 'The Sources of Modern Agnosticism', The Month, 45, 1882. Because of this connection his reputation as a Christian apologist became somewhat tarnished, and his friends felt constrained to make excuses for him; see, e.g., J.J. Lias' paper, 'Is it Possible to Know God?' (Considerations of "The Unknown" and "Unknowable" of Modern Thought)' and the discussion following it in the Journal of the Transactions of the Victoria Institute or Philosophical Society of Great Britain, 17, 1884; and J.W. Burgon 'Henry Longueville Mansel' Lives of Twelve Good Men (2 vols. 5th ed. Lond. 1889), 2, pp.201-07. Other commentators on agnosticism have also noticed it; A.W. Benn, for example, writes: 'English agnosticism owes its individual character to his [i.e. Mansel's] Bampton Lectures; but it also resulted from a far wider movement of thought, which had been in progress for over a century.' op.cit., 2, p.199.

philosophical criticism of the Christian faith by showing that philosophical thought is necessarily unable to arrive at truth in such matters. Both Spencer and Huxley were impressed by Mansel's arguments to show the limits of philosophical thought; the other sections of his work in which he attempts to relate his doctrine of necessary ignorance to the origin of the concept of God, the nature and status of analogical descriptions of the deity, and the ways of determining the truth of alleged revelations, they either neglected or rejected.

Mansel's argument to show that philosophical and religious thought is necessarily limited is in two stages. The first consists in showing that every attempt to develop a theory of absolute existence - theism, pantheism, and atheism are the three he considers - has been and is plagued by contradictions. This fact alone, however, is not sufficient to justify the claim that philosophical thought is impotent in face of the question of the nature of existence. To show that this problem exceeds the reach of man's mind, it is necessary, Mansel argues, to consider the conditions governing human consciousness (for Mansel in common with the empiricist tradition believes that a man can only know or think about that which is some mode or other of his consciousness.) The second stage of his argument consists therefore in describing and analysing the conditions of human conscious-

ness. This analysis, Mansel argues, leads to the conclusion that man cannot by speculative means know the truth nor think validly about the nature of existence, since the conditions governing human awareness restrict the range of man's thought to the finite and the relative. We are never in a position to say on speculative grounds whether there is an absolute existence or not; the very nature of our knowledge prevents us from ever constructing a consistent ontological theory. Mansel's argument does not stop at this point - it could hardly do so as he is setting out to defend the Christian faith - but it was this section of his work that most positively influenced the agnostics.

In his First Principles Herbert Spencer takes over both sections of Mansel's argument and uses them to elaborate and explain his claim that despite appearances, science and religion are in accord with one another: they both teach that the universe is surrounded by an impenetrable mystery. Even Spencer's procedure has a rough similarity with Mansel's. Firstly, like Mansel, he examines the conflicting systems of thought - in his case, science and religion - and points to the features common to both systems; then he develops a theory of the nature and limits of knowledge to further explain and elaborate what is common to science and religion. In the first stage of his argument, the analysis of the basic

concepts of science and religion, Spencer clearly borrows from Mansel, or at least has been strongly influenced by Mansel's work, though he does not acknowledge the extent of his debt. His contention in this section is that the ultimate ideas or basic concepts of science, for example, space and time, and those of religion, for example, theism, pantheism, and atheism, are inadequate, and so cannot be said to represent reality as it is.

Why are we unable to form concepts that accurately reflect reality? The answer to this question, the second section of his argument, consists in large part of quotations and restatements of Mansel's account of the nature and limits of knowledge. Spencer, however, does more than simply repeat Mansel's theories; in one important point he amends this position. "Whereas Mansel claims that the necessary limits of thought prevent us from deciding on speculative grounds which theory of absolute existence, if any, is correct, Spencer contends that the reasons which support the view that our thought is necessarily limited also involve the conclusion that there is something beyond the range of our knowledge, a something which can be described as the Unknowable. The mystery which surrounds the ultimate ideas of science and religion is the mystery of this ineffable reality.

Whilst Mansel's contribution to Spencer's doctrine of the limits of knowledge is clearcut and

substantial, his role in the formation of Huxley's theory is less direct and more in the form of an influence. Huxley's early thought on the limits of human knowledge was strongly shaped by The Limits of Religious Thought, though the more specifically Christian elements in Mansel's work he regarded as inconsistent with his theory of necessary ignorance. Concerning the Lectures he wrote in 1858 to Charles Lyell: 'although, regarding the author as a Churchman, you will probably compare him, as I did, to the drunken fellow in Hogarth's Contested Election, who is sawing through the signpost of the other party's public-house, forgetting that he is sitting at the other end of it. But read them as a piece of clear and unanswerable reasoning.'²⁶ When Huxley came to state his own theory of ignorance he found the reasons for his position not in Mansel or Spencer but in what he took to be the epistemological theory of David Hume. However, whilst Huxley finds the main inspiration for his theory outside of the Hamiltonian tradition, the basis upon which he erects his position is the same as Mansel's and Spencer's, viz., that all our knowledge is knowledge of our own minds or states of consciousness. Unlike

²⁶ Quoted by Lyell in a letter; [K.M.] Lyell, Life, Letters and Journals of Sir Charles Lyell (2 vols., Lond. 1881), 2, p.321. Cf. also T.H. Huxley, 'Agnosticism' Collected Essays: vol.5, pp.335-6.

Mansel and Spencer, Huxley's argument is little more than a gloss on this position, a gloss which leads him into a radical subjectivism. Since we can know only our own states of consciousness, it follows, he claims, that we can never know whether these mental states answer to anything outside the range of our awareness, or whether in fact there is anything other than our consciousness; the limits of the individual's consciousness are the limits of his knowledge. This view of the limits of knowledge conveniently rules out of court as futile all speculations about the existence of God, the Unknowable, and other metaphysical entities; at the same time it inconveniently places the objective existence of nervous systems, physical objects and other minds in the same category. For Huxley this is a marked inconvenience since he also believes in the public character of scientific knowledge, a belief which presupposes, or so he thought, the existence of an external world and other minds. As a result Huxley and his colleagues, Clifford and Stephen, who more or less hold the same view of the limits of knowledge, attempted to reconcile their epistemological views with their belief in the external world and the

27 For example, he writes: 'All physical science starts from certain postulates. One of them is the objective existence of a material world' 'The Progress of Science', Collected Essays: vol.1, p.60.

existence of other minds.²⁸ They were not alone in this concern: both Mansel and Spencer are faced with the same type of problem and they both attempt to surmount it;²⁹ but in one sense at least it is a more pressing problem for Huxley and the agnostics closest to him because of their main interest in the doctrine of necessary ignorance is not to defend religion or to reconcile it with science, but to defend the claim that science alone provides true knowledge and to protect science from the charge of being materialistic.³⁰

While the agnostics connect in a general fashion, as outlined above, their theories of the limits of thought with their convictions about the objective and public character of scientific knowledge, they make

28 See e.g. T.H. Huxley, 'The Progress of Science' op.cit.; L. Stephen, 'Materialism', op.cit.; W.K. Clifford, 'On the Nature of Things-in Themselves' Lectures and Essays (2 vols. Lond.1879) Ed. L. Stephen & F. Pollock, 2.

29 See e.g. H.L. Mansel, Metaphysics or the Philosophy of Consciousness Phenomenal and Real (4th ed. Edinb.1883. Originally published as an article on metaphysics 8th Ed. Encyclopaedia Britannica 1857), p.336 ff.; and H. Spencer op.cit., p.69f. & pp.79-80; and H. Spencer, The Principles of Psychology (2 vols., 2nd Ed., Lond.1870)2, part 7.

30 Cf. e.g. Huxley's statements quoted on p note also Stephen's statement: 'Modern men of science have abandoned it [materialism] as completely as metaphysicians. If human knowledge be merely relative and we are restrained by the law of our nature from penetrating to the absolute of things, it comes to much the same, whether we call everything matter of everything spirit; for in each case, we only assert that everything is some unknowable X or Y.' 'Darwinism and Divinity', Essays on Freethinking and Plainspeaking (Lond. 1873), pp.89-90.

little attempt to relate their epistemological doctrines to their views of the nature of science or the errors of orthodox religion (a fact not so surprising in view of the Christian use of the doctrine of the impotence of reason.³¹). But if the connections between their epistemological views and the other aspects of their creed are undeveloped, it is otherwise with their doctrine of science and their rejection of Christianity: science, according to the agnostics, is in direct opposition to theology, and for this reason theology is to be rejected.³² The pattern of their argument becomes clearer when we look more closely at their doctrine of science.

Broadly speaking, the agnostics agree in two main points about science: firstly, that the domain of science includes all phenomenal reality; secondly, that the only way to attain knowledge, the only morally right and

31 Stephen attempts to argue that the Christian use of the doctrine of human ignorance destroys or vitiates the dogma it is designed to protect in his 'An Agnostic's Apology', An Agnostic's Apology and Other Essays.

32 As one Christian observer, W. Mitchell, expressed it: 'No one who watches the expression of thought by the cultivated intellectual classes of this country through its literature, can deny that the opinion that science and revelation are directly opposed to each other has been spreading abroad with frightful rapidity,' 'Inaugural Lecture', Journal of the Transactions of the Victoria Institute or Philosophical Society of Great Britain, 1, 1867, p.45.

scientific way, is by making sure that our beliefs are always in strict accord with the evidence available for them. In the development of these beliefs important differences appear in the expression of the agnostic doctrine of science, but despite these differences there is a unity of spirit and intention in their efforts to elaborate the doctrine.

The agnostics, as Tyndall's 'Belfast Address' (1874) and Huxley's 'Prologue' (1892) make quite clear, saw their theory of the scope and nature of science as the one suggested by the history of science.³³ However, it was the recent developments in scientific thought, particularly in biology, which provided the main and immediate encouragement for their view. Darwin's On the Origin of Species, as far as the agnostics were concerned, removed the last major barrier to the belief that a systematic and complete knowledge of the physical universe

33 For example, consider the following statements: '... the scientific naturalism of the latter half of the nineteenth century, in which the intellectual movement of the Renaissance has culminated...', T.H. Huxley, 'Prologue', Collected Essays: Vol.5, p.38; and, 'The impregnable position of science may be described in a few words. We claim, and we shall wrest from theology, the entire domain of cosmological theory. All schemes and systems which thus infringe upon the domain of science must, in so far as they do this, submit to its control, and relinquish all thought of controlling it. Acting otherwise proved always disastrous in the past, and it is simply fatuous to-day.', J. Tyndall, 'The Belfast Address', op.cit., p.199.

is possible, and gave a fillip to the view that not only the physical universe but the moral, mental, and social features of human existence, both past and present, are part of the preserve of science.³⁴ What drew critical attention to the agnostic account, however, was not simply their attempt to redraw the boundaries of science, but the claim with which this reclassification was accompanied: viz., that a scientific account of all aspects of the universe is possible because natural laws govern the whole of phenomenal reality. According to the agnostics scientific knowledge - knowledge, that is, which enables us to account for the past, explain the present, and predict the future - is possible only because the scientific investigation of nature informs us of laws which hold in all places at all times.³⁵ If nature is

34 Consider, e.g., Stephen's statement in 'The Effect of Darwin's Discoveries and Methods': 'Briefly it may be described as the substitution of a belief in gradual evolution for a belief in spasmodic action and occasional outbursts of creative energy; of the acceptance of the corollary that we must seek for the explanation of facts or ideas by tracing their history instead of accounting for them by some short a priori method; and thus of the adoption of the historical method in all manner of investigations into social, and political, and religious problems which were formerly solved by a much more summary, if not more satisfactory method.', Essays on Freethinking and Plainspeaking, p.93.

35 For example, Huxley writes: 'The fundamental axiom of scientific thought is that there is not, never has been, and never will be, any disorder in nature. The admission of the occurrence of any event which was not

not universally and absolutely uniform in its operations, then a scientific account of the various aspects of the universe is not possible; there could only be a science of the catastrophic sort which accepts mystery as part and parcel of the universe.

Not all the agnostics, however, were prepared to express their doctrine of science in these terms; some of them were too aware of the difficulties in face of it. There are two main objections to this statement of the agnostic doctrine of science: firstly, the claim that nature is absolutely and universally uniform cannot be shown to be true; secondly, if the agnostics persist in holding to this belief in spite of criticism, then they are in effect denying that their method is the only morally right and sure way to attain truth. Huxley for one was prepared to live with both criticisms. 'The one act of faith in the convert to science', he writes, 'is the confession of the universality of order and of the absolute validity in all times and under all circumstances, of the law of causation. This confession is an act of

the logical consequence of the immediately antecedent events according to these definite, ascertained, or unascertainable rules, which we call the 'laws of nature,' would be an act of self-destruction on the part of science.' Essays Upon Controverted Questions (Lond. 1892), p.247. Cited by A. Ellegård, 'Darwinian Theory and Nineteenth Century Philosophies of Science,' Journal of the History of Ideas Vol.18, 1957, p.379.

faith, because by the nature of the case, the truth of such propositions is not susceptible of proof. But such faith is not blind, but reasonable, because it is invariably confirmed by experience, and constitutes the sole trustworthy foundation of all action.'³⁶ The faith may be reasonably based, but Clifford and Stephen, particularly the former, were not prepared to rest their account of science on such a basis, nor were they willing to jeopardise their claims about the scientific method by allowing the substitution of a reasonable faith for the lack of conclusive evidence. For these reasons Clifford, and to some extent Stephen,³⁷ attempted to restate the agnostic view of science in a way which would preserve the main points of the agnostic account, whilst freeing it from the objections which can be lodged against (say Huxley's presentation of it.

Unlike his colleagues, Clifford does not describe the nature and scope of science in terms of

36 T.H. Huxley, 'Professor Huxley on the Reception of the "Origin of Species"', in F. Darwin, op.cit., 1, p.553. Cf. also J. Tyndall's statement made in 1861 about the influence of prayer: 'It seems to me quite beyond the present power of science to demonstrate that the Tyrolese priest, or his colleague of the Rhone Valley, asked for an "impossibility" in praying for good weather'. 'Reflections on Prayer and Natural Law', op.cit., 2, p.5

37 See L. Stephen's unpublished Metaphysical Society paper, 'The Uniformity of Nature, March 11, 1879; a micro-film copy of which is in the Library of the Australian University. A.W. Brown, The Metaphysical Society, p.335, lists it as paper 82.

its subject matter, and then annex a theory of scientific method to this account; rather, he commences with a theory of method and describes the nature and scope of science in terms drawn from this methodology. Clifford's theory of method is most fully stated in 'The Ethics of Belief,' and though it is not free of ambiguity nor completely rounded, it is possible to distinguish the three main propositions in which it consists.³⁸ They are: firstly, that we are morally bound to form our beliefs in strict accord with the evidence available; secondly, that we have a right to believe only that which can be verified; thirdly, that which cannot be verified cannot serve as a genuine belief, which is to say that it cannot determine or affect our behaviour. In the course of developing these points Clifford arrives at certain conclusions about the status of the proposition 'nature is uniform' and provides his own statement of the scope of science. In the first instance he agrees with the critics of agnosticism that the evidence available justifies only the belief that 'nature is practically uniform as far as we are concerned.'³⁹ but he immediately couples this admission with the contention that we are never justified and can

38 W.K. Clifford, op.cit., 2.

39 W.K. Clifford, op.cit., 2, p.210.

never be justified in either affirming or denying that 'nature is absolutely and universally uniform.' The third point in his theory is that the only statements which can serve as genuine beliefs are those in accord with our justified belief in nature's uniformity; statements about events such as miracles, which are contrary not only to our experience of nature but are contrary as well to the statement that 'nature is absolutely and universally uniform', can never be verified and consequently can never determine our behaviour. The scientist, therefore, does not have to disturb himself about the possibilities of discontinuities in nature, because the existence of such 'events' could have no bearing on his or on anyone else's theory of the workings of the universe; his only concern is with that about which knowledge and truth can be attained. 'What is the domain of Science?' Clifford asks: 'It is all possible human knowledge which can rightly be used to guide human conduct.'⁴⁰ This view of the scope of science differs from the other agnostic version in more than terminology, but in spirit the two accounts are one: they both claim that science alone provides knowledge.

For the most part the anti-Christian character

40 W.K. Clifford, 'Body and Mind,' op.cit., 2, p.70.

of agnosticism stems from the agnostic's doctrine of science. There are two broad points at which their theory cut across Victorian Christian orthodoxy: the occurrence of miracles, and the theological basis of morality. The agnostics were clear cut in their rejection of the miraculous; 'The scientific reasoner,' Stephen writes, presenting their position, 'holds by the continuity and uniformity of nature; theology accepts a dualism which implies catastrophe and the interference of a radically unknowable factor.'⁴¹ When it came to giving detailed reasons in support of their opposition to the miraculous most of the agnostics found that there was no short way to establish the truth of their position. Discussions of the character and status of 'the uniformity of nature' by both friend, such as W.K. Clifford, and foe, such as J.B. Mozley, made it clear that there is no a priori way of ruling out the possibility of miraculous happenings.⁴² Accepting this point, the agnostics devoted

41 L. Stephen, 'The Scepticism of Believers', An Agnostic's Apology and Other Essays, p.82.

42 W.K. Clifford, 'The Aims and Instruments of Scientific Thought', op.cit., 1; J.B. Mozley, Eight Lectures on Miracles Bampton Lectures, 1865. (8th ed, Lond. 1890). Mozley's lectures are the most elaborate treatment of miracles from the position of orthodox Christianity. They are directed against religious disbelievers such as the agnostics and the liberal group within the Church, the Broad Church party. J. Tyndall attacked Mozley's Lectures but only succeeded in harassing

their efforts to showing that there are no adequate a posteriori grounds for asserting that any miracles have taken place.⁴³ 'The real objection,' Huxley writes, 'and

him; see his 'Miracles and Special Providences', Fragments of Science, 2, and Mozley's reply, 'Of Christ Alone Without Sin,' Contemporary Review, 7, 1868. During the 1860's and 1870's there were a spate of works dealing with the question of miracles from the orthodox camp; see, e.g., H.L. Mansel's 'On Miracles as Evidences of Christianity,' Ed. W. Thomson, Aids to Faith (1861, 3rd ed., 1870); C.A. Heurtley, 'Miracles', Replies to 'Essays and Reviews', (Oxford and Lond. 1862); G. Warrington Can we Believe in Miracles? (Lond. n.d.); J.J. Lias, Are Miracles Credible? (Lond. 1883).

43 By and large it is true to say that discussion of the nature of evidence for miracles, and more generally of the nature of evidence for any unusual event, came to the fore in the 1870's. During this decade, particularly in the meetings of the Metaphysical Society, (Cf. A.W. Brown, op.cit., p.70) the agnostics and their critics dispensed with questions of the a priori possibility of miracles and turned to questions of the nature of evidence, if any, that could be tendered for miracles. J.B. Mozley noted this change of emphasis in the preface to the third edition (n.d.) of his On Miracles: 'The more the human mind has gone into this question, the more it has seen reason to put aside all a priori ground against miracles as wholly inadequate, and to consider that the only question which has to be decided on this subject and which seriously demands our attention, is the question of evidence - whether certain alleged miracles have taken place or not.' op.cit., p.xxiii. On this matter the Christian opponents of agnosticism were well aware that the following of the agnostics' scientific method with respect to the miracles of the New Testament could at best lead to the statement that these events probably occurred - a position far short of the Christian claim that these events did occur. Some Christian apologists therefore attempted to develop their own theory of method and evidence with respect to religious matters. The most important of these attempts are: J. Venn, On Some of the Characteristics of Belief, Hulsean Lectures, 1869, (Lond.1870); J.H. Newman, An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent(1870; N.Y.1955); A.F.J. Hort, The Way, The Truth and The Life, Hulsean Lectures 1871, (1st ed., Lond. 1893; 2nd ed. Lond. 1908); H. Wace, The Foundations of Faith Bampton Lectures 1879 (Lond. 1879);

to my mind, the fatal objection to both these suppositions /i.e. the efficacy of prayer and the occurrence of miracles/ is the inadequacy of the evidence to prove any given case of such occurrences which has been advanced.⁴⁴ If we form our beliefs according to the scientific method, they argued, then we are not justified in believing that there have ever been any miraculous events. The two main exponents of this line of reasoning, Clifford and Huxley, develop their arguments in quite different ways. Clifford, working with some clear views about the nature of evidence, presents a strong case against believing in the occurrence of miracles: there is no evidence and there can be no evidence to justify our believing that a miracle has occurred.⁴⁵ Huxley's presentation of the agnostic case is less forceful simply because he does little more than present his position in outline form. His argument - which he takes direct from Hume - is that in examining alleged miraculous happenings we must work with the principle that the more incredible an alleged event is, then the more impeccable must be the evidence

J.B. Mozley, 'Evidence,' Lectures and Other Theological Papers (Lond. 1883).

44 T.H. Huxley, 'An Episcopal Trilogy,' Collected Essays vol.5, p.135.

45 W.K. Clifford, 'The Ethics of Belief,' op.cit., 2.

for its happening; if we operate on this principle, he contends, it is clear that we are not entitled to believe than any miracles have occurred. How we might apply this principle to obtain such ambitious results, Huxley does not explain in any detail; he rests content in pointing to the reasons why we should not accept the testimony of the Apostles to the New Testament miracles.⁴⁶

The second broad point at issue between the agnostics and their Christian contemporaries was the foundations of morality. According to the popular Christian account man has been given a faculty by which to recognize the existence of obligatory moral rules, and this faculty, the conscience, testifies not only to the existence of moral laws but points as well to their establishment by a divine and personal being. Furthermore, men are held morally responsible by both God and man for their obedience to the dictates of conscience because they possess free will and are thus capable of determining whether they will or will not follow the directions of the moral sense. In the Christian account natural theology

46 For Huxley's views see Hume Part II Ch. VIII esp. pp.158-61, Collected Essays: Volume 6; see also his unpublished Metaphysical Society paper, 'The Evidence for the Miracle of the Resurrection' Jan.11, 1876 (No.58 according to A.W. Brown, op.cit. p.329) and 'The Value of Witness to the Miraculous', (1889) Collected Essays Vol.5

and ethics go hand in hand.⁴⁷

Now the agnostics had no desire to deny that there are moral laws binding on all men which conscience makes known, or that men are on occasions morally responsible for their acts. What they denied is the alleged connection between the facts of the moral life - conscience, law, moral responsibility - and the truth of the Christian or any other religious system. Positively they asserted, and asserted at great length, that a science of ethics is possible.

In general terms the sciences they constructed agree in two points. Firstly, that the obligatory character of moral rules does not rest upon any divine command but upon the fact that in the evolution of the social organism obedience to the rules has been found

47 For important statements of the Christian position see: W. Whewell, The Elements of Morality, Excluding Polity (2 vols., Lond.1845), esp. 1, p.38, and 2, Bk.4; T.R. Birks, First Principles of Moral Science (Lond.1873), esp. lects. 1,4,9,12; H.L. Mansel, 'Of the Real in Morality' in Metaphysics...; idem., 'On Utility as a Ground of Moral Obligation' in Letters, Lectures and Reviews (Lond.1873) ed. H. Chandler; on the testimony of conscience to God see: idem., The Limits of Religious Thought, lect. 4; J.H. Newman, op.cit., chs. 5,10; H. Wace, Christianity and Morality, Boyle Lectures 1874-5 (1876; 8th ed., Lond. 1895), Second Series, lect.2; J.B. Dalgairns, 'Is God Unknowable', Contemporary Review, 20, 1872. There were very few Christian determinists, so the agnostic claim that their determinism had Christian forbears in Augustine, Calvin, Jonathan Edwards - L. Stephen, 'An Agnostic's Apology', op.cit., pp.32-3; T.H. Huxley, '...Animals are Automata...', Collected Essays: Vol.1, p.246 - fell on deaf ears.

necessary for the survival of the organism. In developing this point Clifford, Spencer, and Stephen, the agnostics most concerned to establish a science of ethics, reveal tremendous differences of opinion.⁴⁸ For instance: Spencer and Stephen maintain that the survival of the social organism or society involves in some way the happiness of its constituent parts, whereas Clifford, following Darwin's The Descent of Man (1871), denies that there is any intimate connection between the welfare of the whole and the happiness of the parts. Again, Clifford and Stephen put the welfare of the social organism as the end of moral action, whereas Spencer finds it in the happiness of the individual. However, despite these differences, which are all the more apparent because of the extent of their ethical writings, this group of agnostics together with Tyndall, all agree that every moral fact can be adequately explained in terms of the laws governing the interactions of biological, psychological, and social phenomena in the course of cosmic evolution. Huxley alone disagreed with this viewpoint - most notably in 'Evolution and Ethics', the Romanes

48 Cf: W.K. Clifford, 'On the Scientific Basis of Morals' (1875) and 'Right and Wrong: The Scientific Ground of their Distinction' (1875), op.cit., 2; H. Spencer, The Principles of Ethics (2 vols., Lond.1879-92); L. Stephen, The Science of Ethics (1882).

Lecture for 1893⁴⁹ - but he wholeheartedly sympathized with the anti-christian motives which led to their construction: a motive which is illustrated by Stephen's remark about his plan for The Science of Ethics (1882): 'my wish being to put what may be called the derivative or scientific theory of morality so as to meet various objections in their newest shape, and to show how morality is independent of theology.'⁵⁰

Secondly, the agnostics maintain with almost complete unanimity that men are morally responsible for their behaviour because they do not possess free will. A deterministic view of man is not only suggested by physiology: it is required by ordinary beliefs about moral action.⁵¹

From the Christian standpoint these claims threat-

49 Collected Essays: Vol.9.

50 Letter to Norton, 1877, in F.W. Maitland, The Life and Letters of Leslie Stephen, p.300; cf. also: W.K. Clifford, 'The Ethics of Religion' (1877), and 'The Influence upon Morality of a Decline in Religious Belief' (1877), op.cit., 2; preface to 'The Date of Ethics' (1879), Part I of Spencer's, The Principles of Ethics.

51 Cf.: J. Tyndall, 'Science and Man' (1877), op.cit., 2; T.H. Huxley, '... Animals are Automata ...', Collected Essays: Vol.1, and Hume, Part 1, ch.10 in Collected Essays: Vol.6; W.K. Clifford, 'Right and Wrong', op.cit., 22; L. Stephen, op.cit., ch.7.

ened to knock down one of the last remaining supports of natural theology, destroy belief in the true foundations of morality, and make the concept of moral responsibility into a fiction.

III

Finally it must be noted that this account of the origin and pattern of agnosticism is simply an outline designed to highlight those aspects which must be recognized if the movement is to be properly understood. It is true, of course, that even in outline much more could be said on these and related matters; in particular the relation between agnosticism, positivism, and empiricism, since it has so far been assumed that agnosticism is separate from these other two movements. In the next chapter the reasons for this will be explained; here, two further points must be made to round off the account of the origin and pattern of the agnostic movement.

The first concerns the origin of agnosticism. There can be no doubt that the tendencies of thought described in section I are much wider and more complex than is there suggested. To give some examples: it is not only Noetics and Tractarians, Millites and Hamiltonians, who teach doctrines of learned ignorance: August Comte, whose Cours de philosophie positive appeared in 1854 as

Comte's Positive Philosophy, and his earliest followers G.H. Lewes and Richard Congreve also present a doctrine of the limits of knowledge. Again: it is true that developments in geology and biology and the conflicts between catastrophists and uniformitarians were not the only factors at work in shaping contemporary attitudes towards science. The achievements of John Dalton with the atomic theory of matter, J.P. Joule with the principle of the correlation of forces or the conservation of energy, are, according to Huxley, together with Darwin's biology 'the three great products of our time' and they justify the assertion 'that our epoch can produce achievements in physical science of greater moment than any other has to show.'⁵² And discussions of the nature of science are dominated by Mill's logic of scientific investigation and Whewell's history and philosophy of science.

Yet while it is true that these factors were important determinants and expressions of the intellectual tendencies which gave rise to agnosticism, we need not give them a special place in a general description of the

52 'The Progress of Science 1837-1887, Collected Essays; Vol.1, p.66. Cf. also J. Tyndall, 'Force and Matter', op.cit., 2; H. Spencer, 'The Filiation of My Ideas' in D. Duncan, The Life and Letters of Herbert Spencer (Lond. 1908).

origin of agnosticism. The truth is that Hamilton's and Mansel's theory of ignorance, not Comte's, most determines the agnostic doctrine, and the triumph of uniformitarianism with Darwin's work did more to shape their theories of science than did Mill's Logic. It is also true that both Mill and Comte are important figures in the development of agnosticism - as we shall see in the next chapter - but the movements gathered around them stand to agnosticism more often as rivals than as partners.

Secondly it must be noted that the second section presents a bird's eye rather than a ground level view of agnosticism. From on high it appears that the course of agnosticism follows a fairly logical and planned development; from the ground it becomes clear that the coherence is spontaneous rather than planned: that the agnostics - excepting Spencer - did not at first possess a programme but developed one as they expounded and were forced to expound their common beliefs. The logic of events and not only the demands of a system determined the programme and achievements of agnosticism. A close exposition of their doctrines must take this fact into account. Practically this means: that Mansel's theory of the limits of thought must be included in the account of their theory of ignorance: and that the

greatest amount of space must be devoted to their ethical sciences, for they wrote more on the science of ethics than on any other issue in an attempt to silence those Christian and non-christian critics who persistently claimed that moral phenomena are part of nature that falls outside the range of science.

It is not, perhaps, superfluous to remark also that the doctrines or tendencies that are designated by familiar names ending in -isms or -ity, though they occasionally may be, usually are not, units of the sort which the historian of ideas seeks to discriminate. They commonly constitute, rather, compounds to which his method of analysis needs to be applied. Idealism, romanticism, rationalism, transcendentalism, pragmatism - all these trouble-breeding and usually thought-obscuring terms, which one sometimes wishes to see expunged from the vocabulary of the philosopher and the historian altogether, are names of complexes, not of simples - and of complexes in two senses. They stand, as a rule, not for one doctrine, but for several distinct and often conflicting doctrines held by different individuals or groups to whose way of thinking these appellations have been applied, either by themselves or in the traditional terminology of historians; and each of these doctrines, in turn, is likely to be resolvable into simpler elements, often very strangely combined and derivative from a variety of dissimilar motives and historic influences.

A.O. Lovejoy.

Chapter Three

Agnosticism, Positivism, Empiricism.

As with most intellectual movements agnosticism can be considered from many points of view. If an historian is interested in what has now come to be known as agnosticism, viz., the theory of ignorance, then it might well be considered as one expression of a wide nineteenth century intellectual tendency. Again, if attention is centred on agnostic beliefs about science, it might be wise to consider them in connection with empiricists such as J.S. Mill and A. Bain. If its anti-christian apologetic is selected then the agnostics must be seen as part of a very wide movement of thought which embraces such diverse thinkers as H.T. Buckle, W.R. Greg, Matthew Arnold, W.R. Cassels (the author of Supernatural Religion), G.H. Lewes and Marian Evans, as well as the positivists, Congreve, Harrison, and Bridges.

If, however, we take agnostic writings as a whole then it becomes clear that the agnostics constitute a class of thinkers quite distinct from the positivists - Comte's disciples - on the one hand, and the empiricists - Mill's men - on the other. This fact has not, of

course, been ignored by historians of the period, though they, like many mid-Victorians, have not often been concerned to discriminate sharply between the three movements.¹ Depending on the purpose of the investigation, this lack of discrimination may be unimportant: all three movements have points in common. If, however, our aim is to describe the main features of the agnostic movement, then it becomes imperative that the differences between the three movements be singled out; for the agnostics rightly considered themselves to be their own men, not Comte's or Mill's.

II

To outline the differences between the positivists and the agnostics is both difficult and easy. Difficult, because Comte's influence in England came through two different channels; easy, because Spencer and Huxley vehemently pointed out why they were not positivists. Indeed it is almost certain that one of the main reasons why Huxley coined the word 'agnostic' was to avoid the label of 'positivist', though he nowhere

¹ For example: R. Metz, A Hundred Years of British Philosophy (Lond. 1938); J.A. Passmore, One Hundred Years of Philosophy (Lond. 1957). Metz goes a long way towards providing an account of the differences.

suggests this as a specific reason.

Intellectually John Mill is the most important propagator of Comte's thought in England. As is well known Mill first received Comte's work with enthusiasm; used certain elements from it in writing his A System of Logic; introduced and recommended it to his friends; and then, when it became apparent to him, that Comte was projecting on the foundations of his early work the plans for an authoritarian state in which freedom was not to be tolerated, Mill publicly disassociated himself from Comte's work in the articles collected in Auguste Comte and Positivism (1865). Mill's championing of Comte in the forties and fifties through his Logic and his personal associations meant that many of the men who during the sixties and seventies were to take a notable part in English intellectual life came to be familiar with the early and relatively non-political aspect of Comte's thought. This group included Lewes, Bain, Spencer, Huxley, Morley, Tyndall, Leslie Stephen, Frederic Harrison, amongst others. Indeed as a result of Mill's influence a fairly authoritative account of Comte's teaching was made available in the early fifties: G.H. Lewes, who was introduced to Comte's thought by Mill, produced the first popular account of his doctrines,

Comte's Philosophy of the Sciences (1853).² During the same year Harriet Martineau published her abridged translation of the Cours de philosophie positive, a work she had undertaken after reading Lewes' account of Comte in his History of Philosophy.³

In the early fifties English interest in Comte mainly centred on the four leading doctrines of the Cours de philosophie positive. The first doctrine of which is the empiricist theory that all knowledge is restricted to phenomena. In the final stage of its development Comte writes, 'the mind has given over the vain search after Absolute notions, the origin and destination of the universe, and the causes of phenomena, and applies itself to the study of their laws, - that is, their invariable relations of succession and resemblance. Reasoning and observation duly combined are the means of this knowledge.'⁴ This view, as Mill points out, is not peculiarly Comte's: it is 'the general property of the age';⁵ but even so it is a feature of his work that

2 G.H. Lewes, Comte's Philosophy of the Sciences (1853); Lond.1887). Cf. M. Packe, The Life of John Stuart Mill (Lond. 1954), p.291.

3 Cf. R.K. Webb, Harriet Martineau (Lond.1960),p.303

4 A. Comte, The Positive Philosophy of A. Comte (2 vols., Lond. 1853), 1, p.2.

5 J.S. Mill, Auguste Comte and Positivism (1865; Ann Arbor 1961), p.80.

commended the whole to many English thinkers.

A more distinctive, though not completely novel viewpoint, is Comte's law of the three stages of the development of the mind. This law states that 'each of our leading conceptions, - each branch of our knowledge, passes successively through three different theoretical conditions: the Theological, or fictitious; the Metaphysical, or abstract; and the Scientific, or positive.'⁶ Exactly what Comte means by this, as the agnostics were to point out, is not clear; for while the law is supposed to describe the way human thought has developed from the animism of primitive man through the substantial forms of medieval man to the phenomenism of modern man, it does not describe a development which has already taken place: each individual goes through three stages in his own development to adulthood, though some never attain that status and remain in the theological or metaphysical stage; and there are certain fields of investigation where even the adult minds of positive thinkers have been unable to apply the methods of science. Most notably, the field of social life has escaped scientific investigation; theories of society are, to date, either of the theological or metaphysical sort.

Now the main reason why the law of the three stages has not been fulfilled in every branch of investigation is the complexity of the facts to be investigated. Each of the main sciences, Comte argues, can be classified in such a way as to show the dependence of one science upon another according to the complexity of the phenomena it investigates: those ^{sciences which deal with the most general facts come first, those} which deal with more complex phenomena, since the latter can only be investigated once the former has been established. In general terms this means that the logical order of the sciences is: mathematics, astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology, sociology. Primarily this classification is logical rather than historical, but despite a few 'minor defects' the history of science generally confirms it. 'In the main ...', Comte writes, 'our classification agrees with the history of science; the more general and simple sciences actually occurring first and advancing best in human history, and being followed by the more complex and restricted, though all were, since the earliest times enlarging simultaneously.'⁷

The main purpose of the Cours de philosophie positive is to show first of all the truth of the law of the three stages and the accuracy of the classification

of the sciences in order to set the stage for a positive account of the laws which govern the cohesion and the changes amongst social facts. Social physics, he writes, 'is what men have now most need of: and this is the principal aim of the present work to establish.'⁸

Comte's social physics or sociology depends on two points: the first is that humanity in all its inter-related manifestations is subject to law; the second, that these laws reveal not only how the existing order of social facts hold together, but the way in which they change. Social science, he says, 'contemplates each phenomenon in its harmony with co-existing phenomena, and its connections with the foregoing and the following state of human development: it endeavours to discover, from both points of view, the general relations which connect all social phenomena: and each of them is explained, in the scientific sense of the word, when it has been connected with the whole of the existing situation, and the whole of the preceding movement.'⁹

The point of contemplating humanity as 'a vast and eternal social unit'¹⁰ is not simply to gain knowledge,

8 ibid., p.7.

9 ibid., 2, 2p.95.

10 ibid.

but to effect a social reorganization through this knowledge. This is possible because of the power of the intellect; 'It cannot be necessary to prove to anybody who reads this work that Ideas govern the world, or throw it into chaos; in other ^{words} /, that all social mechanism rests upon Opinions.'¹¹ If this is admitted then the law of the three stages and the classification of the sciences become extremely important, since they help us to understand why social science has not previously been formulated, and why knowledge of such a science is rich with promise for a stable social life. If ideas govern the world man makes for himself, and if ideas develop according to law, then the fact that a science of society has now been created by Comte means that modern man is able to bring about the type of society he wishes through the application of sociological laws. The law of progress exemplified in the growth of mind and the sciences can now be consciously applied by man to bring about the social state to which the development of humanity has inevitably led.

From the course of this development Comte deduces the supremacy of sociology over all the other sciences. Since the basic law of mind results in the establishment of sociology as the final science it

11 ibid., 1, p.15.

follows that the sciences which lead up to it are to be subordinated to it. Or, as Comte states the point: 'if we want to conceive of the rights of the sociological spirit to supremacy, we have only to regard all our conceptions ... as so many necessary results of a series of determinate phases, proper to our mental evolution, personal and collective, taking place according to invariable laws, statical and dynamical, which rational observation is competent to disclose.'¹²

In the main these are the doctrines which captured favourable, though not uncritical interest in the first half of the fifth decade; however, by the early sixties the attitude of liberally and scientifically minded individuals towards Comte had become much less favourable. The reason is that Comte's thought ceased to be identified with the Cours de philosophie positive; his later writings, such as the Système de politique positive (1851-1854), in which his early theory is made to support a political and social theory of the most authoritarian and anti-liberal sort, had to be considered along with his earlier works.

In his later writings on social and religious matters Comte argues that in the final development of

¹² ibid., 2, p.503.

the third stage man's mind and social life will be completely ordered; the social anarchy which results from political and intellectual freedom will be non-existent because freedom will be suppressed. The supreme principle of organization is the moral principle of altruism: live for others, where others ultimately means the whole organism of humanity, past, present, and future. Altruism cannot, however, be practised simply by wishing: a man must feel for others, be one with humanity, and this feeling can only be brought about in the positive state, as it has been in more primitive conditions, by the work of religion - in this case, the religion of humanity. For Comte such a religion is not only ~~the~~ology but cultus; it is a secular catholicism in which humanity replaces God, Comte replaces the pope, with its own priests, sacraments, worship, prayer, and so on.¹³

'Others may laugh,' says Mill of Comte's later speculations, 'but we would far rather weep at the melancholy decadence of a great intellect.'¹⁴ There were,

¹³ Cf. J.S. Mill, Auguste Comte and Positivism, pt.2, 'Later Speculations of M. Comte'. Comte's complete positivism had been attacked well before Mill's book: Cf. /-7 'Auguste Comte. Positivism!', North British Review, 21, 1854.

¹⁴ ibid., p.199.

however, other reactions. Those who formed the English positivist movement found in Comte's later speculations the logical development of his early work and the proof of his greatness. This group claimed and got for itself the name of 'positivist', and their activities forced thinkers like Lewes, Mill, Morley, Spencer, Huxley, to say where they stood with regard to Comte.¹⁵ The positivists were Comte's official representatives, and their labours are the second main source of Comtist influence in England.

Positivism as a movement began towards the end of the 1850's when Richard Congreve resigned his orders and his Oxford fellowship to establish a society to preach Comte's theories and to practice the religion of

15 J.S. Mill, (*ibid.*, p.6) defines positivism as the view that man can only know phenomena; see also his Autobiography (Lond. 1873), p.277. G.H. Lewes, 'Auguste Comte', Fortnightly Review, 3, 1866, distinguishes two types of positivism: that which accords with Comte's early speculations - e.g. Mill's and his own - and that which squares with his later views, e.g. Congreve's positivism. Lewes has no hesitation in claiming Spencer as a positivist: cf. The History of Philosophy, 2, pp.757-58. The positivists of Congreve's sort did not view Lewes' positivism kindly: cf. F. Harrison, 'Mr. Lewes' Problems of Life and Mind', Fortnightly Review, 16, 1874. Harrison did not regard Marian Evans as a true positivist: cf. 'Reminiscences of George Eliot' (1901), Memories and Thoughts (Lond. 1906), pp.158-59. J. Morley, like Mill and Lewes, claims that he is a positivist but not a Comtist: cf. F.W. Knickerbocker, Free Minds: John Morley and His Friends (Camb. Mass. 1943), pp.52-5; E.M. Everett, The Party of Humanity: The Fortnightly Review and its Contributors 1865-1874 (Chapel Hill 1939), ch.3, 'Morley and the Positivists'.

humanity.¹⁶ The other key members are F. Harrison, J.H. Bridges, E.S. Beesley, all former students of Congreve, and J.C. Morison, another Oxford man. From about 1860 onwards to attack Comte was to attack this group. Intellectually their achievements resemble those of other contemporary groups of religious men with their background. They provided translations of Comte's writings, they gave numerous expositions of his theories, and they encouraged or engaged in scholarly work particularly in areas which were regarded as having some significance for the history of positivism.¹⁷ Generally they were not particularly interested in science or the conflicts between science and religion.¹⁸ They were much

16 Cf. R. Congreve's first positive church sermon, 'The New Religion in its Attitude towards the Old' (1859) in his Essays: Political, Social, and Religious (Lond. 1874).

17 J.H. Bridges, for example, edited Roger Bacon's Opus Majus; cf. also The New Calendar of Great Men (Lond. 1892) ed. F. Harrison, in which the English positivists wrote briefly on those whom Comte thought ought to be commemorated. For examples of their expository work: R. Congreve, op.cit., F. Harrison, The Creed of a Layman (Lond. 1907); J.H. Bridges, Essays and Addresses (Lond. 1907); J.H. Bridges, Illustrations of Positivism (Lond. 1915) ed. G. Jones. See also A. Harrison, Federic Harrison, Lond. 1926); S. Liveing, A Nineteenth Century Teacher: John Henry Bridges (Lond. 1926) with introd. by P. Geddes.

18 P. Geddes in S. Liveing, op.cit., esp. pp.4-5.

more concerned to recommend the religion of humanity as the necessary substitute for Christianity, and to act out their faith in good works. All this is well summed up in a letter Bridges sent to Beesley in 1862: 'the health of the workman and of his family is the only standard which I can accept. The rest must come after. Seek first the kingdom of God, i.e. the salvation of the home, the family, and other things shall be added unto you.'¹⁹ Like other small religious groups they had conflicts over the nature of orthodoxy - e.g. how far did Comte's authority extend? - and policy differences over the nature of their work and worship.²⁰

When the agnostics claim that they are not positivists they assert two propositions: one, that their theories are not drawn from Comte's writings; two, that they are not Congreve's associates. The controversy between Huxley and Congreve in 1869 in the pages of the Fortnightly Review reveals this; and it is more than likely that this experience brought home to Huxley the need to provide a name for his position.

19 ibid., p.94.

20 Congreve was ultra orthodox and liturgical, and a split occurred in 1878 between him and Harrison and Bridges: cf. R. Metz, op.cit., pp.180-82; J.C. Morison's The Service of Man (1888) is a very unorthodox positivist work; cf. F. Harrison, 'James Cotter Morison: In Memoriam' in Rationalist Press ed. (Lond. 1903).

The dispute commenced quite innocently: the Archbishop of York, W. Thomson, in an address entitled 'On the Limits of Philosophical Inquiry' attacked the combination of religious disbelief, nescience, and faith in science which he said was the new philosophy that had been founded by Comte. Huxley in 'The Physical Basis of Life' (1868) went out of his way to show that Hume not Comte was the founder of the allegedly new philosophy. Moreover, he contends that modern men of science would be extremely foolish to subscribe to Comte's views: 'so far as I am concerned, the most reverend prelate might dialectically hew M. Comte in pieces, as a modern Agag, and I should not attempt to stay his hand. In so far as my study of what specially characterises the Positive Philosophy has led me I find little or nothing of any scientific value, and a great deal which is as thoroughly antagonistic to the very essence of science as anything in ultramontane Catholicism. In fact, he concludes, 'M. Comte's philosophy in practice might be compendiously described as Catholicism minus Christianity.'²¹ There were two replies to this from the positivist camp: Harrison's 'The Positivist Problem', and Congreve's 'Mr.

²¹ T.H. Huxley, 'On the Physical Basis of Life' (1868), Collected Essays: Vol.1, p.156.

Huxley on M. Comte'. Both replies stress, in the midst of strenuous expositions of Comte's doctrine, that generally those who criticise him have not read his works, and are unaware that positivism is the system that binds together all that is best in modern thought and practice. 'However few are they who avow Positivism completely,' Harrison writes, 'its spirit permeates all modern thought.'²²

Huxley replied in 'The Scientific Aspect of Positivism' (1869). Firstly, he rebuts the charge that he is an ignorant critic of Comte: he had, he claims, come to know of Comte's work 'some sixteen or seventeen years' ago through the influence of Mill, 'a distinguished theologian', and 'the late Professor Henfrey'.²³ To complete the list Huxley might also have added that he had reviewed Harriet Martineau's translation for the Westminster Review in 1854. He then points out in some detail what is wrong with Comte's position as well as its virtues. On both points Huxley more or less represents the position of the other agnostics.

Firstly he rejects the basis upon which Comte

22 § F. Harrison, 'The Positivist Problem', Fortnightly Review, 6, 1869, p.471. For Congreve's reply see op.cit.

23 T.H. Huxley, 'The Scientific Aspect of Positivism', Fortnightly Review, 6, 1889, p.653.

rests his position, viz., the law of the three stages and the classification of the sciences. There can be no doubt that thought has developed, but, he argues, Comte's account of this process is neither clear nor true to the facts. Every branch of human thought has not passed through the three stages, nor is it necessary that all branches should pass through each stage, yet on Comte's view it sometimes appears that every branch of knowledge must go through each stage, and that each stage of development should exclude the other. But, Huxley says, statements can be found which take account of the obvious exceptions to such a view; what then becomes of the law?

An accurate account, according to Huxley, sees the development of thought not in three exclusive stages but as a conflict at every point in the development between scientific and mythological or metaphysical (religious) explanations. Huxley writes: 'In the progress of the species from savagery to advanced civilization, anthropomorphism grows into theology, while physicism (if I may so call it) develops into science; but the development of the two is contemporaneous, not successive. For each there long exists an assured province which is not invaded by the other, while between the two lies a debatable land - ruled by a sort of bastards, which owe their complexion to physicism and their substance to anthropomorphism, and are M. Comte's particular aversions -

metaphysical entities.'

'But, as the ages lengthen, the borders of Physicism increase. The territories of the bastards are annexed to science; and even Theology, in the purer forms, has ceased to be anthropomorphic, however she may talk. Anthropomorphism has taken stand in its last fortress - man himself. But science closely invests the walls;'.²⁴ Spencer's First Principles and Tyndall's Belfast Address present roughly similar, though more elaborate accounts, of the historical relations between science, metaphysics, and religion.

Naturally the agnostics believed that the development of scientific knowledge takes place under law, but which law? Spencer suggests in the first edition of First Principles that knowledge of the laws of nature grows in the same way as all other knowledge, viz., according to the degree of force with which, in this case, the uniformity impresses the mind. This is, he says, no simple matter; it is influenced by the extent to which the law bears on personal welfare, the frequency with which it is presented, its conspicuousness, and the complexity of the phenomena involved. But, if we take these influences into account, it can be shown that the

history of scientific knowledge exemplifies this law.²⁵ Leslie Stephen claims that the law of evolution governs the growth of knowledge: scientific knowledge or true beliefs increase and persist because in the natural selection that goes on between beliefs truth is a condition which aids the persistence of a belief. Thus he writes in 'Newman's Theory of Belief': 'The evolutionist holds that, in the struggle for existence, the truest opinion tends to survive; and thus that whilst no generation is in possession of the whole truth, the history of belief is that of a slow gravitation towards truth. Some doctrines which have survived all changes, and strengthened under all conditions may be regarded as definitely established, or at least, as indefinitely close approximations to truth.'²⁶

Next Huxley rejects Comte's classification of the sciences. Here he refers to Spencer's essay 'The Genesis of Science' (1854) as a refutation of Comte's

25 This argument is printed as 'Of Laws in General, and the Order of Their Discovery' in his Recent Discussions in Science, Philosophy, and Morals (N.Y. 1871).

26 L. Stephen, 'Newman's Theory of Belief', An Agnostic's Apology, p.239. Stephen stresses the difficulties in tracing the evolution of opinion in 'The Religion of All Sensible Men', op.cit., p.344

errors.²⁷ In this article Spencer makes the point that historically the sciences did not develop, as Comte suggests, from the general to the specific. The evidence suggests that the sciences develop together; that they aid one another in their development and sometimes cause the development of each other by producing problems which must await the growth of some other science. This, he argues, is what we should expect if scientific knowledge develops out of commonsense observations; for at the commonsense level judgments are made about all sorts of matters that have any bearing on man. Therefore, he concludes: 'It is not simply that, as M. Comte admits, a classification "will always involve something if not arbitrary, at least artificial;" it is not, as he would have us believe, that, neglecting minor imperfections a classification may be substantially true; but it is that any grouping of the sciences in a succession gives a radically erroneous idea of their genesis and their dependencies. There is no "one rational order among a host of possible systems." There is no "true filiation

27 This is one of three articles Spencer wrote on the topic: 'The Classification of the Sciences' (1864; 1869); 'Reasons for Dissenting from the Philosophy of M. Comte' (1864); all three are in op.cit.

of the sciences." The whole hypothesis is fundamentally false.²⁸

Thirdly, Huxley objects to the anti-scientific character of much of Comte's work and the anti-scientific spirit which informs the whole. He regards Comte's rejection of psychology as a science on the ground that mental phenomena cannot be observed as an instance of the former; his advocacy of social, intellectual, and religious authoritarianism in the name of humanity reveals the latter. Needless to say this authoritarianism annoyed the agnostics; for the roots of their thought are as much in science and the fight for its freedom from theology as Comte's and Mill's are in politics and social reform. To believe, as Comte does, that there will ever come a day when the conclusions of scientists will be beyond question, is to completely misunderstand the scientific mind and the history of its achievements: 'All the great steps in the advancement of science have been made by just those men who have not hesitated to doubt the "principles established in the sciences by competent persons;" and the great teaching of science - the great use of it as an instrument of mental discipline -

is its constant inculcation of the maxim, that the sole ground on which any statement has a right to be believed is the impossibility of refuting it.²⁹

Equally abhorrent to the agnostics is the claim, which the English positivists strongly insist upon, that scientific work should be regulated by the state according to the demands of sociology and ethics so that scientists will not fritter away their energies on subjects which have no bearing on the welfare of humanity.³⁰ The agnostics oppose this not simply because it ignores the applied results that come out of pure research, but because it denies the very impulse of science, the unconditioned love of truth. The positivists, Tyndall writes, 'decry and denounce scientific theories; they scorn all reference to aether, and atoms, and molecules, as subjects lying far apart from the world's need; and yet such ultra-sensible conceptions are often the spur to the greatest discoveries. The source, in fact, 'he continues, 'from which the true natural philosopher derives inspiration and unifying power is essentially

1881. 11

29 T.H. Huxley, op.cit., p.669.

30 Congreve writes in 'Mr. Huxley and M. Comte' that the scientists 'fear encroachment, or any tampering with, their scientific independence, their pursuit of truth ... The moral and social system known as Positivism claims to select the subject which should be studied...' (op.cit., p.272.)

ideal.³¹

Politically and religiously the agnostics also reject Comte's authoritarian views. Huxley describes these doctrines as 'the anti-scientific monstrosities of Comte's later writings', though unlike those who sharply distinguish Comte's early and later speculations he is well aware that 'the spirit of meddling systematisation and regulation ... animates ... the "Philosophic Positive" ' as well.³² On the political side the agnostics had no agreed policy: Spencer is a rampant individualist who sees the withering away of the state as one of the end products of social evolution, while Clifford and Stephen support theories of the supremacy of society over the individual that are compatible with a mild socialism. As a rule, however, the agnostics are not deeply concerned to theorize about politics or to take an active part. This is undoubtedly explained by their interest in other intellectual pursuits, but it partly stems from their theory of social determinism. Unlike

31 'The Electric Light' (1879), Fragments of Science, 2, p.454. Cf. also T.H. Huxley, 'On the Advisableness of Improving Natural Knowledge', (1866), Collected Essays: Vol.1; W.K. Clifford, 'Cosmic Emotion', Lectures and Essays, 2.

32 T.H. Huxley, 'The Scientific Aspects of Positivism', Fortnightly Review, 5, 1869, p.668.

Mill and Comte they do not believe that ideas rule the world: 'All social phenomena', Spencer says, 'are produced by the totality of human emotions and beliefs: of which the emotions are mainly pre-determining, while the beliefs are mainly post-determined.'³³

Given this type of view it is not surprising that they feel no attraction to the religion of humanity. They were, of course, put off by the cultic expressions, which were particularly stressed by Congreve, but more importantly they believed that the alleged necessity of such a religion rests upon a mistaken analysis of the moral situation. If right belief is a necessary condition of right action, and if religion is necessary to motivate the person to moral action, then the inevitable decay of Catholicism (or Protestantism in England) will result in moral anarchy. But, the agnostics usually say, neither proposition is correct. 'I do not suppose...', Clifford writes, 'that morality would practically gain much from the wide acceptance of true views about its nature ... I neither admit the moral influence of theism in the past, nor look forward to the moral influence of humanism in the future. Virtue is a habit, not a

³³ H. Spencer, 'Reasons for Dissenting from the Philosophy of M. Comte', op.cit., p.125. Cf. also: L. Stephen, 'Science and Politics' (1892), Social Rights and Duties (2 vols., Lond.1896), 1.

sentiment or an -ism.³⁴ Even amongst the agnostics Clifford's anti-christian feeling is extreme, but generally they agree that moral character or feelings are more important for right living than are true moral beliefs, and that even if morality has been tied up with religion in the past the connection is not essential.

In asserting this type of position, which so many of their contemporaries, Christian and non-christian, found hard to accept, the older agnostics - Huxley, Spencer, Tyndall - had the advantage that they had never experienced a crisis of faith: they had no Christian faith to lose; their moral beliefs and practice had never been intimately connected with orthodox doctrines and worship.³⁵ They did not feel tempted to search for a religion; they did not believe that religion in the usual sense is necessary for a good life. However, Spencer, Tyndall, and Clifford, who was a committed Christian in his youth, attempt to explain what is vital in religion, and not only to reveal the failings of its

34 'The Influence Upon Morality of a Decline in Religious Belief' (1877), Lectures and Essays, 2, p.249. Of all the agnostics Clifford seems to have been most influenced by Comte; see 'Cosmic Emotion', op.cit., 2, pp.271, 284-5.

35 Cf. H. Spencer, Autobiography (2 vols., Lond. 1904), 1, p.151. A.S. Eve, C.H. Creasley, Life and Work of John Tyndall (Lond.1945), pp.25-7.

contemporary manifestations. In general terms they argue that the religious view is essentially one of awe and wonder at the universe and man's place within it. Spencer's doctrine of the Unknowable is a rather near Christian intellectual expression of this feeling; Tyndall more or less accepts it.³⁶ Clifford, however, could not follow this line: for him cosmic emotion is not so precisely or deistically defined. He quotes the lines

Two things I contemplate with ceaseless awe;
The stars of Heaven and Man's Sense of Law. 37

but his wonder is produced by the mystery of the universe which lies ^{beyond} behind the universe we know, and the moral character that has been thrown up by the ongoing evolution of Man. Huxley and Stephen, it appears, were not attracted by such religions.

These points - the law of the three stages, the classification of the sciences, the anti-scientific character of Comte's writings - cover the major areas of disagreement between the agnostics and the positivists. Disagreement, however, is not the only feature of the relationship between them. They were well aware that

36 Cf. e.g. 'Matter and Force' (1867), Fragments of Science, 2, p.73.

37 'Cosmic Emotion, Lectures and Essays, 2, p.254.

Comte's work had exercised an important influence upon the scientific study of society, though, following Mill, they did not regard him as the founder of sociology.³⁸ Huxley's appreciation of this side of Comte's work is more apparent in his 1854 review than his 1869 articles. 'The more M. Comte is an astronomer and a mathematician, the better he comes out in his subordinate parts; the more he is an historian and a politician, the worse. Yet his Social Physics is, notwithstanding, the most valuable part of his book. And why? Simply because it was the part most needed.'³⁹ Huxley probably has Mill's use of Comte's work in the Logic in mind when he refers to 'the part most needed', but as it turned out the agnostics found the clue to a true social physics in Darwin's work, not Comte's or Mill's.

However, the debt of the agnostics to Comte's work in this respect needs to be stressed because it was, as Sidgwick points out, a debt they tended to overlook.⁴⁰

38 J.S. Mill, Auguste Comte and Positivism, p.123.

39 /T.H. Huxley7, 'Comte's Positive Philosophy', Westminster Review, N.S.6, 1854, p.190. In general this review is favourable though critical. Cf. also 'The Scientific Aspect of Positivism', Fortnightly Review, 5, 1869, p.670.

40 H. Sidgwick, 'Critical Notion; The Science of Ethics by Leslie Stephen', Mind, 7, 1883², p.583.

Why this is so is easily understood if we recall that the two chief agnostics came to be familiar with Comte's work in the fifties when they were working their way towards the agnostic position. Then his views did not strike them as particularly original, largely because they had been influenced by Mill's use of them in the Logic, though they were impressed by Comte's systematic presentation of his doctrines. The main influence of his work, if not his ideas, was, therefore of a negative sort; it forced them to develop their own views because they could not accept Comte's. Such an influence is not, of course, unimportant, but it does not mean that the agnostics are half hearted positivists as was sometimes suggested. Still it is not surprising that those who were not intimately connected with the development of agnostic thought should lump the agnostics and the positivists together.⁴¹ After all the agnostic movement

41 Cf: J. Rickaby, 'Man the Measure of All Things': Protagoras the the Positivists" (p.136) and 'Auguste Comte and His Philosophy' (pp.387,389), The Month, N.S. 1, 1870; J. McCosh, Christianity and Positivism (Lond. 1875), p.167. R. Flint gives a very accurate account of positivism in Anti-Theistic Theories (1877; 8th ed., Lond. 1912), p.505; J. Tulloch, Modern Theories in Philosophy and Religion acknowledges the independence of the agnostics from Comte but claims that Comte and the English positivists best represent naturalism in England (pp.vii-viii) but later (pp.227-228) he admits that agnosticism is the more characteristic name for English naturalism.

had to produce its own literature, and it was not until the early seventies that the main features of agnosticism were clearly and publicly outlined, whereas the positivist position, in its initial statement was available for consultation from the early fifties. (This partially explains why positivism was so frequently denounced from pulpits, even though, as Harrison complained in 'The Positivist Problem', there is hardly a positivist to be found.) Given the public's tendency to link them with the positivists, and their distaste for the religious manifestations of Comte's position, it is not altogether surprising that they stressed, not incorrectly, the differences between positivism and agnosticism.

III

While the contrast between positivism and agnosticism is clear, that between agnosticism and empiricism is less marked. The reason is that the agnostics and the empiricists philosophically agree - not merely assent, as the positivists do - in the principle that experience is the source and test of truth; they both reject intuitionism, or the view that 'truths external to the mind may be known by intuition or con-

sciousness, independently of observation and experience.,⁴²
 In applying this principle in metaphysics, religion, the theory of science, ethics, the agnostics often come to different conclusions from J.S. Mill, the chief figure of empiricism. This, of course, would not put them outside of the empiricist movement. As Bain's article 'The Empiricist Position' (1889) - probably written in view of the efforts to define agnosticism⁴³ - makes clear, empiricism covers a fairly wide variety of opinions. However, as Bain's article indirectly suggests, the comprehensiveness of empiricism does not reach as far as some of the main points of agnosticism: empiricism does not involve an anti-Christian attitude or the doctrine of universal evolution.

In noting the differences between Mill and the other empiricists and the agnostics it must be borne in mind that Mill's empiricism, like Comte's positivism, was one of the reasons why the agnostic position came to be stated. In their early careers it is safe to assume that the agnostics were - with, perhaps, Spencer's exception - to varying degrees convinced Millites. 'I can testify from personal obser-

42 J.S. Mill, Autobiography (Lond. 1873), p.225.

43 A. Bain, 'The Empiricist Position', Mind, 14, 1889; See A. Bain, Autobiography (Lond. 1904), p.395.

vation', Stephen wrote in 1900 of Mill's System of Logic, 'that it became a kind of sacred book for students who claimed to be genuine Liberals.'⁴⁴ As far as the theory of science and ethics was concerned Mill's Logic (1843) and his Utilitarianism (articles in 1861, as a book, 1863) were the place to start. Mill, unlike Comte, did not wish for disciples; those around him were forced to grow by thinking his empiricism for themselves. In the case of Bain this resulted in a position fairly close to Mill's. With Huxley, Spencer and Stephen it resulted in the development of agnostic theories.

The explanation why the agnostics consciously diverged from Mill's position whereas others, such as Bain, stood by it, is partly found in the former's attachment to science. Spencer, though not a scientist and Huxley were deeply involved in science, particularly the palaeontological sciences. What they most wanted was evidence that all phenomena could be investigated by man; they had little doubt that the method of investigation and proof would accord with Mill's account, but the Logic

44 L. Stephen, The English Utilitarians (1900; 3 vols. in 1, N.Y. 1950), 3, p.76. Cf. also T.H. Huxley, 'Mr. Balfour's Attack on Agnosticism', Appendix, Mill see M. Packe, op.cit., pp.431-34. [H. B. Huxley, Huxley: Profiles of Science, p.315; on Spencer's relation with ...]

did not show that all phenomena could be investigated. Darwin's work provided the evidence which Huxley in particular required, and, in Spencer's hands, the key to a new way of understanding phenomena.⁴⁵ The seeds of the movement which was to overshadow the empiricism of Mill and Bain were sown. 'Those later writings of his which brought Mill's vogue to a climax', Morely wrote in 1906, 'appeared at the very moment when there broke upon the scene those overwhelming floods of evolutionary speculation, which seem destined to shift or sweep away the beacons that had lighted his philosophical course.'⁴⁶

Spencer, probably more than any other, is responsible for the extension of the historical method, understood as a tracing of evolutionary development, to all phenomena. Whereas Mill, partly through Comte's influence, advocates the historical method for the study of society,⁴⁷ Spencer and the other agnostics advocate

45 Spencer had arrived at his doctrine of universal evolution before Darwin's 1859 success, but Darwin's work made the spreading abroad of his view much easier. For Huxley's refusal to agree with Spencer on organic evolution before 1859 see H. Spencer, Autobiography, 1, p.505.

46 J. Morley, 'A Great Teacher' (1906), The Works of Lord Morley, (Lond.1921), 15, p.12.

47 Cf. J.S. Mill, 'Coleridge' (1840), The Philosophy of John Stuart Mill (N.Y., 1961) ed. M. Cohen, esp. p.84ff; 'Of the Inverse Deductive, or Historical Method', bk.5, ch.8 in John Stuart Mill's Philosophy of Scientific Method ed. E. Nagel. On the relation of Mill and Comte see besides Auguste Comte and Positivism, Autobiography, pp.161-

its use in psychology, sociology, ethics, as well as the physical sciences. The agnostics do not always agree on the range of phenomena that undergo evolutionary development - Spencer alone maintains cosmic evolution⁴⁸ - nor do they accept a common view of evolutionary development - whether it means as Spencer teaches that phenomena are always in a process of becoming more and more diversified and organized at the same time and/or whether it means that those things which have evolved, have done so by a process of natural selection - but they all agree that the evolutionary study of things is the scientific use of the historical method and the most likely method to result in a proper understanding of phenomena.

Working with this principle the agnostics took up positions in opposition to Mill and Bain. For example, they claim that the conflict between empiricism

66, 209-245; A Bain, John Stuart Mill (Lond.1882), p.70. A modern account: J.R. Mueller, John Stuart Mill and French Thought (Urbana 1956), ch.4, 'The Influence of Auguste Comte'; Mill's claims are shown to be more or less accurate (cf.p.129). On the differences between the evolutionary view of the historical method and the empirical see L. Stephen, op.cit., 3, ch.5, 'Historical Method', esp. pp.373-75.

48 Spencer never tried to show how evolution operated in inorganic phenomena, an omission which drew hostile criticism. See D. Duncan, The Life and Letters of Herbert Spencer (Lond. 1908), ch.26, 'Inorganic Evolution'.

and intuitionism is seen to be falsely stated by both camps when it is realized that the knowledge which each individual possesses is gained not only from his experience but from the experience of the race; for in the evolution of man mental characteristics are transmitted as well as physical. Once this is understood it is no difficult matter to see why certain beliefs are held with such intensity: they have been derived and tested in the experience of the race; it is not necessary to deny the conviction of their truth nor to try to explain it in terms of the individual's experience. Thus Spencer writes in The Principles of Psychology:

'The universal law that, other things equal, the cohesion of psychical states is proportionate to the frequency with which they have followed one another in experience, supplies an explanation of the so-called 'forms of thought', as soon as it is supplemented by the law that habitual psychical successions entail some hereditary tendency to such successions which, under persistent conditions, will become cumulative in generation after generation.'⁴⁹ But since the evidence for the evolutionary development of mind depends on the evidence of the evolution of the nervous system, Spencer and the other

49 H. Spencer, The Principles of Psychology (1855; 2nd ed. 2 vols., Lond. 1870-1872), 1, p.66.

agnostics criticise Mill and Bain for their failure to develop a ^{physiologically} psychologically based psychology. 'Understood in its current form,' Spencer writes, 'the experience-hypothesis implies that the presence of a definitely organized nervous system is a circumstance of no moment - a fact not needing to be taken into account.'⁵⁰

A more striking difference between the agnostics and Mill appears in their account of ethics. According to the agnostics Mill fails to provide a correct account of moral phenomena because he neglects to study the conditions under which morality has evolved. Studied in this way it becomes possible, for instance, to account for the moral significance and authority of conscience as teacher and governor; facts which the moral intuitionists stress and Mill and Bain more or less ignore. The intuitionists, the agnostics argue, are right to stress the role of conscience in telling and directing us to the good, but they are mistaken in thinking that the authority of the moral sense stems from some transcendental awareness. The directions of conscience bind and motivate us to what is right because they are based on the experience of the race. Clifford, for example, writes: 'The voice of Conscience is the

voice of our Father Man who is within us; the accumulated instinct of the race is poured into each one of us, and overflows us, as if the ocean were poured into a cup.';⁵¹ and, 'There are two reasons ... why ethical maxims appear to be unconditional. First they are acquired from experience not directly but by tribal selection, and therefore in the individual they do not rest upon the true reasons for them. Second, although they are conditional, the absence of the condition in one born of a social race is rightly visited by moral reprobation.'⁵²

This way of reconciling the claims of intuitionist ethics with an empirical account of moral phenomena is not the only advantage that follows from the agnostic approach. Another is that it becomes possible to explain the relativity of ethical systems by showing that each system serves a common purpose in the life of the society which holds it, viz., it exists to help the society preserve itself in the process of natural selection. To understand morality in this way, it is necessary to view societies as organic

51 'The Influence Upon Morality of a Decline in Religious Belief', Lectures and Essays, 2, p.249.

52 'On the Scientific Basis of Morals', op.cit., 2, p.120.

wholes, rather than as piles of individuals. Mill, the agnostics believed, is basically opposed to such an organic view; for it is contrary to the sharp line he draws between the individual and society in his On Liberty.⁵³

A third point of contrast between agnostic ethics and Mill's position turns on the possibility of a science of ethics. In the Logic Mill places morality amongst the arts, not the sciences: 'Whatever speaks in rules or precepts, not in assertions respecting matters of fact, is art; and ethics, or morality, is properly a portion of the art corresponding to the sciences of human nature and society.'⁵⁴ The reason is that morality takes for granted the truth that a certain thing ought to be pursued, and there is no way of showing the truth of this proposition by scientific means. The scientist can, of course, observe what happens when the end is pursued and how it is pursued but 'whether the ends themselves are such as ought to be pursued, and if so, in what cases and to how great a length, it is no part of his business as a cultivator of science to decide, and science alone will never qualify him for the

53 See L. Stephen, op.cit., 3, pp.293-99.

54 John Stuart Mill's Philosophy of Scientific Method, ed. E. Nagel, pp.352-3.

decision.⁵⁵ Similar points about the distinction between factual and value judgments are made in Utilitarianism.⁵⁶ The agnostics reject such a distinction. For them 'ought' statements are one form of 'is' statements, and their truth is to be established by appeal to experience.⁵⁷ It is possible, they claim, to have a science of ethics, though to construct it society must be viewed as an organic whole and the concept of pleasure or goodness made precise by linking it with the health and/or success of the social organism in the struggle for survival. At least this is in part the view of Spencer and Stephen; Clifford altogether rejects ethical hedonism.

A final point of contrast between the empiricists and the agnostics is their attitude toward the existence of God. All the agnostics agree in rejecting belief in God, which, as they point out, is not to deny the existence of a God. Before 1874 those who were close to Mill would have said that in this matter empiricism

55 ibid., p.356.

56 For example: 'Questions of ultimate ends are not amenable to direct proof.' (Utilitarianism in The Philosophy of John Stuart Mill ed. M. Cohen, p.327).

57 The agnostics were not inclined to put the matter quite so bluntly. Huxley notably disagreed with this view. Cf. ch.12.

and agnosticism were in accord with one another, but the posthumous publication of Mill's Theism made such a statement difficult. In this essay Mill argues that the argument from design promises some ground for thinking that a finite deity might exist, and that in terms of its value for human life, it is 'legitimate and philosophically defensible' to indulge the hope that 'the government of the universe and the destiny of man after death' are under divine control.⁵⁸ From the agnostic viewpoint such a position is anathema; Bain felt the same way, but since Mill's writings set the norm of empiricist orthodoxy, he had to admit that empiricism involved no religious viewpoint. 'Empiricists', he wrote of the design argument, 'differ here, like other men. Hume took the side of barrenness; Mill inclined to the other side, although in a very qualified form.'⁵⁹

58 J.S. Mill, Theism (1874; N.Y. 1957) ed. R. Taylor, p.81.

59 A. Bain, 'The Empiricist Position', Mind, 14, 1889, p.399. In John Stuart Mill (p.133) Bain says that this view was completely unexpected, and his claims are 'concessions to the existing theology.' (p.136). Cf. also J. Morley, 'Mr. Mill's Three Essays' (i) 'ii), Fortnightly Review 16, 1874 and 17, 1875, esp. p.637; W.K. Clifford, 'Right and Wrong: The Scientific Ground of Their Distinction', op.cit., 2, p.176; W.G. Ward, 'Philosophy of the Theistic Controversy', The Philosophy of Theism (2 vols., Lond.1884) ed. W. Ward, 2, pp.106-7.

To the agnostics these contrasts highlight important differences between empiricism and agnosticism. From the empiricist point of view they probably indicated - at least until the late seventies - the diversity of empiricist opinion. Mill, for instance, speaks of Spencer and Bain as co-workers in the field of psychology, and Bain was a sympathetic review of agnostic ethical writings.⁶⁰ The agnostics did not neglect their connection with the empiricist movement: Clifford speaks for them all when he describes Mill as 'that noble thinker, to whom we of this generation owe more than I can tell.'⁶¹ But at the same time they insist that there is a fundamental difference between their schools of thought, a difference which makes them rivals. Agnosticism, Leslie Stephen points out in The English Utilitarians, is a radically and scientifically transformed version of empiricist views: '[Darwinian theories] marked the point at which a doctrine of evolution could be

60 J.S. Mill, August Comte and Positivism, p.66; A. Bain, 'Critical Notice of Herbert Spencer's The Data of Ethics, Mind, 4, 1879: Bain says (p.567): 'Without assuming that Mr. Spencer has propounded a new doctrine, the antithesis of the doctrine of utility, he may claim to have put forward a new point of view, in the working out of the doctrine.' He is less sympathetic towards Stephen: cf. A. Bain, 'On Some Points in Ethics', Mind, 8, 1883. For Bain's version of utilitarianism see Mental and Moral Science (Lond. 1868), pp.434-45.

61 'Right and Wrong', op.cit., 2, p.176.

allied with an appeal to experience. Darwin appealed to no mystical bond, but simply to verifiable experience. He postulated the continuance of processes known by observation, and aimed at showing that they would sufficiently explain the present as continuous with the past. There was nothing mystical to alarm empiricists, and their consequent adaption of Darwinism implied a radical change in their methods and assumptions. The crude empiricism was transformed into evolutionism.⁶²

IV

A brief account of the bearing of positivism and empiricism on agnosticism must simplify and leave much unsaid. For instance, it is necessary to leave to one side the question how far the agnostics accurately understood the philosophies of Comte and Mill.⁶³

To round off the account two further points need to be noted. The first is that all three movements can be regarded as particular manifestations of the intellectual tendencies noted in the last chapter (though it would be necessary to describe them more broadly to

62 op.cit., 3, p.375.

63 This was a matter of dispute, particularly concerning Comte's work. Cf. J.S. Mill, op.cit., pp.15-31, 40-47.

establish the point). Empiricism comes before agnosticism and positivism, and influences the expression that these tendencies receive in these two movements. Clearly it exercises more than a negative influence, but in both cases it sets the stage rather than directs the play.

Secondly empiricists and positivists are not the only ones to play a role in determining the formulation of agnostic doctrine. Several figures in the intuitionist camp play fairly prominent parts as well. Hamilton and Mansel have already been mentioned; after them comes Henry Sidgwick. When the agnostics came to elaborate their ethical theories they probably paid more attention to Sidgwick than any other moral philosopher. In their eyes he embodied all of Mill's failings - the distinction between factual and value judgments, an empirical, not a scientific utilitarianism, opposition to a science of ethics - together with the error of being a moral intuitionist. What is more he attempted to prove, particularly against the agnostics, that none of these failings are genuine. He is partly responsible for the most elaborate of agnostic writings, their ethical sciences; for The Methods of Ethics showed them the

ethical problems they had to tackle.⁶⁴

64 H. Sidgwick, The Methods of Ethics (1874; 7th ed. 1907; Lond. 1962), esp. pp.31-35; 'The Theory of Evolution In Its Application to Practice', Mind, 1, 1876; 'Mr. Spencer's Ethical System', Mind, 5, 1880; 'Critical Notice: The Science of Ethics by Leslie Stephen', Mind, 7, 1882; 'Some Fundamental Ethical Controversies', Mind, 14, 1889. The agnostics were particularly anxious to resolve the problem of the relation between rational egoism and rational benevolence (which Sidgwick leaves unsolved; cf. The Methods of Ethics, pp.496-7).

LEARNED IGNORANCE

The German Professors:

Theologians we,
 Deep thinkers and free,
 From the land of the new Divinity;
 Where Critics hunt for the sense sublime,
 Hidden in texts of the olden time,
 Which none but the sage can see.
 Where Strauss shall teach you how martyrs died
 For a moral idea personified,
 A Myth and a symbol, which vulgar sense
 Received for historic evidence.
 Where Bauer can prove that true Theology
 is special and general Anthropology,
 And the essence of worship is only to find
 The realized God in the human mind.
 Where Feuerbach shows how Religion began
 From the deified feelings and wants of man,
 And the Deity owned by the mind reflective,
 Is Human Consciousness made objective.
 Presbyters, bend,
 Bishops, attend;
 The Bible's a myth from beginning to end.
 With a bug, bug, bug, and a hum, hum, hum,
 Hither the true Theologians come.

H.L. Mansel.

Chapter Four

H.L. Mansel (1) : The Limits of Thought.

The Bampton Lectures were founded to defend the various aspects of Christian doctrine; and Mansel's Lectures, despite their history, are a sincere and deliberate attempt to fulfil the founder's intentions. The Limits of Religious Thought¹ is not an original nor even a substantial contribution to the philosophy of religion. It is, however, a clever and competent working together of many familiar and contemporary types of argument for the Christian position. To name but a few; Mansel draws upon the sceptical philosophy of Sir William Hamilton; the Christian interpretation of moral experience; the apologetic weapon of evidences as hammered out in the deist controversy. In bringing these various items together, he does not slavishly copy earlier expositions of each particular form of argument. Mansel does not, it must be admitted, make any major contribution to each of the traditions he follows - unless, as is the case with his borrowings from Hamilton, he presents a clearer account of the position - but he borrows from them in an independent fashion, freely adapting them to suit his own purposes. This lack of originality, though not of

1 The Limits of Religious Thought (1858; 3rd ed. Lond. 1859; 4th ed. Lond. 1859; 5th ed. Lond. 1867). References, unless otherwise stated, are to the 5th edition.

competence, in Mansel's work made it easier for the agnostics to use him. Because his work is more in the form of a synthesis of existing beliefs and doctrines than the presentation of entirely new material, they were able without too much difficulty to draw from his Lectures the sections they agreed with and to dispense with the rest.

In the following exposition of Mansel's thought attention will be paid both to the elements in his work which appealed to the agnostics and to those which did not. There are two reasons for this approach: firstly, Mansel's Lectures possess a certain intrinsic interest as a serious attempt to work out a sceptical defence of religion;² secondly, and more importantly from the

2 It is important to note that Mansel's significance as a thinker and an historical figure is not limited simply to his role in the agnostic movement. There are several other fruitful ways of considering him. Of philosophic interest is his relation to Hamilton (see J.S. Mill, An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy [1865; 6th ed. Lond. 1889; J.A. Passmore, One Hundred Years of Philosophy (Lond. 1957)] and the role they both played in the dissemination of Kantian thought in England (see R. Wellek, Immanuel Kant in England 1793-1838 [Princeton, 1931]). Theologically his conflict with F.D. Maurice (see A.M. Ramsey, F.D. Maurice and the Conflicts of Modern Theology [Camb. 1951], and R.V. Sampson, 'The Limits of Religious Thought: The Theological Controversy', in 1859: Entering an Age of Crisis Ed. P. Appleman, W.A. Madden, M. Wolff [Bloomington 1959]) and his connection with the group of English divines who hold sceptical views about the scientific character of theological knowledge, a group which reaches from Archbishop W. King and Bishop Peter Browne in the deist controversy through the Noetics to Mansel (see G.C. Joyce, 'Analogy', Hastings Encyclopaedia of Religion

viewpoint of the development of agnosticism, the elements which the agnostics disregarded in Mansel's thought were matters which they had to take into account in the development of their theories of science and morality.

II

Briefly stated, the main aim of Mansel's Lectures is to show that the scope of human thought is limited; that there are matters or situations concerning which we cannot think, and that, in particular, there are religious matters completely and necessarily outside the reach of man's thought. The limits of religious thought, which are but the necessary limits of thought in general as they apply to religious matters, are Mansel's partic-

and Ethics) are worth considering. Again, Mansel's general apologetical role as a philosophical, historical, and exegetical writer is not without interest (see his commentary on St. Matthew's Gospel in The Speaker's Commentary / Lond. 1871 - 1881/ and his The Gnostic Heresies of the First and Second Centuries ed. J.B. Lightfoot / Lond. 1875/; see also J.W. Burgon, 'Henry Longueville Mansel' in Lives of Twelve Good Men Vol.2). With few exceptions - notably J.S. Mill, and A.W. Matthews, in his The Religious Philosophy of Dean Mansel (Lond. 1956) - detailed studies of Mansel generally treat him simply as a theological sceptic (e.g. R. Flint's Agnosticism, N. Annan, Leslie Stephen) or as Maurice's opponent (e.g., A.M. Ramsey, op.cit., and R.V. Sampson, op.cit.) The best general account of Mansel's views and his position in Victorian thought is in L. Stephen's, The English Utilitarians (1900; N.Y. 1950, 3 vols in 1) Vol.III: John Stuart Mill.

ular concern. This concern is of some urgency; for failure to realize that religious thought is limited, or to understand precisely what these limits are, has led the defenders and critics of theological doctrine into barren and futile investigation. To show that these investigations are barren, and, more importantly, to show why they must be, is the task Mansel sets himself.

Mansel's first step is to point out two possible false approaches to the determination of religious truth. 'Dogmatism and Rationalism', he writes, 'are the two extremes between which religious philosophy perpetually oscillates. Each represents a system from which, when nakedly and openly announced, the well regulated mind almost instinctively shrinks back; yet which, in some more or less specious disguise, will be found to underlie the antagonist positions of many a theological controversy.'³ These two systems of thought, or, perhaps, more accurately, tendencies of thought, which give rise to different systems, are not to be identified with dogmatic theology, on the one hand, or the use of reason in determining religious truth, on the other; for, Mansel insists, 'All Dogmatic theology is not Dogmatism, nor all use of Reason, Rationalism,

any more than all drinking is drunkenness. The dogmatic or the rational method may be rightly or wrongly employed; and the question is to determine the limits of the legitimate or illegitimate use of each.'⁴

The dogmatist, Mansel claims, accepts the Scriptures as the inspired word of God, and believes that the scriptural teaching can be rationally grounded and harmonized into a coherent and consistent system of thought - at least, this is what the full blown dogmatist believes. Dogmatism, Mansel writes, 'seeks to build up a complete scheme of theological doctrine out of the unsystematic materials furnished by Scripture, partly by the more complete development of certain leading ideas; partly by extending the apparent import of the Revelation to ground which it does not avowedly occupy, and attempting by interference and analogy to solve problems which the sacred volume may indeed suggest, but which it does not directly answer; partly by endeavouring to give additional support to the scriptural statements themselves, treating them as truths, not above, but within the grasp of reason and capable of demonstration from rational premises.'⁵

4 op. cit., 3rd ed., p.ix.

5 op. cit. 5th ed., pp.4-5. For another contemporary account of dogmatism and rationalism see C. Hodge, Systematic Theology (1871-73; 3 vols. Grand Rapids n.d.) vol.1, ch.3.

Two of Mansel's examples are sufficient to indicate the type of theological thought he has in mind. St. Anselm in his Cur Deus Homo sets out to show that a knowledge of the necessity of the Incarnation for man's salvation could be arrived at, apart from revelation, by reflection on the nature of God and man.⁶ In Mansel's words, Anselm treats scriptural statements 'as truths not above, but within the grasp of reason and capable of demonstration from rational premises.' Again, R.I. Wilberforce's attempt, in his The Doctrine of the Incarnation (1848),⁷ to explain how the second person of the Trinity was able to take upon himself human personality without renouncing his divine personality, by claiming that Christ took unto himself the essence of human nature, which subsists independently of the existence of individual man, is an instance of the dogmatism which attempts to extend 'the apparent import of the Revelation to ground which it does not avowedly occupy.' Nothing of value,

6 Anselm describes the first of the two sections of his work as follows: 'The first of these contains the objections of unbelievers who reject the Christian faith because they regard it as contrary to reason, along with the answers of believers. It ends by proving by necessary reasons (Christ being put out of sight as if nothing had ever been known of him) that it is impossible for any man to be saved without him.' He goes on to say how reason alone shows that salvation requires the incarnation of God. A Scholastic Miscellany: Vol.X, Library of Christian Classics. ed. A.M. Fairweather (Lond. 1956), p.100.

7 I have not seen this work. My account is based on Mansel's; see op.cit., p.9.

Mansel claims, is to be gained from such attempts to wrest Scripture into clearly established and coherent systems of thought. Apart from the question whether such speculations are true or false - and Mansel's later argument is designed to show that we cannot settle issues of this sort - such attempts to combine revealed truth and philosophical conjectures are potentially hazardous for both theology and philosophy: on the one hand they link the assured truths of revelation with hypotheses and theories of doubtful validity and thus tend to cast doubt upon the certainty of revealed knowledge; whilst on the other, they open the way for unnecessary restrictions on philosophical thought by making certain philosophical opinions orthodox and others heretical: 'The problems which [philosophy] has a natural right to sift to the uttermost are taken out of the field of free discussion, and fenced about with religious doctrines which it is heresy to call in question.'⁸

At first sight rationalism appears to differ markedly from dogmatism; for the rationalist more often

⁸ op.cit., p.10. In view of the development of Christian doctrine it is doubtful whether Mansel can sustain the sharp division between dogmatism and dogmatic theology. It is surprising that his discussion of valid and invalid theological thought is so summary, because the topic was a live one in English theological thought as a result of the conflicts between the Tractarians and the Noetics, and the Anglican converts to Rome; see, O. Chadwick, From Bossuet to Newman: The Idea of Doctrinal Development (Camb. 1957).

than not is the critic of revealed truth, whilst the dogmatist is its advocate. The differences between the two types of thought, Mansel claims, are by no means superficial, yet deep down the rationalist and the dogmatist agree: they both teach that there are no limits to the ability of human reason to directly determine the truth and falsity of religious statements. Mansel describes their basic identity, despite their differences, in the following words: 'the two systems may be considered as both aiming, though in different ways, at the same end; that end being to produce a coincidence between what we believe and what we think; to remove the boundary which separates the comprehensible from the incomprehensible. The Dogmatist employs reason to prove, almost as much as the Rationalist employs it to disprove. The one, in the character of an advocate, accepts the doctrines of revealed religion as conclusions, but appeals to reason, enlightened it may be, by Revelation, to find premises to support them. The other, in the character of a critic, draws his premises from reason in the first instance; and adopting these as his standard, either distorts the revealed doctrine into conformity with them, or, if it obstinately resists this treatment, sets it aside altogether. The one strives to lift up reason to the point of view occupied by Revelation: the other strives to

bring down Revelation to the limit of reason.'⁹

When Mansel describes the rationalist as drawing his premises from reason he does not have primarily in mind that type of philosophical rationalism in which a deductive metaphysic is established on the basis of self-evident truths. He uses 'reason' in a wider fashion to mean any reflective action which establishes some criterion or criteria by means of which religious statements may be directly observed in themselves to be true or false. 'By Rationalism,' Mansel writes, '... I mean generally to designate that system whose final test of truth is placed in the direct assent of the human consciousness, whether in the form of logical deduction, or moral judgement, or religious intuition; by whatever previous process those faculties may have been raised to their assumed dignity as arbitrators.'¹⁰ Actual instances of the rationalistic spirit, Mansel claims, are to be found in the treatment of religious doctrines by Immanuel Kant and Benjamin Jowett. Kant's doctrine that the main aim of religion is to help man live a moral life, for this is the highest service of God, rules out large sections of the biblical

9 op.cit., p.7

10 ibid., pp.3-4

and revealed doctrine of prayer, since, Kant claims, any prayer which is not designed to help man live a moral life - a prayer, for instance, that God might act on our behalf in some non-moral matter - is not in accord with the aim of religion and cannot be part of divine teaching.¹¹ Jowett similarly dispenses with the biblical doctrine of the atonement, because he holds that it is incompatible with our moral notions and consequently cannot be held to be a divinely revealed doctrine.¹²

At this point we might ask how we are to settle religious problems, if we eschew the methods of the dogmatists and the rationalists. Mansel delays answering this question because he wishes to show first of all that the two false approaches to religious questions - they are, of course, one approach if we consider simply their faith in reason - are in fact illegitimate uses of reason. In showing their illegitimacy, Mansel presents his doctrine of the necessary limits of thought.

11 For example, Kant writes: 'Praying, thought of as an inner formal service of God and hence as a means of grace is a superstitious illusion (a fetish-making); for it is no more than a stated wish directed to a Being who needs no such information regarding the inner disposition of the wisher; therefore nothing is accomplished by it, and it discharges none of the duties to which, at commands of God, we are obligated; hence God is not really served.' Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone trans. T.M. Greene and H.T. Hudson (N.Y., 1960), pp.182-183.

12 Cf. chapter 3, p.

III

Mansel claims that the confidence that rationalists and dogmatists have in the unaided power of human thought to arrive at truth in religious matters - a power which would seem to make revelation superfluous¹³ - is open to two objections. Firstly, that in fact this confidence in the ability of reason to construct a coherent and consistent theory of the divine nature is without historical justification, since every attempt to theorize about the divine existence, even if the attempt takes the form of a denial of the deity, is full of the most severe difficulties. Secondly, that attempts to theorize on these matters will always fail, as they have in the past, because they attempt to transgress the necessary limits of thought; the theories of rationalists and dogmatists, despite their appearance, are illegitimate exercises of reason.

Mansel establishes the first point by examining, initially, the basic ideas of rational theology; for, as he writes in justification of his procedure, 'a philosophy which professes to elicit from its own conceptions all the essential portions of religious belief, is bound to justify its profession, by shewing that these conceptions

themselves are above suspicion.¹⁴ In view of the history of philosophical thought in the Christian tradition, these basic ideas can be said to be that God is absolute, infinite, and first cause. He introduces these terms and defines them in the following way: 'There are three terms, familiar as household words in the vocabulary of Philosophy, which must be taken into account in every system of Metaphysical Theology. To conceive the Deity as He is, we must conceive Him as First Cause, as Absolute and as Infinite. By the First Cause is meant that which produces all things, and is itself produced of none. By the Absolute is meant that which exists in and by itself, having no necessary relation to any other being. By the Infinite is meant that which is free from all possible limitations; that than which no greater is conceivable; and which consequently can receive no additional attribute or mode of existence which it had not from all eternity.'¹⁵

These definitions have caused some of Mansel's critics a deal of theoretical anguish, particularly in the light of his subsequent argument. J.S. Mill, for example, describes the argument which follows as 'one

14 ibid., p.25.

15 ibid., p.31

long ignoratio elenchi'.¹⁶ The main objection concerns Mansel's definition of the absolute, a definition which he borrows in part from Henry Calderwood's Philosophy of the Infinite.¹⁷ As the definition stands, Mansel seems prepared to accept the view that the absolute does not necessarily exist in any relation, but that it can or might exist in relation, whereas later, his critics complain, he contends, and argues from the position, that the absolute is incapable of existing in any relation at all.¹⁸ Mansel's reply to this, largely Mill's, criticism is, I think, correct: the definition of the absolute, as of the other terms, is merely nominal, and the subsequent argument is designed, in part, to show that such a definition can be and must be replaced by one more philosophically adequate.¹⁹ There would be little

16 J.S. Mill, op.cit., p.17.

17 Mansel (op.cit., p.212 Note xiv) presents Calderwood's definitions as they are found in the first edition (Edinb. 1854). In the second edition (Edinb. 1861) Calderwood vigorously controverts Mansel's arguments.

18 J.S. Mill writes: 'The words, "having no necessary relation to any other being," admit of two constructions. The words in their natural sense, only mean, capable of existing out of relation to anything else. Mr. Mansel cannot intend the latter. He cannot mean that the Absolute is incapable of entering into relation with any other being; for he would not affirm this of God; on the contrary, he is continually speaking of God's relation to the World and to us. Moreover, he accepts, from Dr. Calderwood, an interpretation inconsistent with this. This, however, is the meaning necessary to support his case.' op.cit., p.114.

19 Mansel makes the point in the fifth edition; op.cit., p.31 ft.nt.

gained by defining the terms so that the points to be shown could be immediately grasped by anyone who understood the meaning of the definition. Still, to thus defend Mansel is not to deny that Mill has ground for complaint: the compression of Mansel's arguments, his seeming desire to stun his listeners - the Lectures are first preached - rather than to carry them with him step by step, suggests a bewildering, and sometimes seemingly disjointed array of thoughts. Whatever the reasons for this method, Mansel's purposes would have been better carried out if he had presented clearer signs of the precise movement of his argument. Close attention to the text, however, shows that while the argument is compressed it is not disjointed nor haphazard.

Having defined the fundamental ideas of rational theology, Mansel sets out to show that these ideas, whether taken singly or as a group, are surrounded with difficulties; they cannot serve 'all the needs of human thought and feeling.'²⁰ Mansel's specific claims concerning these ideas can be set out as follows:

- (i) if there is an infinite and absolute being

then it is the sum of all reality;

(ii) the infinite and absolute being cannot be the first cause;

(iii) the infinite and absolute being cannot have any internal relations,

(iv) the infinite and absolute being cannot be described; it is inconceivable.

Mansel establishes point (i) by drawing out the consequences of his definitions of the absolute and the infinite; and in so doing he immediately reveals the inadequacy of the definition of the absolute. If we claim, Mansel argues, that God is both infinite and absolute, then we must mean that God is infinite in the sense defined; for if we say that God is infinite or unlimited in certain respects but not in others, or that he possesses a limited number of attributes in infinite degree but that he is devoid of certain other attributes, then God may be infinite in the manner described but he cannot be the absolute: the reason is that the absolute, as defined, cannot exist in any necessary relation, and a God who is infinite in either of the ways described would exist in certain necessary relations. From the argument it follows that the absolute must be infinite in the sense defined; there can be nothing, either potentially or actually, which is not the absolute and infinite being; in other words, God is equivalent to the

whole of sum of reality, evil included. 'The metaphysical representation of the Deity, as absolute and infinite,' Mansel writes, 'must necessarily, as the profoundest metaphysicians have acknowledged, amount to nothing less than the sum of all reality. "What kind of an Absolute Being is that," says Hegel, "which does not contain in itself all that is actual, even evil included?"',²¹

The force of Mansel's argument depends on the truth of his claim that a God who is infinite in either of the two ways mentioned exists in certain necessary relations. His manner of stating his argument suggests, indeed rests upon, the view that the existence of the absolute as defined is inconsistent with the existence of the absolute in any necessary empirical or logical relations. That this is so becomes more apparent if we look at his own statement of the important section of the argument. The infinite being, he writes, 'cannot be conceived, for example, after the analogy of a line, infinite in length, but not in breadth; or of a surface, infinite in two dimensions of space, but bounded in the third; or an intelligent being possessing some one or more modes of consciousness in an infinite degree, but devoid of others. Even if it be granted, which is not the case, that such a partial infinite may without

contradiction be conceived, still it will have a relative infinity only, and be altogether incompatible with the idea of the Absolute. The line limited in breadth is thereby necessarily related to the space that limits it; the intelligence endowed with a limited number of attributes coexists with others which are thereby related to it, as cognate or opposite modes of consciousness.²² Now it is quite obvious that if the infinite, like the line and the surface, has as a necessary condition of its existence the existence of some other being or entity, then the infinite exists in a necessary relation to that being and is thus not the absolute. If, however, the infinite being does not depend upon any other being for its existence, but merely exists together with these other states of affairs, then the only necessary relations into which the infinite enters are purely logical ones which arise out of the laws of logic which determine the structure of all reality. To take one example: because of the law of non-contradiction it is logically impossible that the infinite being could at the same time possess and not possess the same modes of consciousness; the infinite being is limited either to the possession or non-possession of these modes. The laws of identity and

non-contradiction determine the form of the infinite being and the relations into which it can or must enter; because of these laws it is logically impossible for the infinite to exist in certain states or relations. If this is a correct account of the argument which underlies Mansel's claim that an infinite being devoid of certain characteristics exists in certain necessary relations, then the conclusion he ought to draw from his argument is that a God which is infinite and absolute is inconceivable or unthinkable, and not simply that it is the sum of all reality; for, as he elsewhere argues,²³ thought is only possible concerning objects which are subject to the laws of logic. Mansel, however, does not draw this conclusion at this point in his argument, nor does he explicitly point out that he has shown his definition of the absolute to be markedly defective.

Having established that the infinite and absolute God is the sum of all reality, Mansel moves on to discuss whether it is possible to describe God as the first cause. In view of his argument to establish his first point, it would not appear necessary to show that God cannot be described as a cause, but Mansel sets out to prove his point without recourse to the earlier argument. If the causal connection is a necessary relation,

²³ See H.L. Mansel, Prolegomena Logica (Oxford 1851) Chapters 6 and 7.

then, he argues, it is quite clear that the absolute as defined cannot be a cause. 'A Cause', he writes, 'cannot, as such, be absolute. The cause, as such, exists only in relation to its effect: the cause is a cause of the effect; the effect is an effect of the cause.'²⁴ This argument might, perhaps, be avoided by rejecting this view of the causal relation. To say that the absolute is a cause, it might be argued, involved no more than the assertion that the absolute is responsible for the existence of a certain effect; it does not mean that the absolute is of necessity a cause or that it must bring about the effect; 'The Absolute exists first by itself, and afterwards becomes a cause.'²⁵ However, if this is so, then God is not infinite, nor absolute, for according to this view God lacks for a time a certain state of existence, viz., that state of actually being a cause. 'How', Mansel asks, 'can the Infinite become that which it was not from the first? If causation is a possible mode of existence, that which exists without causing is not infinite; that which becomes a cause has passed beyond its former limits.'²⁶ If the infinite God is a cause, then he must always be a cause, which means that

24 The Limits of Religious Thought, p.33.

25 ibid.

26 ibid.

he must always exist in relation to the effect he produces, and if this is so, then the infinite God cannot be the absolute as originally defined.

Now it might be thought that while these arguments tell against the orthodox Christian view that God causes things other than himself, they do not tell against the view that the absolute and the infinite causes himself. The next step in Mansel's examination is to show that we cannot make this type of move, because it is not possible, without confusion, to describe the infinite and absolute God as having any parts or relations within himself. Mansel establishes this point by considering one particular internal relation, *viz.*, the relation of self-consciousness.

The orthodox Christian doctrine of God as creator, Mansel argues, ignoring the difficulties mentioned above, involves the view that God is a conscious being possessing free will. We are forced to this position for the alternatives are clearly incompatible with God's being absolute and infinite: accepting the view that the causal connection is a necessary relation, then, if God creates because he is determined by some force without his character, he exists in necessary relation to that force, or, if God creates because he is determined by his nature, then he is necessarily related to the effect which he is determined to produce. The only position that can be adopted, therefore, is that God creates,

not because he is determined to do so, but because he wills freely to do so. And since it is possible to conceive free will only in a conscious being, God, on the Christian view, must be regarded as a being possessing consciousness. Yet, Mansel argues, while the ascription of consciousness and free will to God settles some problems, it brings others in its wake. The existence of a conscious being as a conscious being involves it in at least one necessary relation, viz., the relation between the subject and object of consciousness. Mansel's point, to state it more fully, is that if God can only exist as a conscious being, then his existence is necessarily dependent on the object of which he is conscious; and if this is so, a conscious God cannot be absolute and infinite. One apparent way round this problem is to say that God's consciousness is always self-consciousness; thus the existence of some other object is not a necessary condition of his existence. Admittedly, Mansel allows, this manoeuvre solves the problem for the time being, 'but this other alternative is, in ultimate analysis, no less self-destructive than the other.'²⁷

To say that the absolute is self-conscious implies that the absolute has parts; that a distinction can be made

between the absolute which knows and the absolute which is known. Yet if, as previously contended, the absolute is the summation of all reality such a distinction within the absolute is not possible, for if the absolute as subject is distinct from the absolute as object, then the absolute, either as the subject or the object, of consciousness, is not the true absolute, since there is something which it is not. In other words, to claim that the absolute is self-conscious involves the admission that there are two absolutes, neither of which can be true absolute. The conclusion to which we are thus led is that the absolute God cannot be self-conscious, at least not in any way that we can conceive this relation. And, to generalize the point, such a line of reasoning can be employed to show that the absolute cannot have any internal relations whatever. In view of this fact and the preceding arguments, it would appear that the absolute cannot be described, since any description would imply that the absolute was one thing rather than another, ^{AND THERE CANNOT BE ANYTHING OTHER THAN THE ABSOLUTE,} either as something over and against it or as a part of it. 'The almost unanimous voice of philosophy, in pronouncing that the absolute is both one and simple,' Mansel writes, 'must be accepted as the voice of reason

also, so far as reason has any voice in the matter.'²⁸

Mansel's argument does not stop at this point. If we cannot describe the absolute - which is the meaning of the statement that the absolute is one and simple - can we then, Mansel asks, say anything about it at all? Can we even assert that it is? The answer is no; for to say that the absolute is, we must be able to say what it is, and this we cannot do. The metaphysical theist is unable to distinguish God from his creation, yet he cannot identify him with it; his God is unspeakable or incomprehensible. Mansel thus arrives at the point which his first argument established, viz., that an infinite and absolute God is inconceivable. In the context of his present argument, which is concerned with the notions of an infinite and absolute being as a cause, Mansel expresses the point as follows: 'The One and the Many, regarded as the beginning of existence, are thus alike incomprehensible.'²⁹

At this point Mansel terminates his discussion of theism;³⁰ what does the examination entitle him to claim? If we grant that 'the fundamental conceptions

28 ibid., p.35

29 ibid.

30 Strictly speaking the discussion continues for a few more pages (pp.35-38) but it is merely a representation of points already noted.

of this Rational Theology' are 'self-destructive',³¹ than this means no more than that the type of rationalism which attempts to develop a theory of God along orthodox Christian lines is involved in what appear to be insoluble problems. At most all that Mansel has shown is that a consistent rationalist cannot in all likelihood be a metaphysical theist. What about the alternatives to theism, pantheism and atheism? These positions, Mansel allows, are genuine options for the rationalist, but when examined they are found to be no more satisfactory than theism.

Pantheism escapes the problems inherent in the theist's doctrine of creation by denying that there is any difference between God and the world; God, on this view, is the absolute and the infinite and there is nothing other than or distinct from this being. If this is true, then, Mansel claims, 'my personal existence, the great primary fact of all consciousness, is a delusion';³² but, he continues, if we can be mistaken about our personal existence, then surely we can be mistaken about the validity of the pantheist's claim that our personal existence is a delusion? As an argument this line of reasoning does not represent much of a threat to pantheism;

31 ibid., p.35

32 ibid., p.39

Mansel, however, connects it with a more damaging criticism: the pantheist, he claims, is unable to admit that there can be delusions; 'no Pantheist, if he is consistent with himself, can admit the existence of a distinction between truth and falsehood at all.'³³ For the pantheist all thoughts are God's thoughts, and since such thoughts are, presumably, always true, how is it possible that there are erroneous thoughts at all? Similarly, how is it possible that there are both good and evil in the world, if God is the only agent? 'How error and evil, even in appearance, are possible;' Mansel writes, '...how the finite and the relative can appear to exist, even as a delusion, - is a problem which no system of Pantheism has made the slightest approach towards solving.'³⁴ Finite things, irrespective of whether they are considered, as in theism, to be actually related to the deity, or illusory modes of the deity, as in pantheism, present serious problems for any attempt to develop a theory of absolute existence.

Mansel's criticism of pantheism, as the exposition suggests, is mainly aimed at showing that a rational theology cannot be freed from difficulties

33 ibid., p.40.

34 ibid.

simply by pruning away the notion of God as creator. Besides this line of criticism we must also place the conclusion of Mansel's examination of the absolute and infinite being, viz., that such a being is inconceivable; for the point applies equally to both theistic and pantheistic doctrines of God. Moreover, there are hints in Mansel's treatment of absolutist theories that he has in mind the self-refuting character of such doctrines.³⁵ For a thoroughgoing absolutist there is only one being, the absolute, which is both one and simple. Such a position can only be stated and defended by first of all assuming, what is later said to be false, that we can reason about the absolute as if we are other than, or distinct from, the absolute. Without making this assumption an absolutist theory could never be developed; if it is made, then it is inconsistent with the conclusion to which the argument leads. Perhaps this attack could be met by the claim that it is only by making this initial false assumption that we can arrive at a knowledge of the true character of existence. If this move is allowed,

35 Mansel writes: Pantheism 'is saved from the necessity of demonstrating its own falsehood, by abolishing the only conditions under which truth and falsehood can be distinguished from each other.' ibid., p.39. Cf. also ibid., p.217 Note xvii.

then the relation of appearance to reality, the point which Mansel stresses, becomes one of the central problems for the theory of the absolute.

Atheism, the denial of the existence of infinite being, avoids two of the major problems associated with theism and pantheism. On the one hand it is not faced with the problem of reconciling the infinite with the finite; on the other, it is not presented with the problem of the status of inconceivable entities, since the atheist, unlike the theist and pantheist, can freely admit that what cannot be thought cannot be said to exist. In fact, Mansel claims, anyone who wishes to 'make man's power of thought the exact measure of his duty of belief'³⁶ is forced to accept the atheist's position; theism and pantheism can escape the difficulties associated with inconceivable entities only by developing the view, if it can be developed, 'that it is our duty to believe what we are altogether unable to comprehend.'³⁷

Yet, while atheism possesses certain advantages in comparison with the alternative positions, it is not altogether free of difficulty; for atheism, Mansel claims, is a self-refuting theory. In denying the

36 ibid., p.40.

37 ibid.

existence of infinite being, the atheist is committed to the view that the realm of finite existence is limited. However, as a limit is a relation between that which limits and that which is limited, the existence of a limited or finite realm of being implies that there is something which limits the realm of being, and this other existent must itself be infinite or unlimited, otherwise the same problem breaks out again. The atheist, therefore, in asserting that there is only a limited universe of finite things is forced to admit what he ostensibly wishes to deny, viz., the existence of an infinite being. No escape from this argument, Mansel continues, is to be found in the claim that the finite universe limits itself, as distinct from being limited by something other than itself, since the universe which limits itself must both be within and without the limit, whilst the point of the atheist's claim is that there is nothing whatsoever outside of the limit. 'We are involved', Mansel says of the atheist's position, 'in the self-contradictory assumption of a limited universe, which yet can neither contain a limit in itself, nor be limited by anything beyond itself. For if it contains a limit in itself, it is both limiting and limited, both beyond the limit and within it; and if it is limited by anything else,

it is not the universe.'³⁸

As a refutation of atheism Mansel's argument is quite successful, provided that his account of the atheist's position is correct. It is by no means self evident, however, that this account is correct: the denial of the infinite, as the term is understood in theistic and pantheistic systems, does not appear to involve the view that the realm of being is finite. That this view is involved or must be held together with the denial of the infinite can be granted only if it is shown that the claim that the universe is infinite contains severe difficulties; failing this, there is no reason to think that the atheist must maintain that the universe of being is finite. Mansel attempts, though somewhat indirectly, to justify his presentation of the atheistic position; the force of his argument rests upon his general epistemological doctrines.

His argument might be stated as follows. The atheist's claim that the universe is not finite but infinite can be taken to mean only that the universe is without limits, or, what is the same thing, that it extends indefinitely forever. The atheist cannot claim that the infinity of the universe means simply that the

universe extends indefinitely; for while this would be true if the universe were without limits, it might also be true, from the point of view of any human observer, even if the universe is limited or finite.³⁹ If, therefore, the atheist is to deny the charge that he believes the universe of being to be limited or finite, then he must affirm that the universe is without limits. Yet, if he makes this affirmation, he is forced to admit that there is that which is unthinkable; for, according to Mansel, we can only think or conceive that which we experience, and as we experience only that which is finite, we cannot think or have a concept of that which is without limits.⁴⁰ The problem confronting the atheist, then, is either to allow the existence of that which is unthinkable, as the theists and pantheists must, or to claim that the universe of being is limited or finite. Because, Mansel seems to argue, a rationalist who is an atheist could hardly admit the existence of any unthinkable or inconceivable beings or entities, the atheist must affirm that the universe of being is limited.

At this point Mansel brings to an end his discussion of the problems surrounding the various possible views concerning rational theology. His treatment calls

39 Mansel clearly distinguishes these two ways of interpreting the word 'infinite'; see ibid., p.212 Note xv.

40 See section 4.

for some comment in that an attempt to dispense with the three major theories of the nature of existence in eleven pages is something of a tour de force; more abruptly, such an attempt might be taken to reveal a marked degree of philosophical ignorance and incompetence. To so regard Mansel's efforts would be unfair. He goes to great pains in the notes to his lectures to show that the types of arguments he employs are by no means novel or original; that they are in fact lines of reasoning with a long history in philosophical thought. Of course, a summary statement is not without its disadvantages: much more could be said, indeed has been said; still one might claim, with qualifications, that Mansel has revealed in essence some of the central difficulties of the positions he has discussed. But because the arguments are summarily stated the word 'appears' in the statement with which Mansel concludes his discussion needs to be stressed: 'The conception of the Absolute and Infinite, from whatever side we view it appears encompassed with contradictions.'⁴¹

If Mansel's arguments are accepted then the problem is whether it is possible to escape a movement towards a metaphysical scepticism. Quite clearly all

three positions, if they are the only possible positions, cannot be false, yet if Mansel's arguments are correct none of them can be justifiably regarded as true from a rationalistic viewpoint. It would appear, then, that an escape from a practical scepticism is possible only by denying at least one of Mansel's analyses, or by presenting some argument for showing that while the analyses are correct they do not provide any justification for the view that the truth about the nature of existence cannot be known. Mansel attempts to carry out the latter programme, and in so doing he reveals the reasons why rationalism and dogmatism are, and must ever be, theoretically bankrupt; 'we thus prepare the way for a recognition of the separate provinces of Reason and Faith.'⁴²

IV .

To transform the near sceptical character of his attack on rationalism and dogmatism into a defence of theism, Mansel advances two very different lines of argument. The first explains why, because of the nature and limits of thought, it is impossible to theorize

about the infinite and absolute being, without falling into contradiction. The second argument justifies belief in the absolute being on the ground that the type of contradictions found in atheism, but not in theism, are such that the atheistic position cannot be believed.

Thinking, according to Mansel, consists in mental operations involving concepts; 'The concept ... is the characteristic feature of Thought proper, as distinguished from other facts of consciousness: and the Thinking process may be adequately defined as the act of knowing or judging of things by means of concepts.'⁴³ A concept is a general notion which is obtained by an operation of the mind, involving the imagination, upon the intuitions of the presentative faculties. By intuition Mansel means the experience of coming into contact with the individual things which constitute the external and internal world; the number of types of intuitions depends upon the number of presentative faculties or senses that a man possesses. In the formation of concepts the mind gathers what is common to any particular collection of intuitions and forms them into a concept which represents in the mind this common attribute or

set of attributes. Because the concept is a common or general notion it cannot be regarded as an intuition or mental copy of an intuition; for an intuition is always of something particular or individual, whereas a concept is always of that which is general. Furthermore, Mansel claims, the concept is fixed or held in the mind by means of a symbol or representative sign, which is generally a word or group of words. His view of the relation between language, concepts, and the experience upon which concepts are based, is summed up in this statement: 'We have thus, in the complete exercise of thought, three successive representations. The sign is representative of the notion; the notion is representative of the image; and the image is representative of the object from which the notion was formed.'⁴⁴

Since thought is dependent upon experience in that we can think only that which we experience or intuit, it follows that if we cannot be conscious of the absolute God, then we cannot think that deity which is absolute and infinite. Now in fact, Mansel claims, the conditions which govern consciousness prevent us from experiencing anything which is not finite and relative. Examination of four of these conditions or psychological laws, he

contends, is sufficient to establish this point. The four laws are:

(i) that whatever is an object of consciousness must be distinct from other objects of consciousness;

(ii) that whatever is an object of consciousness must be capable of being a term in a relation, since consciousness is a relation;

(iii) that whatever is an object of consciousness must possess temporal features;

(iv) that whatever is an object of consciousness must, if it is a part of the physical world, possess spatial features; or, if it is a part of the mental world, be a member of a system of mental qualities related to a conscious self.⁴⁵

In view of Mansel's previous analysis of theories of the absolute it can be seen that on his view the absolute could not be an object of consciousness, nor, therefore, of thought. Mansel, however, does not simply set out the conclusions of his previous arguments and point out how they rule out the possibility of a consciousness of the absolute.⁴⁶ Rather he takes each

45 See The Limits of Religious Thought Lecture 3.

46 Of course it might be objected that if his analysis of absolute existence is correct, there is hardly any point in asking whether the absolute can be an object of consciousness, since if it exists there can be no consciousness.

condition of consciousness and shows why the absolute and infinite being cannot be intuited or thought. While his detailed arguments are well stated and developed, there is little point in following through the various points; needless to say, Mansel has no difficulty in showing that 'the Finite cannot comprehend the Infinite.'⁴⁷

What is more important, however, is the way in which Mansel uses the doctrine of the limits of thought. Irrespective of whether there is an absolute being or not, he argues, it is not possible to reason about such a being without falling into contradiction; for attempts to think about such an object are really attempts to transgress the limits of thought in the impossible task of thinking the unthinkable. In other words, the attempt to conceive the absolute and infinite being is an attempt to treat that which is absolute as relative, and that which is infinite as finite; it cannot help but give rise to contradictions. Mansel describes the position in the following way: 'For though the mere abstract expression of the infinite, when regarded as indicating nothing more than the negation of limitation, and therefore of conveyability, is not contradictory in itself, it becomes so the instant we attempt to apply it in reasoning to any

object of thought. A thing - an object - an attribute - a person - or any other terms signifying one out of many possible objects of consciousness, is by that very relation necessarily declared to be finite. An infinite thing, or object, or attribute, or person, is therefore in the same moment declared to be both finite and infinite.⁴⁸

There are at least three questions posed by Mansel's account of the nature and limits of thought and the purpose to which it is put. Firstly, there is the question whether the conditions or psychological laws of thought are necessary or contingent; secondly, there is the problem, that to claim the absolute is unthinkable it must, so it would appear, be thought to be so, and is, therefore, in one respect at least, not unthinkable; thirdly, there is the question whether Mansel's doctrine of the limits of thought explains why theories of the absolute must always involve contradictions.

No doubt surrounds Mansel's view of the status of the laws governing consciousness: they are, he teaches, empirical laws discovered by reflection upon the nature of consciousness. Psychological laws are like the laws which hold in the physical world: they are statements of fact which are contingently and not, as are the laws of logic, necessarily true. However, whilst psychological

and physical laws are alike in that they are empirical laws and can be supposed not to hold, they differ in that the laws which hold in physical nature can be conceived or thought to be other than they are, whereas the conditions governing consciousness, like the laws of logic, cannot be conceived or thought not to hold. The limits of thought or the conditions of consciousness are necessary in the sense that they cannot be thought not to hold, but they are not necessary in the sense that they cannot be denied to hold. Mansel, speaking of the contingent character of physical laws, puts his position as follows: 'The same is the case with all psychological judgements, so far as they merely state the fact that our minds are constituted in this or that manner. But there is one remarkable difference between this contingency, and that which is presented by physical phenomena. The laws of the latter impose no restraint on my powers of thought: relatively to me, they are simply universally observed facts. There is therefore no impediment to my uniting in a judgement any two notions once formed; though the corresponding objects cannot consistently with existing laws of nature, be insisted in fact. ... But as regards Psychology: the powers of my being cannot be presented to consciousness, but under one determinate manifestation. The only variety is found in the objects on which they operate. I am thus

limited in my power of forming notions at all, in all cases where I am, by mental restrictions, prevented from experiencing the corresponding intuition. I have then a negative idea only of the nature of an intelligent being constituted in a different manner from myself; though I have no difficulty in supposing that many such exist.⁴⁹

The distinction drawn in this quotation between what can be conceived and what can be believed is central to Mansel's theory of the limits of thought. He allows, in other words, that it is possible to believe a proposition even though it is not possible to think what is believed. This appears somewhat paradoxical; for if we cannot think what we believe, then what can we be said to believe? This paradox is closely related to another difficulty in Mansel's position, viz., that it appears that we can state the position that the absolute is unthinkable only by thinking that it is unthinkable. Mansel's attempt to escape this type of problem (though this is not the only reason why he introduces it)⁵⁰ is found in his doctrine of negative ideas or negative thoughts. Thinking, Mansel claims, takes two forms, positive and negative; and

49 Prolegomena Logica, p.120.

50 In Prolegomena Logica, for example, he makes the doctrine of negative thoughts central to his philosophy of logic.

negative thinking, or 'the negation of thought',⁵¹ concerns that which cannot be or has not been experienced. Just as positive thoughts or concepts are represented by words, so also are negative thoughts. This quotation from Mansel's Prolegomena Logica indicates his doctrine: 'a man born blind may be said to have a negative idea of colour in general; and any man, to have a negative idea of a colour which he has not seen. The blind man may be able to distinguish a sphere from a cube by touch; but if he is told that the ball which he has in his hand is white, he cannot connect the word with any sensations of which he has been at any time conscious. And in like manner, a man who has seen white objects only has no idea of red; he knows it only as some colour which he has not seen. In this manner it is that we have negative ideas only of many of the objects on which men most boldly speculate.'⁵²

Now though Mansel never expresses his position in quite this way, it would appear that the doctrine of negative thoughts or ideas is his way of explaining how it is possible to think that which has not been, or cannot be, experienced. A superficial resolution of the

51 op.cit., p.250.

52 ibid., p.250.

paradoxes noted above can thus be offered. In thinking that there are unthinkables, the thinking is negative, not positive, and involves the use of negative ideas, not concepts. Similarly, when that which cannot be thought is the object of belief, what is believed is a proposition involving, not a concept, but a negative idea. Whatever may be the value of treating the paradoxes in this way, it is clear that Mansel needs a doctrine of negative thoughts to overcome some of the most obvious problems in his theory. The need, however, does not justify their introduction; and, in fact, it is very doubtful if Mansel's theory of thought allows for them. If thinking is a mental operation involving concepts, there can be no negative thinking, for a negative thought is not a concept. Mansel is consistent when he describes a negative thought as the negation of thought, for a negative thought could only be a thought if the conditions governing thought were other than they are. Despite its name a negative thought is not a thought. Mansel however cannot stick consistently to this position, for then he would be unable to explain the apparent activity of thinking in discussing the unthinkable; but at the same time he cannot allow that such reasonings are proper thoughts. For Mansel, then, negative thoughts are a class of thought and the negation of thought, though how they can be both at once he does not explain.

The difficulties surrounding Mansel's doctrine of negative thoughts have an important bearing on the use to which he puts his theory of the necessary limits of thought; for without negative thoughts, there is no point in explaining contradictions in theories of the absolute with the claim that they result from attempts to transcend the limits of thought. If Mansel's account of thought is correct then it is not possible to think beyond the limits of thought or even to attempt to do so, since thinking involves concepts, and concepts are formed in accord with the conditions which govern consciousness. Or, to make the point more concretely: it is not possible to apply, as he suggests is done, the notion of infinity 'in reasoning [if reasoning is an act of thought]' to any object of thought,⁵³ because there is no concept of infinity, and consequently there is no way of applying it in thought to any object of thought. His claim, then, that 'an infinite being ... is therefore in the same moment declared to be both finite and infinite' would be true only if the attempt was made to think that the object is both finite and infinite, whereas in fact it can be thought only to be finite and asserted to be infinite; the incompatibility is not a contradiction in thought but

a contradiction between what the thing is thought to be and what it is asserted to be. It appears then that the fact that thought is limited will not serve to explain why there are contradictions in thought concerning certain matters, as Mansel wishes to maintain. It is, of course, possible to explain by reference to the limits of thought why that which can be asserted cannot in certain instances be thought. This, however, is not sufficient for Mansel because he wants to minimize the significance of the contradictions which arise in certain fields by claiming that thought on these matters must result in contradiction; yet, according to his theory of thought it is not possible to think concerning these matters at all, and consequently whatever contradictions emerge in reasonings in this field cannot be explained by reference to the limits of thought. In this connection we must note that Mansel sharply distinguishes the activities of reasoning and understanding from the activity of thinking. It is quite possible, he claims, to speak meaningfully concerning that which has not been or cannot be experienced, and to construct and understand arguments relating to the inconceivable; 'The meaning of a word', Mansel writes, 'must of course be known before we can determine whether the corresponding object is

conceivable or not.'⁵⁴ And, in his Prolegomena Logica, he claims that 'the test ... of the reality of a thought does not lie in the possibility of assertion but in the possibility of conception; in the power, that is to say of combining the given attributes in a single image representative of an individual object of intuition.'⁵⁵ However, whilst his doctrine of thought involves the separation of reasoning from thinking, the distinction once made seems markedly implausible. Even Mansel denies it on occasions; for example, he rejects the attempt to construct a transcendental metaphysic 'from a conviction of its utter inability to furnish any reliable or even intelligible results. All such theories are open to two fundamental objections:- they cannot be communicated, and they cannot be verified. They cannot be communicated; for the communication must be made by words; and the meaning of those words must be understood; and the understanding is a form of consciousness, and subject to the laws of consciousness. They cannot be verified; for to verify, we must compare the author's experience with our own; and such comparison is again an

54 ibid., p.31 ft.nt.

55 Prolegomena Logica, p.248.

act of consciousness and subject to its laws.⁵⁶

Generally, however, Mansel does not overcome the problems involved in saying that reasoning is distinct from thinking by inconsistently denying the distinction; his method is more subtle, if no more successful: for he pretends that when reason concerns itself with that which lies outside the limits of thought it engages in a special kind of thinking, viz., negative thinking.

Besides using the doctrine of the limits of thought to explain why theories of the absolute must always be beset with difficulties, Mansel also makes it serve as a minor argument for the existence of situations which cannot be thought. A limit, he argues is a relation between that which limits and that which is limited, and if thought is limited then it must be limited by something, something which cannot be thought. 'But a limit', he writes, 'is necessarily conceived as a relation between something within and without itself; and thus the consciousness of a limit of thought implies, though it does not directly present to us, the existence of something of which we do not and cannot think.'⁵⁷

56 Metaphysics, p.29. He uses almost exactly the same words in The Limits of Religious Thought (p.66) when criticising attempts to base a knowledge of God upon mystical experiences.

57 The Limits of Religious Thought, p.67-8.

To be more precise Mansel should say that a limit to thought implies that situations may exist which cannot be thought; for in order to state the claim that thought is limited it is not necessary that the situations which cannot be thought should in fact be actual but that they can be considered or supposed to be actual or not logically impossible. The limits of thought, then, implies that there are possible situations which cannot be thought; whether in fact there are such situations is another question. In other words, because there are limits to thought it is possible that the boundaries of being are not the same as the conditions of thought.

On Mansel's account of thought it is impossible to theorize about a being which is absolute and infinite without falling into contradictions; and yet, because these contradictions stem from human faulty, and not, as first appears, from the nature of the being considered, they cannot be regarded as signs that such a being cannot exist. The doctrine of the necessary limits of thought thus enables Mansel to minimize the importance of the contradictions found in theism. Even so, the problem remains whether there is any rational way of deciding for theism rather than atheism - Mansel tends to ignore pantheism in this stage of his argument - and thereby escaping the practical scepticism resulting from his analysis of the different ontologies. Mansel's answer in The Limits of Religious Thought is less clear than

it is in his Metaphysics, though the structure of the argument in the former requires a straightforward answer. His position, however, if the two accounts are read together, is clear enough: the ontological problem can be settled rationally by examination of the types of contradictions found in theism and atheism. The main point of the solution is that the denial of infinite being is self-refuting and cannot, therefore, be believed, whereas the affirmation of infinite being can be believed, since the position is not self-contradictory and, for all that is known, the contradictions involved in it may be apparent. The argument is expressed in part in Mansel's Metaphysics: 'For the contradictions involved in the denial of the infinite', he writes, 'are positive, and definitely self-destructive; as we directly conceive the universe as limited, and yet as limited by nothing beyond itself; whereas the contradictions involved in the assumption that the infinite exists are merely negative, and might be soluble in a higher state of intelligence; as they arise merely from the impotence of thought, striving to reduce under the conditions of conceivability that which is beyond its grasp.'⁵⁸

the point is, however, that it is much more difficult to show that this type of contradiction is real and not apparent, than it is to reveal the real contradictory character of scepticism; for the atheist can always claim that the concept of a limit has been misunderstood or defined too narrowly and so on, and that the contradiction is apparent and not real. The likely success of such an attempt to avoid criticism may seem rather small, but the question is not whether the atheist can successfully avoid the charge of contradiction, but whether it can be shown conclusively that he cannot. Mansel has not shown that the atheist is logically compelled to accept the position he ascribes to him, and consequently he cannot claim that theism must be accepted because its contradictory contains a real or positive contradiction. At most Mansel can claim that if atheism is as he claims, and cannot be otherwise stated, then it cannot as a system of beliefs be believed.

A second, and more minor point, is that if Mansel's argument proves that atheism cannot be believed, then the same would be true of its contradictory. For according to his earlier analysis of the nature of infinite being, the most thorough statement of the affirmation of such a being is some form of pantheism, and pantheism and atheism are both instances of the same type of self-refuting theory. So, if the denial of infinite being

cannot be believed, neither can the affirmation of this being. Of course both positions can be believed, because it is logically possible that the contradictions involved are apparent and not real; there is no need, however, though it may lend support, to introduce the doctrine of the limits of thought to show that the contradictions in theism and pantheism can be thus regarded. Now this point is somewhat trifling, but it connects up with an important criticism that can be made of the more constructive sections of Mansel's argument: viz., that when he attempt to justify belief in an absolute and infinite being, he assumes that this being can be viewed in a religious or theological way; what is more, he puts to one side his earlier analysis of such a being and assumes that it should be viewed theistically, and not pantheistically. Mansel's attitude on these matters, and some of the reasons underlying them, are stated in this passage from a later section of his Lectures. He writes: 'The Infinite is known to human reason, merely as the negation of the Finite: we know what it is not; and that is all. The conviction that an Infinite Being exists, seems forced upon us by the manifest incompleteness of our finite knowledge; but we have no rational means whatever of determining what is the nature of that Being. The mind is thus unable to frame for itself any speculative representation of the Divine Essence; and for that very

reason, Philosophy is not entitled, on internal evidence, to accept say, or to reject any.⁶⁰ Why the infinite and absolute being should be understood in a religious way, Mansel does not explain; such a being, for all he shows to the contrary, could be infinite Time. However, Mansel's philosophical reasons for viewing the infinite and absolute being in a theistic rather than a pantheistic way are not, perhaps, difficult to discern. Though he never says as much he holds the self-refuting character of pantheism as almost a sure sign that it is erroneous; theism is thus the only possible philosophy of the infinite. Yet even if this is so, he is still faced with the problem that theism logically developed leads to pantheism. Mansel's way around this problem, as the quotation indicates, is the doctrine of the limits of thought: it is possible, indeed necessary, he argues, to believe that there is an infinite being but impossible, because of the impotence of thought, to theorize about it. Now this is not a very successful defence for taking a philosophically naive view of the absolute; since, to be consistent, the limits of thought preclude the thought, and thereby the belief, that there is an infinite being, as much as they do any thoughts about the nature of that being. Or, to reverse

the point, if it is possible to think that there is an infinite being, then it is not possible to plead the limits of thought as a reason for not thinking about its character. And, apart from these objections, it is not at all clear what it means to have a simple undeveloped view of the infinite being; in fact, if we take Mansel's only definition, it would appear that God is the sum of all reality. The doctrine of human ignorance protects Christian orthodoxy, so it seems, only by sacrificing it.

V

When Huxley and Spencer read The Limits of Religious Thought they did not stop to examine the way in which Mansel develops his theory of the necessary limits of thought in relation to Christian doctrine and the enemies of the Faith, rationalism and dogmatism. For them the main point of the work was its clear statement of the doctrine that human thought is limited and that the great part of metaphysics is without its range. They had no difficulty in accepting Mansel's statement of this doctrine - though it is quite obvious that they ignored his exact claims - because they shared his general epistemological views and they could see, as did Mansel, nothing odd in the notion of a limit to thought. A contemporary reader cannot, however, view Mansel's position

with quite the same ease.

There are two general criticisms that can be made of Mansel's attempt to state the limits of human thought. The first objection is that the epistemological basis on which he erects his theory enables him to claim not that he has shown the necessary limits of thought in general, but that he has shown the necessary limits of his thought. The basis of this criticism is the interpretation that Mansel provides of the claim that it is possible to think or know only that of which we are conscious. Mansel takes this statement to mean that we cannot think or know whether that of which we are conscious has an existence apart from our being conscious of it. We can, he claims, distinguish within consciousness the real from the apparent, the actual external world from the fictitious one we create, but we cannot determine whether the real world of which we are conscious exists independently of its relation to us, or whether it has no more objective reality than the fictions from which it is distinguished in consciousness. Mansel is prepared to draw this conclusion: 'If, then, being is interpreted to mean the absolute beyond consciousness, and appearance the relative within it (an interpretation, however, which is not warranted by the analysis of consciousness itself), it must be admitted that the philosophy of the material

world, in its highest form, is not Ontology, but Phenomenology.⁶¹ The phenomenology would be, however, the science of the individual's phenomenal states and not the science of phenomenal states in general; for the reasons which prevent knowledge whether there is a noumenal external world also precludes knowledge whether there are other persons, besides the individual, with their own states of consciousness. At most, then, Mansel can claim that the conditions of consciousness, which set the limits of thought, are the conditions of his consciousness and not of consciousness in general; his actual theory might, of course, be true, but it can never be known to be so.

Because of the subjectivist character of his theory of knowledge and thought - a fact which counts against the theory - Mansel is committed, whether he desires or not, to hold a doctrine of the limits of thought. And the fact that his epistemology commits him to such a view is itself an indication of a serious flaw in his theory; for the notion of a limit to thought is logically odd in much the same way that the notion of a limit to the realm of being is odd. Mansel, of course, denies that the two cases are similar; for if he admits

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Metaphysics, p.354.

that they are, then his whole endeavour in attempting to state the limits of thought appears to be futile. His defence of his position against this, Hegel's criticism, is contained in a note to The Limits of Religious Thought. He writes: ' In maintaining that a limit as such always implies something beyond, and consequently, that the notion of a limited universe is self-contradictory, Hegel is unquestionably right; but he is wrong in attempting to infer from thence the non-limitation of thought. For that which is limited is not necessarily limited by something of the same kind; - nay the very conception of kinds is itself a limitation. Hence the consciousness that thought is limited by something beyond itself, by no means implies that thought itself transcends that limit. A prisoner chained up feels that his motion is limited, by his inability to move into the space which he sees or imagines beyond the length of his chain. On Hegel's principles, he ought to know his inability by actually moving into it.'⁶² There are two different lines of attack in this reply to Hegel. The first, and least effective, is that it cannot be denied that thought is limited because thought cannot be other than itself. Now while this is true, it has little bearing on the

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xxxvii.

The Limits of Religious Thought, p.229 Note

question whether there are things or situations which cannot be thought; for even if Mansel is wrong and there are no such situations, thought is still limited in this logical sense. What Mansel has to show and justify is that there are logically possible situations that cannot be thought.⁶³ Mansel's case, therefore, rests upon his second criticism, viz., that for one thing to limit another, that which limits need not be of the same kind as that which is limited. Now if Mansel is to present an account which is at all plausible he must make this move; for if the limit to thought could only be another thought, then thought would not be limited, because that which cannot be thought is a thought; (though the claim is not merely a face saver, since it is manifestly true that the terms in many limiting relations are not of the same kind.) Mansel's position, however, cannot be saved by arguing that the limit to thought is not a thought but something non-mental. For, if say the existence of God is the limit to thought, it can only be claimed to be such by thinking that it is the limit; but if it is that which cannot be thought, then it cannot be thought to be that

63 The doctrine of negative thoughts is also designed to explain how it is possible to think the logically impossible or to think about that which is logically impossible; see Prolegomena Logica, chapter 8.

which limits thought. The existence of God, or of any other contender for this position, cannot, therefore, be said to be the limit to thought. The fact that the limits of thought cannot be stated without contradiction does not mean that there are no limits to thought; it does mean, however, that if there are limits to thought, they cannot be thought, known, believed or supposed to be such.⁶⁴ Mansel is unable to accept this position and consequently he is forced into the confusions of the doctrine of negative thoughts and the separation of reasoning from thinking. If Mansel can save his doctrine it can only be by re-defining the notion of a limit, but it is difficult to see any successful way in which he might do so. Given his view of the nature of a limit, he cannot, without gross inconsistency, develop a theory of the necessary limits of thought.

64 In this respect the view that there are limits to thought differs from the view that there are limits to being; for while it is not contradictory to say that there are, or might be limits to thought, though it is self-contradictory to say what these limits are, it is not possible to even say that there might be a limit to being, much less that there is, without being involved in a self-contradictory position.

The present writer was at Oxford in the last three years of the decade in which Greg's Creeds of Christendom appeared, and can well recall the share that it had, along with Mansel's Bampton Lectures and other books on both sides, in shaking the fabric of early belief in some of the most active minds then in the university.

John Morley.

I have read a good deal of Mansel's book, enough to show me that, as far as I may do so without risk of false doctrine or temerity, I agree with it. May it seems to me taken from own Protestant teaching. This does not hinder me from feeling a serious objection and fear of some things which he has said. I shall beg your acceptance of a copy of a book of mine (University Sermons) in which some of the views contained which he has followed and which I still hold, as far as I am allowed to do so salva fide, except that in my own mind and reason I feel them to be in part more sceptical than now I have any temptation to affirm.

J.H. Newman.

Chapter Five

H.L. Mansel (2): The Limits of Thought and Christian Belief.

Only two of Mansel's eight Bampton lectures contain his argument to show that thought has certain necessary limits; the rest of his work is given over to two other tasks. One consists in driving home the apologetic relevance of the doctrine of necessary ignorance by showing, in direct imitation of Bishop Butler, that analogous problems of a seemingly insoluble type are found in both philosophical and theological thought; and by suggesting - the point, Mansel claims, could be demonstrated - that these difficulties arise in both cases, as do those surrounding theories of absolute existence, because the necessary limits of thought have been ignored.¹ His other task, one more relevant to our present purposes, is an examination of the ways in which his attack on dogmatism and rationalism affects the orthodox pattern of belief.

Mansel's method of saving the biblical revelation from philosophical criticism poses at least three problems. Firstly, he has to show how it is possible to think about God even though he is beyond thought, since unless the deity can be thought in the first place, he cannot be

1 These matters are taken up in Lectures 6 and 8.

thought to be the author of revelation. Or to link this question with a closely related problem, some form of natural theology is necessary if revelation is to be recognised as such; and Mansel must indicate the foundations of this natural knowledge of God. Secondly, the biblical writers never cease to describe the deity in terms taken from the world of his creation, whereas God is totally other than his creation: what, then, is the status of these descriptions? Thirdly, if dogmatism and rationalism approach questions about the truth of revelation in the wrong way, what is the right method by which to determine the truth in such matters? How, to put the problem more concretely, are we to distinguish genuine from pseudo revelations?²

Mansel's answer to the first problem is strictly in accord with his doctrine of the origin and nature of thought: God, he claims, can be an object of thought only in so far as he is an object of experience or intuition. 'Religious thought,' he writes, 'if it is to exist at all, can only exist as representative of some fact of religious intuition, - of some individual state of mind, in which is

2 Lecture 4 contains a discussion of how it is possible to think of God apart from revelation; the nature of the concepts of the deity in lectures 4 and 5; and the way of determining whether a revelation is genuine in lecture 8.

presented, as an immediate fact, that relation of man to God, of which man, by reflection, may become distinctly and definitely conscious.'³ Now according to Mansel there are two intuitions which reveal God: they are the feeling of dependence and the feeling of moral obligation. By the feeling of dependence Mansel means the experience of having one's life ordered and determined by an immense, but personal, force without oneself, and upon whom one's existence depends; 'It is the feeling', he writes, 'that our existence and welfare are in the hands of a superior Power; - not of an inexorable Fate or immutable Law; but of a being having at least so far the attributes of Personality, that He can shew favour or sincerity to those dependent upon Him, and can be regarded by them with the feelings of hope, and fear, and reverence, and gratitude.'⁴ The feeling of dependence provides the material for the thought that God is the sustainer of mankind; it leaves open the question whether the deity is a malevolent or benevolent being. The feeling of moral obligation, however, makes good this deficiency; for it enables us to think, as well as believe, that God is good, since it reveals

3 The Limits of Religious Thought, p.78.

4 ibid., p.78.

him as a moral being. Yet while religious experience makes possible thought about God as a personal and holy being, who is both sustainer and judge of mankind, it does not provide the basis for a metaphysical investigation of the deity. The reason is that religious experience consists in intuitions of a finite and relative God - a fact necessitated by the nature of consciousness, and shown by the specific forms, viz., sustainer and lawgiver, under which God is known - and not of the nature of the infinite and absolute God as he is in himself.. 'To have sufficient grounds for believing in God', Mansel writes, 'is a very different thing from having sufficient grounds for reasoning about Him. The religious sentiment, which compels men to believe in and worship a Supreme Being, is an evidence of His existence, but not an exhibition of His nature. It proves that God is, and makes known some of His relations to us; but it does not prove what God is in His own Absolute Being.'⁵

Two objections might be brought against Mansel's theory and use of religious experience. The first, and the lesser in terms of his system, is that religious experience may be quite deceptive; it may, for instance, have its origins wholly within the mind, and not in the

encounter of the self with God. Of course, if this were so, religious thought would still be possible, but it would be of interest to the psychologist rather than the theologian. Mansel, unlike some later religious apologists,⁶ admits the point that it is possible to be mistaken about the deliverances of the religious consciousness; he does not stress the fact, but he clearly allows that to intuit God is not to have an indubitable experience. Yet while it is possible to mistake the character and origin of religious experience - as, Mansel maintains, Kant does in his account of the nature of moral obligation⁷ - patient examination and analysis will reveal the likely nature and origin of such states of awareness. In this way, religious experience, besides making thought about God possible, also proves God's existence, in that it provides evidence which strongly suggests, though it does not infallibly show, that there is such a being. A natural theology is both possible and justifiable. To thus outline and explain the nature and use of religious experience is one thing; to show in detail that there is such experience and to defend the theistic interpretation of it is another.

⁶ As, for example, R. Otto, The Idea of the Holy (1917; Penguin Books 1959), pp.21-25, and M. Buber, I and Thou (1923; 2nd Eng. ed. Edinb. 1959), pp.80-81.

⁷ For Mansel's criticism cf. op.cit., p.80 and pp.141-145.

This latter task Mansel leaves, for the most part, to one side; probably because he thought that he could rely on his readers to agree with his account. It is more than likely that neither he nor his Christian contemporaries realized the extent to which developments in the social sciences in the decades after 1860 would threaten the theistic interpretation of religious (and moral) experience. Mansel's account of religious experience, in the light of these later developments, appears somewhat superficial and question begging; but given it, he has no difficulty in showing how religious thought is possible.

There is, however, a more serious problem confronting Mansel's attempt to square catholic orthodoxy with the limits of thought. What his account of the religious consciousness shows is that a finite deity is experienced and thought, whereas the God of orthodoxy, and perhaps of the Bible, is infinite and absolute. Why, then, should we identify the being known in religious experience with the God who is above all thought? To this question Mansel has no answer, other than that the judgment of identification is an act of faith. This is what he says: 'Yet along with all this, though our positive religious consciousness is of the finite only, there yet runs through the whole of that consciousness the accompanying conviction that the Infinite does exist, and must

exist, - though of the manner of that existence we can form no conception; and that it exists along with the Finite, - though we know not how such co-existence is possible... In this impotence of Reason, we are compelled to take refuge in Faith, and to believe that an Infinite Being exists, though we know not how; and that He is the same with that Being who is made known in consciousness as our Sustainer and our Lawgiver.'⁸ Whatever value might be attached to Mansel's appeal to faith, it is clear that faith cannot perform the task required of it; for to judge that the absolute God is the God of religious experience is to think that which is unthinkable to be the same in certain respects as that which is thinkable, and this cannot be done, not even by faith. Mansel, of course, would not agree that his sceptical defence of revelation leads him to this position, but he can only escape the charge temporarily by introducing his doctrine of negative thoughts, a doctrine for which he can find no real place in his account of thought.

Mansel's difficulty in explaining how the God of orthodoxy can be thought to be the same as the deity known in religious experience also applies to any attempt to say what way they are the same being. In this

aspect, however, the difficulty is no problem but a blessing in disguise; for Mansel finds in it a way of putting to an end attempts to specify the precise analogies and resemblances that hold between God and man. This problem, for which the doctrine of necessary ignorance is a palliative, arises as follows. Experience and revelation give rise to concepts of God which are not absolutely adequate in that they depict the deity as finite and relative, whereas he is infinite and absolute: the question then is, in what sense are these concepts true. It is quite certain that they cannot be wholly true, for God would then be finite; they cannot be absolutely false, since this would mean, what no Christian could affirm, that next to nothing is known about the divine nature. The traditional way of escape from these unpalatable alternatives, to state it in brief and misleading terms, has been some form or other of the analogical view; these concepts are true in that they answer to some aspects of the divine nature but not in an exact or comprehensive fashion; they are analogically true. Now two problems seem to confront this type of view; on the one hand, it is difficult to specify the nature of the resemblance between the deity as he is experienced and thought and his actual nature without at the same time implying that there is no ontological gap between God and his creation; whilst, on the other, if the proportion is not specified, or is

defined only in negative terms, it is hard to see what the analogy actually is. To avoid these problems, Mansel recommends a reverent ignorance concerning the whole question of the manner in which God resembles our legitimate concepts of him. He is forced into this position, though he regards it as no burden, because of his doctrine of the limits of thought: to determine how the infinite nature of God resembles our finite concepts of it, we would have to compare the one with the other, and this cannot be done. Instead, therefore, of attempting the impossible we should piously accept the descriptions of the divine nature that God authorises and allows; we are not in a position to say whether they are scientifically accurate representations of the deity, but we can believe that they are providentially designed to guide both our thoughts and actions with respect to God. In the spirit of Butler, Mansel points to the analogy which holds between these legitimate concepts and the most general concepts which are used in thinking and acting - universality and particularity, mind and body, liberty and necessity, and so on - namely, that they are regulative, not speculative concepts; 'the highest principles of thought and action, to which we can attain, are regulative, not speculative: - they do not serve to satisfy the reason, but to guide the conduct: they do not tell us what things are in themselves -

but how we must conduct ourselves in relation to them.'⁹

Besides appearing to solve some of the difficulties in the way of analogical descriptions of the deity, the doctrine of regulative concepts also enables Mansel to attack those who reject the biblical record of divine acts and doctrines on moral grounds. Because human concepts of divine goodness are regulative, it is not possible to say, Mansel argues, how God is good. And if the exact manner of divine goodness is not known, then it is not possible to reject doctrines such as original sin, the atonement, eternal punishment, as inconsistent with the moral character of the deity, nor is it possible to claim that moral miracles, such as the slaughtering of the Amalekites, do not occur. The position we must adopt, Mansel writes, is that: 'While [God] manifests Himself clearly as a Moral Governor and Legislator, by the witness of the Moral Law which He has established in the hearts of men, we cannot help feeling, at the same time, that that Law, grand as it is, is no measure of His Grandeur, that he Himself is beyond it, though not opposed to it, distinct, though not alien from it.'¹⁰

Once again Mansel's way of saving revelation brings its own threat to the revealed doctrines; for in placing God's moral character far above human measures of

9 ibid., p.100.

10 ibid., p.160.

goodness, he seems to empty the claim that God is good of any content. Basically Mansel's problem is that whilst goodness in its essential nature cannot, on his position, be either finite or infinite - for if it is either one or the other the word 'good' cannot be used univocally to describe both God and man - it is difficult to understand, in the light of experience, how goodness could take other than a finite form. Of course, if goodness can be ^shown to have no essential connection with the finite and the relative, then there is no immediate problem in saying that God is good, and no difficulty in understanding what is claimed. But if this is not shown, then there is at least the difficulty of knowing what is meant when goodness is predicated of God: for if his goodness is described simply as a goodness which is not finite and relative, the question arises as to what such a goodness would be; the point of the qualification would have to be explained. If, then, the description of God as good is to be informative as a description, the nature of his goodness must be specified; if it cannot be specified because, as Mansel teaches, the deity is beyond all thought, then the statement that God is good is without content, since it is not possible to say what is actually being ascribed to God. Mansel, of course, wants to have it both ways: he wants to describe God as being good in a human sense of the word, for, apart from the fact that the scriptures teach

that he is - 'Be ye holy as I am holy' (I Peter 1.16) - it would appear to be the only way in which God could be said to be good, whilst at the same time, because of the nature of the deity and certain aspects of the biblical record, he wants to claim that God is not good in the human sense of the word. The doctrine of concepts of the deity as regulative is Mansel's way of attempting to hold his conflicting desires in balance. The balance, however, is not very successful, for it enables God to do that which is evil from a human point of view by destroying the significance of the claim that he is good.

Mansel was not unaware that his position could be criticised along these lines, since J.S. Mill, in his An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy (1865), had indignantly expressed his dissatisfaction with the view that from a human point of view God is and is not good. 'Whatever power such a being may have over me,' Mill claimed, 'there is one thing which he shall not do: he shall not compel me to worship him. I will call no being good, who is not what I mean when I apply that epithet to my fellow-creature; and if such a being can sentence me to hell for not so calling him, to hell I will go.'¹¹ Mansel's reply to Mill's criticism, in The Philosophy of the Conditioned, simply evades the point at

¹¹ An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy p.129.

issue. Resting his argument on the claim that the meaning of the word 'good' is so complex that it can be used univocally to describe widely different conditions, Mansel contends that the fact that God's goodness is not exactly the same as any of the varieties of human goodness is no more reason for saying that it is not the same quality, than there is for saying that 'good' is used equivocally when applied to both a man and his child. 'Is it not just possible', Mansel asks, 'that there may be as much difference between man and God as there is between a child and his father?',¹² The problem Mill is drawing attention to, however, does not turn on whether there is a difference, but on whether this difference is compatible with God and man sharing common qualities. The general direction of Mansel's thought suggests that the difference is such that 'good' cannot be applied univocally to both God and man; but if, as Mansel insists, it can be, then he must explicate the content of the description so that it can be seen that both God and man can be described by the word 'good', despite the differences between them. Mansel is unwilling to carry out this task, for, amongst other things, it would involve an illegitimate attempt to specify the nature of divine goodness; yet unless the

12 The Philosophy of the Conditioned (Lond. 1866), p.170. The material in the book was originally published in the Contemporary Review.

limits of thought are transgressed and the divine goodness examined, we are unable to say what common quality the word 'good' signifies with respect to both God and man.

Before leaving off the discussion of Mansel's treatment of descriptions or concepts of the deity, two further points need to be noted. The first, and by now most obvious, is that Mansel has two views of religious descriptions of the deity: on the one hand he has the theory of regulative concepts; on the other, a somewhat undeveloped analogical theory. More often than not he presents the two views together, but he stresses the former in The Limits of Religious Thought, and the latter, as a direct result of Mill's criticism, in The Philosophy of the Conditioned. In this last named work Mansel announces that he takes the view that God and man resemble one another most exactly in the proportions which hold between the various aspects of their different natures: 'Mr. Mansel ... asserts, as many others have asserted before him, that the relation between the communicable attributes of God and the corresponding attributes of man is not one of identity, but of analogy; that is to say, that the Divine attributes have the same relation to the Divine nature that the human attributes have to human nature.'¹³ To claim that God and man resemble one

another in their proportionalities is to suggest that more than a regulative knowledge of the deity is possible. But whether it is an advance on the view that our concepts of God are only regulative is doubtful; for in order to state the proportions in the first place the meanings of the phrases designating the divine attributes must be known; and the problem, as noted previously, is whether any descriptive content can be given to these phrases which does not imply that the deity is finite. And it is to avoid such problems as this, that Mansel presents his doctrine of regulative concepts of the deity.

The second point to note is that Mansel not only has two views of the nature of concepts of the deity, but that in view of his general epistemological doctrine and his religious faith, he is forced to have two separate and opposed views. This may not be immediately obvious because he presents the two views side by side without distinction. At best, he claims, we can form only regulative concepts of the deity; yet, at the same time, he insists that some of these concepts are true of God as he is in himself and not only as he reveals himself in accommodation to human frailty. Now if Mansel were to stress the regulative character of human concepts of the deity, he would be led to the position that it is impossible to determine whether these concepts resemble the deity as he is, much less how they resemble him. For the limits

of thought which prevent our determining how descriptions of the deity resemble his absolute nature, also make it impossible for us to determine whether they do resemble him. It is possible that God has revealed himself under a set of forms which provide no indication whatsoever of his nature apart from man's apprehension of it; regulative concepts may simply be divinely appointed instruments to help men in their frailty, and no more. Mansel cannot, of course, accept such a radically instrumentalist view of religious knowledge, since he must hold that the incarnation provides information of the absolute nature which is true, and not simply information which must be held to be true, though it might be false.¹⁴ To make room for Christian orthodoxy within his theory of religious descriptions, Mansel vainly attempts to show that the doctrine of regulative concepts is not compatible with the possibility that next to nothing is known about God's absolute nature.

Basically, his argument consists in a rigorous drawing out of the implications of a correspondence theory of truth, given empiricist assumptions about knowledge. Truth, Mansel claims, is a relation between thought and reality as it is made known in consciousness, and not reality as it is in itself; 'Truth and falsehood are not

¹⁴ For example, Mansel writes: 'It is irrational to contemplate God under symbols drawn from the human consciousness? Christ is our pattern: "For in Him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily" (Colossians 2.8).' The Limits of Religious Thought, p.109.

properties of things in themselves, but of our conceptions, and are tested, not by the comparison of conceptions with things in themselves, but things as they are given in some other relation.¹⁵ Now a concept can be judged to be true only by individualizing it in imagination, which is to form a conception, and comparing this conception with materials provided by some other **act** of consciousness; concepts therefore, are true or false relative to the consciousness which possesses them. Whether or not human concepts of God are true or false is to ^{be} determined by reference to the states of awareness in which God is intuited, and not by reference, which is impossible, to the deity in his absolute nature. The question, then, whether regulative concepts of God are absolutely true rests on the unjustified assumption that there is or could be a concept of God true for everyone - men, angels, and God. Regulative concepts of the deity based on religious experience and revelation are true, Mansel appears to claim, in the only way that they can be: they are true relative to human experience.

To argue in this way, however, is not to remove the sceptical tendencies in the doctrine of regulative concepts; for even if it is granted that concepts are true or false relative to the consciousness - or, type of

this latter statement and to claim, as Mansel does, that there is some similarity between human and divine concepts of the deity, is to reject the view that human concepts of God are regulative (in the sense required by the doctrine of the limits of thought) and to replace it by the position that they are true analogically of the deity. Mansel, for the most part, seems unaware that he is maintaining two distinct and opposed theories of religious knowledge - one, an instrumentalist, the other, an analogical theory. His inconsistency, however, is necessary if he is to adhere to both the theory of necessary ignorance and the Christian doctrine of God. But because it is necessary, it reveals yet another weakness in his sceptical defence of revealed religion; for if he remains loyal to the doctrine of the necessary limits of thought, he is unable to claim with justification that God has any

Maurice's doctrine of eternal punishment. Maurice, as Mansel quotes him, described Mansel's position as leading to the view that, 'the notion of a revelation that tells us things which are not in themselves true, but which it is right for us to believe and to act upon as if they were true...' The Limits of Religious Thought, p.334 Note xxiii. Mansel's reply is the same as that noted above. It ought to be observed that if my exposition is correct, then Maurice has misstated the case: revelation on Mansel's view might be divinely false, it need not necessarily be so. The inconsistencies in Mansel's doctrine of regulative concepts have been commented on also by H. Sidgwick; see his review of Letters, Lectures and Reviews in The Academy July 15, 1873 Vol.4, pp.267-268. A fairly sympathetic but loose exposition of Mansel's theory of religious descriptions is provided by E. Bevan in Symbolism and Belief (Gifford Lectures 1933-34; 1938, Beacon Hill 1957) Lecture 14.

qualities at all, or even to postulate in a positive way that he does possess certain qualities. And one of the consequences of this position is that he is unable to show why - to return to the problem with which the discussion was introduced - the God of experience and revelation should be identified - allowing the act to be possible - with the infinite and absolute God.

The difficulties in the way of claiming that the God who is absolute and infinite is the God of religious experience and revelation are such as to suggest that any attempt to show how messages from the deity may be recognized is pointless, at least until the earlier problems are resolved. Mansel, however, is largely unaware of the serious difficulties in his position; and he sets out in the final lecture to show how, in view of his attack on dogmatism and rationalism, the truth of alleged revelations of the mind and nature of the deity can be legitimately determined. In brief, his answer is that the evidences connected with any alleged revelation provide the test of its likely truth, and not any speculative examination of the content of the revealed message. This method, he claims, is the classical Christian approach to such questions: 'To Reason, rightly employed, within its proper limits and on its proper objects, our Lord Himself and His apostles openly appealed in proof of their divine mission; and the same proof has been unhesitatingly claimed

by the defenders of Christianity in all subsequent ages. In other words, the legitimate object of a rational criticism of revealed religion, is not to be found in the contents of that religion but in its evidences.¹⁸ These evidences as Mansel states them are the by then traditional ones as developed and systematized by the orthodox apologists against the deists: the character of the biblical writers; the authenticity of the texts of the scriptures; the nature of the testimony to prophecies fulfilled and the occurrence of miracles; Christ's character and life; the nature of his teachings and their effect; the development and progress of the church, and so on.¹⁹ Mansel's account adds nothing to this list, and in fact he states them in a simple and summary form. What causes him some concern is the fact that these evidences are not all external; some, such as claims based on the moral character of Christ or his teachings, are internal evidences, or evidences which are not facts associated or connected with the revealed acts and statements, but part of the content of revelation itself. Mansel anxiously points out that

18 op.cit., p.162.

19 On the development of the evidences apologetic and its popularity in the early nineteenth century see M. Pattison, 'Tendencies in Religious Thought in England, 1688-1750' in Essays and Reviews Ed. B. Jowett, pp.313-315; and H.D. McDonald, Ideas of Revelation: An Historical Study A.D. 1700 to A.D. 1860 ch.4; see especially McDonald's quotation from Bishop Porteus' summary of evidences, pp.146-148

allegedly revealed acts and doctrines are their own evidence in a negative way; at most they suggest that a doctrine cannot have come from God. And even when used in this way, the argument from internal evidence is of a presumptive sort; for while the regulative knowledge of God enables us to say, to take Mansel's main area of concern, that God is good, it provides no infallible rules by which we may determine what is in accord with the divine goodness. Internal evidences when rightly used in conjunction with all the other evidences for an alleged revelation are no concession to rationalism. The point to be made, of course, is that Mansel's theory of regulative concepts of the deity already contains a marked rationalistic streak.

There is, however, little to be gained in applying earlier criticisms to Mansel's attempt to vindicate belief in the Christian faith. The interesting thing to observe is that as late as 1858 a sophisticated Christian apologist could present as evidence, with hardly any comment, a set of claims which even then were being seriously challenged in one way and another by historical critics and the embryonic stirrings of the social sciences. Mansel, of course, was not unaware of the challenge, but he thought that it could be met simply by exposing, for example, the philosophical pretensions with which critical

histories of Christianity were so often accompanied.²⁰ But the real force of the criticisms consists in their ability to offer a plausible account of Jewish and Christian origins, and against this rather more subtle attack Mansel, like most of his fellow apologists, was powerless. Henry Sidgwick put his finger on the weakness of this side of Mansel's apologetic when he wrote, a trifle unfairly, that Mansel 'really is a well-meaning man, and il a raison for the most part against the Metaphysicians. But he talks of Revelation as if the Bible had dropped from the skies ready translated into English he ignores all historical criticism utterly. If the Bible was proved a whole, I think we might bow beneath the yoke of Mansel and Bishop Butler.'²¹ In the meantime, while Mansel attends to this task and the others that fall to him, the true theologians, the German professors, sing:

Presbyters, bend,
Bishops, attend,
The Bible's a myth from beginning to end.
With a bug, bug, bug, and a hum, hum, hum,²²
Hither the true Theologians come.

And despite his various efforts, Mansel is unable to silence them.

20 See, e.g., Mansel, op.cit., pp.110-117.

21 Letter to H. Dakyns, 1862, in A.S. [Sidgwick] and S.M.S. [Sidgwick], Henry Sidgwick: A Memoir (Lond. 1906), p.81.

22 Cf. quotation facing ch.

Years before, when there took possession of me the project of developing into a System of Philosophy the conception briefly and crudely set forth in the essay on 'Progress: its Law and Cause,' I saw that it would be needful to preface the exposition by some chapters setting forth my beliefs on ultimate questions, metaphysical and theological; since, otherwise, I should be charged with propounding a purely materialistic interpretation of things. ... To me it seemed manifest that the essential part of the book - the doctrine of Evolution - may be held without affirming any metaphysical or theological beliefs; and though, to avoid the ascription of certain beliefs of these classes which I do not hold, I thought it prudent to exclude them, I presumed that others, after noting the exclusion of them by the first division of the work, would turn their thoughts chiefly to the second division. Nothing of the kind happened. Such attention as was given was in nearly all cases given to the agnostic view which I set forth as a preliminary. The general theory which the body of the book elaborates was passed over or but vaguely indicated.

Herbert Spencer.

Chapter Six

The Choragus and Coryphaeus of Agnosticism.

In 1858 Mansel was regarded as one of the leading English philosophers and apologists for Christianity, yet within less than twenty years his reputation in both fields was severely tarnished: his philosophical thought was regarded as outdated and inadequate: his religious apologetic as something of an embarrassment to the Christian cause.¹ The reasons for this are three-fold. One is John Mill's hostile work, An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy, which, whatever its actual value, seriously discredited the philosophic contribution of Hamilton and the Hamiltonians. Another cause was the development of the schools of thought associated with T.H. Green, E. Caird, F.H. Bradley, B. Bosanquet, to name the most important figures, which looked with a new sense of vision upon the philosophies of Kant and Hegel, and viewed with equal disdain the

¹ On the decline of Mansel's reputation as an apologist cf. ch.2, ft.nt.25. From the start there were some Christian thinkers who doubted the value of his work; Hort wrote in 1858: 'It is clear, vigorous, and not often unfair; only a big lie from beginning to end.' A.F. Hort, Life and Letters of Fenton John Hort (2 vols., Lond.1896), 1, p.402. Hort was a disciple of Maurice whose reaction was equally violent: cf. 4, ft.nt.2; ch.5, ft.nt.17. For more temperate reactions see J.B. Mozley's letter to R.W. Church, A. Mozley (ed.) Letters of the Rev. J.B. Mozley D.D. (Lond. 1885), pp.239-41.

Hamiltonian interpretation of these thinkers and the empiricism of Mill and Bain.² The third reason is the use of Mansel's doctrines by Herbert Spencer and Leslie Stephen to support their anti-Christian position. Amongst philosophical amateurs, as were most Victorian theologians and scientists, this use effectively put Mansel's reputation as an apologist into the shadows. 'Mr. Herbert Spencer', wrote the Jesuit editor of The Month, 'simply takes Dean Mansel's statements respecting God, adopts them as his own, thrusts aside (and it is no difficult matter) the feeble unreality which Mansel calls Faith, and boldly and fearlessly carries on to their legitimate and logical conclusion the premises supplied by him.'³

II

There is no reason to doubt that Spencer intended the first part of First Principles to be primarily a preface to his account of the basic laws which govern all phenomena. His labours during the next forty years

2 T.H. Green had hoped that Mill's book on Hamilton would involve both of them in a 'common ruin' (A.S. Sidgwick and E.M. Sidgwick, Henry Sidgwick: A Memoir p.130). In effect the work marks the end of their reign as the contemporary giants of philosophy.

3 'The Coryphaeus of Agnosticism', The Month, 45, 1882, p.458.

are a fair indication of this; for the main results of his work - The Principles of Biology(1864-1899), of Psychology (1855-1899), of Sociology (1876-1896), of Ethics (1879-1893) - are detailed statements and elaborations of claims made in the second part of First Principles on the basis of his general theories about the 'laws of the knowable.'⁴ But the purpose of the preface is not simply to free his theory of the universe from the charge of materialism, as Spencer suggests in his Autobiography. Examination of his early writings reveals that it is not at all surprising that he should accompany his theory of the universe with an attempt to show that the cause of true religion has nothing to fear from this theory.

It is not clear why Spencer in his first attempts at philosophy felt the need to connect his theories with a deistical doctrine of god, since, like Huxley and Tyndall, he had never been deeply committed to or even strongly attracted by the Christian religion.⁵ Whatever the explanation the connection is forcefully made in

4 This was how Spencer described part 2 of First Principles in 1860; ibid. (6th ed., Lond.1911), p.xi.

5 Of his early attachment to Christian beliefs, he writes: 'Their hold had, never been very decided: "the creed of Christendom" being evidently alien to my nature, both emotional and intellectual.' Autobiography (2 vols., Lond.1904), 1, p.151.

Social Statics (1850), his first book and the precursor of First Principles and The Principles of Ethics. In this work Spencer teaches that God wills that progressive improvement of increasing harmony shown by all aspects of the universe which will inevitably culminate in a perfect universe where evil or disharmony will be no more and complete happiness the lot of perfect men.⁶

When asked by his puzzled father why he had lapsed into this theological way of speaking, Spencer replied:

'Some words to signify the ultimate essence, or principle or cause of things, I was obliged to use, and thinking the current ones as good as any other, I thought best to use them rather than cause needless opposition.'⁷ Later in the decade Spencer found reasons which justified belief in an ultimate cause of things, but by then he also found it necessary to restate the developmental optimism of Social Statics. As a result of his dissatisfaction with his earlier views Spencer formulated the plan of his synthetic philosophy, the exposition and synthesis of all knowledge, of which First Principles is the first volume and the statement of the general theory

⁶ For a few examples of his statements cf. ch. 10 part ii.

⁷ D. Duncan, The Life and Letters of Herbert Spencer (Lond. 1908), p. 60.

underlying the whole scheme.

The two major influences that led Spencer to reformulate some of his earlier views were his contact with the sciences of physiology and physics, and his reading of Hamilton and Mansel. Physiology, particularly the work of German theorists, provided him with the key to the pattern of development in every part of the universe.⁸ Thus, he writes in 'Progress: Its Law and Cause' (1857): 'It is settled beyond dispute that organic progress consists in a change from the homogeneous to the heterogeneous. Now, we propose in the first place to show, that this law of organic progress is the law of all progress. Whether it be in the development of the Earth, in the development of Life upon its surface, in the development of Society, of Government, of Manufacturers, of Commerce, of Language, Literature, Science, Art, the same evolution of the simple into the complex, through successive differentiations, holds throughout.'⁹

At the same time Spencer came to know, probably

⁸ Spencer probably came to know of the German contribution to physiology in Richard Owen's morphology classes in the early 1850's (cf. D. Duncan, *op.cit.*, pp.541-2). For a brief account of Owen and the German contribution see C. Singer, A Short History of Scientific Ideas to 1900 (Oxford 1959), pp.384-95, 471, 513.

through reading 'Grove's work on The Correlation of Physical Forces',¹⁰ of the work done by J.P. Joule, H. Helmholtz, W. Thomson, on the equivalence of matter, heat, force, and the principle of the conservation of living force or energy.¹¹ Spencer readily accepted this principle as the basic law of the universe, though he renamed it as the persistence of force, for, since energy or matter are known to use only as they exert a force upon us, force is for us the basic element of the universe.¹² Everything that is, is force.

10 H. Spencer, First Principles (1911 ed.) P.163. This, presumably, is the book Tyndall refers to in a letter to Spencer in 1873: 'I often wished to say to you that your chapters on the Persistence of Force, etc. were never satisfactory to me. You have taken as your guide a vague and to me, I confess, altogether unsatisfactory book.' D. Duncan, op.cit., p.428.

11 For an account of their work I have relied on C.C. Gillispie, The Edge of Objectivity (Princeton 1960), ch.9, 'Early Energetics'.

12 He objects to conservation because it implies a conserver (First Principles (1911), p.149. His statement of his argument to show that force is the ultimate element of all things is: 'While recognizing this fundamental distinction between that intrinsic force by which body manifests itself as occupying space, and that extrinsic force distinguished as energy, I here treat of them together as being alike persistent. And I thus treat of them together partly because, in our consciousness of them, there is the same essential element. The sense of effort is our subjective symbol for objective force in general, passive and active.' ibid. (1911), p.151. On Spencer's place in the history of theories of force see M. Jammer, Concepts of Force (Camb. Mass. 1957), pp.185-87.

In First Principles Spencer welds the law of force to the law of progress: force is distributed throughout the universe according to the law of universal evolution. For a short while it seemed to him that he could more or less represent the developmental optimism of Social Statics in terms of these laws, but the problem of entropy presented itself: while the first law of thermodynamics promises a universe in which energy is neither created nor destroyed, the second promises a universe in which 'energy (however faithful to conservation) becomes increasingly unavailable in the way in which nature does in fact move.'¹³ Ultimately the future state of the universe may be 'universal death', not the utopia promised in 1850, as Spencer was forced to note in later editions of First Principles.¹⁴

The influence of Hamilton and Mansel upon Spencer's future thought was not quite so far reaching as the influence of contemporary science, though it was, as he laments, this side of his work in First Principles which drew the most attention. As a result of Hamilton's

13 C.C. Gillispie, op.cit., p.339.

14 Spencer is not very happy in admitting this to be the case, and argues that for all we know life may reappear in the midst of this universal death; see First Principles (1911), pp.425-31. This qualified pessimism about the future also influences other sections of his work; see ch. part ii.

influence the god of Social Statics is transformed into the impenetrable mystery surrounding the universe. Thus, he writes in 'Progress: Its Law and Cause': 'Does not the universality of the law imply a universal cause? That we can fathom such causes noumenally considered, is not to be supposed. To do this would be to solve that ultimate mystery which must ever transcend human intelligence.'¹⁵ When, however, it came to developing this belief, and in particular showing how it provides the common ground between science and religion, Spencer turned to Mansel's Lectures. The latter was not particularly concerned by Spencer's claim to be developing the Hamiltonian position: Spencer, he writes in The Philosophy of the Conditioned, 'strangely enough professes to be /Hamilton's disciple, while rejecting all that is really characteristic of his philosophy.'¹⁶ But at that point in the early 1860's neither he nor Spencer could know that First Principles would become famous for its doctrine of the Unknowable, and that Mansel would one day be described as the master who taught the agnostics how to dance.

15 loc. cit., p.30.

16 p.39 ft.nt.

III

Spencer's main aim in 'The Unknowable' is to show that there is no essential conflict, but rather a harmony, between scientific and religious attempts to understand and to explain the universe. Of course, Spencer acknowledges, this claim is seemingly at odds with one of the most obvious of facts, viz., that 'of all antagonisms of belief the oldest, the widest, the most profound, and the most important, is that between Religion and Science.'¹⁷ Yet, even without analysing religion and science, this fact may have little bearing on whether science and religion are basically in agreement; for any doctrine which persists, even if in different forms, over a long period of time cannot be entirely devoid of truth. And where there is an obvious history of conflict between two long lived disciplines, then there is every reason to think that in spite of appearances there is a common area of agreement between them; a core of belief or beliefs which both disciplines accept without much awareness of the fact that they agree in this area. 'Between the most diverse beliefs',

Spencer writes, 'there is usually something in common, - something taken for granted in each; and that this something if not to be set down as an unquestionable verity, may yet be considered to have the highest degree of probability.'¹⁸ Obviously this verity or postulate common to both science and religion cannot be a belief, such as the love of God or the chemical constituents of water, which is peculiar to one discipline, but what it is, apart from the fact that it must be highly general, can be determined only by an examination of the nature of religion and science, or, what is the same thing for Spencer, by a consideration of their ultimate ideas or basic concepts.

According to Spencer there are three ultimate religious ideas: atheism, pantheism, and theism. What is common to each of these concepts or theories (as Spencer sometimes calls them) is that they proffer an explanation of the totality of things: 'Every [religious theory] tacitly asserts two things: first, that there is something to be explained; second, that such and such is the explanation.'¹⁹ Yet, though these three theories are the only possible explanations of the

18 ibid., p.8.

19 ibid., p.37.

origin of the universe, they are all inadequate; for each theory, at some point or other, involves belief in that which is inconceivable, or that which cannot be thought or known. Spencer, by using arguments taken from, or similar to those found in The Limits of Religious Thought, has little difficulty in making out his case.

Atheism or the theory that the universe is self-existing - a doctrine which, despite Spencer's listing, is a denial of the view that the universe stands in need of an ultimate or overall explanation - involves the claim that the universe must have existed for all time, since if it commenced in time its existence would not be self caused but dependent on some other force. The conditions of thought, however, preclude the formation of a concept of infinite duration; hence, because atheism necessitates belief in that which cannot be thought, atheism must be rejected. No escape from the problem of belief in inconceivable states of affairs is to be found by rejecting atheism in favour of pantheism, or the view that the universe is self-creating. For if the universe is always potentially what it is to become, then it must have always been so, since if there was a time when it was not, the universe would not be entirely self-creating. But if this is correct, then pantheism also must be rejected; for we can no more think of an ever creating universe than we can think of an ever-

existing one. Theism only appears to avoid these difficulties by shifting the problem from the universe to the creator of the universe; for while the universe described by theism can be thought, its creator cannot be, because he must be regarded as existing from all eternity.

To show further that religious theories are unable to explain the universe, Spencer argues that their descriptions of the nature of the universe or realm of being involve 'assumptions [which] cannot be represented in thought.'²⁰ According to Spencer, the universe as described by religious theories must be represented as having or being (the point is not made clear) a first cause which is infinite and absolute. His reasons for this claim - mostly taken from Mansel's Bampton - can be summarised in the following way. A cause must be postulated to explain the origin of sense impressions, and irrespective of what this cause is - matter, mind, or deity - it has to be regarded as the only first cause in the universe or as part of a causal chain which ultimately leads to a first cause. Spencer's conclusion, if not his arguments, is reasonably clear on this point: 'be the cause we assign what it may, we are obliged to suppose some cause. And we are obliged not only to suppose some

cause, but also a First Cause.'²¹ This first cause must relate to all actual situations as well as states which may come to be; for if there is a class of events to which the first cause is not related, then the principle that every event has a cause must be denied. As this principle, Spencer argues, can hardly be considered to be false, no limits can be placed on the range of application of the first cause; it must, therefore, be considered to be infinite. Yet, not only is it infinite, it is also absolute: there is nothing other than the first cause. For the first cause cannot depend on any other cause, either within or without itself, for its reality, nor can it exist alongside or be conditioned by any other existent, since 'to think of the First Cause as totally independent, is to think of it as that which exists in the absence of all other existence; seeing that if the presence of any other existence is necessary, it must be partially dependent on that other existence, and so cannot be the First Cause.'²² To the question, "What if the other existent is not a necessary empirical condition of the first cause's existence?", Spencer has no answer. His failure to make out a more satisfactory case would seem to indicate that he has not understood how Mansel manages to shift from his

21 ibid., p.31.

22 ibid., p.32.

definition of the absolute to the view that the absolute cannot exist in any relation at all.

Spencer's rather casual method of showing what the nature of the universe must be - he takes no account, for example, of the fact that his attempt to describe its nature commences as an explanation of perception - suggests that he is more anxious to introduce the terms, first cause, infinite, and the absolute, than he is to achieve his stated aim. This suspicion is confirmed by his subsequent procedure: for Spencer argues that the nature of the universe is unthinkable by referring briefly to his previous claim about the inconceivability of unlimited states or quantities, and then, by quoting large slabs of Mansel's examination of the basic ideas of metaphysical theology. 'Here I cannot do better', Spencer writes, 'than avail myself of the demonstration which Mr. Mansel, carrying out in detail the doctrine of Sir William Hamilton, has given in his Limits of Religious Thought. And I gladly do this,' he continues, discrediting Mansel's apologetic, 'not only because his mode of presentation cannot be improved, but also because, writing as he does in defence of the current Theology, his reasonings will be the more acceptable to the majority of readers.'²³

The conclusion Spencer derives from his exam-

ination of religious theories is that irrespective of whether they attempt to explain or describe the universe, they all turn out to be inadequate; for, as he extravagantly claims of the ultimate ideas of religion, 'when rigorously analysed, [they] severally prove to be wholly unthinkable.'²⁴ Recognition of this fact should not, he claims, produce despair, since, if we bear in mind that long lived and conflicting theories generally share some common truth, we should expect to find, as indeed we can, some general verity in the body of confusion and contradiction. Now two facts, he claims, stand out concerning religious theories; one is that basically they attempt to solve the problem of the origin and character of the universe; the other is that they fail to do so. Their failure, Spencer teaches, indicates that the problem of the origin and character of the universe is probably insoluble; that the universe cannot be explained or described. And while critical analysis leads to this position, the complex history of progressive religious development suggests that the belief in the impenetrable mystery of the universe is the essential element common to all religion, since, for one thing, 'all cultivated theology of the present day'²⁵ teaches that the deity cannot be thought. On the basis of these claims Spencer presents

24 ibid., p.37.

25 ibid., p.39.

what he takes to be the essential teaching of religion as the position which science must acknowledge or teach, if there is to be any basic agreement between them. 'Here, then,' he writes, 'is a truth in which religions in general agree with one another, and with a philosophy antagonistic to their special dogmas. If Religion and Science are to be reconciled, the basis of reconciliation must be this deepest, widest, and most certain of all facts - that the Power which the Universe manifests to us is inscrutable.'²⁶

Spencer's discussion of religious theories is so loose and slapdash that there is little gained in subjecting it to detailed comment. Two points, however, need to be noted. The first is that Spencer's arguments show, if anything, that the postulate common to religious systems is that the universe stands in need of explanation, and not that the universe or God - Spencer does not observe much distinction between them - are essentially mysterious. The second is that even on the most generous interpretation of his argument he is entitled to claim only that the universe is probably mysterious, and not that the Power manifested by the universe is inscrutable. The difference between the two claims is seemingly lost on Spencer, but it remains all the same. Besides these matters,

there is a third criticism that can be levelled at Spencer, viz., that in terms of his general system the charge that a theory or proposition cannot be thought is not of much significance, and can hardly be used as a ground for rejecting the position. This point, however, can be more conveniently raised after considering his view on science.

In Spencer's hands the ultimate ideas of science teach, not unexpectedly, that the universe is essentially unknown, and in all probability unknowable. They are, he claims, 'representative^{of} realities that cannot be comprehended.'²⁷ And this fact is known, or should be known, by the scientist; for 'his investigations eventually bring him face to face with an insoluble enigma. He learns at once the greatness and the littleness of the human intellect - its power in dealing with all that comes within the range of experience, its impotence in dealing with all that transcends experience. He more than any other,' Spencer claims, 'truly knows that in its ultimate nature nothing can be known.'²⁸ To help the non-scientists, Spencer examines each of the ultimate ideas of science, which he takes to be the concepts of space, time, matter, motion, force, consciousness, and the self. A brief look at two of his analyses provides

27 ibid., p.55.

28 ibid., p.56.

possessive pronoun 'my' is used to describe one set of perceptions rather than another. All told, then, the existence of the self is certain, though its nature and manner of existence escapes the net of thought.

If Spencer's claim that basic scientific ideas are 'merely symbols of the actual, not cognitions of it,'³⁰ is allowed, then, for the sake of the argument, and putting precision to one side, it might be conceded that he has found the postulate common to science and religion. Science teaches that in all likelihood reality is unknowable; religion, that the totality of things cannot be explained or described. These two statements are not, of course, strict equivalents; and it is a very rough and inexact formulation to say that they both amount to the same claim that the universe is essentially mysterious. However, in view of the ambiguities in his argument, and the lack of rigour, it is pointless to ask for, or to expect, precision in Spencer's claims and conclusions. Still, even if we allow for the slapdash quality of his work, there is one inconsistency which cannot be passed over: viz., his use of the claim that a position or belief cannot be thought. Spencer rejects the ultimate ideas of religion on the ground that they cannot be thought, whereas he maintains that the ultimate

scientific ideas must be believed though they cannot be thought. This blatant inconsistency stems from Spencer's inability to effectively reconcile his aims and methods with the particular arguments he takes from his favourite authority. To develop the point: he is forced into inconsistency because while he requires that conflicting religious theories should each be inadequate his dependence upon Mansel is such that he is unable to find any inadequacy in religious theories other than that they cannot be thought. What Spencer has not grasped is that Mansel's examination of metaphysical theology is designed, in the main, to rebuke rationalistic pretensions about the scope of thought, and not to destroy the hope of constructing a theology; Mansel cannot reject a position simply because it cannot be thought, and neither can Spencer. When Spencer comes to explain why the admission of inconceivable entities is an inadequacy in a theory, the most he can suggest is that they cannot be verified in experience or consciousness; 'we can entertain them only as we entertain such pseudo ideas [*sic*] as a square fluid and a moral substance - only by abstaining from the endeavour to render them into actual thought.'³¹ Of course, not all alleged inconceivable entities or situations are logically impossible, as

Spencer admits implicitly in his treatment of the ultimate ideas of science, so that to suggest that expressions designating them are no better than statements about the logically impossible or descriptions involving category mistakes is to ignore important differences between classes of pseudo ideas. However, if Spencer openly admits what, in fact, he probably trades upon, that the real problem with theories involving statements about inconceivable entities is they cannot be believed, then he spells the doom of his attempt to reconcile religion and science.

IV

The nature and limits of thought interests Spencer mainly because he finds in it the explanation why human endeavour in religion and science can never succeed in explaining or describing the universe. His account is taken for the most part from Mansel's Bampton with gleanings from Hamilton's 'On the Philosophy of the Unconditioned.' We can note that the dreariness that characterises the earlier sections of his discussion is not so marked in this part of his work; largely because he treats his borrowings in a more critical and careful way, relatively speaking, instead of crudely twisting them to suit his own purposes.

'Proof', Spencer writes, 'that our cognitions are not, and never can be, absolute is attainable by analysing either the product of thought, or the process of thought.'³² By the product of thought, Spencer means the end to which thought is naturally directed; and this end he takes to be the task of explanation or of showing how particular facts are but the expression or instances of more general facts. However, while thought always strives towards the more inclusive, the more general, fact, it cannot, Spencer claims, strive for ever; there must be a limit to the series of explanations, a point beyond which no more general fact is to be discovered. The alternative view, viz., that there is an infinite number of explanations is beset with difficulties; for apart from the fact that this position cannot be thought, it would take infinite time to reach the ultimate or most general of all facts, and this would mean that the final product of thought would never be attained by thought. As in his discussion of atheism, Spencer mistakes the position of his opponents for a confused version of his own theory; for those who assert that there are no limits to explanation generally intend thereby to rule out the possibility that there is an ultimate explanation. The point, however, is lost on Spencer; and he proceeds

to conclude that while the purpose of thought compels belief in there being an ultimate explanation or final product of thought, this fact must itself remain shrouded in mystery, for it cannot be explained or understood. 'Comprehension', he writes, 'must become something other than comprehension, before the ultimate fact can be comprehended.'³³

The process of thought, which Spencer seems to identify with the conditions under which thought is possible, when examined, leads to the same doctrine as that taught by the examination of the product of thought. Spencer, quoting from Hamilton and Mansel,

outlines two of these conditions: viz., that consciousness is possible only if the object of consciousness can be distinguished from its environment; and, that consciousness is possible only if the object of consciousness can be a term in a relation. At this point he has no qualms in accepting the conclusion which they derive from these conditions, viz., that the unconditioned or the absolute and infinite being cannot be intuited and cannot therefore be thought. In fact he adds a further condition of consciousness - one which he claims is ignored by Hamilton and Mansel³⁴ - to show that the absolute is incognizable.

33 ibid., p.61.

34 This is not quite accurate with regard to Mansel; see The Limits of Religious Thought p.49 and p.243 Note ix.

To be conscious of an object, Spencer claims, it is not only necessary that it should be recognized as distinct from other things, it must also be recognized as being like other things, or as being a certain sort of thing. Obviously, if this is true, the absolute cannot be thought or (as Spencer prefers) known, since there is no class or type of thing with which it may be identified. The only likely thing which it might be thought to be classifiable with is itself: the absolute is its own kind of thing, and the only instance of that kind. This move, however, cannot be allowed; for given the nature of the absolute it cannot be a term in any relation, not even relations with itself. The conclusion to be drawn, then, is that if the absolute cannot be recognized as a type of thing, it cannot be an object of consciousness or thought; 'to admit that it cannot be known as of such or such kind is to admit that it is unknowable.'³⁵

So far Spencer agrees with Hamilton and Mansel: if there is anything which is absolute and infinite, then it cannot be experienced or thought; it is unknowable. Spencer, however, requires not only that the limits of thought should indicate that if there is an unconditioned being, then it is unknowable, but that there is such an entity, the mysterious reality to which both religion

and science bear witness. To see that this doctrine flows from the theory of the limits of thought, attention, Spencer claims, should be paid not only 'to the purely logical aspect of the question', as Hamilton and Mansel do, but to 'the more general, or psychological aspect',³⁶ as well. When carried out this programme results in the conclusion that 'besides that definite consciousness of which Logic formulates the laws, there is also an indefinite consciousness which cannot be formulated.'³⁷ Or, as he later expresses the point: that 'while by the laws of thought we are prevented from forming a conception of absolute existence; we are by the laws of thought, prevented from excluding the consciousness of absolute existence.'³⁸ Spencer vigorously, but for the most part, vainly, tries to show that this is so by advancing three arguments to reveal how Hamilton and Mansel, despite their claims, admit and must admit, if they are to be consistent, that there is an indefinite or partial awareness of the unconditioned.

His first argument is based on the claim that to use a naming or descriptive expression meaningfully is to admit that the entity to which it refers exists, or, to

36 ibid., p.74.

37 ibid., p.79.

38 ibid., p.82.

put the point psychologically, that it is in some sense an object of consciousness. Hence, because Mansel and Hamilton use expressions such as 'the absolute' and 'the infinite' in their arguments to show that it is not possible to be conscious of the object designated by them in metaphysical systems, they can, Spencer claims, be regarded as implicitly teaching what they deny. 'An argument the very construction of which assigns to a certain term a certain meaning,' he writes, 'but which ends in showing that this term has no such meaning, is simply an elaborate suicide. Clearly, then, the very demonstration that a definite consciousness of the Absolute is impossible to us, unavoidably presupposes an indefinite consciousness of it.'³⁹ As an argument, this line of reasoning is more remarkable for the fact that it involves Spencer in yet another inconsistency - earlier he had distinguished between that which can be spoken about and that which can be thought or experienced - and for the naive theory of meaning it rests upon, than for its power to convince Hamilton and Mansel of inconsistency. After all they can reply that naming and descriptive expressions can be, and are, used in at least two ways: they can be used to actually designate certain states of affairs, and they can be used as they are used. Like the mathematician who wants to show that 'round square'

cannot name any possible object of experience, or the parent who teaches his child that the word 'fairy' does not designate something at the bottom of the garden, the critic of metaphysics employs expressions designating non empirical entities as they are used, and not only as he thinks they should be used. Taken as it stands, then, Spencer's argument is of very doubtful force. It could, however, be developed by showing that Hamilton and Mansel cannot, in terms of their general theory of thought, distinguish between the use and mention of expressions such as 'the absolute' and 'the unconditioned.' Later this point will be elaborated, but for the moment we can note that if Spencer developed his argument in this way, he would gain his point - viz., that there must be some awareness of the absolute if the word 'absolute' is used meaningfully - but only at the expense of his and their general system: for the inability to take account of the different ways in which the naming and describing expressions of metaphysics can be used suggests a serious theoretical weakness.

Spencer's second argument concerns Hamilton's and Mansel's claims that while correlative terms such as relative and absolute, conceivable and inconceivable, suggest one another, the existence of one term does not imply the existence of its correlative. He quotes Hamilton's statement that: 'Correlatives certainly suggest

each other, but the correlative may, or may not, be equally real and positive. In thought contradictories necessarily imply each other, for the knowledge of contradictories is one. But the reality of one contradictory, so far from guaranteeing the reality of the other, is nothing else than its negation. Thus every positive notion (the concept of a thing by what it is) suggests a negative notion (the concept of a thing by what it is not); and the highest positive notion, the notion of the conceivable; is not without its corresponding negative in the notion of the inconceivable. But though these mutually suggest each other, the positive alone is real; the negative is only an abstraction of the other, and in the highest generality, even an abstraction of thought itself.⁴⁰ Needless to say, Spencer objects to this view of correlative terms, for on his theory of meaning to understand and to use the expressions designating correlative terms is to admit that the terms exist. He endeavours, therefore, to show that Hamilton and Mansel are forced to abandon their position. His first point against them seems to rest on a misunderstanding; the other two, on his theory of meaning.

It is a serious mistake, Spencer claims, to describe one of a pair of correlatives as only an abstrac-

ion of the other, or, as nothing else than its negation; for this suggests, what is manifestly false, that one of the terms is without content or can only be described as the negative of its correlative. 'In such correlatives as Equal and Unequal,' Spencer argues, 'it is obvious enough that the negative concepts contain something besides the negation of the positive one; for the things of which equality is denied are not abolished from consciousness by the denial. And the fact overlooked by Sir William Hamilton is, that the like holds even with those correlatives of which the negative is inconceivable in the strict sense of the term.'⁴¹ In making this criticism Spencer seems to have missed the point: for Hamilton's claim is not that one term of any pair of correlatives is without positive content or can only be described negatively, but that if the term of which it is the correlative exists, then its existence is not implied. However, it is not surprising that Spencer, in view of his doctrine of meaning, should misunderstand Hamilton's teaching; for he makes no distinction between a referring expression having a meaning and the existence of the referent. To say then that a term might not exist is equivalent to saying that the expression of which it is the referent is meaningless, or, to put the point

more moderately, without content.

The influence of Spencer's theory of meaning is more clear cut in his second point. If it is true that 'the inconceivable' is simply an expression for the negation of the conceivable and does not designate an object of consciousness, then it must, Spencer argues, be without meaning. It would not matter therefore if other similar meaningless expressions - 'the absolute', 'the unlimited', 'the indivisible', - were substituted for 'the inconceivable' wherever it occurs in sentences. 'If in such cases', Spencer writes, 'the negative contradictories were, as alleged, "nothing else" than the negation of the other, and therefore a mere non-entity, then it would follow that negative contradictories could be used interchangeably: the Unlimited might be thought of as antithetical to the Divisible; and the Indivisible as antithetical to the Limited. While the fact', he continues, 'that they cannot be so used, proves that in consciousness the Unlimited and the Indivisible are qualitatively distinct, and therefore positive or real; since distinction cannot exist between nothings.'⁴² Spencer's line of reasoning depends, of course, on his theory of meaning, and can only be accepted if that theory

of meaning is correct. But one can hardly accept a theory which leads to the position that round squares cannot be proved to be impossible or fairies not to exist, because the expressions 'round square' and 'fairy' are used meaningfully in establishing their non-existence.

Spencer's third point is just a further development of the line of argument suggested in the other two. If the meaning of 'the relative' cannot be understood without knowing the meaning of 'the absolute', then to say that only the relative can be experienced and thought is to admit that the absolute is also an object of consciousness, for otherwise no meaning could be given to 'the relative.' Spencer goes even further. There could, he argues, be no knowledge of the relative if there is no awareness of the absolute: 'if this relation [between the correlatives] is unthinkable, then is the Relative itself unthinkable, for want of its antithesis: whence results the disappearance of all thought whatever.'⁴³ The extreme conclusion suggests, however, that Spencer's premises are false, and not, as he hopes, that Hamilton and Mansel must admit the existence of a consciousness of the absolute.

Spencer's next major criticism is more successful. He point out that despite their claims to the contrary,

Hamilton and Mansel in allowing that belief in the absolute being is justified, admit thereby some awareness of the absolute. The way in which Spencer makes this point contains most of his confusions about the nature of meaning and the precise import of Hamilton's and Mansel's statements about the absolute - Mansel, he writes, 'tacitly admits that we are obliged to regard the Absolute as something more than a negation - that our consciousness of it is not "the mere absence of the conditions under which consciousness is possible",⁴⁴ - but despite this, he has managed to seize upon a serious inconsistency in their position. Neither Hamilton nor Mansel allow that the absolute being can be an object of thought or, therefore, of belief. However, to show this in a thoroughgoing fashion would be to damn the doctrine of necessary ignorance, much more the theory of negative thoughts or acts of indefinite consciousness. Because of Spencer's debt to Hamilton and Mansel he is also unable to develop the point that their theory of thought prevents them from distinguishing the use and mention of expressions. For there are as many difficulties in the way of thinking what metaphysicians use 'the absolute' to designate, as there is in thinking what it allegedly designates; the predicate term in the statement, 'the

expression "the absolute" designates an object with the following qualities ...' will be unthinkable, and will not, therefore, serve to define the alleged referent of 'the absolute'.

In view of the above, not much value can be placed on Spencer's claim to have shown that his philosophical creditors inconsistently deny a truth which in one way and another they assume and indirectly teach. If there was any point in doing so, the same lack of value could be shown to characterise his independent efforts to reveal how the process of thought rests upon an indefinite consciousness of the absolute. But whatever the objective merits of his argument, Spencer is sure that his demonstration of the existence of a reality which can only be known as unknowable provides conclusive evidence that the common testimony of religion and science to an unknowable reality is true. His position in a nutshell is that: 'Common Sense asserts the existence of a reality; Objective Science proves that this reality cannot be what we think it; Subjective Science shows why we cannot think of it as it is, and yet are compelled to think of it as existing; and in this assertion of a Reality utterly inscrutable in nature, Religion finds an assertion essentially coinciding with her own.'⁴⁵

Appended Note to Chapter Six

While Spencer's use of Mansel's doctrines to reconcile science and religion is the most important agnostic attempt to elaborate a theory of ignorance, it is not the only effort to actively enlist Mansel on the side of agnosticism. Leslie Stephen's 'An Agnostic's Apology' (1876), the article which made 'agnostic' a popular name, argues that Mansel's doctrine of ignorance is in conflict with his Christian belief. He writes: 'The last English writer who professed to defend Christianity with weapons drawn from wide and genuine philosophical knowledge was Dean Mansel. The whole substance of his argument was simply and solely the assertion of the first principle of Agnosticism. Mr. Herbert Spencer, the prophet of the Unknowable, the foremost representative of Agnosticism, professes in his programme to be carrying "a step further the doctrine put into shape by Hamilton and Mansel." Nobody, I suspect, would now deny, nobody except Dean Mansel himself, and the "religious" newspapers, ever denied very seriously that the "further step" thus taken was the logical step.' (An Agnostic's Apology and Other Essays, pp.8-9.)

By and large Stephen does not argue his points. Rather he outlines the way in which the Christian theory

of God, man, and the universe always founders, and the Christian is obliged to fall back on a doctrine of mystery and necessary ignorance. What, Stephen asks, is the use of a theory of God, morality, and the future life, if the theory contains contradictions or is at odds with the facts? 'Why, when no honest man will deny in private that every ultimate problem is wrapped in the profoundest mystery, do honest men proclaim in pulpits that unhesitating certainty is the duty of the most foolish and ignorant? Is it not a spectacle to make the angels laugh?' (ibid., p.39.)

Stephen can hardly be said to show that Mansel is guilty of inconsistency but his aim is to illustrate a point rather than prove it. His discussion of Peter Browne and W. King in the deistic controversy, in the History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century (1876), as well as his account of the conflict between Mansel and Mill in The English Utilitarians (1900) show that he is quite aware of the precise issues involved in Mansel's apologetic.

THE NATURE OF SCIENCE

Physical science is one and indivisible. Although, for practical purposes, it is convenient to mark it out into primary regions of Physics, Chemistry and Biology, and to subdivide these into subordinate provinces, yet the method of investigation and the ultimate object of the physical inquirer are everywhere the same. The object is the discovery of the rational order which pervades the universe; the method consists of observation and experiment (which is observation under artificial conditions) for the determination of the facts of Nature; of inductive and deductive reasoning for the discovery of their mutual relations and connections. All physical science starts from certain postulates. [One of them is] that any of the rules, or so-called 'laws of Nature', by which the relation of phenomena is truly defined, is true for all time.

T.H. Huxley

Chapter Seven

Science as the Discovery of Universal Laws

If having a theory means being able to expound one's beliefs systematically, then it might easily be doubted whether the agnostics who hold this view of science, hold it as a theory. Their writings do not contain much that can be regarded as a systematic presentation of this doctrine. There is, for example, little attempt to show that the history of science supports this view; no detailed attempt is made to work out how in fact scientists go about discovering laws; and the concept(s) of law is never seriously analysed.

This, however, is not the whole story. The truth is that the agnostics who hold this theory of science tend to take it for granted, (which is not, of course, a very fertile way of holding a theory); while it is rarely the subject matter of their discourse, it is often reflected in what they say. One reason for this is simply a lack of deep theoretical concern coupled with a strong conviction that the activity and achievements of science speak for themselves. More rationally, they believed that there was no great need to provide statements of their doctrine because most of it is to be found more or less in Mill's Logic. Indeed, though this is not the

reason, it is where Mill's account of scientific investigation is most vulnerable, viz., the justification of the belief in nature's uniformity, that the agnostics feel obliged, largely because of Christian criticism, to articulate part of their theory.

What they take to be the problem varies in part with their view of the nature of the principle. For Spencer the uniformity of nature means that all of nature is subject to laws, and the problem is to show, short of revealing these laws in scientifically uncharted areas, that it is reasonable to believe that they too fall under the reign of law. Tyndall, Huxley, and Stephen are concerned with another problem: how can we justify the belief that there are regular causal connections in nature. For Stephen, however, the problem turns out to be whether there are any logical laws of thought. These are only a few of the differences that emerge in their attempts to show the rationality of belief in nature's uniformity.

II

The most independent defence of the view that nature is uniform is put forward in Spencer's First Principles. Unlike the efforts of Tyndall, Huxley, and Stephen, his account is not designed to answer criticism,

but to play a part in the general statement of the synthetic philosophy. It fits naturally into his exposition of the claim that all of nature is subject to the law of the persistence of force and the law of the evolutionary distribution of force.

He gives two arguments to support the view that all of the natural order is subject to laws. The first he describes as a deduction from the law of the persistence of force: 'The first deduction to be drawn from the ultimate truth that force persists is that the relations among forces persist.'¹ Spencer believes that he can argue from this law, since earlier in First Principles it has been shown that there must be a limit to the number of explanations, and the law of conservation is the most general explanation that science can provide. 'The relation in which it stands to the truths of science in general,' he writes, 'shows that the truth [the most general explanation] transcending demonstration is the Persistence of Force.'² To argue from this law is therefore not to beg the question; the problem is not whether all of nature is subject to one general law but

1 H. Spencer, First Principles (1911), p.156.

2 ibid., pp.153-5

whether there are other (derivative) laws beside.

His deductive argument to show that there are is that since force cannot be created or destroyed within the system of the universe, the causal connections between forces must remain uniform: for if it is allowed that exactly the same arrangement of forces can re-occur without producing exactly the same arrangement of forces as previously, then it is implied that force can be created or destroyed, since the change in the arrangement of forces can only mean an increased or diminution of force. In Spencer's words: 'If the co-operative forces in the one case are equal to those in the other, each to each, in distribution and amount; then it is impossible to conceive the product of their joint action in the one case as unlike that in the other, without conceiving one or more of the forces to have increased or diminished in quantity, and this is conceiving that force is not persistent.'³

Now while Spencer's deductive proof of the 'uniformity of law'⁴ was probably not without influence - both Mill and Bain came to relate the uniformity of

3 ibid., p.156.

4 ibid., p.158.

nature to the first law of thermodynamics⁵ - it did not catch on with his fellow agnostics. They were, perhaps, too aware of the problems surrounding the evidence for, and the ontological status of the things that fall under the concepts of force and matter to state the uniformity of nature in terms of the principle of conservation.⁶

5 Cf. A. Bain, Logic (2 vols, 2nd ed., Lond. 1873); J.S. Mill, A System of Logic (8th ed., 1870), bk.3, ch.10, sect.10.

6 E.g. consider this statement by Huxley in one of his positivistic moods: 'But when the Materialists stray beyond the borders of this path and begin to talk about there being nothing else in the universe but Matter and Force and Necessary Laws, and all the rest of their "grenadiers", I decline to follow them. I go back to the point from which we started, and to the other path of Descartes. I remind you that we have already seen clearly and distinctly, and in a manner which admits of no doubt, that all our knowledge is a knowledge of states of consciousness. "Matter" and "Force" are, as far as we can know mere names for certain forms of consciousness. "Necessary" means that of which we cannot conceive the contrary. "Law" means a rule which we have always found to hold good, and which we expect always, will hold good.' ('On Descartes' "Discourse..." /1870/, Collected Essays: Vol.1, p.193. Cf. also W.K. Clifford's 'On Theories of the Physical Forces' (1870), Lectures and Essays, 1. Here it is reported that he claimed that: 'He considered that by far the larger portion of scientific thought at the present day is in the third stage - that, namely, in which Force is regarded as the great fact that lies at the bottom of all things; but that this is so far from being the final one that even now the fourth stage is on its heels. In the fourth stage the conception of Force disappears, and whatever happens is regarded as a deed.' (ibid., pp.109-10).

And none of them were prepared to accept Spencer's dubious defence of the principle as transcending demonstration. Some of them, however, were more tempted by what he calls the inductive argument.⁷

The point of this argument, as Spencer presents it, is that it is irrational to believe that some aspects of nature do not exist according to law. By irrational he seems to mean three things: the belief is probably false; it is not entertained by the rationally minded; it is absurd. His reasons for the claim(s) are threefold.

Firstly, the history of science is a history of the continuing discovery of order in phenomena which were supposed in principle to be disorderly. Surely, in view of the long history of scientific success in breaking down the barriers which have been erected to divide the universe into that which is under law and that which is not, it is highly probable that science will one day reveal the order that exists in the still uncharted parts in the once extensive kingdom of arbitrariness? Thus, Spencer writes: 'To put the argument numerically - It is clear that when out of surrounding phenomena a hundred

7 This argument originally appeared in the first edition of First Principles, but Spencer deleted it in subsequent editions. He republished it as 'Of Laws in General, and the Order of their Discovery' in his Recent Discussions in Science, Philosophy, and Morals. References are to this work.

of several kinds have been found to occur in constant connexion, there arises a slight presumption that all phenomena occur in constant connexions. When uniformity has been established in a thousand cases, more varied in their kinds, the presumption gains strength. And when the known cases of uniformity amount to myriads, including many of each variety, it becomes an ordinary induction that uniformity exists everywhere.'⁸

Secondly, those who are most concerned with science and the investigation of nature find as a result of their labours that they cannot entertain the belief that part of the universe falls outside the reign of law. 'So overwhelming is the evidence, and such is the effect of [the] discipline [of examining nature], that', Spencer claims, 'to the advanced student of nature, the proposition that there are lawless phenomena has become not only incredible but almost inconceivable.'⁹ And in this the scientist is only a step ahead of the mass of men, for the race's experience of the ever increasing revelation of law 'silently and insensibly',¹⁰

8 op.cit., p.151.

9 ibid., p.152.

10 ibid.

tends to make belief in the complete uniformity of nature part of every man's mental equipment.

His third reason is that 'the progress in the discovery of laws itself conforms to law.'¹¹ Basically the order of discovery is determined by the force with which the uniformity strikes the mind, a force which is largely measured in terms of the experienced constancy of the uniformity and the frequency with which it is encountered. Given this law of the discovery of laws it is only to be expected that much of the order in certain extremely complex phenomena, such as social life, has yet to be revealed. Of course those who say that the present limitations of science are the limits of nature's uniformity will not be convinced by this argument, but we should not worry about their 'absurd assumption.'¹² For if the law of discovery is true, then surely 'we must infer that ultimately mankind will discover a constant order of manifestation even in the most involved and obscure phenomena.'¹³

Obviously none of these arguments show that rejection of the complete uniformity of nature is irrational

11 ibid., p.153.

12 ibid.

13 ibid.

in that it flies in the face of good evidence. Neither the past history of scientific successes in discovering laws in allegedly lawless things, nor the opinions or attitudes of rational men, nor the law of discovery, make probable the claim that every part of the universe behaves in a regular way. At most they provide good reasons for demanding a justification for the claim that certain parts of nature are free of law; they do not show that its contradictory is probably true.

Just how aware Spencer is of this objection is hard to say. If, however, he noticed the controversy between J.B. Mozley and J. Tyndall during the mid-sixties then he would have been made aware of the problems involved in inductive arguments. The dispute between them is not whether one whole of nature is subject to law, but whether we are justified in claiming that there are any regular connections at all. This is a problem which Spencer does not touch upon, but the defenders of miracles made sure that none of his colleagues overlooked it.

III

Mozley, like Mansel, is one of the last in the long line of High Church anti-deistical writers. On Mircales, his Bampton Lectures for 1865, defend the old

fashioned thesis that miraculous events are the necessary accompaniment and test of revealed truth. 'Our reason', he argues, 'cannot prove the truth of [a revealed proposition], for it is by the very supposition beyond our reason. There must be then, some note or sign to certify it and distinguish it as a true communication from God, which note can be nothing else than a miracle.'¹⁴ In expounding and defending this thesis Mozley examines in the second lecture whether miracles can be denied because they are contrary to the uniformity of nature. Of course he argues that they cannot thus be ruled out, because - following Hume, that 'great philosopher of the last century',¹⁵ - he finds that belief in nature's uniformity has no rational foundation whatsoever. It is this section of On Miracles that most annoyed Tyndall.

According to Mozley there can be no doubt that belief in the uniformity of nature is essential to the carrying on of all human activities; 'everything connected with human life depends upon it.'¹⁶ Yet essential though this belief is, can it be established by either demonstrative or probable reasoning? The answer is clearly

14 J.B. Mozley, On Miracles, p.5.

15 ibid., p.31.

16 ibid.

no. It is not a self-evident proposition, since the uniformity of nature can be denied without contradiction. Nor is it a belief that can be shown to be probably true by appeal to experience, since the experiential evidence only establishes the proposition by assuming it to be true: for example, if we argue that the future must resemble the past because what was future has always been found to resemble the past, then this can be regarded as a confirmation of the uniformity of nature only if it is presupposed that the future will resemble the past in this respect. Therefore Mozley concludes: 'What ground of reason, then can we assign for our expectation that any part of the course of nature will the next moment be like what it has been up to this moment, i.e. for our belief in the uniformity of nature? None. ... It is without a reason. It rests upon no rational ground and can be traced to no rational principle.'¹⁷

Like Hume, Mozley finds the origin of this belief in the 'irrational departments',¹⁸ of the mind. It is a propensity of our nature to expect that the future will resemble the past, and while we can, perhaps, explain how this propensity arises it cannot be shown

17 ibid., pp.30-31.

18 ibid., p.36.

that we are logically justified in believing that our expectation will be fulfilled. And if this cannot be shown then it cannot be argued that miracles are impossible because they are contrary to our expectations. 'The weight ... of the objection of unlikeness to experience', Mozley writes, 'depends on the reason which can be produced for the expectation of likeness: and to this call philosophy has replied by the summary confession that we have no reason.'¹⁹

What becomes of science if this argument is correct? Does it not save belief in miracles by making science indistinguishable from superstition? Only, says Mozley, if we mistake the purpose of science. Its aim, he argues, is not to discover necessary connections in nature, but to describe the constant conjunctions that have been so far observed in nature. The scientist qua scientist is not interested in predicting what will be; rather his sole concern is to describe the invariable associations between phenomena that he has observed by scientific means. The achievements of science are the accuracy of its classifications; the skill of the scientist is his ability to carefully discern the connections within his experience. It is true, of course,

that the scientist and those who know of his conclusions will predict the future in terms of them - indeed the great practical value of science comes from these predictions - but the tendency to anticipate the future in terms of the past is not a peculiar feature of the scientific mind; it is common to all men, and cannot be regarded as part of the distinctive work of science. As Mozley puts it: 'Science has led up to the face [of observed constant conjunction] but there it stops, and for converting the fact into a law, a totally unscientific principle comes in, the same as that which generalizes the commonest observation in nature. The one is a selected fact indeed, the other an obvious palpable fact, but that which gives constancy and future recurrence to each - the prediction attaching to them, is a simple impression of which we can give no rational account, which likens the future to the past.'²⁰ Thus, because science is essentially descriptive and not explanatory or predictive, it is not opposed to or threatened by the possibility of miracles.

Against Mozley's claims Tyndall, in his 'Miracles and Special Providences' (1867), makes three main points. The first, like several of his other criticisms, concerns

the usefulness of Mozley's arguments to the Christian cause. Mozley, he argues, saves belief in the possibility of miracles by depriving miraculous events of any observable significance. Unless miraculous events are contrary not simply to our expectations of uniformity but to the actual uniformity of nature then the striking character of alleged miracles is reduced to merely that of an unexpected event. 'Does the fact that man has never raised the dead prove', Tyndall asks, 'that he can never raise the dead.'²¹ According to Mozley the answer is no, but this means that the resurrection of Lazarus is nothing more than an unusual event, and an unexpected event, no matter how extraordinary, cannot be taken to establish divine authority. Mozley's argument, Tyndall concludes, 'cuts two ways - if it destroys our trust in the order of nature, it far more effectually abolishes the basis on which Mr. Mozley seeks to found the Christian religion.'²²

21 J. Tyndall, Fragments of Science, 2, p.19.

22 ibid., p.21. Another criticism, the only one which elicited a response from Mozley, concerns his claim that the doctrine of Christ's sinlessness depends on the performance of his miracles. (Cf. On Miracles, p.11). Tyndall objects that it is a crude measure of moral worth (op.cit., p.7) and it fails to notice that evil men have performed miracles; 'we ought not to play fast and loose with the miraculous; either it is a demonstration of goodness in all cases or in none.' (ibid., p.17) In his reply, 'Of Christ Alone Without Sin', Contemporary Review, 7, 1868, Mozley argues that Tyndall has missed his point:

But does Mozley's argument in fact destroy our trust in the order of nature? Not, says Tyndall, if we bear in mind the purpose and achievements of science. Firstly, we must note that Mozley's description of scientists is false: they are concerned to find necessary connections in nature, and not simply to describe the invariable connections they have observed: they observe in order to discover explanations which are universally true for this connection. Tyndall's statement of the point cannot be bettered: 'The truly scientific intellect never can attain rest until it reaches the forces by which the observed succession is produced. It was thus with Toricelli; it was thus with Newton; it is thus pre-eminently with the scientific man of to-day. In common with the most ignorant, he shares the belief that spring will succeed winter, that summer will succeed spring, that autumn will succeed summer, and that winter will succeed autumn. But he knows still further - and this knowledge is essential to his intellectual repose - that

Christ's miracles establish his sinlessness because they accompany his claims to be sinless: 'No miracle of itself proves anything; no quantity of the miraculous proves anything; there must be an assertion made before there can be anything for the miracle to verify or guarantee.' (pp.482-3). This argument would be overthrown if there was a record of evil men performing miracles to prove the same assertion, but there is no evidence, Mozley claims, that this has ever happened.

this succession, besides being permanent, is, under the circumstances, necessary; that the gravitating force exerted between the sun and a revolving sphere with an axis inclined to the plane of its orbit, must produce the observed succession of the seasons. Not until this relation between forces and phenomena has been established, is the law of reason rendered concentric with the law of nature; and not until this is effected does the mind of the scientific philosopher rest in peace.'²³

And the scientific philosopher is entitled to his rest because in certain areas at least he and his colleagues have discovered the laws or the necessary connections that exist in nature. How do we know? The answer is to be found in the correct predictions about the future that can be made on the basis of scientific discoveries. Mozley fails to see this point because he 'passes over without a word the results of scientific investigation as proving anything rational regarding the principles or methods by which such results have been achieved.'²⁴ These results, however, establish that in certain respects the future will be like the past and suggests the means by which belief in the complete

23 ibid., p.29.

24 ibid., p.23.

uniformity of nature will one day be soundly established on empirical grounds.

It is clear, however, that Tyndall has not overthrown Mozley's claims about belief in nature's uniformity. His argument is an instance of that line of reasoning which shows that the future resembles the past, by assuming the point at issue. Not unfairly Mozley wrote of his defence: 'Tyndall seems incapable of apprehending what the argument he attacks really is.'²⁵ Huxley, probably in a positivistic mood, also protested that Tyndall had not established his claims that there are necessary causal connections in nature. He received a reply which further illustrates the truth of Mozley's contention: 'The evidence of the permanence of natural laws is not that of a generation, but of many generations; and against its accumulative weight the averment of an individual, or even a group of individuals, though it may claim a theoretic chance of being right, is practically of no account.'²⁶ Huxley, Stephen, and Clifford realized that the issue between Mozley and Tyndall could not be settled quite so easily. They all agreed, of course, that

25 (ed) A. Mozley, Letters of the Rev. J.B. Mozley D.D., p.293.

26 A.S. Eve and C.H. Creasley, Life and Work of John Tyndall (Lond.1945), p.119. They state: 'Huxley did not agree wholly with the Fortnightly Review article and wrote to the Spectator. Tyndall replied in the same paper.' (ibid. I have been unable to find this correspondence in the Spectator for 1867 and 1868.

Mozley is on the wrong side; the problem is to show how the Munean arguments could be avoided.

IV

According to Huxley it is pointless to attempt to refute Hume's arguments. The way to escape his sceptical conclusions is to show that we are justified in postulating the uniformity of nature because while it cannot be shown to be true by appeal to experience, it is in fact never falsified by experience. Thus he writes in 'The Progress of Science 1837-1887':

'All physical science starts from certain postulates. One of them is the objective existence of a material world. ... Another postulate is the universality of the law of causation; that nothing happens without a cause (that is, a necessary precedent condition), and that the state of the physical universe, at any given moment, is the consequence of its state at any preceding moment. Another is that any of the rules, or so-called "laws of Nature", by which the relation of phenomena is truly defined, is true for all time. The validity of these postulates is a problem of metaphysics; they are neither self-evident nor are they, strictly speaking, demonstrable. The justification of their employment, as axioms of physical philosophy, lies in the circumstance that expectations

logically based upon them are verified, or at any rate, not contradicted whenever they can be tested by experience.²⁷

How is the uniformity of nature involved in predictions about the future? In what sense can correct predictions be said to verify belief in nature's uniformity? or incorrect ones to falsify it? Huxley does not attempt to answer these questions and it is unlikely that he could; for scientific predictions assume only that the future will resemble the past in certain respects, and the correctness of the prediction shows only that the assumption is compatible with the true prediction; it does not show that this assumption is true. Again, it is not clear what would in fact count as a falsification of this belief: the fact that an alleged uniformity turned out to be false would not entitle us to deny the uniformity of nature, nor would the discovery that all known uniformities were not in fact genuine. If, therefore, we are to add a third type of rational belief to those held on demonstrative and probable reasons, viz., those which can be postulated to be true, Huxley would have to show how postulates differ from superstitious beliefs.

One of the reasons why Huxley gets into these difficulties is that he sees that it is possible to justify acceptance of belief in nature's uniformity by regarding it as a methodological rule, but he is unable to accept what follows from such a move, viz., that scientific activity does not depend on the actual truth or falsity of this belief. As a result he confuses the reasons which justify the proposition as a rule with reasons for regarding the proposition as a likely truth; because the scientist acts as if nature is uniform in looking for laws, Huxley takes his successes to be partial confirmation of nature's uniformity, when, in fact, all they prove is that it pays to investigate on the assumption that it is true. If Huxley is to preserve belief in the uniformity of nature from Mozley's charges, then this confusion is a necessary one; for, as he points out in his book on Hume: 'the axiom of causation resembles all other beliefs of expectation in being the verbal symbol of a purely automatic act of the mind, which is altogether extra-logical, and would be illogical, if it were not constantly verified by experience.'²⁸

If Huxley's treatment of the problem is more sophisticated, and less straightforward than Tyndall's,

it is not much of an advance on what he has to say. In effect the same is true of Leslie Stephen's treatment of the problem, but his solution differs markedly from theirs. Whereas they try to escape Hume's criticisms by widening the concept of probable reasoning, Stephen suggests that the concept of demonstrative reasoning should be widened to include the reasons which justify belief in nature's uniformity. He manages to make a case for this by presenting an interpretation of nature's uniformity which is not shared by any other agnostic: in his hands 'the uniformity of nature' becomes a shorthand expression for the logical laws which govern thought. To say that the future will resemble the past is to assert that if the conditions which have brought about events in the past are exactly repeated in the future then they will bring about exactly the same events; and to deny that this is so is to deny the logical conditions which govern all thought.²⁹ Thus he claims in The Science of

29 Stephen was probably influenced by H. Shadworth Hodgson who wrote in his unpublished Metaphysical Society paper, 'The Pre-Suppositions of Mircales', March 14, 1876 (Brown, no.59): 'The axiom of uniformity has two senses, in one of which it means the obverse and objective aspect of the abstract laws of thinking, which are the three Postulates of Logic (Identity, Contradiction, Excluded Middle). ... It is primarily a constitutive, secondarily a regulative truth.' (pp.4-5). When viewed in this way - 'the philosophical point of view' - 'the logical justification needed' (p.8) for the scientist's use of this principle as a regulative truth is provided.

Ethics: 'Whether we speak of the uniformity of nature, or of the principles of sufficient reason, or of the universality of causation, we are adopting different phrases to signify the same thing. To me, indeed, it appears that the theorem, in whatever form it may be most fitly expressed, is not so much a distinct proposition, the truth or falsehood of which can be discovered, as an attempt to formulate the intrinsic process of all such reasoning. Unless we assume that identical inference can be made from identical facts we are simply unable to reason at all. The alternative to making the assumption is not to admit some other possibility, but to cease to think. If there is nothing [sic] arbitrary in nature; if nothing can at once be and not be; or if the same cause may produce different effects, the very nerve of every reasoning process is paralysed. We can no more argue as to the phenomena that we can make a formal syllogism if we suppose that contradictory propositions are not mutually exclusive.'³⁰

The trouble with this account and defence of the uniformity of nature is that it leaves untouched the problems surrounding the principle of uniformity which is required by the agnostic doctrine of science. The problem is not whether the conditions which necessarily

produce an event will produce the same event in the future, if they are exactly repeated, but whether in fact there is evidence for the belief that there are any causal connections in nature at all. Stephen recognizes this objection - as well as the problem that his account of nature's uniformity tells us nothing at all about nature³¹ - but his attempt to answer it is vitiated because he assumes the point at issue.

In his exposition of Hume's theories in the History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century (1876), he argues that while Hume is right in saying that we can

31 In his unpublished Metaphysical Society paper, 'The Uniformity of Nature', March 11, 1879 (Brown, no.82) which presents in a more confusing way the doctrines presented in the above mentioned works. On this particular issue Stephen argues that the principle is not an identity because while it is involved in all our thinking about the world the process of thought leads to many different conclusions: 'Thus to either observation, the candle is alight or the fire burns, I may apply the same axiom, - viz., that the same fact will occur under the same conditions. But in saying "candle" I have certainly not said "lighted", and therefore the resulting proposition is of little use. In saying "fire" on the other hand, I may have said, and if it is a true case of causation I must have said, "burning"; just as in saying "circle" I have asserted all the geometrical properties belong to a circle. Here I have a fertile proposition, but I have still only applied the same axiom, which is the identical proposition that the same process involves the same relation.' (p.6) But the fact that the axiom can be applied to produce different results - allowing that the axiom can be applied at all - does not mean that the axiom tells us anything about the world; it can only be used to tell us about the world in conjunction with empirical propositions.

conceive a magnet which does not attract iron, he fails to distinguish this claim from one 'easily confounded with /it/, and yet involving a fundamental error - the assertion, namely, that we might expect to find a magnet identical in all respects with the first /observed/ magnet which yet would not attract iron.'³² In other words, Hume fails to see that if we make the ability to attract iron part of the definition of magnet, part of its nature, then it is contradictory to say that magnet might not attract iron. Therefore, Stephen concludes: 'The true answer to Hume's scepticism is ... that we cannot conceive of a non-magnetic magnet; for that is to conceive of a magnet deprived of the quality which makes it a magnet. But it remains true,' he continues, 'as Hume says, that this quality is revealed to us by experience alone, and that we have no right in any given case to appeal to an a priori reason.'³³

But, a Humean might ask, what right have we to say that it is part of the nature of a magnet to attract

32 History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century (1876; 3rd ed., 1902, 2 vols., Lond.1962), 1, pp.43-4.

33 ibid., p.45. Later Stephen made the same criticism, though not quite so confidently, in his exposition of John Mill's thought; see L. Stephen, The English Utilitarians, 3, pp.135-7.

iron? Surely we cannot make this capability part of our definition of the real nature of a magnet unless we can somehow perceive the substantial form of a magnet, a conception which Stephen would dismiss, or know by some other means that magnets will always attract iron. As our experience is limited we cannot claim that it is logically certain that all magnets attract iron. And therefore it remains logically possible that in the future we might find a magnet which does not attract iron. To conclude: Stephen can claim that he has refuted the Humean analysis of the beliefs that every event has a cause, and the same event has the same cause, only because he has failed to see what Hume is about, and why in particular, he places the philosophical relations of identity and causation amongst those relations between ideas which 'may be chang'd without any change in the ideas.'³⁴

³⁴ D. Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature (ed.) Selby Bigge (Oxford 1951), p.69.

The Philosophy of Science consists of two principal parts; the methods of investigation, and the requisites of proof. The one points out the roads by which the human intellect arrives at conclusions, the other the mode of testing their evidence. The former if complete would be an Organon of Discovery, the latter of Proof.

J.S. Mill

Chapter Eight

Science as the Method of Discovery

In one sense there is no distinction between this view of science and the one just discussed; for all the agnostics agree that science is the method of discovering new facts and increasing human knowledge. What they disagree about are the conditions under which science is possible. Clifford denies that the possibility of scientific discovery depends upon nature's being bound 'in adamantine fetters.'¹ And as a result he is forced to present his own agnostic account of the nature, aim, and achievements of science. However, before considering this account we must note by way of introduction several features about Clifford's intellectual environment.

One of them is connected with his age. By the time he graduated from Cambridge in 1867 at the age of twenty two, the problems surrounding the views of science put forward by Spencer and Tyndall had been well canvassed; they were part of his birthright as an agnostic. However, by the early seventies, when Clifford started to contribute regularly to the agnostic cause the main

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J.B. Mozley, On Miracles, p.46.

question was no longer whether the agnostics could justify their account of the reign of law, but whether there is good evidence for believing that the reign of law had ever been infringed. At the very least the debate surrounding these questions shaped the presentation of parts of Clifford's theory.

The discussion, from an agnostic viewpoint, centred around two poles: the efficacy of prayer and the occurrence of miracles, angelic visitations, divine inspirations and so on. The first phase of the debate concerned the prayer question. Tyndall, who had long been concerned with the issue,² sent to the Contemporary Review in 1872 an article by an anonymous person entitled 'The "Prayer for the Sick": Hints Towards a Serious Attempt to Estimate its Value.' The writer proposed that a hospital ward of patients with well known maladies 'should be, during a period of not less, say, than three or five years, made the object of special prayer by the whole body of the faithful, and that at the end of that time, the mortality rate should be compared with the past rate, and also with that of other leading hospitals, similarly well managed, during the same period.'³

² See J. Tyndall, 'Reflections on Prayer and Natural Law' (1860), Fragments of Science, 2.

³ 'The "Prayer for the Sick": Hints Towards a Serious Attempt to Estimate Its Value', Contemporary Review, 20, 1872, p. 210.

This suggestion caused a furore, but little came of it for either side.⁴

While, however, the prayer debate did not get far beyond assertion and counter assertion, the dispute over the ways to test claims about other sorts of divine acts was carried on with great earnestness for most of the decade. For example, during the course of the Metaphysical Society (1869-1880), of which all the agnostics bar Spencer were members, twenty three of the ninety papers read at the Society deal with problems surrounding this issue.⁵

Clifford's 'The Ethics of Belief' was read to the Society in 1876 as the final contribution to a series of five papers each dealing with questions relating to evidence for supernatural happenings. Not unnaturally parts of his paper shows traces of being influenced or foreshadowed by the other contributions

4 Cf. e.g. the contributions of J. Tyndall, the original writer, and J. McCosh to 'On Prayer', Contemporary Review, 20, 1872, A.W. Brown, The Metaphysical Society, pp.177-79, gives an account of the controversy.

5 There were twenty three papers on morality; seven on the soul. A.W. Brown, op.cit., lists the members of the Society (Appendix A) and the papers read (Appendix B).

to the series and earlier papers read at the Society.⁶

6 The five papers (Brown, nos. 56-⁶50) are:
 J. Fitzjames Stephen, 'Remarks on the Proof of Miracles' (19th Nov., 1875); W.B. Carpenter, 'On the Fallacies of Testimony in Relation to the Supernatural' (Dec. 14, 1875); T.H. Huxley, 'The Evidence of the Miracle of the Resurrection' (Jan. 11, 1876); (Huxley's paper was discussed at the next regular meeting of the Society, Feb. 15, 1876); Shadworth Hodgson, 'The Pre-suppositions of Miracles', (Mar. 14, 1876); W.K. Clifford, 'The Ethics of Belief', (April 11, 1876). Only Carpenter's and Clifford's papers were published. The pattern of argument seems to have been as follows: Stephen made the point that while we have to believe on testimony, we should not accept historical testimony concerning 'matter of fact which was not closely, impartially, and completely inquired into at the time.' (p. 11); the testimony of the apostles is therefore suspect. Carpenter argued in his paper (Contemporary Review, 25, 1875) with copious illustrations, even when men have investigated they have often only justified their superstitious preconceptions. Huxley's paper represents an application of Stephen's recommendations to the evidence for Christ's resurrection. He particularly stresses the difficulty of distinguishing between actual - molecular - death, and somatic death from which the person revives. The grief of the disciples, the time factor, and so on, all suggest, he argues, that they could not have investigated whether Christ had really died on the cross: 'it is as absurd as it is repugnant to imagine such an investigation. But if no such investigation did take place, the question whether Jesus died or not, in our modern scientific sense of the word, not only never can be answered, but never could be answered. And if it is not possible for us to say whether the body of Jesus underwent molecular death or not, it would be a mere futility to discuss the further question, whether he was miraculously recussitated or not' (p. 6). One can guess that the discussion at this paper must have gone from the question of evidence for miracles to evidence for the uniformity of nature: do not both beliefs involve a leap of faith? This would explain why Hodgson's paper (cf. ch. 7, ft. nt. 29) tries to represent the principle of nature's uniformity as a logical law of thought, and why Clifford's paper with its strong assertion of the need for evidence argues that the agnostic principle requires the rejection of testimony to miracles while being compatible with the scientist's

Indeed Clifford's paper was regarded by some of his contemporaries as summing up the whole scientific case against belief in miracles: as Henry Wace said, 'it expresses very effectively a tone of thought which is peculiarly characteristic of an influential school of scientific scepticism.'⁷ Another contemporary with a more intimate knowledge of Society meetings took a rather different view: 'it is so manifestly exaggerated and unreasonable', wrote W.G. Ward, 'that I should be doing an injustice to the general body of my opponents by taking him as in any sense their representative.'⁸

belief in uniformity.

Other papers read at the society which contain views not unlike those expressed in 'The Ethics of Belief' are: W. Bagehot, 'On the Emotion of Conviction', Contemporary Review, 17, 1871, which argues against the danger of the emotion of conviction perverting reason and corrupting the character; J.A. Froude, 'Evidence', (May 16, 1871), Brown, no.17): 'I do not say that it is impossible for dead people to be restored to life. We do not know what is possible and what is impossible. I maintain only, that so long as it is not an experiment capable of being repeated, a reasonable person will decline to believe in any alleged instance of such a thing.'; W.R. Greg, 'Can Truths be Apprehended which could not have been Discovered?', Contemporary Review, 25, 1875: 'No truth can, properly speaking, be apprehended and made a portion of our mental acquisitions, which cannot be verified when told to us; and any proposition which we can verify, we could discover - that is what man can verify man could have reached and worked out for himself.' (p.435).

7 H. Wace, 'The Ethics of Belief', Contemporary Review, 30, 1877, pp.42-3.

8 W.G. Ward, 'The Reasonable Basis of Certitude', Nineteenth Century, 3, 1878, pp.534-35. Ward was a member of the Society; cf. A.W. Brown, op.cit., pp.111-12.

Ward's claim is excessive on both counts, but he had probably realized that none of the other agnostics could accept the novelties Clifford uses in defending their common position. The explanation of these novelties and of the independence of his general theory of science is largely to be found in the way Clifford brings together elements and insights from recent developments in mathematics, psychology, and physiology.

By profession Clifford was a mathematician, and in his professional activities he came to know of the development of non-euclidean geometries. As a result he became one of the chief popularizers of these developments, particularly through his posthumously published book, The Common Sense of the Exact Sciences (1885).⁹ These mathematical developments also led him to view science in a completely different way from the other agnostics. The works of Gauss, Lobatchevsky, Bolyai, Riemann, weaned Clifford completely from the view that any branch of science could provide universal propositions

9 See B. Russell's preface and J.R. Newman's introduction to his edition (N.Y.1946) of The Commonsense of the Exact Sciences (1885; ed. K. Pearson). For other examples of his popular expositions of non-euclidean geometries see, 'The Philosophy of the Pure Sciences' (1873), Lectures and Essays, 1, pp.295-323; and his Seeing and Thinking, (1879; 2nd ed., Lond. 1880) ch.4, 'Of Boundaries in General.'

that were known to be true; for they showed that the one branch of science which was thought to give such truths, viz., Euclidean geometry, could not be regarded as providing indubitable universal truths about the nature of physical space.¹⁰ 'There is', Clifford wrote, 'a real parallel between the work of Copernicus and his successors on the one hand, and the work of Lobatchevsky and his successors on the other. In both of them the knowledge of Immensity and Eternity is replaced by knowledge of Here and Now. And in virtue of these two revolutions the idea of the Universe, the Macrocosm, the All, as a subject of human knowledge, and therefore of human interest has fallen to pieces.'¹¹

In psychology Clifford was influenced, so it seems, by Alexander Bain's theory of belief. Put very simply this view is that to believe a proposition is to act in a certain way; 'The relation of Belief to Activity is expressed by saying that what we believe we act upon.'¹² Bain developed this theory because of his dissatisfaction

10 For a brief contemporary introduction to these thinkers see, K.M. Kline, Mathematics in Western Culture (N.Y. 1953), ch.26, 'New Geometries, New Worlds.'

11 'The Philosophy of the Pure Sciences', Lectures and Essays, 1, p.300.

12 A. Bain, Mental and Moral Science (Lond.1868), p.372.

with the classical associationist account as stated, for example, in James Mill's Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind (1829)¹³ The facts of believing, he argued, cannot be explained by saying that belief is a vivid idea or a persistent connection of ideas. What distinguishes believing from other propositional attitudes is its connection with action: 'belief has action for its roots and ultimate criterion.'¹⁴ Since believing is a mental state which motivates, it is to be seen, Bain argues, more as an aspect of the willing rather than the reflecting part of the mind. One consequence of this is that believed propositions are always about the relation between an end and its means, since willing, and therefore believing, consists in the conscious adjustment of means to ends. 'All belief', says Bain, 'implicates the order of the world; or the connexions between one thing and another thing such that the one thing can be explained as a means to secure the other as an end.'¹⁵ One way of

13 This work was reissued in 1869 (2 vols) as 'A New Edition with Notes Illustrative and Critical by Alexander Bain ... Edited with Additional Notes by John Stuart Mill.' For Bain's criticism of James Mill on Belief see his notes to ch.11, 'Belief', together with J.S. Mill's criticism of Bain and his father.

14 A. Bain, 'Belief', *CHAMBER'S ENCYCLOPEDIA* (London 1866)

15 Mental and Moral Science, p1382. Note also his statement: 'The mental state termed Belief while involving the Intellect and the Feeling, is, in its essential import related to Activity, or the Will.' (ibid., p.371). Bain on the will see bk.4 of Mental and Moral Science.

verifying a belief on this view would be to see whether the action based on the belief resulted in the promised end.

Now this account represents only one side of Bain's theory,¹⁶ but it is the side which Clifford took over. But whereas Bain mainly, though not exclusively, supports this view on psychological grounds, Clifford mainly uses evidence drawn from physiology. Like Spencer and Huxley, Clifford believes that a scientific - that is, public - account of mind will not deny the existence of psychological states, but will regard them as expressions or accompaniments of physiological processes

16 Bain's theory of belief is, of course, much more complex - and confused - than has been suggested in the text. For instance the relation between belief and action is never clearly stated. Bain includes all the following types of action as criteria of belief: (i) a belief is that which directly results in action, as when a thirsty man drinks water to slake his thirst; (ii) a belief is that which can directly lead to action, given the opportunity; (iii) a belief is that which can lead indirectly to action if: (a) it is possible to act on the implications of the belief; (b) if beliefs which can be acted upon can be formed by the use of the same method; (c) if the premises which lead to the belief can be acted upon. See Mental and Moral Science, pp.372-74. Again the relation of belief to the will and the intellect is not unambiguous: sometimes belief is seen as a motive - that which leads us to act - and on other occasions as something which is caused by motives and accompanies them: '/pleasure/ influences the Will in action or pursuit, which carries belief with it.' (*ibid.*, p.220). For some of his other writings on belief see The Emotions and the Will (1859; 3rd ed., Lond.1875); Logic (2nd ed., 2 vols., Lond. 1873). Cf. also M.H. Fisch, 'Alexander Bain and the Genealogy of Pragmatism', Journal of the History of Ideas, 15, 1954.

in the brain.¹⁷ They drew encouragement for this position from the work of contemporary and near contemporary physiologists on the sensory and motor nerves, the nature of reflex action, the structure of the brain, and, particularly in Spencer's case, the evidence for the evolutionary development of every part of man from lower organisms.¹⁸ In elaborating this view, whatever its

17 Cf. H. Spencer, The Principles of Psychology (2nd ed., 2 vols., Lond. 1870-72). T.H. Huxley, Collected Essays: vol.1 : 'On the Physical Basis of Life' (1868); 'On "Descartes' Discourse ... of Seeking Scientific Truth"' (1870), 'On the Hypothesis That Animals are Automata and Its History' (1874); W.K. Clifford, Lectures and Essays, 'Philosophy of the Pure Sciences' (1, pp.278-81; 290-2); 'Body and Mind' (1874) (2); Seeing and Thinking. Of the three Spencer presents the most elaborate account, and the only one which tries to show the evolutionary development of mind, in particular the development of conscious states from delays in reflex actions produced by the growing complexity of the organism and the types of situations it thus encounters. (cf. op.cit., 1, esp. pts.3 and 4.) His psychology is not simply a study of the connections between psychological and physiological states - what he calls aestho-physiology (ibid., ch.4, 'Aestho-physiology') - but, as with the other agnostics, the relation between the states of mind and the external situations which give rise to them, which, of course, makes use of the conclusions of aestho-physiology. Spencer's account of mental operations does not include a discussion of belief.

18 For a brief introductory account of nineteenth century physiology see E.G. Boring, A History of Experimental Psychology (2nd ed., N.Y. 1950), esp. ch.2, 'Psychophysiology in the first Half of the Nineteenth Century', and the references to C. Bell, F. Magendie, J. Muller, M. Hall, P. Flourens.

general advantages, the agnostics found it difficult to be consistent: elements drawn from many different theories of the mind-body relationship - double-aspect theory, psycho-physical parallelism, epiphenomenalism - jostle one another in their writings.¹⁹ However, while they had difficulty in working out a consistent view of the relation between psychological and physiological descriptions of the mind, they had no doubt that mental states are to be understood in terms closely linked with the physiological description of the brain processes which accompany them. What this meant for Clifford is that, since all nervous action is either reflex action or the evolutionary product of a delayed reflex action, conscious states such as knowing and believing, which accompany nervous action of the delayed reflex sort, are to be seen as the psychological expression of a stimulation-response pattern. Bain's theory of belief is thus established on a firm physiological basis: for a belief when called into consciousness always leads to

19 E.G. Clifford insists on the parallelism of physiological and psychological states but he has no hesitation in presenting the two together to make up gaps - mainly in the physiological side - if one side of the affair is not known clearly. Cf. his discussion of voluntary action in 'Right and Wrong: The Scientific Ground of Their Distinction', Lectures and Essays, 2, pp.153-8. His double aspect view is closely linked with his theory that the ultimate element of all reality is mind-stuff; cf. 'On the Nature of Things-in-Themselves', op.cit., 2.

action, and the proposition believed is always a statement of what is the appropriate action or response given the conditions under which one must act or the stimulation which leads one to act.

Finally, by way of introduction, it ought to be noted that Clifford's theory of science and morality never received systematic treatment. His Lectures and Essays(1879), which were published posthumously, contain drafts of sections of a book he intended to call The Creed of Science.²⁰ What we possess is little more than an elaborate though unsystematic outline of the theories he might have developed in this work.

II

On Clifford's view science can be defined in several ways. He states at least three definitions:

(i) science is 'organized commonsense';²¹

(ii) the domain of science is 'all possible human knowledge which can rightly be used to guide human conduct.'²²

20 Cf. Lectures and Essays, 1, pp.71-2.

21 'Body and Mind', op.cit., 2, p.31.

22 ibid., p.70.

(iii) 'The important point is that science, though apparently transformed into pure knowledge, has never yet lost its character of being a craft; and that it is not the knowledge itself which can rightly be called science, but a special way of getting and using knowledge. Namely, science is the getting of knowledge from experience on the assumption of uniformity in nature, and the use of such knowledge to guide the actions of men.'²³

Of these the third is not only the fullest but the most accurate account of Clifford's view of science. Science, he says, is not strictly speaking a body of knowledge but a technique for gaining and increasing knowledge on the basis of present knowledge. Given that knowledge or belief is to be defined as a readiness to act - or a certain trace in the brain - then the beliefs gained by scientific investigation cannot but help guide the conduct of the believer when they are brought or called into consciousness.

To say that the third definition is the most accurate of the three is not, however, to say that the other two are inaccurate: the point is that the third defines the nature of science, while the other two define science in terms of what it achieves. This can be most

²³ 'On the Scientific Basis of Morals', op.cit., 2, p.109.

easily seen with the second definition. If the aim of science is to increase our beliefs about the world by the use of certain methods, and if, as Clifford maintains, these methods are the only means by which this aim can be achieved, then the result of scientific enquiry will always be 'practical' knowledge. And since all well established beliefs have been formed by the rigorous, though often unconscious use of the methods of science, the past and future achievements of science can be represented simply as commonsense, though in scientific hands the commonsense which everyone shares and will share in the future is presented in a systematic fashion.

In the next three sections Clifford's reasons for this view of science will be considered. This is the procedure: firstly, his reasons for rejecting the other agnostic view of science are examined, because his theory is partly based on the contention that this view is a false description of scientific activity and makes its possibility depend upon the truth of an unjustifiable proposition; secondly, a summary of his theory of mind, because of his positive claims about science depend upon his analysis, or, more accurately, his analyses of belief; thirdly, an attempt to bring together some of the main points in the previous sections and to show how the general theory of science that results bears upon the question of testimony to supernatural happenings.

Clifford's most succinct statement of the errors of the popular agnostic view is 'The Aim and Instrument of Scientific Thought.' (1872). In it he maintains that this view asserts that the activity and achievements of science are possible because it is true both 'that the uniformity of Nature is theoretically exact' and 'that it is reasonable'.²⁴ Examination reveals, however, that there is no rational justification for the claim that nature is subject to universal laws - which is part of the meaning of the statement that nature's uniformity is theoretically exact - or that it is reasonable - that is, capable of being rationally investigated - if we mean by this that all aspects of nature can be explained or, what is different, shown to have a cause. Furthermore, the activity of science does not rest upon the truth of the statement that nature's uniformity is theoretically exact and reasonable.

Basically Clifford's argument for the first point is the familiar one that to justify the claim that nature is subject to universal laws we would have to transcend our experience. What is novel is the way he connects this argument with the distinction he draws between mathematically or theoretically exact and practi-

²⁴ 'The Aim and Instrument of Scientific Thought', op.cit., 1, p.132.

cally exact law statements.

According to Clifford the assertion that nature is subject to universal laws means that in principle there exist a set of law statements which are absolutely true or, what is the same thing, describe the workings of nature in a mathematically exact way. The evidence for such a claim is of two sorts, neither of which, Clifford argues, provides a logical justification. One sort is thrown up by the activity of the scientist: for whenever he appears to have falsified a well established law statement he almost always finds that the experimental result has been produced by the introduction of some extraneous factor; 'the more carefully he goes to work, the more of the error turns out to belong to the experiment.'²⁵ But all this shows, Clifford argues, is that well established law statements are more precise descriptions of nature than the conclusions derived by particular experiments; the scientist's experience does not justify the claim that they are absolutely accurate representations of the way the world operates. Another line of evidence is found in the history of science: 'As the discoveries of Galileo, Kepler, Newton, Dalton, Cavendish, Gauss, displayed ever new phenomena following

mathematical laws, the theoretical exactness of the physical universe was taken for granted.'²⁶ However, we cannot take it for granted because in order to justifiably assert that any law statement is theoretically exact we would have to know that it is always true, and this knowledge appears to be beyond us. 'I do not say', Clifford writes, 'that such knowledge is impossible to man; but I do say that it would be absolutely different in kind from any knowledge that we now possess at present.'²⁷

Clifford next shows that the universe is not reasonable either in the sense that every event can be explained or shown to have a cause. The first point depends upon what is meant by explanation. According to Clifford an explanation adds to our knowledge of the way the world hangs together by showing how the unknown and unfamiliar explicandum is made up of known and familiar elements.²⁸ In this sense of explanation we

26 ibid., p.140.

27 ibid., p.136. Clifford goes on to point out that the development of non-euclidean geometries has destroyed the claim that geometry provides known universal truths.

28 Clifford points out (ibid., p.147) that he is opposing Mill's and Spencer's view according to which to explain is to show how the explicandum is an instance of a law. Clifford must, of course, oppose this view because it suggests that we already know how the world hangs together.

cannot know whether every natural process can be explained unless we can go beyond our actual experience. How could we know that there are no simple facts which cannot be analysed?, or that there are no processes whose elements are and will remain unfamiliar to us? Obviously we cannot know, and therefore we are unable to justify the assertion that nature is reasonable in the sense defined. Clifford illustrates the point with the question whether gravitation can be explained: 'The attraction may be an ultimate simple fact; or it may be made up of simpler facts utterly unlike anything what we know at present; and in either of these cases there is no explanation. We have no right to conclude, then, that the order of events is always capable of being explained.'²⁹

What about the statement that every event has a cause? This claim, Clifford argues, provides an even worse foundation for saying that the natural order can be rationally investigated than the one just considered; for the word 'cause' in such a statement cannot be given a meaning. 'I, at least,' Clifford writes, 'have never yet seen any single meaning of the word that could be fairly applied to the whole order of nature.'³⁰ The

29 ibid., p.149.

30 ibid., p.151.

point is not argued but his reasons are probably of this sort: if we say that the word 'cause' signifies a special quality in causes, what, then, is it? and what is the evidence that it exists?; if we say that it names a relational feature then the problem is to show what this feature is without making it so general as to be without significance, or so specific that it cannot have universal application.³¹ In view of these difficulties, and considering the way the word is used, the true position would appear to be that our concepts of cause are just means by which we order the world of our experience; 'When we say then that every effect has a cause, we mean that every event is connected with something in a way that might make somebody call that the cause of it.'³² In science and philosophy, where precision of thought and language is required, the word 'cause' will not be used, though it 'may yet be of some

31 Clifford writes: 'When you have made out any sequence of events to your entire satisfaction, so that you know all about it, the laws involved being so familiar that you seem to see how the beginning must have been followed by the end, then you apply that as a simile to all other events whatever, and your idea of cause is determined by it. Only when a case arises, as it always must, to which the simile will not apply, you do not confess to yourself that it was only a simile and need not apply to everything, but you say, 'The cause of that event is a mystery which must remain for ever unknown to me.' (ibid., p.150).

32 ibid., p.151.

use in conversation or literature.'³³

As with Mozley's account of the belief in the uniformity of nature the question arises: what becomes of science if nature's uniformity is not theoretically exact or reasonable in the senses discussed? Like Mozley, Clifford has an answer, but it is, needless to say, very different from the one he presents.

According to Clifford the answer depends on a correct description of the way scientists go about their work. If we compare, for example, the activity of an engineer with that of a scientist, then it becomes clear that the former is generally concerned with problems of a sort with which he is well familiar, whereas the latter is mainly interested in matters that are new to him. 'Both of them make use of experience to direct human action; but while technical thought or skill enables a man to deal with the same circumstances that he has met with before, scientific thought enables him to deal with different circumstances that he has never met with before.'³⁴ How does the scientist use past experience to explain what is unknown? He assumes that the uniformities or regular connections that he has already observed will be manifested in situations he has not previously

³³ 'On the Nature of Things-in-Themselves', op.cit., 2, p.77.

³⁴ 'The Aim and Instrument of Scientific Thought', op.cit., 1, p.128.

encountered. For example, Spencer is able to predict 'the changing characters of human nature and human society' by assuming that the law of evolution which he has observed in 'the development of a kangaroo foetus or the movement of the sap in exogens',³⁵ will hold in this previously unexplained field. Clifford sums up his position on the aim of scientific thought in this way: the aim 'is to apply past experience to new circumstances; the instrument is an observed uniformity in the course of events. By the use of this instrument it gives us information transcending our experience, it enables us to infer things that we have not seen from things that we have seen; and the evidence for the truth of that information depends on our supposing that the uniformity holds good beyond our experience.'³⁶

But if Mozley is wrong in claiming that scientists qua scientists make no attempt to go beyond their experience, his agnostic opponents are also wrong in identifying the scientist's quest with the search for theoretically exact laws. Empirically the activity of science neither depends upon nor requires that it should

35 ibid., p.130.

36 ibid., pp.131-2.

be possible in principle to formulate theoretically exact law statements. For the scientist it is sufficient that he should be able to formulate law statements which are precise enough for experimental purposes; all that he requires in order to carry out his work is the assumption that he is in possession of law statements which are practically universal. 'We assume this kind of universality,' Clifford says on behalf of the scientists, 'and we find that it pays us to assume it.'³⁷

Finally, if we accept this account of scientific activity, then we are presented with a view of the reasonableness of nature. From the scientist's point of view nature is reasonable in that every time he asks a question of nature in terms of the uniformities he has observed - is the phenomena an expression of such and such a set of laws? - he can expect an answer. Put more apologetically: if a reasonable question is defined 'as one which is asked in terms of ideas justified by previous experience, without itself contradicting that experience' then, Clifford says, the order of nature may be said to be reasonable in that 'to every reasonable question there is an intelligible answer which either

we or posterity may know.³⁸

Now in examining what Clifford denies science to be we have been forced to consider some of his positive views. As the title of his paper suggests Clifford's positive account of science is of the instrumentalist sort: essentially science is a tool to help men handle or, what is the same thing, understand previously unencountered situations. Its justification is the same as that which justifies the continued use of any tool: namely, it has been found to serve its purpose. To understand more fully why and how the tool works in this way and the end it serves we must consider Clifford's account of the nature and purpose of belief.

IV

Like the other agnostics Clifford maintains a physio-psychological view of mind: 'The mind ...', he says in 'Body and Mind', 'is to be regarded as a stream of feelings which runs parallel to, and simultaneous with, a certain part of the action of the body, that is to say, that particular part of the action of the brain in which the cerebrum and the sensory tract

are excited.'³⁹ His account can be summed up in five points.

Firstly, the basic principle of all nervous activity is that nervous stimulation leads to nervous reaction. This is most clearly seen in the case of reflex actions where the excitement produced in the sensory nerve by the stimulation of a sense organ is sent to the brain and immediately and directly transferred to a motor nerve which causes, as a result of the excitement, certain muscular changes. Secondly, the conscious states which accompany certain nervous activities are of two sorts, the derivative and the seemingly spontaneous. The former occurs whenever the excitement of the sensory nerve instead of being directly transferred to the motor nerve is caught up in the traces which previous nervous activities of this and similar sorts have established in the brain; the reactions of the brain traces to the excitement of this nervous energy determines which motor nerve is excited. The spontaneous activity of the mind, that which occurs without any direct sensory stimulation, arises from the brain traces which are always in a state of mild excitement; there is always some part of the brain continually

sending 'faint messages which do not actually tell the muscles to move, but as it were begin to tell them to move.'⁴⁰ Clifford sums up the physiological side of these aspects of the mind in this way: 'There is a train of facts between stimulus and motion which may be of two kinds: it may be direct or it may be indirect, it may go round the loopline or not; and also there is a continuous action of the brain even when these steps are not taking place in completeness.'⁴¹

Thirdly, all conscious states are the accompaniments of the non-reflex nervous activities just described. Having a feeling is the clearest and simplest example of a conscious state produced by sensory stimulation; thinking, particularly the making of a judgment or the forming of a belief are examples of seemingly spontaneous acts of the brain.

In this connection it is necessary to note that Clifford does not always place the same stress upon the physiological correlate of thought. In 'Body and Mind' where his aim is to show the parallelism of physiological and psychological states, he emphasises the physiological accompaniments of thought, and in

40 ibid., p.44.

41 ibid., pp.45-6.

particular shows how the physiological view illuminates the true nature of psychological states. In Seeing and Thinking, however, the physiological side is not stressed quite as much; Clifford points out that the physiological correlates of thought are largely unknown.⁴² In explaining how thought is generally carried on by means of words or general conceptions, and the ability of thought to carry us beyond the limits of our own experience, the emphasis is placed upon the psychological rather than the physiological aspect. The importance of this difference in emphasis between the two works is that it highlights a difference which has an important bearing on his account of belief. This account is the fourth point.

When belief is viewed in close connection with its physiological accompaniments two consequences follow. One is that belief can concern only that which has stimulated the sense organs; for believing is simply

42 E.g. Clifford says: 'What we Call a proposition or a statement of fact, is a thing that we remember as a sentence with the verb 'is' in it. It is a sort of link which combines together not only one sensation with one action, but an infinite variety of sensations each with its appropriate action. We do not know what the physical counterpart of that is. Nobody knows where propositions are packed in the brain, but there is every reason to suppose that it is somewhere or other in the cerebral hemispheres, in the great sheet of grey matter which lies just inside of our skulls, and that the formation of anything as a proposition in our minds corresponds to the formation of certain connections between different parts of this sheet of grey matter.' (Seeing and Thinking, pp.102-03).

the psychological expression of excitements in certain brain traces that have been established by past sensory stimulation-motor response patterns. Secondly, since the physiological process of which believing is the psychological expression consists in the brain's sending faint amounts of nervous energy to the motor nerves, it follows that to believe a proposition is to have a tendency or readiness to act in a certain way, given the appropriate conditions. Physiology then confirms the commonsense or Bain's view of belief. Clifford clearly puts this view of belief or judgment in 'Body and Mind': 'Any beginning of an action is what we call a judgment.; ... When you say that A is B, you mean that you are going to act as if A were B ... The assertion that the water is frozen implies a bundle of resolves; which means, given certain other conditions, I shall go and walk upon it. So, then, an act of judgment or an assertion of any kind implies a certain incipient action of the muscles, not actually carried out at that time and place but preparing a certain condition of the mind such as afterwards when the occasion comes, will guide the action that we shall take up.'⁴³

When, however, thought is regarded more in psychological than physiological terms, a rather different view of belief appears. Firstly, since we can believe

propositions about matters which we have not experienced, it appears that the field of the believable is not limited to what we have experienced but to what in principle we can experience as men. Clifford is forced to admit this in his account of the conditions under which we can believe claims supported by testimony. For instance, he argues that he can believe the chemist's testimony about chemistry because he knows how he can test his claims experientially: 'I have reasonable ground for supposing that he knows the truth of what he is saying, for although I am no chemist, I can be made to understand so much of the methods and processes of science as make it conceivable to me that, without ceasing to be a man, I might verify the statement. I may never actually verify the statement, or even see any experient which goes towards verifying it; but still I have quite reason enough to justify me in believing that the verification is within the reach of human apparatus and powers, and in particular that it has been actually performed by my informant.'⁴⁴

Secondly, Clifford is forced to draw a distinction between what we may call genuine and counterfeit thought; for since it is possible to think about matters

such as the life of God, the furniture of hell, and so on which cannot in principle be experienced here and now, there must be thought processes which contain statements that cannot be believed.⁴⁵ Clifford, without commenting on the significance of the distinction, describes these counterfeit thoughts or unbelievable statements entertained by the mind, conjectures or hypotheses. 'Within the range of human action and verification', he writes, 'we may form ... actual beliefs; beyond it, only those hypotheses which serve for the more accurate asking of questions.'⁴⁶

The fifth point about Clifford's theory is that it is an evolutionary account of mind. The intellect, like the moral sense, has developed from its origins in primitive man because it is one of the factors that contribute to the survival of society in the process of natural selection. Other things being equal the society will survive and progress in which the members regulate their behaviour by careful recollection of the past and strict examination of the present; for the needs

45 Clifford does not say that such sentences are meaningless, though occasionally he rejects quite meaningful sentences as meaningless: 'if anybody says that the will influences matter, the statement is not untrue, but it is nonsense.' (Body and Mind, op.cit., 2, p.56.

46 'The Ethics of Belief', op.cit., 2, p.210.

of the whole will be thus more efficiently recognized and knowledge of the behaviour demanded by the whole disseminated throughout the group. For this dissemination to take place it is necessary that each individual should be able to understand what is required of him - for every individual is involved in contributing to or damaging the welfare of society - and as a result man's community-membership has equipped him with a set of general conceptions by means of which he can understand and perform his moral obligations. With each stage in the process of social evolution these general conceptions are increased and refined.

Clifford's moral indignation at the thought of a man's regulating his belief by a rule other than the agnostic principle is to be seen against this view of the social character of the mind. He writes: 'no one man's belief is in any case a private matter which concerns himself alone. Our lives are guided by that general conception of the course of things which has been created by society for social purposes. Our words, our phrases, our forms and processes and modes of thought, are common property, fashioned and perfected from age to age ... Into this, for good or ill, is woven every belief of every man who has speech of his fellows. An awful privilege, and an awful responsibility, that we

should help to create the world in which posterity will live.⁴⁷

V

In terms of his theory of mind we can restate Clifford's account of scientific laws. It is necessary, however, to bear in mind the tension in his theory of belief which arises from his varying emphases upon its physiological and psychological character. Where belief in law statements is concerned the physiological emphasis is most marked, though it is not consistently carried through.

Clifford's position might be expressed in this way. If a person can form beliefs only about that which he has experienced, it follows that it is not possible to believe that the uniformity of nature is theoretically exact, since the person never experiences anything which would produce this belief within him. He does, however, experience certain uniformities in nature, and he comes to believe that they exist; these beliefs will determine his reactions to situations he has yet to meet, though, of course, they are not always appropriate.

In other words the person assumes that which has been true in the past will be true in the future, and he cannot do otherwise; his mind is so constructed that he must always act in response to nervous stimulation in accordance with past- stimulation-response patterns, or not at all. The most general of these stimulation-response patterns are what the scientist regards as belief in practically universal law statements. The correct analysis of such beliefs, if belief is a readiness to act in a certain way, is that 'if you want so-and-so, do so-and-so.'⁴⁸ 'The most abstract statements or prepositions in science are to be regarded', Clifford writes, 'as bundles of hypothetical maxims packed into a portable shape and size.'⁴⁹

The scientific thinker is distinguished from the technical thinker in that he is primarily interested in seeing how far his hypothetical maxims enable him to handle nervous stimulations of an unfamiliar sort. If he is able to make the appropriate responses in reaction, that is, get what he wants even though the situation is different from previous situations in which he has wanted the same thing, then he can claim to have discovered

48 'On the Scientific Basis of Morals', op.cit., 2, p.109.

49 ibid.

that an unfamiliar situation is a manifestation of certain previously noted uniformities. In this way, by assuming the truth of his law statements or by acting as if they are true the scientist is able to increase our knowledge of the world. He cannot guarantee, of course, the truth or falsity of any empirical claim, but, scientific activity is not a quest for certainty but for information that can be rationally regarded as reliable.

But what information is it ration to accept? That, and only that, Clifford replies, which is justified by experiential evidence; 'it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone', he writes in 'The Ethics of Belief', 'to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.'⁵⁰ But, a critic might ask, what evidence does the scientist have for believing that his law statements are true? Here, of course, Clifford's instrumentalism saves the day: from a logical point of view the scientist does not believe but assumes the practical truth of his law statements as a rule. Psychologically and physiologically there is, on Clifford's view, no difference between believing a proposition and assuming it as a rule, but logically there is an important distinction between the

types of justification required: a proposition adopted as a rule does not have to be shown to be true, but only to be a satisfactory regulation for the carrying on of the activity. There can be no doubt that it pays the scientist endeavouring to handle new situations or the ordinary person in thinking about the future to assume that nature is practically uniform. For the scientist this principle is not one of the truths of science, but only one of the means by which science adds to our knowledge of the truth.

The other main rule by which the game of discovery is played is the agnostic principle. Methodologically it is prior to the belief in nature's uniformity, for it regulates, or should do so, the way in which all men, including the scientist, establish and use this rule to infer other propositions. However, the reason for accepting this rule is not that it pays us to do so, but that it is morally obligatory upon us, and, presumably, that which is morally obligatory is also rational.

One problem emerges here: if the agnostic principle is morally binding upon us, what then is the moral and rational attitude towards propositions which have to be received on testimony?: 'Are we to deprive ourselves of the help and guidance of that vast body of knowledge which daily growing upon the world, because

neither we nor any other person can possibly test a hundredth part of it by immediate experiment or observation, and because it would not be completely proved if we did?,'⁵¹ Of course not, says Clifford. The agnostic principle as applied to the evidential value of testimony gives rise to three rules which must be observed in forming rational beliefs based on this sort of evidence. In assessing testimony we must know whether the testifier is veracious; whether he has had an opportunity to know the truth; and whether he has the ability to recognize the truth. In the case of scientific testimony there is little difficulty in seeing that these conditions are met. With testimony to miracles and other supernatural events the question tends to be confused. Clifford therefore shows how to apply these rules to such cases.

Clifford's analysis shows, of course, that it is contrary to the agnostic principle to accept testimony to supernatural happenings. In this section of his work - part 2 of 'The Ethics of Belief' - Clifford runs his two views of belief together so that in effect he establishes two points: firstly, that it is irrational to conjecture that the alleged events took place;

secondly, that the proposition is unbelievable. Only the first point has any connection with the agnostic principle.

To begin he argues that when the rules relating to testimony are applied to religious claims we find that the witness generally fails on the second requirement, and always on the third. We must always regard as highly suspect a claim to have witnessed a supernatural event because there are no reasonably sharp criteria for distinguishing visions from hallucinations, or miraculous events from highly unusual happenings. Clifford illustrates the point with Mohammed's claims to have received the angel Gabriel in the desert: 'What means could he have of knowing that the forms which appeared to him to be the angel Gabriel was not an hallucination, and his apparent visit to Paradise was not a dream?',⁵²

If this claim is correct then we ought to doubt as well whether the person has the ability to recognize truth, since this ability entails that the person is able to distinguish a divine from a natural act. If the witness fails both the second and third requirement it would be immoral and irrational to accept his testimony. Clifford, however, advances another

argument to show why the witness cannot meet the third requirement; the point depends on his physiological view of belief, and results in the claim that the testimony is unbelievable.

Put generally the argument presumes that the witness is unable to show us how to test the truth of his claims. But, Clifford argues, if he cannot show his claim to be true then we cannot know whether he has tested what he claims to be true: consequently we are unable to say whether he has the ability to recognize truth, for to believe a proposition is to be able to act in ways which test its truth. It is possible, of course, that the conditions under which he has arrived at the belief have somehow exempted him from the usual conditions governing believing, but this does not help us in deciding whether he has the necessary ability. Unless we can answer this question affirmatively it is wrong to believe his testimony. What Clifford should say is that we cannot believe his testimony, but this would be to run in the face of facts. To avoid this he presents his two views of belief side by side in his statement of the argument as it concerns a supernatural visitor whose testimony in the past has been subsequently found to be correct. Despite these successes, Clifford argues, we are not justified in believing this ²²² ~~wasn't~~ unverifiable claims because they are at present unver-

ifiable. He writes: 'Even if my supposed visitor had given me such information, subsequently verified by me, as proved him to have means of knowledge about verifiable matters far exceeding my own; this would not justify me in believing what he said about matters that are not at present capable of verification by man. It would be ground for interesting conjecture, and for the hope that as the fruit of our patient inquiry, we might by-and-by attain to such a means of verification as should rightly turn conjecture into belief. For belief belongs to man, and to the guidance of human affairs; no belief is real unless it guides our actions, and those very actions supply a test of its truth.'⁵³

VI

Given the climate of opinion it is not surprising that contemporary reactions to Clifford's theory of science are mainly concerned with 'The Ethics of Belief'. As might also be expected his critics, along with Clifford, fail to recognize or note that he has two doctrines of belief. Wace, Ward, and James, all more or less agree that 'The Ethics of Belief' represents the agnostic principle as the rule 'shun error',⁵⁴ and all three more

53 ibid., pp.192-3.

54 W. James, 'The Will to Believe' (1896), The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy Lond. 1908), p.19. (?)

or less agree that as a principle it would irrationally restrain human life.⁵⁵ Surely, they ask, it is necessary to act on propositions whose truth we have not and often cannot fully test? William James, for example, in 'The Will to Believe' (1896), a not quite contemporary reaction, points out that in social life we often have to believe that which cannot be tested in advance - for instance, a person's trustworthiness - and which can only be tested by first of all believing. How, he asks, can we rationally rule out the possibility that religious propositions fall into the same category? We cannot: 'I, therefore, for one cannot see my way to accepting the agnostic rules for truth seeking, or wilfully agree to keep my willing nature out of the game. I cannot do so for this plain reason, that a rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truth were

55 H. Wace writes: 'In a word, if we are to be guided by the experience of mankind, Faith and not Science must determine the practical order of life. The Just according to Prof. Clifford shall live by Doubt. But the lesson alike of ordinary life and of the Scriptures is that the Just shall live by Faith.' (op.cit., p.48.) Ward says: 'I contend then as for a most obvious matter of fact, that on a large number of subjects, men arrive at a sure, certain personal knowledge of truth, often without instituting any kind of 'inquiry', and almost universally without going through any 'intellectual process' whatever, which they deliberately intend or of which they themselves are even aware.' (op.cit., p.536).

really there would be an irrational rule.⁵⁶

This type of criticism presumes that Clifford means by believing a mental state distinct from the mental states of conjecturing, knowing, assuming, and so on. In part, of course, this is true, and there is much in 'The Ethics of Belief', particularly in his discussion of testimony, to support this interpretation. However, it is also true that Clifford sometimes writes as if there is no vital distinction between believing, knowing, thinking and so on. What does he mean by belief in 'The Ethics of Belief'? As has already been suggested Clifford holds both views together: sometimes he stresses one, sometimes the other, and often he presents them both side by side. It is unlikely, however, despite what he says to the contrary, that Clifford thinks of the ethics of belief in terms of the rule 'shun error'; a more accurate description, one which fits in with his overall view of science, is 'believe truth'. Clifford would have no difficulty in seeing the distinction James draws between these two rules, but he would find it difficult to understand that the distinction has to be made for the benefit of those who might be corrupted by his views.

Clifford's confusion about the nature of belief to which Wace and Ward - not James⁵⁷ - obliquely draw attention is part of a much wider problem in his thought. It reflects the tensions in his theory of mind between the psychological and physiological elements. Some of the difficulties he faces as a result are remarkably like those which Mansel considers in his doctrine of negative thoughts. But these difficulties, together with the problem of what exactly is meant by a belief and action - is belief that which is acted upon? or that which leads to action?; if the latter, where does the belief end and the action begin and end? - the question what sort of novelty characterizes the situations with which the scientist concerns himself,

57 While Wace and Ward are primarily concerned to refute Clifford, and then to present their positive views - a task which they performed in many places - James really deals with Clifford and Huxley in order to introduce his view about the conditions which should govern belief. For this reason James takes Clifford's statement at face value, though he was well aware of the various elements which compose Clifford's theory of mind and belief; cf. 'The Psychology of Belief', *Mind*, 14, 1889, which forms the basis of ch.21, 'The Perception of Reality', The Principles of Psychology (1890). It is worth noting that James maintains that beliefs about, say, a providential God pass the Bain test: 'I myself believe, of course, that the religious hypothesis gives to the world an impression which specifically determines our reactions, and makes them in large part unlike what they would be on a purely naturalistic scheme.' 'The Will to Believe', op.cit., p.29 ft.nt.)

since in a sense every situation is novel, all remain unsettled.

It would be a mistake, however, to end on a critical note. Given the intellectual climate and the time at his disposal, Clifford's theory of science is a considerable achievement: though it produced problems of its own, it suggested means by which the Mozleys might be dealt with, and more importantly, it suggested that a theory of science should be rooted in a description of the way scientific activity actually proceeds.

THE SCIENCE OF ETHICS

While these writers [Darwin, Spencer, Stephen] differ in their account of moral life, and in their definition of the ethical end, they are at one on the question of method. The reform in ethical method which they, and the 'school' constituted by their followers, seek in common to introduce is, in words, the same as Kant's reform of metaphysical procedure, namely, to make it 'scientific'. Previous ethical theories, they say, have been either 'empirical' or 'a priori'. Neither method is the true one. Apply the principle of Evolution to the phenomena of moral life, as it has already been applied to the phenomena of physical life and inorganic nature, and the former, equally with the latter, will fall into order and system. Morality, like Nature, has evolved; and neither can be understood except in the light of its evolution.

J. Seth

Chapter Nine

W.E. Clifford and The Scientific Basis of Morals.

If Seth's lead is to be followed Darwin and not Clifford should be the proper subject of this chapter. Indeed it would not put an undue strain on the limits of this thesis to include Darwin; there are, however, two reasons why Clifford is the more natural subject. One, that he is an agnostic of episcopal rank with a number of ethical articles to his credit, whereas Darwin, if he is an agnostic, has the status of a layman. The second is a difference in intention between them: while Clifford borrows a good deal from Darwin his aim is to present a science of ethics, and this, as we shall see, is not Darwin's purpose in The Descent of Man.

If we exclude a youthful lecture, Clifford wrote six articles on ethical questions between 1875 and the end of 1877. Of these only two - 'The Scientific Basis of Morals' (1875), and 'Right and Wrong' (1875) - are given to a positive exposition of his general theory of ethics. In the remainder Clifford takes up specific problems in and around his science of ethics such as, for example, religious theories of morality - 'The Ethics of Religion' (1877) - and the moral character of the

agnostic principle - 'The Ethics of Belief'(1877).¹

Compared with Spencer and Stephen, the major agnostic writers on ethics, Clifford's output is slender, yet unlike Huxley and Tyndall, whose writings on ethical questions are even slimmer, Clifford attempts to develop a science of ethics, whereas they more or less limit their writings to a defence of the scientific study of morality.² All told it is not improper to consider

1 In order of appearance: 'Of the Scientific Basis of Morals (1875); 'Right and Wrong; The Scientific Ground of their Distinction'(1875); 'The Ethics of Belief'(1876; publ.1877); 'The Ethics of Religion'(1877); 'The Influence Upon Morality of a Decline in Religious Belief'(1877); 'Cosmic Emotion'(1877). They are all reprinted in his Lectures and Essays, 2. The early lecture which is not considered is 'On Some of the Conditions of Mental Development'(1868), op.cit., 1. It is a slight essay which argues, following Spencer's evolutionary biology, that because the evolution of consciousness consists in increasing diversity within unity the individual ought to encourage this development or progress by creative thought and opposition to conventionalism. (ibid.1, pp.105-06). This emphasis on individualism, as Pollock points out (ibid.,1, pp.34-6) is not found in the social theory of morality he develops in the 1870's. Also his way of applying evolutionary theory to ethical matters is rather different in his later works. Spencer, ever jealous of his claims to originality, said that Clifford had plagiarized his theories; Clifford denied the charge and acknowledged Spencer's priority and a general debt to him. See ibid.1, pp.106-08; D. Duncan, The Life and Letters of Herbert Spencer (Lond. 1908), p.143.

2 Cf. p.

Clifford's brief and fragmentary statement of his science alongside the sciences of Spencer and Stephen.

On the second point - Clifford's relation to Darwin - his debt is so large that one might be tempted to call him a disciple. Clifford is well aware of his obligation. When he published 'The Scientific Basis of Morals' (a Metaphysical Society Paper) he appended a note pointing out his indebtedness to Darwin: 'Some remarks of Mr. Darwin's ("Descent of Man", part 1, ch.3) appeared to me to constitute a method of dealing with ethical problems bearing a close analogy to the methods which have been successful in all other practical questions, but differing somewhat in principle from the theories which are at present in vogue, while in its results it coincides with the highest and healthiest practical instincts of *this* and of all times.'³ However, despite this debt Clifford is not Darwin's disciple in ethical theory. And the proof of this is partly to be found in their reasons for discussing morality.

The Descent of Man (1871) is, amongst other things, an attempt to show that man has developed from certain lower forms, and that all the important features

³ op.cit., 2, p.106.

of this development have occurred as a result of the process of natural selection.⁴ Darwin's discussion of morality is mainly centred on showing that a man's moral sense provides no exception to this claim. Conscience has been developed because tribes whose members possess it are more successful in the struggle for survival between tribes. In advancing this position Darwin draws certain moral consequences about, for example, the nature of the good society, but his main purpose is to support his claims about the evolution of man.

Clifford's aim in discussing morality is quite different. His intention, as the title of his earliest article suggests, is to discover the scientific basis of morality, to construct a science of ethics. Put briefly, this means studying scientifically the foundation facts of the moral life - conscience, right, the end of conduct, responsibility - until the point is reached where it can be seen that there is no formal difference between moral and scientific laws. When this point is reached the ethical scientist has the outlines, at least, of the science of ethics. This project, Clifford claims, can be carried out only by making use of Darwin's theory

⁴ The full title of the work is The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex (1871; 2nd ed. 1874; Lond. 1885). For statement of general aims see ibid., p.2.

about man's evolution, particularly his evolution as a moral animal. Clifford, however, finds it necessary to look to other quarters besides Darwin in realizing his aim. On the empirical side he borrows material about the early forms and development of community life from the historical sociologists, Henry Maine and Emile de Laveleye; philosophically he finds a certain amount of help in Frederick Pollock's analysis of ethical terms, and there is, perhaps, some borrowing from Spencer on the nature of society and the character of the evolutionary process. The big debt, however, is to Darwin. But Clifford's science of ethics is an independent work; it can be called Darwinian only in the sense that Darwin's work made its creation possible.

Besides his debt to Darwin there are four other features of Clifford's ethical theory that ought to be mentioned by way of introduction. The first, and most important, is his criterion of an ethical science: viz., that a theory cannot be considered scientific unless it can show that the only significant difference between ethical maxims and scientific statements is one of content. In other words, if an ethical theory provides the scientific basis of morals then it shows that when a person acts according to moral laws he is acting in accord with the natural order. Now the reason behind

this criterion is to be found in his theory of science.⁵ According to Clifford scientific knowledge has two chief characteristics: it is always knowledge of observed uniformities which are assumed to hold beyond our experience; and it is always practical: that is, it exists to enable the individual who possesses it to handle the world without and within. 'Every scientific fact', Clifford writes, 'is a shorthand expression for a vast number of practical directions: if you want so-and-so, do so-and-so.'⁶ If morality falls within the scope of science, then moral knowledge must exhibit these features. And since moral knowledge is for the most part knowledge of what is right and wrong it must be shown, if morality is said to be part of science, that moral laws are like every other type of scientific 'fact'. In Clifford's words: if there is a scientific basis of morals then 'it must be true that, - / 1, The maxims of Ethics are hypothetical maxims / 2, Derived from experience / 3, On the assumption of uniformity in nature.'⁷

The second point to note is that the ethical scientist is not attempting to replace the casuist. He

5 Cf. ch.8

6 'The Scientific basis of Morals', op.cit., 2, p.109.

7 ibid.

is primarily concerned with the foundations of ethics, not the superstructure. The ethical scientist analyses and explains the basic moral conceptions used by the morally mature adult; he is not concerned with the task of applying them in concrete situations. However, while he makes no direct contribution to the problems of casuistry he can help indirectly by ruling out as irrelevant certain types of moral reasonings, such as, for example, those based on allegedly revealed laws.⁸

Another feature worth noticing is the prominence Clifford gives to conscience. Like many of his Christian opponents he regards conscience as the primary moral fact from the individual's point of view.⁹ It occupies this place because it is largely responsible for the individual's awareness of right and wrong as well as being the chief motive for right conduct and the activities of praising and blaming. Not unnaturally Clifford commences his account of the science of ethics by studying conscience; however, one of the results of this study is that conscience is seen not to be the primary

8 Clifford more or less takes for granted the distinction between the ethical scientist and the casuist, but his friend F. Pollock in 'The Casuistry of Common Sense' and 'Ethics and Morals' carefully distinguishes between a theory of the nature and foundations of morality (ethics) and the theory of moralizing or casuistry (morals). Cf. his Essays in Jurisprudence and Ethics (Lond. 1882), esp. pp.261-68; and pp.294-95.

9 Cf. p.

moral fact; objectively, if not subjectively, rightness occupies this place.

Finally, we must note that Clifford's science is necessarily sketchy. He believed that he was one of the early workers in the field, but it is likely that his essays represent only his first pioneering thoughts. Certainly his position receives little more than an outline treatment and not a very systematic one at that. For the historian this obviously poses certain problems: it means that he must present Clifford's position as he thinks best; it also means that difficulties in his theory must be suggested rather than discussed at length.

It might be thought, considering these limitations, that Clifford is not particularly worthwhile studying and this might be true were it not for the fact that Clifford is a member of a school. Viewed in this way Clifford's writings are interesting, despite their limitations, for they help to reveal the diversity and growth of agnostic ethical sciences.¹⁰

¹⁰ This fact alone probably does not exhaust the interest of Clifford's work. I have not investigated the matter but I suspect that Clifford's use of Darwin's The Descent of Man has resulted in a confusion of their moral theories; and it is more than likely that Clifford's work on ethics and the nature of science has exercised some influence in legal theory through the work of Pollock.

II

Conscience, according to Clifford, is one of the central facts of the moral life; indeed its position is so important that ethics can be defined in terms of it. He commences 'The Scientific Basis of Morals' with this definition 'By Morals or Ethic I mean the doctrine of a special kind of pleasure or displeasure which is felt by the human mind in contemplating certain courses of conduct, whereby they are felt to be right or wrong, and of a special desire to do the right things and avoid the wrong ones. The pleasure or displeasure is commonly called the moral sense; the corresponding desire might be called the moral appetite. These are facts existing in the consciousness of every man who need [be] considered in this discussion, and sufficiently marked out by their names; they need no further definition.'¹¹ Because of the significance of conscience Clifford constructs his science by first of all examining conscience and then the other essential features of the moral life which are related to it.

In Clifford's account of man conscience has two basic functions: it provides the materials for moral

¹¹ 'The Scientific Basis of Morals', op.cit., 2, p.106.

judgments, and it motivates the individual to what he believes to be right behaviour. Both functions result from the conscience's being a set of feelings.¹² Because the task of conscience is to feel in response to moral stimuli it must be distinguished from reason or that aspect of the mind which registers, gathers, and represents the feelings that come in from the various senses. In gathering together and representing the mass of moral feelings by verbal signs the reason, or set of feelings called reason, makes moral judgments; their purpose is to make moral action easier by considering the stimulation and desire of the moment against the experience of past moral activity. Clifford writes: 'Conscience is an instinctive desire for those things which conduce to the welfare of society; intellect is an apparatus for connecting sensations and action, by means of a symbolic representation of the external world, framed in common and for common purposes by the social intercourse of men.'¹³

The second function of conscience arises from the fact that to have a feeling is to have a tendency or desire or motive to act in response to that which

12 On his doctrine of feelings cf. p.

13 'Cosmic Emotion', op.cit., 2, p.283.

causes the feeling. Whatever moral stimulus arouses conscience determines us through this feeling to act in response to it; the intended action will be what the individual considers right in the circumstances, but whether the desire will have its way depends on certain other factors such as the memory of past experiences of a similar sort. However if conscience does not always have its way, it always inclines us to do right. Put generally, conscience in this aspect is 'the whole aggregate of our feelings about actions as being right or wrong regarded as tending to make us do the right actions and avoid the wrong ones.'¹⁴

Now this account of conscience raises two questions: how are moral feelings distinguished from other feelings, and what distinguishes the pleasure of moral approval from the pleasures of other types of feelings. Clifford answers neither question. The most that he is prepared to say is that moral feelings differ from (say) intellectual feelings in terms of their function, and that the difference is to be explained by reference to the ways in which they have developed. Beyond this point it is not possible to go: 'We must assume that everybody knows what these words mean; the

feelings they describe may be analysed or accounted for, but they cannot be more exactly defined as feelings.¹⁵

Starting from what he takes to be the facts of everyman's consciousness Clifford asks why has man developed a set of moral feelings? He asks why rather than how because he believes that Darwin has shown in The Descent of Man that man's moral sense and his intellect have developed because their development served an end, viz., man's survival as a member of society. In order to properly understand Clifford's teaching on this question we must first of all see what Darwin has to say.

According to Darwin conscience is a particular compound of mental feelings which result from the composition of certain instincts and mental features that man shares in common with the higher animals. Man's social instinct and his reasoning power are the two basic constituents of his conscience. Because of his social instinct man desires the company of his fellows and their well being. This desire for the welfare of his kin is progressively strengthened and sharpened by the growth of man's intellectual ability. On the one hand this growth enables the individual to recall past actions and thus to feel shame and remorse for behaviour

15
p.107.

'The Scientific Basis of Morals', op.cit., 2,

which has been contrary to the sympathetic promptings of his social instinct; on the other it makes possible, through the development of language, a more precise knowledge of what is entailed in the individual's desire to be with his fellows. There is every reason to think, Darwin claims, that conscience has developed out of these elements into an established feature of the mind that inclines man to seek the continuing existence and health of his fellows or, what is exactly the same thing, the general good of their society.¹⁶

This account explains the general character of conscience but not why such a faculty should have continued to exist and develop once it appeared in man. The answer to this problem, Darwin says, is to be found in the process of natural selection; for the conditions which give rise to this process have been present in the development of conscience. In primeval times variations occurred between tribes in the degree to which they could command the allegiance of their members. Furthermore, conflicts between tribes inevitably occurred because they naturally tended to increase in numbers and thus needed

16 For the argument see The Descent of Man, chs. 3 and 4. Darwin's definition of the general good is: 'The term, general good, may be defined as the rearing of the greatest number of individuals in full vigour and health, with all their faculties perfect, under the conditions to which they are subjected.' ibid., p.121. He puts this definition forward in opposition to John Mill's hedonistic utilitarianism; cf. ibid.

more food in order to survive. Now in these conflicts, other things being equal, the tribe whose members have a strong conscience will succeed against tribes whose members have a weaker inclination to put the common good before their own individual interests; for the former will fight as one man against a less united and therefore less efficient enemy.¹⁷ Add to this the likelihood that mental and moral attributes are transmitted by inheritance, then it follows that tribes of men will probably develop with ever stronger and more sensitive moral senses in their members.¹⁸ To sum up: the explanation why conscience as we know it has developed is that it was one of the elements making for the success of modern man's tribal ancestors in the battle for tribal survival.

Is natural selection still a factor in deter-

17 Darwin writes: 'A tribe including many members who from possessing a high degree /moral qualities/... were always ready to aid one another, and to sacrifice themselves for the common good, would be victorious over most other tribes and this would be natural selection. At all times throughout the world tribes have supplanted other tribes; and as morality is one important element in their success, the standard of morality and the number of well-endowed men will thus everywhere tend to rise and increase.' ibid., p.132.

18 Darwin, unlike Spencer (cf. Principles of Psychology, 1, p.422,) has reservations about the inheritance of moral qualities - why are not senseless customs, superstitions, and tastes transmitted (cf. ibid., p.124) - but he finds no 'inherent improbability' in the doctrine.

mining the moral sense of civilized man? According to Darwin, only to a limited extent, and then it concerns the individual rather than the race to which he belongs.¹⁹ By process of natural selection the evil and morally weak are weeded out and are thus prevented from passing their qualities on to plague posterity. In civilised societies the forces which work for the further development and refinement of man's moral sense are different from those which primarily explain its persistence and development in early times. They include, according to Darwin, 'the approbation of our fellow-men - the strengthening of our sympathy by habit - example and imitation - reason - experience and even self-interest - instruction among youth, and religious feelings.'²⁰

With this account Clifford is in general though not complete agreement. He certainly accepts Darwin's explanation of the development of conscience in primeval society; in 'Right and Wrong' he summarises chapters two and three of The Descent of Man because they contain 'the simplest and clearest and most profound philosophy that has ever been written upon this subject.'²¹ His summary

19 Cf. ibid., pp.137-38.

20 ibid.

21 op.cit., 2, p.166.

is: 'In these chapters it appears that just as most physical characteristics of organisms have been evolved and preserved because they were useful to the individual in the struggle for existence against other individuals and other species, so this particular feeling has been evolved and preserved because it is useful to the tribe or community in the struggle for existence against other tribes, and against the environment as a whole. The function of conscience is the preservation of the tribe as a tribe.'²²

Of the three points of disagreement the first is safely described as a difference of style or presentation. In Clifford's hands Darwin's position is more sharply defined than it is in the Descent of Man. Undoubtedly this difference reflects in part a difference in aims; one of its consequences, however, is that questions which Darwin appears to ignore or leave open are firmly answered by Clifford.²³ A more important difference concerns the major social unit to which the

22 ibid., pp.166-67

23 For example it is not clear from Darwin's discussion whether he thinks that there are any self-regarding virtues. He points out that with primitive peoples other-regarding attitudes are highly esteemed and self-regarding attitudes are not praised, though in civilized races they are encouraged; (op.cit., pp.116-19). Clifford on the other hand uses the theory of the evolution of the moral sense to show 'that there are no self-regarding virtues properly so called.' (op.cit., 2, p.172.)

conscience is directed: Darwin speaks of the tribe whereas Clifford came to prefer the conception of the commune. The third point of difference, which is related to the second, is the place of natural selection in determining the moral sense of civilized man: Clifford believes that it is still the major factor at work.

Clifford's view of the major unit of social evolution is the result of Darwin's statements and, later, the work of Maine and de Laveleye. In his first article, 'The Scientific Basis of Morals', which was written with one eye on The Descent of Man, Clifford follows Darwin. 'The word tribe' he writes, 'is here used to mean a group of that size which in the circumstances considered is selected for survival or destruction as a group.'²⁴ In later articles, however, Clifford uses 'tribe' to name one form of social group rather than the major social unit to which conscience is directed. 'It is clear', he claims in 'Right and Wrong', 'that at different times men may be divided into groups of greater or less extent - tribes, clans, families, nations, towns.'²⁵

One likely reason for the change is that the

24 'The Scientific Basis of Morals', op.cit., 2, p.112.

25 op.cit., 2, p.169.

concept of the tribe is not a very useful one when it comes to understanding modern societies, and Clifford, unlike Darwin, wants to say that what has determined conscience in the past still determines it today.

Another reason is that Clifford became aware of the attempts of Maine and de Laveleye to describe primitive societies and their development ^{into} of modern social forms.²⁶

Their view of the commune as the primitive and elementary social unit provided Clifford with the more precise concept that he needed for his science. Thus he writes in 'The Ethics of Religion': 'The labours of students of the early history of institutions - notably Sir Henry Maine and M. de Laveleye - have disclosed to us an element of society which appears to have existed in all times and places, and which is the basis of our own social structure. The village community, or commune, or township, found in tribes of the most varied race and time, has so modified itself as to get adopted in one place or another to all the different conditions of

26 Clifford does not refer to any specific work but the following illustrate what he has in mind: H.S. Maine, Lectures on the Early History of Institutions (Lond. 1875), esp. ch.3; Emile de Laveleye, 'The Provincial and Communal Institutions of Belgium and Holland' in J.W. Probyn (ed.), Cobden Club Essays: Local Government and Taxation (Lond. 1875).

human existence.'²⁷

According to Maine and de Laveleye the commune is at first a nomadic group composed of related families. Later, when the commune ceases to be nomadic and settles, the basis of membership is no longer kinship but occupancy of the common land. From this stage there results by development various forms of community and village life. 'The great steps in the scale of transition seem to me', Maine writes, 'to be marked by the Joint-Family of the Hindoos, by the House-Community of the Southern Slavonians, and by the true Village-Community as it is found first in Russia and next in India.'²⁸ Further developments include the coming together of various communes to form ever increasing social groups such as clans, counties, and nations. However, in the formation of these larger social groups the primitive elements of society remain basically unchanged. This, as least, is what de Laveleye believes, and from this belief he draws the political conclusion - which Clifford appears to accept²⁹ - that the larger group, particularly the state, must recognize

27 op.cit., 2, p.238.

28 H.S. Maine, op.cit., p.78.

29 See 'The Influence Upon Morality of a Decline in Religious Belief', op.cit., 2, p.250.

the freedom of the commune to govern itself. '"The Commune"', he writes, quoting Royer Collard, '"is like the family, prior to the State; the political law finds it and does not create it."'30

To this view of the character and development of societies Clifford adds the belief that social development has largely been and will continue to be by means of natural selection amongst communes and collections of communes. Just as in the past the moral sense of man determines and is determined by the process of natural selection between communes and collections of communes. The clearest statement of this position is found in 'Right and Wrong' where it is linked with certain utopian views about the evolutionary process as a progress. He writes: 'If a certain number of clans are struggling for existence, that portion of the conscience will be developed which tends to the preservation of the clan; so, if towns or families are struggling, we shall get a moral sense adapted to the advantage of the town or the family. In this way different portions of the moral sense may be developed at different stages of progress. Now it is clear that for the purpose of the conscience

the moral community at any time then will mean a group of that size and nature which is being selected for survival as a whole. Selection may be going on at the same time among many different kinds of groups. And ultimately the moral sense will be composed of various portions relating to various groups, the function or purpose of each portion being the advantage of that group to which it relates in the struggle for existence. Thus we have a sense of family duty, of municipal duty, of national duty, and of duties towards all mankind.³¹

Having shown why man as we know him has and will continue to have a moral sense Clifford next claims that this explanation also tells us what form the perfectly constructed conscience ought to take. Since conscience has continued to exist and develop because it is useful to man in society it follows, Clifford believes, that the function of conscience will always be to direct man to that which serves the well being of society. Whether this is Darwin's view is hard to say, but Clifford teaches it clearly: 'The function of conscience is the preservation of the tribe as a tribe. And we shall rightly train our conscience if we learn to approve those

actions which tend to the advantage of the community in the struggle for existence.'³² It does not occur to Clifford that this step in his argument needs any defence.

To sum up: the general truth that emerges from the study of the development of everyman's moral sense is 'the sole and supreme allegiance of conscience to the community.'³³ Put another way, this truth, 'the first principle of natural ethics',³⁴ means that the feelings which compose conscience are always aroused by actions which have some bearing on the continuing existence of the social group; and the actions to which it inclines the individual always have some significance for the continuing well-being of society. Using this principle Clifford develops most of the remaining features of his ethical science, viz., the nature of right and moral responsibility.

'Right', Clifford teaches, 'is an affair of the community and must not be referred to anything else.'³⁵ By this he means that statements of what is right or
 " ly obligatory are always statements about the type of

ibid., p.167.

ibid., p.172.

bid.

id., p.171

conduct and character that make for the continuing well-being of society. This view follows directly from his account of conscience and the commonsense principle that what conscience approves is right and what it disapproves wrong.

This conclusion is of great importance to Clifford's science on two accounts: firstly it shows that rightness can be studied scientifically; secondly, it enables him to claim his theory as the science of ethics, because it can now be shown that moral laws are amongst the scientific laws which govern the welfare of society. Like scientific laws, ethical maxims are derived from experience, the experience of community needs, on the assumption that what has been true of these needs in the past will continue to be true in the future. Furthermore, Clifford claims, there is no difficulty in seeing that moral laws are hypothetical statements like all other scientific generalizations. According to Clifford the correct analysis of an ethical maxim is: if you wish to remain a member of society then you must do this ... which conduces to the welfare of the group. The correctness of this analysis, he argues, is shown by the consequences of moral disobedience: the person is punished by being cut off from the fellowship of the community - killed, deported, imprisoned, shunned - or,

at the very least, he suffers the remorse of conscience which makes him feel alienated from his fellows. It is true, of course, that moral laws differ from other scientific generalizations in that they can be disobeyed, but this difference, Clifford believes, leaves their scientific status unaffected.³⁶

Now Clifford's presentation of his doctrine of right is not limited to these very general remarks about its nature and the scientific character of ethical maxims. His position is more complex than that. One problem in expounding these other aspects of his theory is that they are not presented systematically in connection with his main claims about rightness. For the purpose of exposition we can overcome this difficulty by considering these ramifications of his doctrine as his answers to three naive objections to his general theory of rightness.

Firstly, Clifford's account suggests that there are no eternal and immutable moral laws, since communities change and so, presumably, do the moral demands they make upon their members. Secondly, the claim that conscience is the proper means for distinguishing right from

³⁶ See 'The Scientific Basis of Morals', op.cit., 2, pp.119-20.

wrong suggests that even within any one community there are no generally binding moral rules; for each society contains members with many different types of conscience. Thirdly, Clifford's account of right is inadequate because it has nothing to say about moral laws of an inter-community kind. In presenting the answers that Clifford provides or might have provided to these objections we can come to see how he defended, qualified, and applied his position.

In answer to the first objection Clifford draws a distinction between moral laws' being eternal and immutable and their being practically constant. He happily concedes the first position as incompatible with his ethical science, but denies that he must also reject the second. The reasons why he wishes to maintain that moral laws are fairly constant and common to many societies are probably tied up with his beliefs about their scientific character and the immorality of religious believing. Concerning the former: to admit that ethical maxims change with changes in the community might be regarded as threatening their scientific status; for scientific laws, on Clifford's view, are practically universal in their scope, whereas moral laws on this admission are not of universal significance. And as it is essential to moral science that ethical maxims be scientific laws, to cast doubt on their scientific status

is to jeopardize the possibility of a science of ethics. Another and quite different reason for his view is that if it is allowed that moral laws change then it might be argued that at certain periods it has been right, or at least not wrong, not to use the agnostic principle in forming beliefs, especially religious beliefs, and this conclusion Clifford cannot tolerate.

However in arguing that ethical laws remain practically constant Clifford does not deny that moral systems undergo change. Such changes, he holds, do not concern the moral laws but the whole complex of rules and precedents which guide the application of the moral law to specific situations. It is not at all clear how Clifford would go about drawing the line between that part of a moral system which remains fairly constant and that which undergoes change.³⁷ His general position on the constancy of moral laws is well presented in 'The Ethics of Religion' where, in arguing against the social catastrophism involved in the view that the Roman Catholic

37 Clifford (op.cit., 2, p.249, ft.nt.2) like Darwin (op.cit., p.117, ft.nt.31) was influenced by an anonymous article on the 'Natural History of Morals', North British Review where (cf.p.374) it is argued against Buckle that only a part of morality remains constant, viz., the basic maxims, and that the rest of the moral system undergoes great changes; the whole article is an anticipation of the views found in Darwin and Clifford. (cf. the summary on p.402).

priesthood has sometimes been a blessing to society,³⁸ he says: 'It seems more analogous to what we find in other fields of enquiry to suppose that there are certain broad principles of human life which have been true all along; that certain conditions have always been favourable to the health of society, and certain other conditions always hurtful.'³⁹

Clifford's answer to the second objection makes use of a Thomistic distinction between the correctly and incorrectly formed conscience.⁴⁰ In any society it is obvious that there is going to be a variety of types of consciences, and some, perhaps all, need improvement. Yet irrespective of any deficiencies that a conscience may possess the individual is obliged to heed its promptings even though it suggests that which is not objectively right.⁴¹ To discover what is objectively right we must examine the directions of the correctly formed conscience, or the one which fulfills its function best. The problem is to recognize this moral sense. Clifford's solution is

38 Cf. 'The Ethics of Religion', op.cit., 2, p.235.

39 ibid., p.236.

40 Pollock points out in the Introduction that Clifford knew quite a deal of Thomistic philosophy; op.cit., 1, pp.31 and 35. On Aquinas, cf. F. Copleston, Aquinas (Harmondsworth, 1957), p.220.

41 (The Scientific Basis of Morals', op.cit., 1, p.107.

that the best moral sense is the one that consistently seeks the welfare of society, but this, as Clifford admits, is not a very useful criterion; for the necessary information is hard to obtain, at least in any detail.

'If we choose to learn by the analogy of an individual organism,' he writes, 'we may see that no permanent or final answer can be given, because the organism grows in consequence of the struggle [to survive] and develops new wants while it is satisfying the old one.'⁴² Still Clifford has no doubt that a sufficient outline can be constructed, and his attempts to show this are valuable for the light they throw on the adequacy of his ethical science.

Clifford draws out what is necessary for the welfare of society or what is right in two ways: negatively by showing what is not necessary, and positively by arguing for two types of right conduct. On the negative side Clifford develops his doctrine of right by rejecting hedonistic utilitarianism and religious theories of right. Against the former he argues that societies survive because all their members are working efficiently, and not because they are all happy. It is probably true that societies which survive will increase in general

happiness, but the happiness is not in fact a necessary condition of group survival. 'No doubt', he writes, 'happiness will in the long run accrue to the community as a consequence of right conduct; but the right is determined independently of the happiness, and as Plato says, it is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong.'⁴³

Ethical science rejects religious theories of right because they oppose the view that right is an affair of the community by identifying or connecting right with the will or character of the deity.⁴⁴ Unlike utilitarianism the error in such views is not one which will be overcome in a practical way at some future time. The reason is that such views of right are invariably associated with institutionalized religion with a caste of priests possessing sacramental or magical powers. Once religion in this sense becomes established in a society then morality is undermined; conscience, which is best strengthened by the individual's own cultivation of it, is weakened and inhibited by priestly interference; and right living is threatened by the priests' appeal to a revealed morality, since they attach the notion of right 'to a lifeless code of rules instead of being the

43 ibid., p.173.

44 Cf. ibid., pp.171-72.

informing character of a nation.'⁴⁵ Clifford finds support for these views in the recent history of priest-ridden continental countries where moral and social progress is inevitably connected with a strong anti-clericalism. All told, Clifford concludes, 'I can find no evidence that seriously militates against the rule that the priest is at all times and in all places the enemy of all men - sacerdos semper ubique et omnibus inimicus.'⁴⁶

Positively, Clifford develops his account of right by showing why the welfare of society always requires that the members of the society be veracious and form their beliefs by the agnostic principle.⁴⁷ His arguments are an amalgam of commonsense observations and certain undeveloped and unsubstantiated views about the nature of society. Other things being equal a society in which men are veracious is likely to be an efficient society because its members can trust one another. Similarly a society in which men live by the agnostic principle will be likely to survive because their method of believing

45 'The ethics of Religion', op.cit., 2, p.227.

46 ibid., p.237.

47 On veraciousness see 'Right and Wrong', op.cit., 2, pp.173-76; on the agnostic principle, 'The Ethics of Belief', op.cit., 2, pp.177-88.

preserves and increases the civilizing tradition of scientific knowledge. These observations, however, provide no firm foundation for saying that all men ought to be agnostic believers and veracious because it is possible, for all we know by observation, that the same beneficial effects could be attained if only half of the population act as Clifford wishes. To place his claims on a firmer footing Clifford supports these empirical observations with the doctrine that 'society is an organism and man in society is part of an organism... in so far as some portion of the nature of man is what it is for the sake of the whole - society.'⁴⁸ Now what this theory amounts to in detail we cannot say but it involves at least these two points: one, that society has no favourites: to each man it gives equally the gifts of the form of conscience and intellect, and from each it demands exactly the same service; two, any change in those aspects of man's nature which are the gifts of society which is not in the direction of the sake of the whole is directly opposed to and encourages behaviour contrary to the commonweal. Because of the first point it follows that if it is necessary for the welfare of society that some men be veracious and scientific believers

then all ought to be. The second point provides the explanation: individual acts of deceit and credulity are wrong because they inevitably influence men to act against the common welfare. A good example of Clifford's use of this latter point occurs in 'The Ethics of Belief' where he claims that a credulous belief 'is sinful because it is stolen in defiance of our duty to mankind. That duty is to guard ourselves from such beliefs as from a pestilence, which may shortly master our own body and then spread to the rest of the town. What would be thought of one who, for the sake of sweet fruit, should deliberately run the risk of bringing a plague upon his family and his neighbours?'⁴⁹ The main problem in this line of reasoning is that the social theory which is used to support it exists only in embryonic form.⁵⁰

We can now consider the third objection. What moral laws, if any, should govern the relations between different societies?⁵¹ Clifford's answer is not a simple

49 'The Ethics of Belief', op.cit., 2, p.184.

50 It is not unlikely that Clifford was influenced by J. Morley's On Compromise (1874) in depicting the evil that follows a casual or inconsistent policy in forming beliefs.

51 Cf. p. where Sidgwick's presentation of this objection is discussed.

one. One strand in his teaching leads to the conclusion that there are only two laws: in cases of conflict between communities the members of each are morally bound to put down the other society, whilst in cases of co-operation or peaceful co-existence the members of each society are to act in ways not contrary to the welfare of the other community. Now one of the difficulties with this view is that in conflicts between barbaric and civilized societies the triumph of the former is, said to be right; and such a conclusion suggests that Clifford's position allows for no international moral laws in the accepted sense. To get round this problem Clifford relies on a doctrine of social progress.

According to this doctrine the form of all communes and collections of communes is determined by the giant social organism of humanity of Man.⁵² The character of each social organism is what it is because that character serves the preservation and development of Man. Great variation is exhibited in the ways in which social organisms further this end, just as there is considerable difference between the various types of social organisms: 'It is to be noticed that part of the

nature of a smaller group may be what it is for the sake of a larger group to which it belongs: and then we may speak of the function of the smaller group. Thus it appears probable that the family, in the form in which it now exists among us, is determined by the good of the nation; and we may say that the function of the family is to promote the advantage of the nation or larger society in some ways. But I do not think it would be right to follow Auguste Comte in speaking of the function of humanity; because humanity is obviously not a part of any larger organism for whose sake it is what it is.⁵³ One of the consequences of this view is that while the history of the communes will not necessarily reveal a straightforward pattern of development the final result will be in the best interests of humanity. Thus while obedience to conscience will sometimes result in what appears to be morally odd results the overall result of such obedience will serve Man. Or, to put the matter somewhat differently and less explicitly, conscience is 'the voice of Man ingrained into our hearts commanding us to work for Man.'⁵⁴ And even though the voice of Man will always take expression as the voice of a particular

53 'Right and Wrong', op.cit., 2, p.170.

54 'Ethics of Religion', op.cit., 2, p.239.

group of men, we must not take this expression as ultimate or final, for it is only one form of the voice of Man, the god and father of us all. 'From the dim dawn of history, and from the inmost depth of every soul, the face of our father Man looks out upon us with the fire of eternal youth in his eyes, and says, 'Before Jehovah was, I am.'⁵⁵ In conclusion we can say that Clifford's doctrine of right leaves room for some account of inter-community moral laws, though just how he would develop this side of his teaching we cannot say.

In view of the fact that Clifford is developing a science of ethics it would not be unreasonable to expect that he will present a theory of good alongside his account of conscience and right. On this matter, however, Clifford has little to say. One reason for this silence, as becomes clear in 'Cosmic Emotion', is that he sees no difference between the concepts of good and right. In his earliest articles - 'The Scientific Basis of Morals', 'Right and Wrong' - good is not mentioned at all, though it would not seem unnatural for him to follow Darwin and say that the end of right conduct - 'the greatest efficiency of all citizens is such'⁵⁶ - is

55 ibid., p.243

56 'Right and Wrong', op.cit., 2, p.173.

good.

In 'Cosmic Emotion', however, Clifford does attempt to fill in a few details concerning his view of goodness. The explanation why is probably to be found in a controversy between Sidgwick and Pollock over the significance of evolutionary theory for moral philosophy. In the course of showing that the various forms of evolutionary theory throw no light on ethical question, Sidgwick argues that Darwin's view of the good society leads to the obviously wrong conclusion that 'some semi-barbarous nations must be held to have attained the end of human existence more than some of the pioneers and patterns of civilization',⁵⁷ because of their success in raising strong healthy barbarians. Obviously, Sidgwick concludes, the good society must possess some other quality or feature by virtue of which it is said to be good and its existence desirable. To Pollock such a position is anathema. His view is that 'good' does not name a peculiar moral quality or feature which makes things intrinsically desirable; rather it is a word which is often and properly used to describe anything which ministers to the chief ends of the various and often

⁵⁷ H. Sidgwick, 'The Theory of Evolution in its Application to Practice', Mind, 1, 1876, p.59.

conflicting forms of organic life, viz., their survival. 'The notion of good', Pollock maintains, 'is itself secondary and relative, and presupposes an end already set before us. There is not a paramount end which we seek because it is good; there are things which we call good, and seek accordingly because they make for the paramount end.'⁵⁸

Clifford's account of good is a version of Pollock's position. Like Pollock he rejects the view that 'good' is the name of a special moral quality or character. How the word is used, he claims, is a matter of convention; there is no way, and more importantly, there is no serious question of showing that one definition is to be preferred to another. For his own purposes Clifford chooses 'good' to mean any action which preserves and furthers the development of organic life. He writes: 'Of all the changes that I have undergone, the greater part must have been changes in the organic direction; some in the opposite direction, some perhaps neutral. But if I could only find out which, I should say that those changes which have tended in the direction of greater organization were good, and those which tended in the opposite direction bad. Here there is no room for proof;

⁵⁸ F. Pollock, 'Evolution and Ethics', Mind, 1, 1876, p.338.

the words 'good' and 'bad' belong to the practical reason, and if they are defined, it is by pure choice. I choose that definition of them which must on the whole cause those people who act upon it to be selected for survival. The good action, then, is a mode of action which distinguishes organic from inorganic things, and which makes an organic thing more organic, or raises it in the scale.'⁵⁹ This definition, Clifford points out, is much wider than the usual one which limits good to moral contexts, but the two are not irreconcilable. What are generally regarded as morally good actions are simply a species of good actions; they are distinguished from other species of good actions in terms of their cause and the end they serve: conscience produces them in order to preserve and further the social group, the highest form of organic life.⁶⁰ Thus the morally good action is what Clifford calls in his earlier articles the right action. The science of ethics is established

59 'Cosmic Emotion', op.cit., 2, p.274.

60 Clifford writes: 'The highest of organisms is the social organism. To Mr. Herbert Spencer, who has done so much for the whole doctrine of evolution and for all that is connected with it, we owe the first clear and rational statement of this analogy between the individual and the social organism, which indeed is more than an analogy, being in many respects a true identity of process and structure and function.' ibid., p.281

by the scientific investigation of conscience, right, the welfare of society (and moral responsibility⁶¹); the conception of good as a distinct moral quality has no place in it.

III

It is true of all agnostic ethical theories that they are deficient in philosophical argument and analysis, but in Clifford's work this is true to a much greater degree than is the case with either Spencer or Stephen. Basically it is this weakness which provides the material for the one objection - of the two main contemporary criticisms - that seriously bothered Clifford.

This criticism is that Clifford has put forward a scientific account of morality which fails to provide any help in determining what is a moral law. Bishop W.C. Magee made this claim in a Metaphysical Society paper entitled 'Hospitals for Incurables Considered from a Moral Point of View', which was in part a response to Clifford's 'The Scientific Basis of Morals'. Magee's paper so impressed Clifford that when the two papers

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see ch.

For Clifford's views on moral responsibility

were published in the Contemporary Review⁶² he appended a note pointing out that his account of right is in need of development.

Magee's criticism is made in two ways. Firstly, that in cases of moral conflict the right conscience cannot be determined simply by polling society since there is no reason for regarding the majority decision as the true voice of Man: how then can we know whose conscience is correct? Secondly, given the fact that societies develop and their moral systems change, it is quite possible that when one individual disagrees with the prevailing view that his conscience testifies to what is truly required of men for the sake of the whole. 'My difficulty (in one sentence)', Magee writes, 'is, that whenever society and I differ I cannot possibly be sure that I have got the judgment of the tribal self which should inform my conscience.'⁶³ He concludes then that Clifford's theory offers no way of deciding 'the morality or immorality of Hospitals for Incurables, or,

62 The two papers together with a paper by F. Harrison based on his contributions to the discussion at the Metaphysical Society were published together under the title 'On the Scientific Basis of Morals', Contemporary Review, and Correspondence of William Connor Magee (2 vols., Lond. 1896), 2, p.24ff, is published under his initials in their reverse order - P.C.W. - the P standing for his see of Peterborough.

63 Contemporary Review, 26, 1875, p.668.

indeed, of anything else.'⁶⁴

Now while Magee's criticism is lightly made and refers only to Clifford's first article it is significant because it raises one of the most pressing problems in Clifford's science. As noted earlier Clifford attempts to overcome this type of objection by showing how his theory explains the moral character of veraciousness and the agnostic principle. His attempt, however, cannot be considered successful simply because it rests to a large extent on undeveloped and unjustified claims about the nature of society. It is true that many of Clifford's views about social life rest upon the empirical studies of qualified investigators, but their evidence, to take one central issue, does not justify the doctrine that the commune is an organism. In adding such a theory to the claims of Maine and de Laveleye, Clifford is attempting to go beyond their material in an effort to explain it. That he and his fellow agnostics should attempt this type of task by use of the analogy of the organism and the process of natural selection is only natural in view of Darwin's successes, but in order to justify the use of this model, much more the claim that it provides the true

64 ibid., p.668. Magee was astonished to find that his particular example did not impress Tyndall and Greg: '... I read my paper, and Tyndall and Greg calmly adopted my reductio ad absurdum, and were for killing the old woman!' (J.C. Macdonnell, op.cit., 2, p.23).

way of understanding social life, it is necessary that it should be shown to be adequate as a model or to be a true description of the facts. Clifford fails to meet Magee's type of criticism because he fails at this task. His concept of the organism as well as the other important concepts in his social theory - general welfare, sake of the whole, humanity - are explained in the sketchiest fashion. Sometimes he acknowledges this, as in his discussion of general welfare,⁶⁵ but for the most part he introduces them without bothering to explicate them. As a result of this Clifford is unable to show in any detail how his social doctrines illuminates social facts. What happens is that he tends to present his theory side by side with observations of historians and sociologists without explaining how the former plausibly and suggestively orders the latter.

To say that Clifford fails to answer Magee's objection because of this weakness is not, of course, to say that his doctrines are false or that his approach is mistaken. It means that in its present form his science is rather inadequate or, put more sympathetically, 'at an early stage of science.'⁶⁶ This is, however, a pretty damning claim against Clifford when we consider that his

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Cf. p.

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'The Scientific Basis of Morals', op.cit., 2, p.106.

aim is to show the scientific basis of morals.

The other main contemporary criticism of Clifford is that in trying to provide a scientific account of morality has managed to miss it or ignore it completely. This method of criticizing agnostic ethical theorizings most characterizes Sidgwick's analyses,⁶⁷ but Magee and Seth make much the same sort of point. All three would agree with Moore's remark that Clifford substitutes sociology for ethics.⁶⁸ Naturally they tend to make this point, or, more accurately, the collection of points, in this line of argument, in different ways.

Of the three Magee is the most tentative because he has the least to go on; he suggests that it is a problem rather than a serious objection. If Clifford completely identifies the goodness of society with its perfection or efficiency, how, Magee asks, can he decide when an efficient society is good? 'We are at once involved - in deciding any practical question of morals - in the vicious circle of first making tribal perfection a test of morality, and then of making morality a test of tribal perfection.'⁶⁹ Clifford, of course, refuses to

67 Cf. p.

68 G.E. Moore, Principia Ethica (1903; Camb.1956), p.40.

69 W.C. Magee, op.cit., p.668.

accept this as a problem: there is, he claims, no question of having to decide whether an efficient society is good for the word 'good' when applied to society means 'efficient'. In other words, Magee is correct in seeing that a moral society is identical with an efficient society in Clifford's doctrine, but mistaken in believing that Clifford regards its goodness as something other than its efficiency.

At this point Sidgwick's and Seth's version of the argument can be brought to bear. If Clifford identifies the end of conduct with community efficiency and obligation with tribal demands, then, they argue, he cannot account for the moral beliefs and feelings of the moral adult. The moral man, Sidgwick argues, is revolted by the thought that barbaric tribes are morally better than civilized communities because they happen to be more efficient fighting machines.⁷⁰ Again, Clifford's account of obligation is not true to the moral experience of the mature Victorian; for in the final analysis the reason for being moral is not because society must and does punish the immoral or because society trains us up to be moral, but because moral laws demand in themselves,

and for no other reason, that they be obeyed. The conclusion of this line of attack, as it concerns obligation, is summed up by Seth: 'In the treatment of obligation we have the great illustration of our contention that to offer Evolution as an explanation of Morality is to eliminate its essential character. "Oughtness", since it cannot be evolved must be explained away.'⁷¹ These criticisms leave Clifford (and his agnostic colleagues) unmoved. From his point of view his account of obligation and the end of conduct takes full care of all that is best in Victorian moral beliefs.

The only way to bestir this indifference is to try to show that Clifford has misunderstood the phenomena of the moral life, particularly the nature and testimony of conscience. 'The truth is', says Sidgwick, 'that the writers who have most occupied themselves in tracing the course of Man's developments have often not been practised in that systematic reflection on the play of their own moral faculties which is essential to clearness of thought in the discussion of ethical principles.'⁷² But who can claim to be the experts in this field? Can Sidgwick show that his description of

71 J. Seth, 'The Evolution of Morality,' Mind, 14, 1889, p.45.

72 H. Sidgwick, 'The Theory of Evolution in its Application to Practice', Mind, 1, 1876, p.56.

conscience is correct and that Clifford's is false? Clearly, Clifford believes, he cannot. Yet, it might be objected, is not this equally true of Clifford's account as well? Here Clifford's answer might be that if he cannot conclusively rule out Sidgwick's position, he is able to show how moral phenomena can be understood scientifically, and this, in view of the developments of science in other previously closed fields, suggests that his approach is the sensible one to adopt.

I was on the whole, disappointed in Spencer's Data of Ethics, though, of course, it contains much that is acute and suggestive; but considered as the mature fruit of so distinguished a philosopher's thought, it seemed to me certainly crude and superficial. I have stated some of my objections to it in the last number of Mind.

Henry Sidgwick (1880)

Have been reading Comte and Spencer with all my old admiration for their intellectual force and industry and more than my old amazement at their fatuous self-confidence. It does not seem to me that either of them knows what self-criticism means. I wonder if this is a defect inseparable from their excellences. Certainly I find my own self-criticism an obstacle to energetic and spirited work, but on the other hand I feel that whatever value my work has is due to it.

Henry Sidgwick (1885)

Chapter Ten

Herbert Spencer's Rational Utilitarianism

To move from Clifford to Spencer is to go from a brief and largely unknown set of articles to the most voluminous and widely discussed of agnostic ethical writings. These two features of Spencer's works are not unrelated: the extent of his writings is one of the reasons why both contemporary and later thinkers have paid attention to his theories.¹ Moral philosophy concerned Spencer from the beginning to the end of his writing life, and he left many memorials of his interest. Social Statics, his first ethical work, appeared in 1850;

¹ For some hostile contemporary reactions see: H. Sidgwick, 'Mr. Spencer's Ethical System', Mind, 5, 1880; A.W. Benn, 'Another View of Mr. Spencer's Ethics', Mind, 5, 1880; F.W. Maitland, 'Mr. Spencer's Theory of Society', Mind, 8, 1883; W. Wallace, 'Ethics and Sociology', Mind, 8, 1883; J. Seth, 'The Evolution of Morality', Mind, 14, 1889. Sidgwick also criticises Spencer in The Methods of Ethics, and at great length in his posthumously published Lectures on the Ethics of T.H. Green, Mr. Herbert Spencer and J. Martineau (Lond. 1902). Two sympathetic reviewers are: A. Bain, 'Critical Notice of Herbert Spencer's "Data of Ethics"', Mind, 4, 1879; F. Pollock, 'Mr. Spencer's Data of Ethics' in Essays in Jurisprudence and Ethics. Some more recent writings take Spencer as the representative of nineteenth century evolutionary ethics: cf. G.E. Moore, Principia Ethica; W. Lillie, An Introduction to Ethics (Lond. 1955).

during the 1860's he attacked John Mill - in a letter published in Bain's influential Mental and Moral Science (1868) - and he let it be known that his earlier views had undergone a change; in 1879 he published 'The Data of Ethics', his most important work in moral philosophy, and the first part of The Principles of Ethics, a two volume work which he completed in 1893.

From a philosophical point of view it is possible to consider 'The Data of Ethics' apart from Spencer's other writings, but to gain a proper historical appreciation of his final (and agnostic) theories it is necessary to see this work against the background of two earlier books, viz., Social Statics and First Principles. The former contains the origin of his later theory; the latter partly explains why he came to restate his early views.

There are many differences between Social Statics and The Principles of Ethics but the most striking feature is the continuity between them, a fact which Spencer himself acknowledges: 'though [the author] adheres to the leading principles set forth in the following pages,' he wrote in an 1864 preface to Social Statics, and endorsed in 1877, 'he is not prepared to abide by the detailed application of them.'² Three of these common

2 H. Spencer, Social Statics (1850; N.Y. 1886), p.xiii.

points are worth noting because they must feature in a general account of his later position. The first is that ethical theory is concerned with the laws that govern the production of the happiness of perfect men in perfect societies.³ Secondly, the belief that the whole universe including man and society is inevitably progressing towards goodness or perfection, and that evil or the imperfect working of the parts of the universe is 'evanescent'.⁴ Thirdly, Spencer teaches that his theory complements and corrects all other moral theories - for example, the expediency philosophy and the moral sense view - by showing how the truths embedded in them harmonize with one another.⁵ Each of these doctrines appears in his later theory, though not always in quite the same form.

Besides these resemblances the differences must also be noted. Perhaps the most noticeable is the linking

3 He writes: 'By successive propositions [ethical theory] must aim to give a systematic statement of those conditions under which human beings may harmoniously combine; and to this end it requires as its postulate, that those human beings be perfect.' (*ibid.*, p.70); 'Greatest Happiness and Morality are the face and abverse of the same fact.' (*ibid.*, p.82.)

4 The title of ch.2 is 'The Evanescence of Evil'. Cf. also: 'evil perpetually tends to disappear ... Whatever possesses vitality, from the elementary cell up to man himself, inclusive, obeys this law.' (*ibid.*, p.74).

5 Cf. *ibid.*, p.499.

in Social Statics of ethics and deistic theology: 'God', he claims, 'wills man's happiness',⁶ and the inevitable progress to perfection is 'the realization of the Divine Idea.'⁷ It was not long before Spencer rejected deism and even though he came to believe in the Unknowable as the power behind cosmic evolution this entity has no place in The Principles of Ethics. Other important differences result from modifications of the views he carries over from Social Statics. In the later work the evolutionary process exhibited by the universe is no longer interpreted as culminating in a morally perfect utopia. The process is still a progress but only part of nature is moving towards moral perfection; for moral goodness is regarded in 'The Data of Ethics' as human pleasure produced by the efficient working of man's faculties. And whereas he formerly believed that this progress will inevitably reach its goal he more or less denies in the later work that a perfect state of nature will ever be achieved.⁸ Again, the plight of imperfect

6 ibid., p.93.

7 ibid., p.87.

8 For example he writes: 'In the private relations of men, opportunities for self-sacrifice prompted by sympathy, must ever in some degree, though eventually in a small degree, be afforded by accidents, diseases, and misfortunes in general; since, however near to completeness the adaptation of human nature to the conditions of

man is recognized in 'The Data of Ethics': Spencer allows that ethical theory will accommodate relative ethics - the rules of conduct for imperfect man - as well as the absolute ethics of completely evolved man.

None of these differences constitute the main contrast between the two works: this is provided by the different methods of investigation. In his later work Spencer teaches that ethical phenomena can be correctly understood only if we can trace and explain the complete course of their development from their non-ethical origins to their most advanced state. Without this knowledge a correct ethical theory cannot be rationally constructed. There is no hint of such a doctrine in Social Statics.

Why did Spencer come to change and restate his ethical theory? Apart from second thoughts and critical comments the reason - the main reason - is the metaphysical theory he developed during the 1850's and presented in First Principles. In this book Spencer sets out the general laws which govern all things, and he outlines a programme of investigations designed to show how these

existence at large, physical and social may become, it can never reach completeness.' ('The Data of Ethics' [1879; Lond. 1902], p.219). For other pessimistic statements see: First Principles (1911), p.413; The Principles of Sociology (3 vols., Lond. 1876-1893), 3, p.599. See also P.B. Dedawar, 'Onwards from Spencer', Encounter, 21, 1963, esp. pp.39-40.

laws are exemplified in the roughly distinct classes of phenomena which make up the world of experience. Good and bad conduct, the subject of ethical enquiry are no exceptions; they too must be examined and given a place in the synthetic philosophy. The Principles of Ethics, volumes nine and ten of the synthetic philosophy, are the result of his study and the fulfilment of his programme. A brief consideration of his metaphysics will preface the way for a study of 'The Data of Ethics'.

In First Principles Spencer teaches that every aspect of the universe is subject to two laws: one is that energy or force, the matter of all things, is indestructible; the other is that the distribution of energy takes place according to the law of evolution. From the first law he derives the doctrine that force exists in regular ways - that there is 'a persistence of relations among forces.'⁹ - and therefore that all aspects of the phenomenal universe will exhibit uniform ways of operating or exist according to laws. Arguing from the second law Spencer concluded that the laws which determine the manifestations of force can best be discovered by studying the ways in which phenomena have evolved. By examining how a particular set of phenomena increas-

ingly develop from the homogeneous and incoherent to the heterogeneous and coherent we can discover the forms taken by the invariable laws of the universe as they apply to this aspect of phenomenal reality. The application of this method to the study of good and bad conduct is one of the chief features of 'The Data of Ethics'.

II

One of the problems facing the reader of 'The Data of Ethics' is that the aim of the work is not at all clear. On the one hand, the preface and initial chapter suggest that Spencer's aim, like Clifford's, is to show the scientific basis of morality. Spencer claims that he feels obliged to reveal it, for without this knowledge men will cease to be moral when they cease to be Christian, and, what is more, they need this knowledge to guide them in correcting the errors of contemporary morality. This account of 'The Data of Ethics' is clearly presented in the preface explaining the work's premature appearance: 'I am the more anxious to indicate in outline, if I cannot complete, this final work, because the establishment of rules of right conduct on a scientific basis is a pressing need. Now that moral

injunctions are losing the authority given by their supposed sacred origin, the secularization of morals is becoming imperative. Few things can happen more disastrous than the decay and death of a regulative system no longer fit, before another and fitter regulative system has grown up to replace it. Most of those who reject the current creed, appear to assume that the controlling agency furnished by it may safely be thrown aside, and the vacancy left unfilled by any other controlling agency. Meanwhile those who defend the current creed allege that in the absence of the guidance it yields, no guidance can exist: divine commandments they think the only possible guides.¹⁰

On the other hand, examination of 'The Data of Ethics' reveals that the work is mainly an attempt to discover the nature of good conduct in completely evolved man and the laws which govern its occurrence. Now Spencer's theory of these matters is a partial fulfilment of what he promises, for, even though he does

10 'The Data of Ethics', p.vi. Cf. also The Principles of Ethics, 1, pp.178,557. It is only in his discussion of positive and negative beneficence (Parts 5 and 6) that Spencer believes that he has failed to provide practical help for contemporary man: 'The Doctrine of Evolution has not furnished guidance to the extent I had hoped. Most of the conclusions, drawn empirically, are such as right feelings, enlightened by cultivated intelligence, have already sufficed to establish.' (op.cit., 2, p.v.

not stress the point, his doctrines show that moral beliefs are not arbitrary but have their place in the process of cosmic evolution. To show this, however, is only to place existing moral rules upon a very general basis; it does not help us to know whether an alleged moral rule is in fact what it is claimed to be, nor does it tell us how we are to face the problem of moral change. And this is the type of knowledge Spencer appears to promise. Indeed he proceeds in the other parts of The Principles of Ethics as if he had provided this knowledge in 'The Data of Ethics', but he nowhere presents it, and in a couple of places suggests that he cannot provide it.

The same confusion of aims appears in his criticism of the utilitarianism of Bentham and the Mills in comparison with his own. According to Spencer they represent the ethical tradition which has come closest to the truth, but until now the insights of this tradition have been presented in a pre-scientific form. These thinkers have formulated generalizations about the way in which happiness is maximized but they have not shown the laws which govern the production of the greatest amount of happiness. Their utilitarianism is not rational or scientific, but empirical. Spencer puts the point in these words: 'Acceptance of these generalizations and the inferences from them does not amount

to recognition of causation in the full sense of the word. So long as only some relation between cause and effect in conduct is recognized, and not one relation, a completely scientific form of knowledge has not been reached. At present, utilitarians pay no attention to this distinction. Even when it is pointed out, they disregard the fact that empirical utilitarianism is but a transitional form to be passed through on the way to rational utilitarianism.¹¹

If we allow that Spencer's rational utilitarianism is correct what practical advantages result? If mankind and its environment as we know it closely resembles the nature and world of completely evolved man, then it might be of some use to know the laws which govern the production of the greatest amount of happiness for perfect men. But in Spencer's account the nature of the resemblance remains vague, and we are forced, as Sidgwick points out,¹² to make do with the generalizations of empirical utilitarianism. Spencer's ethical science appears, despite his claims to the contrary,¹³ to be of

11 'The Data of Ethics', pp.47-8.

12 cf. p.

13 He quotes from his letter to John Mill (in A Bain, Mental and Moral Science, pp.72-73) that: 'I conceive it to be the business of Moral Science to deduce, from the laws of life and the conditions of existence,

little help to contemporary men.

III

Spencer's statement of his ethical science is in two fairly complex parts. The first deals with the subject matter of ethics; the second, the laws determining the existence of good conduct. In the former, the first three chapters of 'The Data of Ethics', Spencer attempts to show that good conduct is both highly or completely evolved and pleasure giving. He does not entertain the question whether ethics has a general subject matter; the first problem is to show how good purposive actions are distinguished from conduct which is non-good.

Spencer's argument to show the connection between good and highly evolved conduct involves three steps. The first two lead to the conclusion that to understand ethical conduct it is necessary to understand the nature of all purposive acts. To reach this point he first lays down the methodological principle that to properly understand a fact it is necessary to under-

what kinds of action necessarily tend to produce happiness, and what kinds to produce unhappiness. Having done this, its deductions are to be recognized as laws of conduct; and are to be conformed to irrespective of a direct estimation of happiness or misery.' ('The Data of Ethics', p.48).

stand the whole to which it belongs. Now it is not very clear what is exactly meant by understanding a part but it would seem to involve being able to explain how and why the part stands to the whole in terms of the principles of organization of the whole. In his second step Spencer applies this principle to the study of ethical conduct. Because conduct, 'the aggregate of inter-dependent actions performed by an organism' is 'in a sense',¹⁴ an organic whole, it follows that ethical conduct can be understood only in terms of the whole of human conduct of which it is a part. We cannot, however, rest here. Human conduct is a part of much larger whole, viz., conduct in general, and thus to understand ethical conduct we must first comprehend 'the conduct of animate beings in general.'¹⁵ How can this be done? The answer according to Spencer is to be found in studying the evolution of the highest conduct from the lowest; for, to put it vaguely, the whole range of the classes of purposive actions are linked together by their being related parts in a process of evolutionary development.¹⁶

14 ibid., p.2.

15 ibid., p.4.

16 Spencer writes (p.4): 'We have to regard the conduct now shown us by creatures of all orders, as an outcome of the conduct which has brought life of every kind to its present height. And this is tantamount to saying that our preparatory step must be to study the evolution of conduct.'

The study of this evolutionary process is Spencer's third step.

For expository purposes Spencer considers the evolution of conduct from two points of view. Firstly, he examines it as it concerns the individual organism per se. His conclusion is that the history of the development of conduct from the lower animals to man is always marked by an increase in the organism's ability to act successfully in response to its environment. By success Spencer means that the conduct of higher or more developed organisms is more efficient at prolonging their lives than the conduct of less evolved organisms. Furthermore the conduct of higher animals is more complex or elaborate in that it involves a wider variety of purposive acts than that of lower animals; for the evolution of conduct is always connected with an increasing complexity in the structure of the animal which results in a more elaborate functioning or pattern of responses to the environment. Thus the higher an animal is in the evolutionary scale the more is its conduct marked by success in prolonging the life of the organism and increases in the range of conscious and purposeful actions. 'Estimating life by multiplying its length into its breadth,' Spencer writes, 'we must say that the augmentation of it which accompanies

evolution of conduct, results from increase of both factors.¹⁷

Now increasing success in self-preservation is not the only feature that distinguishes the conduct of more highly evolved organisms. Besides considering the evolution of conduct from a strictly individual viewpoint it is necessary to regard it as it concerns the individual as a member of a species. Because it is a member of a species, the conduct of the animal is inevitably directed at the increase of the life of the species, particularly its own offspring, as well as self preservation. The self and species or race regarding aspects of conduct are closely associated - self preservation depends in fact on the successful maintenance of offspring - and they both exhibit a common pattern of development: in the more highly evolved species race preserving conduct is more successful than that of less developed species because it produces and brings to maturity offspring with greater length and quality of life than the latter.

Yet, Spencer continues, even if the evolution of race preserving and self preserving conduct were to reach the final point of development the earth would

still be marked by discord. It would not be true that 'the wolf and the lamb shall feed together, and the lion shall eat straw like the ox: and dust shall be the serpent's meat.'¹⁸ To inaugurate the messianic kingdom conduct must be other-regarding as well as self and race preserving. Already, Spencer argues, traces of this state can be seen in the peaceable and co-operative conduct which is found amongst men. However, the presence of aggression within and between societies clearly shows that the limit of the evolution of conduct has yet to be reached.

From the claim that what we regard as completely right conduct - for example, peaceful and co-operative activity - can be attained only when the various aspects of conduct have reached the point of highest evolution, Spencer argues that the subject matter of ethics is the complete behaviour of perfect men. He appears to derive this conclusion by arguing that since the subject of ethical science is completely right behaviour or the right behaviour of perfect men, and since no real distinction can be drawn between that aspect of conduct which is right and that which is non-right, it follows that ethics has for its subject-matter the complete

conduct of man at the limit of evolution. The argument is rather tenuous but it seems to be one of the lines of reasoning by which Spencer links the evolution of conduct with ethical conduct. His summary of the argument to this point is one of his most explicit remarks on this matter: 'Guided by the truth that as the conduct with which Ethics deals is part of conduct at large, conduct at large must be generally understood before this part can be specially understood; and guided by the further truth that to understand conduct at large we must understand the evolution of conduct; we have been led to see that Ethics has for its subject-matter, that form which universal conduct assumes during the last stage of evolution.'¹⁹

Spencer's second argument to show the connection between highly evolved or completely evolved conduct and goodness is based on analysis of the way in which 'good' and 'bad' are used. The principle on which this argument rests is that 'by comparing [a word's] meaning in different connexions and observing what they have in common, we learn the essential meaning of a word.'²⁰ Now according to Spencer linguistic examination reveals

19 'The Data of Ethics', p.15.

20 ibid., p.16.

that 'good' or 'goodness' always designates that which is efficient. In ethical contexts too it is clear that actions are called 'good' if they enable the person to respond efficiently to environmental demands. For instance in the case of certain types of race regarding conduct, 'the expressions good nursing and bad nursing, whether they refer to the supply of food, the quality and amount of clothing, or the due ministrations to infantine wants from hour to hour, tacitly recognizes as special ends which ought to be fulfilled the furthering of the vital functions, with a view to the general end of continuing life and growth.'²¹ From the general point that 'acts are called good or bad according as they are well or ill adjusted to ends',²² Spencer argues that conduct is perfectly good in a moral sense only when each aspect is completely evolved or perfectly efficient; 'so here we see that the conduct called good rises to the conduct conceived as best, when it fulfils all three classes of ends at the same time.'²³

Whatever we may think of Spencer's arguments, he believes that they justify the view that ethics

21 ibid., p.18.

22 ibid., p.19.

23 ibid., p.20.

primarily deals with the whole conduct of perfect men; those aspects of imperfect men's conduct that are called good are only of secondary significance to ethical science. He also considers that he has shown that perfectly evolved conduct and highly evolved conduct are good.

The other section of Spencer's analysis of good conduct concerns the identity of good and pleasure-giving acts. The first of his two arguments to show that they are identical is based on the claim that the word 'good' is always used, and cannot but be used, to designate either or both the experience of pleasure and its cause. Spencer's discussion of this matter is oddly placed in what purports to be an argument about the worthwhileness of life, or, as he puts it, the problem whether 'evolution [has] been a mistake; and especially the evolution which improves the adjustment of acts to ends in ascending stages of organization.'²⁴

According to Spencer, pessimism or optimism are the only possible answers to this question. If we are to resolve the conflict then we must first look for the postulate or basic belief common to them. Upon analysis the postulate is found to be the belief

that a surplus of pleasures over pains would make life worthwhile. The pessimist, Spencer claims, denies and the optimist affirms that life produces such a balance or, perhaps, that it will eventually and inevitably show a balance. Now since all men, practically speaking,²⁵ are either optimists or pessimists it follows that nearly all men 'avowedly or tacitly hold that the final justification for maintaining life, can only be the reception from it of a surplus of pleasurable feeling over painful feeling; and', Spencer adds, going beyond the immediate argument, 'that goodness or badness can be ascribed to acts which subserve life or hinder life, only on this supposition.'²⁶

His justification of this latter claim turns on his analysis of the usage of 'good'. According to Spencer whatever is said to be good is thus described not only because it is efficient but because it is pleasant or produces pleasure and is good as a means. He writes: 'For on remembering that we call good and bad the things which immediately produce agreeable or disagreeable sensations, and also the sensations themselves - a good wine, a good appetite, a bad smell, a bad headache - we see that by referring directly to

25 He allows (p.23) that there are exceptions but they are 'beyond or beneath argument.'

26 ibid., p.23.

pleasures and pains, these meanings harmonize with those which indirectly refer to pleasures and pains.²⁷ In ethical contexts, then, 'good' describes conduct which is pleasurable or produces pleasure; for ethics, to put the point in Spencer's words, 'the good is universally the pleasurable.'²⁸

Spencer provides further support for this conclusion by arguing that it is not necessary to conduct a detailed linguistic study to see that the word is used in this way: it is sufficient to observe the absurdities that result when the word is used to describe that which is not the experience or cause of pleasure. For example, it is almost impossible to describe situations as good where a man experiences pain in regaining money which he has lent, or where misery is the result of noble behaviour.²⁹ By trying to imagine such situations as good we are led to the conclusion that it is 'unquestionable that our ideas of [good and bad acts] really originate from our consciousness of the certainty or probability that they will produce pleasures or pains somewhere.'³⁰

27 ibid., p.23-4

28 ibid., p.24.

29 Cf. ibid., p.25.

30 ibid.

Spencer's second argument for the identification of goodness and pleasure is that each of the four alternative accounts of goodness - each 'standard' of goodness - 'derives its authority from this ultimate standard.'³¹ There is no need, however, to examine these arguments in detail.³²

31 ibid.

32 These accounts are: goodness as the perfection of individual character; goodness as a feature of certain types of motive; goodness as virtuous conduct; goodness as a feature of the consequences that result from certain action. One example of his analysis suffices to illustrate his procedure. Plato and Jonathan Edwards, he claims, teach that perfection of character is exactly identical with goodness of character. Obviously then goodness cannot be defined in terms of the perfection of character; if it is to be described at all, Spencer says, it can only be in terms of the ends which the good character aims at. Since part of the essential meaning of 'perfection' is efficiency, it follows that the perfect character results in conduct which man possesses at the limit of evolution. As such a state of existence and that which leads up to it are justifiable only if the life produced by such conduct has a balance of pleasures over pains, it follows that 'conduciveness to happiness is the ultimate test of perfection in a man's nature.' (ibid., p.27) Now if pleasure is the chief standard of good, as Spencer sometimes suggests, then this analysis establishes the point that perfection of character can be used as a standard or criterion of goodness only if it is supplemented with the chief standard - in which case perfection of character would not be a useful criterion. If, however, Spencer is using 'standard' somewhat loosely to mean that which is completely identical with good - note the first step in his analysis - then all that he has shown is that conduciveness to pleasure is the chief criterion for determining the presence of goodness. On this view Plato and Edwards are not presenting a confused version of his theory.

At this stage in his argument Spencer brings together his conclusions about good conduct. Firstly, he claims to have shown that what we regard as good conduct is always highly or completely evolved conduct. Secondly, that conduct is called good when it is or results in pleasures or when it results in more pleasures than pains. Are there then any grounds for thinking that what we regard as good conduct is in fact pleasurable or pleasure giving? Is life worthwhile? Surprisingly Spencer makes no attempt in Chapter III, where he raises the question, to show that optimism is the correct theory. He seems to take the point for granted.³³

'That which in the last chapter we found to be highly-evolved conduct, is that which, in this chapter, we find to be what is called good conduct; and the ideal goal to the natural evolution of conduct there recognized, we here recognize as the ideal standard of conduct ethically considered.' Later, however, in outlining

33 He writes: 'That which in the last chapter we found to be highly-evolved conduct is that which, in this chapter, we find to be what is called good conduct; and the ideal goal to the natural evolution of conduct there recognized, we here recognize as the ideal standard of conduct ethically considered.' (ibid., p.36). In his 'Replies to Criticism of "The Data of Ethics"', Mind, 6, 1881, p.84, Spencer admits the point but denies that he is obliged to resolve the problem: 'My motive for comparing their views was to show that "There is one postulate in which pessimists and optimists agree."'

the laws that determine good conduct Spencer returns to the identification of pleasure giving and highly evolved conduct, 'the ultimate truth disclosed by analysis in a preceding chapter.'³⁴ The immediate context is the connection between an organism's degree of biological evolution and the degree of pleasurable life it experiences; Spencer is trying to show that 'sentient existence can evolve only on condition that pleasure-giving acts are life-sustaining acts.'³⁵

His argument is partly based on the doctrine that conscious existence is patterned on and has developed out of forms of life which respond to the environment by means of a reflex action. This doctrine means that when a conscious organism has a feeling it has a desire to act in response to it; the type of desire and act will depend on the nature of the feeling. If it is pleasurable the desire will be to act so as to maintain the feeling, but if it is painful the desire will be to terminate the feeling. Now if a pleasurable feeling is associated with conduct which is harmful to the life of the organism it will in time cease to be. Sentient existence has not, however, ceased to exist;

34 'The Data of Ethics', p.70.

35 ibid., p.71.

rather it has maintained itself and undergone great development. This shows, Spencer concludes, that the continuing survival and development of conscious beings has taken place because life maintaining conduct is, on the whole, pleasurable. 'In other words,' he writes, 'those races of beings only can have survived in which, on the average, agreeable or desired feelings went along with activities conducive to the maintenance of life, while disagreeable and habitually avoided feelings went along with activities directly or indirectly destructive of life.'³⁶ For some humans at least life is worthwhile.

Finally, what is the precise relation between good, pleasure-giving, and highly or perfectly evolved conduct? An answer is not easily provided because, as G.E. Moore has pointed out,³⁷ Spencer is not a careful theorizer. Moore's view is that Spencer is grossly inconsistent because he completely identifies good conduct with its being highly evolved and at a later point with its being pleasurable. To be consistent, Moore writes, Spencer should make 'degree of evolution' the 'criterion of ethical value.'³⁸ This criticism is

36 ibid., p.67.

37 Principia Ethica, pp.46-7.

38 ibid., p.50.

unjustified. Moore has misunderstood Spencer's purpose in discussing the evolution of conduct: his aim is to show the place of what is regarded as good conduct in the evolutionary scale; he is not attempting to argue that highly evolved conduct is good simply because it is high in the scale of evolution.³⁹ On the other point Moore is correct: in Spencer's ethical system goodness and pleasure (and pleasure-giving?) are one and the same thing; the words 'good' and 'pleasure' have exactly the same denotation.⁴⁰

At the most abstract level, the level covered by physical laws, the development of conduct will clearly have to be in accord with the law of universal evolution. Considered more concretely, the laws that govern good conduct will overlap with laws that hold in the biological, psychological, and sociological realms; for good conduct is the product of the working together of various elements from these different fields. Spencer puts it in this way: 'Belonging under one aspect to these sciences - physical, biological, psychological, sociological, - it can find its ultimate interpretations only in those fundamental truths which are common to

39 ibid., pp.48-9.

40 ibid., pp.50-1.

all of them.'⁴¹ The discovery of these 'ultimate interpretations' provide a scientific account of the way in which good conduct develops and a few fragmentary indications how men who are not at the limit of evolution might regard their moral problems.

Spencer proceeds by considering separately the bearings of each science upon good conduct. There is, however, no need to follow in detail each aspect of his discussion; for his important statements are mainly found in his treatment of good conduct from the psychological and sociological points of view. In terms of psychology Spencer explains the nature and development of moral motives and the feeling of obligation with which they are associated as well as the form that moral motives will take at the limit of evolution. Sociology enables Spencer to explain how good conduct has, is, and will be affected by man's being part of a social organism which is also subject to the law of evolution.⁴²

41 'The Data of Ethics', pp.52-3.

42 Stated very summarily; physical science enables us to understand the evolution of good conduct as part of cosmic evolution, because its development is in accord with the law of evolution. Biological science reveals that ethical conduct is highly developed because it ministers to the life of the organism in the most efficient way.

Psychology, according to Spencer, is the study of the relations between the world and the mind. More fully, it examines the complex beings which compose the universe as causes of feelings, and the nature of these feelings and their role in determining the organism's response to its environment. Study of the evolutionary scale shows that the higher the animal the more complex and varied is its psychology. Considered from the subject's point of view the higher the degree of evolution the greater the amount of consciousness or the awareness of feelings. This development commences when the reflex action, the relation between stimulation and response in pre-conscious animals, ceases to be automatic and becomes instead a delayed or conscious reaction. Memory, reason, emotion, will, the features which are common to human consciousness have resulted by evolutionary development from this simple origin.

The result of this development is that when man is stimulated to the point of awareness he experiences a complex set of feelings which prompt him to act in certain ways. He cannot ignore these promptings; he must act in response to his feelings, though just how he will act depends on memory of past experiences and reason, as well as his immediate feelings. Past experience, both of the race and the individual, operates in

two ways: at the level of feeling the development of the race has resulted in the existence of emotions or the ideal representation of past feelings; at a more intellectual level memory retains in ideal form the recollection of the actions and their consequences to which feelings have prompted the organism. Because of past experience feelings which are remembered as leading to actions which benefit the organism - generally, the feelings which lead to pleasure - will be allowed and encouraged to have their way. Their promptings become the motive of the person's behaviour. Its selection depends not only on memory but on reason as well; the two mental processes go together. The expression of the motive in action provides the experience of willing.

The further man proceeds along the evolutionary path the more important becomes this process of recollection, reasoning, and willing. His conduct becomes less and less the result of direct responses to immediate feelings, and more and more the result of deliberation. Now since highly evolved conduct is morally proper it follows that good conduct generally results from motives or feelings which 'are removed by their complexity and their ideality from simple emotions and appetites.'⁴³

And this fact explains in part why good conduct often consists in acts which forgo the pleasures promised by immediate feelings: for past experience, both of the race and the individual, teaches that greater and more beneficial pleasures will probably be received if the motives which demand immediate gratification are ignored. Man can only act in this good way because the evolutionary process has provided him with faculties which enable him to prefer motives to temporally remote pleasures rather than those which lead to the pleasures of the moment.

On the basis of these views Spencer proceeds to explain scientifically the nature, origin, and future developments of the moral consciousness. 'Without explicitly saying so,' he writes, 'we have been here tracing the genesis of the moral consciousness. For unquestionably the essential trait in the moral consciousness, is the control of some feeling or feelings by some other feeling or feelings.'⁴⁴

Now to understand the development of moral motives, according to Spencer, we must know not only how they fit into the general pattern of the evolution of psychological phenomena, but the precise conditions

which have determined their appearance and development within the mind of man. The two chief factors are the individual's desire to survive, and the individual's membership of a community. In fact no sharp distinction can be drawn between them: to survive the individual must be a member of a community. As it turns out, this means that to show how these two factors have determined the moral consciousness is largely to offer an explanation in terms of man's membership of the social organism.

According to Spencer, the earliest man lived almost completely for himself and the demands of the moment in a loosely organized family; 'The pre-social man, wandering about in families and ruled by such sensations and emotions as are caused by the circumstances of the moment, though occasionally subject to conflicts of motives, meets with comparatively few cases in which the advantage of postponing the immediate to the remote is forced on his attention; nor has he the intelligence requisite for analyzing and generalizing such of these cases as occur.'⁴⁵ His position in the evolutionary scale explains his behaviour: psychologically his awareness of feelings is not developed to the point where he can utilize the experience of the past to determine

the response of the moment; socially he is a pre-social animal because he is unable to act in a way which considers the needs of others as well as his own, and his group life, consequently, does not demand of him that he should. The situation, however, is not static for the law of evolution is at work in both the psychological and social realms. The mind of man develops and along with it his primitive social organization ceases to be a mere group or collection and becomes a social organism. When this latter development occurs it is no longer possible for the individual to consider his life or to live it apart from society; his behaviour is of direct significance for the life of the social whole and its life and well being conditions his own existence.

As a result of this relationship changes in the social organism will demand and produce changes within man. At first, Spencer claims, the social organism will be lacking in political and religious organization and the early demands of the organism will not, therefore, appear in a political or religious guise. Fear of his fellows and their vengeance explains why man at this stage of development acts in the interest of the whole. Later, however, as the social organism becomes more complex and varied with the development of political and religious institutions, the fear of

fellows becomes refined into a feeling of fear of the chieftain and the gods of the community, and a dread of social disapproval. In the earlier stages of social evolution these political, religious, and social restraints serve the purpose of social survival by making the individual act so as to prefer the needs of the whole. This is necessary in view of the struggle for survival that must go on between societies.⁴⁶ This, however, is not the only purpose served by these restraints: they also work for harmony and order within the organism in times of peace as well as war.

Where do feelings of moral restraint fit into this account of the development of motives? To answer this question we must first note the nature of moral restraints. Moral motives are not distinguished from feelings of political, religious, and social restraints in terms of the feelings of obligation or the type of action they result in. The distinction between moral and non-moral restraints lies in the direction of the motive: a moral motive aims simply and solely to produce

46 Spencer writes: 'The three differentiated forms of control which grow up along with militant organization and action, while enforcing kindred restraints and incentives, also enforce on another; and their separate and joint disciplines have the common character that they involve the sacrifice of immediate special benefits to obtain more distant and general benefits.' (ibid., pp.100-01).

pleasure or to avoid pain: moral motives refer 'not to the extrinsic affects of actions but to their intrinsic effects';⁴⁷ whereas other feelings of restraint serve ends such as social or divine acceptance. Hence, if a man resists a murderous desire within himself his restraining motive is moral only if it is based on a realization of the pain that such an action would cause 'by the infliction of death-agony on the victim, the destruction of all his possibilities of happiness, the entailed sufferings to his belongings.'⁴⁸ Of course if a man resisted the desire through fear of punishment his conduct would still be good, but his motive would not be moral.

Given this account of moral motives, it becomes clear that man can act from moral motives only when he and his society are well up in the evolutionary scale. Without a high degree of mental development man could not efficiently and successfully represent the pleasures and pains caused by his actions. And unless his society was fairly stable, which is to say that men are living according to the directions of their political, religious, and social feelings, man could not gather the experience to enable him to represent the probable consequences of

47 ibid., p.103

48 ibid.

his actions. Moral motives, then, occur after political, religious, and social restraints are established. Why should they develop at this point? One of the answers to this question is found in the faculty of sympathy. As man comes closer to the limit of evolution the pleasures of others become increasingly pleasurable to him, and he is pained to think that his actions cause pain to them.

To explain how moral motives arise is not to account for the general feeling of moral obligation. How does this come about? Spencer's answer is that the general feeling of duty is derived from the feelings of specific obligations 'in a manner analogous to that in which abstract ideas are generated.'⁴⁹ The mind abstracts the common element in various moral restraints and fixes it in the mind as a particular feeling of general moral obligation.

One question remains: so far Spencer has traced the development of moral motives but their future forms has yet to be explored. Will feelings of moral obligation always be experienced as coercive? Will conflict always be one of the chief features of the moral consciousness? According to Spencer the answer is no. Already, he claims, one can find men in whom moral motives

have a natural and undisputed authority. Such men meet their moral obligations without feeling in any way that they are obligations; they do what is right because it is their wish. During the course of evolution few men are in this position; most find the feeling of moral obligation a burden. The context in which moral motives develop partially explains this fact: 'Emerging as the moral motive does but slowly from amongst the political, religious, and social motives, it long participates in that consciousness of subordination to some external agency which is joined with them; and only as it becomes distinct and predominant does it lose this associated consciousness - only then does the feeling of obligation fade.'⁵⁰ It will fade away completely at the limit of evolution; 'with complete adaptation to the social state that element in the moral consciousness which is expressed by the word obligation will disappear.'⁵¹

Already in explaining the psychological features of ethical conduct Spencer has been obliged to make reference to his sociological doctrines. In chapter eight, 'The Sociological View', he uses them to explain the forms that good conduct must take because man lives in society. His approach to this question rests on three

50 ibid., pp.109-10.

51 ibid., p.111.

doctrines: firstly, that societies are social organisms which develop according to the law of evolution, and in which men are mutually dependent parts; secondly, that the ultimate end of moral conduct is the continued life of the individual; thirdly, that this ultimate end can be achieved only by man's living in society.

Now it is clear that this last claim is not always true: membership of society does not always lengthen and increase the life of the individual. It is often necessary, though less and less as society continues to evolve, for the individual to limit his activities and sometimes risk his life for the sake of the organism. If egoism is the correct moral attitude how are these altruistic activities to be morally justified?⁵² From an absolute point of view, Spencer claims, they cannot be justified; but we must remember that man and society are not yet in the last days, and that in the present transitional stage the best moral advice

52 In his discussion of the relation between egoism and altruism (chs.11-14) it is not always clear that he holds that the individual's pleasure is the end of conduct. Sometimes he seems to claim that egoism is the best means to the end of conduct, viz., the greatest happiness of all; for example: 'The conclusion forced on us is that the pursuit of individual happiness within those limits prescribed by social conditions, is the first requisite to the attainment of the greatest general happiness.' (*ibid.*, p.164) Cf. H. Sidgwick, 'Mr. Spencer's Ethical System', *Mind*, 5, 1880, p.220. Still his main contention is clear.

concerns courses of action which are relatively right or least wrong. During the process of evolution man must work with the moral principle: all moral decisions involve a choice between evils and the lesser should obviously be preferred. Applying this principle to the problem of the clash between self- and social-welfare it is clear, Spencer claims, that society can demand that its members ignore their own interests whenever the life of the organism is at stake; for it is only by restraining and perhaps endangering their lives that the members can guarantee the conditions necessary for their own future well-being. It is equally clear, Spencer claims, that 'when the aggregate is no longer in danger, the final object of pursuit, the welfare of the units, no longer needing to be postponed, becomes the immediate object of pursuit.'⁵³

Once we grant that it is necessary for imperfect men in imperfect societies to deliberately limit their self-seeking activities in order to secure them, the question arises how the individuals are to know what precisely they ought to do. Spencer's answer is that the existing moral system provides the best guide: since 'the tendency is ever towards congruity between

beliefs and requirements',⁵⁴ 'the perplexed and inconsistent morality of which each society and each age shows us a more or less different one, are severally justified as being approximately the best under the circumstances.'⁵⁵

To properly appreciate the limited applicability of this advice we must recall that society is progressing towards perfection. At the limit of evolution there will be no conflict between the individual's egoistic activities and the welfare of the social whole. One reason is that the pleasure seeking activities of the individual will be satisfied only if other individuals are experiencing pleasure; the cause of this state of affairs is the complete development of the faculty of sympathy. Like other faculties sympathy has developed when the men who possessed it experienced more pleasures than pains as a result of having it; the faculty, then, could occur and develop only when social development had reached a point where 'there have ceased to be frequent occasions for anything like serious self-sacrifice.'⁵⁶ In the final state there will be no occasion for serious

54 ibid., p.117.

55 ibid., p.118.

56 ibid., p.216.

self-sacrifice, though there will still be opportunities for acting altruistically - for instance, within the family circle⁵⁷ - and man will spontaneously meet these opportunities because the thought of the pleasures produced will be pleasurable to him. 'In its ultimate form, then,' Spencer writes, 'altruism will be the achievement of gratification through sympathy with those gratifications of others which are mainly produced by their activities of all kinds successfully carried on - sympathetic gratification which cost the receiver nothing, but is a gratis addition to his egoistic gratifications.'⁵⁸

Besides this fact two other things can be known about man's conduct in utopia: one is that it will be perfectly just; the other, that it will be beneficent . Spencer draws the first feature from the fact that man is a member of a social organism which has the same 'fundamental principles of organization' as are found in an 'individual organism.'⁵⁹ In the

57 Cf. ibid., pp.218-19. This view connects up with his claim that the evolutionary progress will not reach complete perfection. See ft.nt.8.

58 ibid., p.220.

59 ibid., pp.123-24. Unlike Clifford Spencer's theory of the social organism is stated at length and the resemblance and the difference between it and other types of organisms explained: cf. 'The Social Organism' (1860) in Essays: Scientific, Political, Speculative, 1; The

physical organism the welfare of the whole demands that each constituent organ receive due amount of nutrient (blood) and efficiently carry out its function. Without the nutrient the organ cannot fulfil its function and the distribution of blood to the other constituent parts is upset and their work hindered to the consequent detriment and, perhaps, destruction of the whole. 'It follows', Spencer writes, 'that the due balancing of respective claims and payments [of nutrient] is requisite, directly for the welfare of each organ, and indirectly for the welfare of the organism.'⁶⁰

The same principle is true of the social organism. In this case there is no common nutrient which is distributed to all members, but both the life of the individual and the organism is based on the fact that a man must receive and give certain things if he and his society is to prosper. What he must receive is the proper reward for his work. If the fisherman, for

Principles of Sociology, 1, Part 2, chs. 1 and 2. Despite his care in stating the doctrine it is open to the objection whether there is any evidence to justify the assertion that society is organized on organic principles: is there, for instance, any evidence to support the claim that each member of society is mutually dependent upon one another? Some of the problems are taken up in my exposition of Stephen's theory in which the concept of social organism plays a more central part than it does in Spencer's ethical theory.

example does not receive the benefits of his labour, then his life-sustaining activities will be hampered and the well being of society will be affected as men leave off fishing for more profitable ways of life. Of course at the limit of evolution the social organism will be thoroughly efficient: each man will therefore receive his due. If we enquire into the conditions under which such a state of affairs could exist it becomes clear, Spencer claims, that each man must faithfully fulfil all his contracts. Each man can receive his due reward only if other men honour their obligations towards him. In other words, men will act towards one another in a perfectly just way at the limit of evolution. Justice is not, however, the only social characteristic of the conduct of perfect men. In utopia man will want to be just because his faculty of sympathy will make injustice abhorrent to him. And this faculty will naturally lead men to seek the good of other men because of the pleasure it produces for the others. Beneficence as well as justice characterizes the social conduct of completely evolved man, for 'sympathy is one root of both justice and beneficence.'⁶¹

With this study of the bearing of sociology on

on ethical conduct Spencer concludes his discussion of the detailed evolutionary laws which determine good conduct. Obviously, as Spencer admits, a knowledge of these laws will be of little use to the casuist, for though they may help him to understand the place of the moral phenomena which hold his attention within the evolution of good conduct their main practical bearing on moral conduct concerns a state of affairs which is yet to be. Ethical science will explain what is the case and why it must be so only when there are perfect men and societies. 'This final permanent code', Spencer writes of his account of the just and beneficent conduct of perfect men, 'alone admits of being definitely formulated, and so constituting ethics as a science in contrast with empirical ethics.'⁶²

How useful is this ethical science? This is a question that Spencer takes very seriously because he was sensitive to the criticism that his type of ethical theory contributes little to the discussion of concrete moral problems.⁶³ Against such a criticism, Spencer makes two points. Firstly, quite apart from whatever contribution it may make to practical problems, his

62 ibid., p.128.

63 Cf. D. Duncan, The Life and Letters of Herbert Spencer, p.59.

theory is useful or valuable because it is true. If offers an accurate account of perfect moral behaviour, just as mechanics offers a true explanation of the motion of perfect bodies. Science, he claims, develops by ignoring the transient and particular features which characterize any particular instance of behaviour according to law in the search for truths which hold at all times in all places. 'The science of rational mechanics is', he writes, 'a science which consists of such ideal truths, and has come into existence only by their dealing with ideal cases. It remains impossible so long as attention is restricted to concrete cases preventing all the complications of friction, plasticity, and so forth.'⁶⁴ The ethical scientists, therefore, must ignore many of the concrete problems which generally entertain moral theorists.

Secondly, ethical science is of use in understanding and explaining the phenomena of relative ethics in the same way as rational mechanics is of use in explaining the mechanical systems involved with 'the complications of friction, plasticity, and so forth', or the way in which a knowledge of physiology makes possible a more adequate understanding of pathological

conditions. Even though a complete account cannot be provided ethical science takes us a long way in understanding the morality of imperfect men. Admittedly, Spencer continues, there will be situations where absolute ethics will be of no use whatever, and we will have to rely on empirical utilitarianism or the guidance of existing moral systems. In other cases, however, the code formulated by ethical science will provide a guide to the conduct which from an absolute point of view is least wrong. He writes: 'So a system of ideal ethical truths, expressing the absolutely right, will be applicable to the questions of our transitional state in such ways that, allowing for the friction of an incomplete life and the imperfection of existing natures, we may ascertain with approximate correctness what is the relatively right.'⁶⁵

In the other sections of The Principles of Ethics Spencer provides many illustrations of the way in which absolute ethics can guide the conduct of contemporary men. In 'Justice' (Part IV), for example, he argues that absolute justice amongst men means that each man will be free to do as he wishes provided his freedom does not hamper the freedom of others, and that each man

will receive what he rightfully earns by his free conduct. Obviously the conduct of imperfect men during time of war will not be in accord with absolute justice, but, Spencer argues, the increasing tendency in peaceful Britain towards a welfare state in which the rightly rich are compelled to aid the justly poor is to be condemned as being 'at variance with the fundamental principle of a harmonious social life.'⁶⁶ At the political level, however, 'it is not to be expected that among party politicians, eagerly competing with one another to gain votes by promising State-aids of countless kinds, any attention will be paid to a doctrine of State-duties which excludes the great mass of their favourite schemes.'⁶⁷

One weakness in Spencer's use of ethical science to solve or guide men living under relative ethics is that he nowhere discusses the principles by which absolute morality can be applied to men in process of evolution. If his ethical science is to be of use in this way then he must provide a theory of applied absolute morality just like the physicist provides a theory for the application of rational mechanics to

66 (Justice, 1891), The Principles of Ethics, 2, p.225.

67 ibid.

empirical situations; otherwise the application will appear arbitrary. Spencer's failure to relate absolute ethics to relative ethics reveals his confusion of aims in The Principles of Ethics.

IV

For a present day reader 'The Data of Ethics' is likely to possess little intrinsic interest because it suffers rather badly from vagueness of statement. Key concepts, such as the concept of good, are never clearly explicated, and Spencer's arguments are often loose and inconclusive. As one would expect his contemporaries were not unaware of this weakness but they could not ignore the work because of it. What they generally did ignore is the mass of empirical and pseudo-empirical material that Spencer presents. For both friend and foe alike the aim and general method of the work were its most interesting features. As representatives of the hostile critics we can consider the criticisms of Sidgwick, J. Llewelyn Davies, and, in a later chapter, T.H. Huxley.

Unlike Davies and Huxley, Sidgwick's examination of Spencer's doctrine is not concerned so much with the extent to which an evolutionary approach to ethical questions represents an advance on other moral philos-

ophies as with the success with which Spencer adds to the understanding of moral phenomena. From one point of view this may appear unusual because Sidgwick is the most persistent late nineteenth century critic of the belief that evolutionary theory has any bearing on the fundamental questions about the nature of good and right; he never tires of making the point that to explain how moral beliefs develop is not to show their truth. In discussing Spencer's doctrine, however, Sidgwick does not dwell on this point: he correctly considers 'The Data of Ethics' to be primarily an attempt to expound a version of hedonistic utilitarianism by means of evolutionary theories rather than an attempt to justify the truth of utilitarianism. Sidgwick's distinction between explaining and justifying ethical beliefs is, as it becomes clear, lost on Spencer, but it explains why Sidgwick, in his review of 'The Data of Ethics', treats Spencer as a theorist who more or less takes the view that goodness and rightness as Sidgwick understands these terms exist.⁶⁸

68 Pollock tries to guard against this interpretation by arguing that Spencer's talk about pleasure as goodness does not mean that there is a special ethical quality in which pleasure participates. See, 'Mr. Spencer's Data of Ethics', op.cit., pp.363-5.

Sidgwick finds two main failings in 'The Data of Ethics'. Firstly, he objects that the aim of the work is not clear. Is contemporary morality or the ethics of utopia Spencer's main interest? There is, Sidgwick claims, signs that the former is, but the overall effect of the work suggests the latter. Taken on its own this criticism amounts to little more than an objection to the vagueness of Spencer's work. What Spencer should do is to make clear his precise intentions; that is, he 'ought to draw a clearer line between the actual and the ideal.'⁶⁹ When, however, this criticism is taken with the other main point it becomes a more damaging objection. If this second point is correct then Spencer cannot draw a clear line between the actual and ideal because he fails to provide, and Sidgwick suggests, probably cannot provide a clear and informative account of the ideal.

This criticism turns on what is to be regarded as an adequate knowledge of the ideal. Spencer, Sidgwick argues, seems prepared to accept a negative conception of the ideal as adequate. It is sufficient for his purpose to know, for example, that ideally just conduct is like actually just conduct without the pains which at present almost invariably accompany it. But what

69 H. Sidgwick, 'Mr. Spencer's Ethical System', Mind, 5, 1880, p.222.

50 are we told when ideally just conduct is described in this way? It cannot be regarded as a positive description unless it is accompanied by a detailed account of the nature and social life of perfect men; for just behaviour could be thought to be painless only on the assumption that there is a radical change in human nature and society as we know it. Without some knowledge of these changes this description amounts to little more than the claim that perfectly just conduct is both like and unlike actually just conduct, and while this tells us something it does not inform us what perfectly just behaviour is in itself. Spencer fails to positively describe ideal conduct because he neglects to buttress his account with the theories that would enable us to comprehend the nature of ideal conduct. And this means, of course, that Spencer is not in a position to show clearly or in any detail the relations that hold between the ideal and the actual.

Sidgwick surrounds this damning criticism with two other objections. Firstly, he suggests that Spencer's method of argument in 'The Data of Ethics' provides no basis for thinking that Spencer can make good this deficiency. 'Among the meagre generalities that he has given us,' Sidgwick writes, 'I can find nothing that is in any degree important which is not also in a high

degree disputable.'⁷⁰ Secondly, he points out that even if Spencer's account of the ideal was not open to criticism, he still could not claim with justification that it can sometimes be used as a guide in the problems that beset contemporary life. The world of absolute ethics is so different from the present situation that it is presumptuous to think that we can take ethical rules from the former for use in the latter. 'Even if we could construct scientifically Mr. Spencer's ideal code,' Sidgwick writes, 'I do not think such a code would be of much avail in solving the practical problems of actual humanity. For a society in which - to take one point only - there is no such thing as punishment, is necessarily a society with its essential structure so unlike our own, that it would be idle to attempt any close imitation of its rules of behaviour.'⁷¹ Whatever the alleged deficiencies of empirical utilitarianism, Sidgwick concludes, it is still the best approach to moral problems for transitional man.

Spencer, as is to be expected, was quite unmoved by this criticism. In Sidgwick's criticism, he writes, 'we have a distinct statement of the opinion that for

70 ibid., p.224.

71 ibid., p.226.

practical purposes it comes to the same thing whether we do or do not entertain an ideal of conduct and of society.⁷² Obviously this is a misunderstanding.

Sidgwick is claiming that ideals can serve as guides to conduct only if we know what the ideal involves, and only if it can be applied to the situations we are confronted with. And it is a fair criticism to say that Spencer fails to explain adequately the meaning of his ideals, and he provides no theory whereby we can apply the absolute ethics to the life of partly evolved mankind.⁷³

The other main criticism of Spencer questions not the success of his ethical system but the general correctness of his approach to the problems of philosophical ethics. Davies, a Christian critic who may be regarded as an example of this school of opinion, argues that Spencer's theory is not a true science of ethics because while it explains how the feeling and notion

72 H. Spencer, 'Replies to Criticism of "The Data of Ethics"', Mind, 6, 1881, p.87.

73 It must be noted that these criticisms are primarily directed at 'The Data of Ethics', not The Principles of Ethics. However, Spencer's completion of his ethical theory did nothing to alter Sidgwick's criticism: the final edition(1902) of The Methods of Ethics cf.p.470), and his Lectures ... (see lecture 5) contain much the same type of criticism as 'Mr. Spencer's Ethical System'. It will be obvious that to clearly establish these criticisms it would be necessary to examine what Spencer says in his works on biology, psychology, and sociology about the near end result of the evolutionary progress.

of moral obligation has originated it fails to show why this feeling should always be heeded and the moral law obeyed. If it is Spencer's aim to expound the nature and form of right conduct then it is essential that he justify the heteronomy of conscience and law, but this cannot be done simply by tracing the conditions under which moral phenomena have developed. 'Whilst he confines himself to tracing natural evolution,' Davies writes, 'he has no right to use the terms of duty.'⁷⁴

In response to this typical intuitionist criticism Spencer gives the usual agnostic reply: the final reason why a man ought to act in accord with his moral feelings is the fact that he has them and cannot act otherwise. No other reason can be found for moral action. The moral motive is the reason for being moral just as the hunger motive is the reason for acting hungrily. It is possible to trace the origin of these motives and the consequences that result from their having their way, but it is pointless to ask whether there is some non-biological-psychological-sociological explanation why they ought to have their way. In the case of the hunger motive this is quite clear, and it is none the less true of the moral motive. This is how Spencer puts the case to Davies: 'Perhaps he will still

ask - Why, having this feeling of obligation should a man yield to it? If so, the answer is of the same general nature as that which may be given to the question - Why, having an appetite for food, should a man eat? Though, in the normal order, a man eats to satisfy hunger, and without definite consciousness of remote ends, yet if you demand its justification, he replies that, as conducive to health, strength, and ability to carry on life and to do his work, the yielding to his appetite is needful. And similarly one who performs an act which his sense of duty prompts, if asked for his reason, may fitly reply that though he yielded to the feeling without thought of distant consequences, yet he sees that the distant consequences of such conformity are, on the average of cases, beneficent not only to others but in the long run to himself.⁷⁵ Clearly much more needs to be said on this matter, but Spencer seems unable to contemplate a more adequate reply, as is also evidenced by his reactions to Huxley's presentation of a similar criticism in his Romanes Lecture.⁷⁶

75 ibid., 2, p.450.

76 See ch. 12.

Mr. Stephen's book is an elaborate and important - though not, in my opinion, a thoroughly successful - attempt to 'lay down an ethical doctrine in harmony with the doctrine of evolution'. Its merits and defects combine to render it a difficult book to review: as its chief merit appears to me to be its sustained vigorous thoughtfulness, its abundance of pertinent and pointed observations and reflections, ... while on the other I find it wanting in clearness of method and systematic arrangement, both as regards the conduct of particular arguments and the organisation of the whole set of discussions which it contains.

H. Sidgwick

Mr. Stephen's theory is ... interesting as pressing to its logical issues the biological view of morality implied in the theories of both his predecessors [Darwin and Spencer], and also as recognizing and facing, with great candour, the difficulties of that view.

J. Seth

Chapter Eleven

Leslie Stephen's 'The Science of Ethics'

In ethical theorizing Stephen had two advantages over Clifford and Spencer. One is that he knew in detail the history of modern British philosophy; the other is that his attempt 'to lay down an ethical doctrine in harmony with the doctrine of evolution',¹ came after the attempts of Clifford and Spencer. As one would expect The Science of Ethics (1882) shows the benefit of these advantages. It is a careful and elaborate work, and by virtue of these qualities it ranks as the best agnostic treatment of ethical questions.

Stephen is quite aware that his book owes much to the work of his contemporaries, both agnostic and otherwise. At first, he says, he was a disciple of John Mill - 'the Gamaliel at whose feet I sat' -

¹ L. Stephen, The Science of Ethics, p.vii, Cf. also L. Stephen, 'Sidgwick's Methods of Ethics', Frazer's Magazine, 91, 1875. His History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century (1876) and his The English Utilitarians (1900) contain many comments bearing on his ethical views; however it is probably best to have read The Science of Ethics before considering what he has to say on other philosophers. His Social Rights and Duties (2 vols., Lond. 1896) contains many of his shorter pieces on ethics.

but the work of Darwin and Spencer during the 1860's led him to think that an historical approach to ethics along evolutionary lines was needed if utilitarianism was to be made scientific. Of his transition from Saul to Paul he writes: 'So far as ethical problems were concerned, I at first regarded Mr. Darwin's principles rather as providing a new armoury where with to encounter certain plausible objections of the so-called Intuitionists, than as implying any reconstruction of the tuilitarian doctrine itself. Gradually, however, I came to think that a deeper change would be necessary, and I believe that this conviction came to me from a study of Mr. Herbert Spencer's works.'² These are, of course, the main influences. Others that he mentions are Hume, Bentham, James Mill, Lewes, amongst the 'writers belonging to what I may call my own school',³ as well as the chief contemporary critic of this school, Henry Sidgwick. To this list we can add Fitzjames Stephen and W.K. Clifford, whose essays he edited. It is not at all unlikely that his brother's trenchant criticisms of John Mill's ethic in Liberty, Equality, Fraternity (1873) strengthened his own rejection,⁴ nor

2 ibid., p.vi.

3 ibid., p.vii

4 J.F. Stephen, Liberty, Equality, Fraternity

that his application of the theory of evolution to social phenomena was influenced by Clifford's vigorous and simple use of Darwin's Descent of Man as a basis for a science of ethics.

Because he is so heavily indebted to other writers Stephen describes The Science of Ethics as lacking in any positive originality of doctrine: 'I do not believe ... ', he writes, 'that there is a single original thought in the book from beginning to end.'⁵ This is perhaps too extreme, but in a general sense it is accurate. Most of Stephen's doctrines are to be found scattered amongst his intellectual creditors, particularly his fellow agnostics.⁶ But his work is not simply Clifford stated at length or Spencer presented

(Lond. 1873) 'Mr. Mill's system is violated not only by every system of theology which concerns itself with morals, and by every known system of positive morality, but by the constitution of human nature itself.' (pp.12-13) He also suggests that if happiness was as precise 'an idea as bodily health' (p.267) it could be measured, but it is not. Leslie takes up the notion of health as a measure of happiness.

5 L. Stephen, op.cit., p.vii.

6 There are marked echoes of their statements: e.g. his argument to establish a connection between health and happiness comes straight from Spencer; and this definition of conscience could almost come straight from Clifford: 'The conscience is the utterance of the public spirit of the race, ordering us to obey the primary conditions of its welfare, and it acts not the less forcibly though we may not understand the source of its authority or the end at which it is aiming.' (ibid., pp;350-1).

carefully. What distinguishes his book is his careful and thorough attempt to combine views similar to those found in these writers in an independent and critical fashion. This independence of treatment cannot be shown in a summary, but it is possible to summarily illustrate the relation between the ethical sciences of Clifford, Spencer, and Stephen.

Briefly, Stephen's science falls midway between Spencer's and Clifford's. His ethical system resembles Spencer's in that it is an attempt to make hedonistic utilitarianism scientific, but like Clifford's his science is mainly concerned with the general features of moral systems, past, present, and future, and not the ethics of utopia. This is not to say that there are no traces of utopian hopes in Stephen's work: like Clifford he looks to the future to resolve some of the difficulties of the present - in his case, the correlation of right behaviour with happiness - but optimistic hopes play a small part in his theory.⁷ On the general aim of ethical science Stephen differs from both Clifford and Spencer. Whereas Clifford says that a successful ethical theory shows that moral laws are the laws of social well being, and Spencer, the code of perfect men, Stephen claims

that it shows that moral dispositions are demanded and created by the race in order that it and its members may survive contentedly. Finally, like Clifford, Stephen puts the demands of the race or society before the welfare of the individual: thus, despite his psychological hedonism, he believes that altruism and not egoism, as Spencer claims, is the basis of all right behaviour that is morally motivated. In the next two sections we will examine how and why Stephen develops these various doctrines.

II

According to Stephen the main aim of The Science of Ethics is 'to discover the scientific form of morality, or, in other words, to discover what is the general characteristic, so far as science can grasp it, of the moral sentiments.'⁸ In explaining and carrying out this aim Stephen engages in a wide variety of theoretical activities. A lot of time is spent in presenting and analysing material drawn from psychology and historical sociology to illustrate and support his claims about the nature, function, and

development of morality; he also carefully attends to explaining the basic conceptions of his ethical science - for example, the nature of science, the nature of the race or social tissue - and their bearing upon ethical phenomena; thirdly, he applies his ethical science and becomes a scientific moralist in attempting to work out an 'ideal code of morality',⁹ for modern European man. Compared with other agnostic works the second is the most novel aspect of Stephen's work; for his colleagues tend to treat such questions lightly. Because of this interest we will treat this side of Stephen's work in the next section, and devote this section to a brief exposition of the main features of his ethical doctrine, as far as is possible, apart from these other matters.

The first of the two basic doctrines upon which Stephen builds his ethic is that pleasure or happiness is the end of human conduct, and that the word 'good' refers, and can only refer, to anything which ministers to that end. Neither part of this doctrine is defended by Stephen; he takes both propositions to be more or less self-evident. Conduct, he writes, 'is determined by feelings; we flee from pain; we seek

pleasure; life is a continuous struggle to minimise sufferings and lay a firm grasp upon happiness; "good" means everything which favours happiness, and "bad" everything that is conducive to misery; nor can any other intelligible meaning be assigned to the words.¹⁰ This does not mean, however, that immediate pleasure is the aim of every desire, or that every happy state is good; a truly happy life is possible only if and because a man often embraces pain and flees the pleasure of youthful and elderly lusts. This fact immediately poses a problem: how are evil pleasures to be singled out from those which minister to and constitute the end of life? A study simply of the mass of complex and often conflicting views that men have on this subject cannot provide the answer. The only way to reduce this complexity to order is to find out what other feature is associated with the pleasures that increase the individual's happiness.

In most cases this feature is the health of the individual, a conception more easily grasped and applied than that of the individual's happiness. Broadly speaking the two features must go together; for if the individual is to survive, the happiness he craves must

be associated with acts which tend to be beneficial. Thus, Stephen claims, 'we may certainly say, in general terms, that there is a close connection between health and happiness as between disease and misery, and that the anomalies which present themselves in attempting to generalise this theory might be cleared up by a more accurate investigation.'¹¹ If, however, the conception of health provides a clear and fair guide to the objects that an individual ought to desire to secure his end, it fails to provide any guidance as to what the individual is morally obliged to desire. What sort of pleasures are morally good or contribute to the moral end? To answer this type of problem Stephen introduces his theory of the race.

This theory is the second of Stephen's two basic doctrines. It is the view that the race is an entity distinct from its members but dependent upon them; it exists in and through them, though its existence is not simply to be identified with theirs. Of this entity Stephen says: 'It is ... necessary to speak of society as an organism or an organic growth which has in some sense a life of its own. And this, it is to be repeated, implies no mystical or non-natural sense.

11 ibid., p.80; cf. p.83.

Society is not an organism with a single centre of consciousness. It is not something which has any existence apart from the existence of individual members. But the name marks the essential fact, that although at any time the properties of the constituted whole are the product of the constitutive units, those units have gained their properties in virtue of belonging to this whole.¹² Stephen's argument to establish the existence of the race starts from the fact that individuals are shaped by their social environment and the claim that the members of a race are so related to one another that changes within one man or the effects of such changes can be transmitted to all other members of the race.

One of the consequences of this view is that while the individual is the vehicle of the race, he is able to influence it by influencing the other members. According to Stephen the influence of the individual can even extend to the conditions which make for the survival of the race in the process of natural selection between races. This can be readily seen, for example, in the way that courageous men often prosper the whole of society by their activities; and while it may be

12 ibid., pp.111-12.

more difficult to note the ill effects often produced by a lack of courage the dangerous influence of cowardice may be equally widespread. The same can be shown with the other virtues as well: temperance, truthfulness, justice, benevolence. The races which succeed in maintaining and developing themselves in the struggle for survival are those in which a large number of their members foster these virtues. Generally speaking, virtuous men are a condition of the race's vitality.

Since these virtues are commonly regarded as morally good - 'these four classes of excellence ... seem to constitute all that is meant by the general moral law',¹³ - we are able to see that what is morally good is that which prospers the health of the race. 'Briefly, then, we may say that morality is a statement of the conditions of social welfare; and morality, as distinguished from prudence, refers to those conditions which imply a direct action upon the social union.'¹⁴

Now once we know that moral goodness is that which contributes to the vitality of the race we are able to say that the pleasures which the individual morally ought to desire are those which contribute to

13 ibid., p.217.

14 ibid.

this end. More precisely, the individual ought to find pleasure in the conduct covered by the virtues. But is this possible? Can virtuous conduct always be pleasurable? Stephen denies, of course, that it is, but he claims that for the average member of society virtuous behaviour is more likely to secure his health and happiness than is immoral conduct. So just as the individual's health provides a roughly accurate guide to the things which will maximize his happiness, so too the vitality of the race, as indicated by the virtues, is ^a/reasonably accurate guide, other things being equal, to the way each individual can best secure his health and happiness. But if this means that a person must be prepared to sacrifice his health for the sake of the race, then the problem is to explain how he can if by nature he always seeks his own happiness. Or, as Stephen puts it: if psychological hedonism is true, and if 'virtue is a condition of social welfare,' then why 'should I be virtuous?'¹⁵

Stephen's answer to this question turns on his account of sympathy. This faculty enables a man to desire the pleasure of other men even though it may lead him to experience no selfish pleasure or even pain. To

reconcile this ability with his psychological hedonism Stephen takes this doctrine in the weakest possible sense: what is meant by saying that happiness or the desire for happiness is the overriding motive is that human conduct is always motivated by feeling. In the case of many altruistic acts the feeling is the sympathetic feeling of the thought of pleasure that will be gained in others as a result of the act; it is not true that the individual always gains pleasure himself in desiring the pleasure of others. 'Your pain is not painful to me because I infer that some other consequences will result to me,' as is maintained, Stephen says, by those who claim that altruistic actions are one form of self seeking behaviour, 'but because the thought of your pain is itself painful.'¹⁶ It is not my pain at the thought of your pain that motivates me, but your pain itself (as represented in my consciousness). This is, of course, an odd, perhaps impossible, position for a psychological hedonist to take, but Stephen is driven to it in order to account for what he takes to be moral conduct. 'So far as I sympathise with you', he claims, 'I annex your consciousness. I act as though my nerves could somehow be made continuous with yours

in such a way that a blow which fell upon your frame would convey a sensation to my brain.'¹⁷

Now since the faculty of sympathy enables the individual to almost literally feel with others, so that it almost becomes true to say that my sympathetic actions are motivated by our feelings, it is of no great significance that Stephen 'cannot prove that it is always prudent to act rightly or that it is always happiest to be virtuous.'¹⁸ For the moral man the happiness of his fellows is his happiness, even though he must on occasions sacrifice his own selfish pleasures or even his life in securing their good. Thus, Stephen claims, virtuous conduct is possible even though it does not always secure the individual's greatest happiness; 'the admission ... does not diminish the intrinsic motives to virtue, inasmuch as those motives are not really based upon prudence.'¹⁹

Stated briefly this is the essence of Stephen's ethical doctrine; and it is upon this basis that he establishes his science of ethics.

17 ibid., p.237.

18 ibid., p.434.

19 ibid.

Once it is seen that morality is one of the conditions of social vitality then we know at least one general feature of ethical phenomena. Historical study of the ways in which morality has fulfilled this function tells us more about this general characteristic. The most striking result of such a study is that the races which have survived victoriously in the process of social evolution - to fail in the struggle^{of} evolution is not necessarily to go out of existence - are those in which the sanctions for moral behaviour became more and more internal and less and less external. The highest type of man in a civilized race acts virtuously not because he is afraid to do otherwise but because his character naturally leads him to right behaviour. The fittest societies today are those in which the moral law has been internalized in the character of its members; but the existence of moral instincts or conscience in men today is not their own doing but the gift of the race working through its past members in the struggle to survive.²⁰ To thus explain how morality functions so as to further the health and happiness of

20 It is only because social evolution has reached this point, Stephen claims, that we are able to see what is common to the vast complexity of moral rules, and are then able to state a science of ethics.

the race, and thereby the health and happiness of the individual, is to provide a detailed account of 'the general characteristic, so far as science can grasp it, of the moral sentiments.'²¹ This account, Stephen maintains justifies the claim that his theory of morality is a science of ethics.

III

To thus summarize this side of Stephen's position is to do scant justice to the complexity of arguments and illustrations with which he states and maintains his doctrine. However, it will be clear that in substance, if not in treatment, his doctrines bear strong resemblance to aspects of the works of Clifford and Spencer. The same cannot be said quite so firmly of his discussion of the nature of ethical science, the conception of the race, and the character of the moral sanction. Here Stephen's thought is most clearly independent of the work of his fellow agnostics, though not in the sense that their views have exercised no influence upon him.

To take the first matter: Stephen teaches that a scientific theory is distinguished by two features,

and that his ethical theory has them both. Firstly, a scientific theory is completely independent of metaphysical doctrines; science, he says, is the region, 'where all metaphysical tenets are indifferent.'²² Secondly, it can be tested by appeal to experience. Neither of these claims is developed at length and consequently, they are not very clear, but one of the first points that emerge is that Stephen does not think that these two claims are just different ways of saying the one thing. He raises the problem of the demarcation between science and metaphysics but claims that he need not solve it. 'However that line may be drawn,' he writes, 'we may admit that, in the case of the physical science at least, we can obtain knowledge which, within its own sphere, is entirely independent of the metaphysicians' theories.'²³

In interpreting the first criterion we are faced with two problems: one is that Stephen seems to distinguish metaphysicians into two groups, the 'good' and the 'bad'; the other is that he nowhere attempts to explain in detail what he means by independence. On the first point, the difference Stephen notices between

22 ibid., p.7.

23 ibid., p.5.

metaphysicians is roughly speaking the distinction that Strawson draws between the descriptive and revisionary metaphysicians.²⁴ The 'good' metaphysician is the one who attempts to describe the basic concepts which man uses to order his experience: 'The metaphysician, as I take it, has a locus standi only so far as he can throw light upon the general conditions of belief, or again, upon the nature of certain ultimate distinctions, such as that of object and subject, taken for granted in the scientific statement.'²⁵ Stephen cannot claim that his ethical position is independent of this type of metaphysical consideration; for in his discussion of the charge that a science of ethics is impossible because there are no laws governing good conduct he argues that there must be, otherwise good conduct would not be a determinate thing and thus could not be an object of thought. The other type of metaphysical activity attempts to revise our understanding of the world by telling us of the alleged reality that lies behind the universe of experience; its practitioners are the ontologists, particularly the philosophical theists.²⁶ Presumably

24 P.F. Strawson, Individuals (Lond. 1959), pp.9-11.

25 L. Stephen, op.cit., p.451.

26 Cf. ibid.

it is this type of metaphysics for which there is no need nor place in science.

What is meant by the claim that science is independent of metaphysics? There are at least two ways of interpreting the claim, but both run into difficulties. In its most extreme form the statement can be viewed as meaning that the formation, interpretation, and discussion of scientific theories can be carried on independently of any metaphysical considerations. To discuss this claim we would have to know much more about the nature of science and metaphysics than the information which Stephen gives to us. However, we can note that historically the division between science and metaphysics has not been of this order. Secondly, it is not true of Stephen's own science of ethics. Acceptance of his views will depend on how one answers the question whether there are any entities, such as the race, which are never directly observed but which can only be inferred from other beings in whom they exist and manifest themselves. On the face of it this is a metaphysical problem which cannot be settled simply by appealing to the facts of experience; put crudely, the question does not concern the facts but the inferences that can be drawn from them.

The other way in which Stephen can mean that

science is independent is that there is no connection between scientific and metaphysical beliefs such that the truth or falsity of one has a direct bearing on the truth or falsity of the other. That this is part, at least, of his view comes out in his claim that the scientist's independence of metaphysics is illustrated by the geometer's indifference to theories of the nature of space: 'Space, according to some thinkers has only a phenomenal reality; if so, the truths of the geometer are only applicable to phenomena. Space, as we know it may perhaps be only one of various possible kinds of space. If so, the doctrines of geometry can only be regarded as certain for that kind of space with which we are conversant. The geometer postulates space, and (it may be) one particular kind of space; but the validity of his reasoning, so long as that postulate is granted remains unaffected.'²⁷

But what is meant by this particular claim? Has Stephen shown that it amounts to anything more than that metaphysical theories attempt to describe what is beyond experience and scientific theories describe the world of phenomena and therefore the truth of the former cannot, unlike the latter, be tested by experience?

If this is all that is meant then how does the first criteria²⁸ of a scientific theory differ from the second? Obviously, in view of Stephen's earlier remarks, the two are not the same, and the independence of science from metaphysics is more than a matter of definition. But what else is included in the conception is not explained by Stephen. It is indicative, perhaps, of his awareness of the problems involved in drawing out the conception of independence that Stephen leaves off the discussion once he thinks he has established the general point. While, however, we can sympathize with his problem it is clear that he cannot establish this point without first of all presenting a more detailed account of the nature of scientific and metaphysical thought. Whether such a study would convince us that 'independence' is the best way to describe the relation of the two is another matter.

Stephen's second criteria²⁹ of scientific statements is expressed in various ways. Sometimes he presents it in a positivistic fashion: 'Scientific knowledge means simply that part of knowledge which is definitive and capable of accurate expression.'²⁸ Whether there is more than one criteria³⁰ of definitive

and accurate expression is not clear, but Stephen holds that the capability of being tested by experience is the most important measure of a statement's having a clear and distinct meaning or scientific character.

It is to Stephen's credit that in taking this position he pays some attention to the variety of activities that come under the concept of testing. This complexity leads him to distinguish between empirical statements in terms of the degree to which they can be considered scientific: the measure is the extent to which the statement is in principle falsifiable. The completely scientific statement is the one the conditions of whose falsification can be seen at a glance and which is, therefore, in principle most easily falsifiable. 'All men are mortal', for example, is a completely scientific statement because it is clear from the proposition what would count against its truth. The majority of scientific propositions are not like this; the conditions of their falsification cannot be known immediately we comprehend their meaning; to distinguish them from the other sort of propositions Stephen calls them approximately scientific. Stephen describes the distinction in these words: scientific knowledge 'is merely the crystallized core of the vague mass of indefinable and inaccurate knowledge ... It reaches the highest and most strictly scientific stage when it admits

of being stated in precise propositions of unconditioned^{al} validity. By unconditional, I mean, of course, that the conditions under which it holds are given in the proposition itself. ... But this unconditionality and precision represent an ideal which is seldom if ever realized; and propositions are generally called scientific which make some approximation to this quality. They are approximately scientific when they are precise enough to afford a generally reliable rule and require conditions which are generally fulfilled, or, in other words, when they do not fully reveal and formulate a "law of nature", but make some approximation to that completeness of statement.²⁹

Another important distinction between scientific statements is the degree to which they can in fact be tested. 'The accepted test of true scientific knowledge is a power of prediction',³⁰ but, Stephen points out, it is not always possible for us to test the power in ways that fully satisfy us. In some cases we can test the proposition with a high degree of precision; for example, statements about planetary motions, and statements that can be tested in controlled

29 ibid., pp.7-8.

30 ibid., p.11.

experiments. We do not have to worry overmuch about the influence of extraneous factors. This, however, is not the case with propositions whose predictive power cannot be tested in controlled situations: here we have always to bear in mind the possibility that the results of the test are not being determined by the factors we are considering. Predictions made in these circumstances must always be regarded as conditional; we must believe that no extraneous factors have operated. We cannot, therefore, be as certain about the results of such predictive tests as we can about those conducted in experimentally controlled situations, but this in no way affects their scientific character. 'I do not refuse the name of science', Stephen writes, 'to the general proposition which enables us to make this conditional prediction. On the contrary they form the great mass of scientific knowledge.'³¹

It is obvious that these distinctions are the beginning of an attempt to theorize about the nature of science and scientific knowledge, but Stephen does not proceed any further with them or bother in detail to justify the points he has made. The explanation is that he makes these distinctions not as part of a

general attempt to theorize about science, but simply to show in what sense his ethical theory may be described as scientific. In terms of these distinctions his ethical theory is approximately scientific, and its truth is shown, though not established, by its power in making conditional predictions about moral phenomena. It cannot help but be approximately scientific because it cuts across the fields of sociological and psychological phenomena where the best theories tend to be 'a collection of unverified guesses and vague generalizations.'³² At most the science of ethics can provide a series of general statements which are true of the great mass of men in society; it cannot account precisely for the development and function of each individual's moral disposition, but it can explain how and why these dispositions have appeared in the great bulk of the race. However, if it cannot tell us what is exactly required of each man in the way of moral character and behaviour if the race is to survive, it can tell us what is generally required, and this general statement can be tested by appeal to the facts. Again, if Stephen's theory is correct it should be possible for him to show

why moral systems differ so strikingly from race to race and at different periods in the one race's history. There are, of course, many ways in which the explanatory or predictive power of his theory can be tested, but Stephen is well aware that the complexity of the phenomena concerned make the various tests extremely difficult to carry out. He is sure, however, that the conditional predictions that can be made in terms of his theory provide strong confirmation of its truth.

Now it is just this capacity of Stephen's theory to explain the development and variety of moral phenomena that Sidgwick claims is doubtful. In his review of The Science of Ethics he writes: 'It is only in [the tribal] period that I can regard the natural selection of social "tissue" as a really important factor in the development of morality. I do not see, for instance, how any of the important changes that have taken place in the morality of civilized Europe during the last twenty centuries can be properly attributed to this cause.'³³ Sidgwick does not, of course, try to show this by considering the important changes and seeing whether Stephen's science can account for them; the reason is that he doubts whether the concepts

³³ H. Sidgwick, 'Critical Notice: The Science of Ethics by Leslie Stephen', Mind, 7, 1882, p.577.

Stephen uses to understand the evolutionary development of morality can be applied in any precise way to social phenomena. In particular this objection applies to Stephen's theory of the race as a social organism or tissue.

As we have already noted the social organism is the term generally used by the agnostics to describe the basic unit of social evolution. In those sections of his work where he is concerned to state his general position Stephen follows suit. For example, in chapter one he maintains that the order underlying the complexity of human behaviour in any one society can be understood only by regarding society as an organism with structural laws of its own: 'A full realisation of this truth, which is of course a very old truth in substance, a perception that society is not a mere aggregate but an organic growth, that it forms a whole, the laws of whose growth can be studied apart from those of the individual atoms, supplies the most characteristic postulate of modern speculation...'³⁴

Two problems are posed by this statement: what is a society?, and, what does it mean to describe it as a social organism? Stephen's main discussion of

these problems (chapter three 'Social Motives') leads him to qualify his earlier and more general statements. One qualification is that the word 'society' when used to describe that which undergoes social evolution means race - caucasian, negroid, chinese - and not some smaller unit as it might and probably is sometimes meant to suggest. Secondly, Stephen claims that it is misleading to describe the basic unit of social evolution as an organism: social tissue, he says, is a more adequate term.

Stephen's main reason for taking the race as the unit of social evolution is that any smaller grouping fails to do justice to the facts. If, for example, the state is regarded as the unit, and social development as the result of natural selection between states, then, we might at first be led to the conclusion that the vital state is the one with the strongest army. But such a view of civilized states is plainly inadequate: war between states as the means to survival 'is no longer the case in any moderately civilized state of the world.'³⁵ The factors which lead to the growth and maintenance of the modern state are much more complex: 'To state the case fully, we should require to know many

other properties of equal importance, and directly dependent upon an entirely different set of conditions, such as the industrial capacity of the race, its geographical position, and so forth.³⁶ However, in order to understand many of these features which determine the vitality of the state we are forced to consider it as part of a much wider grouping, the race. It is only because the race is what it is that the members of a particular state can, for instance, utilize their country's natural endowments to make their nation strong and vital. More generally, the vitality of the race is a necessary condition of the vitality of the state; and it is only through the success of the race in the struggle for survival that the members can hope to maintain and develop their nation.

Stephen brings forward two types of evidence for this claim. Firstly, the influence of society (or race) in shaping man's nature. There is no reason, Stephen claims, to assume that man's innate capacities have changed over the years,³⁷ but the difference between say the ancient Greeks or Britons and the modern Englishman is tremendous. The explanation of the difference

36 ibid., p.125.

37 ibid., p.102.

can only be found in the different social influences to which the individual is exposed. The child inherits from his society (race) the language, the knowledge, the attitudes, the skills which distinguish him as a man from the men of other races past and present. 'The activity of the individual', Stephen writes, 'is essentially conditioned, not merely by his individual organization, but by the social medium. His predecessors have created a new world. The physical basis may be the same, but the man develops under a set of influences, which profoundly affect his intellect, his emotions, and his activities.'³⁸ The relationship is not only one way: the individual influences the race as well as being influenced by it. The activities of each individual have some bearing upon the activities that go to make up the workings of society. 'If millions can live in a region which formerly supported a few thousands, it is because each of the millions has millions of co-operators. If I can devote myself to write an ethical treatise, it is because thousands of people all over the world are working to provide me with food and clothes, and a variety of intellectual and material products.'³⁹

38 ibid., pp.107-8.

39 ibid., p.108.

The second type of evidence is provided by what happens when one part of a race develops a feature which enables it to succeed more efficiently in the process of natural selection. Once a significant variation occurs within part of a race it is invariably disseminated throughout the whole, so that the race is better enabled to survive. Stephen suggests, though he fails to show in detail, that this is what happened with the development of artillery in Europe. Of this development he says: 'The invention by one [individual] is ... in certain respects an invention by all, though the laws according to which it spreads will of course be highly complex.'⁴⁰ The dissemination, which occurs in part by a process of natural selection between the different sections of the race, does not take place all at once, but eventually the race per se embraces the new discovery and its benefits; and just as 'a new discovery spreads through the social tissue as a fermentation spreads through a continuous fluid',⁴¹ so too does any significant change within a part of the race that works for its vitality. If, therefore, we are to understand the general conditions of social maintenance and development we must go beyond such smaller social units as

40 ibid., p.122.

41 ibid., p.123.

villages or nations and consider them as part of a much larger 'society', viz., the race.

Strange as it may seem this is the evidence upon which Stephen rests his theory of the race as the basic unit of social evolution. Furthermore this evidence, when linked together, provides him with what he takes to be the two features which characterize the race qua race. 'The unity which we attribute to it', he says, 'consents¹³ in this that every individual is dependent upon his neighbours, and thus every modification arising in one part is capable of being propagated directly in every other part.'⁴²

On the face of it Stephen's evidence fails to justify his theory of the nature and importance of the race. At most it shows that the activities carried on within social groupings such as a town or state depend and have depended upon the activities of other and sometimes larger groupings. It is a far cry from the conclusion to the claim that there is a living bond between each member of the same stock which is expressed by their dependence each upon the other and their ability to change in accordance with the demands of the stock. Not only does Stephen fail to justify such a claim, he also, and this is more important, fails to expound it

adequately. In what sense can each member of the caucasian race be said to be dependent upon every other member? If dependence is taken loosely to mean any human relation which affects the individual's way of life as well as the relations that affect these relations - as Stephen's point about the myriads of people who make possible his ethical theorizing suggests - then there appears to be no reason for saying that the individual depends only upon the members of his race. But if dependence is not understood in this vague way, then what can it mean if it is to cover the social relation that holds between each and every member of the race?

A similar problem occurs with the claim that in the race 'any modification arising in one part is propagated throughout the whole system'.⁴³ Evidence for this claim is lacking but the question is whether this is an oversight or whether the claim is so vague that it would be difficult to know what evidence could be regarded as confirming it. Even if the transmission of the modification is interpreted in the broadest (and vaguest) sense as the transmission of the benefit of the modification there still remains the problem of saying what it is that experiences the benefit. What is meant

by the race? It cannot be defined, and Stephen has no wish to do so, as all the members of a common stock either now or in the future because it is difficult to attach any consistent meaning to that which is the benefit of all members of a race. If, however, the benefit of the race is identified with the benefit of some of its members, then the problem is to show how this is possible. To be a little more precise, two problems arise: one is that if the race is something which cannot be identified with all its members, then what is it?; the other is, how are we to decide when the benefit of a section of a common stock indicates that the race has benefited? Stephen has many things to say which bear on the formulation of these problems - for instance, the claim that the race is a social tissue - but on the precise points at issue, viz., what is the empirical content of his view of the race and the evidence which supports it, he is unfortunately silent.

Once Stephen assumes that the race has a social unity he pays more attention to the empirical implications of the doctrine. The most important thing to note is the complexity within this unity. This complexity, he argues, is of such a sort that it is obviously false to think of the members of the race being marshalled together for a common purpose in the way that the complex parts of an animal organism are ordered together for a

common purpose. For this reason it is a mistake to think of the race in terms of the analogy of an organism; tissue is more adequate because it suggests that the members of the race are united one with another without loss of their independence of action, and, it also possesses some of the biological associations that cling to the word 'organism'. The analogy is spelt out in the following way: 'The tissue is built up of men, as the tissue of physiology is said to be built up of cells. Every society is composed of such tissue; and the social tissue can no more exist apart from such associations than the physiological tissue exist apart from the organs of living animals. The distinction does not correspond to things separate as concrete phenomena, nor can it be compared to the distinction between a coat and the cloth of which it is made; for unorganized social tissue does not exist, and the tissue develops new properties according to the mode in which it is arranged. Thus, if you will, the distinction may be regarded as merely a logical device, and yet, without taking into account in some form or other the facts which it is intended to describe, it seems impossible to give an adequate account of the processes which we have to consider.'⁴⁴ In terms

of this analogy it is possible to fit in other aspects of the life of the race. The states, for instance, are simply well established formations or gatherings of tissue; its formation, as that of other social organs within the tissue of the race 'is determined by the special circumstances in which it is placed, the physical geography of its habitat and so forth, but which do not so break it up into distinct fragments as to destroy its continuity.'⁴⁵

While this analogy may be fruitful in bringing together some of the various types of social life that occur within the race the problem remains whether its use is justified. I have already argued that Stephen cannot claim to have shown that there is a race in the sense his theory requires, and that it is ^{at} not all clear what the social unity could be, or what the thing is that the analogy of the social tissue is supposed to render more intelligible. Now if these points are correct then Stephen's attempt to build a science of ethics around the claim that morality is one of the conditions that maintain the race in the struggle for existence is seriously jeopardized. 'The difficulty of determining the units'⁴⁶

45 ibid., p.126.

46 ibid., p.120.

of social evolution defeats Stephen and destroys the claims of his ethical science.

Whereas the problems of Stephen's doctrine of social evolution seem to me the most obvious objections to his science, other critics find it in his discussion of the reasons for being moral. Following Sidgwick these critics claim that the scientific approach to ethics⁴⁷ is unable to offer a complete account of moral obligation; Stephen was well aware of this objection and in 'Sidgwick's Methods of Ethics' (1875) he attempted to show why he thought the charge to be baseless.⁴⁸ His discussion of the moral sanction in The Science of Ethics is a more sophisticated version of his earlier claim.

Like his fellow agnostics Stephen understands the sanction of morality as the cause of moral behaviour. To ask why be virtuous is to ask how men come to act morally, and the answer is the existence of moral motives which direct men to right conduct: 'If, for example,

47 J.A. Irving, 'Evolution and Ethics', Queens Quarterly, 55, 1948, pp.458-463; N. Annan, Leslie Stephen, ch.7, 'The Moral Society', esp. pp.216-18.

48 He writes: 'By "ought" I mean obedience to the moral law; by the moral law I mean that body of rules the observance of which secures the greatest sum of happiness. To say, then that a man ought to desire the general happiness prompts a man to obey the rules which secure the general happiness. And I am unable to find any other meaning in the words'. (Sidgwick's 'Methods of Ethics', Frazer's Magazine, 91, 1875, p.322.

virtue means all such conduct as promotes happiness, the motives to virtuous conduct must be all such motives as impel a man to aim at increasing the sum of happiness. These motives constitute the sanction.⁴⁹

Now one of the objections to this view of the sanction of moral behaviour is that if the existence of the moral motive is the only reason for being moral, then there is no reason why the man without a moral motive should be moral. Stephen meets this difficulty by distinguishing between the cause and reason, the sanction and the justification of moral behaviour. The existence of the sanction explains why men are moral; the justification of moral behaviour or the theory of motives explains the true character of moral motives and conduct. In terms of this theory it can be shown to the murderer who lacks the right motive why it is wicked to kill: 'It is capable proof - scientific proof, if you will - that murder is wrong - "wrong" as opposed to the rules actually accepted and regarded with reverence in every civilized society; and wrong, again, as being opposed to that underlying moral code to which actual morality is an approximation, and which expresses the conditions of social welfare. I may, therefore, prove

to the murderer that he is acting wickedly.⁵⁰

It is a sign, perhaps, of Stephen's desire to show that his theory provides an adequate account of moral phenomena that he fails to spell out clearly the implications of this claim. In proving to the murderer that his act is wicked because it damages the race, Stephen is not providing him with a reason why he ought not to kill but with the reason by murderous acts are wicked, and this is quite a different thing. Stephen does not believe that it is possible to show why a man ought not to kill or why he ought to seek the well being of the race if this means demonstrating that the situations covered by these laws have a simple moral feature distinct from the physical and mental phenomena with which it is associated, and because of which it is to be desired or sought. The main reason he gives is that attempts to prove the existence of this moral feature invariably drag ethics into the wasteland of metaphysics;⁵¹

50 ibid., p.443.

51 But compare his views in 1875: 'How then, should I "prove" utilitarianism? Happiness is the end; observance of the law is the means. I can prove that the end exists ... If you ask me to prove anything more, I admit my incapacity; but I add that I cannot see what more there is to be proved.' (Sidgwick's Methods of Ethics', Frazer's Magazine, 91, 1875, p.322.)

and it is possible to account for moral phenomena without doing this. Stephen would have to admit his account is contrary to the fairly common belief that moral laws are or should be capable of justification in the sense he rejects. He does not bring out this fact but rather points out that his proof of the wickedness of murder is sufficient for the man with some moral sensibility. If the explanation is truly believed and thus becomes part of the person's character then it will act as a motive in restraining the man from future evil acts: 'though the proof will be thrown away if he is a moral idiot, that is, entirely without the capacity upon which morality is founded, the proof is one which must always affect his character, if we suppose the truth to be assimilated, and not the verbal formula to be merely learnt by rote.'⁵² In other words the moral life is not threatened because the only 'ought' that science knows refers to one of the relationships that actually holds between individuals and the race.

To Sidgwick and later critics this account of the reasons for being moral are inadequate. According to them the question why be virtuous is not answered either by explaining how a man is moral or by showing,

in Stephen's fashion, why moral motives are moral. Stephen has left this central problem untouched: 'when Mr. Stephen maintains', Sidgwick writes, 'that it is capable of "scientific proof" to a murderer that murder is "wrong as being opposed to that underlying moral code which expresses the conditions of social welfare," I must again answer that it may doubtless be scientifically proved that murder is not generally conducive to the preservation of social tissue, but that if it can be scientifically proved that the murderer ought to adopt the preservation of social tissue as his ultimate end, the proof must be different in kind from any reasoning that Mr. Stephen has used; and I am unable to conjecture how he would set about constructing it.'⁵³ These remarks are undoubtedly critical but it is best to see them as a statement of a position over and against Stephen's rather than as a precise criticism of his theory.⁵⁴ If we consider them strictly as a critical comment then it can be said that it misinterprets what Stephen says. Of course Sidgwick can reply to such a charge by claiming that analysis of Stephen's position shows that

53 H. Sidgwick, op.cit., p.585.

54 A point which Stephen suggests in a letter to Sidgwick: 'Most of the points at issue between us would require a treatise instead of a letter....' (F.W. Maitland, The Life and Letters of Leslie Stephen, p.351.)

he is faced with this problem, but the truth of this reply is far from evident; after all Stephen knew what Sidgwick would say on this particular matter and he has taken steps to protect himself from this type of criticism. Just how well is a rather large question.

I believe that the real basis of the whole controversy against the prevalent Materialism of the present day lies in the question of the Human Will. Once that the will of Man is free; and no Philosophy, say what it may of fixed laws, can ever really upset the truths dictated by man's religious instincts. This is why I look on the philosophy of such people as Mr. Mill as so utterly mischievous; because the question of Free will or No free will, is really the question of Belief or No belief. If I am a thing subject to purely material laws, the sooner I go the way of other things the better. If I am merely a part of the Universe, I am content to be resolved, as soon as may be, into the gases which pervade the Universe. My free will is the only thing which makes me better than a gas.

H.L. Mansel

Chapter Twelve

Moral Obligation and Responsibility: Two Difficulties in the Science of Ethics

These two matters are described as difficulties not because Clifford, Spencer, and Stephen viewed them as such, but because many of their contemporaries believed that they could not be accounted for in scientific terms. We have already noted how the holders of this view attacked the agnostics' doctrine of moral obligation, and there would be no need to repeat the story but for the fact that the objection was also made from within the agnostic camp. Fairly late in the day Huxley made common cause with the moral intuitionists; his disaffection from the agnostic position is pretty clearly stated in 'Ethics and Evolution', the Romanes Lecture for 1893.¹

Huxley's rejection of the view that an evolutionary science of ethics can provide a complete account of morality is in two sections. The first, and most

¹ Collected Essays: Vol.9 (Lond.1895). As Leonard Huxley suggests (Life and Letters of Thomas Henry Huxley, 2, p.352) it becomes clear in view of this Lecture why Huxley limited his earlier writings on ethics - e.g. 'Science and Morals' (1886), op.cit. - showing that a scientific study of morality does not involve a denial of moral phenomena; there are intimations of his Lecture in some of his earlier works, e.g., 'Natural Right and Political Rights' (1890), Collected Essays: Vol.1. Cf. also Huxley's letter to Romanes in L. Huxley, op.cit., 2, p.350

widely noted, is that success in the evolutionary process requires the moral attitude of a gladiator in an arena, for it is a process of unrestrained and brutal competition; 'the practice of that which is ethically best - what we call goodness or virtue - involves a course of conduct which, in all respects, is opposed to that which leads to success in the cosmic struggle for existence.'² What is sometimes said to be social evolution is not part of the evolutionary process but a checking of it.³

The second criticism is the typical intuitionist objection.⁴ Even if we ignore the fact that evil as well as good is a supposed product of cosmic evolution, the knowledge that goodness has been evolved provides no reason why we ought to desire it: 'Cosmic evolution may

2 Collected Essays: Vol.9, pp.81-2.

3 Cf. ibid., p.81, and 'Evolution and Ethics: Prolegomena' (1894), op.cit., pp.37-40.

4 That Huxley makes this criticism is sometimes overlooked, partly because the first criticism receives the most stress. See J.A. Irving, 'Evolution and Ethics', Queens Quarterly, 55, 1948, pp.450,463; and N. Annan, Leslie Stephen, pp.211-12, 217: both writers fail to understand what Huxley is about and they lump him with Spencer and Stephen as a propounder of evolutionary ethics! H. Peterson, Huxley: Prophet of Science, p.285; Julian Huxley, Evolution and Ethics 1893-1943 (Lond.1947), p.1; and A.N. Prior, Logic and the Basis of Ethics (Oxford 1949), pp.45, 107, all realize Huxley's purpose. Prior (p.107) points out that Huxley together with Sidgwick and Whately is one of the nineteenth century critics of the naturalistic fallacy.

teach us how the good and evil tendencies of man may have come about; but, in itself, it is incompetent to furnish any better reason why what we call good is preferable to what we call evil than we had before.'⁵

Ethical science has to accept the fact of moral obligation even though the scientists cannot explain it or analyse it into non-moral components. It is true that ethical scientists provide 'more or less sound arguments',⁶ to explain how the feeling of moral obligation has arisen, but, Huxley insists, to explain the feeling is not to explain the fact of obligation, any more that the explanation of the feeling of beauty explains the beautiful. 'Some day...', he writes, 'we shall arrive at an understanding of the evolution of the aesthetic faculty; but all the understanding in the world will neither increase nor diminish the force of the intuition that this is beautiful and that is ugly.'⁷

Now the reactions of Spencer and Stephen to these criticisms were a mixture of annoyance and disbelief.

5 T.H. Huxley, op.cit., p.80

6 ibid., p.79.

7 op.cit., p.80.

On the one hand they were justifiably annoyed at his treatment of their doctrines, in particular the doctrine of social evolution; on the other they baulked at what followed if Huxley was deliberately denying the possibility of a science of ethics. Privately, as one of his letters shows, Spencer was able to face the facts:

'Practically his view is a surrender of the general doctrine of evolution in so far as its higher applications are concerned, and is pervaded by the ridiculous assumption that, in its application to the organic world, it is limited to the struggle for existence among individuals under its ferocious aspects, and has nothing to do with the development of social organisation, or the modification of the human mind that takes place in the course of that organisation.... The position he takes, that we have to struggle against or correct the cosmic process, involves the assumption that there exists something in us which is not a product of one cosmic process, and is practically a going back to the old theological notions, which put Man and Nature in antithesis.'⁸ Publicly, he tells another story: less than six weeks after he wrote the letter he published a note in The Athenaeum stating that since

⁸ D. Duncan, The Life and Letters of Herbert Spencer, p.336.

Huxley and he agreed on so many points concerning evolution 'it is impossible that Prof. Huxley can have meant to place the ethical views he holds in opposition to the ethical views I hold.'⁹

Stephen's reply, 'Ethics and the Struggle for Existence' (1894), is a more worthwhile contribution to the debate. Like Spencer he objects to Huxley's portrayal of cosmic evolution as a vicious war in which co-operation is unknown and success always rests upon cruelty. Such a view, he claims, ignores the fact that co-operation is as necessary a feature of the process as is conflict, and, moreover, it falsely depicts the process in terms drawn from human experience. 'There is not only a conflict,' Stephen writes, 'but a system of tacit alliances. One species is necessary to the existence of others, though the multiplication of some implies also the dying out of particular rivals. The conflict implies no cruelty... and the alliance no good-will.'¹⁰ There is

9 'Evolutionary Ethics', The Athenaeum, Aug. 5, 1893, p.194. This was in reply to an article 'Prof. Huxley on Evolution and Ethics', July 22, 1893, in which the reviewer makes practically the same point about the theological affinities of Huxley's views (see p.119) as Spencer does in the letter quoted above!

10 'Ethics and the Struggle for Existence' (1894?) in Social Rights and Duties (2 vols., Lond.1896), 1, p.232.

no reason to think that the evolutionary process could not produce men who must act in a moral fashion. Huxley, in a letter to Stephen, appears to accept the possibility,¹¹ but, as his 'Prolegomena' to 'Evolution and Ethics' makes clear, he refuses to accept the theory of social evolution by which Spencer and Stephen fill out this possibility.¹²

To understand Stephen's reply to Huxley's second objection we must remember his view that any belief which cannot be publicly verified is to be regarded, more or less, as a metaphysical proposition. Now the intuitionist view of goodness or rightness is for Stephen a metaphysical doctrine because it cannot be shown by any public test that such a thing exists: those who hold the view are forced to say that it can be recognised but not shown (in any conclusive way at least.) If an agnostic were to hold such a position then he would not only be maintaining a metaphysical ethic: he would be going back on the agnostic view that, as Huxley put it in 1866, 'there is

11 Huxley wrote in 1894: 'I don't see there is any real difference between us. You are charitable enough to overlook the general immorality of the cosmos on the score of its having begotten morality in one small part of its domain.' (L. Huxley, *op.cit.*, 2, p.382). This remark makes one wonder if Huxley understood what Stephen's ethical position really is.

12 Cf. ft.nt.3.

but one kind of knowledge and but one method of acquiring it.¹³

Because Stephen finds it hard to believe that Huxley is consciously making such a move, he suggests that he has failed to grasp the difference between a scientific and metaphysical theory of ethics and has unwittingly stumbled into the metaphysician's camp. Consequently he briefly repeats the distinction for Huxley's benefit. A scientific account of ethics neither attempts to explain away goodness nor to offer any reason why such a thing exists. It simply accepts the fact that there are goods and tries to show how they have been brought about: 'It "explains" certain phenomena, in the sense of showing their connection with previous phenomena, but does not show why the phenomena should present themselves at all.'¹⁴ If we attempt to explain why these things must be as opposed to how they come to be, or if we attempt to give a special status to moral knowledge then we have left the realm and method of science for those of metaphysics. And Huxley is surely aware that there is no point in following the fanciful pursuits of

13 T.H. Huxley, 'On the Advisableness of Improving Natural Knowledge', Collected Essays: Vol.1, p.41.

14 L. Stephen, op.cit., 2, p.229.

the metaphysicians; for 'if we agree, as Huxley would have agreed, that Hume's doctrine is true, if we cannot know a single fact except from experience, we are limited in moral questions, as in all others to elaborating and analysing our experience, and can never properly transcend it.'¹⁵

It seems clear, however, that Huxley did not think he was forsaking Hume, and he was unaffected by the charge that he was being inconsistent. 'Don't you know', he lightheartedly wrote to a friend, 'that I am become a reactionary and secret friend of the clerics.'¹⁶ One can sympathise with the agnostics' reluctance to believe this, even as a half truth. But, whether or not Huxley fully understood the implications of his criticisms, their reactions, as the 'Prologue' shows, did not lead him to qualify his position, though it is true that the second criticism is not mentioned in this addition.

What is the significance of Huxley's lecture? From the contemporary point of view and in terms of the history of the agnostic movement it is of considerable interest; for Huxley's criticisms suggest, as Spencer and Stephen clearly saw, that the aims of the movement

15 ibid., p.226.

16 L. Huxley, op.cit., 2, p.359.

had been mistaken in certain respects.¹⁷ And the mistake, given the context in which agnosticism developed, was not of a mean order. Whatever his motives Huxley had indeed become a reactionary and friend of clerics.

Philosophically the work is not quite so interesting, for Huxley is simply repeating criticisms that Sidgwick and others had been making during the course of the movement. The argument between Huxley and his fellow agnostics is, however, worth noting because it is marked on their part by the same curious lack of straightforwardness which is noticeable in their earlier attempts to refute criticism of a scientific theory of obligation. Often they proceed as if there is nothing to be said for opposed views; and they tend to believe that their critics can be answered by the exposition of their theories of moral obligation. At no point do they openly acknowledge that what they take to be the fact of moral obligation is very different from what Sidgwick, Seth, and Davies believe it to be, or that the views of these thinkers attempt to account for certain commonsense assumptions - such as the belief that there

17 On Contemporary interest see [] 'Prof. Huxley on Evolution and Ethics', The Athenaeum, July 22, 1893; H. Peterson, op.cit., pp.283-5.

must be a final reason for being moral - which on an agnostic view must be regarded as false or confused. As they wished to show that their moral doctrines adequately account for commonsense moral beliefs it is, perhaps, natural that they did not stress some of the differences between their theories and common belief. However it is also likely that they were unaware of the complexity of the issues involved in trying to establish a positive theory of moral obligation. But whatever the reason their ethical claims would have been strengthened if they had tackled some of these problems head on instead of ignoring or slipping past them.

II

While most of the agnostics were insensitive to or failed to see the point of the claim that the scientific account of moral obligation does not square with commonsense beliefs, they were acutely sensitive to the charge that a scientific account of moral behaviour is impossible because it would have to deny the ordinary view that a moral action is one which results from an uncaused act of will. This claim, Clifford says, is 'the most formidable objection that has been made to a scientific

treatment of ethics.¹⁸ Not all the agnostics would put the matter in exactly these terms - indeed, Spencer treats the problem very casually¹⁹ - but all are aware of it, and most of them attempt to show why the charge can be dismissed. In trying to show why it can be, the agnostics are not only aiming to defend the scientific study of moral action, which is Clifford's and Stephen's main concern in their ethical writings, they are also attempting to destroy that part of the case for miracles which says that they cannot be rejected or regarded as highly improbable simply because they are not subject to law, since we experience the same freedom from law in every moral act.²⁰

Basically, the agnostic discussion of moral responsibility centres around two points. One is that the doctrine of free will contributes nothing to an understanding of moral responsibility; the other is that

18 'Right and Wrong', Lectures and Essays, 2, p.148.

19 Cf. The Principles of Psychology, 1, pp.500-03. He is hardly concerned with the question of moral responsibility.

20 For example, Mansel writes: 'Deny the existence of a free will in man; and neither the possibility of miracles, nor any other question of religion or morality, is worth contending about. Admit the existence of a free will in man; and we have the experience of a power, analogous, however inferior, to that which is supposed to operate in the production of a miracle, and forming the basis of a legitimate argument from the less to the greater.' ('on Miracles' in Aids to Faith [ed. 7 W. Thomson, p.19).

analysis of what people ordinarily believe about moral responsibility shows that the commonsense view is compatible with and, indeed, requires a determinist view of human behaviour. For our purposes the former point can be neglected since it mainly consists in showing what many indeterminists - especially the followers of Hamilton - were prepared to admit, viz., that free will is inconceivable, and its existence is incompatible with the common belief in the connection between character and act. Despite these difficulties Hamilton and Mansel teach that we must believe in the existence of free will or give up our belief in moral acts.²¹ The agnostic's second point consists in showing that this is a false dilemma.

It ought to be noted before we consider their individual contributions that in each case the method of procedure is unsatisfactory. None of them ever stops to show what is meant by the vulgar notion of responsibility; they each assume, with the partial exception of Clifford, that the notion of responsibility is pretty clear cut,

21 Hamilton writes: 'As equally unthinkable, the two [i.e. freedom and fate] counter, the two one-sided schemes are thus theoretically balanced. But practically, our consciousness of the moral law, which, without a moral liberty in man, would be a mendacious imperative, gives a decisive preponderance to the doctrine of freedom. We are free in act, if we are accountable for our actions.' ('Conditions of the Thinkable', Discussions on Philosophy etc., p.597).

with the result that it is never quite clear what is involved in showing the compatibility of determinism and moral responsibility. If they had paid more attention to (say) Sidgwick's and Bradley's analysis of moral acts, then they might have been able to present a better set of defences for their claim.²² As it is their discussions, especially Tyndall's and Huxley's, pose problems rather than settle them.

In the writings of Tyndall and Huxley our attempts to assess moral responsibility are largely taken to be questions about whether a person is to be blamed or punished. The answer, they teach, is primarily to be found in discovering whether the physical act infringes the moral code. Tyndall, the publicist's publicist, presents the simplest and most implausible version of this view in an argument to show that the dispute between determinists and indeterminists is irrelevant to the actual application of the concept of moral responsibility. His position is that a man is morally responsible for any act which transgresses the moral code irrespective of the motives which cause the transgression. Thus, he argues, the determinist is unmoved by the criminal's plea

22 Cf. H. Sidgwick, The Methods of Ethics, Bk.1, ch.5; F.H. Bradley, Ethical Studies (Oxford 1876), Essay 1.

that he ought not to be held morally responsible for his acts since he could not help himself. His reply to such a claim is that the law has been broken: 'with a view to our own safety and purification we are determined that you and such as you shall not enjoy liberty of evil action in our midst.'²³ And, though the advocate of free will might not agree with the determinist's reasons for punishing the criminal, he will agree that he ought to be punished; 'Practically, then, as Bishop Butler predicted we act as the world acted when it supposed the evil-deeds of its criminals to be the products of free-will.'²⁴

Obviously the problem cannot be settled or shelved quite so easily. The indeterminist will object that Tyndall's account of moral (and legal) responsibility is not true to the facts. A morally wicked act is not simply an act which offends the moral code; it must be one that is freely performed as well. And, the indeterminist will argue, the only sort of freedom that will square with ordinary beliefs on the matter is the will's freedom from being caused.

23 'Science and Man' (1877), Fragments of Science
2, p.365.

24 ibid., p.366.

Now Huxley's account of moral responsibility takes note of this type of criticism, but he denies that it provides any support for the indeterminist position. It is true that a person cannot act in a responsible fashion unless he is free, but the freedom required by morality and the law is the freedom from external constraint, not freedom from causation. 'An agent is free', Huxley says, 'when there is nothing to prevent him from doing that which he desires to do.'²⁵ Secondly, Huxley takes note that 'a person is held responsible only for those acts which are preceded by a certain intention'²⁶, but he denies, as he must because of his epiphenomenalism,²⁷ that to say that a volition is a necessary condition of responsible act means that it is a necessary causal condition of the act. Instead he takes the view that the moral code defines an offensive act as one done willingly, and that we attempt to find out whether the act was preceded by a volition in order to describe, and not to

25 'On the Hypothesis that Animals are Automata...',
Collected Essays: Vol.1, p.240.

26 Hume, Collected Essays: Vol.6, p.222

27 For instance: 'our mental conditions are simply the symbols in consciousness of the change which takes place automatically in the organism; and that, to take an extreme illustration, the feeling we call volition is not the cause of a voluntary act, but the symbol of the state of the brain which is the immediate cause of the act' ('...Animals are Automata...', loc.cit., p.240).

explain, how the act was performed. 'A man's moral responsibility for his acts has, in fact, nothing to do with the causation of these acts, but depends on the frame of mind which accompanies them.'²⁸

Clearly this is a more sophisticated doctrine of responsibility than Tyndall's, but it too is a theory developed for the law courts. Huxley makes no attempt to explain how other features associated with responsible acts, such as praise, exhortation and remorse, fit into this account. And, given his epiphenomenalism it is difficult to see how he could find a place for them, since activities such as praising, verbal blaming, and exhorting are presumably based on the assumption that mental conditions can have some influence in determining actions.

When we turn to what Stephen and Clifford say we find a more thoroughgoing and sensitive attempt to square ordinary views of moral responsibility with determinism. In particular Stephen's discussion stands out because of its length and his awareness that interest in moral responsibility is not limited to questions about accountability. Unfortunately, however, Stephen's

attempted comprehensive discussion of moral responsibility is not the most successful agnostic treatment of the question, largely because he fails to treat one point at a time. Instead of showing by detailed analysis that our ordinary beliefs about moral responsibility are compatible with determinism, Stephen oscillates between attempts to establish this point and the related but separate claim that belief in free will as a cause of moral acts is incompatible with a belief in the person's accountability for those acts. Of course any thorough discussion of this matter would have to investigate both these matters, but Stephen tends to take them together with the result that he fails to get very far with either of them. One unintended consequence of his method is that his harmonization of determinism and moral responsibility, once it is extracted from his discussion, appears almost as dogmatic as that found in Tyndall and Huxley.

There are two parts to Stephen's treatment of the relation between determinism and moral responsibility. In the first he makes three points to show that common conceptions of moral responsibility are compatible with and require a deterministic view of moral conduct. Firstly, he contends that the freedom which we ordinarily regard as a necessary condition of moral action is simply the

absence of coercion or external constraint. This type of freedom is the only one that Stephen seems to think is commonly thought to be necessary for a moral act. 'I assume freedom, in the sense of freedom from external force,' he writes, 'wherever I assume merit, because the internal force accounts and must account for all that part of the phenomenon for which the external force does not account.'²⁹ Secondly, our ordinary way of determining moral responsibility depends upon the belief that people must act in character; that there is a necessary connection between the type of person a man is and the type of acts he performs. For example, when we find a saintly person with his throat cut we tend not to assume that he is morally responsible for what has happened, since we realize that the 'more saintly' a man is 'the smaller is the possibility'³⁰ that he would freely kill himself. And, as is not unnatural, - the third point - our common belief in the necessary connection between character and conduct is embedded in our language about moral character and moral acts. Thus, Stephen claims, 'to say that a man is benevolent means that he will always be benevolent; to say that an action is benevolent means that it proves

29 The Science of Ethics, p.281.

30 ibid., p.282.

the man to be benevolent.³¹

The second part of his discussion attempts to defend his claim that the only freedom necessary for a responsible act is the freedom from coercion. Stephen feels bound to consider this problem again because the claims of Hamilton and Mansel about the necessity of another sort of freedom as well strike a sensitive chord within him. 'Though', he writes, 'I am far from admitting this [Hamilton - Mansel] assertion, I think that it is true in this as in many other cases, that each party to the controversy is most effective when assailing the positions of its antagonist.'³²

According to Stephen the mistake of the Hamilton-Mansel school is that they take the statement that the cause of a moral act is caused to mean that the cause of a moral act is coerced or forced. If this were a true analysis, then they would be quite right in concluding that determinism is incompatible with the commonsense view of moral acts. But for this analysis to be correct the determinist must be regarded as claiming that the determinants of adult character are causing the character now at this moment; for only then would it be proper to describe the cause of moral actions as coerced because it is caused. The determinist, however, certainly does

31 ibid.

32 ibid., p.285.

not say this. What he asserts is that the causes of the character of the moral adult have acted and made his character what it is today; he shows the effects of their influence, but it is not an influence which is continually being produced. Stephen illustrates his contention in this way: 'We might (though the language would be somewhat strained) call the child ... the "cause" of the man. But for the child the man would not exist. But there is not a child plus a man, in which case there might be a coercion of the man by the child. The child and man form a continuous whole, with properties slowly varying according to its character and the external circumstances.'³³ Once we see that the force of the Hamiltonian claim rests upon this misunderstanding of the determinist position then we have removed the major objection to the view that determinism is incompatible with moral responsibility.

But is it as simple as this? One can easily imagine Mansel objecting that Stephen has misinterpreted his position. The objection, he might say, is not that the causes of the cause of moral acts are external constraints upon present action, but that if there are such causes then their existence robs any act caused by

character of moral significance just as surely as coercion does. If Stephen is to satisfactorily refute this claim he must show that the vulgar notion of responsibility does not involve, ^{as} on the Hamiltonian claim, a belief in uncaused acts of will.

It is to Clifford's credit that he realized, probably as a result of Sidgwick's 'admirable book, "The Methods of Ethics"',³⁴ that a detailed study of the language of moral responsibility is necessary to support the scientific case. At the same time he had no illusions about this being an easy task: 'Words in common use, such as [conscience and responsibility] have their meanings practically fixed before difficult controversies arise; but after the controversy has arisen each party gives that slight tinge to the meaning which best suits its own view of the question. Thus it appears to each that the common language obviously supports their own view, and that the opponents are using words in a new meaning and wresting them from their proper sense.'³⁵ Nevertheless Clifford believes that his tinge brings out most clearly what is implied in ordinary talk about moral responsibility.

Like Stephen, Clifford maintains that moral

34 'Right and Wrong', Lectures and Essays, 2, p.161.

35 ibid., p.149.

actions are caused in some sense by a person's character, and that this belief is contained in the ordinary language of moral responsibility. Unfortunately he fails to show this, but he approaches the matter in the right way. If, he argues, we examine ordinary talk about physical and moral responsibility we find that in both cases we generally say that a 'man is responsible for that part of an event which was undertermined when he was left out of account, and which becomes determinate when he was taken account of.'³⁶ With this statement the indeterminist might well agree were it not for the interpretation which Clifford gives it. For he claims that in accepting this statement we also accept the view that 'when we ask the practical question, "who is responsible for so-and-so?" we want to find out who is to be got at in order that so-and-so may be altered.'³⁷

Now if this is what is ordinarily meant by asking who is morally responsible, then our common beliefs about the responsibilities of others are incompatible with the belief that uncaused volitions are the significant causes of responsible acts; for there is, on Clifford's view, no way of getting at a person's free will in order

36 ibid., p.150.

37 ibid., p.151.

to stop or encourage the willing of these acts.³⁸ However, since willing is a necessary causal condition of a moral act, this cause must be a part of our character, a part which, like the rest, is capable in principle of being changed or influenced by external forces. If we wish further evidence that our beliefs about moral responsibility are based on such a view, then we have only to examine the process of moral education, for 'if the acts for which we hold people responsible do not depend on the character, what is the use of trying to alter the character?'³⁹

To complete his case Clifford shows how determinism accounts for moral action. There are, he says, three necessary conditions of a moral act. The first two are quite usual: the act should not be compelled by external circumstances, and the person should have an awareness of right and wrong. To these the indeterminist will add that the act must be voluntary by which he means preceded by an uncaused act of will. Alone amongst the agnostics, Clifford admits that a moral act must be voluntary or chosen, but he denies that we can account for

38 Clifford says of acts of free will: 'There is something wholly capricious and disorderly, belonging to that moment only.' (*ibid.*, p.148).

39 *ibid.*, p.159.

this voluntariness by bringing in free will. According to Clifford the voluntary character of a moral act can best be noted by making the following the third condition of a moral act: 'the action [must be] one in regard to the doing or not doing of which conscience might be a sufficient motive.'⁴⁰

Now to understand why Clifford regards this third condition in this way we must recall his psychological-physiological view of mind. According to this doctrine what we regard as voluntary or willed acts result from motives which are consciously entertained by the mind. There are a variety of ways in which this is done. In the simplest case a voluntary act is one which is not instinctive; in more complicated situations the act sometimes results from a conflict between motives in which one motive naturally prevails; in the case of a moral act the motive which prevails in this struggle is not one which merely happens to succeed but one which is deliberately chosen and thus helped to prevail by 'the deeper motive choosing self which is called Reason, and the Will, and the Ego.'⁴¹ It is not sufficient for moral actions that the act should have been deliberately

40 ibid., p.152.

41 ibid., p.157

performed, as the second and third conditions make clear. The person must have a conscience, and the conscience must have been operative in the determination of the act; that is, the conscience must have been a motivating force, and the act will result from the ego's supporting or suppressing this motive.

As it stands Clifford's argument that his deterministic theory of man is not incompatible with but required by belief in moral responsibility can hardly be regarded as adequate. In judging it, however, we must bear in mind that it was not intended to be anything but a brief statement. Considered against the background of other agnostic efforts in this field, it provides an unhappy commentary on the ability of his colleagues to handle what they rightly considered to be for many a serious problem; for brief as Clifford's treatment is, it is the most careful and rounded of agnostic contributions to this issue.

Chapter Thirteen

Conclusion

The conflict between Huxley and the other agnostics over evolution and ethics illustrates the failure of vision which accompanied the agnostic movement in its latter days. The agnostics were tired and old, and more importantly, they found themselves living in a world in which they and their cause were no longer relevant. Leslie Stephen captured the depression which resulted from ^{the} combination ^{of} age and remoteness when he wrote in 1892: 'Lights which once cheered me have gone out all too rapidly; and, to say nothing of individuals, I have also lived long enough to watch the decay of once flourishing beliefs. I can remember, only too vividly, the confident hope with which many young men, whom I regarded as the destined leaders of progress, affirmed that the doctrine which they advocated were going forth conquering and to conquer, and though I may still think that those doctrines had a permanent value, and were far from deserving the reproaches now often levelled at them, I must admit that we greatly exaggerated our omniscience. I am often tempted, I confess, to draw the rather melancholy moral that some of my young friends may be destined to disillusionment, and may be driven

some thirty years hence to admit that the present confidence was a little in excess.¹

At the philosophical level there are several reasons why the agnostics became somewhat remote figures. It is partly explained by the fact that philosophy was becoming more and more a professional activity carried on within universities and professional associations. This, as well as the fact that the dominant university philosophers - Bradley, Bosanquet, Caird, Sidwick, Ward - were opposed to agnosticism, is, however, only part of the story. Even with such strong opposition the agnostics would have made headway if they had been more competent philosophers. Generally speaking they lack keen philosophical awareness, and at a time when standards of philosophizing were being set more and more by professional philosophers, this lack told against them. This failing is all the more apparent in their ethical writings because of their extent. Whatever might be the value of the descriptive material contained in their ethical works it is clear that their grasp of the philosophical problems involved in moral philosophy is rather weak. And the same can be said for most of the other

¹ 'The Aims of Ethical Societies' (1892), Social Rights and Duties, 1, p.38.

aspects of agnosticism that we have considered. There are of course exceptions - Clifford's work on the nature of science shows considerable independence - but generally agnosticism failed as a strictly philosophical movement.

Agnosticism, however, did not fail to make an impression on contemporary philosophers. Bradley and Caird took note of agnostic doctrines, and Sidwick, Ward, Alexander, and James developed or strengthened their positions in reaction to agnostic theories.² The agnostics could not, however, rejoice at judgments such as the one James made of Spencer: 'He left a Spencer's name to other times, linked with one virtue and a thousand crimes. The one virtue is his belief in the universality of evolution - the 1000 crimes are his 5000 pages of absolute incompetence to work it out in detail.'³

Apart from their influence upon philosophical circles the agnostics exercised a wide influence upon

2 Cf. J.A. Passmore, 'Darwin's Impact on British Metaphysics', Victorian Studies, 3, 1958-1960; J. Ward, Naturalism and Agnosticism, Essays in Philosophy (Camb. 1927), pp.55-56, and 'Can Faith Remove Mountains' (1879); S. Alexander, Moral Order and Progress (1889) acknowledges a debt to Stephen's Science of Ethics.

3 Cited E.G. Boring, A History of Experimental Psychology, p.243.

educated opinion. In part this was a deliberate policy: they were anxious to publicize their views and took every advantage of public opportunities. In part it resulted from the periodical position: until the mid-seventies they had no option but to publish in general reviews such as the Contemporary, Fortnightly, Frazer's and so on.

Positively, as James suggests, the most important role the agnostics played in influencing opinion was in gaining the wide acceptance of evolution as a general explanatory concept. Clifford, for example, drew attention in 1877 to the increasing tendency to consider things from an evolutionary viewpoint. 'It is probable', he writes, 'that the doctrine of evolution fills a somewhat larger space in our attention than belongs to its ultimate influence. In the next century, perhaps, men will not think so much about it; they will be paying a new attention to some new thing. But', he continues, 'it will have seized upon their minds, and will dominate all their thoughts to an extent that we cannot as yet conceive.'⁴ Clifford was, of course, right. Evolutionary theories, though not always of the sort that agnostics would approve of, became the order of the day in meta-

4 'Cosmic Emotion', Lectures and Essays, 2, pp.273-4.

physics, ethics, theology, and so on.⁵

A second general influence exercised by the agnostics concerned the relation of science and religion. Through their support the belief that science and Christianity are irreconcilably opposed gained wide acceptance. The success they had in propagating their view can be partially measured by the extent to which orthodox Christians were prepared to trim their sails to science. For example if Aids to Faith (1861) is compared with Lux Mundi (1889) the difference is quite striking. Both works were produced by distinguished High Church Anglicans as restatements of the faith to meet current needs. In the former the claims of science against faith are corrected; in the latter, the faith is restated to harmonize with science: in 1861 Adam and Eve are defended; Darwin is extolled in 1889. Aubrey Moore, for instance, writes in Lux Mundi: 'The one absolutely impossible conception of God in the present day, is that which represents Him as an occasional visitor: science had pushed the deist's God farther and

5 See R. Metz, A Hundred Years of British Philosophy, ch.3, 'The Evolutionary Naturalist School'; J.A. Passmore, One Hundred Years of Philosophy (references to evolution) J. Huxley, Evolution and Ethics (Introduction)

farther away, and at the moment when it seemed as if He would be thrust out altogether, Darwinism appeared, and under the guise of a foe did the work of a friend. It has conferred upon philosophy and religion an inestimable benefit, by showing us that we must choose between two alternatives. Either God is everywhere present in nature, or He is nowhere. He cannot be here and not there.'⁶ Lux Mundi became the text book of the catholic wing of the Church for the next thirty years.

Probably the most important aspect of agnosticism is the effect it had in helping to change current attitudes about science and religion. The agnostics, however, were not primarily publicists. They aimed to change men's beliefs by showing the truth of their own. At this level they were not quite so successful, but there can be no doubting the intensity of their aim and purpose in pursuing it.

6 A. Moore, 'The Doctrine of God', Lux Mundi (1889; 12th ed. Lond. 1891) ed. C. Gore, p.73. On this movement see A.M. Ramsey, From Gore to Temple(Lond. 1960) ch.1, 'Lux Mundi'.

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The place of publication is London unless otherwise stated.

The following abbreviations are used:

C.R.	<u>Contemporary Review</u>
V.I.	<u>Journal of the Transactions of the Victoria Institute or Philosophical Society of Great Britain</u>
F.R.	<u>Fortnightly Review</u>
H.I.	<u>Journal of the History of Ideas</u>
N.C.	<u>Nineteenth Century</u>
V.S.	<u>Victorian Studies</u>

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