

Frances Power Cobbe

*The Peak in Darien,
With Some Other
Inquiries Touching
Concerns of the Soul
and the Body*

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An Octave of Essays



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PREFACE.

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My last little book, *Lectures on the Duties of Women*, was addressed principally to the young of my own sex. The present volume is intended for my contemporaries who are daily brought face to face with some of the darker problems of the time, or are led by their advancing years to ponder ever more earnestly on the mystery of the great transition. In these various papers,—some new, some already published in different periodicals,—I have striven to meet fairly the questions whether the denial of God and immortality be indeed (as Agnostics and Comtists are wont to boast) a “magnanimous” creed, whether life be truly (as Leopardi and Schopenhauer and hundreds of their English disciples din daily in our ears) a burden and a curse, and whether (as much recent legislation and newspaper literature would seem to teach) bodily health be after all the *summum bonum* for which personal freedom, courage, humanity, and purity ought all to be sacrificed?

To these discussions, I have added one on the “Fitness of Women for the Ministry of Religion,”—a subject, I believe, destined soon to acquire importance,—with two or three less serious papers on other matters touching moral questions; and, in conclusion, I have returned to a speculation concerning the immediate entry into the life after death which I find has possessed interest for many readers. That “Peak in Darien,” which we must all ascend in our turn,—the apex of two worlds, whence the soul may

possibly descry the horizonless Pacific of eternity,—is the turning-point of human hope. And it appears to me infinitely strange that so little attention has been paid to the cases wherein indications seem to have been given of the perception by the dying of blessed presences revealed to them even as the veil of flesh has dropped away. Were I permitted to record with names and references half the instances of this occurrence which have been narrated to me, this short essay might have been swelled to a volume. It is my wish, however, that it should serve to suggest observation and provoke the interchange of experiences, rather than be considered as pretending to decide affirmatively the question wherewith it deals.

Perhaps it may be as well to forestall any misapprehension by stating plainly that I utterly disbelieve, and even regard with intense dislike, all so-called “Spiritualist” manifestations and attempts to recall the dead; and that I have never found any sufficient testimony for stories of ghosts or apparitions of the departed beheld by men and women still in the midst of life. Only at the very moment when we are passing into their arms does it seem to me that the law of our being may permit us to recognize once more the beloved ones who are “not lost, but gone before.” The lines of W. J. Fox precisely express my thought on this subject:—

Call them from the dead!
Vain the call must be;
But the hand of death shall lay,
Like that of Christ, its healing clay

On eyes which then shall see
That glorious company.

FRANCES POWER COBBE.

JULY, 1882.

MAGNANIMOUS ATHEISM.

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“Be of good cheer, brother!” said John Bradford to his fellow-martyr while the fagots were kindling: “we shall have a brave supper in heaven with the Lord to-night!” “Be of good cheer, everybody!” cry an army of modern confessors, seated in library chairs: “there is no heaven and no Lord, and when we die there will be an end of us all, *in saecula saeculorum*; but the generations who come after us will be greatly edified by our beautiful books and our instructive example.”

Perhaps the moral vitality of our age is in no way better exemplified than by the fact that certain doubts, which seem to strike mortal blows at the head and heart of human virtue, yet leave it breathing, and even pulsating with aspirations after some yet loftier excellence than saints and heroes have hitherto attained. To look back to the “infidels” with whom Massillon and Jeremy Taylor had to do, and compare them with the Agnostics of our time, is indeed more encouraging than to compare the “faithful” of past centuries with those of the present age. While the old Atheist sheltered his vice behind a rampart of unbelief where no appeals could reach him, the new Agnostic honestly maintains that his opinions are the very best foundations of virtue. No one can for a moment say of him that he chooses darkness rather than light *because* his deeds are evil. If it be (as we think) darkness which he has chosen, there can be no question that his deeds are good,

and that his conceptions of duty are truly elevated and far-reaching, and enforced by every argument which he has left himself at liberty to use. Renouncing faith in God and in the life hereafter,—that is to say, in *Goodness Infinite* and *Goodness Immortalized*,—he retains the most fervent faith in goodness as developed in human life,—that is to say, in *goodness finite* in degree and in duration. If we are to accept his own statement of the case, the Agnostic has completely turned the front of the theological battle. It is now the pagans who have seized and hold aloft the sacred labarum of duty and self-sacrifice, and *in hoc signo* are destined to victory.

The claim is one of the gravest which can be put forth between man and man. It was not easy—it was, alas! often beyond our strength—to combat our doubts or those of others, while yet we fought against them as a sailor fights against enemies cutting his anchor cable on a stormy night. We stand amazed and disarmed by the strange intelligence that, when these doubts have done their work, and cast us adrift altogether from allegiance to God and hope of another life, *then*, when all seems lost, we shall suddenly discover that we have touched the Fortunate Isles of virtue and peace. Only the thorough sceptic, we are assured, can be the perfect saint. Nobody can disinterestedly serve his brother on earth till he is entirely persuaded he has no Father in heaven. The fruit of the Tree of Knowledge (of course it is always assumed that it *is* a tree of genuine knowledge on which Atheism grows) is to be desired, not only because it will make us “wise,” but because it will make us *good*. Who will hesitate any more to pluck and eat?

To the consideration of this now common pretension of Agnosticism to be the true FRIEND OF VIRTUE, in the room of the old delusion of religion, the following pages will be devoted. For the purposes of our particular argument and to avoid entangling ourselves with too many collateral questions, I shall treat it here as the *Assumption of the Moral Superiority of Atheism over Theism*. Is that assumption justifiable? I, for one, am entirely ready to admit that, *if* there be anything in the faith in God and immortality which detracts from the highest conceivable perfection of human virtue,—if, in short, Atheism have a better morality to teach than Theism,—then the case of Theism must be abandoned. The religion which is *not* the holiest conceivable by the man who holds it is condemned *ipso facto*.

For the present, I may assume that no important difference of opinion exists as to the practical rules of morality. It is the proper *motives* to a virtuous and self-sacrificing life which Agnostics claim to place on higher ground than that which has been hitherto given to them. They propose to tell us to “do justice and love mercy” both in a better and more disinterested way than while we added to those unquestionable duties the mistaken attempt to walk humbly with our God. The question lies in a nutshell,—Can they do it? Is there anything in the true Theistic faith detracting from the disinterestedness of virtue, or calculated to rob it of a single ray of purity and glory? This must be our first contention, since religion now stands on its defence as a basis of morality. When it is settled, it may perhaps appear that religion may justly again assume the offensive, and challenge Atheism to prove its capacity for

serving equally efficiently as a support for the virtue of humanity; and, if it appear that to such a challenge no satisfactory reply can be given, then it will be manifest that, in their expressions of satisfaction and joy at the anticipated downfall of religion, Atheists display disregard of the moral interests of their race.

Let the lists be cleared in the first place. I shall not be expected to defend all the base and demoralizing things which, in the misused name of Christianity, have been inculcated concerning "Other-worldliness,"—the doing good for the sake of getting to heaven, and avoiding evil from fear of hell. Since the day, recorded by Joinville, when the mysterious old woman carried her waterpot and torch before St. Louis, and told him she intended to put out the fires of hell and burn up heaven, so that men might learn to love God for his own sake, and not from fear or hope,—since that distant time, there have not been wanting righteous souls who have girded and spurned at the vile lessons current in the Churches, and asked with Kingsley,—

"Is selfishness,—for time, a sin,—stretched out into eternity,
Celestial prudence?"

Beyond a doubt, one of the heaviest charges against the popular creed is that, while its ministers have raged against the smallest theological error, and convulsed the world by their ridiculous disputes concerning mysteries altogether beyond the reach of human comprehension, they have complacently endured and even fostered moral heresies which withered up the very roots of virtue. The whole tone of ordinary Romish exhortation, *faire son salut*, is often base

beyond expression; and the teaching of the Church of England in the last century was no better. Here are some specimens of it. Rutherford says (*Nature and Obligations of Virtue*, 1744), "Every man's happiness is the ultimate end which reason teaches him to pursue, and the constant and uniform practice of virtue becomes our duty *when* revelation has informed us that God will make us finally happy in a life after this." Paley is no better. He says:[1] "Virtue is the doing good to mankind in obedience to the will of God and *for the sake of everlasting happiness*. According to which definition, the good of mankind is the subject, the will of God the rule, and *everlasting happiness the motive of virtue*." Waterland, the great champion of Trinitarianism, went even further. He says that "being just and grateful without future prospects has as much of moral virtue in it *as folly or indiscretion has*." These are the kind of doctrines which have been placidly admitted among the recognized teachings of the great Christian Churches. Nor have some of the philosophers proved a whit more conscious of the simple notion of duty. Bentham, for example,[2] plainly lays it down that for a man to give up a larger pleasure of his own for a smaller one of his neighbor's is an act not of virtue, but of *folly*.

Certainly, if the new Agnostics had no types of religion or morality save these thoroughly debased ones wherewith to compare their system, they might well claim to be the evangelists of a purer gospel. Better, assuredly better, would it be to believe in no God than to pay homage to the all-adorable Author of Good for the sake of the payment we expect him to give us. Better, assuredly better, to expect no

life beyond the grave than to poison every act of courage, justice, or beneficence by the vile notion of being rewarded for it in heaven; or to refrain from treachery and cruelty and lies, merely, like a beaten hound, from dread of the bloody scourge of hell.

But it would be an insult to the well-informed and widely-read advocates of Agnosticism, if we were to assume for a moment that they were ignorant that this base alloy of religion has been almost universally repudiated by the higher class of English divines of the present day, of every shade of Orthodoxy; while, outside of the Churches, there is not a religious man who does not regard them with unmitigated disgust. The question really is, not whether religion *may* be made to corrupt morality with bribes and threats, but whether it properly does so; whether a religious man *ought*, in accordance with his theology, to be less disinterested than an Atheist. To reply to this question, it seems only necessary to recall what a Theist believes about God and immortality as concerned with his own virtue.

A Theist believes, then, that the goodness and justice, which the Agnostic recognizes and loves so well in their human manifestations, have existence beyond humanity, and are carried to ideal perfection in a Being who is, in some sense, the Soul and Ruler of the universe.

This belief, at all events (whether legitimately held or only a dream), cannot, I presume, so far as it goes, be charged with detracting from the purity of virtue. Goodness cannot be esteemed less good, or justice less just, because there exists One who is supremely good and just.

Further, as regards himself, the Theist believes that this supremely good and just Being so constituted his nature and the world around him as that the law of goodness and justice should be *known* to him as the sacred rule, whereby he is inwardly bound to determine his actions and sentiments. In other words, he believes that he has acquired his moral sense of God, and not from any undesigned, fortuitous order of things which may have impressed it as an hereditary idea on his brain.

I am at a loss to guess how *this* step further can be supposed to be hostile to the disinterestedness of virtue. It is easy to see how the opposite theory of the origin of conscience, as exhibited in Mr. Darwin's *Descent of Man*,—whereby the authority of the human intuition, “Thou shalt do no murder,” is traced to the same origin as the bees' intuition of the duty of killing their brothers, the drones (namely, the hereditary transmission of ideas found conducive to the welfare of the tribe),—should dethrone Conscience from her assumed supremacy, and place her among the crowd of other hereditary notions, neither more nor less deserving of honor. And, on the other hand, the attribution of our moral ideas, directly or indirectly, to the teaching of a Being immeasurably above us,—a theory which represents conscience as a ray shot downward from a sun, instead of a marsh-fire illumined under special conditions of social existence, and liable to blaze up, die down, or flit hither and thither as they may determine,—must inevitably elevate and sanctify the laws of morals to our apprehension. In truth, it is obvious that, had the first hypothesis (of the hereditary transmission of useful ideas)

been heard of in the days of our ancestors, the “mystic extension” (as Mr. Mill calls it) of utility into morality could never have been accomplished, and repentance and remorse would have been unknown experiences. But all this refers to the practical *authority* of moral laws. It is with the *disinterestedness* of the man who obeys them that we are at present concerned; and this disinterestedness is not, that I perceive, influenced one way or the other by the theory he may hold of how he comes by his knowledge of them.

But now we reach the point where, it is to be presumed, the Atheist finds ground for his claim to superior disinterestedness. The Theist believes not only that goodness and justice are attributes of God, and that God has taught him to be good and just, but that God further holds what the old Schoolmen called the *Justitia Rectoria* of the universe,—that he so ordains things as that, sooner or later, good will surely befall the good, and evil the evil. So much as this is included in the simplest elements of Theism. In its fuller development, Theism teaches more: namely, that God takes the interest of a Father in the moral welfare of his children; that he has created every human soul (and doubtless thousands of races of other intelligent beings) for the express purpose that each should attain, through the teaching and trials of existence, to virtue, and so enter into the supreme bliss of sympathy and communion with himself. Theism thus understood teaches that God is perpetually training each soul for that sublime end, inspiring it with light, answering its prayers for spiritual aid, punishing it for its errors, hedging up its way with thorns to prevent its wanderings, and finally certainly conducting it, through this

life and perhaps many lives to come, to the holiness and blessedness for which it was made.

The position of a Theist differs therefore essentially from that of an Atheist as regards the practice of virtue, inasmuch as the Atheist thinks he has no superhuman spectator or sympathizer; that the thoughts and feelings which awaken his conscience and move his heart do not originate in any mind out of his own; that the woes of his life bear with them no moral meaning of retribution or expiation; and finally that, whether he be a hero or a coward, a saint or a sinner, it will be all one, so far as himself is concerned, when the hour of his death has sounded. His actions may and will have important consequences to other men, but as regards his own destiny they can have no consequences at all; for the grave will receive everything that remains of him. The virtues he may have acquired with unutterable struggles will die away into nothingness, like the sound of a broken harp-string. He will neither rejoin his dead friends nor come into any fresh consciousness of God. Neither dead friends nor God have any existence; and a little sooner or later, as he may chance to be a more or less important person, he will be altogether forgotten, and no being in the universe will ever more remember that he once *was*.

Now, I think it would be idle to deny that it must be *far harder* to be virtuous under the shadow of this Atheism than in the sunshine of Theism. The tax and strain upon the moral nature of a man who holds the views just indicated of the emptiness of the universe of any One absolutely good and just, of the low and haphazard origin of conscience, and

of the utter loneliness and unaided state wherewith man pursues his weary course from the cradle to the inevitable, eternal grave, must be simply enormous. All honor, sincere and hearty honor, and full recognition of their noble disinterestedness, be to those Atheists who, under such strain, yet struggle successfully and incessantly to do good and not evil all their days, and to die bravely and calmly, letting go their grasp of life and joy and love, and sinking without a groan under the waters which are to cover them for evermore. There is something in the self-sustained, Promethean courage of such a man which commands our admiration; and we can well imagine him looking round on his suffering fellows pitifully, as on his orphaned and disinherited brothers and sisters, with infinite compassion, deeming them destined like himself to perish with all their aspirations and capacities disappointed and unfulfilled. For such a man to devote himself to the labors of practical benevolence and the relief of the woe which surrounds him, whence he usually draws his strongest arguments for his desolate creed, would seem to be the fittest, if not the only fit pursuit; and, when we behold him engaged in it (as in instances I could readily name), our whole hearts recognize his virtue as absolutely beautiful and disinterested. But because the Atheist's virtue, when he is virtuous, is without alloy, is there any just reason to hold that it is *more* pure than that of the Theist? His task is, as I have readily admitted, the *harder* of the two; *so* hard indeed is it that there seem the gravest reasons for fearing that, if a few noble spirits perform it, the mass of tried and tempted men who can scarcely lift themselves from their selfishness even

with the two wings of Faith and Hope will lie prone in the very mire of vice when those wings are broken. But, because the Atheist's duty is harder to do, is it consequently better done? Is the music which he draws from that one string of philanthropy sweeter than the full chord of all the religious and social affections together?

Let us revert to the points of difference between the two creeds as above enumerated. Is a man necessarily *self-interested* in doing the will of a Being whom he *loves* and hopes by serving to approach and resemble? Of course, if he is looking for payment,—for health, wealth, happiness on earth or celestial glory,—for any adventitious reward outside of the fact of becoming better and nearer to God,—then, indeed, his service is self-interested. He is a mercenary in the army of martyrs. In strict ethics, his conduct, however exactly legal, is not virtuous; for virtue can only be absolutely without side-looks to contingent profit, present or future. I presume that, when Agnostics boast of the superior disinterestedness of the virtue they inculcate over that of religious men, they think (and cannot divest themselves of the early acquired habit of thinking) of religion as of this kind of labor-and-wages system,—hard duty below, high glory above,—with perhaps the additional complication of certain scholastic doctrines of imputed righteousness. But it is time this confusion should cease. Love of goodness *impersonated in God* is not a less disinterested, though naturally a more fervent, sentiment than love of goodness in the abstract. The Theist, in his attempt to obey by good deeds the will of the Being he loves, acts as simply as the Atheist, who loves the good deed, thinking that no being

higher in the scale of existence than himself has any appreciation of the difference between good and evil. The Theist, indeed, adds to his love of goodness *per se* a love of goodness impersonated in God, who desires good actions to be done,[3] and possibly also a hope that, by doing good now, he may be given the power to do it again and again for ever; but it is all the same charmed circle of *doing good for goodness' sake*, out of which he never emerges into any such motive as doing good for the sake of honor, prosperity, or heavenly bliss in a golden city. The sole thing which the Theist asks of God as the reward of obedience is the power to obey better in future, the privilege of obeying forever. The payment of his virtue is to be virtuous now and throughout eternity. Whether it be in this life or another, there is no difference; no new principle comes into play; no bribe unsought for here is hoped for there. He says to God: "It is a joy to serve Thee, but infinitely greater is the joy to serve Thee with the assurance that the term of my service will never expire. Precious is the privilege of calling Thee Father. How glad then am I that I shall be a child at Thy feet forever! Lord, I seek no heaven hereafter. I covet no abode of bliss, no outward reward above. To be with Thee is my heaven and my salvation and the only reward I seek. As I abide in Thee now, may I continue to live in Thee, O Father; and to grow in wisdom and love and purity and joy in Thee, time without end." [4]

Surely, it is altogether absurd to speak of this religion as involving any, even the very slightest shade of interestedness or detraction from the highest conceivable type of human virtue. If it deserve such a condemnation,

then must likewise stand condemned the most pure and exalted human love which friend has ever felt for friend,—for this also, by its very nature, seeks to serve for love's sake, to arrive at perfect harmony, to dwell with the beloved in unbroken and everlasting union.

Turn we now to the other side of the subject. Theism has been, I hope, vindicated from the charge of interestedness. What shall we say to the general ethical aspect of Agnosticism, which assumes to be the nobler system? Admitting the blameless conduct and the high aspirations of some of its professors, what value shall we attach to their claim to be the heralds of a higher morality?

If I may, without offence, condense their lessons in a very obvious parallel, they amount to this “symbol”: “Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he cease to believe either in one God or in three; and that he be fully assured that those who have done good and those who have done evil shall alike go into everlasting nothingness.” This creed piously accepted, he will advance to perfection and outrun in two ways any excellence which has been hitherto attained.

1st. While recognizing that, so far as he himself is concerned, death means the annihilation of consciousness, he will act throughout his life with a deep and conscientious concern for the consequences of his actions to those who come after him or, as Mr. Frederick Harrison expresses it, to his own posthumous activity.

2d. By welcoming the conclusions of Atheism, and especially the doctrine of the annihilation of consciousness at death, not as a sorrowful truth, but as the latest and