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## ARTICLE II.

## A FIELD OF KNOWLEDGE STRANGELY ABANDONED.

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WHAT men do not know often reveals some deeper secret of their mind and character. For instance, in cases brought before courts it is a matter of remark how much some witnesses do not remember. In the pithy story related in the Gospel of John concerning a blind man, said to have been cured by Jesus, the Pharisees attempted to break the force of the man's own testimony to his cure. Disconcerted in this endeavor, they covered their failure by saying, "As for this fellow, we know not whence he is." The response of the man was penetrating: "Why herein is a marvellous thing, that ye know not whence he is, and yet he hath opened mine eyes."

The surprise, which was not altogether confidence or admiration, exhibited in this plain man's observation is repeated in the experience of many who come in contact with the agnosticism of our time. It is a marvellous thing to survey the fields which their minds abandon. A brief allusion to the word just used will soon bring the abandoned field to view. Only the most recent dictionaries of our language contain the word "agnostic." Less than twenty years ago even the best of them had not treasured it. The most prominent and extensive cylopaedias up to the present date have failed to include it; yet our current literature is full of references to it. So rapidly yet silently has this term taken its place as a sign of our times. Nescience, which is its synonyme, had been recognized a little sooner by the lexicographers, yet not in the present philosophical sense until after the publication of *The Limits of Religious Thought*, in 1858. These facts, while they are far from indicating that agnosticism is a novel product, still bear witness that it is a phase

of thinking which has found in our generation a congenial soil and climate.

This term may be employed to designate the posture of thinkers who in some respects—in very important respects, indeed—are very far asunder. Thus the agnosticism of Kant constituted an epoch in the history of philosophical thought. But the epoch which he constituted is in utter contrast with that of Comte; yet the same name may be given to the latter. Herbert Spencer may be regarded as the typical agnostic of the hour. How different, however, from him was Sir William Hamilton. On Hamilton's tombstone it is written, "His aim was by a pure philosophy to teach that we see through a glass darkly: now we know in part; his hope was that in the life to come he should see face to face, and know even as he is known." Nevertheless Hamilton built up the special theory of nescience. One may easily quote from Horace Bushnell passages which Herbert Spencer might put alongside of his excerpt from Mansel to show that God is not an object of science. "There is," said he, "in fact, no science here, and never will be."<sup>1</sup> But any one who really knows what that brilliant spirit wrought would feel that his disclaimer of knowledge is wholly of another intent from that of James Mill. It is undoubtedly true that both Kant and Hamilton were in a sense agnostic. It is also true that their methods have been perverted to the undermining of theism. But their aim was to lead the way to what they hoped would prove the only unassailable ground of confidence in God and in immortality. The philosopher may be cast down when he hears the Hartford divine telling him "Metaphysics have never established anything," they "are impossible;" but the philosopher is not destroyed, for he will hear in a moment the same voice affirming, "Faith is a much higher, more explorative way of knowledge here than opinion, and cannot well be ignored as the summit-faculty of souls." Such a mind may be far too independent in the way it makes its distinctions, but it cannot be said to abandon really any field of cognition, least of all the one in which

<sup>1</sup> *Life and Letters*, p. 498.

“the summit-faculty” has its range. For the purposes of this Article the other class of writers will be taken as representing the agnosticism of the time.

The field especially abandoned by these writers is that covered by theology. If we make a sharp distinction between science and philosophy the realm of the latter would be relinquished also. But our transcendent interest pertains to theology. This is the department, too, which is oftenest and with most emphasis stigmatized as without form and void to human thought. This whole realm, which has been so prolific, which has through many ages dominated education and learning, is at once and at a stroke dismissed as hopelessly impotent. Of course as long as such dismissal was regarded as simply the idea of some few obscure persons, isolated, and having only an obscure following, it would be regarded as something done in a dream. But when the spirit of such a creed becomes an active force, aspires to the control of education, literature, and physical science, and realizes largely its aspiration, we may then bethink ourselves how radical a revolution it is proposing. The scholar, who knows what action and re-action have been in the past, will not give way to alarm himself: he cannot be an alarmist, for he says to himself, as Athanasius said of the paganism of the emperor Julian, “It is but a passing cloud”; still such revolutions, if transitory, are accompanied with much confusion, storm, and stress. It is incumbent, therefore, on us to put distinctly before us how vast the province is which is thus to be taken out of the scholar’s empire. At a time when our seminaries are multiplying the number of distinct professorships, and feeling the need of four instead of three years for their curriculum, it gives one a queer feeling to encounter not one man, but groups of aggressive thinkers who assure us that this entire department is going by the board.

The reasons given for this abandonment, if valid, are sufficiently startling. The rigid forms of this nescient philosophy hold that all which can be known by the mind is the phenomena presented to the bodily senses. But neither God

nor any spiritual being can be thus presented. In that form which is now styled the synthetic philosophy the mind is tantalized, however, by something which is not merely phenomenal, which is called vaguely "the ultimate existence," "the unseen reality," "the inscrutable power." Still this existence, reality, or power is utterly "unknowable." We seem to live in sight of it all the time, but the moment we would put our eye upon it it vanishes.

To the average intellect, unless it has been tossed too long in the logical blanket, herein lies a marvellous thing. It is strange to him that through a leadership so knowing he should be brought so suddenly and sharply into a perfectly blank space. The vestibule is ample; the temple is vacuity. For it is undeniable that the representative men in this school of thought are substantial, and some of them extraordinary, contributors to our present learning. With them the passion to comprehend the cosmos is characteristic. Has not one of them called his philosophy "the cosmic"? We cannot withhold admiration for the vastness of that scheme of literary and scientific labor which Mr. Spencer projected twenty years ago, and which he has been steadily and with rare ability prosecuting to the present hour. An ordinary scholar stands simply amazed at the ease and erudition with which he marshals his facts in so many departments under his universal formula. Can it be possible that, having conquered this world, he has deliberately and from principle repressed the natural sigh that there is no other to conquer? This supposition would tally well with his repeated claim that the position he has taken up has in it more humility and is more purely religious than that of the theologians. Recall, for instance, the question, "May we not without hesitation affirm that a sincere recognition of the truth that our own and all other existence is a mystery absolutely and forever beyond our comprehension contains more of true religion than all the dogmatic theology ever written?" The force of the claim for superior piety made in this passage is, indeed, somewhat weakened when we consider that all the dogmatic

theology one would care to defend contains a sincere recognition of this very truth. That the divine existence, if not our own, is not within the comprehension of the finite mind is an axiom in every scheme of divinity that is of any account in such discussions. The statement is made so often in the books as to have become trite that the mind only apprehends, it does not comprehend, the Deity. Our knowledge is positive, but it is limited ; it is real, but not exhaustive. That a mind like Spencer's, which has taken so wide a range, which is so knowing, should regard the limited knowledge, which is all that the average theologian affirms, as calculated to lessen humility must strike the ordinary mind with perplexity. It is, indeed, somewhat singular that one who knows so well what an authority the Christian Scriptures are with the English-speaking peoples should not have shown from those Scriptures that "as touching the Almighty, we cannot find him out." Nowhere else is there more emphatic recognition of what is transcendent in the Unseen Reality. Nevertheless the assumption in an Abraham or a Moses that God is an object of real knowledge does not in the least breed presumption. For neither in this nor any other realm of activity is ignorance the mother of true devotion. Not because we assume to know, nor because we assume not to know, are we reverent. That depends somewhat on the reasons we have for our assumptions ; more, however, on the spirit with which we assert our knowledge or ignorance.

This fact, that the modern agnostics are led by men who are otherwise knowing, suggests another marvel. For it should seem that the very sweep of this intelligence needs the field which they abandon. We note with admiration the comprehensiveness of research and survey exhibited by some of their leaders. The very numerous, if diverse, attempts to set forth the true order of the sciences sufficiently indicate the range of studies which the agnostic mind cultivates. Now it is easy enough to see that mere sciolism might remain oblivious of any higher realm than that of observation and classification. Neither is it difficult to understand how men who are not

sciolists should become absorbed in certain special lines and methods of investigation, and that habit in these should become a second nature. Still we must hold that the scientific studies which mark our age are as truly fitted to awaken as to repress the philosophic spirit. The best minds, therefore, even among physical inquirers, must become philosophical. Of this we may see indications in the prevalent discussions. To be sure, the inauguration of the positive school made short work with metaphysics. But nothing is more noticeable than the avidity with which prominent specialists in science, even those supposed to have close affinity with that school, have entered into the repudiated region. Tyndall and Huxley have attracted public attention quite as much, to say the least, by their frequent forages into the border lands as by their conceded proficiency in their own specialties. For the border lands have a natural fascination. The mountains are there. Thence flow the streams. From the tops are great outlooks. If the sky be no nearer, the heavens of thought seem more open there. If science just at present would appear to affiliate with agnosticism, and be really responsible for its popularity, this can be only temporary. For science is only reading the order which is in the universe. But order is simply thought. Mr. Alcott quotes Aristotle as having said, "A ship is all but the wood." What even these chemists and biologists are studying is not matter, as ordinarily conceived, but ideas. But what can we make of ideas except as we refer them to some mind which thinks them. But science encounters thought at every point in the universe to which it reaches, and this on a vast scale. If the spectroscope assures us that the same substances burn in the sun or stars which we observe on the earth, it involves the assurance that the same ideal element encounters us there which encounters us here. The late eminent mathematician Benjamin Peirce, alluding to this fact, declared, "The solution of the problem of this universal presence of such a spiritual element is obvious and necessary. There is one God, and science is the knowledge of him." In fact, that which Spen-

cer calls the ultimate religious, as well as the ultimate scientific idea, approaches so very near this conclusion that it is a marvel why he hesitated to go over to it. For he had hardly more to do than to exchange subject for predicate in his famous "Reconciliation." Thus when he refers to "this deepest, widest, and most certain of all facts, that the power which the universe manifests to us is utterly inscrutable," suppose we say, "The power which is utterly inscrutable the universe manifests to us." But what the universe manifests to us we should know certainly to the extent to which it is manifested. It might almost seem as if we were reading that classical verse of Paul: "For the invisible things of him . . . . are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made." In Paul the invisible becomes clearly seen; in Spencer the inscrutable becomes manifest. We do not so much wonder that the philosopher styled this "The Reconciliation"; it came perilously near being an identity of propositions. Even if we take no liberties by the proposed interchange of subject and predicate in the reconciling sentence, we shall reduce the divergence between agnostic theology and the natural theology to which the world has long been accustomed thus: in the one, what is manifested of the unseen reality dwindles to the minimum, while what is not manifested is brought so close to the eye as to shut off vision; in the other, what is manifested expands to the maximum, while what is not manifested lies in the far and dim, but fair and grand background.

Now our contention is that by as much as the range of investigation widens and deepens the investigating mind should see more and more, not less and less, of the presence and character of this power which is so necessarily postulated. They who know so much should know more. To spread out an orderly cosmos on such an extended canvas, to see it in its development, growth, and upbuilding from the atoms to the systems of suns which fill and yet do not fill space, from the original homogeneous gas to the cultured genius of George Eliot, and yet "sense" nothing but a

walled horizon to represent the unseen reality, is marvelously suicidal. Such a philosophy is suicidal because it would interpret the physical universe by dwarfing the mind which is to do the interpretation. If our age astonishes us by indefinitely enlarging the field of the known, it should not astound us by disendowing the knower. But the psychology that recognizes in the soul no higher faculties than those of sensation, association, and comparison does disendow it. Undoubtedly it remains a matter of curious interest to watch how ingeniously the universe can be explained with so scant a mental science. Still we must hold that the explanation is more ingenious than satisfactory. The world we explore has grown too large to find room within such a philosophy. The mind of man must be recognized as having reason as well as understanding and sense, as having by virtue of its being mind intuitive ideas, such as of space, time, infinitude, cause, duty, perfection. Then the cosmos will lie, as its very vastness makes it need to be, in the grasp and light and warmth of a Power who is known to us by his name, that is, by attributes which include every conceivable excellence.

In the experience of the blind man healed by the Master there was a very especial occasion for marvel. "Ye know not whence he is, and yet he hath opened mine eyes." You are so knowing; but here is a fact of a very remarkable character, not far away, but close at hand, which you propose to ignore. Similarly we express ourselves with regard to the field abandoned by the agnostics. Eyes have been opened by entering within this field.

The problem is not, as has been stated, merely that of the existence, universality, and vast influence of religion. That of itself is a problem not easily handled by those who hold that there is no Supreme Being who can be known sufficiently to be intelligently worshipped, loved, and served. The principal leaders of the nescient school have sooner or later felt to the quick the pressure of this problem. We have only to refer to Comte's Religion of Humanity, which so shamed some of his thorough-going disciples; to Mill's posthumous

essays on religion, which conceded so much more to theistic belief than was altogether pleasant to many who followed him; to the mere ventures of younger men who are still querying what the world is to do to supply the place which the imminent failure and dissolution of Christianity will leave vacant. Indeed, why were written the chapters of Spencer on "The Reconciliation" except for the admitted necessity of accounting on agnostic principles for the facts of religious history? Thus, speaking of the religious sentiment, this writer said, "Here is an attribute which, to say the least, has had an enormous influence, which has played a conspicuous part throughout the entire past as far back as history records, and is at present the life of numerous institutions, the stimulus to perpetual controversies, and the prompter of countless daily actions. Any theory of things which takes no account of this attribute must, then, be extremely defective." This, so far, is fairly put. He proceeds, of course, to explain this factor in the world's development by showing that a real omnipresent, incomprehensible power must be conceded as underlying all phenomena. No doubt this would serve as a partial interpretation, because there is in it so much of truth. But the problem is not fully stated. The theory of things should explain not merely the fact and general power of religion, but also what there has been in it of inspiring, beneficent, purifying influence. It can hardly be denied that the inspiring, beneficent, purifying influence has been in the direct proportion to the prevalence of the belief that God is knowable. The unseen reality, which has no attributes, especially no personality, righteousness, or love, to which it were a contradiction in terms to ascribe attributes, that never had any life in it, it would not have. It has been written concerning the cathedral age thus: "The church fervor took fire in the thought of building for religion, and began to throw itself up in stone as by a divine call." And especially of the cathedral at Rouen: "It was as if the stone itself, bedded in cruciform lines of foundation, had shot up into peaks and pinnacles and pointed forms, and sprung its flying

buttresses across in air by some uplifting sense or quickening aspiration." Not even this architectural effect could have come from regarding God as some great unknown. But such results in art are not at all the ones which would most suffer for want of sufficient explanation. The Christian history at least has witnessed more wondrous elevations and transfigurations than have been realized in stone. It shows a long line of men and women who have been regarded as saints, not because they were canonized in some church, but because while here on the earth, in the midst of an unclean world, they walked in white. For instance, no one who knows the career and character of Horace Bushnell will hesitate to acknowledge that he was a man of marked spiritual and moral power, and that this spiritual element gave to the products of his brain a singular suggestiveness. It is evident, too, that this character ripened with years, and came to be in some respects exceedingly worthy of admiration. No better evidence of this could be asked than what is contained in the graceful tribute paid to his memory by Professor Austin Phelps. But in the memoir this power and ripeness are repeatedly and emphatically referred to his fuller knowledge of God. Striking illustrations of this might be selected from different parts of this book. One passage, however, is so apt that we shall transcribe it in full. At Niagara Falls he writes of his capacity "to think and feel greater things concerning God. . . . It is as if my soul were shut in within a vast orb made up of concentric circles of brass or iron. I could hear, even when I was a child, the faint ring of a stroke on the one that is outmost and largest of them all; but I began to break through one shell after another, bursting every time into a kind of new and wondrous and vastly enlarged heaven, hearing no more the dull, close ring of the nearest casement, but the ring, as it were, of concave firmaments and third heavens set with stars: till now, so gloriously has my experience of God opened his greatness to me, I seem to have gotten quite beyond all physical images and measures, even those of astronomy, and simply to think God is to find and

bring into my feeling more than even the imagination can reach." We are told also by one who knew him most intimately that certain crises, when he passed up into a higher and sweeter and purer living, were characterized by a more definite and signal apprehension of God. He passed at such times a boundary into a larger land. "I was set upon by the personal discovery of Christ and of God as represented in him."

What was true in this particular instance may be stated as the law of Christian character. The graces which have adorned our human nature in connection with the Christian religion have sprung into existence by virtue of some new revelation of the Heavenly Father. It must be remembered, too, that this transformation has occurred not in men and women of education, of good moral stock, of a certain mystic and emotional temperament, but among all classes and conditions and races. Let one read, for example, a few hours almost anywhere in the History of Methodism, and he will concede that some new and surprising fashion of conduct is induced among thousands and tens of thousands of British citizens. Such notable persons as Wesley himself and Fletcher of Madeley appear on the scene; but you will be not less amazed at the change which takes place in Thomas Olivers or Matthias Joyce. For these men are examples of "the sudden and entire restoration of the debased conscience." This is strong language, but the facts are abundant which justify it. This restoration was effected by one great truth written on the heart,— God, the holy and just one, has made himself known as your Saviour. Similar effects have been produced uniformly wherever and whenever this truth has been declared and received. They are produced among degraded peoples, even the most degraded. We may read, to be sure, in The Data of Ethics "As well might we expect a child of English type to be born among negroes as expect that among the organically immoral one who is organically moral will arise." A truth is here expressed. But it is expressed in forgetfulness of certain other facts which relieve its hopelessness. Moral,

thoroughly upright men do arise among the most corrupt populations. The history of Christian missions is full of evidence on this point. Now we postulate the law of gravitation because it holds good in the distant stars as well as in our own apple-orchard. So these facts of character-building can be adduced as occurring among members of alien races, in every grade of life, and on certain conditions. These conditions are religious. It will not be sufficient to answer, Yes, we admit that religion is a great power, since it is the recognition of an inscrutable mystery. For these changes in character occur not in connection with the confronting of that great wall of mystery, but with the acceptance of the professed revelation of that mystery. In referring to that epoch in his life at which he began to be a power for good in the world, Paul describes it as "When it pleased God to reveal his Son in me." The entire story of Christian piety is but a series of chapters which have for their motto "This is life eternal, that they might know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent." We are not using these passages as proof-texts, but as accepted statements of what has taken place uniformly and on an immense scale wherever that wonderful thing, Christian character, has sprung into existence. Why, in extensive circles this is the accustomed phrase to designate those persons who have come into a new moral life: they are such as "know the Lord." Here, then, is a long and wide series of facts, certainly very important facts, in the history of mankind. These facts indicate a power at work as distinctive and obvious as that of electricity. It is a power that works under law also. In far the largest number of known instances that power is a certain alleged truth regarding God. But that alleged truth is not that God is a great unknown; emphatically the contrary,—that God has become known. The agnostic explanation, then, we submit, breaks down. Those facts in the religious history of the race which most need explanation it does not explain at all.

For it is not assuming too much to say that the phenomena now under notice are altogether the most worthy of notice of

any which engage scientific attention. The effects produced by that religion which claims to have a real and the purest cognition of the Creator are the choicest effects produced on this planet. We are dazzled by the brilliant results reached in this modern age through the physical sciences and the industrial arts. It were idle to disparage these. It were a shame not to glow with admiration of them. Still there never was an age in which the paramount value of a pure heart and a good conscience and a life devoted to well-doing deserved better appreciation. We are doing nothing so fine in the realm of nature that our philosophers can give a second place to the changes which are occurring in the realm of character. We point to these changes, and we point to the unquestionable fact that they are associated with the belief that God is known. Does any one say that this will not prove that the belief is well founded? It will prove it in the only sense in which proof can be asked in such a department of inquiry. For we cannot suppose that the most perfect results possible to appear in a moral being will spring from an illusion. Especially when we add that these results spring out of that illusion uniformly through the centuries, in every country and in every nation in which the illusion is accepted as the truth, and in proportion as the illusion is taken to be the truth do we have before the mind a supposition which is so marvellous as to be revolting. For in that case one would be justified in breaking out, as President Edwards did in consequence of a similar attempted explanation of the fruits which appeared in the religious work of the year 1740 in New England: "Now if such things are enthusiasm and the fruits of a distempered brain, let my brain be evermore possessed of that happy distemper!" Surely we may pray to be excused from any philosophy which in the name of a reconciliation or solution of a great problem obliges us to receive the notion that what is truest and best in life is the uniform product of error.