

JOHN STUART MILL ON "NATURE."

BY REV. J. C. HIDEN, D.D., PUNGOTEAGUE, VA.

When a thinker of Mr. Mill's celebrity turns his attention to the subject of religion, and undertakes to ascertain, upon purely rational principles, the proper attitude for a thoughtful human being on this, the most momentous of all issues, it becomes important to us to learn what he may have to say, and on what basis his conclusions rest.

His "Three Essays" are on "Nature," on "The Utility of Religion," and on "Theism." They were published posthumously, not, as we are informed in Helen Taylor's preface, because the author was unwilling to meet the odium which "might result from the free expression of his opinions on religion," but because of the author's habit of keeping his works on hand for the purpose of revision, and of bestowing all the elaboration in his power upon the adequate expression of his conclusions. This explanation is perfectly satisfactory, as there is not the slightest reason for suspecting John Stuart Mill of cowardice in any form. The views set forth in these Essays were doubtless the deliberately formed opinions of a very able man, and as such I shall treat them in this review of the essay on "Nature."

The Rev. Mr. Cecil, a very thoughtful man, used to say that the last and most terrible device of the Devil would be the man, who, without malice, prejudice or partiality, should set forth the real objections to Christianity. I do not believe that such a man has yet appeared. Tom Paine is full of ribald and profane abuse. Voltaire was venomously malicious. Renan is not without his partialities, and even Mill, though never indecent, and never intentionally unfair, had evident and powerful prejudices against every form of organized Christianity extant in his day. To these prejudices, very early imbibed

from his father, can be traced many of the most serious errors to be found in these "Essays."

In defining "Nature," and in setting forth its relation to "law," the author goes astray on the threshold. He says (p. 5) that the nature of a thing "means its entire capacity of exhibiting phenomena. And since the phenomena which a thing exhibits, however much they may vary in different circumstances, are always the same in the same circumstances, they admit of being described in general forms of words, which are called the *laws* of the thing's nature." Here is sad confusion. The "forms of words" are not called "the laws of the thing's nature," unless we are very careless in our speech, or else try to cover out of sight the very wide difference between phenomena, and the laws under which the phenomena occur. The phenomena do not "admit of being described as 'laws,' " unless we determine beforehand to ignore the causes of the phenomena, or else to confound causes with effects. Phenomena occur according to laws; but they are not laws. This statement is insisted upon here, not as a matter of verbal criticism, but because it involves a vital issue. If the phenomena are a law unto themselves, then the idea of a First Cause is no longer necessary to our thinking. God is legislated out of His own universe; religion is abolished, and philosophy is unthinkable.

Again: On page 14, we have: "The laws of motion and of gravitation are neither more nor less than the observed uniformities in the occurrence of phenomena; partly uniformities of antecedence and sequence, partly of concomitance." It is difficult just here to resist the suspicion that this is a convenient method of getting rid of a God. Kepler's laws were just as really laws before as after Kepler observed them. They had been in operation for countless ages before Kepler was born. The "uniformity" was produced, that is to say, it had a Will behind it. But Mr. Mill, by reducing law to a mere shred of itself—by making it to consist in "an observed uni-

formity"—easily gets rid of all this. This is not necessarily intentional sophistry. The author probably imposed upon himself; but the fallacy is none the less glaring on this account.

On pages 38-39 we have a notable coincidence of thought between Mr. Mill and Dr. A. T. Bledsoe: "The only admissible moral theory of creation is that the principle of good *cannot* at once and altogether subdue the powers of evil, either physical or moral; could not place mankind in a world free from the necessity of an incessant struggle with the maleficent powers, or make them always victorious in that struggle; but could and did make them capable of carrying on the fight with vigor, and with progressively increasing success. Of all the religious explanations of the order of nature, this alone is neither contradictory to itself, nor to the facts for which it attempts to account."

Now, Dr. Bledsoe, in his able and learned "Theodicy," after much discussion of the question: "How are we to account for the fact that God allowed sin to come into the world?" deliberately reasons to the conclusion that God could not prevent it; that it would have been a violation of the necessary attributes of God, if He had prevented it. I shall not here discuss this question, but simply note the very different results reached by these two thinkers, though they agree upon the general principles stated above.

Mr. Mill's conclusion is that God, if there be any God, is a Being of quite limited powers and resources, moral and physical; that He is decidedly not omnipotent. Dr. Bledsoe repudiates this view, and holds fast to the omnipotence of the Creator. He insists that the coercion of a free and responsible moral agent is no part of the functions of omnipotence itself, and that such coercion would be a moral contradiction in terms.

On page 39, Mr. Mill says: "Those who have been strengthened in goodness by relying on the sympathizing

support of a powerful and good Governor of the world, have, I am satisfied, never believed that Governor to be, in the strict sense of the term, omnipotent. * * * They have believed that He could do any one thing, but not any combination of things; that His government, like human government, was a system of adjustments and compromises, that the world is inevitably imperfect, contrary to His intention. And since the exercise of all His power to make it as little imperfect as possible, leaves it no better than it is, they cannot but regard that power, though vastly beyond human estimate, yet as in itself not only finite, but extremely limited."

Now, without commenting upon the dogmatism of the author's assumption that he knows what these good people believe about the omnipotence of God so much better than they themselves know; and passing by the wild notion that power can be regarded as "vastly beyond human estimate," and yet as "extremely limited," I must insist that Mr. Mill is distinctly wrong in holding that God "leaves" the world "no better than it is." He does not leave it. He is still at work on it; and, by Mr. Mill's own admission, it is gradually improving under His discipline. How does Mr. Mill know that, under all the moral conditions of the intricate problem, any better school could have been devised by Omniscience itself?

After complaining grievously of the moral government of the Creator, supposing Him to exist and to be omnipotent; after citing the Esquimaux and the Patagonians as examples of the general state of a vast majority of the human race; Mr. Mill says, on page 41: "It may be possible to believe with Plato that perfect goodness, limited and thwarted in every direction by the intractableness of the material, has done this because it could do no better. But that the same perfectly wise and good Being had absolute power over the material, and made it, by voluntary choice, what it is, to admit this might have been supposed impossible to any one who has the simplest notions of moral good and evil."

On this point I have to say: First, that neither Mr. Mill, nor anybody else can prove what is so readily and so generally assumed, namely, that what are called "savages" are necessarily in a worse moral condition than they would be in if they were "civilized." I am by no means sure that what we call "civilization" is necessary, or friendly to the highest moral state. Some very imperfectly civilized people were among the best people that I have ever known; and not a few of the most superlative scoundrels of ancient and of modern times have been the most highly cultivated men of their times.

But, secondly: Mr. Mill speaks of "the intractableness of the material," as thwarting the Creator at every turn. What is this material? It is human souls, responsible to God for their conduct, and created moral agents; and until Mr. Mill can show that such agents can be absolutely controlled; that Omnipotence itself can absolutely control such agents, or, at least, that there can be such a thing as "absolute power" exercised over a free and responsible agent, his objection amounts only to the statement that God has not wrought a flat contradiction to His whole scheme of a moral government. Is not absolute power, exercised over a free and responsible agent, a contradiction in terms?

Mr. Mill, at the close of his first Essay, concludes that "the scheme of nature, regarded in its whole extent, cannot have had for its sole or even principal object the good of human or other sentient beings." This is assuming that Mr. Mill has regarded nature in its whole extent. He makes no allowance for his own ignorance. "He knows it all." How can we doubt the conclusions of a man who has regarded nature in its whole extent? And yet assumptions such as this are largely the brunt of Mr. Mill's attacks upon the Christian doctrine of Theism. Such assumptions are best met by stating them in their naked assurance.