

THE ETHICS OF RATIONALISM.

BY FRANK VINCENT WADDY.

RATIONALISM, the philosophy of agnostics and freethinkers, is frequently attacked by those known as believers on the ground of its alleged lack of ethical standards, said to result from rejection of theological dogma, the adherents to religious precept contending that "faith" is necessary to virtuous life here, and indispensable in securing a comfortable time hereafter.

In support of this argument the lives and habits of certain eminent freethinkers are quoted as evidence of the debasing influence of skepticism upon character; thus Goethe, George Eliot, Paine, Ingersoll and others are favorite material for the criticism of their pious detractors.

These attacks furnish an example of a common logical fallacy, namely, arguing from insufficient data; for it is clear that, even granting the moral deficiency of particular individuals, not all who share their convictions are necessarily vicious. The ethical standard set up by a system of philosophy or religion is independent of the demerits of its followers. In the state prisons are Presbyterian pickpockets, Baptist burglars and Methodist murderers, but the characters of these criminals are not necessarily products of the religious influence under which some of them claim to have been brought up. Evidence from isolated cases is misleading, and attempts to prove the evil influence of mental freedom upon personal morality by this means are futile. It would be equally logical to contend that because a New England minister was convicted of murder some time ago, therefore the profession of religion engenders homicidal tendencies.

The fact is, the truth lies at the mean—that no man is wholly vicious or virtuous, whether atheist, fanatic or somewhere between. Moreover, ethical conduct is determined largely without reference to any system of belief, there being millions of people utterly indifferent to religion who nevertheless live with rectitude and integrity, guided by the natural instinct of sympathy, refraining

from wrong-doing in obedience to the sense of moral obligation bred by expediency in ages past, and entirely without the aid of special deterrents or incentives. Experience shows the results of base conduct and judgment dictates avoidance of it.

Secular teaching is also attacked as a destructive force, tearing down while unable to rebuild, and demolishing the faith of the ages without suggesting anything adequate to take its place. Those who advance this objection overlook the fact that in the nature of the case no substitute is required. If an ancient faith shackles the feet of progress it must be discarded. It is much as if a surgeon who undertakes the cure of an infirmity demanding the use of crutches were asked by the patient what aid he intended to furnish in their place. The surgeon explains that the crutches will not be needed, but the cripple, habituated to their daily use, cannot imagine dispensing with them.

A rationalist, in pointing out the inconsistencies of official religion, is not removing any props of virtue or supplying aid to vice, and if the structure of faith requires modification to bring its tenets into harmony with established truth, that structure can be treated with all reverence during the process. "The abolitionist," says Hawthorne, "brandishing his one idea like an iron flail," will work only havoc and destruction unless he be prepared to furnish something by way of constructive reform. The apostle of free thought should preserve respect for thinkers who have gone before, and facts in theology (if there be any) should appeal to him as strongly as facts in any other branch of study.

An enthusiast is often inconsistent, his ideas being polarized and his outlook limited by preconception. Theists discount or ignore the conclusions of scientific inquiry, while materialists treat with contempt the claims of the spiritual and the phenomena of psychophysiology. Conflicting ideas must be examined with neutrality, unbiased by presuppositions religious or scientific. A rationalist should at all costs be reasonable, and one who is prejudiced or intolerant is irrational.

As to the system of ethical principles demanded as a substitute for the dogmatic creeds, the exercise of moral courage will effectually combat most of life's evils—with no system can man escape them all—and self-respect, in avoidance of what is unworthy or discreditable, will take the place of other deterrents and incentives. Necessity for rewards and punishments vanishes with attainment of full moral stature, much as the need of such inducements falls away upon outgrowing physical childhood.

Conduct should be determined irrespective of reward, beyond that which effort, and nothing else, will bring. High endeavor and single purpose, the pursuit of lofty ideals, indeed all the nobler impulses, will be found independent of polemical questions and incapable of even causing a difference of opinion. The majority of religious argument is upon subjects that do not matter. The brightness of truth, the baseness of wrong, the necessity for sympathy—these things fortunately are not controlled by creeds and are not church monopolies.

The moral force of a noble life cannot be diminished by the exercise of additional self-reliance, which riddance of superstition calls into action, nor will present influence be lessened by discarding errors of the past.

The responsibilities of the rationalists are no greater and no less than those of others, though they see with clearer vision the fallacies of certain teachings. For instance, the doctrine of vicarious suffering or atonement, which implies that man can escape the natural results of his actions, is neither just nor reasonable. It has no rational meaning. A "sin" like any other action must have its results, if it be a causative act; the penalty of such an act is its natural complement, and follows inevitably. Forgiving a sin is a very different matter from undoing it—a feat impossible even with the obliging aid of a god. The teaching that iniquities can be canceled by the simple process of having them forgiven is pernicious as well as untrue, for it gives a license to those accepting it which they would not otherwise have. On the other hand, it has doubtless furnished a profound solace to countless penitents, and is therefore not without utility, even though based upon error. The idea that Jesus or any one else should be punished for one's actions instead of oneself is indeed strange ground for consolation. Such an instance of injustice should rather cause intense displeasure and indignation. The sacrificial atonement of Christ has no reliable historical foundation, but even if it had it would not commend itself, since the blissful state of "heaven" could never be justly known to the sinner while the result of his sins had been to send other people to hell.

An objection sometimes raised against rationalists is that they expect tangible proof for things that can be discerned only spiritually. When a student states his disbelief in certain doctrines he is accused of approaching a spiritual problem with physical weapons. In most cases the empirical thinker is merely making scientific use of his faculties rather than an emotional use of his imagination.

Instead of demanding supersensuous explanation for phenomena incompletely understood, he applies himself to analysis, prepared to exhaust the natural and possible before resorting to the unnatural or seemingly impossible. That which will not bear investigation upon logical lines is not inviting material for spiritual perception—or for any other kind.

MISCELLANEOUS.

BOOK REVIEWS.

THE SEVENTH SEAL. By *Jeanette Agnes*. Philadelphia: The John C. Winston Company, 1920. Pp. 177. Price, \$1.25 net.

Among other things we are taught in this book that "the soul, as we ordinarily use the term, is but a partial expression of a soul that in the beginning was a complete embodiment of the masculine and feminine power, but that the Creative Law, when investing this soul with physical form in which to work out its experiences, gain the mastery over evil. . . . and the capacity for unending happiness, gave portions of the soul separate bodies at an early stage in the evolutionary process, endowing both with certain similar capacities and certain complementary ones" (p. 74). These contentions are proven by a truly Gnostic interpretation of certain passages of both the Old and the New Testament. Occasionally recourse is had to the pronouncements of modern science. The most far-reaching conclusions are drawn, for the object of the book is to show, e. g., that "the Bible teaches that the law of the creative life energy, operating through the physical sex of soul complements, is. . . . the way of emancipation from want, sickness and all imperfections of the human race; in truth, the way of eternal life without the body's passing through what we call death," etc., etc. (p. 9). The author's mind seems to be one of those, not infrequently found, who combine, with great sincerity of purpose and a peculiar acumen in argumentation, a perfectly unique point of view, a point of view which in this instance is characterized by an agglomeration of Bibliolatry, natural (i. e., sexual) philosophy, and science. The book will no doubt find readers among people drawn in similar directions.