

The Necessity of Atheism

Percy Bysshe Shelley

Table of Contents

<u>The Necessity of Atheism</u>	1
<u>Percy Bysshe Shelley</u>	2
<u>There Is No God</u>	3
<u>On Life</u>	8
<u>On A Future State</u>	10

The Necessity of Atheism

The Necessity of Atheism

Percy Bysshe Shelley

This page copyright © 2001 Blackmask Online.
<http://www.blackmask.com>

- [There Is No God](#)
 - [On Life](#)
 - [On A Future State](#)
-

There Is No God

This negation must be understood solely to affect a creative Deity. The hypothesis of a pervading Spirit co-eternal with the universe remains unshaken.

A close examination of the validity of the proofs adduced to support any proposition is the only secure way of attaining truth, on the advantages of which it is unnecessary to descant: our knowledge of the existence, of a Deity is a subject of such importance that it cannot be too minutely investigated; in consequence of this conviction we proceed briefly and impartially to examine the proofs which have been adduced. It is necessary first to consider the nature of belief.

When a proposition is offered to the mind, It perceives the agreement or disagreement of the ideas of which it is composed. A perception of their agreement is termed belief. Many obstacles frequently prevent this perception from being immediate; these the mind attempts to remove in order that the perception may be distinct. The mind is active in the investigation in order to perfect the state of perception of the relation which the component ideas of the proposition bear to each, which is passive; the investigation being confused with the perception has induced many falsely to imagine that the mind is active in belief. — that belief is an act of volition, — in consequence of which it may be regulated by the mind. Pursuing, continuing this mistake, they have attached a degree of criminality to disbelief; of which, in its nature, it is incapable: it is equally incapable of merit.

Belief, then, is a passion, the strength of which, like every other passion, is in precise proportion to the degrees of excitement.

The degrees of excitement are three.

The senses are the sources of all knowledge to the mind; consequently their evidence claims the strongest assent.

The decision of the mind, founded upon our own experience, derived from these sources, claims the next degree.

The experience of others, which addresses itself to the former one, occupies the lowest degree.

(A graduated scale, on which should be marked the capabilities of propositions to approach to the test of the senses, would be a just barometer of the belief which ought to be attached to them.)

Consequently no testimony can be admitted which is contrary to reason; reason is founded on the evidence of our senses.

Every proof may be referred to one of these three divisions: it is to be considered what arguments we receive from each of them, which should convince us of the existence of a Deity.

1st, The evidence of the senses. If the Deity should appear to us, if he should convince our senses of his existence, this revelation would necessarily command belief. Those to whom the Deity has thus appeared have the strongest possible conviction of his existence. But the God of Theologians is incapable of local visibility.

2d, Reason. It is urged that man knows that whatever is must either have had a beginning, or have existed from all eternity, he also knows that whatever is not eternal must have had a cause. When this reasoning is applied to the universe, it is necessary to prove that it was created: until that is clearly demonstrated we may reasonably suppose that it has endured from all eternity. We must prove design before we can infer a designer. The only idea which we can form of causation is derivable from the constant conjunction of objects, and the consequent inference of one from the other. In a base where two propositions are diametrically opposite, the mind believes that which is least incomprehensible; — it is easier to suppose that the universe has existed from all eternity than to conceive a being beyond its limits capable of creating it: if the mind sinks beneath the weight of one, is it an alleviation to increase the intolerability of the burthen?

The other argument, which is founded on a Man's knowledge of his own existence, stands thus. A man knows not only that he now is, but that once he was not; consequently there must have been a cause. But our idea of causation is alone derivable from the constant conjunction of objects and the consequent Inference of one from the other; and, reasoning experimentally, we can only infer from effects caused adequate to those effects. But there certainly is a generative power which is effected by certain instruments: we cannot prove that it is inherent in these instruments" nor is the contrary hypothesis capable of demonstration: we admit that the generative power

The Necessity of Atheism

is incomprehensible; but to suppose that the same effect is produced by an eternal, omniscient, omnipotent being leaves the cause in the same obscurity, but renders it more incomprehensible.

3d, Testimony. It is required that testimony should not be contrary to reason. The testimony that the Deity convinces the senses of men of his existence can only be admitted by us, if our mind considers it less probable, that these men should have been deceived than that the Deity should have appeared to them. Our reason can never admit the testimony of men, who not only declare that they were eye-witnesses of miracles, but that the Deity was irrational; for he commanded that he should be believed, he proposed the highest rewards for, faith, eternal punishments for disbelief. We can only command voluntary actions; belief is not an act of volition; the mind is ever passive, or involuntarily active; from this it is evident that we have no sufficient testimony, or rather that testimony is insufficient to prove the being of a God. It has been before shown that it cannot be deduced from reason. They alone, then, who have been convinced by the evidence of the senses can believe it.

Hence it is evident that, having no proofs from either of the three sources of conviction, the mind cannot believe the existence of a creative God: it is also evident that, as belief is a passion of the mind, no degree of criminality is attachable to disbelief; and that they only are reprehensible who neglect to remove the false medium through which their mind views any subject of discussion. Every reflecting mind must acknowledge that there is no proof of the existence of a Deity.

God is an hypothesis, and, as such, stands in need of proof: the onus probandi rests on the theist. Sir Isaac Newton says: *Hypotheses non fingo, quicquid enim ex phaenomenis non deducitur hypothesis, vocanda est, et hypothesis vel metaphysicae, vel physicae, vel qualitarum occultarum, seu mechanicae, in philosophia locum non habent.* To all proofs of the existence of a creative God apply this valuable rule. We see a variety of bodies possessing a variety of powers: we merely know their effects; we are in a estate of ignorance with respect to their essences and causes. These Newton calls the phenomena of things; but the pride of philosophy is unwilling to admit its ignorance of their causes. From the phenomena, which are the objects of our attempt to infer a cause, which we call God, and gratuitously endow it with all negative and contradictory qualities. From this hypothesis we invent this general name, to conceal our ignorance of causes and essences. The being called God by no means answers with the conditions prescribed by Newton; it bears every mark of a veil woven by philosophical conceit, to hide the ignorance of philosophers even from themselves. They borrow the threads of its texture from the anthropomorphism of the vulgar. Words have been used by sophists for the same purposes, from the occult qualities of the peripatetics to the effuvium of Boyle and the crinities or nebulae of Herschel. God is represented as infinite, eternal, incomprehensible; he is contained under every predicate in non that the logic of ignorance could fabricate. Even his worshippers allow that it is impossible to form any idea of him: they exclaim with the French poet,

Pour dire ce qu'il est, il faut etre lui-meme.

Lord Bacon says that atheism leaves to man reason, philosophy, natural piety, laws, reputation, and everything that can serve to conduct him to virtue; but superstition destroys all these, and erects itself into a tyranny over the understandings of men: hence atheism never disturbs the government, but renders man more clear-sighted, since he sees nothing beyond the boundaries of the present life. — Bacon's Moral Essays.

The [Beginning here, and to the paragraph ending with *Systeme de la Nature*," Shelley wrote in French. A free translation has been substituted.] first theology of man made him first fear and adore the elements themselves, the gross and material objects of nature; he next paid homage to the agents controlling the elements, lower genies, heroes or men gifted with great qualities. By force of reflection he sought to simplify things by submitting all nature to a single agent, spirit, or universal soul, which, gave movement to nature and all its branches. Mounting from cause to cause, mortal man has ended by seeing nothing; and it is in this obscurity that he has placed his God; it is in this darksome abyss that his uneasy imagination has always labored to fabricate chimeras, which will continue to afflict him until his knowledge of nature chases these phantoms which he has always so adored.

If we wish to explain our ideas of the Divinity we shall be obliged to admit that, by the word God, man has never been able to designate but the most hidden, the most distant and the most unknown cause of the effects

The Necessity of Atheism

which he saw; he has made use of his word only when the play of natural and known causes ceased to be visible to him; as soon as he lost the thread of these causes, or when his mind could no longer follow the chain, he cut the difficulty and ended his researches by calling God the last of the causes, that is to say, that which is beyond all causes that he knew; thus he but assigned a vague denomination to an unknown cause, at which his laziness or the limits of his knowledge forced him to stop. Every time we say that God is the author of some phenomenon, that signifies that we are ignorant of how such a phenomenon was able to operate by the aid of forces or causes that we know in nature. It is thus that the generality of mankind, whose lot is ignorance, attributes to the Divinity, not only the unusual effects which strike them, but moreover the most simple events, of which the causes are the most simple to understand by whomever is able to study them. In a word, man has always respected unknown causes, surprising effects that his ignorance kept him from unraveling. It was on this debris of nature that man raised the imaginary colossus of the Divinity.

If ignorance of nature gave birth to gods, knowledge of nature is made for their destruction. In proportion as man taught himself, his strength and his resources augmented with his knowledge; science, the arts, industry, furnished him assistance; experience reassured him or procured for him means of resistance to the efforts of many causes which ceased to alarm as soon as they became understood. In a word, his terrors dissipated in the same proportion as his mind became enlightened. The educated man ceases to be superstitious.

It is only by hearsay (by word of mouth passed down from generation to generation) that whole peoples adore the God of their fathers and of their priests: authority, confidence, submission and custom with them take the place of conviction or of proofs: they prostrate themselves and pray, because their fathers taught them to prostrate themselves and pray: but why did their fathers fall on their knees? That is because, in primitive times, their legislators and their guides made it their duty. "Adore and believe," they said, "the gods whom you cannot understand; have confidence in our profound wisdom; we know more than you about Divinity." But why should I come to you? It is because God willed it thus; it is because God will punish you if you dare resist. But this God, is not he, then, the thing in question? However, man has always traveled in this vicious circle; his slothful mind has always made him find it easier to accept the judgment of others. All religious nations are founded solely on authority; all the religions of the world forbid examination and do not want one to reason; authority wants one to believe in God; this God is himself founded only on the authority of a few men who pretend to know him, and to come in his name and announce him on earth. A God made by man undoubtedly has need of man to make himself known to man.

Should it not, then, be for the priests, the inspired, the metaphysicians that should be reserved the conviction of the existence of a God, which they, nevertheless, say is so necessary for all mankind? But Can you find any harmony in the theological opinions of the different inspired ones or thinkers scattered over the earth? They themselves, who make a profession of adoring the same God, are they in Agreement? Are they content with the proofs that their colleagues bring of his existence? Do they subscribe unanimously to the ideas they present on nature, on his conduct, on the manner of understanding his pretended oracles? Is there a country on earth where the science of God is really perfect? Has this science anywhere taken the consistency and uniformity that we see the science of man assume, even in the most futile crafts, the most despised trades. These words mind immateriality, creation, predestination and grace; this mass of subtle distinctions with which theology to everywhere filled; these so ingenious inventions, imagined by thinkers who have succeeded one another for so many centuries, have only, alas! confused things all the more, and never has man's most necessary science, up to this time acquired the slightest fixity. For thousands of years the lazy dreamers have perpetually relieved one another to meditate on the Divinity, to divine his secret will, to invent the proper hypothesis to develop this important enigma. Their slight success has not discouraged the theological vanity: one always speaks of God: one has his throat cut for God: and this sublime being still remains the most unknown and the most discussed.

Man would have been too happy, if, limiting himself to the visible objects which interested him, he had employed, to perfect his real sciences, his laws, his morals, his education, one-half the efforts he has put into his researches on the Divinity. He would have been still wiser and still more fortunate if he had been satisfied to let his jobless guides quarrel among themselves, sounding depths capable of rendering them dizzy, without himself mixing in their senseless disputes. But it is the essence of ignorance to attach importance to that which it does not understand. Human vanity is so constituted that it stiffens before difficulties. The more an object conceals itself from our eyes, the greater the effort we make to seize it, because it pricks our pride, it excites our curiosity and it

The Necessity of Atheism

appears interesting. In fighting for his God everyone, in fact, fights only for the interests of his own vanity, which, of all the passions produced by the mal-organization of society, is the quickest to take offense, and the most capable of committing the greatest follies.

If, leaving for a moment the annoying idea that theology gives of a capricious God, whose partial and despotic decrees decide the fate of mankind, we wish to fix our eyes only on the pretended goodness, which all men, even trembling before this God, agree is ascribing to him, if we allow him the purpose that is lent him of having worked only for his own glory, of exacting the homage of intelligent beings; of seeking only in his works the well-being of mankind; how reconcile these views and these dispositions with the ignorance truly invincible in which this God, so glorious and so good, leaves the majority of mankind in regard to God himself? If God wishes to be known, cherished, thanked, why does he not show himself under his favorable features to all these intelligent beings by whom he wishes to be loved and adored? Why not manifest himself to the whole earth in an unequivocal manner, much more capable of convincing us than these private revelations which seem to accuse the Divinity of an annoying partiality for some of his creatures? The all-powerful, should he not have more convincing means by which to show man than these ridiculous metamorphoses, these pretended incarnations, which are attested by writers so little in agreement among themselves? In place of so many miracles, invented to prove the divine mission of so many legislators revered by the different people of the world, the Sovereign of these spirits, could he not convince the human mind in an instant of the things he wished to make known to it? Instead of hanging the sun in the vault of the firmament, instead of scattering stars without order, and the constellations which fill space, would it not have been more in conformity with the views of a God so jealous of his glory and so well-intentioned for mankind, to write, in a manner not subject to dispute, his name, his attributes, his permanent wishes in ineffaceable characters, equally understandable to all the inhabitants of the earth? No one would then be able to doubt the existence of God, of his clear will, of his visible intentions. Under the eyes of this so terrible God no one would have the audacity to violate his commands, no mortal would dare risk attracting his anger: finally, no man would have the effrontery to impose on his name or to interpret his will according to his own fancy.

In fact, even while admitting the existence of the theological God, and the reality of his so discordant attributes which they impute to him, one can conclude nothing to authorize the conduct or the cult which one is prescribed to render him. Theology is truly the sieve of the Danaides. By dint of contradictory qualities and hazarded assertions it has, that is to say, so handicapped its God that it has made it impossible for him to act. If he is infinitely good, what reason should we have to fear him? If he is infinitely wise, why should we have doubts concerning our future? If he knows all, why warn him of our needs and fatigue him with our prayers? If he is everywhere, why erect temples to him? If he is just, why fear that he will punish the creatures that he has, filled with weaknesses? If grace does everything for them, what reason would he have for recompensing them? If he is all-powerful, how offend him, how resist him? If he is reasonable, how can he be angry at the blind, to whom he has given the liberty of being unreasonable? If he is immovable, by what right do we pretend to make him change his decrees? If he is inconceivable, why occupy ourselves with him? IF HE HAS SPOKEN, WHY IS THE UNIVERSE NOT CONVINCED? If the knowledge of a God is the most necessary, why is it not the most evident and the clearest. — *Système de la Nature*. London, 1781.

The enlightened and benevolent Pliny thus Publicly professes himself an atheist, — *Quapropter effigiem Del formamque quaerere imbecillitatis humanae reor. Quisquis est Deus (si modo est alius) et quacunq̄ue in parte, totus est genus, totus est visus, totus auditus, totus animae, totus animi, totus sul. ... Imperfectae vero in homine naturae praecipua solatia, ne deum quidem omnia. Namque nec sibi protest mortem consciscere, si velit, quod homini dedit optimum in tantis vitae poenis; nee mortales aeternitate donare, aut revocare defunctos; nec facere ut qui vixit non vixerit, qui honores gessit non gesserit, nullumque habere In praeteritum ius praeterquam oblivions, atque (ut. facetis quoque argumentis societas haec cum, deo compeletur) ut bis dena viginti non sint, et multa similiter efficere non posse. — Per quaedeclaratur haud dubie naturae potentiam id quoque ease quod Deum vocamus. — *Plin. Nat. Hist. cap. de Deo*.*

The consistent Newtonian is necessarily an atheist. See Sir W. Drummond's *Academical Questions*, chap. iii. — Sir W. seems to consider the atheism to which it leads as a sufficient presumption of the falsehood of the system of gravitation; but surely it is more consistent with the good faith of philosophy to admit a deduction from facts than an hypothesis incapable of proof, although it might militate, with the obstinate preconceptions of the

The Necessity of Atheism

mob. Had this author, instead of inveighing against the guilt and absurdity of atheism, demonstrated its falsehood, his conduct would have, been more suited to the modesty of the skeptic and the toleration of the philosopher.

Omnia enim per Dei potentiam facta sunt: imo quia naturae potentia nulla est nisi ipsa Dei potentia. Certum est nos eatenus Dei potentiam non intelligere, quatenus causas naturales ignoramus; adeoque stulte ad eandem Dei potentiam recurritur, quando rei alicuius causam naturalem, sive est, ipsam Dei potentiam ignoramus —
Spinoza, Tract. Theologico-Pol. chap 1. P. 14.

On Life

Life and the world, or whatever we call that which we are and feel, is an astonishing thing. The mist of familiarity obscures from us the wonder of our being. We are struck with admiration at some of its transient modifications, but it is itself the great miracle. What are changes of empires, the wreck of dynasties, with the opinions which support them; what is the birth and the extinction of religious and of political systems, to life? What are the revolutions of the globe which we inhabit, and the operations of the elements of which it is composed, compared with life? What is the universe of stars, and suns, of which this inhabited earth is one, and their motions, and their destiny, compared with life? Life, the great miracle, we admire not because it is so miraculous. It is well that we are thus shielded by the familiarity of what is at once so certain and so unfathomable, from an astonishment which would otherwise absorb and overawe the functions of that which is its object.

If any artist, I do not say had executed, but had merely conceived in his mind the system of the sun, and the stars, and planets, they not existing, and had painted to us in words, or upon canvas, the spectacle now afforded by the nightly cope of heaven, and illustrated it by the wisdom of astronomy, great would be our admiration. Or had he imagined the scenery of this earth, the mountains, the seas, and the rivers; the grass, and the flowers, and the variety of the forms and masses of the leaves of the woods, and the colors which attend the setting and the rising sun, and the hues of the atmosphere, turbid or serene, these things not before existing, truly we should have been astonished, and it would not have been a vain boast to have said of such a man, "Non merita nomen dei creatoris, sed non Iddio ed il Poeta." But how these things are looked on with little wonder, and to be conscious of them with intense delight is esteemed to be the distinguishing mark of a refined and extraordinary person. The multitude of men care not for them. It is thus with Life — that which includes all.

What is life? Thoughts and feelings arise, with or without, our will, and we employ words to express them. We are born, and our birth is unremembered, and our infancy remembered but in fragments; we live on, and in living we lose the apprehension of life. How vain is it to think that words can penetrate the mystery of our being! Rightly used they may make evident our ignorance to ourselves; and this is much. For what are we? Whence do we come? and whither do we go? Is birth the commencement, is death the conclusion of our being? What is birth and death?

The most refined abstractions of logic conduct to a view of life, which, though startling to the apprehension, is, in fact, that which the habitual sense of its repeated combinations has extinguished in us. It strips, as it were, the painted curtain from this scene of things. I confess that I am one of those who am unable to refuse my assent to the conclusion of those philosophers who assert that nothing exists but as it is perceived.

It is a decision against which all our persuasions struggle, and we must be long convicted before we can be convinced that the solid universe of external things is "such stuff as dreams are made of." The shocking absurdities of the popular philosophy of mind and matter, its fatal consequences in morals, and their violent dogmatism concerning the source of all things, had early conducted me to materialism. This materialism is a seducing system to young and superficial minds. It allows its disciples to talk, and dispenses them from thinking. But I was discontented with such a view of things as it afforded; man is a being of high aspirations, "looking both before and after," whose "thoughts wander through eternity," disclaiming alliance with transience and decay: incapable of imagining to himself annihilation; existing but in the future and the past; being, not what he is, but what he has been and all be. Whatever may be his true and final destination, there is a spirit within him at enmity with nothingness and dissolution. This is the character of all life and being. Each is at once the center and the circumference; the point to which all things are referred, and the line in which all things are contained. Such contemplations as these, materialism and the popular philosophy of mind and matter alike they are only consistent with the intellectual system.

It is absurd to enter into a long recapitulation of arguments sufficiently familiar to those inquiring minds, whom alone a writer on abstruse subjects can be conceived to address. Perhaps the most clear and vigorous statement of the intellectual system is to be found in Sir William Drummond's *Academical Questions*. After such an exposition, it would be idle to translate into other words what could only lose its energy and fitness by the

The Necessity of Atheism

change. Examined point by point, and word by word, the most discriminating intellects have been able to discern no train of thoughts in the process of reasoning, which does not conduct inevitably to the conclusion which has been stated.

What follows from the admission? It establishes no new truth, it gives us no additional insight into our hidden nature, neither its action nor itself: Philosophy, impatient as it may be to build, has much work yet remaining as pioneer for the overgrowth of ages. it makes one step towards this object; it destroys error, and the roots of error. It leaves, what it is too often the duty of the reformer in political and ethical questions to leave, a vacancy. it reduces the mind to that freedom in which it would have acted, but for the misuse of words and signs, the instruments of its own creation. By signs, I would be understood in a wide sense, including what is properly meant by that term, and what I peculiarly mean. In this latter sense, almost all familiar objects are signs, standing, not for themselves, but for others, in their capacity of suggesting one thought which shall lead to a train of thoughts. Our whole life is thus an education of error.

Let us recollect our sensations as children. What a distinct and intense apprehension had we of the world and of ourselves! Many of the Circumstances of social life were then important to us which are now no longer so. But that is not the point of comparison on which I mean to insist. We less habitually distinguished all that we saw and felt, from ourselves. They seemed, as it were, to constitute one mass. There are some persons who, in this respect, are always children. Those who are subject to the state called reverie, feel as if their nature were dissolved into the surrounding universe, or as if the surrounding universe were absorbed into their being. They are conscious of no distinction. And these are states which precede, or accompany, or follow an unusually intense and vivid apprehension of life. As men grow up this power commonly decays, and they become mechanical and habitual agents. Thus feelings and then reasoning are the combined result of a multitude of entangled thoughts, and of a series of what are called impressions, planted by reiteration.

The view of life presented by the most refined deductions of the intellectual philosophy, to that of unity. Nothing exists but as it is perceived. The difference is merely nominal between those two classes of thought which are distinguished by the names of ideas and of external objects. Pursuing the same thread of reasoning, the existence of distinct individual minds, similar to that which is employed in now questioning its own nature, is likewise found to be a delusion. The words, I, you, they, are not signs of any actual difference subsisting between the assemblage of thoughts thus indicated, but are merely marks employed to denote the different modifications of the one mind.

Let it not be supposed that this doctrine conducts the monstrous presumption that I, the person who now write and think, am that one mind. I am but a portion of it. The words I, and you, and they are grammatical devices invented simply for arrangement, and totally devoid of the intense and exclusive sense usually attached to them. It is difficult to find terms adequate to express so subtle a conception as that to which the Intellectual Philosophy has conducted us. We are on that verge where words abandon us, and what wonder if we grow dizzy to look down the dark abyss of how little we know!

The relations of things remain unchanged, by whatever system. By the word things is to be understood any object of thought, that is, any thought upon which any other thought is employed, with an apprehension of distinction. The relations of these remain unchanged; and such is the material of our knowledge.

What is the cause of life? That is, how was it produced, or what agencies distinct from life have acted or act upon life? All recorded generations of mankind have wearily busied themselves in inventing answers to this question; and the result has been — Religion. Yet that the basis of all things cannot be, as the popular philosophy alleges, mind, is sufficiently evident. Mind, as far as we have any experience of its properties — and beyond that experience how vain is argument! — cannot create, it can only perceive. It is said also to be the cause. But cause is only a word expressing a certain state of the human mind with regard to the manner in which two thoughts are apprehended to be related to each other. If anyone desires to know how unsatisfactorily the popular philosophy employs itself upon this great question, they need only impartially reflect upon the manner in which thoughts develop themselves in their minds. It is infinitely improbable that the cause of mind, that is, of existence, is similar to mind.

On A Future State

It has been the persuasion of an immense majority of human beings in all ages and nations that we continue to live after death — that apparent termination of all the functions of sensitive and intellectual existence. Nor has mankind been contented with supposing that species of existence which some philosophers have asserted; namely, the resolution of the component parts of the mechanism of a living being into its elements, and the impossibility of the minutest particle of these sustaining the smallest diminution. They have clung to the idea that sensibility and thought, which they have distinguished from the objects of it, under the several names of spirit and matter, is, in its own nature, less susceptible of division and decay, and that, when the body is resolved into its elements, the principle which animated it will remain perpetual and unchanged. Some philosophers — and those to whom we are indebted for the most stupendous discoveries in physical science — suppose, on the other hand, that intelligence is the mere result of certain combinations among the particles of its objects; and those among them who believe that we live after death, recur to the interposition of a supernatural power, which shall overcome the tendency inherent in all material combinations, to dissipate and be absorbed into other forms.

Let us trace the reasoning which in one and the other have conducted to these two opinions, and endeavor to discover what we ought to think on a question of such momentous interest. Let us analyze the ideas and feelings which constitute the contending beliefs, and watchfully establish a discrimination between words and thoughts. Let us bring the question to the test of experience and fact; and ask ourselves, considering our nature in its entire extent, what light we derive from a sustained and comprehensive view of its component parts, which may enable us to assert, with certainty, that we do or do not live after death.

The examination of this subject requires that it should be stripped of all those accessory topics which adhere to it in the common opinion of men. The existence of a God, and a future state of rewards and punishments are totally foreign to the subject. If it be proved that the world is ruled by a Divine Power, no inference necessarily can be drawn from that circumstance in favor of a future state. It has been asserted, indeed, that as goodness and justice are to be numbered among the attributes of the Deity, he will undoubtedly compensate the virtuous who suffer during life, and that he will make every sensitive being, who does not deserve punishment, happy forever. But this view of the subject, which it would be tedious as well as superfluous to develop and expose, satisfies no person, and cuts the knot which we now seek to untie. Moreover, should it be proved, on the other hand, that the mysterious principle which regulates the proceedings of the universe, to neither intelligent nor sensitive, yet it is not an inconsistency to suppose at the same time, that the animating power survives the body which it has animated, by laws as independent of any supernatural agent as those through which it first became united with it. Nor, if a future state be clearly proved, does it follow that it will be a state of punishment or reward.

By the word death, we express that condition in which natures resembling ourselves apparently cease to be that which they are. We no longer hear them speak, nor see them move. If they have sensations and apprehensions, we no longer participate in them. We know no more than that those external organs, and all that fine texture of material frame, without which we have no experience that life or thought can subsist, are dissolved and scattered abroad. The body is placed under the earth, and after a certain period there remains no vestige even of its form. This is that contemplation of inexhaustible melancholy, whose shadow eclipses the brightness of the world. The common observer is struck with dejection of the spectacle. He contends in vain against the persuasion of the grave, that the dead indeed cease to be. The corpse at his feet is prophetic of his own destiny. Those who have preceded him, and whose voice was delightful to his ear; whose touch met his like sweet and subtle fire: whose aspect spread a visionary light upon his path — these he cannot meet again. The organs of sense are destroyed, and the intellectual operations dependent on them have perished with their sources. How can a corpse see or feel? its eyes are eaten out, and its heart is black and without motion. What intercourse can two heaps of putrid Clay and crumbling bones hold together? When you can discover where the fresh colors of the faded flower abide, or the music of the broken lyre seek life among the dead. Such are the anxious and fearful contemplations of the common observer, though the popular religion often prevents him from confessing them even to himself.

The natural philosopher, in addition to the sensations common to all men inspired by the event of death,

The Necessity of Atheism

believes that he sees with more certainty that it is attended with the annihilation of sentiment and thought. He observes the mental powers increase and fade with those of the body, and even accommodate themselves to the most transitory changes of our physical nature. Sleep suspends many of the faculties of the vital and intellectual principle; drunkenness and disease will either temporarily or permanently derange them. Madness or idiocy may utterly extinguish the most excellent and delicate of those powers. In old age the mind gradually withers; and as it grew and was strengthened with the body, so does it together with the body sink into decrepitude. Assuredly these are convincing evidences that so soon as the organs of the body are subjected to the laws of inanimate matter, sensation, and perception, and apprehension, are at an end. It is probable that what we call thought is not an actual being, but no more than the relation between certain parts of that infinitely varied mass, of which the rest of the universe is composed, and which ceases to exist so soon as those parts change their position with regard to each other. Thus color, and sound, and taste, and odor exist only relatively. But let thought be considered only as some peculiar substance, which permeates, and is the cause of, the animation of living beings. Why should that substance be assumed to be something essentially distinct from all others, and exempt from subjection to those laws from which no other substance is exempt? It differs, indeed, from all other substances, as electricity, and light, and magnetism, and the constituent parts of air and earth, severally differ from all others. Each of these is subject to change and decay, and to conversion into other forms. Yet the difference between light and earth is scarcely greater than that which exists between life, or thought, and fire. The difference between the two former was never alleged as an argument for eternal permanence of either, in that form under which they first might offer themselves to our notice. Why should the difference between the two latter substances be an argument for the prolongation of the existence of one and not the other, when the existence of both has arrived at their apparent termination? To say that fire exists without manifesting any of the properties of fire, such as light, heat, etc., or that the Principle of life exists without consciousness, or memory, or desire, or motive, is to resign, by an awkward distortion of language, the affirmative of the dispute. To say that the principle of life may exist in distribution among various forms, is to assert what cannot be proved to be either true or false, but which, were it true, annihilates all hope of existence after death, in any sense in which that event can belong to the hopes and fears of men. Suppose, however, that the intellectual and vital principle differs in the most marked and essential manner from all other known substances; that they have all some resemblance between themselves which it in no degree participates. In what manner can this concession be made an argument for its imperishability? All that we see or know perishes and is changed. Life and thought differ indeed from everything else. But that it survives that period, beyond which we have no experience of its existence, such distinction and dissimilarity affords no shadow of proof, and nothing but our own desires could have led us to conjecture or imagine.

Have we existed before birth? It is difficult to conceive the possibility of this. There is, in the generative principle of each animal and plant, a power which converts the substances homogeneous with itself. That is, the relations between certain elementary particles of matter undergo a change, and submit to new combinations. For when we use words: principle, power, cause, etc., we mean to express no real being, but only to class under those terms a certain series of coexisting phenomena; but let it be supposed that this principle is a certain substance which escapes the observation of the chemist and anatomist. It certainly may be; thought it is sufficiently unphilosophical to allege the possibility of an opinion as a proof of its truth. Does it see, hear, feel, before its combination with those organs on which sensation depends? Does it reason, imagine, apprehend, without those ideas which sensation alone can communicate? If we have not existed before birth; If, at the period when the parts of our nature on which thought and life depend, seem to be woven together; If there are no reasons to suppose that we have existed before that period at which our existence apparently commences, then there are no grounds for supposing that we shall continue to exist after our existence has apparently ceased. So far as thought and life is concerned, the same will take place with regard to us, individually considered, after death, as had taken place before our birth.

It is said that it is possible that we should continue to exist in some mode totally inconceivable to us at present. This is a most unreasonable presumption. It casts on the adherents of annihilation the burden of proving the negative of a question, the affirmative of which is not supported by a single argument, and which, by its very nature, lies beyond the experience of the human understanding. It is sufficiently easy, indeed, to form any proposition, concerning which we are ignorant, just not so absurd as not to be contradictory in itself, and defy refutation. The possibility of whatever enters into the wildest imagination to conceive is thus triumphantly

The Necessity of Atheism

vindicated. But it is enough that such assertions should be either contradictory to the known laws of nature, or exceed the limits of our experience, that their fallacy or irrelevancy to our consideration should be demonstrated. They persuade, indeed, only those who desire to be persuaded.

This desire to be forever as we are; the reluctance to a violent and unexperienced change, which is common to all the animated and inanimate combinations of the universe, is, indeed, the secret persuasion which has given birth to the opinions of a future state.