

## MR. BALFOUR ON "THE FOUNDATIONS OF BELIEF."

BY THE VENERABLE ARCHDEACON FARRAR.

MR. BALFOUR'S book\* has been received by critics, so far as I have observed, with a chorus of unanimous approbation, and having read it through with deep interest, I must express my own humble opinion that this high appreciation has been well earned. It is unusual, it is almost unprecedented, to find a statesman who, though engaged in the very forefront of the political conflict, has yet found time to devote his energies and his ability to a study which demands so much earnest, laborious, and independent thought. It is not, indeed, uncommon to find English statesmen who have also been literary men. Canning and Lord John Russell, Lord Beaconsfield and Mr. Gladstone, are recent instances; and on the Treasury Bench are seated men of high literary ability like Sir William Harcourt, Mr. John Morley, Professor Bryce, and Sir George Trevelyan. Some of these gentlemen have made brilliant contributions to English literature, and Mr. Gladstone has again and again devoted his scanty leisure and his splendid gifts to the consideration of subjects directly theological. But when these eminent politicians have read "The Foundations of Belief," I think that there is not one of them who would not be glad to acknowledge that the book is almost unique as the work of a party leader who, at a comparatively early age, has attained so leading a position; and that the service which it contributes to the deepest interests of religion is one which any living man might have been proud and thankful to render. I do not think that more than one or two of our prelates, or more than a dozen living clergymen or divines, could have produced this metaphysical defence of the ultimate bases on which all theology must rest. It must be ranked in theological importance with Mr. Illingworth's recent Bampton Lectures on "The Personality of God." It does not, for the most part, deal

directly with the problems of religion, and the majority even of ordinarily educated readers will find it a hard task to follow its closely woven and continuous train of reasoning. Those who approach it, as many will, without any preliminary initiation into the elements of scientific and metaphysical thought, will in all probability wholly fail to understand its drift or its utility.

The Apologists of Christianity, whose duty it is to meet the manifold attacks upon its whole superstructure, have continually to change their front. The entire method of attack differs from age to age, and many of the entrenchments which availed to keep back the besieging hosts in a past generation have become comparatively useless in our own. Bishop Butler rendered an immortal service to the cause of religion when he showed that the difficulties which beset "Revealed religion" were to be found no less abundantly in what was then called "Natural religion." Paley, availing himself of the learning of Lardner, used his incomparable gifts of lucidity and practical common-sense to show, as against Hume, how solid were the bases of historical evidence in favour of the events of which the Evangelists and Apostles were witnesses. Mr. Balfour has endeavoured to render a similar service to our own generation. His train of arguments will be talked about by many, but will be beyond the full comprehension of all but the highly educated few. They will undoubtedly be "caviare to the general," who will be at a loss to understand either their significance or their importance. This, however, does not in the least detract from their value. The real defence of the truths which underlie the very possibility of reasoned systems of belief must ever be left in the hands of thinkers, through whom the broad results of more recondite meditation filtrate downwards to the many. If what I have said sounds like very high eulogy I can only say that it is the expression of a sincere opinion. To offer to anyone "light coin, the tinsel clink of compliment," would be to me

\* "The Foundations of Belief; Being Notes Introductory to the Study of Theology." By the Right Hon. A. J. Balfour. (Longmans.)

only a little less odious than to imitate the microscopic malignity of critics who revel in mean detraction, and feed with habitual delight on that "dust" which is "the serpent's meat."

In the very brief space at my disposal anything like a review of this book would be out of the question; and it would be still less possible to adduce any of the numerous elucidations and illustrations which many of its passages suggest. I should have but little adverse criticism to offer, for I have found in it scarcely anything with which I am forced to disagree.

multitude. The positions of Paley have been deeply undermined. The opponent with which Christianity has now to deal is one which goes by the different names of Agnosticism, Positivism, Empiricism, or as Mr. Balfour prefers to call it, "Naturalism." It asserts that we are, by our very nature, incapable of knowing anything but "phenomena, and the laws by which they are connected," and denies the possibility of any knowledge but such as is taught by the natural sciences. Mr. Balfour tests this system in its relation to Ethics, to Æsthetic, and to Reason.



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I will therefore only commend the essay to the consideration of all who are concerned in the study of fundamental theology, and will merely indicate something of what they may expect to find in its pages.

Mr. Balfour took his degree at Cambridge in the Moral Science Tripos, and this book, with its predecessor on "Philosophic Doubt," proves that he has never laid aside the studies of his youth. The arguments of Bishop Butler, as is shown by not a few recent attacks upon them, are no longer sufficient to meet the changed conditions of modern thought: Kant's Transcendental Idealism could never be made sufficiently clear and simple to become an available possession for the

He shows by close reasoning that the sublimity of the Moral Law is utterly destroyed if it be regarded as nothing but an accident of evolution. If we cannot claim for that Moral Law a divine and eternal origin, and if man be nothing more than an automaton, the accidental product of material forces—which have been described by an infidel as being "blind as fate, unregardful as tyranny, merciless as death, which have no ear to hear, no heart to pity, and no arm to save"—its majesty would be annihilated, and its cogency indefinitely weakened. He shows that the laws of Beauty would be reduced to utterly meaningless chaos, unless we believe that "somewhere, and for some

Being, there shines an unchanging splendour of beauty of which, in Nature and Art, we see, each of us from our own standpoint, only passing gleams and stray reflections." He shows that if Reason be regarded as nothing better than a modification of nervous tissue, such a view involves a degradation of mankind, immediate and immense, from the summit of creation to a creature which was made and will be unmade by the clash of atoms. Reason itself would then sink into "the dim passage from one set of unthinking habits to another." "All that gives dignity to life, all that gives value to effort, shrinks and fades under the pitiless glare of a creed like this." Naturalism, then, reduces the sentiments which gather round *beauty* to a poor and purposeless jest played on us by Nature; and those that gather round *morality* to a deliberate fraud. It degrades the spiritual life of ethical ideals to a parasitic growth, sheltered by alien convictions, and nourished by processes in which Naturalistic scientists take no share.

From this preliminary glance at the consequences of Naturalism, Mr. Balfour passes to its philosophic basis. He shows that we are necessarily entangled in masses of contradiction if we have nothing on which to rely except the conclusion of Naturalism that all our observations and experiences must practically be imperfect and delusive. We are then attempting to rest science upon observations which science itself asserts to be erroneous. In the next chapter Mr. Balfour touches on Kant's Transcendental Idealism. That system destroys the belief in any objective reality by resolving the world into "a mind (or thinking subject), which is the source of relations, and a world which is constituted by those relations." Now, the system of Kant does indeed confer upon us inestimable services. It frees us from blank scepticism, for it supplies us with a vision of all things in God; it makes Reason "the essence of all that is or can be"; and it elevates the Ego far above the position of a mere product of the world, of which it is, in fact, a prior condition. Mr. Balfour cannot, however, accept this theory, for reasons which it is impossible here to summarise. In the next chapter, on Philosophy and Rationalism, he proceeds to show that there is no scientifically established doctrine of Rationalism to whose canons we are compelled to bow; and that beliefs cannot be swept aside as superstitious, unscientific, ridiculous, or

incredible merely because they clash with or lie beyond the prevalent mode of interpreting sense-perception. He then argues that a purely "Rationalist orthodoxy" depending on external "Christian evidences," and reducing theology to a humble annex to science, "lacks momentum and cannot hold its own." Thus he passes to the *third* part of his subject, on "some causes of belief," as his first two parts have been on "some consequences of" and "some reasons for" belief. He cannot accept a scheme which places Naturalism and Theology side by side as unconnected regions of knowledge which can hold no mutual intercourse with each other. He cannot be content merely to patch and plaster an accepted Naturalism "with a number of heterogeneous propositions drawn from an entirely different source." He thinks that an imaginary observer would soon find out that "other influences besides reasoning were required to supplement the simple physiological and psychological causes which originate the immediate beliefs of perception, memory, and expectation." He sees in all that comes under the head of "*Authority*" one group of causes of supreme importance, and deprecates as a gross delusion "the identification of Reason with all that is *good* among the causes of belief, and of Authority with all that is *bad*." Many of the incidental remarks in this chapter, as well as his main argument, are full of interest; for instance, his keen analysis of the supposed arguments for Papal Infallibility. His conclusion is that, while there are abundant instances in which "Authority has perpetrated error and retarded progress," yet "it is Authority rather than Reason to which in the main we owe not religion only, but ethics and politics." He holds that "Authority supplies us with essential elements in the premises of science; lays deep the foundations of social life and cements its superstructure"; and that "it is no exaggeration to say that, if we would find the quality in which we most notably excel the brute creation, we should look for it not so much in our faculty of convincing and being convinced by the exercise of reasoning, as in our capacity for influencing and being influenced by Authority."

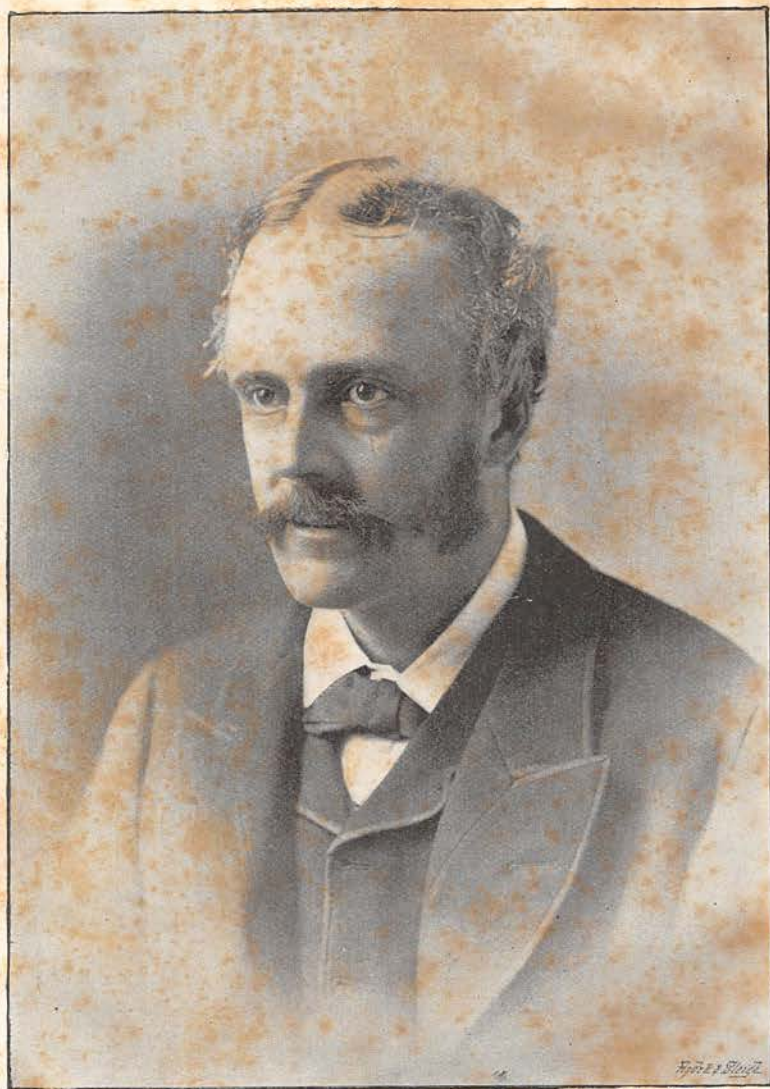
Thus we pass to the Fourth Part—"Suggestions towards a Provisional Philosophy." Mr. Balfour here argues that "Faith, or assurance, which, if not in excess of reason is at least independent of it, seems to be a necessity in every great department of knowledge which touches on action—and

what great department is there which does not?" It has in no sense been his object to *discredit* Reason, but only to show that unaided Reason has not given us a satisfactory philosophy of the universe. We must take account "not only of premises and their conclusions, but of needs and their satisfaction." We may then "utterly decline to circumscribe the knowable by frontiers whose delimitation Reason itself assures us can be justified on no rational principle whatsoever." It is impossible to follow Mr. Balfour closely through the remainder of his very valuable book. He illustrates with great force the danger in theology of leaning too timidly on theory, and suffering experience to be dragged down when the theory decays. He shows that essential religious truth may be separated from the theological formulæ in which for a time it has been enshrined; and that, even within the limits of the same unchanging formulæ, large changes and adaptations of belief are possible. We owe something—nay, we owe much—to the deep and gracious shadows of human language, which, though not given us for the purpose of concealing our thoughts, is yet incapable of fully expressing our partial knowledge under the naked and pitiless glare of accurate certainty. "It would be a mistake," says Mr. Balfour, "to suppose that any complete correspondence between Belief and Religion was secured by the linguistic precision and the logical impeccability of the propositions by which beliefs themselves are communicated and recorded." Mr. Spencer tries to prove that the ultimate ideas of science and theology are alike unthinkable, but that "the knowable" belongs to science alone. But the knowable itself is of very little value if it reduces even such properties of matter as

weight and resistance to mere "suggestive ideas produced by objective agencies which are unknown and unknowable." If "the certainties of science lose themselves in depths of unfathomable mystery," says Mr. Balfour, "it may well be that out of these same depths should emerge the certainties of religion."

Coleridge used to say that Mrs. Barbauld's name was "a pleonasm of nakedness"—not only *bare* but *bold*. This paper would be the same if it pretended to be a review, and not a general indication of the nature and contents of the book of which it speaks. But it may serve the useful purpose of preparing the reader for what he may expect in Mr. Balfour's book, and of urging him to examine and to master it. I have no space left to follow the author through his last chapter, on Science and Theology, and on "A Provisional Unification," which could not be compressed into a few lines, because they are crowded with important considerations. But some of the author's conclusions are (1) that we can at present construct no system of knowledge which shall not suffer from defects of proof and incoherencies; (2) that no unification of belief can be formed on a purely scientific basis; (3) that even philosophy must recognise that "most of the proximate causes of belief and all its ultimate causes are non-rational in their character; and (4) that no unification of beliefs can be adequate which does not include ethical beliefs such as inspire moral sentiments, ideals, and aspirations, and satisfy our ethical needs.

Such is an outline of the contents and method followed in a book for which the distinguished author is entitled to the warm gratitude of every thinker to whom the highest and deepest interests of the human race are dear.



*Photo by Elliott and Fry, Baker-street.*

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