

CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN THE LATE J. S. MILL AND R. PHARAZYN, OF WANGANUI.

At the request of a number of the members of the "Wanganui Freethought Association," we publish the following correspondence, together with such comments as Mr. Pharazyn thought necessary to make in explanation when he read it at a late meeting of the Association.

He writes: The circumstances under which I ventured to bring my crude fancies under the notice of Mr. Mill were as follows: My friend Mr. S. Revans, of the Wairarapa—one of the ablest men it has ever been my good fortune to know—was kind enough frequently to discuss philosophical subjects with me, and on one occasion I made a suggestion which he remarked would interest Mill (whom he had known intimately many years ago in connection with the 'Westminster Review') and said that I should write to him on the subject, and make use of his name. I accordingly did so as below:—

Wellington, New Zealand, 14th April, 1866.

SIR,—Having long been a great admirer and earnest student of your writings, and having just read your admirable "Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy," I trust you will excuse the liberty I take of writing to you on a subject, suggested by an article on your work (probably written by Mr. Lewes) which appears in the January number of the 'Westminster Review.' The Reviewer says in reference to your comments on Mr. Mansel (with which I cordially agree and which exactly express the impression made on my mind by that Bampton lecture):—"On the whole it seems to us that though Mr. Mill will consent to worship only a God of goodness, he has thrown no light on the grave problem—frankly stated though imperfectly solved by Mr. Mansel—how such a conception of God is to be reconciled with the extent of evil and suffering actually prevailing throughout the earth. We are compelled to say, respecting Mr. Mill's treatment of this subject—what we should not say respecting his treatment of any other—that he has left an old perplexing problem not less perplexing than he found it." My own criticism was similar, and the subject is one on which I have often thought. The conclusion at which I have long since arrived is this: 'That no proof of the existence of a God can be given nor of the nature of his attributes, in short that the question is an insoluble one in any strictly scientific sense.' But of course it is objected, if there is no proof of there being a good God there may be a bad one, and so we fall back on orthodox myths, or, at best "intuitions," to avoid this shocking possibility of belief, of the effects of which African fetichism and American psychomancy are examples and warnings. There is something of this argument not only in the "Eclipse of Faith" sort of books, but in the "Phases" of the one Newman and the "Apologia" of the other, and indeed it gives a tinge to all Theistic as well as Theological reasoning, and constitutes the half-conscious philosophy of popular religion. Now it seems to me that the real answer to all this is not *logical* at all, but *practical*, though in a wide sense it is logical too, as "is the proof of the principle of utility," "for questions of ultimate ends do not admit of proof, in the ordinary acceptance of the term."

I take my stand then upon the fact that belief has always a reference to practice, that, to use Mr. Bain's words, "belief has no meaning except in reference to our actions" (Bain's *Emotion and the Will*, p. 569 ed. of 1859). Now we find by ample experience that belief should be based upon *facts* where there are facts positive or negative. But what if there are no facts; what if there is an absolute void? apt to be filled by ghosts and demons, eternal punishment, and other products of wild imaginations and bad digestions. In such a case I say let us believe what on the whole it is best for mankind to believe about the unknown and the unknowable. The laws of association will very soon make this a very strong practical religion, quite ready to admit all facts and excluding all fictions. The very exceptions or apparent ones to a benevolent scheme of creation, for the rule is certainly *not* malevolence in the physical world as we call it—overborne by ethical ideas for the most part due to the social organisation, which is improving or may be made to improve—will, as it seems to me, keep alive the faith in infinite goodness being somehow the soul of all things, and at any rate exclude any real belief that the devil is God.

That this is important for the mass of mankind most thinkers allow, or insist, as Comte, for instance, whose mystical scheme for a "Religion of Humanity" would, I think, be superseded by this natural religion, the theory of which I have indicated above, in rough and imperfect language, which I hope you will regard as conveying ideas telegraph fashion from under the world. I do not know that this matter has ever been thus considered; certainly any such theory as mine is often *not* brought to bear when it *might* be with effect.

I then gave some instances, and expanded the argument a little, and referred to Mr. Revans, ending by making some references to New Zealand politics; but I have quoted enough to explain the reply, which I now give:—

Avignon, August 22, 1866.

SIR,—The great occupation of my time in the latter part of the session has prevented me from more promptly acknowledging your letter of April 14. I am glad to find that a student and thinker,

such as you evidently are, finds so much in common between me and himself. The author of the article in the 'Westminster Review' from which you quote (who is not, as you suppose, Mr. Lewes) is quite right in saying that I have thrown no new light on the difficulty of reconciling the belief in a perfectly good God with the actual constitution of nature. It was not my business to do so, but if I had given any opinion on the point, it would have been that there is no mode of reconciling them, except the hypothesis that the Creator is a Being of limited power. Either he is not all powerful or he is not good; and what I said was that unless he is good I will not call him so, nor worship him. The appearances, however, of contrivance in the universe, whatever amount of weight we attach to them, seem to point rather to a benevolent design limited by obstacles, than to a malevolent or tyrannical character in the designer; and I therefore think that the mind which cherishes devotion to a Principle of Goodness in the universe, leans in the direction in which the evidence, though I cannot think it conclusive, nevertheless points. I therefore do not discourage this leaning, though I think it important that people should know that the foundation it rests on is an hypothesis, not an ascertained fact. This is the principal limitation which I would apply to your position, that we should encourage ourselves to believe, as to the unknowable, what is best for mankind that we should believe.

I do not think it can ever be best for mankind to believe what there is not evidence of; but I think that as mankind improve, they will more and more recognise two independent mental provinces, the province of belief, and the province of imaginative conjecture; that they will become capable of keeping these distinct, and while they limit their belief to the evidence will think it allowable to let their imaginative anticipations go forth, not carrying belief in their train, in the direction in which experience and the study of human nature shows to be the most improving to the character and most exalting or consoling to the individual feelings.

I do not know enough of New Zealand politics to enter on that subject with you. I think most people in England are now of opinion that the colony should have perfect freedom to manage its own affairs, paying the expenses of its own wars. There is some fear that you will not be just to the aborigines, but a still stronger belief that if you are not, we cannot effectually protect them. I hope you are not wrong in saying that there is no disposition to be unjust to them. But if so, the New Zealand colonists are, I believe, the only "Englishmen under new conditions" who do not think any injustice or tyranny whatever legitimate against what they call inferior races, at least if those races do not implicitly submit to their will. I will *hope* better things for New Zealand, but in this as in the other and greater matter my *belief* will depend on the evidence.

I have not forgotten Mr. Revans, to whom pray make my remembrances.

I am, sir,

Yours very sincerely,

J. S. MILL.

I may be permitted to add, that I *want* precisely what Mr. Mill *said*, and it is interesting to notice his superior accuracy of language in distinguishing between "belief" and "imaginative anticipations." In the last of his "Three Essays on Religion," that on "Theism," written in 1868, he enlarges on this subject in a section entitled "General Result," and judging from internal evidence I think my letter may have suggested it to his mind. For my own part, with the wider knowledge and deeper thought which the lapse of nearly twenty years necessarily brings, I have found it impossible honestly to retain even that modicum of faith in the supernatural which "imaginative conjecture" supplies, while I have become more and more convinced that a sound philosophy can only be based on positive conceptions derived from experience and leading to a purely monistic theory of the universe, while the identification of individual life with that of humanity at large seems to me to afford ample scope for the indulgence of those loftier aspirations, which react favourably on character and advance social happiness. In the long run ideas govern the world, but their power depends upon the amount of truth they contain, and the ultimate test of truth is experience.

R.P.

A paper on the ventilation of theatres was lately read at the Parker Museum of Hygiene, London. In some crowded theatres, the air has been said by a competent authority to be more foul than that of the street sewers. The intensely heated air would seem to act like a pump, and to draw up the vitiated atmosphere from the drains below the building. The introduction of electric lighting to some of the metropolitan theatres has done much to mitigate the evil; but the ventilation of public buildings does not receive the attention which its importance demands.