

The Usefulness of Religion

John Stuart Mill

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[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four-point ellipsis indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth.—The division into three sections is not Mill's.

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Introduction

Friends of religion and its enemies have had a great deal to say about whether religion is *true*; but—as has sometimes been remarked—there has been very little discussion or controversy about whether and how it is *useful*. This might have been expected, because in matters that affect us so deeply *truth* is our first concern. If religion, or some particular religion, is true, there's no need to argue for its usefulness. Having genuine knowledge about what kind of place the universe is and how it is governed—if *that* isn't useful, it's hard to imagine anything that is! Whether a person is in a pleasant or in an unpleasant place, a palace or a prison, it has to be useful for him to know *where* he is. And so for as long as men accepted the teachings of their religion as definite facts, no more open to doubt than their own existence or the existence of objects in their environment, it couldn't possibly occur to them to ask whether or how it was *useful* to believe it. There was no need to insist that religion is •useful until people had to a large extent stopped being convinced by the arguments purporting to show that it is •true. Until people had stopped believing, or stopped relying on the belief of others, they couldn't defend religion as *useful* without having a sense that they were lowering something that they were trying to raise. An argument for the usefulness of religion is an appeal

- to unbelievers, to get them to practise a well-meant hypocrisy, or
- to semi-believers to make them avert their eyes from what might possibly shake their unstable belief, or finally
- to people in general to abstain from expressing any doubts they may feel.

The last motivation would reflect the view that a structure of immense importance to mankind is so insecure at its foundations that men must hold their breath in its neighbourhood for fear of blowing it down!

At the present stage of history, however, we seem to have arrived at a time when among the arguments for and against religion the arguments concerning its usefulness have an important place. We are in an age of weak beliefs, and an age in which any ·religious· belief that men *do* have results more from their wish to believe than from any evaluation of evidence. The wish to believe doesn't arise only from selfish feelings but often from ones that are entirely disinterested [= 'not *self*-interested', here and throughout]; and though this *wish* can't produce the unwavering and perfect reliance that once existed, it puts a protective fence around the effects of early education; it often causes direct doubts to fade away through disuse; and, above all, it gets people to continue organizing their lives according to doctrines that have lost part of their hold on the mind, and to maintain towards the world the same—no, a *more* demonstrative attitude of belief than they thought it necessary to display when they had a real, complete, personal *belief*.

If religious belief really is as necessary to mankind as we are continually told that it is, we should find it very sad that the •intellectual grounds for it should have to be backed up by moral bribery or corruption of the understanding. Such a state of things is most uncomfortable even for those who can without actual insincerity describe themselves as 'believers'; and is still worse for those who, though they are aware that they no longer find the case for religion's truth convincing, are restrained from saying so because they are

afraid of contributing to an irreparable harm to mankind. For a conscientious and cultivated mind it is most painful to be drawn in opposite directions by the two noblest of all objects of pursuit—truth and the general good. Such a conflict is bound to produce a growing indifference to one or other of these objects, and probably to both. Many people who could do terrific work on behalf of truth and of mankind if they thought they could serve one without loss to the other are either totally paralysed or led to confine their efforts to matters of minor detail; what does this show to them that any real freedom of thought, or any considerable strengthening or broadening of the thinking capacities of mankind at large, might turn men into unbelievers, which would (they think) be the surest way to make them vicious and miserable. Many others, having observed in other people or experienced in themselves elevated feelings that they don't think could come from any source except religion, are honestly opposed to anything that they think might dry up the fountain of such feelings. So they either dislike and disparage all philosophy, or throw themselves with intolerant zeal into the forms of philosophy in which intuition takes the place of evidence, and internal feeling is made the test of objective truth. The whole of the dominant metaphysics of the present [19th] century is a tissue of corrupted evidence in favour of religion; often only on behalf of deism, but always involving a misuse of noble impulses and capacities for theoretical thought. [Deism is a thin belief in a higher power, one that doesn't intervene in human affairs and may not even be a person.] This is one of the most deplorable of those wretched wastes of human abilities that make it surprising that enough is left unwasted to keep mankind making progress, however slowly. It is time to consider, more impartially and therefore more deliberately than is usually done, what we get out of all this straining to prop up beliefs that need so much intellectual toil and ingenuity to keep

them standing. Are these efforts adequately repaid by gains to human well-being? Wouldn't human well-being be better served by frankly recognizing that some subjects are out of reach of our faculties, and by applying those same mental powers to strengthening and enlarging the other sources of virtue and happiness that are open to us, sources that don't need the support of supernatural beliefs or the threat of supernatural penalties? [Mill writes of 'the support or sanction of supernatural beliefs'. Oddly, 'sanction' can mean 'penalty' and can mean 'permission'; Mill's use of it in this Essay is closer to 'penalty', but on each of the six occasions of use 'threat of penalty' seems to be what he had in mind.]

Yet there are difficulties in this issue, and they can't be brushed aside as promptly as sceptical philosophers sometimes tend to believe. It isn't enough to assert in general terms that *truth can never be in conflict with usefulness*—that if religion is false the consequences of rejecting it must all be good. The knowledge of every positive truth is indeed a useful acquisition, but the same doesn't hold without qualification for negative truth. Suppose we learn for certain that *nothing else can be known*: knowing *this* doesn't give us any new facts that can help us to guide ourselves; the most it can do is to undermine our trust in something that we used to take as a guide. And that 'something' may, though it is itself fallacious, have pointed in the same direction as the best guides we have, and if it happens to be more conspicuous and legible it may be that it would have kept us on the right path when the others had been overlooked. So it's perfectly conceivable that religion is morally useful without being intellectually defensible; and it would be a very prejudiced unbeliever who denied that this has sometimes been the case, and that it is even now the case with regard to some nations and some individuals. Whether it is generally the case, and will go

on being so, it is the question I shall examine in this Essay. Is religious belief, considered as a mere state of mind and apart from the question of its truth, really indispensable to the temporal welfare of mankind? [By 'the temporal welfare' Mill means 'the welfare in this life', i.e. setting aside any question of welfare in an after-life (which would not be 'temporal' because it would be eternal and thus outside time).] If religious belief is useful, is it •intrinsically and universally so, or only in some way •accidentally so and therefore useful only in certain places and at certain times? Could the benefits of religious belief be obtained in some other way without having mixed into them the very large ingredient of evil that comes with even the best form of religious belief? These are the questions I shall address. [In this essay 'evil' as an adjective means 'bad, harmful', and as a noun 'something that is bad, harmful'. It doesn't have, as it tends to these days, the sense of 'worse than merely wicked', applied to people or actions.]

We are all familiar with the arguments on one side of the question: religious writers have celebrated to the utmost the advantages both of religion in general and of their own religious faith in particular. But those who have held the contrary opinion have merely insisted on the more obvious and flagrant of the positive evils that have been caused by past and present forms of religious belief. And indeed mankind have been so unremittingly occupied in doing evil to one another in the name of religion—from the sacrifice of Iphigenia to the Dragonnades of Louis XIV, and worse—that for any immediate purpose there was little need to look further for arguments. [Iphigenia: daughter of Agamemnon, who slaughtered her as a sacrifice to the goddess Artemis whom he had offended, so that she would send a good wind to take his ships to the Trojan war. Dragonnades: a policy of the Catholic Louis XIV in which very crude and brutal soldiers— dragoons—were sent to live in the homes of Protestants and to behave as badly as they wished. There is a heart-breaking account

of this in Julian Barnes's short story 'Dragons', in his book *Cross Channel*.] But these disgusting consequences belong not to religion as such but to particular forms of it, and they aren't evidence against the usefulness of any religions except the ones that encourage such horrible crimes. And the worst of these evils have already been to a great extent cleared out of the more improved forms of religion; and as mankind make progress in their ideas and feelings this process of cleansing continually goes on: the immoral or otherwise bad consequences that have been drawn from •religion are being abandoned, one by one, and after having been defended for centuries as being of •its very essence are found to be easily separable from it. Still, although these bad consequences lie in the past and can no longer be used as arguments against religion, they are still valid as arguments against its beneficial influence. What we learn from the history of such disgusting cases is that •some of the greatest improvements ever made in the moral sentiments of mankind have taken place without religion, indeed *in spite of* religion; and that •what we are taught to regard as the most important of all improving influences, namely religion, has fallen so far short of playing such a role that the *other* good influences on human nature have had as one of their hardest tasks the improvement of religion itself. However, the improvement *has* taken place; it is still proceeding, and for the sake of fairness we should assume it to be complete. We ought to suppose religion to have accepted the best human morality that reason and goodness can develop from philosophical, Christian, or any other elements. When religion has thus freed itself from the pernicious consequences of embodying this or that bad moral doctrine, the ground is clear for considering the question: Are the useful properties of •religion confined to •it, or can their benefits can be obtained in other ways?

This essential part of the ·whole· inquiry into the temporal usefulness of religion is my topic in this Essay. It is a part to which sceptical writers haven't paid much attention. The only direct discussion of it that I know is a short work partly compiled from Bentham's manuscripts; it is full of sound, deep views, though it seems to me to press many parts of the argument too hard. [This refers to Philip Beauchamp's *Analysis of the Influence of Natural Religion on the Temporal Happiness of Mankind*.] This treatise, and occasional remarks scattered through Comte's writings, are the only things I know that contribute much to the sceptical side of this argument. I shall use both of them freely in what follows.

My discussion will be divided into two parts, corresponding to the two aspects of the subject—

- its social aspect: What does religion do for society? What amount of benefit to *social interests*, in the ordinary sense of that phrase, arises from religious belief?
- its individual aspect: What does religion do for the individual? What influence does it have in improving and ennobling individual human nature?

Everyone is interested in the social question, but only the best people care about the individual question. But if either is more important than the other, the best people will judge the individual question to be the more important of the two. So I shall start with the other, because it has the better chance of being easily made precise and manageable.

The social question

In considering religious belief as an instrument of social good, we must start by drawing a distinction that is very often overlooked. It is usual to credit religion as such with the whole of the power inherent in *any* system of moral duties taught by education and enforced by opinion. Mankind would certainly be in a dreadful state if •no principles or precepts of justice, truthfulness, or beneficence were taught publicly or privately, and if •these virtues weren't encouraged—and the opposite vices repressed—by the praise and blame. . . .of mankind. Nearly everything of this sort that actually happens does so in the name of *religion*; almost everyone who is taught any morality whatever is taught it *as religion*, and has it drummed into him throughout his life principally as religion.

The result of this is that the effect that the teaching produces *as teaching* it is supposed to produce *as religious teaching*. This gives to religion the credit for all the •influence in human affairs that belongs to *any* generally accepted system of rules for the guidance and government of human life.

Few persons have sufficiently considered how great this •influence is—what vast power belongs naturally to any doctrine that is •accepted by just about everyone and •impressed on the mind from the earliest childhood as *duty*.

I don't think it needs much thought for one to conclude that *this*—the state of affairs described in the indented passage just above—is the great moral power in human affairs, and

that religion seems powerful only because this mighty power has been under its command.

·AUTHORITY·

Consider first the enormous influence of authority on the human mind. (I am now speaking of influence on what men believe, on their convictions, on their thoughts and feelings—and *not* influence on their voluntary behaviour.) The mass of mankind believe everything that they are said to know, apart from facts taken in through their own senses, on the 'evidence' of *authority*. That is the evidence on which even the ablest people accept all the truths of science, or facts in history or in life, of which they haven't personally examined the proofs. On any matter of opinion, the agreement of mankind has supreme power over the vast majority of people. If something is certified to them as agreed upon by all mankind, they believe it with a confidence that they don't give even to the evidence of their senses when the general opinion of mankind stands opposed to it. Thus, when any rule of life and duty has conspicuously received general assent it obtains a hold on the belief of every individual, a stronger hold than it would have had even if he had reached it through the inherent force of his own understanding. And this holds true whether or not the rule in question is based on religion. If the German poet Novalis could say 'My belief has gained infinitely for me from the moment when one other human being begins to believe the same', how much more when it's not 'one other person' but all the human beings one knows of! You may want to object: 'No scheme of morality can owe whatever power it has over the mind to universal assent, because no scheme of morality *has* universal assent.' That is true as regards the present age, but that *strengthens* the argument that it might at first seem to controvert. Here is how. Exactly in proportion as the accepted systems of belief have been challenged, and it has

become known that many people don't accept them, their hold on the belief of people in general has been loosened and their influence on conduct has declined. And since this has happened to them *despite* the religious threat of penalties that has been attached to them, there can be no stronger evidence that they were powerful not •as religion but •as beliefs generally accepted by mankind. To find people who believe their religion as unshakably as you believe that fire will burn your hand when thrust into it, we must look to the oriental countries where Europeans don't yet predominate, or to the European world when it was still universally Roman Catholic. Men often disobeyed their religion in those times, because their human passions and desires were too strong for it, or because the religion itself offered means of forgiveness for breaches of its obligations; but although they •disobeyed, they usually didn't •doubt. There was in those days an absolute and unquestioning completeness of belief such as has not occurred generally in Europe ever since.

·EDUCATION·

That, then, is the power exercised over mankind by simple authority, the mere belief and testimony of their fellow-creatures. Now consider what a tremendous power education has—the indescribable effect of bringing people up from infancy in a belief, and in habits based on it. [The next sentence reflects the fact that in Mill's time 'education' could mean merely 'upbringing', our meaning for the word being a 'restricted' one.] Consider also that in all countries, from the earliest ages down to the present, those who have from their earliest years been taught some kind of religious belief, and taught rules as the commands of the heavenly powers to them and to mankind, are not merely •those who have been 'educated' in the restricted sense of the word, but •almost all those who have been brought up by parents or other concerned adults.

For young children, the commands of God are no weightier than the commands of their parents (or so I suppose; I can't *imagine* that it would be otherwise); so it's reasonable to think that •any system of social duty that mankind might adopt, even one divorced from religion, would have the same advantage of being drummed into people from childhood on; and that •this advantage will be possessed much more in the future than it is now, because society is much more inclined now than it used to be to take pains for the moral tuition of those numerous classes whose education it has previously left to chance. [In case it isn't clear: Mill's point is that moral doctrines will be more widely ingrained in the •future (because of widespread •present moral education) than they are •at present (because the present state of things results from less thoroughly spread •past moral education).] Now, the impressions of early education have something that it is much harder for later convictions to obtain—namely, command over the *feelings*. We see daily how powerful a hold these first impressions retain over the •feelings even of people who have given up the •opinions that they were taught when young. What about opinions that people acquire through their own investigations later in life? Well, sometimes those are woven in with the person's feelings as forcefully as are opinions acquired in early childhood; but this happens only with people who are unusually sensitive and intelligent, and even then what enables them to bring their feelings into line with their opinions is a strong sense of moral duty and sincerity, courage and self-devotion—all of which are themselves the fruits of early-childhood impressions.

The power of education is almost boundless: there is no natural inclination that education isn't strong enough to push around and if necessary to destroy by disuse. The greatest recorded victory that education has ever achieved over a whole host of natural inclinations in an entire people

was the maintenance through centuries of the institutions of Lycurgus—who in the 7th century BCE created the system of education, social conduct, and law that we all associate with Sparta centuries later. This system owed little if anything to religion, for the Gods of the Spartans were the same as those of other Greek states. No doubt every state in Greece believed that its particular social-political set-up was first established with some sort of divine support (mostly that of the oracle at Delphi), and it was usually easy enough to obtain the same or an equally powerful support for a change. It wasn't religion that gave the Spartan institutions their strength: the root of the system was devotion to Sparta, to the ideal of the country or State. If this were transformed into ideal devotion to a greater country—*the world*—it would achieve much nobler things than Sparta did. Among the Greeks generally, social morality was extremely independent of religion. Any dependence between them ran the other way: the worship of the Gods was inculcated chiefly as a social duty, because the Greeks thought that if the Gods were neglected or insulted their displeasure would fall not just on the offending individual but equally on the state or community that bred and tolerated him. Such moral teaching as existed in Greece had very little to do with religion. The Gods were not thought to care much about men's conduct towards one another, except when men contrived to give the •Gods themselves a stake in some human project by placing an assertion or undertaking under the penalty-threat of a solemn appeal to •them. I grant that the sophists and philosophers, and even popular orators, did their best to press religion into the service of their special concerns, and to convince people that the sentiments—of whatever kind—that they busy drumming into people were particularly acceptable to the Gods; but this never seems to be the main consideration except in the special case of direct offence

to the dignity of the Gods themselves. [Mill's words '...press religion into the service...' are a metaphorical reference to an old system whereby the British navy acquired sailors: official 'press gangs' would roam the towns and countryside, arresting men and 'pressing' them into the service of the navy. The laws permitting this were still on the books in Mill's time.] For the enforcement of human moralities, non-religious inducements were almost exclusively relied on. I think that ancient Greece offers us the only example in which non-religious teaching has had the indescribably great advantage of forming the basis of education. Much can be said against the quality of some part of the content of the teaching, but very little can be said against its effectiveness. The most memorable example of the power of education over conduct is, I repeat, this exceptional case of ancient Greece; which gives us good reason to believe that in other cases early religious teaching has owed its power over mankind to its being early rather than to its being religious.

·PUBLIC OPINION·

We have now considered two powers, that of authority, and that of early education, which operate on men's conduct through their involuntary beliefs, feelings and desires, and which religion has always regarded as almost exclusively *its* business. Let us now consider a third power that operates directly on men's actions, whether or not their involuntary sentiments go along with it. This is the power of public opinion—the effect on men of the praise and blame, favour and disfavour, of their fellow creatures—and is a source of strength inherent in any system of moral belief that is generally adopted, whether connected with religion or not.

Men usually give to the motives for their actions names that are more flattering than they are entitled to—so much so that they generally have no idea how much the parts of their conduct that they take most pride in (as well as some that they are ashamed of) are due to the motive of public

opinion. Of course public opinion mostly commands the same things that are commanded by the accepted social morality; because that morality is really just the summary of how each individual person wants everyone else to behave towards him (whether or not he behaves like that towards them). So when people do things that their conscience approves, they can easily flatter themselves that they are acting from the *motive* of conscience though really they are driven by the inferior motive of wanting to conform. We continually see how much power opinion has in opposition to conscience; how men 'follow a multitude to do evil' [Mill takes that phrase from Exodus 23:2]; how often opinion gets men to do things that their conscience disapproves, and still oftener prevents them from doing things that it commands. But when the motive of public opinion acts in the same direction as conscience, which it usually does (naturally, because public opinion is what made the conscience in the first place), then it is it is the most overpowering of all the motives that act on the bulk of mankind..

The strongest passions that human nature exhibits (except for the merely animal ones) each have a name that stands for just *one part* of the motive derived from what I am here calling 'public opinion'. The parts of that motive—specifically of its attractive power—include

the love of glory,
the love of praise,
the love of admiration,
the love of respect and deference,
the love of sympathy.

When we think that someone is excessively influenced by any one of these, our word for what moves him is 'vanity'. The fear of shame, the fear of having a bad reputation or of being disliked or hated, are direct and simple forms of the

•detering power of public opinion. But the deterrent force of people's unfavourable opinions doesn't consist solely in the painfulness of knowing oneself to be their object; it also includes all the penalties that the public can inflict—

- exclusion from society and from the countless kinds of help that human beings require from one another,
- forfeiture of all that is called *success* in life,
- often the great diminution or total loss of income,
- positively nasty treatment of various kinds, sufficient to make life miserable, and in some states of society as far as actual persecution and death.

And again the influence of public opinion in pushing or pulling people to act in certain ways includes the whole range of what is commonly meant by 'ambition'; because except in times of lawless military violence the •objectives of social ambition can only be achieved through the good opinion and favourable disposition of our fellow-creatures. Also, nine times out of ten those •objectives wouldn't even be wanted if they didn't bring with them power over the thoughts and feelings of mankind. In the great majority of people, even the pleasure of self-approval mainly depends on the opinion of others. That opinion has so much unwanted influence on ordinary minds that it would take an exceptionally sturdy person to be capable of confidence that he is in the right when the world—i.e. when *his* world—thinks him to be wrong; and for most men the most conclusive proof of their own virtue or talent is that people in general seem to believe in it. Through all branches of human affairs, regard for the thoughts and feelings of our fellow-creatures is, in one form or another, the pervading motive in almost everyone. (And we should note that this motive is naturally strongest in the most sensitive people—the ones whose natures are the most promising material for the formation of great virtues.) We all know from experience how far its power reaches; there

is no need for me to prove or illustrate it here. As soon as the means of living have been obtained, the far greater part of the remaining •human• labour and effort that takes place on the earth is aimed at acquiring the respect or the favourable regard of mankind—to be looked up to, or anyway not to be looked down upon, by them. The industrial and commercial activities that advance •civilization flow from that source, and so do the frivolity, extravagance, and selfish thirst for power and fame that hold •it back. If you want an example of the power exercised by the terrors derived from public opinion—we all know that many murders have been committed merely to remove a witness who knew and was likely to disclose some secret that would bring disgrace upon his murderer.

Anyone who fairly and impartially considers the subject will see reason to believe that the great effects on human conduct that are commonly ascribed to motives derived directly from religion mostly have for their immediate cause the influence of human opinion. Religion has been powerful not through its intrinsic force but because it has wielded that additional and more mighty power—the power of public opinion. Religion has had an immense effect on the direction of public opinion, which in many very important respects has been set by religion and nothing else. But •when we consider the powers that religion wields directly, and not through public opinion, what we find is not impressive: religion's own threats of penalties, when not stiffened by the penalty-threats added by public opinion, have never had much influence except in the minds that were in special moods or that belonged to exceptional people. When I say 'never', I mean never since the times when people believed that God was frequently at work delivering temporal rewards and punishments [see note on 'temporal' high on page 3]. When a man firmly believed that if he violated the sacredness of a

particular sanctuary he would be struck dead on the spot, or suddenly hit with a mortal disease, no doubt he took care not to incur the penalty; but as soon as someone was brave enough to defy the danger, and escaped unharmed, the spell was broken. The Jews, as much as any people who ever lived, were taught that they were subject to God's rule and that unfaithfulness to their religion and law would be repaid by God with temporal punishments; and yet their history was nothing but a series of lapses into paganism! Their prophets and historians, who held fast to the ancient beliefs (though they interpreted them so loosely that they thought God might express his displeasure with a king by doing something nasty to his great-grandson), never ceased to complain that their countrymen turned a deaf ear to their prophecies; and hence, believing as they did in a divine government operating by temporal penalties, they couldn't fail to anticipate. . . . *a general overturn*, which did in fact occur, luckily for the credit of their prophetic powers! (Unlike the only intelligible prophecy in the Revelations, the Apostle John's prediction that Jerusalem would suffer a fate like that of Nineveh and Babylon; which still hasn't happened.) In the course of time, experience forced all but the very ignorant to believe that divine punishments were not to be confidently expected in a temporal form; and there can be no doubt that this contributed greatly to the downfall of the old religions, and to the general adoption of a religion which, without absolutely ruling out God's interfering in this life to punish guilt or reward merit, shifted the principal scene of God's retribution to a world after death. But when. . . punishments are that far in the future and never seen by the eye, they aren't likely to have on ordinary minds a very powerful counter-force against strong temptation, even if they are infinite ·in intensity· and eternal ·in extent·. Their mere remoteness reduces enormously the effect that

they—or rather the threat of them—has on the kinds of minds that most require the restraint of punishment. An even larger reduction ·in the effect of such threats· comes from their uncertainty, which belongs to them from the very nature of the case. Rewards and punishments administered after death must be based not on particular actions but on a general survey of the person's whole life, and he easily convinces himself that whatever little sins he may have been guilty of, there will be a balance in his favour at the bottom line. All positive religions [= 'all religions supposed to have been given by God'] aid this self-delusion. •Bad religions teach that God's vengeance can be bought off by offerings or grovelling apologies; •the better ones want to avoid driving sinners to despair, and therefore emphasize God's *mercy* so much that hardly anyone is compelled to think he is irrevocably condemned. The sole quality of these •punishments that might seem apt to make ·the threat of· them effective, namely their overpowering magnitude, is itself a reason why nobody (except the occasional hypochondriac) ever really believes himself to be in very serious danger of incurring •them. Even the worst evil-doer is hardly able to think that any crime he has been able to commit, any evil he can have inflicted in the short period of his existence, can have deserved torture extending through an eternity. And so we find religious writers and preachers continually complaining about how little effect religious motives have on men's lives and conduct, despite the tremendous penalties that are threatened.

I have mentioned Bentham as one of the few authors who have written anything pointful about the effectiveness of the religious threat of penalties. He brings forward several cases to prove that •religious obligation, when not enforced by •public opinion, has almost no effect on people's conduct. ·I shall mention three of them·. (1) **Oaths**. The oaths taken in courts of justice, and any others that public opinion rigidly

enforces because of their obvious importance to society, are felt as real and binding obligations. But university oaths and custom-house oaths, though from a religious point of view equally obligatory, are in practice utterly disregarded even by men who are in other respects honourable. The oath to obey the university's statutes—including one requiring a certain religious belief—has for centuries not been taken seriously by anyone; and utterly false statements about the value of the cargo in one's ship are (or used to be) daily and unblushingly sworn to at the custom-house by people who care as much as anyone else about all the ordinary obligations of life. In each case the explanation is that in these matters truthfulness wasn't enforced by public opinion. (2) **Duelling**. Although it is now obsolete in this country, the practice of duelling continues in full vigour in several other Christian countries. It is thought and said to be a sin by almost all who are guilty of it; they have resorted to it in obedience to public opinion, and to escape from personal humiliation. (3) **Illicit sexual intercourse**. This stands in the very highest rank of religious sins, for men and for women; but because it isn't severely condemned by opinion in the male sex, they have in general very little scruple in committing it; whereas the religious obligation is commonly effective with women, not because it is any stronger for them than for men but because in their case it is backed in real earnest by public opinion.

[Mill goes on to concede that Bentham's example of (1) oaths is not a good one, because people who go through the formalities of university or custom-house oaths regard them as a mere formality, and don't think they are breaking their religious duties in swearing them. Then:] The same criticism doesn't apply equally to Bentham's other examples, (2) duelling and (3) sexual irregularities. Most of those who perform these acts, (2) by the command of public opinion and

(3) with its permission, really do think they are offending God. No doubt they don't think they are offending him so much that their salvation is seriously in danger. Their reliance on his mercy prevails over their dread of his resentment—which illustrates my earlier point that the inevitable uncertainty of religious penalties makes them feeble as a deterring motive. That holds true even for acts that human opinion condemns, and much more for acts that public opinion allows. What mankind think of as a trivial sin is hardly ever thought to be taken very seriously by God, at least by those who feel inclined to commit it!

·TWO KINDS OF EXTREME·

I wouldn't dream of denying that in some states of mind the idea of religious punishment acts with overwhelming force. In people who are clinically depressed, and in ones whose thoughts and imaginations have been given an habitually melancholy cast by great disappointments or other human causes, the thought of God's punishments hooks in with the pre-existing tendency of the mind and supplies images that could drive the unfortunate sufferer even to madness. Often, during a temporary state of depression, these ideas grip the mind so strongly that they have a permanent effect on the character; this is what has happened in most of the cases that the religious sects call 'conversion'. But if the depressed state ceases after the conversion, as it often does, and if the convert doesn't relapse but perseveres in his new course of life, the main difference between that and his old way of life is that now he guides his life by the public opinion of his religious associates, whereas previously he had guided it by the opinion of the non-religious world. Anyway, we get one clear proof of how little real fear of eternal punishments most people have—religious people and worldly ones—when we see how even at the approach of death, when the remoteness of the threatened punishment

(which deprived the threats of so much of their effect) has been exchanged for the closest proximity, they are quite free from anxiety about their prospects in another world, and never for a moment seem to think themselves in any real danger of eternal punishment. This holds for almost everyone who hasn't been guilty of some enormous crime, and for many who have.

What about the cruel deaths and bodily tortures that martyrs have so often undergone for the sake of religion? I don't want to lessen the stature of this admirable courage and constancy by attributing any part of it to the influence of human opinion. (Human opinion *does* sometimes have that effect, producing similar firmness in people who are not otherwise distinguished by moral excellence—for example the North American Indian being burned to death at the stake.) But granting that what upheld these heroic sufferers in their agony was not

- the thought of glory in the eyes of their fellow-religionists,

I don't think that it was, for most of them,

- the thought of the pleasures of heaven or the pains of hell.

Their impulse was a divine enthusiasm—a self-forgetting devotion to an idea, a state of exalted feeling. Such a state is by no means restricted to religion; every great cause can inspire it. This phenomenon belongs to the critical moments of existence, not to the ordinary everyday life of human motives, and nothing can be inferred from it as to the effectiveness of the religious or non-religious ideas that it sprang from in overcoming ordinary temptations, and regulating the course of daily life.

We may now have done with this branch of the subject. . . . The value of religion as a supplement to human laws—a more cunning sort of police, an assistant to the thief-catcher

and the hangman—is not the part of its claims that the more high-minded believers are fondest of insisting on; and they would probably be as ready as anyone to admit that if religion's nobler work in the soul could be dispensed with, a substitute might be found for that coarse and selfish social instrument, the fear of hell. In their view of the matter, the best of mankind absolutely require religion for the perfection of their own character, even if the coercion of the worst could be accomplished without its aid.

But these nobler spirits (these 'high-minded believers') generally maintain that religion *is* needed for some aspects of social good that are more elevated than mere police-work etc.. Specifically, they say that

- religion is needed as a teacher, if not as an enforcer, of social morality;
- only religion can teach us what morality is;
- all the high morality ever recognized by mankind was learnt from religion;
- the most sublime thoughts of the greatest non-religious philosophers have stopped far short of Christian morality, and whatever inferior morality they may have reached (with the help, some think, of dim traditions derived from the Old Testament or from a primeval revelation), they could never induce their fellow-citizens to accept it from them;
- men in general won't adopt a morality, rally round it, and lend their human system of penalty-threats for its enforcement, unless they think it has come from the gods; and
- even if human motives are sufficient to produce *obedience to the rule* of morality, if it weren't for the religious idea we wouldn't have had *the rule*.

There is truth in much of this, considered as a matter of history. Most ancient peoples received their morals, their

laws, their intellectual beliefs, and even their practical skills and techniques—in short, everything that tended either to guide or to discipline them—as revelations from the higher powers, and they couldn't easily have been induced to accept them in any other way. This was partly the effect of their hopes and fears relating to those powers—hopes and fears that were stronger and more pervasive in early times than they are today, because back then the agency of the gods was seen in the daily events of life, as men's experience hadn't yet revealed to them the fixed laws according to which physical phenomena follow one another. Also, these primitive minds couldn't help feeling a certain deference for powers greater than their own, tending to think that beings with superhuman power must also have superhuman knowledge and wisdom; and this gave them a disinterested [= 'not *self*-interested'] desire—quite apart from their personal hopes and fears—to behave in accordance with the supposed preferences of these powerful beings, and not to adopt any new practice unless the gods had authorized it.

But just because when men were still savages they wouldn't have accepted either moral or scientific truths unless they thought them to have been revealed supernaturally, does it follow that they would now give up moral truths—any more than scientific ones—because they believed them to have no higher source than wise and noble human hearts? Aren't moral truths clearly enough *right* for mankind at least to go on believing them once they had acquired them? Admittedly, some of the precepts of Christ as exhibited in the Gospels—rising far above the Paulism [= the doctrines propagated in Paul's letters to local churches, in the New Testament] that is the foundation of ordinary Christianity—carry some kinds of

moral goodness to a greater height than had ever been attained before; though much of what is supposed to be exclusive to them is equalled in the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius, which we have no reason to think were in any way indebted to Christianity. But this benefit, whatever it amounts to, has been gained. Mankind have come to possess it. It has become the property of humanity, and can't now be lost by anything short of a return to primitive barbarism. The noble moralities that can be found . . . in the authentic sayings of Jesus of Nazareth are surely in harmony with the intellect and feelings of every good man or woman, to such an extent that there is no danger of their being let go once they have been acknowledged as the creed of the best and most advanced portion of our species. I mean

- the 'new commandment to love one another';¹
- the recognition that the greatest are those who serve others, not those who are served;
- the reverence for the weak and humble, which is the basis for chivalry because they and not the strong have been pointed out as having the first place in God's regard and the first claim on their fellow men;
- the lesson of the parable of the good Samaritan;
- the lesson of 'he that is without sin let him throw the first stone';
- the precept of doing as we would be done by;

and there are others as well (though with some poetical exaggerations, and some maxims whose precise point is hard to understand). For a long time to come there will be, as there always have been, plenty of shortcomings in acting on these items of morality; but we can regard it as downright impossible that they should be forgotten or should lose their

¹ Not, however, a *new* commandment, though that is what Jesus calls it (John 13:34). In fairness to Moses, the great Hebrew lawgiver, it should always be remembered that the precept to 'love thy neighbour as thyself' already existed in the third book of the Old Testament ('Leviticus 19:18')—and very surprising it is to find it there!

effect on the human conscience, while human beings remain cultivated or civilized.

·So· the belief that the accepted maxims of morality have a supernatural origin ·doesn't do anything *good* for us now; but it· has one very *bad* consequence. The supposed supernatural origin consecrates the whole of the accepted morality, and protects it from being discussed or criticized. So that if the moral doctrines that are accepted as a part of religion include any that are imperfect, these doctrines will be taken to be just as binding on the conscience as the noblest, most permanent and most universal precepts of Christ. An imperfect doctrine might be one that

- was erroneous from the outset, or
- was expressed without proper limits and qualifications, or
- was perfectly all right at one time, but no longer suited to the changes that have taken place in human relations;

and I firmly believe that so-called Christian morality contains

instances of all of these kinds. Wherever morality is supposed to have a supernatural origin, morality is stereotyped; just as law is stereotyped, for the same reason, among believers in the Koran.

Belief in the supernatural, then, great as were its services in the early stages of human development, can't be considered to be any longer required, either for enabling us to know what is right and what is wrong in social morality, or for providing us with motives to do right and to abstain from wrong. Such a belief, therefore, isn't necessary for social purposes, at least in the coarse way in which these can be considered apart from the character of the individual human being. That less coarse branch of the subject now remains to be considered. If supernatural beliefs are indeed necessary for the perfection of the individual character, that makes them necessary also for the highest excellence in social conduct. . . . [From now on in this essay, 'social' and its cognates do not occur.]

The individual question

Well, then, what is it in human nature that makes it require a religion? ·This breaks down into two questions·. What does the human mind lack that religion provides? What qualities does religion develop in the human mind? When we have answered these two questions, we'll be better able to judge how far these lacks can be made up for in other ways ·than through religion·, and how far those qualities—or qualities equivalent to them—can be developed and brought

to perfection by other means.

The old saying 'What first created gods was fear in the world' is not true, I think, or at any rate there isn't much truth in it. [The 'old saying' is a much-quoted line from the Latin poet Statius, which Mill gives in Latin—*Primus in orbe Deos fecit timor.*] Belief in gods had a more honourable origin than that, I think, even in the most primitive minds. The universality of the belief has been very reasonably explained as arising from

the human mind's spontaneous tendency to attribute •life and •volition —like the life and volition it feels in itself—to any •natural object that appears to be self-moving. This was a plausible fancy, and at first no better theory could be formed. People naturally held onto this one for as long as the motions and operations of •these objects seemed to be arbitrary, and explainable only in terms of the free choice of the •divine Power itself. At first, no doubt, the objects themselves were supposed to be alive, and that's what African fetish-worshippers still believe. But it must soon have seemed absurd •to most primitive people that things that could do so much *more than* man does couldn't or wouldn't do *what* man does—for example, couldn't or wouldn't speak. And so they shifted •from supposing •that the object they saw was alive and full of desires to supposing that it was inanimate but was the creature and instrument of an invisible being with a shape and organs similar to those of humans.

Once these beings had come to be •believed in, it necessarily followed that they were •feared. They were thought to be able to inflict great harm on human beings; and the sufferers didn't know how to avert the harm or to foresee it, and their only recourse for such information was to ask the gods themselves. So it's true that fear had much to do with religion; but belief in the gods evidently preceded fear and didn't arise from it; though once the fear was established it was a strong support for the belief, because men couldn't think of any greater insult to the gods than to doubt their existence. [Of course Mill doesn't here mean 'support' in the sense of evidence or reasons for the truth of the belief; his topic is merely psychological 'support', i.e. a consideration that causes people to keep their minds away from doubts.]

I needn't go further into the natural history of religion, because my present concern is to explain not its origin in

primitive minds but its persistence in cultivated ones. A sufficient explanation of this can be found, I think, in •the limitedness of man's certain knowledge and •the boundlessness of his desire to know. Human existence is hemmed in by mystery: the narrow region of our experience is a small island in a boundless sea, which at once •awes our feelings and •stimulates our imagination by its vastness and its obscurity. To add to the mystery, the domain of our earthly existence is an island not only in infinite space but also in infinite time. The past and the future are alike hidden from us: we don't know the origin of anything that exists, or its final destination. •The spatial challenge is no greater than the temporal one. Given that

we feel deeply interested in knowing that there are myriads of worlds at an immeasurable (and to us *inconceivable*) distance from us in space; and that we are eager to discover what little we can about these worlds, and when we can't know what they are we can never get enough of speculating about what they may be;

isn't it a matter of even deeper interest to us

to learn—or even to conjecture—about where this unremote world that we inhabit came from, what cause or agency made it what it is, and on what powers its future fate depends?

Who wouldn't want *this* knowledge more passionately than any other conceivable knowledge, so long as there seemed to be the slightest chance of getting it? What wouldn't we give for any credible news from that mysterious region, any glimpse into it that might let us see light through its darkness, especially any credible theory of it that represented it as inhabited by a benign and not a hostile influence? But our only way into that region is through imagination, assisted by plausible but inconclusive analogies derived from human

agency and design. Our imagination is free to fill the vacuum with whatever imagery is most congenial to it—sublime and elevating imagery for a lofty imagination, low and mean imagery for a grovelling one. [(1) The 'region' Mill is talking about is probably the whole of reality apart from 'the narrow region of our experience'—most of past time, all future time, most of space, and... anything else there may be from which answers to our questions might come. (2) The 'inconclusive analogies' he speaks of are the ones that have led some people to argue that much of the natural world is similar (or 'analogous') to the products of human thought, which entitles us to infer that the natural world is also a product of thought—divine thought.]

Religion and poetry address themselves, at least in one of their aspects, to the same part of the human constitution: they both make up for the same lack in us—the lack of •ideal conceptions that are grander and more beautiful than any we see •realized [= 'made real'] in the prose of human life. Religion, as distinct from poetry, results from the craving to know whether these imaginative conceptions have realities corresponding to them in some world other than ours. When the mind is caught up with this craving, it eagerly snatches at any rumours regarding other worlds, especially when they are delivered by people whom it thinks wiser than itself. To the •poetry of the supernatural, therefore, there comes to be added a positive •belief and expectation, which unpoetic minds can share with poetic ones. Belief in a god or gods, and in a life after death, becomes the canvas on which every mind paints, as well as it can, such ideal pictures as it can either invent or copy. Each person hopes to find in that other life the •good that he has failed to find on earth, or the •better that is suggested to him by the •good that he has partially seen and known on earth. More especially, this belief provides the finer minds with material for conceptions of beings more awe-inspiring than they can have known

on earth, and also more excellent than they are likely to have known. So long as •human life is insufficient to satisfy human aspirations [= 'desires and hopes and aims'], so long •there will be a craving for higher things, a craving that finds its most obvious satisfaction in religion. So long as •earthly life is full of sufferings, so long •will people need consolations: selfish people will be consoled by the hope of heaven, tender and grateful ones by the love of God.

So there's no disputing that religion has been and still is of value to the individual as a source of personal satisfaction and of elevated feelings. But we still have a question:

The good that we get from religion—is the *only* way to get it to travel beyond the boundaries of the world we inhabit? Mightn't we get a poetry and (in the best sense of the word) a *religion* out of the idealization of •our earthly life and the development of a high conception of what may be made of •it? Mightn't such a •this-worldly• religion do just as well in exalting our feelings, and (with aid from education) do better in ennobling our conduct, than any belief about the unseen powers?

At the bare suggestion of such a possibility, many will insist that •if our life is not prolonged beyond what we can see, it is too brief—too small and insignificant—for great and elevated feelings to be connected with it; •that a life confined to the natural life that we see can't match with anything higher than Epicurean feelings, and with the Epicurean doctrine 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.'

The maxim of the Epicureans is certainly sound within certain limits, and can be applied to much higher things than eating and drinking. •To make the most of the present for all good purposes, including purposes of enjoyment; •to keep under control the mental dispositions that lead to undue sacrifice of present good for a future that may never come;

•to develop the habit of deriving pleasure from things within our reach, rather than from too eagerly pursuing objects at a distance; •to think that any time you spend on anything other than your own pleasure or doing things that will be useful to others is time wasted—these are wise maxims. When the injunction *Carpe diem!* [Latin = ‘Seize the day!’] is understood as implying those maxims, it is a reasonable and legitimate thing to infer from the shortness of life. But the inference:

Life is short, so we shouldn’t care about anything beyond it,

is *not* legitimate; and the supposition that human beings in general can’t take a deep interest—even the *deepest* interest—in things they’ll never live to see is a view of human nature that is as false as it is *low*. Bear in mind that even though individual life is short, the life of the human species is not. When •the duration of our species—whose indefiniteness makes it practically equivalent to endlessness—is combined with •indefinite capacity for improvement, this provides the imagination and the sympathies a large enough objective to satisfy any reasonable demand for something grand to hope for. . . .

Don’t think that only people with most lofty minds and hearts are capable of identifying their feelings with •the entire life of the human race. This noble ability does indeed imply a certain level of development, but not a higher one than can be achieved—and *will be* achieved if human improvement continues—by everyone. Much smaller objectives than •this—ones confined within the limits of the earth though not within those of a single human life—have been found sufficient to inspire large masses of people, and long successions of people, with an enthusiasm that could govern their conduct, and colour their whole life. For the entire Roman people through many generations *Rome* was as much a religion as

Jehovah was to the Jews—indeed, even more so, because the Romans never slackened in their worship as the Jews did in theirs. And the Romans, otherwise a selfish people with no very remarkable abilities except purely practical ones, nevertheless derived from this idea of *Rome* a certain greatness of soul. This shows itself in all their history where the idea of *Rome* is concerned (and nowhere else); it has earned for them the great admiration—not deserved in any other way—that has been felt for them by most noble-minded persons from that time to this.

When we consider how intense a feeling *love of one’s country* has become in favourable circumstances of education [see note on page 5], we have to think it possible for the love of that larger country, *the world*, to be nursed into similar strength, both as a •source of elevated emotion and as a •principle of duty. If the whole course of ancient history doesn’t convince you of this, read Cicero’s book *On Duties* [Mill gives the Latin, *De Officiis*]. The standard of morals laid down in that celebrated work isn’t very high; it is too lax on many points (to our way of thinking), allowing for capitulations of conscience. But it doesn’t compromise on the subject of duty to our country. The thought that a man with even the smallest claim to be virtuous might hesitate to sacrifice his life, his reputation, his family, everything valuable to him, for the love of country is one that •Cicero•, that eminent interpreter of Greek and Roman morality, can’t entertain for a moment. So we see that people could be trained not only to •believe in theory that *the good of their country* was an objective that everyone else ought to pursue, but to •feel this practically as the grand duty of life. Couldn’t they, then, be made to feel the same absolute obligation towards *the universal good*? Think of a morality based on broad and wise views about the good of the whole •species•, not sacrificing the individual to the collective or the collective to the individual,

but giving to duty on the one hand and to freedom and spontaneity on the other their proper province. In the better natures among mankind such a morality would get its power from •sympathy and •benevolence and •the passion for ideal excellence: in the less good natures its power would come from •the same feelings (developed to whatever level they were capable of) with •the added force of shame. This noble morality wouldn't depend for its dominance on any hope of reward; but it would involve a reward that might be looked for, a reward the thought of which would be a consolation in suffering and a support in moments of weakness. It would be the reward not of existence in a problematic •future life, but of the approval in •this life of those whom we respect, and ideally of all those—dead or living—whom we admire or venerate. For the thought that our dead parents or friends would have approved our conduct is almost as strong a motive as the knowledge that our living ones do approve it: and the idea that Socrates or •prison reformer John• Howard or •George?• Washington or Marcus Aurelius or Christ would have sympathized with us, or that we are trying to do our part in the spirit in which they did theirs, has operated on the very best minds as a strong incentive to act in accordance with their highest feelings and convictions.

To call these sentiments 'morality' and nothing else is claiming too little for them. They are a real *religion*. What is ordinarily meant by 'morality' is something having to do only with outward good works; but in the religion I am proposing, as in other religions, good works are only a *part*, and really they are consequences of the religion rather than the religion itself. The essence of religion is **the strong and earnest direction of the emotions and desires towards an ideal objective which is recognized as being of the highest excellence and as rightly superior to all selfish objects of desire**. The Religion of Humanity •which I have

been proposing• satisfies this condition to as great an extent, and in as high a sense, as do even the best supernatural religions. . . .

I could say much more on this topic; but what I have said already is enough to show that the •sense of unity with mankind, and a •deep feeling for the general good, can be developed into a feeling and a principle that could fulfill every important function of religion and would itself be entitled to count as a religion. (Anyone who isn't convinced of this—•presumably because it is so unlike anything that humankind ever *has* achieved—must be unable to distinguish •the intrinsic capacities of human nature from •the forms in which those capacities happen to have been historically developed.) I further maintain that the Religion of Humanity not only *could* fulfill these functions but *would* fulfill them better than *any* supernatural religion. It is not only *entitled* to be called a 'religion': it is a better religion than anything else that has ever had that title. •I have two reasons for saying this•.

(1) In the first place, it is disinterested [= 'not *self*-interested']. It carries the believer's thoughts and feelings out of himself and fixes them on an objective that he loves and pursues not selfishly but as an end for its own sake. The •religions that deal in promises and threats regarding a future life do the exact opposite: •they pin the person's thoughts to his own posthumous interests; •they tempt him to regard the performance of his duties to others mainly as a means to his own personal salvation; and •they are very serious obstacles to the great purpose of moral culture, the strengthening of the unselfish element in our nature and the weakening of the selfish element, because they present to the imagination such tremendous *amounts and intensities* of selfish good and evil that anyone who fully believes in their reality will find it hard to have any feeling or interest to spare for any

other distant and ideal objective. It's true that many of the most unselfish people have been believers in supernaturalism, because their minds haven't dwelt on the threats and promises of their religion but chiefly on the idea of a Being to whom they looked up with a confident love, willingly leaving it to him to decide all matters relating to themselves in particular. But in its effect on ordinary minds, what now goes by the name 'religion' operates mainly through the feelings of self-interest. Even the Christ of the gospels directly promises reward from heaven as a primary motive for the noble and beautiful beneficence towards our fellow-creatures which he so impressively teaches. This makes even the best supernatural religions radically inferior to the Religion of Humanity; because the greatest thing that moral influences can do to improve human nature is to develop our unselfish feelings in the only way *any* active element in human nature *can* be effectively developed, namely by habitual exercise: whereas the habit of expecting to be rewarded in another life for our conduct in this life makes even virtue itself no longer an exercise of the unselfish feelings.

(2) Secondly, the value of the old religions as means of elevating and improving human character is enormously reduced by the fact that it is nearly (if not entirely) impossible for them to produce their best moral effects unless the intellectual faculties are sluggish if not downright twisted. Anyone who habitually thinks, and who can't blunt his inquiring intellect by trickery, *can't* confidently ascribe absolute perfection to the author and ruler of such a clumsily made and capriciously governed creation as this planet and the life of its inhabitants. To adore such a being with your whole heart, you would need a heart that had first had trickery built into it. It is inevitable that either the worship is greatly overclouded by doubt, and occasionally quite darkened by it, or the moral sentiments sink to the

low level of the ordinances of Nature—the worshipper must learn to think that blind favouritism, atrocious cruelty, and reckless injustice are not blemishes in an object of worship because there is so much of these in the commonest phenomena of Nature. Granted, the God who is worshipped is usually the God not only of Nature but also of some revelation; and the character of the revelation will greatly modify and may actually *improve* the moral influences of the religion in question. This is emphatically true of Christianity, because the Author of the Sermon on the Mount is assuredly a far more benign being than the Author of Nature. But unfortunately, the believer in the Christian revelation is required to believe that the same being is the author of both! If he doesn't resolutely avert his mind from this subject or practise the act of quieting his conscience by sophistry, he will be involved in endless moral perplexities, because the ways of his Deity in Nature are often totally at variance with what he thinks to be the commands of that same Deity in the Gospel. Those who suffer the least moral damage from this tangle are probably those who never try to reconcile the two standards—the one set by Nature, and the one set by Jesus in the Gospels—with one another, but admits to himself that the purposes of Providence are mysterious, that its ways are not our ways, that its justice and goodness are not the justice and goodness that we can understand and that it is fitting for us to practise. When *this* is how the believer feels, however, the worship of God stops being the adoration of abstract moral perfection. It becomes a matter of the bowing down to a gigantic image of something not fit for us to imitate. It is the worship of pure power.

I say nothing of the moral difficulties and perversions involved in revelation itself; though even in the Christianity of the Gospels, at least in its ordinary interpretation, there are some that are so flagrant that they almost outweigh all

the beauty and benignity and moral greatness that so clearly distinguish the sayings and character of Christ. For example, thinking 'This is the object of highest worship!' of a being who could make a Hell and create countless generations of human beings with the certain foreknowledge that he was creating them to be sent to Hell. Is there *any* moral atrocity that couldn't be justified by the imitation of such a Deity? And could we *possibly* adore such a being without frightfully distorting the standard of right and wrong? Any other of the outrages to the most ordinary justice and humanity involved in the common Christian idea of God's moral character sinks into insignificance beside this dreadful ·Hell-focused· idealization of wickedness.

Also, most of the other outrages are (fortunately) not so unambiguously derivable from Christ's own words as to be indisputably a part of Christian doctrine. It may be doubted, for instance, whether Christianity is really responsible for ·the doctrines of· atonement and redemption, original sin and vicarious punishment. [Sin is 'original' if it is built into our very nature, implying that we are *innately* sinful. Vicarious punishment is the punishment of one person to pay for the crimes or sins of someone else—as Jesus is said to have died on the cross as punishment for *our* sins.] And the same may be said about the doctrine that salvation is possible only for those who believe in the divine mission of Christ. It is nowhere reported ·in the Bible· that Christ himself made this statement, except in the account of the resurrection that the gospel of St. Mark gallops through in its last chapter; and some critics (the best ones, I think) consider that to be a later addition. Again, the proposition that 'the powers that be are ordained by God', and the whole series of consequences deduced from it in the Epistles [i.e. in the letters Paul wrote to various Christians and

churches], belong to St. Paul, and must stand or fall with Paulism, not with Christianity.

But one moral contradiction is inseparable from every form of Christianity; no ingenuity can resolve it, and no trickery can explain it away. It is that so precious a gift ·as eternal blessed life· should have been given to a few and withheld from the many; that countless millions of human beings should have been allowed to live and die, to sin and suffer, without the one thing they needed ·for salvation·, the divine remedy for sin and suffering, which the Divine Giver could as easily have given to everyone as to give it by special grace to a favoured minority. Furthermore, this divine message (if that's what it is) has come with credentials that are so weak that they fail to convince a large proportion of the strongest and most cultivated minds, and the tendency to disbelieve them seems to grow with the growth of scientific knowledge and critical discrimination. Anyone who can believe that these—God's awarding salvation to only a few, and his not giving better evidence of his existence and his wishes—are the intentional shortcomings of a perfectly good Being must silence every prompting of the sense of goodness and justice as human beings understand them.

Of course it can and quite often does happen that someone worships with the most intense devotion the God of Nature or the God of the Gospel without perverting his moral sentiments; but this requires him to fix his attention exclusively on what is beautiful and beneficent in the precepts and spirit of the Gospel and in the dispensations of Nature, setting aside everything that is ugly or harmful as though it didn't exist. So, I repeat, this simple and innocent faith has to co-exist with a sluggish and inactive state of the intellectual faculties. Someone who has an intellect that he *uses* can't possibly come anywhere near to this except by tricking up and perverting either his intellect or

his conscience. It's nearly always the case, regarding sects and individuals who derive their morality from religion, that the better logicians they are, the worse moralists!

Only one form of belief in the supernatural—only one theory respecting the origin and government of the universe—is completely free from intellectual contradiction and of moral perversity. It is the position that utterly gives up the idea of an omnipotent creator, and regards Nature and Life not as the expression throughout of the moral character and purpose of the Deity, but as the product of a struggle between •planning and designing goodness and either •an intractable material •that goodness has to work with• (as Plato thought) or •a positive force for evil (which is what the Manicheans maintained). A creed like this, which I have known to be devoutly held by at least one cultivated and conscientious person of our own day, allows one to believe that all the mass of actual evil wasn't designed by the Being whom we are called upon to worship, and hasn't come into existence on his orders, but rather exists *in spite of* him . According to this •theological• theory, a virtuous human being has the lofty role of fellow-labourer with •God•, the Highest—a fellow-soldier in the great battle. He contributes a little, but he and his like jointly contribute a lot, towards that progressive ascendancy and eventually complete triumph of good over evil that history points to and that this doctrine teaches us to regard as planned by the Being to whom we owe everything good we can find in Nature. There can't be any possible objection to the moral tendency of this creed; the only effect it can have on someone who succeeds in believing it is an ennobling one. The evidence for it (if you can call it 'evidence' at all) is too shadowy and unsubstantial, and the promises it holds out too are distant and uncertain, for it to be a permanent substitute for the Religion of Humanity. But the two can be held in conjunction: someone to whom

ideal •human• good, and the progress of the world towards it, are already a religion, can allow himself the pleasing and encouraging thought that the other—•active goodness vs. stubborn material, or good vs. evil—*might* be true, even though there is no significant evidence for it. Apart from any dogmatic •belief, the region of the •imagination is a rich resource—for those who need it— of possibilities, of hypotheses that can't be known to be false; and when such a •possibility is somehow favoured by nature as we experience it, we can legitimately indulge ourselves with thoughts about •it. These thoughts can play their part, along with other influences, in feeding and enlivening the tendency of the feelings and impulses towards good. (I said 'when it is favoured by nature', and in the present case—of the belief that Nature is the scene of a struggle between planning and designing good on the one hand and obstinacy or evil on the other—there *are* pointers to it in nature; for whatever force we attach to the analogies of Nature with the effects of human design, there is no disputing Paley's remark that what is good in nature exhibits those analogies much oftener than what is evil.)

The supernatural religions must always have one advantage, such as it is, over the Religion of Humanity, namely the prospect they hold out to the individual of a life after death. •The Religion of Humanity can involve *some* thought of an after-life: the •scepticism of the •understanding doesn't necessarily exclude the •theism of the •imagination and feelings •that last clause is exactly as Mill wrote it•; and this imaginative theism provides opportunity for a hope that the power that has done so much for us may be able and willing to give us an after-life also. But such a vague possibility can't ever come close to being an outright belief. If we have to estimate the value of this element—the prospect of a world to come—as a constituent of earthly happiness, I can't

help thinking that as the condition of mankind improves, as people become happier in their lives and more capable of deriving happiness from unselfish sources, they will care less and less for this gratifying expectation. As things now stand, those who are the most anxious either for a very long present life or for a life hereafter are not usually the happy ones, but rather those who never have been happy. People who have had their happiness can bear to part with existence, but it is hard to die without ever having lived! When mankind no longer need a future existence to console them for their sufferings in the present life, the after-life will have lost its chief value to them personally, though they will have plenty of *other* desires, concerns, and objectives concerning what happens after their death. I am now speaking of people who are unselfish; and not of a person who is so wrapped up in *himself* that he can't invest his feelings in anything that will survive him, and can't feel that his own life is prolonged in the lives of his younger contemporaries and in all who help to carry on the progressive movement of human affairs. If *this* person is to keep up any interest in existence, he needs the notion of another life for himself beyond the grave, because his present life, as its end approaches, dwindles into something too insignificant to be worth caring about. But if the Religion of Humanity were as diligently taught and maintained as the supernatural religions are (and it's easy to imagine its being even more so), all who had received the customary amount of moral education would, right up to the hour of their own death, live imaginatively in the life of those who are to follow them; and although no doubt many of them would like to survive as individuals for a much longer than the present duration of life, it seems to me likely that each of them would sooner or later have had enough of existence and would gladly lie down and take his eternal rest. But let us stop looking that far forward, and note a significant

fact about how things stand now: people who believe in the immortality of the soul usually quit their earthly life with every bit as much reluctance as those who don't expect an after-life. The mere **ending of existence** is not an evil to anyone: if you find the idea of it formidable, that's because your imagination is creating an illusion that makes you think of yourself as *alive while feeling yourself to be dead!* What is horrible about death is not death itself but the act of dying and the gloomy events that go with it, and a dying person has to go through these, whether or not he believes in immortality. So far as I can see, the sceptic loses through his scepticism only one real and valuable consolation, namely the hope of reunion with those dear to him who have ended their earthly life before him. There's no denying that loss, and it oughtn't to be minimized. In many cases it is too great to be estimated or compared with other losses; and it will always be enough to keep alive in the minds of more sensitive people the imaginative hope of an after-life. This is a hope that can be rationally maintained because, although in our knowledge and experience nothing supports the thesis that there is an after-life, nothing contradicts it either.

History, so far as we know it, confirms the opinion that mankind can perfectly well do without the belief in a heaven. The Greeks' idea of a future state was anything but tempting! Their Elysian fields offered very little attraction to their feelings and imagination. In the *Odyssey* Achilles says that he would rather be on earth as the slave of a poor master than reign over the whole kingdom of the dead; which expressed a very natural attitude and no doubt a very common one. And the...tone of the dying emperor Hadrian's address to his soul gives evidence that the popular conception hadn't changed much during that long interval. [From Homer to Hadrian—about 900 years. Hadrian's poem to his soul has been translated thus: 'Little soul, gentle and drifting, guest and

companion of my body, now you will dwell below in pallid places, stark and bare; there you won't make jokes as you used to do.'] Yet we don't find that the Greeks enjoyed life less than other people, or that they feared death more. The Buddhist religion probably has today more believers than either Christianity or Islam. Buddhism recognises many kinds of •punishment in a future life—or rather future *lives*, through the transmigration of the soul into new bodies of men or animals. But the blessing from Heaven that it offers as a •reward, to be earned by persevering in the highest level of virtuous life, is *annihilation*, or anyway the ending of all conscious or separate existence. It is impossible not to see this religion as the work of legislators and moralists trying to provide supernatural motives for the conduct they wanted to encourage; and they could find nothing more utterly wonderful to hold out as the final prize, to be won through the mightiest efforts of labour and self-denial, than what we are so often told is the terrible idea of *annihilation*! Surely this proves that the idea

of annihilation is not really or naturally terrible; that not only philosophers but people in general can easily reconcile themselves to it and even consider it as a good; and that a *natural* part of the idea of a happy life can be this:

•After the best that life can give has been fully enjoyed for a long time, •when all life's pleasures—even those of benevolence—have become familiar, •when nothing untasted and unknown is left to stimulate curiosity and keep one wanting to prolong one's existence, *life is laid down*.

It seems to me possible—indeed, probable—that in a higher and (above all) a *happier* condition of human life, the burdensome idea may be not annihilation but immortality; and that human nature, though pleased with the present and not in a hurry to leave it, would find comfort and not sadness in the thought that it isn't chained through eternity to a conscious existence that it can't be sure it will always wish to preserve.