

Theism

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 five Parts is Mill’s; the further subdivision is not.

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Contents

Part 1: Introduction and Arguments	1
Theism	2
The evidence for theism	4
Argument for a first cause	5
Argument from the general consent of mankind	9
The argument from consciousness	11
The argument from marks of design in nature	13
Part 2: Attributes	16
Omnipotence	16
Omniscience	17
What limits god’s power?	18
God’s moral qualities	19
Part 3: Immortality	22
Part 4: Revelation	27
Part 5: General result	36

Part 3: Immortality

We can divide indications of immortality into two groups: •those that are independent of any theory concerning the creator and his intentions, and •those that depend on an antecedent belief about God. I shall discuss the former group first; my treatment of the latter group will begin on page 25.

Theorizing men down the centuries have put forward a considerable variety of arguments of the former type, .i.e. arguments that don't presuppose anything about God. The arguments in Plato's *Phaedo* are examples of that sort. But most of those arguments have no supporters now, and needn't be seriously refuted. They are generally based on •preconceived theories about whatever it is in man that does the thinking, considered as something distinct and separable from the body, and on •other preconceived theories concerning death. For example: Death or dissolution is always a separation of parts; the soul is simple and indivisible, and therefore doesn't have parts; so it can't undergo this separation. Curiously enough, one of the speakers in the *Phaedo* brings against this argument just the point that would be brought against it today, namely:

Although thought and consciousness are mentally distinguishable from the body, they may not be in a substance that is separable from the body. Rather than that, they may be a *result* of the body, relating to it (the illustration is Plato's) in the way a tune relates to the musical instrument on which it is played. And if that is the case, the arguments used to show that the soul doesn't die with the body would equally show that the tune doesn't die with the instrument, but survives its destruction and continues to exist apart.

In fact, modern philosophers who dispute the arguments for the immortality of the soul don't generally •believe the soul to be an independent substance, but regard 'the soul' as the name of a bundle of attributes— feeling, thinking, reasoning, believing, willing, etc.—and •regard these attributes as a consequence of the organization of the body. They infer from this that the supposition

•the soul can survive when the organization of the body is

dispersed,

is as unreasonable as the supposition that

•the colour or aroma of a rose can survive when the rose itself has perished.

Thus, anyone who wants to infer the immortality of the soul from its own nature has first to prove that feeling, thinking, etc. are attributes not of •the body but of •a separate substance. Well, what is the verdict of science on this point? It isn't perfectly conclusive either way. In the first place, science doesn't prove experimentally that some mode of organization has the power to produce feeling or thought. To conduct such a proof, we would have to be able to make an organism, and then test to see whether it could feel; and we can't do this, because there's no human way to make an organism from scratch; an organism has to be developed out of a previous organism. On the other hand, there is pretty well conclusive evidence that •all thought and feeling occurs along with or just after some event in the bodily organism; that •differences in the organization of brain and nerves, especially differences in how complex they are, correspond to differences in the development of the mental faculties; and though we have no positive evidence that mental consciousness ceases for ever when the brain stops working, we do know that •diseases of the brain disturb the mental functions, and that •decay or weakness of the brain weakens them. So we have good enough evidence that for us in our present state of existence brain-activity is, if not the cause of mental operations, then at least a necessary condition for them to occur. Combine that with the view that the mind is a distinct substance and you get this: the separation of the mind from the body would not be, as some have liked to think, a liberation from shackles and a return to freedom; rather, the separation would simply put a stop to the mind's activities and send it back into unconsciousness. . . .

But it's important to point out that these considerations only amount to lack of evidence *for* immortality; they provide no positive evidence *against* it. We must beware of giving *a priori* validity to the conclusions of an *a posteriori* philosophy. The root of all *a priori*

thinking is the tendency to transfer to external things a strong association between the corresponding ideas in our own minds; and the thinkers who try hardest to limit their beliefs by experience, and honestly believe that they do so, aren't always sufficiently on their guard against this mistaken transfer. Some regard it as a truth of reason that miracles are impossible; and similarly there are others who, because their experience always associates in their minds the phenomena of life and consciousness with the action of material organs, think it intrinsically absurd to think that those phenomena could exist under any other conditions. But they should remember that the uniform coexistence of one fact with another doesn't make the one fact a part of the other, or identical with it, and that's what is needed for them to be connected in a way that is absolutely or metaphysically necessary. Thought isn't tied to a material brain by metaphysical necessity; it's simply a going-together that we have always found in our experience. And when things are analysed to the bottom on the principles of associative psychology, it turns out that the brain—like any material thing—is merely a set of actual or believed-possible human sensations, namely the ones the anatomist has when he opens the skull, and the impressions of molecular or other movements that we think we would receive when the brain was at work if there were no bony covering and our senses or our instruments were sufficiently delicate. Experience doesn't provide us with any examples of a series of states of consciousness that doesn't have this group of contingent sensations attached to it, and thus that doesn't have a brain attached to it; but it is as easy to imagine such a series of states without this accompaniment as to imagine them with it, and we don't know any reason in the nature of things why these two shouldn't be thus separated. We are free to suppose that the same thoughts, emotions, volitions and even sensations that we have here may continue or start again somewhere else under other conditions . . . And in entertaining this supposition we needn't be embarrassed by any metaphysical difficulties about a thinking substance. 'Substance' is merely a general name for the lastingness of attributes: wherever there is a series of thoughts connected together by memories, that constitutes a thinking substance. . . .

Thus, the only evidence science provides *against* the immortality of the soul is negative: it consists in the fact that there is no evidence *for* it. And even that negative evidence is not as strong as negative evidence often is. In the case of witchcraft, for instance, the fact that there is no unflimsy evidence that it ever existed is as conclusive as the most positive evidence of its non-existence would be; for if witchcraft exists, it exists on this earth, and if it had existed here the factual evidence would certainly have been available to prove it. But it's not like that with the soul's existence after death. That the soul doesn't remain on earth and move about visibly or interfere in the events of life is proved by the same weight of evidence that disproves witchcraft. But there is absolutely no evidence that it doesn't exist elsewhere. . . . Some may think that there is an additional and very strong presumption against the immortality of the soul from the analysis of all the other objects in Nature. All things in Nature perish, and, as philosophers and poets complain, the most beautiful and perfect are the most perishable. A flower of the most exquisite form and colouring grows up from a root, comes to perfection in weeks or months, and lasts only a few hours or days. Why should it be otherwise with man? Why indeed? But why, also, should it *not* be otherwise? Feeling and thought are not merely different from what we call inanimate matter, but are at the opposite pole of existence, and analogical inference has little or no validity from the one to the other. Feeling and thought are much more real than anything else; they are the only things that we directly know to be real, all other things being just the unknown conditions on which these . . . depend. All matter. . . has a merely hypothetical and unsubstantial existence: it's a mere assumption to account for our sensations; we don't perceive it, we aren't conscious of it, but only of the sensations that we are said to receive from it. In reality, 'matter' is a mere name for our expectation of certain sensations when certain other sensations give signs of them. In the light of this analysis, we can see that *the fact that the things in Nature perish* is really just the fact that *certain contingent possibilities-of-sensation eventually come to an end and are replaced by others*. Does that imply that the series of our feelings must itself be broken off? No, it does not! Drawing that

conclusion is not reasoning from •one kind of substantive reality to •another, but reasoning from •something that has no reality except in reference to something else to •something that is the only substantive reality. From a philosophical point of view, *mind*. . . is the only reality of which we have any evidence; and no analogy can be recognized or comparison made between it and other realities, because there *are* no other known realities to compare it with. That is quite consistent with its being perishable; but the question of whether it *is* perishable stands on its own, untouched by any of the results of human knowledge and experience. This is one of those very rare cases where there is really a total absence of evidence on either side, and in which the absence of evidence for the affirmative does not, as so often it does, create a strong presumption in favour of the negative.

But the belief in human immortality, in the minds of mankind generally, is probably based not on any scientific arguments, whether physical or metaphysical, but on foundations that in most minds are stronger than such arguments would be. I mean the foundation of •the disagreeableness of giving up existence (at least for those to whom existence has so far been pleasant) and •of the general traditions of mankind. The natural tendency of belief to follow these two inducements—•our own wishes and •the general assent of other people—has been reinforced in this case by the utmost exertion of the power of public and private teaching. Rulers and teachers, wanting to increase people's obedience to their commands (either from selfish motives or in the interests of the public good), have always done their utmost to encourage the belief that there is a life after death, a life in which we'll have •pleasures or •sufferings far greater than on earth, depending on whether in this life we •do or •don't act as we are commanded to in the name of the unseen powers. As *causes* of belief these various circumstances—the desire not to go out of existence, and the force of indoctrination—are most powerful. As *reasons* they carry no weight at all.

The pleasure it would give us to believe that P is called the 'consoling nature' of P. The view that an opinion's consoling nature can be a reason for believing it is a doctrine that •is irrational in itself and that •would endorse half the mischievous illusions

that have messed up private lives or been recorded in history. When it is applied to the belief in the immortality of the soul, the irrational doctrine is sometimes wrapped up in quasi-scientific language. We are told that the desire for immortality is one of our instincts, and that corresponding to every instinct there is a real object that can satisfy it: where there is hunger there is somewhere food, where there is sexual feeling there is somewhere sex, where there is love there is somewhere something to be loved, and so on. Similarly (they say), since there is the instinctive desire for eternal life, there must be eternal life. We can show what is wrong with this without digging deeply into the subject; we don't have to go into intricate and obscure considerations concerning instincts, or discuss whether the desire in question *is* an instinct. Let us admit •for purposes of argument• that wherever there is an instinct, there exists something of the sort that this instinct demands; how do we get from *that* to the conclusion that this 'something' exists in an unlimited quantity that is sufficient to satisfy the infinite craving of human desires? What is called 'the desire for eternal life' is simply the desire for *life*; and what this desire calls for does exist. There *is* life! To suppose that the desire for life guarantees to us personally the reality of life through all eternity is like supposing that the desire of food assures us that we shall always have as much as we can eat throughout our lives (and for as much longer as we can conceive our lives being stretched out to).

The argument from tradition or the belief of the human race in general, if we accept it as a guide to our own belief, must be accepted in its entirety; so it will commit us to believing that the souls of human beings not only •survive after death but •show themselves as ghosts to the living; for everyone who has •one belief also has •the other. Indeed it is probable that the former belief came from the latter, and that primitive men would never have supposed that the soul doesn't die with the body if they hadn't fancied that it visited them after death. Nothing could be more natural than such a fancy; it seems to appear in perfect detail in dreams, which in Homer and in all ages like Homer's are supposed to be real apparitions. To dreams we have to add not merely waking hallucinations but the delusions . . . of sight and hearing.

Actually, these 'delusions' are really misinterpretations of those senses; sight or hearing supplies mere hints, on the basis of which the imagination paints a complete picture and fills in the details that make it 'real'. These 'delusions'—as they occurred in ancient times—should not be judged by a modern standard: in early times the line between imagination and perception was not at all clearly defined; there was little if any of the knowledge we now have concerning the actual course of nature, which makes us distrust or disbelieve any appearance that conflicts with known laws. At a time when men were ignorant about what were the limits of nature and what was or wasn't compatible with it, no one thing seemed to be much less probable—less like 'how the world goes'—than any other. So when we reject (as we have excellent reason to) the tales and legends about actual appearances of disembodied spirits, we deprive mankind's belief in a life after death of what has probably been its chief ground and support. The fact that people in primitive times all believed in life after death never had much force as evidence for the truth of that belief, and now it has no force at all. It may be objected that this belief has maintained itself in ages that •have stopped being primitive and that •reject these superstitions that used to go along with it; to which I reply that the same can be said of many other opinions of primitive times, and especially opinions on the most important and interesting subjects, because those are the subjects on which the prevailing opinion, whatever it may be, is the most carefully drilled into all who are born into the world. This particular opinion, moreover, even if it has on the whole held its ground, has done so with a constantly growing number of dissentients, and those especially among people with developed minds. Finally, those mentally developed people who still have the belief presumably base it not on the belief of others but on arguments and evidence; and those arguments and that evidence are what we need to estimate and judge.

I have presented a sufficient sample of the arguments for a future life that don't presuppose an antecedent belief in the existence of God or any about his attributes. Now let us consider what natural theology does for that great question—what arguments are supplied by the light it throws or by the bases for conjectures it provides.

We have seen that the light it throws is very faint! Natural theology provides only a balance of probability in favour of existence of a creator, and a considerably smaller balance of probability in favour of his benevolence. It provides some reason to think that he cares for the pleasures of his creatures, but emphatically *not* that this is all he cares about, or that other purposes don't often take precedence over this one. His intelligence must be adequate to the contrivances apparent in the universe, but needn't be more than adequate to them; and his power is not only not proved to be infinite, but the only real evidence in natural theology tends to show that it is limited, because any contrivance is a way of overcoming difficulties, and always presupposes that there are difficulties to be overcome.

Now, what inference can we legitimately draw from these premises in favour of a future life? It seems to me that, apart from explicit revelation, we can't draw any. The common arguments are:

- the goodness of God;
- the improbability that he would ordain the annihilation of his noblest and richest work, •man•, after most of his short life had been spent acquiring faculties that he didn't have time to use properly; and
- the special improbability that God would have implanted in us an instinctive desire for eternal life, and doomed that desire to complete disappointment.

In a world where one could without contradiction accept 'This world is the work of a Being who is both omnipotent and benevolent', these 'arguments' might be *arguments*. But they aren't arguments in a world like ours. God may be perfectly benevolent, but because his power is subject to unknown limitations we don't know that he *could* have given us what we so confidently assert that he *must* have given—I mean, could have given it without sacrificing something more important. However sound the evidence is for God's benevolence, it doesn't indicate that benevolence is his only motivation; he may have other purposes as well, and we can't tell to what extent those may have interfered with the exercise of his benevolence; so we don't know that he •would have granted us eternal life even if he •could have done so.

And the same thing holds for the supposed improbability of God's having given us the wish for eternal life without enabling it to be gratified. The limits on his power, or conflicts among his purposes, may have compelled him to adopt a scheme requiring that we should have that wish even if it weren't going to be gratified. One fact about God's government of the world is quite certain, namely that he either couldn't or didn't want to grant to us everything we wish. We wish for life, and he has granted some life; some of us wish for a boundless extent of life, and that is not granted; and this is perfectly in line with God's ordinary ways of governing the world. Many a man would like to be as rich as Croesus or as powerful as Augustus Caesar but has his wishes gratified only to the moderate extent of a pound a week or the Secretaryship of his Trade Union. Thus, natural religion provides no basis whatsoever for confidence that we shall have a life after death. But if you feel that *hoping* for a future state will make you either more satisfied or more useful, there is no reason why you shouldn't go on hoping. There is empirical evidence for the existence of a Being who has great power over us—all the power implied in the creation of the cosmos, or at least of the organisms in it—and for his being good, though not for that's being his predominant attribute; and as we don't know the limits either of his power or of his goodness, there is room for us to *hope* that he may be powerful enough and good enough to grant us this gift, provided that it would really be beneficial to us. There is also the question of what the after-life,

if there is one, will be like. The same reasons that permit the hope justify us in expecting that if there is a future life it will be at least as good as our present life, and won't be lacking in the best feature of the present life, namely *improvability by our own efforts*. Every estimate of probability that we know how to make flatly opposes the common idea of the future life as a state of rewards and punishments, except in the sense that the effects of our actions on our own character will follow us in the after-life as they have done in this life. Whatever the probability is that we shall have a future life, all the probabilities about what such a life will be like are in favour of this: whatever we have been made to be like, or have made ourselves to be like, before our death, *that* is what we'll be like when we enter into the life hereafter. The fact of death won't make any sudden break in our spiritual life, or influence our character differently from how *any* important change in our mode of existence can always be expected to modify it. Our soul—the thing that thinks in us—has its laws which in this life are invariable, and any analogies drawn from this life must assume that the same laws will continue. To imagine that at our death a miracle will occur by the act of God *making perfect* everyone whom he wants to include among his elect might be justified by a properly authenticated explicit revelation, but it is utterly opposed to every presumption that can be deduced from the light of Nature.

Part 4: Revelation

In discussing evidence for theism I have so far restricted myself to evidence derived from the light of Nature. What addition has been made to that evidence, and to what extent have the conclusions obtainable from it been strengthened or modified by the establishment of a direct communication with God? That is a different question, which I shall now address. My purposes in this Essay don't require me to discuss claims about revelations that are specifically Christian or of any other religion in particular, but they do require me to consider revelation *generally*. If I don't do that, the results I have reached up to here may lose much of their practical bearing, because it will be open to people to ignore the weakness of the natural evidence for theism and pin everything on what they claim to be divine revelation.

First point: the indications of a creator and of his attributes that we have found in Nature, though much fainter and less conclusive as to his existence than the pious mind would like to think they are, and even less informative about his attributes, still suffice to give to the supposition of revelation a *standing point* that it wouldn't have had otherwise. The alleged revelation isn't forced to build up its case from the foundation; it doesn't have to prove the very existence of the Being from whom it claims to come. It claims to be a message from a Being whose existence, whose power, and to a certain extent whose wisdom and goodness, are at least *indicated* with more or less probability by the phenomena of nature. The sender of the alleged message isn't a sheer invention; there are grounds independent of the message itself for believing that he is real. The grounds don't amount to proof; but they do suffice to take away all antecedent improbability from the supposition that a message may really have been received from him. And the following point is important to my present project. The very imperfection of natural theology's evidence regarding God's attributes removes some of the main obstacles to believing in a revelation. Any objections grounded on imperfections in the revelation itself, even if they are conclusive against it if it is considered as recording the acts or expressing the wisdom of a

Being with infinite power, wisdom and goodness, are no reason whatever against its having come from a Being such as the course of nature points to—one whose wisdom may be limited, whose power is certainly limited, and whose goodness, though real, is not likely to have been the only motive that actuated him in the work of creation.

(The argument of Butler's *Analogy of Religion* is, from its own point of view, conclusive:

- the Christian religion is open to no objections, either moral or intellectual, that don't count at least as strongly against the common theory of Deism [a thin belief in a higher power, one that doesn't intervene in human affairs and may not even be a person];
- the morality of the Gospels is far higher and better than the morality that appears in the order of Nature; and
- what is morally objectionable in the Christian theory of the world is objectionable only when combined with the doctrine of an omnipotent God; and . . . doesn't count at all against the moral character of a Being whose power is supposed to be restricted by real though unknown obstacles that prevented him from fully carrying out his design.

Butler's grave error was that he shrank from admitting the hypothesis of limited powers; so that his appeal amounts to this: 'The belief of Christians is neither more absurd nor more immoral than the belief of Deists who acknowledge an omnipotent Creator; so let us believe both, despite their absurdity and immorality.' He ought to have said: 'Let us trim our belief in either Christianity or Deism down to what doesn't involve absurdity or immorality, to what is neither intellectually self-contradictory nor morally perverted.'

Returning now to the main subject: On the hypothesis of a god who made the world and in making it had regard for the happiness of his sentient creatures (however that regard may have been limited by other considerations), there is no antecedent improbability in the supposition that his concern for their good would continue, and that he might sometimes give proof of it by communicating to them some knowledge of himself beyond

what they could discover by their unaided faculties, and some •knowledge or precepts useful for guiding them through the difficulties of life. Also, on the hypothesis that God's power is limited (which is the only tenable hypothesis), we can't object that these helps 'ought to have been more helpful' or 'ought to have been . . .' different in some way from what they are. The only question to be considered, and we can't let ourselves off from considering it, is about *evidence*. Can any evidence suffice to prove a divine revelation? If so, what sort of evidence—and how much of it—must there be? I shan't consider directly the different question of whether the special evidences of Christianity, or of any other alleged revelation, come up to the mark. The questions I intend to consider are:

- What evidence is required?
- What general conditions ought it to satisfy?
- Given what we know of the constitution of things, can those conditions be satisfied?

Evidence of revelation is commonly divided into 'external' and 'internal'. External evidence is the testimony of the senses or of witnesses. By 'internal evidence' is meant the indications that the revelation itself is thought to provide of its divine origin—indications supposed to consist chiefly in the excellence of its precepts, and its general suitability to the circumstances and needs of human nature.

It's very important to consider this internal evidence, but its importance is mainly negative; it may provide conclusive grounds for rejecting a revelation, but it can't unaided entitle us to accept •a supposed revelation• as divine. If the moral character of the doctrines of an alleged revelation is bad and perverting, we ought to reject it, whoever it comes from, for it can't come from a good and wise Being. But the excellence of the morality of an alleged revelation can never entitle us to credit it with a supernatural origin; for we can't have conclusive reason for believing that human beings couldn't •discover moral doctrines that human beings can •perceive and recognize as excellent. So if a revelation is to be proved to be divine it must be by external evidence—i.e. by the exhibition of supernatural facts. Well, then, is it possible to prove supernatural facts? If it is, what evidence is required to prove

them? As far as I know, this question has been seriously raised only on the sceptical side, by Hume. It is the question involved in his famous argument against miracles, an argument that goes down to the depths of the subject. It may be that that great thinker didn't perfectly grasp •the exact scope and effect of his argument, and •they have been utterly misconceived by those who have tried to answer him. [Mill briefly cites the example of a Dr. Campbell, and refers to writings of his own in which Campbell's error is corrected. Then:] Let's start from the beginning. It is obviously impossible to maintain that if a supernatural fact really occurs, human beings aren't equipped to have proof of its occurrence. The evidence of our senses could prove this, as it can prove other things. To put the most extreme case: suppose that I actually saw and heard •a Being—either of the human form or of some form previously unknown to me—commanding a world to exist, and •a new world actually coming into existence and starting to move through space, at his command. This evidence •of my senses• would certainly convert the creation of worlds from a •speculation into a •fact of experience. You may say: 'But you couldn't know that such a singular appearance was anything more than a hallucination of your senses.' True; but the same doubt exists at first concerning every unsuspected and surprising fact that comes to light in our scientific researches. Our senses have been deceived •and may be deceived again•; that is a possibility that has to be met and dealt with, and we *do* deal with it by several means. If

- we repeat the experiment, and get the same result again;

or if

- at the time of the observation the impressions of our senses are in all other respects the same as usual, making it extremely improbable that they have been defective regarding this one matter;

or if—above all—

- other people's senses confirm the testimony of our own;

we conclude, with reason, that we can trust our senses •with respect to the unusual experience that we have just had•. Indeed our senses are all that we have to trust to. Even when we are reasoning •in a strictly logical way• we depend on our senses

for our ultimate premises. The only appeal there can be against the decision of our senses is an appeal •from the senses without precautions •to the senses with all due precautions. When the evidence on which an opinion rests is of a sort that we base the whole conduct and safety of our lives on, we need ask no further. Objections that apply to *all* evidence are valid against *none*. All they prove is the abstract proposition that our senses are fallible.

But these days the evidence of miracles isn't of this persuasive kind—at least to protestant Christians. It isn't the evidence of our senses, but of witnesses, and even this we don't get at first hand but have to rely on the testimony of books and traditions. And even in the case of the original eye-witnesses, the supernatural facts they are supposed to have testified to are not of the utterly elevated kind supposed in my example (•in which I actually see a Being bring a world into existence merely by his command•). There could be little room for doubt about the nature of *that*, or about the impossibility of *its* having had a natural origin. But the •supposed• miracles of which we have records are not like that. For one thing, they have generally been such that it would have been extremely difficult to verify them as matters of fact; also, it has nearly always been within the bounds of possibility that they were brought about by human means or by the spontaneous agencies of nature. This is the sort of case that Hume was talking about in his argument against the credibility of miracles.

His argument is this (•though not in his exact words•):

The evidence of miracles consists in testimony. We rely on testimony because of our experience that under certain conditions testimony is generally truthful. But that same experience tells us that even under the best conditions testimony is frequently false, whether intentionally or unintentionally. So when someone testifies to something the occurrence of which would be more at variance with experience than the falsehood of this testimony, we ought not to believe it. All prudent persons conform to this rule in their everyday lives; and any who don't are sure to suffer for their credulity.

Now, a miracle is in the highest possible degree contradictory to experience: if it weren't, it wouldn't be a miracle!

The very reason for regarding it as a miracle is that it breaks some law of nature, that is, some otherwise invariable uniformity in the succession of natural events. So there's a strong reason for disbelieving it—the strongest reason that experience can give for disbelieving *anything*. •Whereas, on the other side of the equation•, lying or error on the part of witnesses— even when they are of good character, and there are many of them—is quite within the bounds of common experience. So *that* is the supposition that we ought to prefer,

There are two apparently weak points in this argument. One is that the evidence of experience that it appeals to is only negative evidence, which is not so conclusive as positive; since •apparent• facts of which there had been no previous experience are often discovered, and proved by positive experience to be true, •i.e. to be genuine facts•. The other seemingly vulnerable point •in the argument• is this. The argument seems to assume that the testimony of experience against miracles is undeviating and indubitable; and so it *would* be if the whole question concerned the probability of future miracles with none having taken place in the past. But the position of those on the other side is that there *have* been miracles, and that the testimony of experience is not wholly on the negative side. All the evidence that has been brought forward in favour of any miracle ought to be reckoned as counter-evidence against the basis for the assertion that •reports of• miracles ought to be disbelieved. If the question is to be stated fairly, •it mustn't be imply that there is some evidence against miracles and none in favour of them; rather• it should be stated as depending on a *balance* of evidence: a certain amount of positive evidence in favour of miracles, and a negative presumption [see note on page 1] from the general course of human experience against them.

In order to support the argument when it has been doubly corrected in this way, it has to be shown that •the negative presumption against a miracle is very much stronger than •the negative presumption against a merely new and surprising fact. This, however, evidently *is* the case. A new physical discovery, even if it clashes with a well established law of nature, is only the

discovery of another law that wasn't previously known. There's nothing in this that isn't familiar to our experience: we were aware •that we didn't know all the laws of nature, and •that one such •apparent• law is liable to be counteracted by others. When the new phenomenon comes to light, it is found still to depend on law; it is always exactly reproduced when the same circumstances are repeated. So its occurrence is within the limits of variation in experience, which experience itself reveals to us. But a miracle, in the very fact of being a miracle, declares itself to be *not*

•one natural law superseding another •seeming• natural law,

but rather

•something that supersedes the law that includes all other laws, the law that experience shows to be universal for all phenomena, namely *that they depend on some law*, i.e. that they are always the same when there are the same phenomenal antecedents—they don't occur in the absence of their phenomenal causes, or fail to occur when the phenomenal conditions are all present.

[In this context, 'phenomenal' means 'empirically detectable'.] We can see that this argument against belief in miracles had very little to ground to stand on until a fairly late stage in the progress of science. A few generations ago, the universal dependence of phenomena on invariable laws not only •wasn't recognized by mankind in general but •couldn't be regarded by educated people as a scientifically established truth. Many phenomena seemed quite irregular in their course, and apparently didn't depend on any known antecedents. No doubt a certain regularity in the occurrence of the most familiar phenomena must always have been recognized, but even these regularities had frequent exceptions that hadn't yet been studied in enough depth to be reconciled with the general rule. From ancient times onwards, the heavenly bodies were the most conspicuous examples of regular and unvarying order; yet even among them •comets were a phenomenon apparently starting without any law, and eclipses were a phenomenon that seemed to occur in violation of law. For that reason both comets and eclipses continued through many centuries to be regarded as miracles, intended as signs and omens

of human fortunes. It would have been impossible in those days to prove to anyone that this supposition—that comets and eclipses were miraculous—was antecedently improbable. It seemed to fit appearances better than the •rival• hypothesis of an unknown law.

But now, with the progress of science, all phenomena have been conclusively shown to be amenable to law; and even in the cases where the laws haven't yet been exactly ascertained, delay in discovering them is fully accounted for by the special difficulties of the subject. So the defenders of miracles have adapted their argument to this altered state of affairs, by maintaining that a miracle needn't necessarily be a violation of law. It may, they say, take place in accordance with a law that we don't know.

There are two ways of taking this. **(1)** It may mean only that when God is using his power to interfere with and suspend his own laws, he guides himself by some general principle or rule of action. This, of course, can't be disproved, and is in itself the most probable supposition. **(2)** But it may mean that a miracle can be in accordance with a law in the same sense in which the ordinary events of nature are in accordance with laws. If that is what is meant, it seems to indicate an imperfect grasp of what is meant by a 'law', and of what constitutes a 'miracle'.

When we say that an ordinary physical event E always takes place according to some invariable law, we mean •that it is connected—either by following or by accompanying—some definite set S of physical antecedents; •that whenever S is exactly reproduced, E will occur unless it is counteracted by the similar laws of some other physical antecedents; and •that whenever E occurs it will always be found that S has existed beforehand (or some other set of antecedents, if E could be caused in more than one way). Now, an event that happens like that isn't a miracle. To be a miracle it must be produced by a direct volition, without the use of means; or at least, without the use of any means which if simply repeated would produce it again. For there to be a miracle, •properly so-called•, one or other of these must be the case:

- an event E occurs without having been preceded by any antecedent phenomenal conditions that would be sufficient to produce E again if they were repeated; or
- an event E, for the production of which the antecedent

conditions exist, is delayed or prevented without the intervention of any phenomenal antecedents that would delay or prevent E in a future case.

The test of a miracle is this: Were there present in the case external conditions such that whenever these conditions or causes reappear the event will be reproduced? If there were, it isn't a miracle; if there were not, it is a miracle, but it doesn't happen according to any law—it is an event produced without any law or even in spite of some law. [Mill calls these external causes 'second causes'. That phrase is a technical term in theology. It refers to any causal mechanism that God might make use of, *between* his will and the desired upshot.] You might want to say: 'A miracle doesn't necessarily exclude the intervention of second causes. If God wanted to raise a thunderstorm by miracle, he might do it by means of winds and clouds.' Undoubtedly; but let us break this down into two cases, and look at them separately. (1) The winds and clouds *were not* sufficient to excite the thunderstorm without other divine assistance. In that case, the storm is not a fulfillment of law but a violation of it. (2) The winds and clouds *were* sufficient to excite the thunderstorm. In that case, there is a miracle, but it isn't the storm; it's the production of the winds and clouds, or whatever link in the chain of causation it was at which God first made use of physical antecedents. If

- there wasn't any *first*-physical-antecedent, i.e. if
- the event called 'miraculous' was produced by natural means, and those in turn by others, and so on back to the beginning of things; in short, if
- the event is an 'act of God' only in the sense that he foresaw it and ordained it as a consequence of the forces he set going at the creation;

then there is no miracle at all. There is only the ordinary working of God's providence.

Here is another example: Someone who claims to be under orders from God cures a sick person by rubbing some ointment on him. Would this treatment have cured the patient if it were administered by someone who wasn't specially commissioned by God? If so, there is no miracle; if not, there is a miracle, but there is also a violation of law.

Here is a line of argument that some will use:

If these events are violations of law, then law is violated every time a physical event is produced by a voluntary act of a human being. Human volition constantly modifies natural phenomena, not by *violating* their laws but by *using* them. Why can't divine volition do the same? The power of volitions over phenomena is itself a law—known and acknowledged as such before most other laws of nature. It's true that when the human will exercises power over any object, it does so through the direct power it has over the human muscles and not over anything else. But God has direct power over everything that he has made. So the supposition that events are produced, prevented, or modified by God's action doesn't involve supposing any violation of law, any more than this is involved in the supposition of that events are produced or modified by man's action. Both are equally parts of the course of nature, equally consistent with what we know of the government of all things by law.

Those who argue like this are mostly believers in free will, who develop the argument along these lines:

Every human volition *starts up* a new chain of causation. It is the *first* link of the chain, not connected by invariable sequence with any previous state of affairs. So even if God's intervention did constitute a breaking-in on the connected chain of events, by introducing a new originating cause that has no root in the past, this would be no reason for discrediting it, since every human act of volition does precisely the same. If God breaks laws, then so does man. In fact, neither does, because the start-up of volition is not governed by any laws.

Those who dispute the free will theory, and regard volition as no exception to the universal law of cause and effect, may answer:

Volitions don't interrupt the chain of causation; they carry it on, because the connection of cause and effect is of just the same nature between motive and act as between a set of physical antecedents and a physical consequent.

But this, whether true or not, doesn't really affect the argument—i.e. doesn't do any harm to the proposed likening of human

volition to divine volition. If anything saves the human will's interference with the course of nature from being an exception to law, it is our including among laws the relation of motive to volition; and by parity of argument interference by the divine won't be an exception to law either, because we can't help supposing that God, in every one of his acts, is determined by motives.

So the alleged analogy holds good: but what it proves is only what I have maintained from the outset—that divine interference with nature could be proved if we had the same sort of evidence for it as we have for human interferences. The question of antecedent improbability arises only because we don't have direct perceptual evidence of divine intervention—as we do of human volitions. That God has intervened in the world is always matter of inference, and somewhat speculative inference at that. And we don't have to think hard to see that in these circumstances the antecedent presumption against the truth of the inference is extremely strong.

When the human will interferes to produce some physical effect other than the movements of the person's own human body, it does so by using *means*, and it has to employ means that are by their own physical properties sufficient to bring about the effect. Divine interference is stipulated as proceeding in a different manner from this: it produces its effect without means, or with means that aren't in themselves sufficient to produce the effect (—so that God's part in this is to make up for the insufficiency). In the •human case, all the physical phenomena except the first bodily movement are produced in strict conformity to physical causation; and that first movement is traced *by positive observation* to the cause—the volition—that produced it. In the •divine case, the event is supposed not to have been produced at all through physical causation, or anyway not through physical causation that is sufficient to account for it, and *there is no direct evidence* to connect it with any volition. The grounds for ascribing it to a volition are only negative, because there is no other apparent way of accounting for its occurrence.

But in this merely speculative explanation there is always another hypothesis possible, namely that the event was produced by physical causes in some way that isn't apparent to us. It may be due to •a law of physical nature that we don't yet know, or to

•the unknown presence of conditions necessary for producing it according to some law that we *do* know. Take a case where an event that is supposed to be miraculous reaches us *not* through the uncertain medium of human testimony *but* through the direct evidence of our own senses. And assume, of course, that we don't have direct evidence that the event was produced by a divine volition, like the direct evidence we have that movements of our bodies are produced by human volitions. As long as the miraculous character of the event is merely an inference from the supposed inadequacy of the laws of physical nature to account for it, so long will the hypothesis of a •natural origin for the phenomenon be entitled to preference over that of a •supernatural one. The commonest principles of sound judgment forbid us to suppose for any effect a cause of which we have had absolutely no experience, unless we have discovered that all those of which we *have* had experience are absent. Now consider this kind of situation:

A physical state of affairs occurs which our knowledge doesn't enable us to account for, because it depends either on •laws that empirical science hasn't yet brought to light, or on •unsuspected facts about this particular case.

There aren't many things of which we have had more frequent experience than we have of *that!* Accordingly, when we hear of an amazing event we always (in these modern times) believe that if it really did occur it wasn't the work of God or of a demon, but a consequence of some unknown natural law or of some hidden fact. And each of these suppositions is still on the cards when (as in the case of a miracle properly so-called) the amazing event seemed to depend on the will of a human being. It's always possible that

- there is at work some undetected law of nature that the wonder-worker has become able to call into action; or that
- the wonder has been brought about (as in the truly extraordinary feats of jugglers) by the applying ordinary laws in a way that we don't notice.

In each of those cases, the person in question may not be aware of just what he is doing, so that neither case necessarily involves voluntary deception. And there is a third possibility. It may be the case that:

•The event had no connection with the volition at all; the coincidence between them was a result of craft or accident, the 'miracle'-worker having seemed or claimed to produce by his will something that was already about to occur—e.g. 'commanding' an eclipse of the sun at the moment when he knows through astronomy that an eclipse is on the point of taking place.

In a case of this third sort, the miracle might be tested by a challenge to repeat it; but it should be noticed that recorded 'miracles' were seldom or never put to this test. No miracle-worker seems ever to have made a *practice* of raising the dead! The most notable 'miraculous' operations—including 'raising the dead'—are reported to have been performed in only a few isolated cases, which may have been cunningly selected cases, or may have been accidental coincidences. In short, there is nothing to exclude the supposition that *every* alleged miracle was due to natural causes: and as long as that remains possible, no scientific observer—and no man of ordinary common sense—would conjecture a cause, namely a divinely caused miracle, which there is no reason to think real, except its ability to account for something that is sufficiently accounted for without it.

If we stopped here, the case against miracles might seem to be complete. But when we look into the matter further, you'll see that the considerations I have presented don't entitle us to conclude without qualification that the 'miracle' theory of the production of any phenomenon ought to be summarily rejected. The most we can conclude is that no extraordinary powers that have ever been alleged to be exercised by any human being over nature can be evidence of miraculous gifts to anyone to whom the existence of God and his intervention in human affairs is not already accepted as a settled fact. The existence of God can't possibly be proved through miracles, for unless a god is already recognized the apparent miracle can always be explained through an hypothesis that is more probable than the hypothesis that it is an interference by a Being of whose very existence it is supposed to be the sole evidence. Up to this point, Hume's argument [see page 29] is conclusive. But it is less conclusive if we

accept as a fact—or even as a probability resting on independent evidence—that a Being exists who created the present order of Nature and, therefore, may well have power to modify it. Once we admit a god, the thesis that some effect was directly produced by his direct volition is no longer •a purely arbitrary hypothesis to account for the given fact, but must be reckoned with as •a serious possibility. So now the question changes its character, and our answer to it should depend on what we know or reasonably guess concerning *how* God governs the universe. The options are:

- the event in question was brought about by the agencies through which God's government of the universe is ordinarily carried on;
- the event in question is a result of a special and non-ordinary interference by God's will, over-riding those ordinary agencies.

Our question is: which of those two is more probable, given what we know or guess about how God governs the universe? Let us start here: Assuming as a fact the existence and providence of God, the whole of our observation of Nature gives us incontrovertible evidence that •he governs the universe by means of second causes [see note on page 31]; that •all facts—or at least all *physical* facts—follow uniformly upon given physical conditions, and never occur except when the appropriate collection of physical conditions is realized. (I limit the assertion to *physical* facts so as to leave the case of human volition an open question; though actually I needn't do so, for the following reason. If the human will is free, it has been left free by its creator, and isn't controlled by him either directly or through second causes; it isn't governed at all, so it isn't an example of God's way of governing.) Whatever God does govern, he governs by second causes. This wasn't obvious in the infancy of science, but it came to be increasingly recognized as the processes of nature were more carefully and accurately examined, until it is now positively known for almost every class of phenomena. The exceptions are some obscure and complicated cases that our scientific processes haven't yet been able completely to clear up and disentangle; a complete proof that *these* also are governed by natural laws can't be given in the present state of science. Still, these cases also contribute something to the evidence that *all*

physical events are governed by second causes; their contribution is negative, ·consisting in evidence that nothing other than second causes is at work·; but even that will count as conclusive evidence except in contexts where religion is the topic under discussion. When someone inquires into an event—whether for scientific or for practical purposes—he asks himself ‘What is its cause?’ and not, ‘Does it have any natural cause?’ A man would be laughed at if he took seriously the possible answer ‘The event’s only cause is the will of God’.

Against this weight of negative evidence we have to set whatever positive evidence there is for the occurrence of miracles. And I have already admitted that this evidence could conceivably have been strong enough to make the exception as certain as the rule—i.e. to make it just as certain that •some events *don’t* fall under natural laws as it is that •most events *do*·. If we had the direct testimony of our senses to a •supernatural fact, it might be as completely authenticated and made certain as any •natural one. But we never do have that testimony. The supernatural character of the fact is always, as I have said, a matter of inference and speculation, and the mystery is always open to the possibility of a solution that isn’t supernatural. To someone who already believes in supernatural power, the supernatural hypothesis may seem more probable than the natural one; but only if it fits with what we know or reasonably guess concerning •how the supernatural agent goes about doing things. Well, everything we know about •this from the evidence of nature fits with the natural theory and clashes with the supernatural. So there is a vast preponderance of probability against a miracle; to counterbalance it we would need a case where a supposed miracle and its circumstances had a very extraordinary and indisputable *fit* with something we think that we know, or have grounds for believing, regarding God’s attributes.

This *fit* is supposed to exist when the purpose of the miracle is extremely beneficial to mankind, e.g. when it offers support for some highly important belief. Why? Well, God’s goodness is supposed to make it highly likely that for such an excellent purpose he *would* make an exception to his general rule of government. But for reasons that I have already discussed ·in Part 2 of this Essay·, any inference that we draw from •the goodness of God to

•what he has or hasn’t actually done is utterly precarious. If we reason directly from God’s goodness to positive facts, there ought to be no misery or vice or crime anywhere in the world. We can’t see in God’s goodness any reason why

- if he deviated once from the ordinary system of his government in order to do good to man, he shouldn’t have done so on a hundred other occasions;

or any reason why

- if the benefit aimed at by some given deviation ·from natural laws· (such as the revelation of Christianity) was transcendent and unique, that precious gift should have been granted only after the lapse of many ages;

or any reason why

- when the gift was at last given, the evidence for it should have been left open to so much doubt and difficulty.

Bear in mind that God’s goodness doesn’t create a presumption in favour of a departure from his general system of government unless his good purpose in this couldn’t have been achieved without going against any natural laws. If God intended that mankind should receive Christianity, or any other gift, it would have agreed better with everything we know about his government if he had arranged, in his initial scheme of creation, for it to arise at the appointed time by natural development. To which I would add that everything we know concerning the history of the human mind indicates that that’s how it actually *did* arise.

In addition to all these considerations there is another, namely the extremely imperfect nature of the testimony that we have for the miracles (real or supposed) that accompanied the foundation of Christianity and of every other revealed religion. At best it is merely testimony, given without cross-examination, of people who were

- extremely ignorant,
- credulous, as ignorant people usually are,
- honourably credulous when the excellence of the doctrine or a proper reverence for the teacher makes them eager to believe,
- not used to distinguishing the perceptions of sense from what is floated in on top of them by the suggestions of a

lively imagination, and

- unpractised in the difficult art of deciding between appearance and reality, and between the natural and the supernatural.

Furthermore, their testimony was given at a time when no-one thought it worthwhile to contradict any story about an alleged miracle, because it was generally believed at that time that miracles in themselves proved nothing because they could be worked by a lying spirit as well as by the spirit of God. [Mill is not referring to 'lying' testimony about the occurrence of a miracle, but about the possibility that a reported miracle really did occur but came not from God but from some devil.] Such were the witnesses; and we don't have the direct testimony even of *them*. The only history we have of these supposedly miraculous events is in documents that were written much later (even orthodox believers agree about that), and often don't even name the supposed eye-witnesses. It is only fair to admit that these gospels include the best and least absurd of the wonderful stories that were so plentifully current among the early Christians; but on the rare occasions when they do name someone as a subject or spectator of a miracle, they doubtless draw on this tradition, mentioning the names the story was connected with in the people's minds. And that connection may have been accidental. Anyone who has observed how, even these days, a story grows up from some small foundation, taking on additional details at every step, knows very well how a story can begin as anonymous and then get names attached to it. For example, the name of someone who told the story gets brought *into* the story itself, first as a witness and still later as a participant.

We should remember the very important point that stories of miracles only grow up among ignorant people, and aren't adopted by educated people until they have become the belief of multitudes. The miracle-stories that Protestants believe started up at times and in places where there was hardly any understanding of probability, and miracles were thought to be among the commonest of all phenomena. The Catholic Church, indeed, holds as an article of faith that miracles have never ceased, and new ones continue to

be, now and then, brought forth and believed, even in the present incredulous age—yet if in an incredulous generation certainly not among the incredulous portion of it, but always among people who, in addition to the most childish ignorance, have grown up (as does everyone who is educated by the Catholic clergy) trained to believe that

- it is a duty to believe and a sin to doubt;
- it is dangerous to be sceptical about anything that is offered for belief in the name of the true religion; and
- nothing is so contrary to piety as incredulity.

No-one but a Roman Catholic, and by no means every one of them, believes in these latter-day 'miracles'. Yet the testimony in their favour often gives much better evidence than we have for any of the early miracles—better especially in one of the most essential respects, namely that in many cases the alleged eye-witnesses are known, and we have their story at first hand.

So that's how the balance of evidence stands regarding the reality of miracles, assuming that the existence and government of God has been proved by other evidence. On one side:

- the great negative presumption arising from the whole of what the course of nature reveals to us of how God governs, namely through second causes and by invariable cause-effect regularities.

On the other side:

- a few exceptional cases, supported by evidence of a sort that wouldn't justify belief in anything that was even slightly unusual or improbable; the eye-witnesses
 - in most cases unknown,
 - in no case competent by character or education to examine the real nature of the appearances that they may have seen,¹ and
 - always having a combination of the strongest motives that can inspire human beings to persuade themselves, and then persuade others, that what they have seen was a miracle.

Furthermore, even if the reports of supposed miracles

¹ There is in fact one—only one—known exception to the ignorance and lack of education of the first generation of Christians. It is St Paul. But the only miracle he reports is that of his own conversion on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:3-8); and of all the miracles of the New Testament this is the easiest to explain by natural causes.

are entirely accurate, it is always on the cards that they were either mere coincidences or were produced by natural means—even when we can't (and usually we *can*) suggest what those means might have been.

I conclude that 'miracles' have no claim whatever to the status of historical facts, and are utterly worthless as evidences of any revelation.

What can be said with truth on the side of miracles amounts only to the What can be said with truth on the side of miracles amounts only to the following. Considering

- that the order of nature provides some evidence of the reality of a creator, and of his having good will to his creatures though not for his being motivated, in his conduct towards them, solely by good will;
- that all the evidence of his existence is also evidence that he is not all- powerful; and
- that in our ignorance of the limits of his power we can't positively decide that he was able to provide for us, by his initial plan of creation, all the good that he intended us to have, or to give us any part of it earlier than he in fact did;

—considering these things, and considering further that an extremely precious gift came to us which

- was helped but apparently not necessitated—•not outright *caused*—by what had gone before, but
- appears to have been due to the particular mental and moral endowments of one man, who openly declared that it didn't come from himself but *from God through him*,

then we are entitled to hope that what that man declared may be true. Such a hope isn't disqualified by its being inherently impossible or absolutely incredible that the gift came from God through the man. I speak of *hoping*, no more than that, because I don't think that any human testimony about this has any value as evidence. Not even the testimony of Christ on this subject, because he is never reported as offering any evidence except his own internal conviction; and everyone knows that in prescientific times men always supposed that any unusual abilities that they found themselves with were an inspiration from God; the best men always being the readiest to ascribe to that higher source, rather than to their own merits, any honourable special gift that they had.

Part 5: General result

The upshot of my examination of the evidence for theism, and of the evidence (assuming that theism is true) that there have been divine revelations, is this:

The rational attitude of any thoughtful person towards the supernatural, whether in natural or in revealed religion, is that of •scepticism—as distinct from •belief on the one hand and from •atheism on the other.

In this context I take 'atheism' to include not only •positive atheism, i.e. the dogmatic denial of God's existence, but also •negative atheism, i.e. the denial that there is any evidence either for or against God's existence, which I call a form of atheism because

for most practical purposes amounts to the same thing as if the existence of a god had been disproved. If I am right in the conclusions I have been led to by this inquiry, there is evidence, but not enough to count as a proof, and amounting only to one of the lower degrees of probability. What evidence there is points to the creation (not of the universe but) of the present order of the universe by

- an intelligent mind •whose power over the materials was not absolute, •whose love for his creatures wasn't his sole active motive, but •who nevertheless wanted them to thrive.

We should entirely reject the idea that the universe is under the

providential government of an omnipotent Being who rules for the good of his creatures. Does the creator *still exist*? We have no guarantee of even that much, except that he can't be subject to the law of death that affects living things on this planet, because he himself created the conditions that produce the mortality of any creatures that we know to be mortal. Consider the idea that this Being, not being omnipotent, may have produced a machinery that falls short of what he aimed at, so that he sometimes has to intervene to make corrections. This is in itself neither absurd nor impossible, though in none of the cases in which God is thought to have intervened is the evidence anywhere near conclusive. It remains a mere possibility, to occupy the minds of those who find it comforting to suppose that blessings that ordinary human power is inadequate to attain may come not from extraordinary human power but from the generosity of a better-than-human mind which continuously cares for man. The possibility of a life after death has the same status: such life is a favour that this powerful Being, who wishes well to man, may have the power to grant; and indeed he has actually promised it—if the message alleged to have been sent by him really *was* sent by him. The whole domain of the supernatural is thus removed from the region of belief into that of simple hope; and it's likely to remain there for ever, as far as we can see; for we can hardly expect either that we'll ever get positive evidence for the direct agency of God's benevolence in human destiny, or on the other hand that we'll ever find any reason to think that it's quite impossible that human hopes on that subject should be realized.

Next question: Is it irrational to have hopes in a region of mere imagination, where there is no prospect that we'll ever have a basis for thinking it probable that the hopes will be realized? Ought such hopes to be discouraged because they depart from the rational principle of regulating our feelings as well as our opinions strictly by evidence? Different thinkers are likely, for a long time at least, to give different answers to this, depending on their individual temperaments. What are the principles that ought to govern the development and management of the imagination? We don't want our imagination to be so active that it can confuse the intellect or mislead actions and the will, or so inactive that no use is made of

its power for increasing the happiness of life and improving one's character. Philosophers have never seriously considered what principles would be best for achieving this double result, though some opinion on it is *implied* in almost all kinds of thinking about human character and education. I expect that in the future this will be regarded as a very important branch of study for practical purposes, and all the more so when the weakening of positive beliefs about higher-than-human states of existence lessens the imagination's intake of material from that domain of supposed reality. My view about it is based on my belief that human life is a small and confined thing, and judging by the present it is likely to remain small and confined even if the progress of material and moral improvement eventually frees it from the greater part of its present calamities. I think that this human life greatly needs any help the imagination can give it in *aiming further and higher*—any help, that is, that doesn't run counter to the evidence of fact. So I think it is a part of wisdom to make the most of any probabilities on this subject, even small ones, that give imagination any ground to stand on. I'm convinced that the development of such a tendency in the imagination, provided it stays in step with the development of severe reason, need not pervert the judgment. It is possible to form a perfectly sober estimate of the evidence on each side of a question while preferring to let one's imagination dwell on the most comforting and most improving possibilities, without even slightly overrating the solidity of the grounds for expecting that these possibilities, rather than any others, will be actually realized. Though this is not one of the practical maxims handed down by tradition and recognized as rules for the conduct of life, a great part of the happiness of life depends on its being silently observed. Consider for example the phenomenon of a *cheerful disposition*. It is always regarded as one of the chief blessings of life, but what does it mean? It is just the tendency, either from constitution or from habit, to dwell chiefly on the brighter side of the present and the future. If every nice or nasty aspect of everything ought to occupy exactly the same place in our imagination that it does in fact occupy and therefore ought to have in our practical planning, what we call a cheerful disposition would be merely one kind of folly, on a par with (though not as unpleasant as) the opposite

disposition in which the gloomy and painful view of all things is habitually uppermost. But we don't find in practice that those who take life cheerfully are less alive to real risks of evil or danger, and less careful to provide against them, than other people. The tendency is rather the other way, for a hopeful disposition gives a spur to the faculties and keeps all the active energies in good working order. When imagination and reason are developed, each in the appropriate way, they don't take over one another's work. For us to keep up our conviction that we must die, we don't have to be always brooding over death. It's far better for us to think no further about this inevitable event than is required for •observing the rules of prudence in regard to our own life and that of others, and •fulfilling whatever duties we have with regard to our death. The way to secure this is not to think perpetually about death, but to think perpetually about our duties and the rule of life. The true rule of practical wisdom is not

•In your habitual thinking, make all the aspects of things equally prominent;

but rather

•In your habitual thinking, give the greatest prominence to the aspects of things that depend on, or can be modified by, your own conduct.

In things that don't depend on us, it is desirable to choose to look at things and at mankind on their pleasant side. Why? Not just because it makes life more enjoyable, but also because it helps us to love mankind better and to work with more heart for their improvement. After all, why *should* we feed our imaginations with the unlovely aspect of persons and things? Some dwelling on the evils of life is *necessary*—either in the sense that it can't be avoided or in the sense that it is needed for the performance of our duties and for preventing our sense of the reality of those evils from becoming speculative and dim. I say, though, that any dwelling on the evils of life that isn't necessary in one of those two ways is at best a useless expenditure of nervous energy. But if it is often a waste of strength to dwell on the •evils of life, it is worse than waste to dwell habitually on its •meannesses and •basenesses. [See note on 'evil' on page 17.] One has to be aware of them; but living with active thoughts of them makes it almost impossible to maintain in

oneself a high tone of mind. The imagination and feelings become tuned to a lower pitch; the daily objects and incidents of life come to be associated in one's mind with degrading rather than elevating things, and these associations give their colour to one's thoughts, just as associations of sensuality colour the thoughts of those who indulge freely in that sort of contemplation. Men have often experienced having their imaginations corrupted by one class of ideas, and I think they must have felt with the same kind of pain how mean associations can take the poetry out of the things that are most full of poetry—for example when a beautiful tune that had been associated with highly poetical words is heard sung with trivial and vulgar ones. I am saying all this just to illustrate the principle that in the management of the imagination literal truth of facts is not the only thing to be considered. Truth is the province of reason, and it is by the development of reason that one provides for truth's being *always known and often thought of*—as often as is required by duty and the circumstances of human life. But when reason is strongly developed, the imagination may safely go its own way, doing its best to make life pleasant and lovely inside the castle, trusting to the fortifications that reason has built and still maintains around the perimeter.

On these principles it seems to me that it is legitimate and philosophically defensible to allow ourselves a hope concerning how the universe is governed and the destiny of man after death, while we recognize as a clear truth that we have no basis for anything more than a hope. The beneficial effect of such a hope is far from trifling. It makes life and human nature a far greater thing to the feelings, and gives greater strength as well as greater solemnity to all the thoughts and feelings that are awakened in us by our fellow-creatures and by mankind in general. It reduces our sense of nature's irony—that painful feeling we have when we see the exertions and sacrifices of a person's life culminating in the formation of a wise and noble mind, only to disappear from the world right at the time when the world seems about to begin reaping the benefit of it. [In the next sentence, 'art' is used first in something like our present sense of it, and then in the sense of 'skill or technique or set of rules'. Mill may have thought of this as a mild pun.] The old truth that *life is short and art is long* is one of the most discouraging things about

our condition; this hope for an after-life admits the possibility that the art used in improving and beautifying the soul itself may do some good in some other life, even when it has seemed useless for this life. But the benefit consists less in the presence of any specific hope than in the enlargement of the general scale of the feelings; the loftier aspirations won't be so much inhibited and cut down to size by a sense of the insignificance of human life—by the disastrous feeling of 'not worthwhile because time is so short'. It is obvious that there will be a great gain—I needn't go into the details—from the increased inducement to work on improving one's character right up to the end of life.

There's another use of imagination—a most important one—that until now has been kept up principally by means of religious belief, and that is infinitely precious to mankind; so much so that human excellence greatly depends on how well this has been provided for. It involves the imagination's familiarity with the conception of a *morally perfect being*, and the habit of taking the approval of such a being as the norm or standard to by which to judge our characters and guide our actions. This idealization of our standard of excellence in a *person* is quite possible even if the person is thought of as merely imaginary. But religion, ever since the birth of Christianity, has taught that our highest conceptions of combined wisdom and goodness exist in actual reality in a living being who has his eyes on us and cares for our good. Through its darkest and most corrupt periods, Christianity has still raised this torch on high—has kept this object of veneration and imitation before the eyes of man. Admittedly the image of perfection has been most *imperfect*, and in many respects it has had a perverting and corrupting tendency, not only from the low moral ideas of the times, but also from the mass of moral contradictions that the deluded worshipper was compelled to swallow because of the supposed necessity of

what Mill wrote next: complimenting the Good Principle with absolute power.

he may have meant: rounding out (completing) his account of the source of goodness by crediting it with absolute power.

or perhaps he meant: paying to the source of goodness the compliment of crediting it with absolute power.

[Two comments. (1) In Mill's day the spelling 'complimenting' could be used in the manner of the first suggestion, for which we would now use 'complementing'. (2) For several centuries up to Mill's time, 'principle' very often meant 'source'.] But human beings are capable of overlooking any amount of either moral or intellectual contradiction, and accepting propositions that are utterly inconsistent with one another, not only without being shocked by the contradiction but even allowing each of the contradictory beliefs to produce at least a part of its natural consequences in the mind. (This is one of the most universal as well as of the most surprising characteristics of human nature, and one of the most vivid proofs of the low level to which the reason of mankind in general has so far risen.) Pious men and women have gone on ascribing to God particular acts and a general course of will and conduct that are incompatible with even the most ordinary and limited conception of moral goodness; and many important parts of their own ideas of morality have been totally warped and distorted; and despite all this they have gone on conceiving their God as clothed with all the attributes of the highest ideal goodness that they have been psychologically able to conceive, and have had their own aspirations towards goodness stimulated and encouraged by that conception. And it's beyond question that a complete belief in the real existence of a Being who exemplifies our own best ideas of perfection, and in our being in the hands of that Being as the ruler of the universe, gives to these feelings a force that they can't get from reference to a merely *ideal* conception.

This particular advantage can't be had by those who take a rational view of what and how much evidence there is for the existence and attributes of the creator. On the other hand, those people aren't burdened with the moral contradictions that infect every form of religion that aims at giving a moral justification for how the universe is governed. This enables them to form a much truer and more consistent conception of ideal goodness than is possible for anyone who thinks he has to find ideal goodness in an omnipotent ruler of the world. Once the power of the creator is recognized as limited, there is nothing to disprove the supposition that his goodness is complete, and that the **ideally** perfect character—one that we would like to model ourselves on,

and to whom we look for approval when we act well—may have a **real** existence in a Being to whom we owe all such good as we enjoy.

Above all, the most valuable part of the effect on the character that Christianity has produced by presenting a divine person as a standard of excellence and a model for imitation •is available even to the absolute unbeliever and •can never more be lost to humanity. For it is Christ, rather than God, whom Christianity has presented to believers as the pattern of perfection for humanity. It is the God incarnate [= ‘God made flesh’, referring to the man Jesus of Nazareth], more than the God of the Jews or the God of Nature, who upon being idealized has taken hold of the modern mind to such a good effect. Whatever else may be taken away from us by rational criticism, Christ is still left; a unique figure, unlike all his precursors and at least as much unlike all his followers, even those who had the direct benefit of his personal teaching. It’s no use saying that Christ as exhibited in the Gospels isn’t historical, and that we don’t know how much of what is admirable •in his reported doings and sayings• has been added by the tradition of his followers. The tradition of followers suffices to insert any number of marvels, and may have inserted all the ‘miracles’ Christ is reported to have performed. But who among his disciples or among their pupils was capable of inventing the sayings ascribed to Jesus, or of imagining the life and character revealed in the Gospels? Certainly not the fishermen of Galilee; equally certainly not St. Paul, whose character and idiosyncrasies were of a totally different sort; still less the early Christian writers, whose most obvious characteristic is that all the good that was in them was derived, as they always said it was, from the higher source. What *could* be inserted into the story by a disciple we can see in the mystical parts of the Gospel of St. John—ideas borrowed from Philo and the Alexandrian Platonists, and put into the mouth of Christ in long speeches about himself. The other Gospels contain not the slightest hint of these speeches, though they are claimed to have been delivered on occasions of the deepest interest, with all Christ’s principal followers present; most prominently at the

last supper. The East was full of men who *could* have stolen any quantity of this poor stuff, as the many Oriental sects of Gnostics afterwards *did*. But about the life and sayings of Jesus there is a stamp of personal originality, combined with profound insight, that must place the Prophet of Nazareth, even in the judgment of people who don’t think he was divinely inspired, in the very first rank of the men of sublime genius of whom our species can boast. (You won’t think so if you are looking for scientific precision in his utterances; but it’s not sensible to look for *that* when something very different was being aimed at.) When this pre-eminent genius is combined with the qualities of probably the greatest moral reformer, and martyr to that mission, who ever existed on earth, religion can’t be said to have made a bad choice in picking on this man as the ideal representative and guide of humanity. And it wouldn’t be easy—even now, even for an unbeliever—to find a better translation of the rule of virtue from the abstract into the concrete, •from the ideal into the real•, than to try to live in such a way that Christ would approve our life. And then there is this fact:

In the thoughts of the rational sceptic it remains a possibility that Christ actually was what he supposed himself to be—a *man* charged with a special, explicit and unique commission from God to lead mankind to truth and virtue.²

When we bear that in mind, we may well conclude that •after rational criticism has done its utmost against the evidence for religion, the influences of religion on the character that will remain—the ones that survive the critical attack—are well worth preserving, and that •what they lack in direct strength as compared with those of a firmer belief is more than made up for by the greater truth and rightness of the morality they sanction.

[In this paragraph the word ‘impressions’ presumably stands for the imaginings, hopes, aspirations and strivings that Mill has been talking about.] Impressions such as these, though not in themselves amounting to what can properly be called a ‘religion’, seem to me excellently fitted to aid and strengthen the real though purely human religion that sometimes calls itself the ‘Religion of Humanity’ and sometimes the ‘Religion of Duty’. [Mill presents the ‘religion of humanity’ in the closing

² ‘What about his supposing himself to be God?’, you may ask. He didn’t. He never made the smallest claim to divinity, and would probably have thought such a claim to be as blasphemous as it seemed to the men who condemned him.

pages of his essay *The Usefulness of Religion*; and a knowledge of that seems to be presupposed in what he says in this present essay.] This religion offers inducements for developing a religious devotion to the welfare of our fellow-creatures as •an obligatory limit to every selfish aim, and •an end for the direct promotion of which no sacrifice can be too great; and the impressions I have been describing add to this the feeling that in making devotion-to-the-welfare-of-our-fellow-creatures the rule of our life, we may be co-operating with the unseen Being to whom we owe everything that is enjoyable in life. This form of religious idea allows one to have the feeling that one is *helping* God—repaying him for the good he has given, by a voluntary co-operation •that he *needs* and •that may enable him to get a little nearer to the fulfillment of his purposes. (This elevated feeling isn't possible for those who believe in the *omnipotence* of the source of good in the universe!) The conditions of human existence are highly favourable to the growth of such a feeling, and here is why:

There is a battle constantly going on between the powers of good and those of evil. Even the humblest human creature

can take *some* part in this battle, and even the smallest help to the right side has value in promoting the very slow progress by which good is gradually gaining ground from evil. That progress is often so slow as to be almost undetectable; but when we compare the state of the battle at two times that are far apart, the progress of good over evil becomes visible to us, and that gives us a promise that the good will win the final victory—quite certainly, though not very soon.

The most animating and invigorating thought that can inspire a human creature is the thought of doing something, on even the humblest scale if nothing more is within reach, towards bringing this final victory a little nearer. And I am perfectly sure that it—the religion of humanity—is destined to be the religion of the future, whether or not supernatural sanctions are brought into it. But it appears to me that supernatural hopes, of the sort that rational scepticism (as I have called it) is willing to endorse, may still contribute quite a lot towards giving this religion the ascendancy it ought to have over the human mind.