

In what did he fail, the reader asks, what step should he have taken, what was the cause of his failure? The answer does not lie on the surface, but may be gathered from the general tenor of the poem, and is confirmed by Browning's utterances in other works.

In the first place, Sordello's life was not a complete failure. It was a constant progress towards higher ideas, towards a closer grasp of truth and reality, a better plan of life. Experience was not thrown away on him. With the ideas expressed in Sordello's final soliloquy—as to his past life, the aim of man, the relativity of good and evil, and so on, Browning would entirely agree. The final action of rejecting the imperial badge, he would approve. That which was lacking was a sufficient motive for that action and a sufficient object to have served Sordello as the goal of life.

Now, the truth attained by Sordello in this final debate, is truth as may be attained by the unaided human spirit. But it is inadequate. Were it not so, religion would be superfluous and revelation needless—which is by no means Browning's opinion. It will be noted that among the influences that work upon Sordello, there is no reference* to religion, although it must, inevitably, be considered, if only to be rejected in framing a philosophy of life. It is indeed there, in Christianity, that Browning finds a solution for Sordello's difficulty. The Christian religion furnishes a motive sufficient to bend the proudest spirit to the meanest duty. God is an object for infinite love, and in Christ he appears in a form capable of inspiring infinite love. The man who accepts this manifestation of the divine, and is inspired by this love, has his line of action laid down both by precept and example,—and more important still, has a motive for action, never failing and never insufficient. "Ah, my Sordello," says Browning, taking up the thread of the soliloquy, to insert in Sordello's system this keystone truth:—

* There is a single slight reference which has no bearing on the matter in hand.