

Christian position seems to be, not that right and wrong are in themselves indistinguishable except in the light of revelation, but that if the doctrines of Christianity could be overthrown there would no longer be any motive strong enough to make men do good and eschew evil. Whether Christian teachers render any service to humanity by constantly dwelling upon the moral disabilities of the "natural man" is a matter, we think, of grave doubt. What inducement has a man who is not regarded as in a "state of grace" to put forth any strenuous efforts towards a higher life? If he takes seriously what all his religious friends say, he is hopelessly incapable of performing a single right action; and if, under the circumstances, he does not try, part of the blame, at least, must be laid on the shoulders of those who filled his mind with a pernicious theory. The truth, however, is, that morality and religion have, in the modern civilized world, entered into very close relations, or, as a recent writer has expressed it, into a partnership, the affairs of which it is extremely difficult to wind up. The partners, as the same writer says,* are already quarrelling as to who put the most capital into the business, and a long process will probably have to be gone through before a settlement is obtained. This much must, however, be conceded to religion—that it has elevated morality by introducing into it the conception of the *absolute*. On the other hand, it has embarrassed it with a vast number of arbitrary and superstitious enactments,—new moons and Sabbaths, useless washings and postures, and fastings and abstinences of all kinds,—so that very often poor morality has lain wholly covered up, lost to sight, under all this heap of rubbish.

There are two questions which, strictly speaking, ought to be settled before the subject above-mentioned can profitably be entered on. The first is: Has there been a decline in religious belief? The second is: To what is that decline—presuming it to be a fact—due? To a perception of the falsity of the beliefs, or to some deterioration in the capacity of men for recognizing truth? We presume the fact of the decline must be taken for granted; and if so it is unquestionable that its effect upon morality will depend upon the answer to be given to the second of the above questions. If men are losing their power of perceiving truth, then doubtless morality, which is largely a matter of the perception of relations, will run a very grave risk indeed. If, on the other hand, the rejection of certain beliefs is the result of an improvement in human powers, there is every ground to hope that morality will not permanently languish for want of the faulty conceptions

of a religious nature with which it was formerly associated. It is altogether too much to suppose that a false religion is needed to sustain right action among men; but if a true religion is in danger of disappearing because men can no longer perceive its truth, then indeed the case is as serious as anything we can well imagine. The issue thus presented is, however, one into which we obviously cannot enter. The reader, we are persuaded, will see that here is the true *nodus* of the whole discussion; and according as he works out this problem for himself will he see reason for hope or despondency in regard to the tendencies of the present age. What we all need in order to preserve our equanimity amid the clash of opinions on these momentous topics, is to reflect that as man by searching cannot find out God, so neither can he fathom the ultimate secrets of the universe. Grant that we have, and can have, no certainty of a future life, we at least are certain that our powers and perceptions are wholly—we might almost say infinitely—inadequate to measure the possibilities of existence. There may be—it seems almost presumptuous not to say there are—planes of being altogether above that which we occupy. Certain orders of phenomena are within our ken, but what madness to say that we, creatures but of yesterday, grasp, or have even the rudest conception of the whole scheme of things! There are minds that cannot bear the thought of their own radical impotence to discern all truth, and who turn disdainfully from any question to which the great rule of thumb will not apply; but these are not amongst the most philosophic of mankind. The true philosopher feels not only that we know but little of what is, or may be, knowable by us, but that it would be the height of presumption to suppose ourselves gifted with faculties capable of exhausting all the knowledge of the universe. In the little spheres to which our conscious life is confined personality seems everything; but what of the larger sphere in which we doubtless have a place which we can no more understand than the atoms of our body can understand their relations to the thinking, feeling Man? Do not let us expect too much from our philosophers. They may give us gleams of light from time to time, but we should not resign ourselves slavishly to their authority, or scan their utterances as if in them we should find the words of eternal life—or eternal death. They are but men as we, bearing their own burdens, wrestling with their own doubts, solving their own problems, and perhaps with as painful a sense of the inadequacy of their powers as it is given to any man to feel. "The aids to noble life," as Matthew Arnold has said, "are all within," and he will do best who grapples with his difficulties for himself, and settles his life upon such a basis as to rob mere speculation of all its terrors.

* Vide "Religious Beliefs and Morality," by A. C. Lyall, in *Fortnightly Review* for April, 1878.