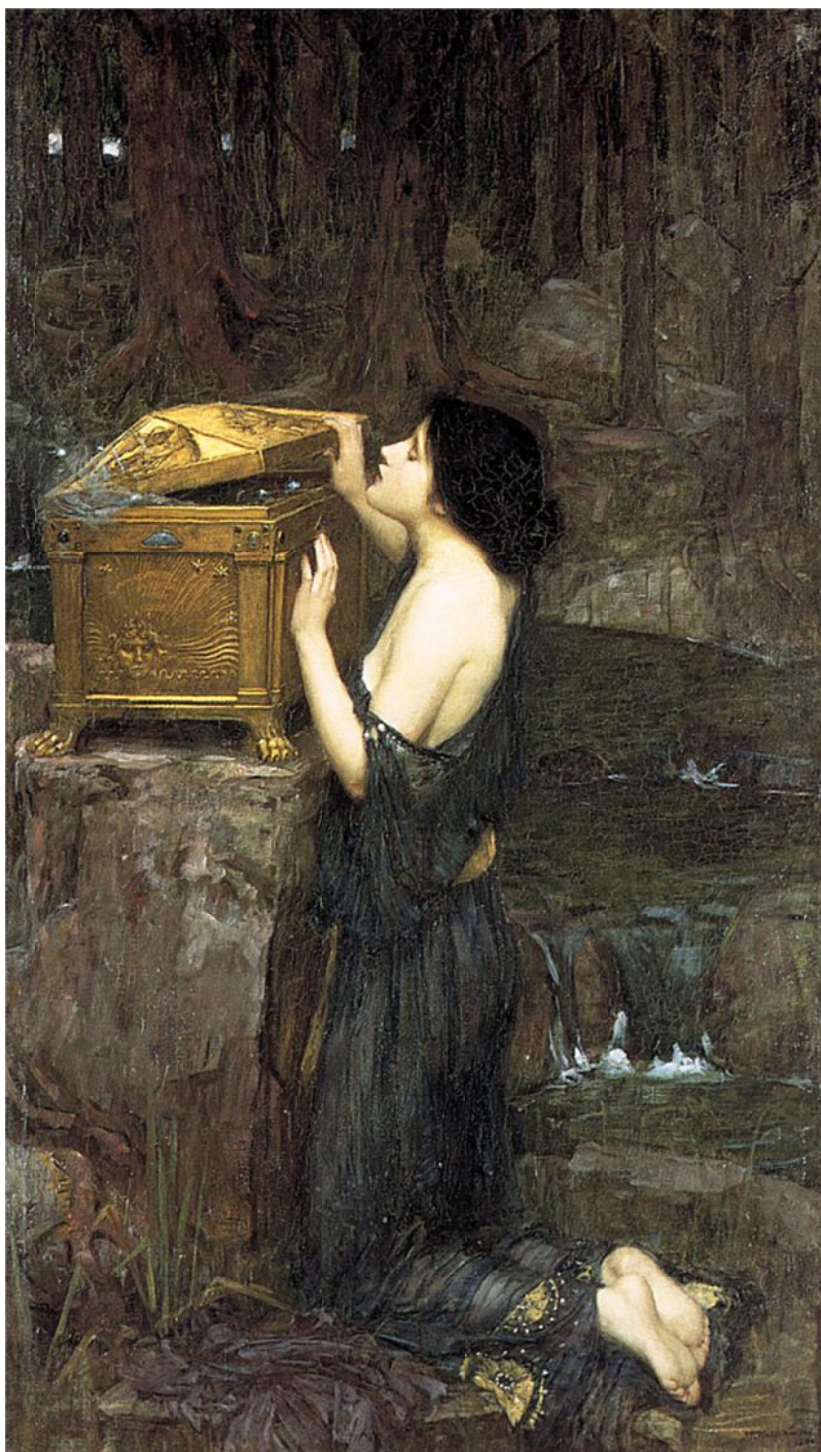


Agnosticism, Atheism, Monism

Typical of an endless list of *-isms*, *e.g.*, evolutionism, existentialism, humanism, hylo-idealism (and other false idealisms), materialism, pessimism, positivism, quietism, rationalism, sacerdotalism, skepticism (whether religious, philosophical or merely "healthy"), etc., etc.



Pandora (1898) John William Waterhouse, Private Collection



Agnosticism is the modern variation on the ancient theme of the Greek philosopher, “All I know is that I know nothing.”¹

Agnosticism is lack of reason (agnoia), nescience rather than ignorance.³

Having found gnosis we cannot turn our backs on it and become agnostics, says a Master of Wisdom.

Agnostic [is] a word claimed by Mr. Huxley to have been coined by him to indicate one who believes nothing which cannot be demonstrated by the senses. The later schools of Agnosticism give more philosophical definitions of the term.²

“Plato and Pythagoras,” says Plutarch, “distribute the soul into two parts, the rational (noetic) and irrational (agnoia); that that part of the soul of man which is rational is eternal; for though it be not God, yet it is the product of an eternal deity, but that part of the soul which is divested of reason (agnoia) dies.” The modern term *Agnostic* comes from *Agnosis*, a cognate word. We wonder why Mr. Huxley, the author of the word, should have connected his great intellect with “the soul divested of reason” which dies? Is it the exaggerated humility of the modern materialist?⁴

We are not Advaites,⁵ but our teaching respecting the one life is identical with that of the Advaites with regard to Parabrahm. And no true philosophically trained Advaites will ever call himself an agnostic, for he knows that he is Parabrahm and identical in every respect with the universal life and soul — the macrocosm is the microcosm and he knows that there is no God apart from himself, no creator as no being. Having found Gnosis we cannot turn our backs on it and become agnostics.⁶

¹ Cf. *Blavatsky Collected Writings*, (*THE THEOSOPHIST AND THE HINDU PANTHEISM*) III p. 358; [& quoting a commonly misinterpreted paraphrase of Plato’s *Apology of Socrates*, 21e. In the following translation by Thomas Taylor, the actual quotation, here italicised, can be seen in the context of Socrates’s train of thoughts:

“O Athenians . . . this man appeared to me to be wise in the opinion of many other men, and especially in his own, but . . . he was not so. And afterwards I endeavoured to show him that he fancied himself to be wise, but was not. Hence I became odious to him, and also to many others that were present. Departing, therefore, I reasoned with myself that I was wiser than this man. For it appears that neither of us knows any thing beautiful or good: but he indeed not knowing, thinks that he knows something; but I, as *I do not know any thing, neither do I think that I know*. Hence in this trifling particular I appear to be wiser than him, because I do not think that I know things which I do not know.” *Apology*, 21d-e.]

² *Theosophical Glossary*: Agnostic

³ Cf. *Secret Doctrine*, I p. 7

⁴ *Key to Theosophy*, § VI (THEOSOPHICAL TEACHINGS AS TO NATURE AND MAN) p. 95 *fn.*

⁵ [Cf. “The One secondless Existence is ADVAITA, ‘Without a Second,’ and all the rest is *Māyā*, teaches the Advaita philosophy.” *Secret Doctrine*, I p. 54 *fn.* Non-dualistic Advaita is one of three Indian schools of philosophy “founded by Sankarāchārya, the greatest of the historical Brahman sages. The two other schools are the Dvaita (dualistic) and the Visishtadvaita; all the three call themselves Vedāntic.” *Theosophical Glossary*: Advaita.]

⁶ *Mahatma Letter* 10 (88) pp. 53-54; 3rd Combined ed.



The strong Agnostic assumes the negative position of knowing nothing but phenomena and refuses to believe in anything else.

Far be it from me to discourage one so willing as yourself by setting up impossible barriers to your progress. We never whine over the inevitable but try to make the best of the worst. And though we neither push nor draw into the mysterious domain of occult nature those who are unwilling; never shrink from expressing our opinions freely and fearlessly, yet we are ever as ready to assist those who come to us; even to — *agnostics* who assume the negative position of “*knowing nothing but phenomena and refuse to believe in anything else.*”⁷

The weak Agnostic may be ready to entertain new ideas, but the light of Truth will always blind the religious bigot.

We prefer immeasurably more in our [Theosophical] Society Agnostics, and even rank Atheists, to bigots of whatever religion. An Agnostic’s mind is ever opened to the truth; whereas the latter blinds the bigot like the sun does an owl. The best — *i.e.*, the most truth-loving, philanthropic, and honest — of our Fellows were, and are, Agnostics and Atheists (disbelievers in a *personal* God). But there are no *free-thinking* boys and girls, and generally early training will leave its mark behind in the shape of a cramped and distorted mind. A proper and sane system of education should produce the most vigorous and liberal mind, strictly trained in logical and accurate thought, and not in blind faith. How can you ever expect good results, while you pervert the reasoning faculty of your children by bidding them believe in the miracles of the Bible on Sunday, while for the six other days of the week you teach them that such things are scientifically impossible?⁸

The most science can do is to assume the attitude of agnosticism and to maintain it.⁹

With the exception of psychism, every other –ism is a shade of materialism, a science without a soul.

Everyone sees that metaphysics instead of being a science of first principles has now broken up into a number of more or less materialistic schools of every shade and colour, from Schopenhauer’s pessimism down to agnosticism, monism, idealism, hylo-idealism, and every “ism” with the exception of psychism — not to speak of true psychology. What Mr. Huxley said of Positivism, namely that it was Roman Catholicism *minus* Christianity, ought to be paraphrased and applied to our modern psychologi-

⁷ *Mahatma Letter* 4 (5) pp. 16-17; 3rd Combined ed.

⁸ *Key to Theosophy*, § XIII (ON THE MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT THE THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY) p. 270

⁹ *Secret Doctrine*, I p. 520



cal philosophy. It is psychology, *minus* soul; psyche being dragged down to mere sensation; a solar system *minus* a sun; *Hamlet* with the Prince of Denmark not entirely cast out of the play, but in some vague way suspected of being probably somewhere behind the scenes.¹⁰

Ancient pagans held far deeper views on the First Cause and its emanations than modern philosophers, whether Agnostics, Materialists or Christians.

We believe in an ever unknowable Principle, because blind aberration alone can make one maintain that the Universe, thinking man, and all the marvels contained even in the world of matter, could have grown without some *intelligent powers* to bring about the extraordinarily wise arrangement of all its parts. Nature may err, and often does, in its details and the external manifestations of its materials, never in its inner causes and results. Ancient pagans held on this question far more philosophical views than modern philosophers, whether Agnostics, Materialists or Christians; and no pagan writer has ever yet advanced the proposition that cruelty and mercy are not finite feelings, and can therefore be made the attributes of an *infinite* god. Their gods, therefore, were all finite.¹¹

Agnostics have to choose between the Secret Doctrine of the East, and the materialistic Darwinian and Biblical Doctrines of the West.

There are things, perhaps, that may have escaped the *far-seeing* — but not *all-seeing* — eyes of our modern naturalists; yet it is Nature herself who undertakes to furnish the missing links. Agnostic speculative thinkers have to choose between the version given by the Secret Doctrine of the East, and the hopelessly materialistic Darwinian and Biblical accounts of the origin of man; between no soul and no spiritual evolution, and the Occult doctrine which repudiates “special creation” and the “Evolutionist” Anthropogenesis equally.¹²

Agnosticism, Positivism, and Materialism are the worst enemies of Theosophy and Mysticism.

It is a gross injustice and untruth to assert, as our anonymous correspondent does, that “the freethinkers are notoriously unholy in their lives.” Some of the noblest characters, as well as deepest thinkers of the day, adorn the ranks of Agnosticism, Positivism and Materialism. The latter are the worst enemies of Theosophy and Mysticism; but this is no reason why strict justice should not be done unto them. Colonel Ingersoll, a rank materialist, and the leader of free

¹⁰ Blavatsky *Collected Writings*, (PSYCHOLOGY, THE SCIENCE OF THE SOUL) VIII p. 334

¹¹ *Key to Theosophy*, § XI (ON THE MYSTERIES OF RE-INCARNATION) p. 221

¹² *Secret Doctrine*, II p. 157



thought in America, is recognised, even by his enemies, as an ideal husband, father, friend and citizen, one of the noblest characters that grace the United States. Count Tolstoy is a freethinker who has long parted with the orthodox Church, yet his whole life is an exemplar of Christ-like altruism and self-sacrifice. Would to goodness every “Christian” should take those two “*infidels*” as his models in private and public life. The munificence of many freethinking philanthropists stands out in startling contrast with the apathy of the monied dignitaries of the Church. . . . “What can you offer to the dying woman who fears to tread alone the DARK UNKNOWN?” we are asked. Our Christian critic here frankly confesses

(a) that Christian dogmas have only developed *fear* of death, and

(b) the *agnosticism* of the *orthodox believer* in Christian theology as to the future *post-mortem* state.

It is, indeed, difficult to appreciate the peculiar type of bliss which orthodoxy offers its believers in — damnation.¹³

Much of current agnostic speculation on the existence of the First Cause is little better than veiled Materialism.

Outside of initiation, the ideals of contemporary religious thought must always have their wings clipped and remain unable to soar higher; for idealistic as well as realistic thinkers, and even free-thinkers, are but the outcome and the natural product of their respective environments and periods. The ideals of both are only the necessary results of their temperaments, and the outcome of that phase of intellectual progress to which a nation, in its collectivity, has attained. Hence, as already remarked, the highest flights of modern (Western) metaphysics have fallen far short of the truth. Much of current agnostic speculation on the existence of the “First Cause” is little better than veiled materialism — the terminology alone being different. Even so great a thinker as Mr. Herbert Spencer speaks of the “Unknowable” occasionally in terms that demonstrate the lethal influence of materialistic thought, which, like the deadly Sirocco, has withered and blighted all current ontological speculation.¹⁴

¹³ *Blavatsky Collected Writings*, (ANSWERS TO QUERIES) VIII, p. 298

¹⁴ *Ibid.* I pp. 326-27



Between Agnostics and Catholics, the age revels at a debauch of phenomena.

This is the moment to guide the recurrent impulse which must soon come, and which will push the age toward extreme atheism, or drag it back to extreme sacerdotalism, if it is not led to the primitive and soul-satisfying philosophy of the Āryans. He who observes what is going on today, on the one hand among the Catholics, who are breeding miracles as fast as the white ants do their young, on the other, among the free thinkers, who are converting by masses into agnostics — will see the drift of things. The age is revelling at a debauch of phenomena.¹⁵

Brutal but frank Materialism is more honest than Janus-faced agnosticism in our days.

. . . *Monism* is the Pecksniff¹⁶ of modern philosophy, turning a pharisaical face to psychology and idealism, and its natural face of a Roman Augur, swelling his cheek with his tongue — to Materialism. The Monists are worse than the Materialists; because, while looking at the Universe and psycho-spiritual man from the same negative stand-point, the latter put their case far less plausibly than sceptics of Mr. Tyndall's or even Mr. Huxley's stamp.¹⁷ . . . in this age of Materialism, Agnosticism, Evolutionism, and false Idealism, there is not a system, however intellectually expounded, that can stand on its own legs, or fail to be criticized by an exponent from another school of thought as materialistic as itself.¹⁸

Monism is no better than a mask concealing the void of final annihilation, even of consciousness.¹⁹

And why cannot a *Monist* be a Theosophist? And why must Theosophy at least involve *dualism*? Theosophy teaches a far stricter and more far-reaching *Monism* than does Secularism. The Monism of the latter may be described as materialistic and summed up in the words, "Blind Force and Blind Matter ultimating in Thought." But this . . . is *bastard* Monism. The Monism of Theosophy is truly philosophical. We conceive of the universe as one in essence and origin. And though we speak of Spirit and Matter as its two poles, yet we state emphatically that they can only be considered as distinct from the standpoint of human, *māyāvic* (*i.e.*, illusory) consciousness.²⁰

¹⁵ *Mahatma Letter* (First Letter of K.H. to A.O. Hume), 3rd Combined ed., Appendix I, p. 475

¹⁶ [Or Pecksniffian, an extreme hypocrite, after Seth Pecksniff, a character in Charles Dickens "Martin Chuzzlewit."]

¹⁷ *Secret Doctrine*, I p. 528 *fn.* [on modern materialism being *agnosticism*.]

¹⁸ *Blavatsky Collected Writings*, (THE BABEL OF MODERN THOUGHT – II) XIII p. 95

¹⁹ *Cf. Secret Doctrine*, I p. 620 *fn.*

²⁰ *Blavatsky Collected Writings*, (FORCE OF PREJUDICE) XI p. 336



The Occultist would be guilty of treason, were he to demolish the old gods before he could replace them with the eternal verities that they represent.

However much the Agnostics of our age may find themselves in the mental attitude demanded by Modern Science, people are always apt to cling to their old hobbies so long as the remembrance of them lasts. They are like the Emperor Julian — called the Apostate, because he loved truth too well to accept aught else — who, though in his last Theophany he beheld his beloved Gods as pale, worn-out, and hardly discernible shadows, nevertheless clung to them. Let, then, the world cling to its Gods, to whatever plane or realm they may belong. The true Occultist would be guilty of high treason to mankind, were he to break forever the old deities before he could replace them with the whole and unadulterated truth — and this he cannot do as yet.²¹

Atheists and Agnostics are thinly attracted to “godless” Buddhism, or to our highly philosophical and logical agnosticism.

The atheist as the agnostic will protest, having logic as well as reason on his side. He will say: Why not accord to others that which you claim for yourselves? However weighty our arguments and *gentle* our persuasion, no theist would fail to feel hurt were we to try our hand in persuading him to throw away his theism and accept the religion or philosophy “which *we* consider to be true” — namely, “godless” Buddhism, or highly philosophical and logical agnosticism.²²

The “moral standard of the Theosophists” is TRUTH and this covers all.

. . . Whether those who believe in a personal, or anthropomorphic deity, or those who call themselves Agnostics, or Atheists, or Buddhists or even Materialists, once that they have joined the Theosophical Society, they are bound to present to the world a far higher “standard of morality” than that which is developed merely through fear of hell or any other future punishment. The love of virtue for its own sake does not seem to enter in, or agitate the centres of our correspondent’s reflective faculties.²³

No sincere seeker of Truth can ever be found among the blind believers in the “Divine Word.”

It may sound odd and paradoxical, but it is true to say that, hitherto, the most apt workers in practical theosophy, its most devoted members, were those recruited from the ranks of agnostics and even of materialists. No genuine, no sincere searcher after truth can ever be found among the *blind* believers in

²¹ *Blavatsky Collected Writings*, (THE DANGERS OF PRACTICAL MAGIC) XIV p. 64

²² *Ibid.* (SOME WISE WORDS FROM A WISE MAN) IV, p. 495; [on theism or belief in a god.]

²³ *Ibid.* (PLEA FOR A PERSONAL GOD) V, p. 320; [answering to a rather impertinent question, No. 5, of an inquisitive correspondent: “What is the *moral standard* of the *Theosophists*? Is it utility? What *sanction* of morality do they acknowledge? These can be easily found out on the theory of a personal God.”]



the “Divine Word,” let the latter be claimed to come from Allāh, Brahmā or Jehovah, or their respective *Korān*, *Purāna* and *Bible*. For:

“Faith is not *reason’s* labour, but repose.”

He who believes his own religion on faith, will regard that of every other man as a lie, and hate it on that same faith. Moreover, unless it fetters reason and entirely blinds our perceptions of anything outside our own particular faith, the latter is no faith at all, but a temporary belief, the delusion we labour under, at some particular time of life. Moreover, “faith without principles is but a flattering phrase for wilful positiveness or fanatical bodily sensations,” in Coleridge’s clever definition.²⁴

Our doctrine knows no compromises. It either affirms or denies, for it never teaches but that which it knows to be the truth.

Neither our philosophy nor ourselves believe in a God . . . Our philosophy falls under the definition of Hobbes. It is pre-eminently the science of effects by their causes and of causes by their effects, and since it is also the science of things deduced from first principle, as Bacon defines it, before we admit any such principle we must know it, and have no right to admit even its possibility. . . .

Nevertheless we deny most emphatically the position of agnosticism in this direction, and as regards the solar system. Our doctrine knows no compromises. It either affirms or denies, for it never teaches but that which it knows to be the truth. Therefore, we deny God both as philosophers and as Buddhists.²⁵



²⁴ *Blavatsky Collected Writings*, (IS THEOSOPHY A RELIGION?) X p. 160; [& quoting Edward Young; cf. *Mead’s Quotations*, p. 139.]

²⁵ *Mahatma Letter* 10 (88) p. 52; 3rd Combined ed.

