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FROM AGNOSTICISM TO THEISM

CHARLES F. DOLE

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FROM AGNOSTICISM
TO THEISM

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The winds that o'er my ocean run
Reach through all worlds beyond the sun ;
Through life and death, through fate, through time,
Grand breaths of God they sweep sublime.

Eternal trades, they cannot veer,
And, blowing, teach us how to steer ;
And well for him whose joy, whose care,
Is but to keep before them fair.

O thou, God's mariner, heart of mine !
Spread canvas to the airs divine !
Spread sail ! and let thy Fortune be
Forgotten in thy Destiny.

— *D. A. Wasson.*

FROM AGNOSTICISM TO THEISM

BY

CHARLES F. DOLE

Author of "The Coming People," "The Theology of Civilization,"
"The Religion of a Gentleman," etc.



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From Agnosticism to Theism

BY CHARLES F. DOLE

I HAVE no desire to make out an argument for Theism, least of all things a defense of it. I abhor special pleading, and have no confidence in any cause which requires it. I merely propose to state, as simply and briefly as possible, the considerations which urge my mind to a theistic view of the universe, or, in other words, to a spiritual philosophy of life. Incidentally, I shall of course presently explain in what sense I can use these easily misunderstood words, "theistic" and "spiritual."

Let me confess at the outset how strong my intellectual sympathy is with the agnostic position, as represented, for example, by such a mind as the late Mr. Huxley. In fact, the way of agnosticism has proved

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to my mind an admirable and necessary mode of approach to the philosophical problems of human existence. Thus, if I have ever had any postulates of thought, they have been substantially the following: that all human opinions are fallible; that they are therefore fit subjects of inquiry, correction, and further development; that the open mind, free of bias, prejudice, and egotism, is the essential condition of discovering truth; that whatever is true can bear the most searching examination; that the realm of knowledge is democratic, by which I mean that there can be no facts of importance which any fair-minded man may not verify, if he will, for himself; that no one has any right to profess to believe anything which one's own mind has not apprehended; that there are various subjects of speculation toward which the only honest attitude for many minds, at least for the present, is of him who says, frankly, "I do not know." Is not this the characteristic temper of the "Agnostic"?

Let me add that, although reared in an "Evangelical" denomination, my mind has always revolted against the word "supernatural" and the implications which usually go with it. I never could easily believe that, besides Nature and natural processes, there was another world where processes were not natural. Thus

the biblical stories of miracles were an unassimilable burden, till I caught the clue of the great procession of the wonder-stories and psychic phenomena which mark the history of all peoples, and which we are studying to-day at first hand. This sort of study — for instance, Professor William James' new work on "The Varieties of Religious Experience" — leaves me still agnostic as regards any assumed supernatural existence.

Moreover, I cannot believe in God as many conceive of God. They seem to have three different facts in view : There is the self ; there is Nature ; of these two facts they are sure ; and besides, there is God, of whom they are not as sure as they would like to be. As an old Doctor of Divinity once said to me, looking up to the stars at night, "Ah! if we only were sure that there is a God." Here was the conception of a Being, to be demonstrated, perhaps some time to be seen, inclosed in a form, sitting on a throne ; a Being now here, and again somewhere else, — a third something in addition to the universe. I suspect that it was with reference to such a God, a supernatural existence, that Mr. Huxley was agnostic. I find myself equally agnostic about this supernatural God. I cannot disprove the hypothesis that such a God is. But my mind does not find such a God in the facts which

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present themselves. Besides Nature (taking this word in its largest meaning), I cannot discover the evidence of another Being.

Once more, I have to be an agnostic about a future life. Who really knows that he shall have continued personal existence for ever, as he knows that he loves his wife and children? Here is a subject toward which the attitude of modesty, rather than dogmatism, seems to be fitting. While I go heartily with those who hold to the idea of immortality as a valid and rational hope, I cannot feel that this hope is in any way strengthened by making it an article of a creed. To insist that men shall express a stronger conviction upon any given subject than they sincerely possess, seems to me to be really, not a confession of faith, but of intellectual distrust.

I said that I see no evidence of the existence of a God superimposed upon the universe, or dwelling somewhere in it as an inhabitant, — a sort of a supernatural third Being, besides the self and the world. So far as this variety of theism prevails, it is a survival of polytheism. In place of many supernatural beings, one only remains. Putting aside such an idea of God once for all, I proceed to tell what theistic conception not only satisfies my mind, but appears to tally with all the facts which I know. I may rather say that my

thought of God grows out of the facts, and is indeed the only satisfactory interpretation of the facts which I can find. In short, the name "God" is the highest, and on the whole the most comprehensive name with which to sum up my understanding, and my feeling too, about the universe. When I say that I believe in God, I really mean that the universe does not appear to me as a mere mechanism, but as pulsating with life; I mean that the intellectual aspect of the universe is the most striking fact that I observe; I mean that I find in its higher reaches an ethical order or structure; it seems to me singularly purposive; I find it one in essence, and nowhere chaotic or dualistic; it exhibits to my mind not ill-will or indifference, but, as I am more and more firmly constrained to think, a predominant good-will. Seeking to study all kinds of facts, daring to blink none of them, I am simply compelled by the weight of these facts to call this a Divine Universe, — or, using the highest name which man has ever developed to describe reality, I say that the Universe brings me face to face with God.

This name indeed seems to me of little moment. The profound question is: What kind of a universe do we live in? I am bound to answer that we live in a good, a rational, a spiritual universe. When men

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ask, "Is there a God?" I reply, We live in a universe which possesses every quality and characteristic which rational faith ever attributed to God. When men ask, "Shall we ever see God?" I answer that we can already see and feel and know every fact which constitutes the "divine" nature.

Before I go on to show how the facts impress me to say these things, let me use a simple illustration to explain just what I mean in calling the universe "divine" or "spiritual." I am accustomed, for example, to say that I believe in my friend as a man, or as a person. Can I prove the rather mysterious fact of personality? It is not even easy to define it, thoroughly as I believe in it. I see no person, but only a physical structure. Nevertheless, when I speak my friend's name I sum up the total impression that he makes upon me. It is more than a bodily impression: there is intelligence in it; there is sentiment and affection; there is the exhibition of a good-will toward me. All these subtle things are as hard facts as my friend's bones and muscles, and even more indispensable, if I am to call him by the name of a man. Thus, besides the material aspect of the man, there is another aspect which, for want of any better term, and by a sort of figure, we call the man's spiritual nature, without which he would not be a complete

man at all. In this mode of thought I do not find it of the slightest consequence how this spiritual aspect is brought about, or what relation it bears to the mechanical facts of nerve and brain cells. Choose any theory that you please as to the part which the nerves and the cells and the blood play, the fact which holds over is, that none of these physical processes have the slightest significance except by reason of the intellectual or spiritual results which they work out. An automaton would not be a man even if you could make it act and dress itself. The man thinks and reasons and loves; his consciousness lies at the heart of his manhood. Grant that man should learn to produce life as he once learned to produce fire, so much the more wonderful is this nature which I call spiritual. When I say, then, that the universe impresses me as divine or spiritual, and when I sum up my total impression of it by calling it God, I mean the same thing as when I think of my friend,—not as body alone, but as a spiritual personality,—and when I accordingly sum up my total impression of him by calling him my good friend.

I will now explain more in detail how I get this spiritual impression of the world. Grant that we all begin with what we call the facts of sense. Grant, if you like, that nothing ever comes to us at all except

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through the door of some one of the senses. Go as far as you like in your study of the kinds of phenomena which engage the attention of naturalists like Haeckel. Presently the inevitable question arises : What is this mystery which we call matter ? We are of it ; we play with it ; we handle it and construct with it ; we believe in the reality of its existence ; but its essence eludes us. We might as well call it spirit as matter. Among our speculations about it, the hypothesis that its atoms are each a whirling center of force serves as well as anything else to cover our ignorance of its inner nature.

And now, what is force ? We feel its presence everywhere. We possess a little store of it in ourselves ; we learn to turn it on and apply it. We live as if in a boundless ocean of it. Its tides sweep over and through us. In regard to both matter and force, we appreciate the reality of what Mr. Herbert Spencer has called the "Unknowable." Philosophical theists have always been modest in naming the mysterious source and origin of things. God is another name for the "unknowable" ; God is that which is in and behind matter ; God is that which exercises force ; or, if you prefer, Force is one of his names. In other words, that which is behind all things is revealed in Force, both in me and everywhere around us.

I have willingly enough adopted the term "unknowable." I should as willingly have used the same expression to characterize the inscrutable kernel of personality which we find so difficult to catch and define in the case of the individual man. And yet, however mysterious man's innermost nature is, man is not altogether unknowable. However mysterious the universe is, beyond our finding out, it is not unknowable. If we never know quite what force or matter is, yet our science at every step consists in learning about matter and force.

The truth is, that through the phenomena of both matter and force the unknowable enters the field of knowledge.

Let us see what other qualities or attributes we discover in our universe through which the unknowable makes itself known to us. Thus, for example, in a recent paper before the American Association for the Advancement of Science, its president, Dr. Charles S. Minot, calls attention to the marvelous fact of consciousness. The life of the universe rises into consciousness, and reveals itself in consciousness. In other words, there is something in the nature of things besides machinery; there is life, of which consciousness is the signal and characteristic. Try if you can to imagine a universe without anywhere a ray of

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consciousness. Such a universe might exactly as well be non-existent. It could have no value or significance unless consciousness in some form took cognizance of it.

This brings us to another fact which we predicate about our universe. It is instinct with intelligence. I mean that everything that we see passes over at once into terms of thought. However carelessly we may use the word *law* to describe the processes of Nature, we at least mean to affirm our conviction that this is a rational world, and no chaos. We express the relations of the atoms and molecules by ideal numbers, and the motions of bodies in ideal curves. Our own minds are able to hold the universe in a certain sense in our thought. This is simply because we are ourselves the children of the universal intelligence, and our minds reflect back what we discover.

The universe is also beautiful. This is to say that there is everywhere order, structure, and form. Wherever the play of life is, there is beauty. It is a world that makes patterns and colors and harmonies, and its forces play in rhythm. It is as true to call the universe beautiful as to call it orderly, or to say that it reveals energy. Neither do I forget the facts which we call ugly, without specimens of which I cannot see how we should discover the nature of beauty at all.

But the ugly thing is never wholly ugly. Even the dead things have a beauty of their own, or else they are on their way to pass over into new forms of life. The worst ugliness is a tribute to the reality of beauty.

Can we now, in any legitimate sense, say that the universe is moral? With difficulty, if we set man over against the universe. But our thought of man is not as separate from the universe. We think of man as the child of the universe. Here the life of the world rises toward its fruitage. Elsewhere we have a partial expression of what the universe is. Here, especially at man's best, we have the fullest expression of the nature of the universe. Man is what the universe has made him. Man at his best shows, does he not, the trend of the process of evolution in the universe? Here is matter, force, consciousness, intelligence, beauty, or art; also goodness, justice, love.

This is very obvious to the student of morality upon the large scale of history. Morality begins with the dawn of intelligence; it is in the animals; it exists as a social or co-operative force, without which animal existence could not go on. It is at work among the most childish peoples, who all respond to some sort of appeal to the sense of justice. Show men's intelli-

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gence that a course of action is for the common good, and there sets in a natural tide of obligation pressing them to take that course.

This fact is, of course, most marked in the case of men who are quite normal and mature, and less marked in children and childish peoples. Why must Darwin find out and tell the truth, however little his fellows relish it? Why must Haeckel go to the trouble of puncturing popular superstitions? Why must Wilberforce or Garrison give his life for the sake of freeing an "inferior race" from slavery? Why must men die at the stake or on the cross for an idea? Is all this only another form of egotism? Or is it not rather because the spirit of the universe is in these men's acts? Because, in other words, goodness or good-will is as really a characteristic of the hidden life of the universe as it is of a true and normal man? Whence does justice, love of truth, mercy, sympathy, humanity, idealism come from, unless these spiritual factors are as truly of the nature of the universe as force is, or orderly sequence, or the mathematical relations of a parabola? In short, I find in man — not in one man alone, but in all men at their best — a natural, not supernatural, incarnation; by which I mean, that "the unknowable," or God, is made known in man through all the characteristic qualities of the universe, whose

child man is. The universe is the macrocosm, man is the microcosm.

“An audacious conception,” it may be said. But is there any other conception that tallies with the facts or makes any sense of them? And is not man — I mean, man at his best and most mature development — entirely worthy of this conception? That he can conceive of a universe at all, much more a divine universe; that he can talk of the infinite in space and time; that he can prefer, a thousandfold, honor, or love, or the good of men unborn, to the longest life, is the mark of his birthright. The “unknowable” is in him.

I hear, now, a chorus of the voices of distrust. “Very good,” men say; “if goodness is in man, and idealism, and the love of truth, so are sensualism, cruelty, injustice, and all animalism. Are these ugly things also the characteristics of the universal nature?” This seemed to be a perfectly valid difficulty to men who held the old-fashioned dogma of creationism. I wonder that men find it a difficulty who hold and apply the idea of evolution. To the thoroughgoing evolutionist, evil can never seem the same kind of universal fact as force is, or intelligence, or goodness. Evil, like cold or darkness, is merely incidental and relative. The feebleness of a child, his falls and hurts, his back-

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wardness and waywardness, his lapses, his faults and his stupidities, simply mark the path of a being who must grow before he comes to fuller and ampler health and life. That he is still a child, and not a mature man, means that he needs yet more life, and especially the higher qualities of life. He errs and falls and "sins" by way of the process of life, wherein he finds out for himself what the fullness of the life of the universe is. He never breaks the Golden Rule without learning a new lesson of the fact that the Golden Rule is the way of his happiness.

Is not ill-will, it is asked, a species of force? The ill-will, for example, of a passionate child or an excited mob seems to me like the misdirection of the power in a mill by an ignorant workman, whereby he and others are injured. In the display of passion or hate, in falsehood or cruelty, I see simply the crude force of the animal nature. The man is not yet "all there." The very fact of immorality implies ideals to which the man is climbing.

What shall we say of the man slowly dying of cancer? We say, what some of us have actually witnessed, that the spirit of man never shows itself so sublime, like the child of the universe, as when it lifts itself above disease and pain, which touch only the body, and translates suffering into the terms of a nobler

good-will. Here is God in his highest manifestation, turning what we call evil into good.

The time has gone by when, after having driven the devil out of every corner of the phenomenal universe, and failed to find the touch of malice or hate in earthquakes or tempests, we can be scared by the presence of the devil of dualism in the moral order, and persuaded that "sin" is a kind of power, and not, rather, the want of power, the mark of low human vitality.

I have so far simply followed a common modern habit of speech and used the word "universe." But how does any one know enough to make this magnificent assumption? And what do we mean when we say that we live in a universe? We surely do not know this by the superficial facts of observation. Early men were not unreasonable in thinking that they saw the working of all sorts of discordant forces, if not of numberless deities, in the processes of Nature. Are we perfectly sure even now that the earthquake is a part of the order of the universe? If our idea of a universe is anything like the unity of a machine, we cannot easily adjust the facts of earthquakes and falling stars and death to such a mechanical universe.

The truth is, we do not believe in the universe as a

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piece of mechanism. What we think is that all things in it are related together, that all things work together. The unity is vital; it is the unity of that which moves and grows, as if it corresponded to some idea or purpose. As an actual world, seen only for the moment, it is not a universe. It becomes a universe to us in view of the ideal suggestions that its æonian processes reveal. Suppose, for instance, that the only tenable supposition of the consummation of the universe was its total collapse into darkness and death. I doubt whether in this case we should call it a universe. There are facts, such as man's love of truth, his justice and his disinterestedness, which lie outside of the processes of a world simply grinding itself to extinction. Moreover, the intelligence stands aghast at the conception of a meaningless universe which only exists to run down. I suspect, therefore, that the word "universe" has no valid meaning apart from the conception of an ideal, or intellectual, or spiritual order, which indeed we do not see actually realized as yet, but which the processes of Nature, including the story of man, urge upon our minds. The universe is not merely certain physical processes so correlated as to work aimlessly together, but its vital processes work together for good — that is, for life, and not for death; for the expression of goodness or spiritual personality;

and not for annihilation and chaos. Thus, we see power in our universe, we see intelligence, we see form and beauty, we see also already good-will, or love. We conclude that this, the latest of the characteristics of the universe to develop into manifestation, is the key and clew to the meaning of the whole. In this case, and in this case only, we have a valid universe. As Mr. Browning says,

“ From the first, Power was — I knew.
 Life has made clear to me
 That, strive but for closer view,
 Love were as plain to see.
 When see? When there dawns a day,
 If not on the homely earth,
 Then yonder worlds away,
 When the strange and new have birth,
 And Power comes full in play.”

In short, I cannot use the word *universe* intelligently except as I find in it a spiritual meaning. There might conceivably be a material aggregation, but not a material universe.

This sort of unity seems a bold flight of the intelligence. I for one am filled with wonder whenever I turn to it. It betokens the marvelous nature which man shares, that he should be capable of this thought. But what else or less will satisfy man's thinking?

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That all the phenomena of existence are translatable into the conception of one universe life, present everywhere, of whom Power and Mind and Will and Love are so many names, seems to me vastly more satisfying and rational than anything else which we can say. For example, Haeckel's "Law of Substance" does not seem to me at all adequate to account for the very things which he makes the basis of religion, namely, the good, the true, and the beautiful. What an altogether amazing world it is if we suppose its infinite number of atoms to have combined together of themselves and to have built up the colossal structure of order and beauty; to have made history, and written dramas, and thought out philosophies, and urged men to bear the crosses of sorrow for love's sake! This is a harder and not an easier form of the mystery which theism interprets under the name of the One and Infinite God. Haeckel hardly does justice to the higher possibilities of his monistic philosophy. He therefore seems to me to fail to answer the practical problems of human life as regards what duty is, and why I should die rather than deny it, or what truth is, and why, unless I happen to like it, I ought to follow it. Whereas, if our monism is once seen to be theistic or spiritual rather than mechanical, the intelligence, the goodness, and the truth now appear, not as mere

accidents of being, but as coeval with the star-dust, and universal as force is. I not only feel in my body the pressure of the law of gravitation, but I feel a nobler urgency, namely, the pressure of the universal good-will, commanding all men to live like "sons of God."

Let me reaffirm that I am professing to make no hard and fast demonstration of Theism. I simply state what I find as I study the universe. I am everywhere impressed with the fact that thought is dominant; that material things are made intelligible only in terms of thought; that, begin as often as you will with matter or phenomena, you are presently dealing with ideal, moral, spiritual values; that, so far as the universe bears any fruit or promises any results, the fruit and the results are measured in such spiritual values. I do not find the universe bad or indifferent; I have to call it good. In short, the mystery that is in and behind all things — Mr. Spencer's "Unknowable" — is as truly characterized by goodness as by power or by order. This is essentially a theistic interpretation of the facts of the world.

Grant now that this is at first only a working theory. It is at least as good as the conception of gravitation or of the atomic theory. It seems to tally with the

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facts and relate them together as nothing else does. We try such a working theory and inquire how it works. Will it work? I cannot see why any reasonable agnostic should not go with me here. I observe indeed that most of the agnostics whom I know actually proceed as if this were a good and spiritual universe. They live as a man would live if he believed in goodness as the most substantial reality. They hold virtue, truth, honor, civic duty, and humanity as the most precious things. They measure success not in what they get as animals, but in what they can give and accomplish as men. Thus Haeckel, I take it, does not study and write in order to coin his power into money, but to persuade men's minds, to teach what he holds to be truth, to increase human welfare. This is exactly the kind of conduct which corresponds to the theistic interpretation of the universe. It does not seem to me to correspond with the idea of a chaotic, or bad, or meaningless, or atheistic world. If that of which we are only the children were futile or bad, or if goodness only consisted in an accidental arrangement of nerve-cells, I cannot see why we should recognize any obligation to be good. Where does the obligation arise unless in "the nature of things"? But this obligation is a spiritual force, and, to my thinking, presupposes a spiritual reality. This

is the very fact which men have groped after under the name of "God."

The fact is, the agnostic likes to pique men's curiosity. He enjoys the advantage of living the "good life" just as the most consistent theist would live it. He gives access to the moral or spiritual forces which play through him. He knows that this course works well, and nothing else brings a man satisfaction. "But see," he says, "how little I need the usual religious capital in the way of phrases and formulas and creeds. I get on without any of them." As if a man were ever richer for phrases and creeds! As if the man who believes in truth and goodness were not infinitely more religious than he is who talks of God, but really believes in his own selfishness! The "religious" men have professed too much. It is they who drive the agnostic to say less than he really believes. When unreal men make superstition into a religion, real men are tempted to say, "If this is religion, we want none of it."

We are brought here to the relation of our Theism to Ethics. The highest of all sciences is that which is concerned with the principles of human conduct. The most practical of the arts is the art of living together in society. Grant the theistic interpretation of the universe, and at once all conduct relates itself

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to the vital power at the heart of Nature. To do right is simply to live in unison with the invisible good-will. When man, the child of the universe, expresses goodness or love, he simply expresses the highest characteristic of the Spirit of the Universe, the Father and Mother of us all. Here is the only permanent foundation of a Science of Ethics.

We see at once what human happiness, or welfare, or satisfaction is at its best. It is the unison of the individual life with the life that makes all things. We are happiest when there flows through us most fully the motion of the life which is summed up into the names of Mind, Beauty, Truth, and Good-will. All experience bears out this assertion. The fact is beneath all names, descriptions, and religions. The fact at times transcends bodily weariness or pain. Jesus' beatitudes only partially express it. In his hours of uttermost good-will a man most completely lives. Is not this what we should expect in consonance with the thought of an infinite good-will at the heart of the world? Here is a sort of "experience of religion," free of all visions or swoons or rhapsodies, that lies within the reach of the most prosaic or humble citizen of the universe. Try the recipe and see for yourself. Come out of your selfishness or egotism; enter by any genuine act of good-will into the universal

order of love, and see if the world does not behave as if it were God's world.

A simple parable may serve to help some minds still further to grasp my meaning. Let us suppose some little vein in my hand to be gifted with self-consciousness, after the fashion of a man's consciousness. This bit of a vein goes on to philosophize about its relation to the life of the man in whose body it lives. It has been told that there is somewhere a man, but it cannot see any man. It only sees a little part of my body. It hears about the indefinite expansion of the body in all directions, as the man hears of the stellar system. The mite of a vein begins to doubt whether there is a man. No one has seen him. Where is he? There is nothing but nerves and muscles and organs. There is no unity apparent except a mechanical one. The very fact that I am everywhere in my body, that I, the man, am moral or spiritual, and have no fixed habitation in the heart or any gland, that my unity is of a person and not of a machine, mystifies the poor little agnostic vein.

Suppose now this little vein fairly goes over to the side of outright pessimism. It "guesses" that no one cares for it; it is bruised and wounded at times, and complains that its life is not worth living. And yet all this time, so long as it performs the functions of a

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vein, I am really taking care of it. I suffer in its hurts ; I am glad through it, too, whenever my body tingles with health. The vein does not know when it is well off.

The tiny vein at last proceeds to act out its pessimism about me. It ceases to play its part in the circulation ; it tries to get its nourishment as before, but without doing its work, or pouring my life-blood through it. And now pain sets in, and the nerves bring the story of the little vein's need — the need of more of my life !

Suppose "the gospel" comes to this pessimistic vein ; I mean the fact that my life is in and through my whole body, and that the single condition necessary to enjoy all that I possess is that each nerve and vein and cell shall keep in line with the flow of my life, shall give the circulation full and free play through it, shall pour my life out and share and express it, and not try to get and keep life for itself. The sick vein obeys the message ; it wills to do all that I ask ; it will be hurt and bruised if need be, and it will not complain ; it will die for me if I require. And now this little vein, once restored to its place in unison with my life and my will, has new fullness of life, in which all the other veins in my body partake.

This is only a parable, but it serves to illustrate

what the nature of the relation is which I conceive we, the conscious selves, bear to the universal life. There is a sense in which we can never see or know God at all. There is a profound and practical sense in which we can be sure of the indwelling reality of the life of the universe. It is the sense in which the old writer taught that "whosoever loveth is born of God and knoweth God." For, to love or to show good-will is the highest function of the life of man. To love is to enter into the divine order.

CHARLES F. DOLE.

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