

The Brain and the Bible

By Robert G. Ingersoll

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THIS book, written by a brave and honest man, is filled with brave and honest thoughts. The arguments it presents can not be answered by all the theologians in the world. The author is convinced that the universe is natural, that man is naturally produced, and that there is a necessary relation between character and brain. He sees, and clearly sees, that the theological explanation of phenomena is only a plausible absurdity, and, at best, as great a mystery as it tries to solve. I thank the man who breaks, or tries to break, the chains of custom, creed, and church, and gives in plain, courageous words, the product of his brain.

It is almost impossible to investigate any subject without somewhere touching the religious prejudices of ourselves or others. Most people judge of the truth of a proposition by the consequences upon some preconceived opinion. Certain things they take as truths, and with this little standard in their minds, they measure all other theories. If the new facts do not agree with the standard, they are instantly thrown away, because it is much easier to dispose of the new facts than to reconstruct an entire philosophy.

A few years ago, when men began to say that character could be determined by the form, quantity, and quality of the brain, the religious world rumbled to the conclusion that this fact might destroy what they were pleased to call the free moral agency of man. They admitted that all things in the physical world were links in the infinite chain of causes and effects, and that not one atom of the material universe could, by any possibility, be entirely exempt from the action of every other. They insisted that, if the motions of the spirit -- the thoughts, dreams, and conclusions of the brain, were as necessarily produced as stones and stars, virtue became necessity, and morality the result of forces capable of mathematical calculation. In other words, they insisted that, while there were causes for all material phenomena, a something called the Will sat enthroned above all law, and dominated the phenomena of the intellectual world. They insisted that man was free; that he controlled his brain; that he was responsible for thought as well as action; that the intellectual world of each man was a universe in which his will was king. They were afraid that phrenology might, in some way, interfere with the scheme of salvation, or prevent the eternal torment of some erring soul.

It is insisted that man is free, and is responsible, because he knows right from wrong. But the compass does not navigate the ship; neither does it, in any way, of itself, determine the direction that is taken. When winds and waves are too powerful, the compass is of no importance. The pilot may read it correctly, and may know the direction the ship ought to take, but the compass is not a force. So men, blown by the tempests of passion, may have

the intellectual conviction that they should go another way; but, of what use, of what force, is the conviction?

Thousands of persons have gathered curious statistics for the purpose of showing that man is absolutely dominated by his surroundings. By these statistics is discovered what is called "the law of average." They show that there are about so many suicides in London every year, so many letters misdirected at Paris, so many men uniting themselves in marriage with women older than themselves in Belgium, so many burglaries to one murder in France, or so many persons driven insane by religion in the United States. It is asserted that these facts conclusively show that man is acted upon; that behind each thought, each dream, is the efficient cause, and that the doctrine of moral responsibility has been destroyed by statistics.

But does the fact that about so many crimes are committed on the average, in a given population, or that so many any-things are done, prove that there is no freedom in human action?

Suppose a population of ten thousand persons; and suppose, further, that they are free, and that they have the usual wants of mankind. Is it not unreasonable to say that they would act in some way? They certainly would take measures to obtain food, clothing, and shelter. If these people differed in intellect, in surroundings, in temperament, in strength, it is reasonable to suppose that all would not be equally successful. Under such circumstances, may we not safely infer that, in a little while, if the statistics were properly taken, a law of average would appear? In other words, free people would act; and, being different in mind, body, and circumstances, would not all act exactly alike. All would not be alike acted upon. The deviations from what might be thought wise, or right, would sustain such a relation to time and numbers that they could be expressed by a law of average.

If this is true, the law of average does not establish necessity.

But, in my supposed case, the people, after all, are not free. They have wants. They are under the necessity of feeding, clothing, and sheltering themselves. To the extent of their actual wants, they are not free. Every limitation is a master. Every finite being is a prisoner, and no man has ever yet looked above or beyond the prison walls. Our highest conception of liberty is to be free from the dictation of fellow prisoners.

To the extent that we have wants, we are not free. To the extent that we do not have wants, we do not act.

If we are responsible for our thoughts, we ought not only to know how they are formed, but we ought to form them. If we are the masters of our own minds, we ought to be able to tell what we are going to think at any future time. Evidently, the food of thought -- its very warp and woof -- is furnished through the medium of the senses. If we open our eyes, we cannot help seeing. If we do not stop our ears, we cannot help hearing. If anything touches us, we feel it. The heart beats in spite of us. The lungs supply

themselves with air without our knowledge. The blood pursues its old accustomed rounds, and all our senses act without our leave. As the heart beats, so the brain thinks. The will is not its king. As the blood flows, as the lungs expand, as the eyes see, as the ears hear, as the flesh is sensitive to touch, so the brain thinks.

I had a dream, in which I debated a question with a friend. I thought to myself: "This is a dream, and yet I can not tell what my opponent is going to say. Yet, if it is a dream, I am doing the thinking for both sides, and therefore ought to know in advance what my friend will urge." But, in a dream, there is some one who seems to talk to us. Our own brain tells us news, and presents an unexpected thought. Is it not possible that each brain is a field where all the senses sow the seeds of thought? Some of these fields are mostly barren, poor and hard, producing only worthless weeds; and some grow sturdy oaks and stately palms; and some are like the tropic world, where plants and trees and vines seem royal children of the soil and sun.

Nothing seems more certain than that the capacity of a human being depends, other things being equal, upon the amount, form, and quality of his brain. We also know that health, disposition, temperament, occupation, food, surroundings, ancestors, quality, form, and texture of the brain, determine what we call character. Man is collectively and individually, what his surroundings have made him. Nations differ from each other as greatly as individuals in the same nation. Nations depend upon soil, climate, geographical position, and countless other facts. Shakespeare would have been impossible without the climate of England. There is a direct relation between Hamlet and the Gulf Stream. Dr. Draper has shown that the great desert of Sahara made negroes possible in Africa. If the Caribbean Sea had been a desert, negroes might have been produced in America.

Are the effects of climate upon man necessary effects? Is it possible for man to escape them? Is he responsible for what he does as a consequence of his surroundings? Is the mind dependent upon causes? Does it act without cause? Is every thought a necessity? Can man choose without reference to any quality in the thing chosen?

No one will blame Mr. Brown or Mr. Jones for not writing like Shakespeare. Should they be blamed for not acting like Christ? We say that a great painter has genius. Is it not possible that a certain genius is required to be what we called "good"? All men cannot be great. All men cannot be successful. Can all men be kind? Can all men be honest?

It may be that a crime appears terrible in proportion as we realize its consequences. If this is true, morality may depend largely upon the imagination. Man cannot have imagination at will; that, certainly, is a natural product. And yet, a man's action may depend largely upon the want of imagination. One man may feel that he really wishes to kill another. He may make preparations to commit the deed; and yet, his imagination may present such pictures of horror and despair; he may so vividly see the widow clasping the mangled corpse; he may so plainly hear the cries and sobs of orphans, while the clouds fall upon the coffin, that his hand is stayed. Another, lacking imagination, thirsting only for revenge,

seeing nothing beyond the accomplishment of the deed, buries, with blind and thoughtless hate, the dagger in his victim's heart.

Morality, for the most part, is the verdict of the majority. This verdict depends upon the intelligence of the people; and the intelligence depends upon the amount, form, and quality of the average brain.

If the mind depends upon certain organs for the expression of its thought, does it have thought independently of those organs? Is there any mind without brain? Does the mind think apart from the brain, and then express its thought through the instrumentality of the brain? Theologians tell us that insanity is not a disease of the soul, but of the brain; that the soul is perfectly untouched; but that the instrument with which, and through which, it manifests itself, is impaired. The fact, however, seems to be, that the mind, the something that is the man, is unconscious of the fact that anything is out of order in the brain. Insane people insist that they are sane.

If we should find a locomotive off the track, and the engineer using the proper appliances to put it back, we would say that the machine is out of order, but the engineer is not. But, if we found the locomotive upside down, with wheels in air, and the engineer insisting that it was on the track, and never running better, we would then conclude that something was wrong, not only with the locomotive, but with the engineer.

We are told in medical books of a girl, who, at about the age of nine years, was attacked with some cerebral disease. When she recovered, she had forgotten all she ever knew, and had to relearn the alphabet, and the names of her parents and kindred. In this abnormal state, she was not a good girl; in the normal state, she was. After having lived in the second state for several years, she went back to the first; and all she had learned in the second state was forgotten, and all she had learned in the first was remembered.

I believe she changed once more, and died in the abnormal state. In which of these states was she responsible? Were her thoughts and actions as free in one as in the other? It may be contended that, in her diseased state, the mind or soul could not correctly express itself. If this is so, it follows that, as no one is perfectly healthy, and as no one has a perfect brain, it is impossible that the soul should ever correctly express itself. Is the soul responsible for the defects of the brain? Is it not altogether more rational to say, that what we call mind depends upon the brain, and that the child -- mind, inherits the defects of its parent -- brain?

Are certain physical conditions necessary to the production of what we call virtuous actions? Is it possible for anything to be produced without what we call cause, and, if the cause was sufficient, was it not necessarily produced? Do not most people mistake for freedom the right to examine their own chains? If morality depends upon conditions, should it not be the task of the great and good to discover such conditions? May it not be possible so to understand the brain that we can stop producing criminals?

It may be insisted that there is something produced by the brain besides thought -- a something that takes cognizance of thoughts -- a something that weighs, compares, reflects and pronounces judgment. This something cannot find the origin of itself. Does it exist independently of the brain? Is it merely a looker-on? If it is a product of the brain, then its power, perception, and judgment depend upon the quantity, form, and quality of the brain.

Man, including all his attributes, must have been necessarily produced, and the product was the child of conditions.

Most reformers have infinite confidence in creeds, resolutions, and laws. They think of the common people as raw material, out of which they propose to construct institutions and governments, like mechanical contrivances, where each person will stand for a cog, rope, wheel, pulley, bolt, or fuel, and the reformers will be the managers and directors. They forget that these cogs and wheels have opinions of their own; that they fall out with other cogs, and refuse to turn with other wheels; that the pulleys and ropes have ideas peculiar to themselves, and delight in mutiny and revolution. These reformers have theories that can only be realized when other people have none.

Some time, it will be found that people can be changed only by changing their surroundings. It is alleged that, at least ninety- five per cent. of the criminals transported from England to Australia and other penal colonies, became good and useful citizens in a new world. Free from former associates and associations, from the necessities of a hard, cruel, and competitive civilization, they became, for the most part, honest people. This immense fact throws more light upon social questions than all the theories of the world. All people are not able to support themselves. They lack intelligence, industry, cunning -- in short, capacity. They are continually falling by the way. In the midst of plenty, they are hungry. Larceny is born of want and opportunity. In passion's storm, the will is wrecked upon the reefs and rocks of crime.

The complex, tangled web of thought and dream, of perception and memory, of imagination and judgment, of wish and will and want -- the woven wonder of a life -- has never yet been raveled back to simple threads.

Shall we not become charitable and just, when we know that every act is but condition's fruit; that Nature, with her countless hands, scatters the seeds of tears and crimes -- of every virtue and of every joy; that all the base and vile are victims of the Blind, and that the good and great have, in the lottery of life, by chance or fate, drawn heart and brain?

WASHINGTON, December 21, 1881.

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