

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-61167-2 - God and Nature: The Second of Two Volumes (The First Being 'Mind and Matter') Based on the Gifford Lectures Delivered in the University of Edinburgh in 1919 and 1921

Edited by G. F. Stout and A. K. Stout

Excerpt

[More information](#)

BOOK ONE INTRODUCTORY

Chapter I

ETHICAL NEUTRALITY AND PRAGMATISM

1. *The Province of the Gifford Lecturer*

Disregarding what may be called side-shows, Gifford Lectures, whatever titles they have borne, have dealt, from various points of view, with one main problem: What is the ultimate nature of the all-inclusive Universe and what consequently is the status and destiny of human beings as parts of it? This is to be my central topic also. The special title [of my first volume],¹ *Mind and Matter*, only indicates the way in which I approach it. Whether we consider the relation of mind and body, or the relation of mind, as knowing, feeling and willing subject, to matter as its object, the conclusions we reach, whatever they may be, are bound to influence our whole attitude—theoretical, practical and emotional—to the universe and to our own lives. In the present chapter, I shall discuss certain preliminary questions concerning the way in which we ought to approach this all-important problem of the nature of the universe and man's place in it.

Even in my initial statement, I have taken for granted what perhaps I have no right to take for granted. I have assumed that the universe is a unity in such a sense that it has a nature as a whole. I have also assumed that it is possible for us to inquire what its nature is with a reasonable prospect of getting such an answer as will make it worth while to raise the question. These are no doubt

¹ Bracketed words inserted by Ed.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-61167-2 - God and Nature: The Second of Two Volumes (The First Being 'Mind and Matter') Based on the Gifford Lectures Delivered in the University of Edinburgh in 1919 and 1921

Edited by G. F. Stout and A. K. Stout

Excerpt

[More information](#)

natural assumptions. The very word 'universe' seems to imply them. None the less they have been and are disputed by acute thinkers whom we cannot disregard. I shall therefore at a later stage¹ consider explicitly how far and in what way the universe can be known as a unity. Meanwhile I shall follow the prevailing trend of common sense and philosophy in presupposing that the Universe of Being is not ultimately a disjointed plurality. I shall assume that it is One, so far and in such a way that we may legitimately inquire into its general constitution as a whole.

*2. The Importance of our Problem for Human Life
and Conduct*

There are two introductory questions with which I propose to deal at present. Both are connected with the fundamental importance for human life and conduct of the problem of the nature of the universe and man's place in it. We are sometimes faced with situations which concern us inevitably, so that however we meet them, and even if we ignore them altogether, our action or inaction is charged for us with important consequences. A man in imminent danger of being run over is in such a position; so is the general of an army confronted by a formidable enemy. It sometimes depends on us whether or not we shall place ourselves in circumstances of this sort. For instance, by declining a responsible post we may evade risks and trials which we should have to face if we accepted it. It is otherwise with the urgency of primary bodily needs, such as the need of food to sustain life; we must either bestir ourselves or starve. The need of adopting some practical and emotional attitude in regard to our place and destiny in the universe constitutes an inevitable practical problem of this kind. There is no way of escaping the situation from which it arises; every human being who

¹ [Books II and IV—Ed.]

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-61167-2 - God and Nature: The Second of Two Volumes (The First Being 'Mind and Matter') Based on the Gifford Lectures Delivered in the University of Edinburgh in 1919 and 1921

Edited by G. F. Stout and A. K. Stout

Excerpt

[More information](#)

ETHICAL NEUTRALITY AND PRAGMATISM 3

has reached a certain stage of mental development must deal with it in some way or other; even to ignore it is by no means to escape it. However a man may meet it, whether by ignoring it or by accepting more or less definite answers in the way of religious belief or unbelief, his procedure affects more or less deeply his general attitude, practical and emotional, to life as a whole. Hence we find generally that when men have reached a certain stage of mental and moral development they have, under the pressure of this practical need, formed what we may call, in a wide sense, religious beliefs, including under this head beliefs which would ordinarily be called irreligious, sceptical or agnostic.

3. *The Formation of Religious Beliefs*

The questions which these beliefs in one way or another answer are fundamentally of the same nature as those which philosophers attempt to answer by systematic reasoning and analysis. But the way in which such results are reached is not initially that of philosophy, and even when philosophers have said their say, their influence on the mass of mankind, though important, is limited and indirect. Religious beliefs are not primarily due to systematic inquiry and reasoning, nor to critical examination of evidence and logical analysis. So far as they are not accepted more or less passively from authority and tradition, they represent the total outcome of the concrete experience and activity of such beings as we are, living in such a world as ours. They express the view which human minds are impelled to take of a situation which they are bound to face, so as to adapt themselves to it in thought and action as best they can. This does not necessarily mean that they are held without valid grounds. It only means that such grounds, so far as they may exist, are not explicitly recognised and analysed, except perhaps in a very partial and inadequate way. It may be, indeed,

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-61167-2 - God and Nature: The Second of Two Volumes (The First Being 'Mind and Matter') Based on the Gifford Lectures Delivered in the University of Edinburgh in 1919 and 1921

Edited by G. F. Stout and A. K. Stout

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4

INTRODUCTORY

that they are so deep-seated, of so complex and evasive a character, that they never can be fully displayed so as to be laid bare for scrutiny and criticism. In this respect, they are like many beliefs on which we rely in ordinary life without misgiving.

One of the two questions we have to consider in this introductory chapter is this: how are we, from the point of view of critical reflexion, to treat these precritical unreflective beliefs? Plainly, we cannot accept them without full inquiry. Are we then to set them aside and begin *de novo*? If not, how shall we determine their value in philosophy? This is a topic to which I shall recur,¹ after dealing with the other question, which may be stated as follows.

4. *Pragmatism and 'Ethical Neutrality'*

Seeing that our interest in religious problems is not merely theoretical but, at least for most human beings, predominantly active and emotional, how far, if at all, are we justified in allowing the nature of our practical and emotional needs to determine the nature of our answers to these problems? How far is it legitimate to seek for such answers as will positively satisfy our needs and to reject those which do not? On this issue there is a sharply defined conflict of opinion. We find in the one camp the pragmatists, as represented, e.g., by Mr Schiller, in the other the advocates of 'ethical neutrality', as represented by Mr Bertrand Russell. The pragmatist, as I understand him, urges that we merely blind ourselves to fundamental facts if we attempt to treat practical problems as if they were merely theoretical. It is like the fabled procedure of the ostrich hiding its head in the sand. In a situation calling for practical adjustment, what is required both in belief and in action is a way of satisfying practical needs. Hence in relation to practical interest the true coincides

¹ Pp. 20ff.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-61167-2 - God and Nature: The Second of Two Volumes (The First Being 'Mind and Matter') Based on the Gifford Lectures Delivered in the University of Edinburgh in 1919 and 1921

Edited by G. F. Stout and A. K. Stout

Excerpt

[More information](#)

ETHICAL NEUTRALITY AND PRAGMATISM 5

with the useful.¹ At any rate if there is truth which is not useful, it is no concern of ours in the given circumstances. When we say that the truth is what we ought to seek, we imply that it has value for us; and in adapting ourselves to practical exigencies, a truth which does not help us is valueless: therefore it is futile to concern ourselves with it at all. In the only useful sense which we can attach to the word 'true', a belief is true only so far as it is useful and so long as it is useful. This doctrine, as I have stated it, applies only to practical problems. But the pragmatist makes it general, because he holds that all interests are ultimately practical, and for him truth and usefulness, for all practical purposes, practically coincide.

For Mr Russell, on the contrary, and those who think with him, the conceptions of truth and of value are quite separate. In forming beliefs, all that ought to concern us is the question—What is true?—and to this our wants, desires, needs and our view of what ought to be or what ought not to be bear no sort of relevance. So far as any other interest than the purely theoretical interest of discovering what is true leads us to believe what otherwise we should not believe, we are deceiving ourselves; and if we do so consciously we are consciously deceiving ourselves. Any other view must rest on the assumption that the bare fact that we want something to be true or feel that it ought to be true is a valid ground for believing that it really is true. But this, they say, is an utterly baseless presumption in all possible applications. What is, once for all, is quite distinct from and very commonly contrary to both what it ought to be and what we should like it to be. Hence whatever practical and emotional interests may be involved in a question, these ought not in the slightest degree to influence us in deciding what answer we shall give to it, or even whether we shall answer it at all, instead of giving it up as a hopeless riddle. This is

¹ *Useful* in a very wide sense, satisfactory for life and conduct. The word 'practical' has the same wide application in this connexion.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-61167-2 - God and Nature: The Second of Two Volumes (The First Being 'Mind and Matter') Based on the Gifford Lectures Delivered in the University of Edinburgh in 1919 and 1921

Edited by G. F. Stout and A. K. Stout

Excerpt

[More information](#)

what is called being 'ethically neutral', where the word 'ethical' is, I presume, used to indicate that not only lower interests and values are to be regarded as irrelevant in the search for truth, but also the highest ideals of which human beings are capable.¹

5. *Emotional and Practical Needs influence the Believer and the Sceptic alike*

Before discussing the issue raised by the opposed theories of 'ethical neutrality' and pragmatism, it will be well to consider a prior question. Whether or not we ought to permit ourselves to be swayed by emotional and practical needs in shaping our view of human life in relation to the universe, it seems clear that in fact we inevitably are so. It is scarcely too much to say that no one quite succeeds in approaching the problem of the existence of God or of a future life as if he were determining an atomic weight or whether the syllogism is a *petitio principii*. This holds good for the sceptic and unbeliever as well as for others—at any rate for those of them who are active partisans of their own views.

That it is true of the adherents of positive dogmas scarcely admits of dispute. It is constantly being urged against them by their opponents; and they themselves explicitly or implicitly confess it. The pitiable state of one 'without God and without hope in the world' is regarded as a legitimate motive for believing in God, even though other views may be theoretically tenable. Similarly with a future life: it would be dreadful, 'if this were all and naught beyond our earth'. Therefore we ought, if we can, to believe that this all is not all and to turn aside from the dismal alternative.

¹ I have throughout put the phrase 'ethical neutrality' in inverted commas. I do so because I deny that those who regard ethical considerations as relevant in philosophy are merely or mainly actuated by the tendency to believe what they would like to be true. To assume this really begs the main question at issue from the outset. I revert to this point on p. 13.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-61167-2 - God and Nature: The Second of Two Volumes (The First Being 'Mind and Matter') Based on the Gifford Lectures Delivered in the University of Edinburgh in 1919 and 1921

Edited by G. F. Stout and A. K. Stout

Excerpt

[More information](#)

ETHICAL NEUTRALITY AND PRAGMATISM 7

This attitude of mind is found even in those who diverge most widely from traditional standards of orthodoxy. The religious development of Spinoza, no less than that of Bunyan, is dominated by the need to be released from a burden. Bunyan called it the burden of sin; Spinoza called it bondage to passion. But it was in principle the same burden which weighed on both. The position of those who justify this procedure is not of course that we ought to allow ourselves to be swayed by interests of any kind without distinction. We must guard ourselves against being influenced by relatively low, narrow or selfish motives. But if a belief subserves our highest ideals as no other can, if it supports and inspires us in living the best life of which we are capable, this in itself is regarded as a reason for adopting it and clinging to it with a confidence which we may not be able to justify on purely theoretical grounds. Consider, for instance, Dr Ward's picture of what the belief in God may be to men of religious genius. 'There have been men', he says, 'who proclaimed that "they had overcome the world", being in it but no longer of it, had realised "a peace passing all understanding" and found "strength to do all things" in the consciousness of an in-dwelling presence. . . . And their lives confirmed their profession, whatever we may think of the mysterious and seemingly mystical source to which they appealed. They *were* superior to the weakness of the flesh, the fear of men and the temporal anxieties that hold so many in bondage. . . . With a single eye and a single aim their whole being seemed full of light and joy. At one in mind and will with the ground of all reality and the source of all good, as they conceived it, what had they to fear, whoever might be against them? They stood fast, strenuously devoted through life and faithful in death to the widest, deepest and highest that they knew, or indeed—when all is said and done—that it has entered into the heart of man to conceive.'¹

¹ *Psychological Principles*, p. 469. [Chap. XVIII, § 5.]

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-61167-2 - God and Nature: The Second of Two Volumes (The First Being 'Mind and Matter') Based on the Gifford Lectures Delivered in the University of Edinburgh in 1919 and 1921

Edited by G. F. Stout and A. K. Stout

Excerpt

[More information](#)

So far Dr Ward. I need not here discuss how far he is drawing a fancy picture. To me it seems that he is describing an ideal to which some few have approached in an extraordinary degree and many others in a more or less partial and fitful way. But the point I am now concerned with is this. Granting the supreme practical and emotional value of the belief, this value tends to be taken, consciously or unconsciously, by mankind in general as a legitimate motive for accepting it and abiding by it in spite of theoretical doubt and difficulties.

Here we must be careful to avoid confusing two questions which in practice it is difficult to keep apart. It may be held that a belief which works in this way must for that very reason be based on genuine insight into the nature of things, even though the grounds may be such that the believer finds it difficult or impossible to define them so as to make them convincing to others. But quite apart from this, there is in general a strong tendency to treat the value of a belief for human life and conduct as a reason for preferring it to opposing views and for disregarding what may be urged in their favour. This is often carried so far that opposition to a dogma is treated as if it meant antagonism to the good way of life with which it is inseparably connected in the mind of the believer. Thus scepticism or unbelief is taken to indicate some kind of moral perversity or, at least, moral blindness. This is a fruitful source of intolerance and of the heat of theological conflicts.

It must be admitted that believers in God and a future life and in more special creeds are, in general, far from being 'ethically neutral'. But what of their opponents, who are so ready to claim freedom from this sort of bias? I cannot see that their claim is at all justified. They too are nearly always—perhaps always—more or less influenced in forming their views by emotional and practical values. The Epicureans as well as the Stoics recommended their doctrines as leading to the most satisfactory 'way of life'. Lucretius is a typical example. Similarly, in all ages,

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-61167-2 - God and Nature: The Second of Two Volumes (The First Being 'Mind and Matter') Based on the Gifford Lectures Delivered in the University of Edinburgh in 1919 and 1921

Edited by G. F. Stout and A. K. Stout

Excerpt

[More information](#)

ETHICAL NEUTRALITY AND PRAGMATISM 9

we commonly find behind the unbelief of the unbeliever—at least when he is at all zealous in propagating his views—strong feelings and convictions concerning social, political and moral questions and the conditions of human welfare in general. He may, like the believer, be sometimes swayed by low, narrow and selfish motives. But often his impelling interest is worthy of all respect and admiration. He may think, and historical facts may largely justify him in thinking, that preoccupation with a supernatural order leads to error, blindness and a distorted sense of values in dealing with the actual and verifiable conditions of our present life. He may be, for instance, indignant and impatient with those who are content to have the poor 'always with us' because they regard this as a dispensation of Providence for which they are not responsible. He is, in general, impatient and indignant at what seems to him the support lent to an easy-going tolerance of evil and misery and injustice by the doctrine of a future life, in which what is wrong in this life will be set right. Such beliefs appear to him as a sort of drug and soothing syrup with which humanity has lulled itself to sleep. Like Byron, he is inclined to couple together 'rum' and 'true religion'. Hence an attitude of strong aversion to everything of the nature of religious dogma, which makes it difficult or impossible to view religious questions in a dry light—to be 'ethically neutral'.

Another form of bias which works in a similar way arises from the revolt against tradition and authority, as opposed to freedom of thought and practical progress. Rebellion against religious dogmas becomes identified with freedom to think and live untrammelled by what is felt as an oppressive bondage to current orthodoxy, not only in what concerns religion, but generally. For established creeds become inextricably interwoven with, and both support and are supported by, a complex system of opinions, sentiments and institutions—of ways of thinking and acting, moral, social and political, extending to all the

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-61167-2 - God and Nature: The Second of Two Volumes (The First Being 'Mind and Matter') Based on the Gifford Lectures Delivered in the University of Edinburgh in 1919 and 1921

Edited by G. F. Stout and A. K. Stout

Excerpt

[More information](#)

main interests of human life. Hence antagonism to a part of the system almost inevitably tends to become antagonism to it as a whole. It tends to become a more or less indiscriminate antagonism to established tradition and authority as such. Consider for instance the atheism of Shelley or of the early days of the French Revolution. The impelling motives of the unbeliever, like those of the believer, may be and often are of a high and noble nature. But the resulting state of mind is hardly compatible with 'ethical neutrality'. It is hardly compatible with any sustained conscientious effort to examine and sift traditional beliefs in a dry light so as to discriminate what truth they may contain intermingled with error.

6. *'Ethical Neutrality' may defeat itself*

I have so far referred only to the more obvious and palpable forms of bias which may interfere with 'ethical neutrality'. There are others of a kind more subtle and evasive. The very effort to be 'ethically neutral' is apt to defeat itself. Men are being constantly deluded by their natural tendency to assume as true what they think ought to be true or what they want to be true or what it in any way suits them to regard as true. The advocate of 'ethical neutrality' is actuated by a strong desire to avoid this source of error. He has what amounts to a horror of it. This leads him to forget that though apparent accordance with practical and emotional needs may not be of itself evidence of truth, neither is it of itself evidence of falsehood. He rather seems to proceed on the assumption that belief formed under the stress of practical and emotional needs must be untrue or baseless.

A further development of the same bias may impel him, in shaping his own views, to guard beforehand against possible occasions of the fallacy he so much dreads. Take, for instance, Mr Bertrand Russell's denial of the unity of the universe. If the universe of being is merely a collection