

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00014-7 - A Doubter's Doubts about Science and Religion: By a Criminal Lawyer

Robert Anderson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

A DOUBTER'S DOUBTS

ABOUT SCIENCE AND RELIGION.



CHAPTER I.

“ONE of the first and noblest of human sciences”—such is the eulogy which Edmund Burke has pronounced upon the law. “It is,” he goes on to say, “a science which does more to quicken and invigorate the understanding than all other kinds of learning put together.” And if this estimate be just, it will probably be admitted that, for sharpening the intellect, the study and practice of the criminal law must bear the palm. But moral qualities are of greater worth than mere

B

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00014-7 - A Doubter's Doubts about Science and Religion: By a Criminal Lawyer

Robert Anderson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

quick-wittedness, and no one who has much to do with criminals and crime can fail to suffer morally. We are told that the primitive attitude of the human mind is trust; distrust is the prevailing characteristic of any one who sees much of the shady side of human nature. He degenerates into a sort of high-class detective. By a perverted instinct he becomes systematically sceptical.

There are no sceptics in the old scholastic sense. The most ardent Pyrrhonist, if robbed of his purse, or struck over the head by a burglar, promptly forgets his theories, and gives proof of his belief in the certainty of objective knowledge. Philosophic scepticism, so called, is merely a conceit of sham philosophers; it never invades the sphere in which a man's interests require that he should believe and know. And, as Kant has aptly said, it is "not a permanent resting-place for human reason." But scepticism is not necessarily Pyrrhonism. Pyrrho did not invent

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00014-7 - A Doubter's Doubts about Science and Religion: By a Criminal Lawyer

Robert Anderson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

ABOUT SCIENCE AND RELIGION. 3

the word ; he only perverted and degraded it. The *σκεπτικός* considers, reflects, hesitates, doubts. An admirable habit, surely, if kept within due limits, but proof of moral deterioration if abnormally developed.

And no one is so sensible of this kind of deterioration as the man who himself has suffered it. He almost envies the ingenuousness of folk who accept a banknote without looking at the water-mark, and never ring a coin upon the counter. And yet these very people value his judgment and advice when they find themselves in a difficulty ; and his power to help them largely depends upon his habit of reflecting, hesitating, doubting. May not this habit of mind, then, be turned to account for the help of others, in higher and more important matters than fee-marked briefs ever deal with ?

We have all heard of "the confidence trick." With unfailing certainty it comes up again and again in our police reports, and we

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00014-7 - A Doubter's Doubts about Science and Religion: By a Criminal Lawyer

Robert Anderson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

always read the story with mingled feelings of wonder, amusement, and pity. Nor is it merely the rustic and the tourist in the streets of London who fall victims to such frauds. By an artifice quite as silly and transparent one of our greatest city houses was not long since defrauded of £20,000 in gold. The details of the swindle would be delightful reading, but to divulge them would involve a breach of faith, for the merchants preferred to bear their loss, rather than incur the ridicule which publicity would have brought on them. But there are developments and phases of the "confidence trick" of which the police court takes no cognizance, and where the victim's loss cannot be estimated at a money value. Simple folk are every day imposed upon by deceptions just as shameless, palmed off upon them in the name of religion. And not of religion only, but of science also. And may not a sceptic do good service here? Is this not work

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00014-7 - A Doubter's Doubts about Science and Religion: By a Criminal
Lawyer

Robert Anderson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

ABOUT SCIENCE AND RELIGION. 5

for a high-class detective? It cannot be, surely, but that some at least will be found to appreciate an honest effort to expose such frauds.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00014-7 - A Doubter's Doubts about Science and Religion: By a Criminal Lawyer

Robert Anderson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CHAPTER II.

THERE is one fact which not even the dreamiest of egoists can doubt, and that is, his own existence. Here at least knowledge is absolute. I exist: this is certain. But how did I come to exist? I live: how did life begin? The question is one to which every man is bound to find a reasonable answer. To say I am descended through generations numbered or innumerable from a first man, is merely to put the difficulty back. Where did the first man come from? Religion answers in one word — Creation. But this is to cut the knot, as it were, without even an attempt to untie it. It must not be taken for granted that man is in-

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00014-7 - A Doubter's Doubts about Science and Religion: By a Criminal Lawyer

Robert Anderson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

ABOUT SCIENCE AND RELIGION. 7

capable of reasoning out the problem of his own existence.

Between the higher organisms and the lowest there is a gulf which might well be regarded as impassable. But closer observation and fuller knowledge will disclose the fact that between these extremes there are unnumbered gradations of development, and that the distance between the several steps in the series is such as might be passed by the operation of known laws. The problem, therefore, which religion would solve by the one word "creation," science answers by the one word "evolution." And science claims priority of audience.

But, as we proceed, let us not forget to reflect, hesitate, doubt; and, above all, let us cast away prejudice. Let us take the place of free thinkers and *real* sceptics, not shams. Many people reserve their scepticism for the sphere in which religion is the teacher, while in the presence of science they are as inno-

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00014-7 - A Doubter's Doubts about Science and Religion: By a Criminal Lawyer

Robert Anderson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

cent and simple in their receptivity as the infant class in a Sunday-school. We shall only deceive ourselves if we begin by overstating the evidence on which the doctrine of evolution rests. It must be conceded that its foundation largely depends on the researches of the Paleontologist. And here we demand some direct proof that the fossil remains belong to the same economy or system as the living organisms we compare them with. But there is no such proof, and it is a question whether the presumption be not the other way.

Let that pass, however, for a more serious question claims attention. It may be admitted that the development of plants and animals from their simplest to their most complicated forms may be explained by natural causes. But this is only theory. What direct evidence is there that the phenomena have, in fact, been thus produced? The horse may have been developed from a pig-like animal, and man may be "descended

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00014-7 - A Doubter's Doubts about Science and Religion: By a Criminal Lawyer

Robert Anderson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

ABOUT SCIENCE AND RELIGION. 9

from a hairy quadruped furnished with a tail and pointed ears.”* But what direct proof is there that either the horse or the man was, in fact, developed or evolved in this way? The answer must be, Absolutely none. It is a matter of inference only.†

The prisoner in the dock may have committed the murder we are investigating. The theory of his guilt will account for all the facts. Therefore let him be convicted and hanged. This sort of argument would not pass at the Old Bailey. Men are sceptics there, and free thinkers. Proof that the prisoner may have committed the crime is worthless, unless we go on to prove that it could not have been committed by any one else. But with that further proof the case is clear, and the accused goes to the gallows. And so here. If the facts of biology can in

* *Descent of Man*, pt. ii. chap. xxi.

† Marvellous results are produced by culture, but they are subject to the seemingly inexorable laws of degeneracy and the sterility of hybrids.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00014-7 - A Doubter's Doubts about Science and Religion: By a Criminal Lawyer

Robert Anderson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

no other way be accounted for, evolution holds the field.

But are we not forgetting the nature of the problem to be solved? The first and greatest question relates, not to the phenomena of life, but to its origin. How did life begin? That was the question we set out with. And here evolution affords no answer, and must stand aside. Let the existence of life be taken for granted, and evolution will explain the rest. But the sceptic takes nothing for granted. How did life begin? Science answers ——! In presence of a question which lies across the threshold of knowledge, science, the very impersonification of knowledge, turns agnostic and is dumb. "Creation" is the answer religion gives. The rejoinder which science ought to make is that life first sprang out of death, out of nothing; in a word, abiogenesis.

And this is, in fact, the answer which science would formerly have given. But