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Man Is Not a Free Moral Agent

Ross Winn

1903

The world in which we live is not perfect. Life is a strange blending of pleasure and pain, and the human race, taken as a whole, is full of incongruities and imperfections. Yet we are impelled constantly to seek better conditions, to strive for improvement, and in the midst of continued trials and defeats surrounded by a thousand limitations, and groping in the gloom of our intellectual obscurity, we struggle on toward the heights, believing that somewhere we will stand in the eternal light and grasp at last the crown of perfect happiness, and that for us will dawn the glories of a Golden Age. Man is naturally an idealist. He is a dreamer of dreams—and sometimes the dreams come true. In every human brain there is a little nich—and some times it is very small, but it is there—a little nook in which the ideal is enshrined. And what a man's ideal is—be it of light or of darkness—that also is the man. Tell me what a man worships and I will tell you what the man is. There is a vast difference between what a man worships and what he thinks he worships. A little two-by-four theological bigot who hasn't evolved out of the brimstone period, may believe that he worships the God of the Universe, but don't you believe it. A fellow whose highest conception of a god is one who belongs to the Baptist church and runs a

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close communion-paradise on a gold basis with accommodations for church-members only, has got his trolley off the divine line of universal truth, and his god is an odious caricature.

We hear a great deal about God and religion and justice and liberty, and we see very plainly, if we are at all observant, that men do not agree about these abstractions. Men dispute about the nature of God, and the essentials of religion, and the meaning of justice, and the limitations of liberty. They have different conceptions of God, of religion, of justice, of liberty. These divergent conceptions exist because these propositions are merely abstractions. The human mind is simply a magazine of sensations that group themselves into forms of thought, and out of this maelstrom of conflicting sensations that are created and caused by the contact of matter with mental organization ideas originate and link themselves into that wonderful association of turbulent emotions we call the mind.

The human mind operates by two methods of activity. These are perception and comparison. By perception we mean the effect produced by the contact of extraneous phenomena with the nerve forces of the brain. By comparison, we mean, broadly speaking, the faculty of reason. Ideas, which are nothing but nerve sensations grouped into forms of expression, are nearly always the product of the combined force of perception and comparison. We first perceive and then compare, and as the result we have the idea, and a train of ideas joined together by natural attraction produce or result in thought. Therefore the human mind is simply a chemical laboratory, in which sensory perception is the raw material which the machinery of comparison transforms into the finished product called thought. From this material conception of mind there is but one logical conclusion. Man has no free will; he is no more a free moral agent than he is a free physical agent, and consequently, what he thinks, does or seeks to do is in obedience to forces beyond his reach, and independent of his will.

We start, therefore, with the reasonable assumption that man is in no sense a free moral agent; that, like every other individual

unit of the material Universe, he is but the agent of those forces that, without his knowledge or consent, bring him into being, hurl him irresistibly into action and ultimately returns him to his original elements.