Augustus Hopkins Strong and the Struggle to Reconcile Christian Theology with Modern Thought

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Ethical Monism as Both a Conclusion and a Starting Point for Theology

When Strong returned to Rochester in September of 1872, he assumed his new role as president and professor of theology at the seminary. At this point, he was not an ethical monist. In fact, although the term ethical monism had been used by a handful of writers before Strong, he probably would not have recognized the phrase as a distinct philosophical term, much less have embraced it as his own.

Strong’s decision to adopt both the concept and the terminology of ethical monism was not the result of an overnight conversion—like most ideological shifts, his personal journey took place over time. In fact, although this chapter discusses Strong’s earliest references to ethical monism, it is difficult to pin down exactly when he first embraced the idea. Strong himself never pointed to a eureka moment, yet a real change took place in his thinking. Although his journey to ethical monism was incremental and the seeds of ethical monism were planted years before he announced his discovery, at some point Strong experienced a genuine change of mind.

Strong’s Early Rejection of All Types of Philosophical Monism

Several years before Strong became an ethical monist, he wrote several articles arguing against any kind of philosophical monism. Although Strong’s theology was developing, he apparently did not envision that he would soon adopt and somewhat adapt the language of monism as he attempted to resolve lingering tensions within his own theological system.

While Bibliotheca Sacra has had a tendency to relocate, it was fairly stable during most of Strong’s academic career. Beginning in the mid-1880s, the journal was published by Oberlin College, and it remained there throughout the balance of Strong’s tenure at Rochester. Although Oberlin was nominally Presbyterian, the school was more than happy to publish essays by prominent Baptists such as
Strong. In January 1888, for instance, the journal included an article by Strong titled “Modern Idealism,” in which Strong described modern idealism as “the method of thought which . . . regards ideas as the only objects of knowledge and denies the independent existence of the external world.” Strong traced this idealistic “method of thought” back to English philosopher John Locke (1632–1704), and he discussed its development through the writings of Berkeley, Schelling, Fichte, Hegel, and others.

At this point in his career, Strong was opposed to the kind of idealism he saw becoming increasingly popular in academic circles, so he put forward a number of reasons for rejecting idealism as a valid explanation of the world. For example, Strong claimed that idealism is inconsistent with itself because it is forced to grant the existence of something “before ideas, and more than ideas, namely, the self.” Modern idealism, Strong argued, describes ideas as the only real objects of knowledge, but noted that those ideas could not possibly exist apart from a previously existing self that is able to think those ideas and is not itself merely an idea. According to Strong, such idealism is unable to hold together because it cannot live within its own terms. It is essentially self-refuting, or at least internally inconsistent.

Strong further noted that idealism confuses the conditions of external knowledge with the objects of that knowledge. Sensations and ideas are necessary conditions of external knowledge, but such things should not be confused with being the only real objects of external knowledge. Then, most interestingly, Strong argued against modern idealism by pointing out that it “is monistic in its whole conception of the universe.” Strong believed that modern idealism was intrinsically monistic, and without explaining why, he cited this as a good reason for rejecting it out of hand. In the late 1880s, Strong seems to have viewed philosophical monism as inherently and self-evidently erroneous.

In another article, published a few years later, Strong rejected the concept of monism in even clearer terms. In an article titled “Modern Exaggerations of Divine Immanence,” Strong contended that an overemphasis on God’s immanence inevitably leads to a whole host of theological problems. One, he suggested, was a tendency to undermine the reality of sin as a genuine moral evil. If God is too closely identified with the physical universe, then this would seem to undercut the biblical doctrine of sin and the concept of human responsibility: “Here we have the proof that monism is false. God and man are not of the same substance, else moral evil had been impossible. Every monistic system breaks in pieces when it attempts to deal with the fact of sin.” If God and humans are ultimately of the same substance, then it seems impossible for humans to sin lest the divine
substance also be party to that sin. At this point Strong seems to have rejected, as he put it, “every monistic system” because of its inability to explain the reality of sin. As late as 1890, he saw this inability to explain the existence of sin in the world as one of the fatal weaknesses inherent in philosophical monism.

Strong’s early dismissal of philosophical monism also appeared in the first edition of his *Systematic Theology* (1886). In a chapter discussing flawed explanations of the universe, Strong addressed what he believed to be three erroneous views: materialism, materialistic idealism, and pantheism. He gave reasons for rejecting each of these positions, but his discussion of pantheism is the most interesting. Strong defined pantheism as “that method of thought which conceives of the universe as the development of one intelligent and voluntary, yet impersonal, substance, which reaches consciousness only in man.” He noted that pantheism “identifies God, not with each individual object in the universe, but with the totality of things.” Strong admitted that pantheism contains several elements of truth, such as its affirmation of the intelligence of God and his immanence in the universe. However, he noted that pantheism’s main weakness is its denial of God’s personality and his transcendence over the created universe.

Strong listed a number of other specific objections to pantheism based primarily on human experience and reason. Among these, he noted that pantheism assumes a unity of substance that not only is without proof but also is contrary to the natural sense of most people. Humans intuitively know that they are not God or parts of God but, rather, distinct personal beings. The “unity of substance” that Strong detected as inherent to pantheism is essentially philosophical monism. Pantheism is unavoidably and unequivocally monistic. Strong then went on to state that “any system of monism contradicts consciousness.” In Strong’s mind, pantheism was necessarily monistic, and this was a major part of pantheism’s undoing. At this point in his theological development, Strong still viewed every form of philosophical monism as conflicting with what humans innately know to be true about themselves. As he saw it, human self-consciousness effortlessly refutes “any system of monism.”

Strong’s all-inclusive public denial of monism held steady up through the fourth edition of his *Systematic Theology* (1893). In the fifth edition (1896)—the first to incorporate the concept of ethical monism—Strong replaced his previous statement (“any system of monism contradicts consciousness”) with a more qualified one: “Many systems of monism contradict consciousness; they confound harmony between two with absorption into one.” The change was a fairly subtle one—from “any” to “many”—but this rewording was necessary to avoid undercutting his own newly discovered key to theology. This use of less comprehensive
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terminology reflected the fact that Strong no longer believed that all forms of monism were to be rejected. Sometime in the early 1890s, Strong had changed his mind about philosophical monism.

**Strong’s Continuing Theological Development Leading to His Embrace of Ethical Monism**

Strong’s theology developed in a number of areas during his early years at Rochester. Chapter 1 discussed the first six of Strong’s twelve theological lessons. Strong himself mentioned these lessons at appropriate points throughout the first two hundred pages of his autobiography. He then went back and summarized these six lessons before revealing lessons 7 through 10:

My first doctrinal lesson, with regard to the depth and enormity of sin, was the result of contrasting myself with him [Christ]. The second lesson I learned, that only God can regenerate, was really the lesson that only Christ can make man like himself. The third truth I attained to was the truth that Christ’s atonement is the only ground of acceptance with God and the only effectual persuasive to faith. The doctrine of the church followed next in order, for the church is, in the fourth place, composed of only those who believe in Christ. This faith is not an external matter of life; those who believe are joined inwardly to the Savior; union with Christ was the fifth great principle which I apprehended. Then [sixth] I began to see that this same Christ who had recreated believers had also created nature and that all science was the shining of his light.¹⁰

Strong’s seventh doctrinal lesson had to do with the practice of prayer. He discovered that “prayer is an entering into the mind and will of Christ, so that the believer becomes partaker of his knowledge and power.”¹¹ This lesson, like many of the others, focused on the person and work of Christ and how the believer relates to the second person of the Trinity.

Strong’s eighth, ninth, and tenth theological lessons were directly related to his gradual embrace of ethical monism. As Strong readily admitted, the endeavor to comprehend Christ’s deity, his atoning work, and his relationship to the world was an important part of his theological development. For a time, as he wrestled with the fact of Christ’s deity and his atonement, Strong found it difficult to understand and reconcile these two concepts.¹² He agreed with Ezekiel Robinson’s “realism in explaining the justification of the believer by virtue of his vital union with Christ and the condemnation of the race by virtue of the derivation of its
life from Adam.”¹³ For Strong, such realism explained the “how” of imputation, but it did not really answer the question of divine justice. It still left questions in Strong’s mind about how the sin of the human race could be justly imputed to Christ. In time, Strong came to see Christ’s immanence in the human race as the foundation for Christ’s bearing of human guilt. Initially, he saw this connection as stemming from Christ’s incarnation, but eventually, Strong came to the conclusion that Christ’s union with the human race must have predated his incarnation in order for the imputation of human sin to be just. As he put it, he came to see that “imputation resulted from a prior vital union.” Though it took Strong a while to work out the exact nature and timing of this union, Strong believed this concept was one of his major contributions to theology. He wrote,

If I have added anything to theological science, it is by my application of the realistic principle to the atonement. . . . I removed the imputation to Christ of the sin of the race from the region of arbitrariness and put it within the realm of reality and order. If Christ took our nature, he must have taken it with all its exposures and liabilities. Though the immaculate conception freed him from depravity, it still left him under the burden of guilt.¹⁴

Strong believed this application of the realistic principle to the atonement could help explain the relationship between Christ’s personal holiness and his ability justly to bear the sin of the human race. Strong regarded this discovery to be his eighth theological lesson.

Having laid out this understanding of the atonement, Strong anticipated some criticism at the hands of dissenting theologians, yet it occurred to him that his application of the realistic principle to the atonement did not go far enough. In his autobiography, Strong wrote, “There flashed upon me with new meaning the previously acknowledged fact of Christ’s creatorship.” Strong began to draw conceptual lines between the creation of the human race and the doctrines of Christ’s incarnation and atonement. In his ninth theological lesson, Strong came to believe that Christ’s creation of humanity established a vital union between the Creator and his creatures that existed from the time of creation. This union, Strong now realized, had far-reaching theological implications. As he explained it, “Christ’s union with the race in his incarnation is only the outward and visible expression of a prior union with the race which began when he created the race.” Strong’s ninth theological lesson was that Christ, because of his creation of the human race, is the very life of humanity, and through this connection to humanity, Christ is involved in the responsibility for human sin. Therefore, Strong concluded, Christ’s atoning work is not merely possible but also necessary.¹⁵
Strong regarded his ninth theological lesson as his “second new and original contribution . . . to theology,” but he still was not done fleshing out all of the implications of his new understanding of Christ’s relationship to humanity. Strong’s tenth theological lesson was closely related to the previous two, but it took Christ’s relationship to the human race a few steps further. Strong concluded that “Christ . . . is the life of humanity only as he is the life of the whole universe.” In other words, Christ’s relationship to humanity stemming from Creation is but a reflection of his vital relationship to the entire created order. Strong explained this important transition in his thinking:

I quickly saw that I must take another and a final step and must see in Christ not only the life and light of men but also the omnipresent and immanent God . . . . This general doctrine of Christ’s identification with the race because he is the Creator, Upholder, and Life of the universe, I called ethical monism . . . . And this ethical monism is the last, and the most important, addition which I have made to theology. It is the tenth distinct advance step in my doctrinal thinking.16

In Strong’s opinion, his final and most important theological lesson was his discovery of ethical monism.

Strong’s Earliest Affirmations of Ethical Monism

Strong’s writings do not provide a precise date when he first came to hold what he eventually called ethical monism. In his autobiography, Strong states that the concept of ethical monism “was so radical and novel that I hesitated long before I ventured to publish it to the world.”17 Yet publish it he did, albeit in stages.

Prior to publishing directly on the subject, in early 1892 Strong mentioned his growing interest in philosophical monism in a private letter to fellow Northern Baptist leader Alvah Hovey (1820–1903). Hovey had recently published a book addressing, among other things, the relationship of God to nature.18 Hovey was concerned about what he saw as a theological drift toward monism, and his book was in part a rebuttal of theological revisionism.

In a letter dated February 7, 1892, Strong wrote to Hovey about Hovey’s rejection of all forms of monism and philosophical idealism:

Dear Dr. Hovey, I thank you heartily for the copy of your new book of “Studies in Ethics and Religion.” I congratulate you on its handsome appearance. I am under special obligations for the second essay, which I have
read with unusual interest. The subject of the relation of God to nature has been and upon which I have had very anxious thought. Your treatment is very helpful and suggestive. I am trying to work my way through it and still come out an orthodox believer, but I see much to attract in the doctrine of Lotze and Schurman. It seems to me more and more that this doctrine, in its philosophical and theological aspects, is the great speculative question with which we shall have to deal with for the next twenty years. I find all the recent philosophers ranged on one side. . . . If we wish to be popular, I am afraid we shall have to be Monists. Ah, if it were not for sin, and for the Holy Spirit who convinces us of sin, I almost think we might be! I wish I could talk this matter over with you. With revered thanks, I am, ever faithfully yours. A. H. Strong.  

Interestingly, at this point Strong noted the potential for monism to lead one away from orthodox belief, and he thanked Hovey for his helpful discussion of the subject. Yet within a short time Strong began publishing ideas that signaled his own affinity for a somewhat new monistic understanding of God’s relationship to nature.

“Christ in Creation” Article (1892)

In the fall of 1892 Strong wrote an article titled “Christ in Creation” that was published in both the Examinor and the Magazine of Christian Literature. In this article, Strong did not use the term ethical monism, but he laid out most of its basic elements. For example, Strong described Christ as “the life of man,” and he wrote about the importance of understanding Christ’s “relation to the universe of which we form a part.” Strong knew that he was venturing into theologically uncharted waters: “Some of the views I present may be thought new; but the unfolding of the subject will certainly enlarge our conceptions of the unsearchable riches of Christ.” In fact, he began the article by noting, “Theology is a progressive science, not because the truth itself changes, but because human apprehension and statement of the truth improve from age to age.” Strong believed that his own apprehension of the truth had improved and that this article was a more accurate statement of important theological truths.

Even at this early stage, Strong seems to have realized that his ideas bore some similarities to both philosophical idealism and pantheism, so he sought to distinguish his understanding from these two theories. He presented his new understanding of Christ’s creatorship not only as different from subjective idealism and pantheism but also as an antidote to both of these wrong ideas. Strong, in
fact, claimed that “the moment we recognize Christ as the principle of self-consciousness and of self-determination in God, we clear ourselves from Pantheism as well as from a will-less and soul-less Idealism.” With this statement and others, Strong preemptively tried to show the dissimilarity between his new theological discovery and both pantheism and philosophical idealism.

Strong also acknowledged that “evolution is a great truth,” explaining that “nature is the living garment of the Deity,” “nature is the omnipresent Christ manifesting God to creatures,” and Christ himself “is the principle of evolution.” Most of the major features of Strong’s ethical monism appear in this 1892 article. The only important thing missing from the article is Strong’s name for his new idea.

Having expressed the main features of ethical monism in print, Strong then waited for two years, as he put it, “trembling on the brink,” before using the term ethical monism to announce more formally his theological discovery to the world. Strong later explained both his initial hesitation and his final decision to go public with his theological discovery: “At last I concluded that intellectual honesty required me to disclose my views even if they cost me my position as theological teacher. I felt that I could make no further progress without printing the conclusions I had already reached.” Strong realized his ethical monism would be perceived as both novel and controversial, and he apparently thought this new idea might cost him his job at the seminary, yet he decided to publish his views.

“Ethical Monism” Articles (1894)

In 1894 Strong finally gave his new idea a name when he published a series of three articles titled “Ethical Monism.” In these articles, Strong pointed out that modern thought was moving steadily in the direction of monism, and he illustrated this trend with examples from the fields of science, literature, theology and philosophy.

For his first example, Strong cited Thomas Chamberlin (1843–1928), who was then head professor of geology and dean of the College of Science at the newly established University of Chicago. Working in one of the hard sciences, Chamberlin had come to embrace the principle that any supreme Being that exists must necessarily be confined to the universe rather than outside of it in any way. Although Strong did not think Chamberlin intended to espouse pantheism, he rightly thought that Chamberlin failed to place enough emphasis on the doctrine of divine transcendence. Strong cited Chamberlin not because he agreed with the exact way in which Chamberlin expressed the concept of monism—he
did not. For Strong, Chamberlin provided clear evidence that leading scholars in the natural sciences were beginning to embrace a form of monism.

For his next example, Strong pointed to the writings of the recently deceased poet Robert Browning (1812–89). Strong regarded Browning as a monist of the best sort: “[Browning] is a monist, but an Ethical Monist; a believer that God and man are of one substance; but a hater of pantheism, which denies God’s transcendence and separate personality.” Although not completely uncritical of the famous poet, Strong was in basic agreement with Browning on the issue of monism. According to Strong, even an English poet had come to see this new truth about God and his relationship to the world.

For his third example, Strong cited Lutheran theologian Isaak August Dorner (1809–84). Strong quoted Dorner as saying that “the unity of essence in God and man is the great discovery of the present age. . . . The characteristic feature of all recent Christologies is the endeavor to point out the essential unity of the divine and the human.” This sounded a lot like pantheism, yet Strong regarded Dorner to be not a pantheist but, rather, “a great name in modern theology.” Apparently some of the great theologians had embraced a form of monism.

For his final example, Strong pointed to German idealist Rudolf Hermann Lotze (1817–81) as proof that monism was the leading philosophy of the day. Strong claimed that “no thinker of recent times has had greater influence in this direction than has Lotze. He is both a monist and objective idealist. Yet he holds with equal tenacity to the distinction between the divine personality and the human personality.” Once again, Strong did not find Lotze’s monism to be particularly troubling. He asserted that Lotze “intends his monism to be an Ethical Monism, by which I mean simply a monism that conserves the ethical interests of mankind.”

In offering these examples from various fields of endeavor, Strong had managed to label at least two of these men (Browning and Lotze) proponents of ethical monism. Strong believed he had demonstrated that great minds involved in the pursuit of truth from different angles were now coming to similar conclusions—conclusions that essentially affirmed his own discovery of ethical monism.

Having cited these four examples, Strong concluded, “It is not too much to say that the monistic philosophy, in its various forms, holds at present almost undisputed sway in our American universities. Harvard and Yale, Brown and Cornell, Princeton and Rochester, Toronto and Ann Arbor, Boston and Chicago, are all teaching it.” He realized that monism was becoming increasingly popular within the world of academia, and he feared that the church would miss
the opportunity to shape “the ruling idea of our time.” Addressing believers and especially Christian preachers, Strong asked two revealing questions:

This universal tendency toward monism, is it a wave of unbelief set a-going by an evil intelligence in order to overwhelm and swamp the religion of Christ? Or is it a mighty movement of the Spirit of God, giving to thoughtful men, all unconsciously to themselves, a deeper understanding of truth and preparing the way for the reconciliation of diverse creeds and parties by disclosing their hidden ground of unity?

Strong knew many thoughtful Christians viewed every form of monism as part of a “wave of unbelief” that threatened the Christian faith. His second question proposed an alternative understanding of this modern trend toward monism, and Strong indicated that the second question represented his own view of the opportunity that now lay before the church: “I confess that I have come to believe the latter alternative to be possibly, and even probably, the correct one, and I am inclined to welcome the new philosophy as a most valuable helper in interpreting the word and the works of God.” Then with increasing boldness Strong went on to explain what he thought was at stake: “Monism is, without much doubt, the philosophy of the future, and the only question would seem to be whether it shall be an ethical and Christian, or a non-ethical and anti-Christian monism.”35

Strong believed that Christians needed to embrace this new philosophy, and he warned of dire consequences should the church reject what was quickly becoming “the ruling idea” in many leading universities:

If we refuse to recognize this new movement of thought and to capture it for Christ, we may find that materialism and pantheism perversely launch their craft upon the tide and compel it to further their progress. Let us tentatively accept the monistic principle and give to it a Christian interpretation. Let us not be found fighting against God. Let us use the new light that is given us, as a means of penetrating more deeply into the meaning of Scripture. Let us see in this forward march of thought a sign that Christ and his kingdom are conquering and to conquer.36

No doubt this statement includes a bit of hyperbole, but it also reveals Strong’s conviction about the importance of this issue and his optimism about the good that might come if the church embraced a Christian, in other words an ethical, form of philosophical monism.

Strong explained ethical monism by contrasting it with “forms of monism which do not conserve man’s ethical interests.” He felt that any kind of monism
that emphasized God’s immanence in the world, to the exclusion of his transcendence, failed to preserve both human freedom and responsibility for sin. In contrast to this, Strong described ethical monism as “a monism which maintains both the freedom of man and the transcendence of God.” Strong recognized that monism apart from divine transcendence necessarily leads to some form of pantheism in which God is “only an impersonal and necessary force.” In such a system, humans do not possess any kind of real freedom or personal responsibility. In contrast, “The Ethical Monism, then, for which I contend, is not deterministic monism; it is the monism of free-will, the monism in which personality, both human and divine, sin and righteousness, God and the world, remain.”

Strong rightly thought that some Christians would oppose monism no matter how he qualified it, but he tried to explain why such Christians should consider the possibility that ethical monism might be true. He pointed out that human apprehension of truth changes over time; older theories are eventually replaced by newer ones, which people come to deem superior. He offered the following illustration: “Modern astronomy supplanted the ancient by showing that the heliocentric theory gave a simpler and more complete explanation of the movements of the solar system than the geocentric did.” He then drew the comparison: “So the monistic philosophy rests its claim to acceptance upon its ability to solve the problems of nature, or the soul, and of the Bible, more simply and completely than the theory of dualism ever could. The test of truth in a theory . . . is not that it can be itself explained, but that it is capable of explaining other things.” Strong believed that his ethical monism helped explain physical, intellectual, and moral problems better than more traditional and perhaps more orthodox understandings of the universe ever could.

Strong thought ethical monism supplied helpful answers to some difficult questions, but he also knew that monism raised some questions of its own. He wanted to answer some questions he anticipated, such as, “How can there be any finite personality or freedom or responsibility, if all persons, as well as all things, are but forms or modifications of the divine?” To put it more directly, “How can we be monists, and yet be faithful to man’s ethical interests?” In keeping with several of his key doctrinal lessons, Strong found the answer to these questions in the person of Christ. He pointed out that Christ “is of the substance of God, yet he possesses a distinct personality.” He then answered these questions with a question of his own: “If in the one substance of God there are three infinite personalities, why may there not be in that same substance multitudinous finite personalities? No believer in the Trinity can consistently deny the possibility of this.” Strong himself saw this as more than a possibility. It was the heart of his ethical monism. Strong
believed that since God is a single substance but three distinct persons, those who affirm the doctrine of the Trinity have already conceded the theoretical possibility that the universe and all the persons it contains could be part of that one substance as well. As Strong explained it, “God has limited and circumscribed himself in giving life to finite personalities within the bounds of his own being.”62 This was a clear departure from the traditional, orthodox understanding of God, and Strong knew it, but he believed the time had come for theology to take a new step forward in keeping with the progress of doctrinal development.

Despite Strong’s comment about the possibility of “multitudinous finite personalities” within the one substance of God, in his more direct treatments of the doctrine of the Trinity Strong remained essentially orthodox. Ethical monism never seems to have actually corrupted his understanding of the Trinity to the degree that it logically might have.43

As he came to the end of this first series of articles, Strong summarized his new and rather controversial idea: “Let me then sum up my monistic doctrine by saying: There is but one substance—God. The eternal Word whom in his historic manifestation we call Christ, is the only complete and perfect expression of God. The universe is Christ’s finite and temporal manifestation of God.” Then once more he contrasted ethical monism with pantheism:

This is not pantheism, for pantheism is not simply monism, but monism coupled with two denials, the denial of the personality of God and the denial of the transcendence of God. My doctrine takes the grain of truth in pantheism, namely, its monistic element, while it maintains in opposition to pantheism the personality of God and the personality of man, though it regards the latter as related to the former, somewhat as the persons of the Trinity are related to the one all-inclusive divine personality.44

Strong was confident that his ethical monism embraced the truth that could be found in pantheism while rejecting the aspects of pantheism that were false. He believed that his discovery of ethical monism was nothing short of a Copernican revolution that needed to be embraced by the Christian community. This doctrine would change the way people thought about theology, philosophy, and humanity’s relationship to God through Christ.45 It was something that his fellow theologians needed to accept and incorporate into their theological systems.

“Ethical Monism Once More” Articles (1895)

About a year after publishing his first three-part series on ethical monism, Strong wrote another three-part series on the subject, titled “Ethical Monism
Once More.” A number of readers had, in Strong’s opinion, misunderstood his earlier discussion, so Strong again tried to clarify exactly what he meant by ethical monism.

Strong explained that this was in fact a dualistic monism. The terms dualism and monism have often been contrasted with each other, but Strong saw the former term as an important modifier of the latter: “Whatever else we may be, or may not be, we must be dualists through and through, and we must never give up our dualism, because dualism is not only the necessary condition of ethics, but is also inseparably bound up with many, if not all, of those great truths which constitute the essence of the Christian scheme.” Strong’s ethical monism did not completely rule out the concept of dualism. In fact, it necessarily included dualism, and Strong sensed the need to emphasize this point.

Strong believed in two kinds of dualism: a dualism of matter and mind and a dualism of man and God. Both kinds of dualism involved postulating the existence of a soul—in distinction from matter in the one case and in distinction from God in the other. He saw such distinctions as reflections of the truth he called “psychological dualism.” Strong asserted that psychological dualism was completely compatible with philosophical or metaphysical monism because the two terms addressed different kinds of existence. He attempted to resolve the apparent tension in the phrase dualistic monism:

Dualistic monism is not a contradiction in terms, because the dualism and the monism are asserted of different things…. While dualism truly asserts that matter and mind, man and God, are two, not one, monism with equal truth asserts that matter and mind, man and God, have underground connections and a common life, because all things, humanity included, live, move, and have their being in God.

For Strong ethical monism was a kind of dualistic monism that acknowledged the existence of personality in distinction from matter. Further, his ethical monism acknowledged the existence of multiple personalities while affirming the existence of a single substance: God.

As he had in the earlier set of articles, Strong once again sensed the need to emphasize the differences between ethical monism and pantheism: “This Ethical Monism is not pantheism, because it maintains the separate personality of man and the absolute transcendence of God. . . . Pantheism is indeed monism, but monism is not necessarily pantheism.” Strong believed this last statement was true precisely because his ethical monism was a dualistic monism and pantheism rejected the dualism his system entailed. Strong laid out the differences between
ethical monism and pantheism largely in terms of pantheism’s denial of the dualistic element that ethical monism required: “Pantheism . . . does not admit dualism into its system; Ethical Monism embraces it as of the very essence of truth.”

Strong also faulted pantheism for viewing the universe as coterminous with God and thus confining God to the universe while denying his freedom. Strong himself was willing to describe the universe as a manifestation of God, but he did not actually identify the universe, or any being or thing in the universe, with God. As he put it, “God is not any single thing in the universe, nor is he the whole universe put together, but he is infinitely above all and he infinitely transcends all.” Although to some Strong’s ethical monism might seem to obliterate any kind of Creator-creature distinction, Strong ostensibly affirmed such a distinction.

Strong believed that some readers had misjudged his earlier articles on ethical monism because they misunderstood what he meant by the word *substance*. When Strong used this word, he did not mean it in any materialistic sense. In fact, concerning those who thought ethical monism meant that God occupied space and divided himself into parts, Strong replied that such an interpretation was completely against what he intended. Instead, Strong used the word *substance* in a nonmaterial sense: “There is but one substance, one underlying reality, the infinite and eternal Spirit of God, who contains within his own being the ground and principle of all other being.” For Strong, this one substance, God, is a spirit being in whom all things exist. All things that exist in the universe are manifestations of God, but they are not God or parts of God in any sense. Rather, God is the ground of their existence in much the same way that human volitions are manifestations of a human mind without being parts of that mind.

After briefly discussing how secondary causes operate in the universe, Strong noted that all secondary causes are actually the work of the one great First Cause. He then explained that ethical monism finds this First Cause in Christ himself. Christ is, in fact, the one who alone makes this world a universe.

As he had mentioned in the earlier series of articles, Strong once again pointed to various advances in science as confirming Christian doctrines. For example, he thought that advances in the study of heredity helped explain the doctrine of original sin. More broadly speaking, he believed that evolution enabled believers better to understand the development of the human race. Unlike many of his potential readers, Strong viewed Darwin and Huxley not as enemies of the faith but, rather, as helping explain some of the great truths found in Scripture. To those who might look with suspicion at his understanding of the relationship between evolution and the Christian faith, Strong asked, “Why should we
regret the publication and acceptance of the doctrine of evolution, if it reveals to us the method of Christ’s working both in nature and in grace?” He then reaffirmed his conviction that “Nature reveals a present God, and evolution is the common method of his working.” By viewing evolution as God’s means of bringing about his will in the universe, Strong embraced the basic principles of Darwinism and, in fact, saw evolutionary principles as compatible with and confirming of his ethical monism.

Strong recognized that some of his critics feared that his doctrine of ethical monism tended to identify God with every stick and stone in the universe, not to mention with depraved humans and even the devil himself. He pointed out that such fears were completely unnecessary, asserting that the plants, animals, and even fallen beings in the universe are but “varied manifestations of [God’s] creative wisdom or of his punitive justice.” He then drew an important distinction between such manifestations of God and the incarnation of God. He explained that God has been incarnated in Christ alone. All other things and beings in the universe are manifestations of God’s will, but they are not to be equated with the incarnation of God. Strong saw this distinction between manifestation and incarnation as lying behind the fact that humans remain fully responsible for the physical and moral evil in the universe. Although in Strong’s view the universe is evolving according to God’s plan, human individuals remain responsible for all that is wicked in this world. Thus, in Strong’s thinking, ethical monism maintains the ethical responsibility of all humanity.

Having argued that the universe in only a manifestation of God, Strong then asserted that “God’s regular volitions . . . constitute nature.” He suggested that, in place of the “old theory” that God created nature and even violent persons and animals, one should embrace the fact that God has chosen to manifest himself in nature and such creatures. For Strong, God’s manifestation of himself in nature and even violent creatures is best understood in light of ethical monism and the Darwinian explanation of evolutionary progress.

Strong thought that his ethical monism helped provide a thoroughly Christian explanation of evolution. Nonetheless, he confessed that, at the end of the day, he accepted ethical monism not because of how it helped explain evolution but, rather, because of the light it shed on the doctrine of the atonement. Over time Strong had become increasingly uncomfortable with the idea of the imputation of guilt from one person to another. He spoke disdainfully about “an external and mechanical transfer” of guilt, which seemed to him unjust. Eventually Strong had come to a new understanding of the atonement: “It was a great day for me when I first saw that there was a natural union of Christ with all men
which preceded the incarnation—that all men in fact were created and had their being in him, and that therefore he who was the ground and principle of their life, though personally pure, must bear their sins and iniquities.” This view was quite different from the more common understanding of the atonement, and Strong fully recognized this fact.

Strong noted that three main objections had been presented against his understanding of the atonement. First, some argued that Strong’s view made the atoning work of Christ compulsory rather than free. In reply, Strong pointed out that his view simply moved the time of Christ’s original commitment to the atonement further back, making it contemporaneous with creation. In other words, in Strong’s view the atonement was just as free as in the more traditional view; his view merely connected Christ’s free decision to provide atonement to the act of creation, rather than to the act of incarnation. The freedom of the decision remained the same; only the timing of that free decision changed. Strong believed this change resulted in a more consistent understanding of the atonement: “I am persuaded that only when we regard Christ’s suffering for sin in the flesh as the culmination and expression of his natural relation to humanity can we deliver his atonement from the charge of arbitrariness or claim for it the confidence of thoughtful men.” In Strong’s opinion, his view made the atonement more certain and more attractive to modern sensibilities.

Second, some critics objected that, by disconnecting the atonement from the incarnation, Strong’s view made the atonement both eternal and universally effective for both men and angels. To this, Strong replied that he affirmed that the atonement was in some sense eternal or perpetual. As he saw it, a loving and holy God must always suffer due to the existence of sin. Speaking more personally, he confessed, “I need a present atonement as much as the patriarchs did. The knowledge that Christ now suffers for my sin is the strongest motive to keep me from my sin.” Concerning the possible atonement of demons, Strong admitted that Christ suffers on account of both wicked men and demons because he is the ground of their being and the source of their life. Yet, he did not believe that any demons would actually be redeemed. His explanation for why demons would not be saved amounted to an acknowledgment of God’s free choice to save whomever he wishes.

The third objection posed against Strong’s understanding of the atonement was that his view made the atonement itself impossible, because it made Christ no more divine than any other man. Strong answered this objection by reaffirming his belief in the full deity of Christ and by arguing that his own view greatly simplified the doctrine of the person of Christ: “We need now no
complicated theory of the two natures and of the union between them. We have at the same time and in the same Being complete and sinless humanity combined with suffering and atoning divinity.” No doubt for many of Strong’s readers this statement raised more questions than it answered, but Strong believed that with this and other replies he had answered the main objections others had raised against his view of the atonement.

Strong concluded this second series of articles on ethical monism by summarizing the doctrine of ethical monism. He described it once more as “psychological dualism combined with metaphysical or philosophical monism.” He also expressed his hope that he had convinced his readers that ethical monism was “thoroughly Christian” because it honored Christ by recognizing him as Lord of all.

Early Responses to Strong’s Ethical Monism

Responses to Strong’s announcement were not long in coming. Strong’s first series of articles had appeared in November 1894. The following month, the editor of the McMaster University Monthly wrote, “The rumor that Dr. Strong, of Rochester Theol. Seminary, had adopted Monism and was adapting his theology to this new view has been confirmed by three articles from his pen in the Examiner on Ethical Monism.” The writer then offered a number of quotes from Strong’s recent articles that he thought both summarized Strong’s position and proved it to be untenable before concluding that “both philosophic and theological mists hang over [Strong’s] view, and these must be cleared away by much careful thinking, before many will be inclined to adopt it.” Interestingly, he also noted that Strong’s ethical monism was not completely original because its roots could be found in German thought. This early mention of Strong’s ethical monism was necessarily brief. In many ways, however, it indicated the kind of response Strong could expect.

In December 1894, Alvah Hovey (1820–1903) wrote a series of three short articles in response to Strong’s articles of the previous month. By 1894, Hovey was near the end of his long career as president of Newton Theological Institution, and as one of his biographers put it, “probably no other American Baptist ever spoke with more ex cathedra influence than he.” Hovey was a conservative theologian of solid New England stock; his influence and his orthodoxy were unquestionable—and he found Strong’s announcement about ethical monism alarming.

From the outset, Hovey expressed his admiration for Strong, for example, “In respect to the essential principles of the Christian religion he [Strong] has
always been firm as a rock.” Hovey also rightly recognized that Strong’s embrace of ethical monism sprang from a “strong desire to set the truths of Christianity in a clearer rational light, and to establish them on surer philosophical foundations.” However, although he admired Strong’s intention, Hovey did not share Strong’s optimism about the benefits that would flow from a widespread adoption of ethical monism. In his three articles, Hovey discussed four main difficulties he believed monism, including Strong’s ethical monism, necessarily entailed. Taken together, these difficulties ultimately led Hovey to reject Strong’s ethical monism.

The first of these difficulties stemmed from the fact that monism seems to depict God as both infinitely complex and internally conflicted. Rather than a God who is unified and ultimately simple, monism envisions a deity whose substance extends throughout the material world and includes all things. Hovey noted that if the entire universe is composed of divine volitions, then such volitions are necessarily conflicted because some elements of the universe are inherently antagonistic toward other elements in the universe. Thus, God himself must be internally conflicted. Hovey also pointed out that such a vision of God as substantially extended throughout the universe might easily provide an excuse for idolatry: if everything is part of God’s substance, the worship of material objects may just be another way of worshipping the deity.

Hovey’s second difficulty with monism was that, in his opinion, monism does not really view Christ as “the complete and perfect expression of God.” Hovey pointed out that, if the divine substance is divided into myriad finite beings and things, then everything is an expression of God, and Christ no longer holds the unique position afforded to him in the Gospels:

If then the monistic philosophy is true, it cannot be said of the historical Saviour that He was “a complete expression of God,” and the words of Jesus must be understood in a non-natural sense as referring to the invisible Word as well as the incarnate Logos, or, in a very restricted sense, as meaning, perhaps, that he who has seen me, as thou hast, has seen God in so far as He is a Father to mankind (or to me).

This tendency of monism to deny the unique position to Christ as the perfect and complete expression of God seems in conflict with the biblical record.

Hovey’s third difficulty with monism was that monism envisions created things as divine volitions, and finite spirits as circumscriptions of the divine substance, and this ultimately leads to significant problems with one’s understanding of sin and human responsibility. Hovey believed monism necessarily
implied that “things are divine volitions, regular and habitual, but finite spirits are the divine substance, circumscribed and individualized, yet acting freely and often wickedly.” Hovey explained this another way: “The divine life as a whole, moving in volitions which represent the one all-embracing consciousness, is seen in the changes of nature, but the divine life circumscribed and acting as finite spirits is free, and brings strife and sin into the life of God.” He argued that, even if monism were the trend in modern philosophy, it needed to be rejected because it did not exalt or improve one’s view of God, and it did not help resolve the problem of sin.72

Hovey admitted that by tacking the qualifier ethical in front of monism Strong was attempting to avoid these kinds of problems. However, he thought that the overall tendency of monistic philosophy was too strong to be held in check by a mere adjective: “We cannot easily suppress a fear that the logical tendency of monism is to deny human responsibility by referring it to God, the only real being. . . . The more strictly the human spirit is identified with the divine substance or life, the more difficult will it be to imagine it guilty of wrong doing.”73 In the end, Hovey thought that the tendency of monism to swallow everything up in God made it impossible to hold humans guilty of sin. Monism, even as qualified by Strong, could not be reconciled with biblical statements about human responsibility and guilt.

Hovey’s fourth difficulty with monism was more general. In his final article, Hovey claimed that monism lacked biblical support and was, in fact, inconsistent with biblical teaching.74 He thought it was clear that Strong had come to embrace ethical monism not by way of Scripture but by means of philosophy, yet Strong had put forward a few biblical texts that he thought favored monism. Hovey examined three of these texts (John 1:3–4, 15:5–6; Col 1:16–17) and concluded that none of them actually supported a monistic interpretation of the world.

He pointed out that Strong had misread the Greek punctuation in John 1:3–4 and therefore had misappropriated the text. In John 15:5–6, Hovey noted that the branches attached to the vine were not all inclusive of everyone or everything in the universe. Instead, in this passage Christ was speaking about his disciples, or at least those who professed to be his disciples. Concerning Colossians 1:16–17, Hovey argued that Paul was talking about Christ’s creation of the world. The apostle was saying that the world came into existence through Christ and is held together by him. This had nothing to do with philosophical monism. As Hovey commented, “Dr. Strong is therefore right in insisting upon creation, though it is difficult to grasp his notion of the act, if it is anything more
than a series of modifications in the One Divine substance.” With regard to the Colossians passage he also wrote, “Monism seems to be off its true base when it proposes to vindicate the fact of creation. It would be better for it to drop the word and satisfy itself with teaching the reality of change or modification in the substance of the self-existent and only being.” At the end of his third article, Hovey concluded that not a single passage of Scripture put forward by Strong ultimately supported monism and that the consistent message of Scripture seemed to place an infinite gulf between the Creator and the things created. Although Hovey respected Strong as a fellow laborer in the Gospel ministry, he believed that Strong had made a significant misstep in his adoption of ethical monism.

Strong appears never to have replied directly to Hovey’s criticisms in any of his published works. However, just a few years after Hovey’s articles appeared, Strong delivered an interesting address in honor of Hovey’s fifty years of ministry at Newton Theological Institution. In this speech, Strong surveyed the changes in the field of theology over the past fifty years. The presence of Hovey and the occasion notwithstanding, Strong held little back as he took the opportunity to press once again his views on ethical monism. Without using the exact phrase ethical monism, Strong asserted that the current generation was coming to recognize the great truth of God’s immanence in the world. He claimed that, while the theology of fifty years ago had virtually forgotten about the immanence of God, recent theologians had rediscovered this doctrine in the past half century. In recent decades, he asserted, believers had come to realize afresh that God is immanent in the world and that this immanent God is none other than Christ himself. Therefore, there exists a Christian form of monism. One can only wonder what Hovey thought as he listened to Strong use a speech in his honor to argue for ideas that he had criticized in print just a few years earlier.

The summer after Hovey’s last article appeared, another critical but even-handed response to Strong’s first three articles appeared in the Methodist Review. Adolphus J. F. Behrends (1839–1900) had graduated from Rochester Theological Seminary shortly after Strong, and the two men had known each other for some three decades. In fact, when Strong left the First Baptist Church of Cleveland in 1872, to take up the post as president of the seminary, the church called Behrends as their next pastor. In his article evaluating ethical monism, Behrends indicated that he knew and respected his ministerial predecessor, but he spoke freely about his concerns regarding Strong’s ethical monism.

Behrends described Strong’s articles as “startling in their significance.” He noted, “That they have been read with incredulous amazement is very plain;
and that their influence is regarded with alarm, as likely to be very injurious, is evident from the criticism which they have already received.” No doubt this last statement was a reference to the articles by the editor of the *McMaster University Monthly* and by Alvah Hovey. Behrends pointed out that Baptists have not historically demonstrated any inclination toward philosophical pantheism, and he viewed Strong’s writings as having the potential to begin a theological revolution among Baptists.\(^7^9\)

Behrends readily confessed that Strong was not a pantheist, and for this much he was thankful, but he believed that pantheism was the logical and inevitable outcome of Strong’s ethical monism. He summed up Strong’s theory as including four major ideas: (1) there is but one substance—God; (2) there are no second causes in nature; (3) as in the Trinity, there are three infinite personalities in one substance, so in the same numerical substance there may be multitudinous finite personalities; and (4) Christ is the natural life of humanity, that is, its substance, and it follows that he was responsible for the sin committed by his own members. In reply to such statements, Behrends objected, “When [Strong] says that he is not a pantheist I believe him; but... I am constrained to assume that his language does not fit his thought, and that he would and must repudiate the inevitable implications of his statements.”\(^8^0\) Behrends then examined each of these ideas in some detail, pointing out where each went astray, and concluded,

One thing is plain—he who accepts the monism commended in these articles must be prepared to pay a heavy price. There are many things in the articles which are superbly said and which every devout man will most heartily indorse. But there is a dead fly in the precious ointment. I cannot regard them as anything but subversive. I dread their influence upon our young men, who will not stop where the author does.\(^8^1\)

In the end, Behrends appreciated Strong’s desire to give unity to thought and his desire to see a stronger ethical connection between God and humanity—in fact, he did not even object to the term *ethical monism*. However, he believed that the ground of unity between God and humans should be found in God’s will rather than in his substance. Behrends thought that Strong was pursuing the right general idea but that he had wrongly linked the concept of monism to the substance of God. As Behrends said in the final line of the article, “I like the text, but I do not like the sermon.”\(^8^2\) In this Behrends was not alone. Many others who heard “the sermon” went away shaking their heads and thinking that the preacher had somehow missed the mark.
Ethical Monism in Strong’s Systematic Theology

Appearing about the same time that Strong began to embrace ethical monism, the fourth edition of Strong’s Systematic Theology (1893) contained no trace of his new theological discovery. This soon changed, however, as subsequent editions appeared.

In the preface to the fifth edition of his Systematic Theology (1896), Strong indicated that this new edition contained a number of minor corrections and a few additional references, but the substance of the volume “remain[ed] unchanged,” as he put it, “with four exceptions . . . where the principle of Ethical Monism is adopted.” Strong indicated that the changes reflecting his adoption of ethical monism appeared on pages 51, 203, 205, and 413.

The first of these changes appeared at the beginning of a chapter titled “Erroneous Explanations of the Facts.” In this chapter in subsequent editions Strong directly discussed ethical monism as a way of understanding the universe and its relationship to God. In an introductory paragraph, Strong listed four major theories addressed in the chapter: materialism, materialistic idealism, pantheism, and ethical monism. In this initial summary, Strong defined ethical monism as follows:

Universe = Finite, partial, graded manifestation of the divine Life; Matter being God’s self-limitation under the law of necessity, Humanity being God’s self-limitation under the law of freedom, Incarnation and Atonement being God’s self-limitations under the law of grace. Metaphysical Monism, or the doctrine of one Substance, Principle, or Ground of Being, is consistent with Psychological Dualism, or the doctrine that the soul is personally distinct from matter on the one hand and from God on the other.

Although Strong laid out this preliminary definition of ethical monism and discussed the other three theories (materialism, materialistic idealism, and pantheism) at length in the pages that followed, for some reason he ended the chapter without ever returning to the topic of ethical monism. This apparent oversight continued until the eighth edition of his Systematic Theology (1907), when he finally added a separate discussion of ethical monism at the end of the chapter, now retitled “Erroneous Explanations, and Conclusion.”

This chapter, as it appears in the final edition, contains Strong’s mature and carefully crafted discussion of ethical monism. Here Strong defines ethical monism as “that method of thought which holds to a single substance, ground, or principle of being, namely, God, but which also holds to the ethical facts of God’s transcendence as well as his immanence, and of God’s personality as
distinct from, and as guaranteeing, the personality of man.”87 In affirming the existence of “a single substance,” this definition maintains a form of ontological monism. However, Strong believed that his insistence on the personality of man as distinct from God’s personality was why his philosophical perspective could rightly be called ethical monism.88

Strong thought that biblical passages about God’s omnipresence by implication taught his own view of divine immanence. Therefore, Strong believed that support for his understanding of divine immanence could be found throughout Scripture. He cited texts such as Psalm 139:7, Jeremiah 23:23–24, and Acts 17:27–28 as examples supporting his position.89 Strong then cited a few biblical passages he thought implied an understanding of divine transcendence similar to his own, including 1 Kings 8:27, Psalm 113:15, and Isaiah 57:15.90 In addition to Scripture, Strong claimed that revered theologians such as Augustine and Anselm also supported his understanding of God’s relationship to the universe.91 Although he did not actually claim that Augustine and Anselm taught ethical monism, he implied that they embraced the essence of his philosophical position. Strong then discussed ethical monism under four main points, each treated below: (1) metaphysical monism is qualified by psychological dualism; (2) the universe is a manifestation of the divine life; (3) divine immanence guarantees individuality in the universe; and (4) Christology is the key to understanding the universe.92

**Metaphysical Monism Is Qualified by Psychological Dualism**

In his first point, Strong confessed that ethical monism bore some similarity to pantheism in that both philosophical positions hold that “God is in all things and that all things are in God.” For Strong this was the one great element of truth in pantheism, but he also argued that this “scientific unity” is consistent with the facts of ethics, namely, with the fourfold concept of “man’s freedom, responsibility, sin, and guilt.” In Strong’s mind this meant that “Metaphysical Monism, or the doctrine of one substance, ground, or principle of being, is necessarily qualified by Psychological Dualism, or the doctrine that the soul is personally distinct from matter on the one hand, and from God on the other.”93 In other words, ethical monism acknowledges a kind of natural unity between God and humanity, but it also sees a personal and moral distinction between the two. As he had in earlier articles, Strong once again cited various authors to demonstrate that the overwhelming trend in modern thinking was toward a monistic understanding of the world. While older theology emphasized individuality and strong distinctions between God and humanity, Strong thought his forbears had largely overlooked the solidarity he and many other modern thinkers perceived
in the universe. If Christian theology did not adapt to this modern understanding of the world, it risked being left behind as hopelessly outdated, and perhaps just as important, theology would fail to move forward to a new and better understanding of God and His relationship to the universe.

Employing picturesque language, Strong explained how individuals related to one another within his system:

The individuality of human beings, real as it is, is not the only reality. There is the profounder fact of a common life. Even the great mountain-peaks of personality are superficial distinctions, compared with the organic oneness in which they are rooted, into which they all dip down, and from which they all, like volcanoes, receive at times quick and overflowing impulses of insight, emotion and energy.94

For Strong this emphasis on the common life of all humans, which they ultimately share with God, had been largely missing in earlier theology. He aimed to grasp this truth from the clutches of pantheism and redeploy it in the service of a more perceptive and more culturally acceptable Christian theology.

_The Universe Is a Manifestation of the Divine Life_

In his second point, Strong provided a more positive explanation of the key differences between ethical monism and pantheism. He began by stating, “In contrast then with the two errors of Pantheism—the denial of God’s transcendence and the denial of God’s personality—Ethical Monism holds that the universe, instead of being one with God and conterminous with God, is but a finite, partial and progressive manifestation of the divine Life.” Strong then offered an interesting though controversial analogy: “The universe is related to God as my thoughts are related to me, the thinker.”95 Within ethical monism, God is viewed as a being that is greater than the universe while the universe itself is seen as a manifestation of God.

Once again, Strong pointed to various writers who supported his philosophical proposal. This time he focused on poets who seemed to show a measure of sympathy for ideas similar to ethical monism. Quite tellingly, several of the poets he cited were not known for their orthodoxy.96 As was the case with his first point, he cited no scriptural texts in support of his position.

_Divine Immanence Guarantees Individuality in the Universe_

In his third point, Strong argued against another misunderstanding of ethical monism:
The immanence of God, as the one substance, ground and principle of being, does not destroy, but rather guarantees, the individuality and rights of each portion of the universe, so that there is variety of rank and endowment. . . . While God is all, he is also in all; so making the universe a graded and progressive manifestation of himself, both in his love for righteousness and his opposition to moral evil.97

Strong noted that some critics had claimed that ethical monism led to moral indifference because it eliminated all distinctions between God and humans. He responded by pointing out that such a charge might rightly be laid at the feet of pantheistic monism, but it could not rightly be attributed to ethical monism. As Strong put it, “Ethical monism is the monism that recognizes the ethical fact of personal intelligence and will in both God and man, and with these God’s purpose in making the universe a varied manifestation of himself.”98 In Strong’s mind, his critics had confused ethical monism with pantheistic monism and had wrongly attributed the errors of the latter to his view.

Christology Is the Key to Understanding the Universe

In his fourth and final point, Strong described the person and work of Christ as the key to understanding the universe:

Since Christ is the Logos of God, the immanent God, God revealed in Nature, in Humanity, in Redemption, Ethical Monism recognizes the universe as created, upheld, and governed by the same Being who in the course of history was manifest in human form and who made atonement for human sin by his death on Calvary. The secret of the universe and the key to its mysteries are to be found in the Cross.99

Having omitted any reference to the Scriptures in his first three points, Strong at last cited a number of biblical passages he thought supported his view of Christ and Christ’s relationship to the universe: John 1:1–4, 14, 18; Ephesians 1:22–23; Colossians 1:16–17; 2:2–3, 9; and Hebrews 1:2–3. While orthodox scholars generally agree that these verses indicate that Christ created and currently sustains the universe, it is not readily apparent how they might support ethical monism, and Strong did not explain. In fact, Strong moved on to what really lay behind his ethical monism: “This view of the relation of the universe to God lays the foundation for a Christian application of recent philosophical doctrine.”100

Strong thought that his ethical monism fit very nicely with the findings of modern science and the direction contemporary philosophy seemed to be
Ethical monism offered an explanation of the universe that Strong believed many thinkers would find attractive, yet he believed it offered a genuinely Christian explanation of the universe. He proposed that “the system of forces which we call the universe is the immediate product of the mind and will of God; and, since Christ is the mind and will of God in exercise, Christ is the Creator and Upholder of the universe.” For Strong this meant that “Nature is the omnipresent Christ, manifesting God to creatures.”

Strong then teased this idea out a bit. He identified Christ himself as “the principle of cohesion, attraction, interaction, not only in the physical universe, but in the intellectual and moral universe as well.” This meant that some of the so-called discoveries of modern science were really just names for the Christ who lay behind them and, more important, that Christ is the foundation for ethics and logic. Strong explained, “As the attraction of gravitation and the principle of evolution are only other names for Christ, so he is the basis of inductive reasoning and the ground of moral unity in creation.”

Once again Strong found it necessary to emphasize that ethical monism affirms the truths contained in pantheism and deism while rejecting the errors present in these philosophical systems. In other words, ethical monism provides a better philosophical explanation of reality than either of these systems. Strong ended his discussion of ethical monism by asserting that ethical monism provides the basis for a new and better explanation of many different philosophical and theological issues. As he confessed in the preface to the final edition of his *Systematic Theology*,

> During the twenty years which have intervened.... My philosophical and critical point of view meantime has also somewhat changed. While I still hold to the old doctrines, I interpret them differently and expound them more clearly, because I seem to myself to have reached a fundamental truth which throws new light upon them all.... This view implies a monistic and idealistic conception of the world.

Chapter 4 discusses how ethical monism fit with, and in several cases influenced, key areas of Strong’s theology.