

FISKE JOHN

THE IDEA OF GOD AS
AFFECTED BY MODERN
KNOWLEDGE

John Fiske

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by Modern Knowledge**

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John Fiske

The Idea of God as Affected by Modern Knowledge

PREFACE

When asked to give a second address before the Concord School of Philosophy, I gladly accepted the invitation, as affording a proper occasion for saying certain things which I had for some time wished to say about theism. My address was designed to introduce the discussion of the question whether pantheism is the legitimate outcome of modern science. It seemed to me that the object might best be attained by passing in review the various modifications which the idea of God has undergone in the past, and pointing out the shape in which it is likely to survive the rapid growth of modern knowledge, and especially the establishment of that great doctrine of evolution which is fast obliging us to revise our opinions upon all subjects whatsoever. Having thus in the text outlined the idea of God most likely to be conceived by minds trained in the doctrine of evolution, I left it for further discussion to decide whether the term "pantheism" can properly be applied to such a conception. While much enlightenment may be got from carefully describing the substance of a philosophic doctrine, very little can be gained by merely affixing to it a label; and I could not but feel that my argument would be simply encumbered by the introduction of any question of nomenclature involving such a vague and uninformative epithet as "pantheism." Such epithets are often regarded with favour and freely used, as seeming to obviate the necessity for that kind of labour to which most people are most averse, – the labour of sustained and accurate thinking. People are too apt to make such general terms do duty in place of a careful examination of facts, and are thus sometimes led to strange conclusions. When, for example, they have heard somebody called an "agnostic," they at once think they know all about him; whereas they have very likely learned nothing that is of the slightest value in characterizing his opinions or his mental attitude. A term that can be applied at once to a Comte, a Mansel, and a Huxley is obviously of little use in the matter of definition. But, it may be asked, in spite of their world-wide differences, do not these three thinkers agree in holding that nothing can be known about the nature of God? Perhaps so, – one cannot answer even this plain question with an unqualified yes; but, granting that they fully agree in this assertion of ignorance, nevertheless, in their philosophic attitudes with regard to this ignorance, in the use they severally make of the assertion, in the way it determines their inferences about all manner of other things, the differences are so vast that nothing but mental confusion can come from a terminology which would content itself by applying to all three the common epithet "agnostic." The case is similar with such a word as "pantheism," which has been familiarly applied to so many utterly diverse systems of thought that it is very hard to tell just what it means. It has been equally applied to the doctrine of "the Hindu philosophers of the orthodox Brahmanical schools," who "hold that all finite existence is an illusion, and life mere vexation and mistake, a blunder or sorry jest of the Absolute;" and to the doctrine of the Stoics, who "went to the other extreme, and held that the universe was the product of perfect reason and in an absolute sense good." (Pollock's "Spinoza," p. 356.) In recent times it has been commonly used as a vituperative epithet, and hurled indiscriminately at such unpopular opinions as do not seem to call for so heavy a missile as the more cruel term "atheism." The writer who sets forth in plain scientific language a physical theory of the universe is liable to be scowled at and called an atheist; but, when the very same ideas are presented in the form of oracular apophthegm or poetic rhapsody, the author is more gently described as "tinctured with pantheism."

But out of the chaos of vagueness in which this unhappy word has been immersed it is perhaps still possible to extract something like a definite meaning. In the broadest sense there are three possible ways in which we may contemplate the universe.

First, we may regard the world of phenomena as sufficient unto itself, and deny that it needs to be referred to any underlying and all-comprehensive unity. Nothing has an ultimate origin or destiny; there is no dramatic tendency in the succession of events, nor any ultimate law to which everything must be referred; there is no reasonableness in the universe save that with which human fancy unwarrantably endows it; the events of the world have no orderly progression like the scenes of a well-constructed plot, but in the manner of their coming and going they constitute simply what Chauncey Wright so aptly called "cosmical weather;" they drift and eddy about in an utterly blind and irrational manner, though now and then evolving, as if by accident, temporary combinations which have to us a rational appearance. This is Atheism, pure and unqualified. It recognizes no Omnipresent Energy.

Secondly, we may hold that the world of phenomena is utterly unintelligible unless referred to an underlying and all-comprehensive unity. All things are manifestations of an Omnipresent Energy which cannot be in any imaginable sense personal or anthropomorphic; out from this eternal source of phenomena all individualities proceed, and into it they must all ultimately return and be absorbed; the events of the world have an orderly progression, but not toward any goal recognizable by us; in the process of evolution there is nothing that from any point of view can be called teleological; the beginning and end of things – that which is Alpha and Omega – is merely an inscrutable essence, a formless void. Such a view as this may properly be called Pantheism. It recognizes an Omnipresent Energy, but virtually identifies it with the totality of things.

Thirdly, we may hold that the world of phenomena is intelligible only when regarded as the multiform manifestation of an Omnipresent Energy that is in some way – albeit in a way quite above our finite comprehension – anthropomorphic or quasi-personal. There is a true objective reasonableness in the universe; its events have an orderly progression, and, so far as those events are brought sufficiently within our ken for us to generalize them exhaustively, their progression is toward a goal that is recognizable by human intelligence; "the process of evolution is itself the working out of a mighty Teleology of which our finite understandings can fathom but the scantiest rudiments" ("Cosmic Philosophy," vol. ii. p. 406); it is indeed but imperfectly that we can describe the dramatic tendency in the succession of events, but we can see enough to assure us of the fundamental fact that there is such a tendency; and this tendency is the objective aspect of that which, when regarded on its subjective side, we call Purpose. Such a theory of things is Theism. It recognizes an Omnipresent Energy, which is none other than the living God.

It is this theistic doctrine which I hold myself, and which in the present essay I have sought to exhibit as the legitimate outcome of modern scientific thought. I was glad to have such an excellent occasion for returning to the subject as the invitation from Concord gave me, because in a former attempt to expound the same doctrine I do not seem to have succeeded in making myself understood. In my "Outlines of Cosmic Philosophy," published in 1874, I endeavoured to set forth a theory of theism identical with that which is set forth in the present essay. But an acute and learned friend, writing under the pseudonym of "Physicus," in his "Candid Examination of Theism" (London, 1878), thus criticizes my theory: In it, he says, "while I am able to discern the elements which I think may properly be regarded as common to Theism and to Atheism, I am not able to discern any single element that is specifically distinctive of Theism" (p. 145). The reason for the inability of "Physicus" to discern any such specifically distinctive element is that he misunderstands me as proposing to divest the theistic idea of every shred of anthropomorphism, while still calling it a theistic idea. This, he thinks, would be an utterly illegitimate proceeding, and I quite agree with him. In similar wise my friend Mr. Frederick Pollock, in his admirable work on Spinoza (London, 1880), observes that "Mr. Fiske's doctrine excludes the belief in a so-called Personal God, and the particular forms of religious

emotion dependent on it" (p. 356). If the first part of this sentence stood alone, I might pause to inquire how much latitude of meaning may be conveyed in the expression "so-called;" is it meant that I exclude the belief in a Personal God as it was held by Augustine and Paley, or as it was held by Clement and Schleiermacher, or both? But the second clause of the sentence seems to furnish the answer; it seems to imply that I would practically do away with Theism altogether.

Such a serious misstatement of my position, made in perfect good faith by two thinkers so conspicuous for ability and candour, shows that, in spite of all the elaborate care with which the case was stated in "Cosmic Philosophy," some further explanation is needed. It is true that there are expressions in that work which, taken singly and by themselves, might seem to imply a total rejection of theism. Such expressions occur chiefly in the chapter entitled "Anthropomorphic Theism," where great pains are taken to show the inadequacy of the Paley argument from design, and to point out the insuperable difficulties in which we are entangled by the conception of a Personal God as it is held by the great majority of modern theologians who have derived it from Plato and Augustine. In the succeeding chapters, however, it is expressly argued that the total elimination of anthropomorphism from the idea of God is impossible. There are some who, recognizing that the ideas of Personality and Infinity are unthinkable in combination, seek to escape the difficulty by speaking of God as the "Infinite Power;" that is, instead of a symbol derived from our notion of human consciousness, they employ a symbol derived from our notion of force in general. For many philosophic purposes the device is eminently useful; but it should not be forgotten that, while the form of our experience of Personality does not allow us to conceive it as infinite, it is equally true that the form of our experience of Force does not allow us to conceive it as infinite, since we know force only as antagonized by other force. Since, moreover, our notion of force is purely a generalization from our subjective sensations of effort overcoming resistance, there is scarcely less anthropomorphism lurking in the phrase "Infinite Power" than in the phrase "Infinite Person." Now in "Cosmic Philosophy" I argue that the presence of God is the one all-pervading fact of life, from which there is no escape; that while in the deepest sense the nature of Deity is unknowable by finite Man, nevertheless the exigencies of our thinking oblige us to symbolize that nature in some form that has a real meaning for us; and that we cannot symbolize that nature as in any wise physical, but are bound to symbolize it as in some way psychical. I do not here repeat the arguments, but simply state the conclusions. The final conclusion (vol. ii. p. 449) is that we must not say that "God is Force," since such a phrase inevitably calls up those pantheistic notions of blind necessity, which it is my express desire to avoid; but, always bearing in mind the symbolic character of the words, we may say that "God is Spirit." How my belief in the personality of God could be more strongly expressed without entirely deserting the language of modern philosophy and taking refuge in pure mythology, I am unable to see.

There are two points in the present essay which I hope will serve to define more completely the kind of theism which I have tried to present as compatible with the doctrine of evolution. One is the historic contrast between anthropomorphic and cosmic theism regarded in their modes of genesis, and especially as exemplified within the Christian church in the very different methods and results of Augustine on the one hand and Athanasius on the other. The view which I have ventured to designate as "cosmic theism" is no invention of mine; in its most essential features it has been entertained by some of the profoundest thinkers of Christendom in ancient and modern times, from Clement of Alexandria to Lessing and Goethe and Schleiermacher. The other point is the teleological inference drawn from the argument of my first Concord address on "The Destiny of Man, viewed in the Light of his Origin."

When that address was published, a year ago, I was surprised to find it quite commonly regarded as indicating some radical change of attitude on my part, – a "conversion," perhaps, from one set of opinions to another. Inasmuch as the argument in the "Destiny of Man" was based in every one of its parts upon arguments already published in "Cosmic Philosophy" (1874), and in the "Unseen World" (1876), I naturally could not understand why the later book should impress people

so differently from the earlier ones. It presently appeared, however, that none of my friends who had studied the earlier books had detected any such change of attitude; it was only people who knew little or nothing about me, or else the newspapers. Whence the inference seemed obvious that many readers of the "Destiny of Man" must have contrasted it, not with my earlier books which they had not read, but with some vague and distorted notion about my views which had grown up (Heaven knows how or why!) through the medium of "the press;" and thus there might have been produced the impression that those views had undergone a radical change.

It would be little to my credit, however, had my views of the doctrine of evolution and its implications undergone no development or enlargement since the publication of "Cosmic Philosophy." To carry such a subject about in one's mind for ten years, without having any new thoughts about it, would hardly be a proof of fitness for philosophizing. I have for some time been aware of a shortcoming in the earlier work, which it is the purpose of these two Concord addresses in some measure to remedy. That shortcoming was an imperfect appreciation of the goal toward which the process of evolution is tending, and a consequent failure to state adequately how the doctrine of evolution must affect our estimate of Man's place in Nature. Nothing of fundamental importance in "Cosmic Philosophy" needed changing, but a new chapter needed to be written, in order to show how the doctrine of evolution, by exhibiting the development of the highest spiritual human qualities as the goal toward which God's creative work has from the outset been tending, replaces Man in his old position of headship in the universe, even as in the days of Dante and Aquinas. That which the pre-Copernican astronomy naively thought to do by placing the home of Man in the centre of the physical universe, the Darwinian biology profoundly accomplishes by exhibiting Man as the terminal fact in that stupendous process of evolution whereby things have come to be what they are. In the deepest sense it is as true as it ever was held to be, that the world was made for Man, and that the bringing forth in him of those qualities which we call highest and holiest is the final cause of creation. The arguments upon which this conclusion rests, as they are set forth in the "Destiny of Man" and epitomized in the concluding section of the present essay, may all be found in "Cosmic Philosophy;" but I failed to sum them up there and indicate the conclusion, almost within reach, which I had not quite clearly seized. When, after long hovering in the background of consciousness, it suddenly flashed upon me two years ago, it came with such vividness as to seem like a revelation.

This conclusion as to the implications of the doctrine of evolution concerning Man's place in Nature supplies the element wanting in the theistic theory set forth in "Cosmic Philosophy," – the teleological element. It is profoundly true that a theory of things may seem theistic or atheistic in virtue of what it says of Man, no less than in virtue of what it says of God. The craving for a final cause is so deeply rooted in human nature that no doctrine of theism which fails to satisfy it can seem other than lame and ineffective. In writing "Cosmic Philosophy" I fully realized this when, in the midst of the argument against Paley's form of theism, I said that "the process of evolution is itself the working out of a mighty Teleology of which our finite understandings can fathom but the scantiest rudiments." Nevertheless, while the whole momentum of my thought carried me to the conviction that it must be so, I was not yet able to indicate *how* it is so, and I accordingly left the subject with this brief and inadequate hint. Could the point have been worked out then and there, I think it would have left no doubt in the minds of "Physicus" and Mr. Pollock as to the true character of Cosmic Theism.

But hold, cries the scientific inquirer, what in the world are you doing? Are we again to resuscitate the phantom Teleology, which we had supposed at last safely buried between cross-roads and pinned down with a stake? Was not Bacon right in characterizing "final causes" as vestal virgins, so barren has their study proved? And has not Huxley, with yet keener sarcasm, designated them the *hetairæ* of philosophy, so often have they led men astray? Very true. I do not wish to take back a single word of all that I have said in my chapter on "Anthropomorphic Theism" in condemnation of the teleological method and the peculiar theistic doctrines upon which it rests. As a means of investigation it is absolutely worthless. Nay, it is worse than worthless; it is treacherous, it is debauching to the

intellect. But that is no reason why, when a distinct dramatic tendency in the events of the universe appears as the *result* of purely scientific investigation, we should refuse to recognize it. It is the object of the "Destiny of Man" to prove that there is such a dramatic tendency; and while such a tendency cannot be regarded as indicative of purpose in the limited anthropomorphic sense, it is still, as I said before, the objective aspect of that which, when regarded on its subjective side, we call Purpose. There is a reasonableness in the universe such as to indicate that the Infinite Power of which it is the multiform manifestation is psychical, though it is impossible to ascribe to Him any of the limited psychical attributes which we know, or to argue from the ways of Man to the ways of God. For, as St. Paul reminds us, "who hath known the mind of the Lord, or who hath been his counsellor?"

It is in this sense that I accept Mr. Spencer's doctrine of the Unknowable. How far my interpretation agrees with his own I do not undertake to say. On such an abstruse matter it is best that one should simply speak for one's self. But in his recent essay on "Retrogressive Religion" he uses expressions which imply a doctrine of theism essentially similar to that here maintained. The "infinite and eternal Energy from which all things proceed," and which is the same power that "in ourselves wells up under the form of consciousness," is certainly the power which is here recognized as God. The term "Unknowable" I have carefully refrained from using; it does not occur in the text of this essay. It describes only one aspect of Deity, but it has been seized upon by shallow writers of every school, treated as if fully synonymous with Deity, and made the theme of the most dismal twaddle that the world has been deluged with since the days of mediæval scholasticism. The latest instance is the wretched positivist rubbish which Mr. Frederic Harrison has mistaken for criticism, and to which it is almost a pity that Mr. Spencer should have felt called upon to waste his valuable time in replying. That which Mr. Spencer throughout all his works regards as the All-Being, the Power of which "our lives, alike physical and mental, in common with all the activities, organic and inorganic, amid which we live, are but the workings," – this omnipresent Power it pleases Mr. Harrison to call the "All-Nothingness," to describe it as "a logical formula begotten in controversy, dwelling apart from man and the world" (whatever all that may mean), and to imagine its worshippers as thus addressing it in prayer, "O x^n , love us, help us, make us one with thee!" If Mr. Harrison's aim were to understand, rather than to misrepresent, the religious attitude which goes with such a conception of Deity as Mr. Spencer's, he could nowhere find it more happily expressed than in these wonderful lines of Goethe:

"Weltseele, komm, uns zu durchdringen!
Dann mit dem Weltgeist selbst zu ringen
Wird unsrer Kräfte Hochberuf.
Theilnehmend führen gute Geister,
Geline leitend, höchste Meister,
Zu dem der alles schafft und schuf."

Mr. Harrison is enabled to perform his antics simply because he happens to have such a word as "Unknowable" to play with. Yet the word which has been put to such unseemly uses is, when properly understood, of the highest value in theistic philosophy. That Deity *per se* is not only unknown but unknowable is a truth which Mr. Spencer has illustrated with all the resources of that psychologic analysis of which he is incomparably the greatest master the world has ever seen; but it is not a truth which originated with him, or the demonstration of which is tantamount, as Mr. Harrison would have us believe, to the destruction of all religion. Among all the Christian theologians that have lived, there are few higher names than Athanasius, who also regarded Deity *per se* as unknowable, being revealed to mankind only through incarnation in Christ. It is not as failing to recognize its value that I have refrained in this essay from using the term "Unknowable;" it is because so many false and stupid inferences have been drawn from Mr. Spencer's use of the word that it seemed worth while to

show how a doctrine essentially similar to his might be expounded without introducing it. For further elucidation I will simply repeat in this connection what I wrote long ago: "It is enough to remind the reader that Deity is unknowable just in so far as it is not manifested to consciousness through the phenomenal world, – knowable just in so far as it is thus manifested: unknowable in so far as infinite and absolute, – knowable in the order of its phenomenal manifestations; knowable, in a symbolic way, as the Power which is disclosed in every throb of the mighty rhythmic life of the universe; knowable as the eternal Source of a Moral Law which is implicated with each action of our lives, and in obedience to which lies our only guaranty of the happiness which is incorruptible, and which neither inevitable misfortune nor unmerited obloquy can take away. Thus, though we may not by searching find out God, though we may not compass infinitude or attain to absolute knowledge, we may at least know all that it concerns us to know, as intelligent and responsible beings. They who seek to know more than this, to transcend the conditions under which alone is knowledge possible, are, in Goethe's profound language, as wise as little children who, when they have looked into a mirror, turn it around to see what is behind it." ("Cosmic Philosophy," vol. ii. p. 470.)

The present essay must be regarded as a sequel to the "Destiny of Man," – so much so that the force of the argument in the concluding section can hardly be appreciated without reference to the other book. The two books, taken together, contain the bare outlines of a theory of religion which I earnestly hope at some future time to state elaborately in a work on the true nature of Christianity. Some such scheme had begun vaguely to dawn upon my mind when I was fourteen years old, and thought in the language of the rigid Calvinistic orthodoxy then prevalent in New England. After many and extensive changes of opinion, the idea assumed definite shape in the autumn of 1869, when I conceived the plan of a book to be entitled "Jesus of Nazareth and the Founding of Christianity," – a work intended to deal on the one hand with the natural genesis of the complex aggregate of beliefs and aspirations known as Christianity, and on the other hand with the metamorphoses which are being wrought in this aggregate by modern knowledge and modern theories of the universe. Such a book, involving a treatment both historical and philosophical, requires long and varied preparation; and I have always regarded my other books, published from time to time, as simply wayside studies preliminary to the undertaking of this complicated and difficult task. While thus habitually shaping my work with reference to this cherished idea, I have written some things which are in a special sense related to it. The rude outlines of a very small portion of the historical treatment are contained in the essays on "The Jesus of History," and "The Christ of Dogma," published in the volume entitled "The Unseen World, and Other Essays." The outlines of the philosophical treatment are partially set forth in the "Destiny of Man" and in the present work.

It amused me to see that almost every review of the "Destiny of Man" took pains to state that it was my Concord address "rewritten and expanded." Such trifles help one to understand the helter-skelter way in which more important things get said and believed. The "Destiny of Man" was printed exactly as it was delivered at Concord, without the addition, or subtraction, or alteration of a single word. The case is the same with the present work.

Petersham, *September 6, 1885.*

I

Difficulty of expressing the Idea of God so that it can be readily understood

In Goethe's great poem, while Faust is walking with Margaret at eventide in the garden, she asks him questions about his religion. It is long since he has been shriven or attended mass; does he, then, believe in God? – a question easy to answer with a simple yes, were it not for the form in which it is put. The great scholar and subtle thinker, who has delved in the deepest mines of philosophy and come forth weary and heavy-laden with their boasted treasures, has framed a very different conception of God from that entertained by the priest at the confessional or the altar, and how is he to make this intelligible to the simple-minded girl that walks by his side? Who will make bold to declare that he can grasp an idea of such overwhelming vastness as the idea of God, yet who that hath the feelings of a man can bring himself to cast away a belief that is indispensable to the rational and healthful workings of the mind? So long as the tranquil dome of heaven is raised above our heads and the firm-set earth is spread forth beneath our feet, while the everlasting stars course in their mighty orbits and the lover gazes with ineffable tenderness into the eyes of her that loves him, so long, says Faust, must our hearts go out toward Him that upholds and comprises all. Name or describe as we may the Sustainer of the world, the eternal fact remains there, far above our comprehension, yet clearest and most real of all facts. To name and describe it, to bring it within the formulas of theory or creed, is but to veil its glory as when the brightness of heaven is enshrouded in mist and smoke. This has a pleasant sound to Margaret's ears. It reminds her of what the parson sometimes says, though couched in very different phrases; and yet she remains uneasy and unsatisfied. Her mind is benumbed by the presence of an idea confessedly too great to be grasped. She feels the need of some concrete symbol that can be readily apprehended; and she hopes that her lover has not been learning bad lessons from Mephistopheles.

The difficulty which here besets Margaret must doubtless have been felt by every one when confronted with the thoughts by which the highest human minds have endeavoured to disclose the hidden life of the universe and interpret its meaning. It is a difficulty which baffles many, and they who surmount it are few indeed. Most people content themselves through life with a set of concrete formulas concerning Deity, and vituperate as atheistic all conceptions which refuse to be compressed within the narrow limits of their creed. For the great mass of men the idea of God is quite overlaid and obscured by innumerable symbolic rites and doctrines that have grown up in the course of the long historic development of religion. All such rites and doctrines had a meaning once, beautiful and inspiring or terrible and forbidding, and many of them still retain it. But whether meaningless or fraught with significance, men have wildly clung to them as shipwrecked mariners cling to the drifting spars that alone give promise of rescue from threatening death. Such concrete symbols have in all ages been argued and fought for until they have come to seem the essentials of religion; and new moons and sabbaths, decrees of councils and articles of faith, have usurped the place of the living God. In every age the theory or discovery – however profoundly theistic in its real import – which has thrown discredit upon such symbols has been stigmatized as subversive of religion, and its adherents have been reviled and persecuted. It is, of course, inevitable that this should be so. To the half-educated mind a theory of divine action couched in the form of a legend, in which God is depicted as entertaining human purposes and swayed by human passions, is not only intelligible, but impressive. It awakens emotion, it speaks to the heart, it threatens the sinner with wrath to come or heals the wounded spirit with sweet whispers of consolation. However mythical the form in which it is presented, however literally false the statements of which it is composed, it seems profoundly real

and substantial. Just in so far as it is crudely concrete, just in so far as its terms can be vividly realized by the ordinary mind, does such a theological theory seem weighty and true. On the other hand, a theory of divine action which, discarding as far as possible the aid of concrete symbols, attempts to include within its range the endlessly complex operations that are forever going on throughout the length and breadth of the knowable universe, – such a theory is to the ordinary mind unintelligible. It awakens no emotion because it is not understood. Though it may be the nearest approximation to the truth of which the human intellect is at the present moment capable, though the statements of which it is composed may be firmly based upon demonstrated facts in nature, it will nevertheless seem eminently unreal and uninteresting. The dullest peasant can understand you when you tell him that honey is sweet, while a statement that the ratio of the circumference of a circle to its diameter may be expressed by the formula $\pi = 3.14159$ will sound as gibberish in his ears; yet the truth embodied in the latter statement is far more closely implicated with every act of the peasant's life, if he only knew it, than the truth expressed in the former. So the merest child may know enough to marvel at the Hebrew legend of the burning bush, but only the ripest scholar can begin to understand the character of the mighty problems with which Spinoza was grappling when he had so much to say about *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*.

For these reasons all attempts to study God as revealed in the workings of the visible universe, and to characterize the divine activity in terms derived from such study, have met with discouragement, if not with obloquy. As substituting a less easily comprehensible formula for one that is more easily comprehensible, they seem to be frittering away the idea of God, and reducing it to an empty abstraction. There is a further reason for the dread with which such studies are commonly regarded. The theories of divine action accepted as orthodox by the men of any age have been bequeathed to them by their forefathers of an earlier age. They were originally framed with reference to assumed facts of nature which advancing knowledge is continually discrediting and throwing aside. Each forward step in physical science obliges us to contemplate the universe from a somewhat altered point of view, so that the mutual relations of its parts keep changing as in an ever-shifting landscape. The notions of the world and its Maker with which we started by and by prove meagre and unsatisfying; they no longer fit in with the general scheme of our knowledge. Hence the men who are wedded to the old notions are quick to sound the alarm. They would fain deter us from taking the forward step which carries us to a new standpoint. Beware of science, they cry, lest with its dazzling discoveries and adventurous speculations it rob us of our soul's comfort and leave us in a godless world. Such in every age has been the cry of the more timid and halting spirits; and their fears have found apparent confirmation in the behaviour of a very different class of thinkers. As there are those who live in perpetual dread of the time when science shall banish God from the world, so, on the other hand, there are those who look forward with longing to such a time, and in their impatience are continually starting up and proclaiming that at last it has come. There are those who have indeed learned a lesson from Mephistopheles, the "spirit that forever denies." These are they that say in their hearts, "There is no God," and "congratulate themselves that they are going to die like the beasts." Rushing into the holiest arcana of philosophy, even where angels fear to tread, they lay hold of each new discovery in science that modifies our view of the universe, and herald it as a crowning victory for the materialists, – a victory which is ushering in the happy day when atheism is to be the creed of all men. It is in view of such philosophizers that the astronomer, the chemist, or the anatomist, whose aim is the dispassionate examination of evidence and the unbiased study of phenomena, may fitly utter the prayer, "Lord, save me from my friends!"

Thus through age after age has it fared with men's discoveries in science, and with their thoughts about God and the soul. It was so in the days of Galileo and Newton, and we have found it to be so in the days of Darwin and Spencer. The theologian exclaims, if planets are held in place by gravitation and tangential momentum, and if the highest forms of life have been developed by natural selection and direct adaptation, then the universe is swayed by blind forces, and nothing is left for God to do:

how impious and terrible the thought! Even so, echoes the favourite atheist, the Lamettrie or Büchner of the day; the universe, it seems, has always got on without a God, and accordingly there is none: how noble and cheering the thought! And as thus age after age they wrangle, with their eyes turned away from the light, the world goes on to larger and larger knowledge in spite of them, and does not lose its faith, for all these darkeners of counsel may say. As in the roaring loom of Time the endless web of events is woven, each strand shall make more and more clearly visible the living garment of God.

II

The Rapid Growth of Modern Knowledge

At no time since men have dwelt upon the earth have their notions about the universe undergone so great a change as in the century of which we are now approaching the end. Never before has knowledge increased so rapidly; never before has philosophical speculation been so actively conducted, or its results so widely diffused. It is a characteristic of organic evolution that numerous progressive tendencies, for a long time inconspicuous, now and then unite to bring about a striking and apparently sudden change; or a set of forces, quietly accumulating in one direction, at length unlock some new reservoir of force and abruptly inaugurate a new series of phenomena, as when water rises in a tank until its overflow sets whirling a system of toothed wheels. It may be that Nature makes no leaps, but in this way she now and then makes very long strides. It is in this way that the course of organic development is marked here and there by memorable epochs, which seem to open new chapters in the history of the universe. There was such an epoch when the common ancestor of ascidian and amphioxus first showed rudimentary traces of a vertebral column. There was such an epoch when the air-bladder of early amphibians began to do duty as a lung. Greatest of all, since the epoch, still hidden from our ken, when organic life began upon the surface of the globe, was the birth of that new era when, through a wondrous change in the direction of the working of natural selection, Humanity appeared upon the scene. In the career of the human race we can likewise point to periods in which it has become apparent that an immense stride was taken. Such a period marks the dawning of human history, when after countless ages of desultory tribal warfare men succeeded in uniting into comparatively stable political societies, and through the medium of written language began handing down to posterity the record of their thoughts and deeds. Since that morning twilight of history there has been no era so strongly marked, no change so swift or so far-reaching in the conditions of human life, as that which began with the great maritime discoveries of the fifteenth century and is approaching its culmination to-day. In its earlier stages this modern era was signalized by sporadic achievements of the human intellect, great in themselves and leading to such stupendous results as the boldest dared not dream of. Such achievements were the invention of printing, the telescope and microscope, the geometry of Descartes, the astronomy of Newton, the physics of Huyghens, the physiology of Harvey. Man's senses were thus indefinitely enlarged as his means of registration were perfected; he became capable of extending physical inferences from the earth to the heavens; and he made his first acquaintance with that luminiferous ether which was by and by to reveal the intimate structure of matter in regions far beyond the power of the microscope to penetrate.

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