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THEISM AND MODERN THOUGHT

I

We in this age—and the same holds true for men in every age—should take stock of the old things as well as press forward in ways that are new. Our life has to face the future; but we face it with eyes that have been taught to see and hands trained to act by past experience. This past experience guides our actions almost unconsciously; so that we may think little of it or may not think of it at all. We become aware of it only when we reflect on the principles, methods and ideals of our life. In our thinking, also, we are for ever gathering new facts and shedding old ideas, and we are apt to overlook its fundamental continuity. It is the new things and not the old that attract attention; and, as our experience grows, we make our ways of organising it—our scientific methods—more swift and certain. But just because our experience is a growth, the changes in it are not mere changes—not simply the substitution of one thing for another. What is new does not entirely displace what is old; it adds to it and takes away from it; but there is always something which persists and which is modified not by disconnected jerks but by continuous stages. This continuity is a mark not only of our active life

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but also of our thought. In both there are permanent factors which guard the unity of the whole. And these permanent factors are always combined with other factors, which by comparison are transient; and it is not easy to disentangle them in our reflexion.

Amongst the more permanent factors in our thinking must be counted an attitude towards the world and towards life as a whole. The details of the environment demand constant attention; but the details are always changing. At first the pressing needs of living leave little room for thought; but these needs vary from day to day. Whenever men begin to reflect they go beyond the immediate details and try to form some kind of view of the nature and meaning of life as a whole. There are indeed many things which interfere with this wider view: the pressure of momentary needs; the swift change of external objects; nay, science itself—for in showing us the connexions of things in detail, it may tend to restrict our view to a narrow horizon. But the call of the whole is insistent, though it may not be loud; and so we lift our eyes from the scenery in the foreground and try to form some idea of the world as a whole and of our own place in it.

Further, in this quest there always remains an element of mystery. We cannot have a complete view of the world-whole, for its detail is infinite. And we cannot get as clear and distinct a view of it as we may have of more limited objects of knowledge. We get much more exact knowledge from the special sciences than we can ever hope to get from theology. If our thought could be hedged within the region

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which is sometimes called 'positive,' there would be no mystery to baffle us. But this region of 'positive' facts is itself imbedded in a wider world of experience; it cannot stand by itself, as some writers have thought. In describing it we use a set of concepts which apply very imperfectly to the whole to which it belongs. For this whole is unique; there is but one universe, and therefore nothing else with which it can be compared. When we are examining particular things, we explain one fact by reference to other facts of the same kind. But we cannot in this way explain the universe, because it is the only fact of its kind. Our view of it must be formed from itself alone and from the facts and relations which it includes. And this view will not be simply a description of our experience (for such would be endless), but an interpretation of it—an attempt to see the meaning of particular things in the light of the whole to which they belong. And the light which makes all things visible may be itself unfathomable to the direct gaze.

Thus, within the realm of thought, we may discover three lines of contrast all connected with one another: the contrast between transient and permanent factors; that between our apprehension of the details of experience and the intuition of the whole; and that between the precise and definite concepts of science and the ideas whose inexhaustible meaning produces in us the sense of mystery. All of these contrasts, as they are revealed in our experience, fall short of absoluteness—admit of more and less. Permanence is a matter of degree for a mind evolved as man's mind has been; the whole cannot be grasped

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without its parts, and the parts are always fitted into a surrounding context suggestive of a larger whole; while, apart from purely formal and abstract concepts, the object of knowledge is always suggestive of more than is definitely known. Yet, taking each of these contrasts, belief in God may be said to belong to one and not to the other of the contrasted opposites. It is not transient, but, in varying forms and degrees, a permanent characteristic of almost all reflective thought. In spite of the exuberance of polytheistic mythologies, its object nearly always stands in a unique relation to man's life and the course of the world as a whole. And, equally in spite of the most rationalistic theology, God, in our idea of Him, is almost always conceived as at once the source of all reality and the ground of all knowledge and, at the same time, as never fully comprehensible in His own nature. Thus it comes about that the idea of God does not present entirely the same features, as it appears in successive periods of human thought. The history of these changes, and of the development they show, has been made the subject of many works on religion and theology. No attempt can be made here to trace this history even in its later period, far less to give any criticism of modern writers on the subject. At most all that can be done is to bring out, in very general terms, the way in which the problem presents itself to the thought of the present day, and to compare it with the attitude of times immediately antecedent to our own. Every age has its own attitude to the theistic idea. This attitude is bound up with its dominant scientific conceptions, with its

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knowledge of nature and of history, and with its ideals. The idea of God may be affected by all these, and in its turn it influences and modifies them. However conceived, the idea is always unique in the importance and comprehensiveness of its object, so that our whole thinking and life tend in one direction or in another according as it is accepted or rejected; while, on the other hand, being thus closely associated with the whole mental attitude, the theistic idea is modified according to the kind of concepts which experience and science have rendered dominant in our consciousness. Further, these concepts commonly owe their place in men's minds to influences which are for the most part independent of theological belief or religious experience: so that, at any period, God is defined or described almost in the same way both by those who profess belief in Him and by those who deny or doubt His existence.

If we survey the question of theistic belief and argument as it appears throughout the times usually described as modern, we may, I think, distinguish three different attitudes to the meaning of the question and the methods appropriate for dealing with it. Each of these is characteristic of a different period. It is not indeed peculiar to it; it persists after the time of its bloom, or it may be traced at an earlier stage of growth; and all of them may be found in previous history. Yet each flourished most abundantly in a particular period and is representative of the prevailing spirit of that period in things of the mind. They are thus the attitudes of different ages. The first of these ages may be called the Age of

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Reason. It covered most of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; and we may look upon it as ushered in by Descartes and as brought to an end by Hume and Kant. In this period the traditional 'proofs' for the existence of God were elaborated and discussed, asserted and refuted. The next period may be called, in Kant's words, the Age of Criticism; it is founded on a limited distrust of reason, and it issued in the doctrine which became known in the latter half of the nineteenth century as Agnosticism. For this type of view, knowledge of God is not possible; but it is possible that belief or faith may still remain. These two attitudes—those of the Age of Reason and of the Age of Criticism—appear at first sight to be exhaustive. Either, it would seem, we must trust reason and follow it whithersoever it leads; or else we must distrust reason and avoid it altogether in subjects to which it is inadequate. But these alternatives do not exhaust the possible attitudes of thought. Reason was somewhat narrowly conceived in the period of rationalism, and the criticism that followed destroyed less than it appeared to destroy. Most of us have recovered from agnosticism without thereby reverting to rationalism, and in the present period of attempted reconstruction there are signs that this age may be destined to be an Age of Comprehension.

These bald statements need explanation. We may begin to understand the attitude of contemporary thought to the problem of theism by looking more closely at the way in which that problem was dealt with both in the period of rationalism and in that of

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criticism, so as to discover in what respects their attitude and point of view differ from the attitude and point of view which we are justified in adopting.

The outstanding feature of the first period—or of the Age of Reason—was the formulation and discussion of the proofs of the existence of God—proofs which had been handed on from previous thinkers, especially the Scholastic philosophers. From the presence of the idea in our minds of a being than whom no greater can be conceived, or of a perfect being, from the mere existence of the world, and from the marks of design or adaptation in its parts, it was argued that God exists. These are the well-known Ontological, Cosmological, and Teleological arguments. Then, as now, there were two sides to the argument. Some held that the proofs, or some of them, were valid demonstrations and that consequently we can prove that God exists in much the same way as we can prove a mathematical or physical theorem; while others held that all the so-called proofs are invalid, and that consequently God does not exist, or at any rate that we have no ground for saying that He does. These proofs have now, for some time back, fallen into disfavour, even among writers who defend the theistic view. Most thinkers have ceased to regard them as convincing and have even begun to find them uninteresting. The mental attitude of competent persons towards these arguments has thus changed in a radical manner from what it was two hundred or even one hundred years ago. What is the reason of the change? Most will answer with confidence that it is due to the criticism of the arguments carried out first

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by Hume and afterwards more systematically by Kant. Kant's criticism struck at the roots of the whole rationalist method of thought, for he attempted to show that, equally in affirming and in denying the existence of God on grounds of reason, we passed beyond the bounds of reason into territory over which it had no jurisdiction. If his criticism is valid, the 'proofs' fall to the ground. But much more will fall to the ground along with them: all assertions about ultimate reality or the true nature of things will have to be discarded. Thus not only the philosophies of Descartes and Spinoza and Leibniz will be refuted, but that of Hegel also and even that of Bergson. The modern or neo-Hegelians, therefore, and the followers of Bergson cannot really agree with the criticism of Kant; and yet they have about as little respect as he had for the old proofs for the existence of God. As a rule they do not even think it worth while to refute them, they are content to ignore them.

It would seem therefore that something more than the effectiveness of the Kantian criticism is necessary to explain the neglect into which the old theistic arguments have fallen. For myself I think that this neglect is not altogether justified and that the prevailing temper of our age has dismissed them too lightly. They do not indeed achieve their object, and prove the existence of God. But they do show the inadequacy of the once popular anti-theistic views which would explain the nature of all reality from the basis of materialism or of naturalism. This, however, in passing. The question is why we pay so little regard to those arguments which a preceding age often

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regarded as convincing and united in regarding as important. If Kant's criticism is not sufficient to explain the changed point of view, what was its cause? It appears to me that the true explanation lies in the special and somewhat restricted view of reason common to the Age of Reason—the view which we commonly name by the term Rationalism.

What then is Rationalism? Some distinguished authorities hold that the essence of Rationalism consists in this, that it is the use of reason for the purpose of destroying religious belief. This definition sounds as if it were the satire of an orthodox writer who was accusing the rationalists of prejudice—anxious only to destroy, not to construct. But it is not. It is the definition put forward by writers who count themselves among the Rationalists; and on that account it deserves attention. Yet, as a definition, it is faulty, because it does not bring out the characteristics of the rationalist method, only its purpose and result. And we find a method essentially the same when the purpose and results are of a different nature. If we turn to the great deistical controversy of the eighteenth century in England, for instance, we may, if we like, give the name of Rationalist to the writers on one side of the controversy, because their purpose and result may be said to have been destructive of the religious faith of the time, and refuse it to the writers on the other side of the controversy, because their purpose and result was the edification of men in the faith. But, if we do this, we overlook a fundamental similarity between the two sides in the controversy. Their reliance on reason, their view of reason, and their use

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of reason were essentially the same. In these respects Butler and Tindal, for instance, are very much at one, however much they differ in the results they reached, and perhaps from the outset intended to reach. The essential characteristic of the method called Rationalism was the precise but limited view taken of reason; and this feature was common to the writers of both camps. They aimed at precision in their arguments and thus rendered a great service to clear thinking. But their view was limited. By 'reason' they meant the passage from proposition to proposition by the ordinary processes of deduction and induction—especially deduction. They brought to light what could and what could not be arrived at in this way. But they sought to apply to the interpretation of the universe as a whole the same kind of intellectual process as that by which one passes from part to part in the examination of finite things or from proposition to proposition in a chain of reasoning. By 'reason' they meant reasoning—the work of the discursive understanding, as it is called, in contrast with that knowledge which partakes of the nature of intuition.

This distinction points to a very radical difference of attitude amongst philosophers, to which too little attention has been paid. The first principle of Rationalism is, I think, put most clearly in the assertion or assumption of Descartes that "all knowledge is of the same nature throughout and consists solely in combining what is self-evident." For Descartes and many other writers of his own generation and afterwards, mathematics and mathematical physics furnished the sole valid type of reasoning. The

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