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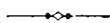
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John William Dawson

Excerpt

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MODERN IDEAS OF EVOLUTION



CHAPTER I

PRESENT ASPECTS OF THE QUESTION

THE great fabric of the Darwinian evolution may be said to have attained to its completion. Its chief corner-stone has been laid with shouting by its jubilant adherents, and it is presented to us as a permanent and finished structure, fitted to withstand all the attacks of time and chance. We are even asked to regard its architect as the Newton of Natural Science, and to believe in the finality and completeness of the structure which he has raised.

In seeming contrast with this, we find that the disciples of the great teacher are already beginning to diverge widely in their beliefs, and to found new schools, some of which are tending toward the old and discarded theory of Lamarck, or to a modification of it known as Neo-Lamarckianism, while others boast that they maintain the pure Darwinian doctrine though even among these there are diverse shades of

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belief. Thus, like other hypotheses and philosophical systems which have preceded it, Darwinism seems to have entered on a process of disintegration, and it is not easy to divine in what form or forms it may be handed down to our successors.

While thus liable to different interpretations within itself, the Darwinian evolution has still more varied aspects when we regard it in relation to the other beliefs and interests of humanity. The hypothesis has been applied to all sorts of uses in relation to physical and natural science, as well as to history and sociology and it has been made a means of revolutionising our classifications and our ideas of species and other groups. It is sometimes monistic or positivist, and scarcely distinguishable from the old-fashioned atheism and materialism. Sometimes it assumes the newer form of agnosticism, and poses as neutral and indifferent with regard to those spiritual interests of man which are important beyond all others. Again, it becomes theistic, and here we have adherents of the new system ranging from those who are content to reconcile it with a theistic belief, which recognises a God very far off and shorn of His more important attributes, to those who accept evolution as a new gospel, adding fresh light to that which shines in the teaching of Jesus Christ. At a lower level it is evident that the ideas of struggle for existence and survival of the fittest, introduced by the new philosophy, and its resolution of man himself

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into a mere spontaneous improvement of brute ancestors, have stimulated to an intense degree that popular unrest, so natural to an age discontented with its lot, because it has learned what it might do and have, without being able to realise its expectations, and which threatens to overthrow the whole fabric of society as at present constituted.

In these circumstances it seems desirable that science, and especially natural and physical science, which may in some degree be held responsible for this movement, should define its own position, and do what it can to remove the difficulties and relieve the fears which have been engendered by the use or misuse of its facts and principles.

Science will in this way best consult its true interests; since, if it commits itself to a philosophy professing finality, it is pretty certain to suffer in the inevitable reaction. On the other hand, if it will carefully sift that which is true from that which is false or hypothetical, it may ultimately fall heir to anything that may be valuable or permanent in the new philosophy without suffering from its mistakes.

We must bear in mind in this connection, that systems of philosophy which endeavour to explain everything by one idea, as they have appeared from time to time, though they have sprung into the field like boastful Goliaths, cowing too many good men for a time into silence or retreat, have soon proved vulnerable to mere pebbles from the armoury of nature.

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Those especially whose studies of philosophy began half a century ago, and who have seen several such systems wax and wane, besides knowing that the same process has been going on ever since the time of Thales of Miletus, have lost confidence in the infallibility of such all-embracing generalisations, and may be pardoned for at least cautioning their younger colleagues against sacrificing science to speculation, and against the tendency to become merely scientific specialists without breadth or sympathy for higher things.

The example of the great apostle of evolution himself should warn us as to this. Darwin, as he sits in marble on the staircase of the British Museum, represents a noble figure, made in the image of God, and capable of grasping mentally the heaven above as well as the earth beneath. As he appears in his recent biography, we see the same man paralysed by a spiritual atrophy, blinded and shut up in prison and chained to the mill of a materialistic philosophy where, like a captive Samson, he is doomed to grind all that is fair and beautiful in nature into a dry and formless dust. Would that he had lived to pull down the temple of Dagon with his own hands, even if an ephemeral reputation had perished in the ruins, and to avenge himself of the cruel enemies that had put out the eyes of his higher nature!

This depth of unscientific and unspiritual degeneration, into which the mind may be thrown by the excessive pursuit of evolutionary ideas, is well shown

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by Darwin himself in a letter written a year before his death. With reference to his doubts as to the existence of God, he asks—‘Can one trust to the convictions of a monkey’s mind?’ But if the idea of God may be a phantom of an ape-like brain, can we trust to reason or conscience in any other matter? May not science and philosophy themselves be similar fantasies, evolved by mere chance and unreason? In any case, does not this deprive science of the ennobling idea that nature is the development of Divine Mind, and so reduce it to mere drudgery, pursued only for its useful applications or for self-interest?

This seems a serious indictment against evolution, at least in its extreme forms, but its validity seems to be proved by a careful scrutiny of the developments that have followed the publication of the *Origin of Species*, and which, despite the efforts of so-called theistic and Christian evolutionists, may be held to have tended constantly to a lower and lower depth of materialistic agnosticism, and, at the same time, of debasement of natural science into a jumble of false classifications and visionary speculations. Neither science nor theology need, however, slide hopelessly into this gulf, and it may even be possible to stand near to the treacherous margin and to rescue some grains of truth from this ‘confused movement of the mind of our age,’ as it has been called by a recent German writer.¹

¹ Wiegand, *Darwinismus*, notice in the *Academy*, Aug. 25, 1877.

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In endeavouring to secure this desirable result, we must not take for granted the truth of the assertion so often confidently made, that science is hostile to religion. It is no doubt true that monistic and agnostic evolution, and those forms of Darwinism which follow the author of the system in negation of the living God, are inconsistent with religion as well as with all the higher interests of men. There may, however, be a theistic principle of development apparent in all nature, and which represents what we can perceive of the plan and methods of creation, understanding by that word the making of all things by Almighty Power, whether immediately or mediately, through means of things already made, and laws previously established. It may be said in favour of this view that it gives an inexpressible dignity to man and to science. It shows that the human reason must be after the model of the infinite Divine reason, that in scientific inquiry we are studying God's laws and revelation of Himself in nature. Nay, more, if we regard Christ as an incarnation of the Creator, we have in Christianity itself a higher revelation of God, which must be in harmony with nature; and we shall have a right to hold that the scientific investigator is doing Christ's work and God's work, and, on the other hand, that those qualities of humility, faith, sincerity, and love of truth which God requires of His followers are also those most profitable in scientific study, while scientific habits of thought are of the utmost value in

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the study of revelation and in the difficulties of the Christian life.

It is also to be observed that even the positivist and agnostic admit, as appears in recent controversies, that some religion or substitute for it is necessary to the highest perfection of man. For example, Harrison, in a recent paper,¹ believes as a positivist in what he calls the religion of humanity, that is, in setting up an ideal standard of human nature, based on historical examples, as something to live up to. His opponent Huxley, from the point of view of an agnostic, thinks this futile—stigmatises man as a failure, and as a ‘wilderness of apes’—and would adore the universe in all its majesty and grandeur.

In this they rehabilitate very old forms of religion, for it is evident that the most ancient idolatries consisted in lifting up men’s hearts to the sun and moon and stars, and in worshipping patriarchs and heroes. Thus we find that there can be no form of infidelity without some substitute for God, and this necessarily less high and perfect than the Creator Himself, while destitute of His fatherly attributes. Further, our agnostic and positivist friends even admit their need of a saviour, since they hold that there must be some elevating influence to raise us from our present evils and failures. Lastly, when we find the ablest advocates of such philosophy differing hopelessly among themselves, we may well see in this an evidence of the

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need of a divine revelation. Now, all this is precisely what the Bible has given us in a better way. If we look up with adoring wonder to the material universe, the Bible leads us to see in this the power and Godhead of the Creator, and the Creator as the living God, our Heavenly Father. If we seek for an ideal humanity to worship, the Bible points us to Jesus Christ, the perfect man, and at the same time the manifestation of God, the Good Shepherd giving His life for the sheep, God manifest in the flesh and bringing life and immortality to light. Thus the Bible gives us all that these modern ideas desiderate, and infinitely more. Nor should we think little of the older part of revelation, for it shows the historical development of God's plan, and is eminently valuable for its testimony to the unity of nature and of God. It is in religion what the older formations are in geology. Their conditions and their life may have been replaced by newer conditions and living beings, but they form the stable base of the later formations, which not only rest upon them, but which without them would be incomplete and unintelligible.

The lesson of these facts is to hold to the old faith, to fear no discussion, and to stand fast for this world and the future on the grand declaration of Jesus—'God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.'

It is somewhat reassuring that the controversies

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respecting evolution centre around the Bible, which is thus shown to be a formidable power in the world, and not a thing of the past, as some would have us suppose. In this connection it is to be observed that the attitude of the Bible is often misrepresented, since, though it affirms distinctly the creation of all things by the living God, it does not commit itself either as to the limits of species or as to any special doctrine with respect to the precise way in which it pleased God to make them. When we look at the details of the narrative of creation, we are struck with the manner in which the Bible includes, in a few simple words, all the leading causes and conditions which science has been able to discover.

For example, the production of the first animals is announced in the words: 'God said, Let the waters swarm with swarmers.'¹ A naturalist here recognises not only the origination of animal life in the waters, but also three powers or agencies concerned in its introduction, or rather, perhaps, one power and two conditions of its exercise. First, there are the Divine power and volition contained in the words, 'God said.' Secondly, there is a medium or environment previously prepared and essential to the production of the result — 'the waters.' Thirdly, there is the element of vital continuity in the term 'swarmers'—that reproductive element which hands down the organism with all its

¹ This is, perhaps, the best word to express the meaning of the term *sheretzim*—rapidly multiplying or dividing creatures.

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powers from generation to generation, from age to age. If we ask modern science what are the agencies and conditions implied in the introduction on the earth of the multitudinous forms of humble marine life which we find in the oldest rocks, its answer is in no essential respect different. It says that these creatures, endowed with powers of reproduction and possibly of variation, increased and multiplied and filled the waters with varied forms of life; in other words, they were *sheretzim*, or swarmers. It further says that their oceanic environment supplied the external conditions of their introduction and continuance, and all the varieties of station suited to their various forms—‘the waters brought them forth.’ Lastly, since biology cannot show any secondary cause adequate to produce out of dead matter even the humblest of these swarmers, it must here either confess its ignorance, and say that it knows nothing of such ‘abiogenesis,’¹ or must fall back on the old formula, ‘God said.’

Let it be further observed that creation or making, as thus stated in the Bible, is not of the nature of what some are pleased to call an arbitrary intervention and miraculous interference with the course of nature. It leaves quite open the inquiry how much of the vital

¹ It is sometimes urged against the idea of creation that it implies abiogenesis or production without previous life. But there must have been abiogenesis at some time, and probably more than once, else no living thing could have existed.