

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00513-5 - The Destiny of Man: Viewed in the Light of his Origin

John Fiske

Excerpt

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THE DESTINY OF MAN.



I.

*Man's Place in Nature, as affected by the
Copernican Theory.*



WHEN we study the Divine Comedy of Dante — that wonderful book wherein all the knowledge and speculation, all the sorrows and yearnings, of the far-off Middle Ages are enshrined in the glory of imperishable verse — we are brought face to face with a theory of the world and with ways of reasoning about the facts of nature which seem strange to us to-day, but from the influence of which we are not yet, and doubtless never shall be, wholly freed. A cosmology grotesque enough in the light of later knowledge, yet wrought out no less carefully than the

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physical theories of Lucretius, is employed in the service of a theology cumbrous in its obsolete details, but resting upon fundamental truths which mankind can never safely lose sight of. In the view of Dante and of that phase of human culture which found in him its clearest and sweetest voice, this earth, the fair home of man, was placed in the centre of a universe wherein all things were ordained for his sole behoof: the sun to give him light and warmth, the stars in their courses to preside over his strangely checkered destinies, the winds to blow, the floods to rise, or the fiend of pestilence to stalk abroad over the land,—all for the blessing, or the warning, or the chiding, of the chief among God's creatures, Man. Upon some such conception as this, indeed, all theology would seem naturally to rest. Once dethrone Humanity, regard it as a mere local incident in an endless and aimless series of cosmical changes, and you arrive at a doctrine which, under whatever specious

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name it may be veiled, is at bottom neither more nor less than Atheism. On its metaphysical side Atheism is the denial of anything psychical in the universe outside of human consciousness ; and it is almost inseparably associated with the materialistic interpretation of human consciousness as the ephemeral result of a fleeting collocation of particles of matter. Viewed upon this side, it is easy to show that Atheism is very bad metaphysics, while the materialism which goes with it is utterly condemned by modern science.¹ But our feeling toward Atheism goes much deeper than the mere recognition of it as philosophically untrue. The mood in which we condemn it is not at all like the mood in which we reject the corpuscular theory of light or Sir G. C. Lewis's vagaries on the subject of Egyptian hieroglyphics. We are wont to look upon Atheism with unspeakable horror and loathing. Our moral sense revolts against it no less than our intelligence ; and this is because, on its

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practical side, Atheism would remove Humanity from its peculiar position in the world, and make it cast in its lot with the grass that withers and the beasts that perish ; and thus the rich and varied life of the universe, in all the ages of its wondrous duration, becomes deprived of any such element of purpose as can make it intelligible to us or appeal to our moral sympathies and religious aspirations.

And yet the first result of some of the grandest and most irrefragable truths of modern science, when newly discovered and dimly comprehended, has been to make it appear that Humanity must be rudely unseated from its throne in the world and made to occupy an utterly subordinate and trivial position ; and it is because of this mistaken view of their import that the Church has so often and so bitterly opposed the teaching of such truths. With the advent of the Copernican astronomy the funnel-shaped Inferno, the steep mountain of Purgatory crowned

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with its terrestrial paradise, and those concentric spheres of Heaven wherein beatified saints held weird and subtle converse, all went their way to the limbo prepared for the childlike fancies of untaught minds, whither Hades and Valhalla had gone before them. In our day it is hard to realize the startling effect of the discovery that Man does not dwell at the centre of things, but is the denizen of an obscure and tiny speck of cosmical matter quite invisible amid the innumerable throng of flaming suns that make up our galaxy. To the contemporaries of Copernicus the new theory seemed to strike at the very foundations of Christian theology. In a universe where so much had been made without discernible reference to Man, what became of that elaborate scheme of salvation which seemed to rest upon the assumption that the career of Humanity was the sole object of God's creative forethought and fostering care? When we bear this in mind, we see how natural and inevitable it was

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that the Church should persecute such men as Galileo and Bruno. At the same time it is instructive to observe that, while the Copernican astronomy has become firmly established in spite of priestly opposition, the foundations of Christian theology have not been shaken thereby. It is not that the question which once so sorely puzzled men has ever been settled, but that it has been outgrown. The speculative necessity for man's occupying the largest and most central spot in the universe is no longer felt. It is recognized as a primitive and childish notion. With our larger knowledge we see that these vast and fiery suns are after all but the Titan-like *servants* of the little planets which they bear with them in their flight through the abysses of space. Out from the awful gaseous turmoil of the central mass dart those ceaseless waves of gentle radiance that, when caught upon the surface of whirling worlds like ours, bring forth the endlessly varied forms and the endlessly

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complex movements that make up what we can see of life. And as when God revealed himself to his ancient prophet He came not in the earthquake or the tempest but in a voice that was still and small, so that divine spark the Soul, as it takes up its brief abode in this realm of fleeting phenomena, chooses not the central sun where elemental forces forever blaze and clash, but selects an outlying terrestrial nook where seeds may germinate in silence, and where through slow fruition the mysterious forms of organic life may come to take shape and thrive. He who thus looks a little deeper into the secrets of nature than his forefathers of the sixteenth century may well smile at the quaint conceit that man cannot be the object of God's care unless he occupies an immovable position in the centre of the stellar universe.

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II.

*Man's Place in Nature, as affected by
Darwinism.*

WHEN the Copernican astronomy was finally established through the discoveries of Kepler and Newton, it might well have been pronounced the greatest scientific achievement of the human mind ; but it was still more than that. It was the greatest revolution that had ever been effected in Man's views of his relations to the universe in which he lives, and of which he is — at least during the present life — a part. During the nineteenth century, however, a still greater revolution has been effected. Not only has Lyell enlarged our mental horizon in time as much as Newton enlarged it in space, but it appears that throughout these vast stretches of time and space with which

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we have been made acquainted there are sundry well-marked changes going on. Certain definite paths of development are being pursued ; and around us on every side we behold worlds, organisms, and societies in divers stages of progress or decline. Still more, as we examine the records of past life upon our globe, and study the mutual relations of the living things that still remain, it appears that the higher forms of life — including Man himself — are the modified descendants of lower forms. Zoölogically speaking, Man can no longer be regarded as a creature apart by himself. We cannot erect an order on purpose to contain him, as Cuvier tried to do ; we cannot even make a separate family for him. Man is not only a vertebrate, a mammal, and a primate, but he belongs, as a genus, to the catarrhine family of apes. And just as lions, leopards, and lynxes — different genera of the cat-family — are descended from a common stock of carnivora, back to

which we may also trace the pedigrees of dogs, hyænas, bears, and seals ; so the various genera of platyrrhine and catarrhine apes, including Man, are doubtless descended from a common stock of primates, back to which we may also trace the converging pedigrees of monkeys and lemurs, until their ancestry becomes indistinguishable from that of rabbits and squirrels. Such is the conclusion to which the scientific world has come within a quarter of a century from the publication of Mr. Darwin's "Origin of Species;" and there is no more reason for supposing that this conclusion will ever be gainsaid than for supposing that the Copernican astronomy will some time be overthrown and the concentric spheres of Dante's heaven reinstated in the minds of men.

It is not strange that this theory of man's origin, which we associate mainly with the name of Mr. Darwin, should be to many people very unwelcome. It is fast bringing about a still greater revolu-