

Scientific Secularism.

MODERN Secularism takes several forms, but they all have this in common, that they are concerned simply and solely with this present physical world and recognise no other. Common to them all, too, is the fact that they are ultimately self-defeating, in that they make man a tragic figure, of all living creatures the most to be pitied. These characteristics are specially prominent in the case of Scientific Secularism.

Those who suppose that the conflict between Religion and Science has now been resolved are mere ostriches burying their heads in the sand. There are still men of science who stoutly maintain that all knowledge is scientific knowledge, and that we know nothing whatsoever but the things that have been learned by laboratory methods. In other words, they recognise only positive facts and observable phenomena, together with their objective relations and the laws which determine them. There are many, too, who are not scientists, but who are so enamoured of scientific method that they are disinclined to believe anything which cannot be proved, as they say, "scientifically." They assume that in the religious realm we have but faith and cannot know, and they prefer to commit themselves only to what they know, in the false confidence that knowledge is solely of the things they see.

That natural science is rendering great service to mankind in many practical ways is too obvious to need comment. The fact remains, however, that science cannot meet man's deepest need. It has no message for humanity, no gospel. On all the great questions concerning right conduct, the value of human personality, the meaning of life and the purpose of the world, it is as silent as the grave. If there were nothing but the hard facts of science on which to base one's philosophy of life, that philosophy would be a very bleak affair. Such apparently is the view of J. W. Krutch, when he speaks of "the disillusion with the laboratory." "Science," he says, "has always promised us two things not necessarily related—an increase first in our powers, second in our happiness and wisdom; and we have come to realise that it is the first and less important of the two promises which it has kept most abundantly."¹ And, after all, an increase in our

¹ *The Modern Temper*, p. 61.

powers is of little avail unless it is accompanied by an increase in our happiness and wisdom, but it is precisely at that point that science fails us altogether.

Take, for instance, the case of astronomy. Sir James Jeans assures us that the message of astronomy gives no clue whatsoever to the meaning of life. It cannot help us to decide whether life is the climax towards which the whole creation moves; or a mere accident, an unimportant by-product of natural processes; or a disease of matter in its old age when it has lost its high temperature; or (as we should like to believe) the only reality.² It is hardly surprising, therefore, that in the name of astronomy man has sometimes been declared to be a mere parasite infesting the epidermis of one of the meanest of the planets. That is a devaluation of human personality which is fatal to any exalted view of life. Similarly, many a physicist assumes, on the strength of his researches, that all phenomena arise from electrons and quanta and the like, controlled by mathematical formulæ; and thus, as Eddington points out, he may conclude that even his wife is simply an elaborate differential equation, though he will be tactful enough not to obtrude this opinion in the domestic circle.³ The universe, the physicists tell us, is running down like a clock, and the eventual issue is to be the extinction of all life and intelligence. Again, while we cannot but admire the technical skill and efficiency of those scientists who have found out how to release the energy of the atom, nobody seems to be particularly elated by this discovery—on the contrary, there is a haunting fear in men's hearts that this new power will, sooner or later, be put to terrible uses. And if, as is often said, that is Nature's "ultimate" secret, one is tempted to reply: So much the worse for Nature! There are chemists, too, who naively assume that man is simply a bag of salts with a little water, and who foolishly suppose that matter by chemical action produces the mind or soul, so that all the activities of human beings are comparable to what goes on in test-tubes. As A. E. Taylor justly says: "If all we knew about the actual world were only what we can learn in the physical and chemical laboratory, so far as I can see, Atheism might conceivably be true."⁴ Nor is the position any better when we enter the realm of biology. Biology may suggest that man is a little higher than the brutes, but it offers no support to the view that he is a little lower than the angels. Many biologists deny that there is any purpose at all in the evolutionary process. Sir Arthur Keith maintains that there is purpose, but insists that it is unconscious purpose (whatever that may be). And what is this purpose?

² Cf. *The Universe Around Us*, p. 344f.

³ *The Nature of the Physical World*, p. 341.

⁴ *Does God Exist?* p. 44.

He says that the end Nature has in view is to produce evolutionary units in the form of separate tribes or nations, the members of each tribe or nation being co-operative and public-spirited in their dealings with one another, but suspicious of and on the defensive against the members of all other tribes or nations.⁵ If that is a complete and correct account of the evolutionary process, one is constrained to ask: Is there any value in it at all?

To all this kind of thing we inevitably react as Wordsworth is said to have reacted to the scientific theories of the 18th and 19th centuries. What moved him was not intellectual antagonism, but moral revulsion, the feeling that something had been left out, and that what had been left out comprised everything that was most important. As E. L. Woodward said in his broadcast on "The Crisis of Civilisation": "We are in confusion . . . because the scientific method is the best instrument which our intellect has devised, and yet we also know that the results obtained by this instrument do not make sense . . . somewhere we have missed the point."⁶ The great achievements of science are justly praised, and we resist or ignore established scientific facts at our peril. But science does not and cannot give us a complete view of reality, and its account of reality is as different from reality itself as a perfectly accurately drawn map of England is different from England. When science has taught us all it can about the physical world and done all in its power to ameliorate our lot, it still remains true that, as A. N. Whitehead says: "The fact of religious vision, and its history of persistent expansion, is our one ground for optimism. Apart from it, human life is a flash of occasional enjoyment lighting up a mass of pain and misery, a bagatelle of transient experience."⁷

There are some scientific men who seem to realise all this, and are, therefore, making futile attempts to save ethical and spiritual values on a purely secularist basis. Julian Huxley, for example, fired by Lord Morley's remark that "the next great task of science will be to create a religion for humanity," has attempted to invent a sort of scientific religion. He regards religion as a biological problem! He finds the essence of religion in the sense of sacredness, and claims that what is apprehended by the religious consciousness is "the Eternal Power, which is outside man, power possibly in part spiritual, certainly in all its most obvious aspects material."⁸ This sacred object of religion he declares to be the sum total of the permanent facts of human experience, the facts

⁵ Cf. *Essays on Human Evolution* (reviewed by Dean Matthews in *The Sunday Times*, March 24th, 1946).

⁶ *The Listener*, March 28th, 1946.

⁷ *Science and the Modern World*, p. 238.

⁸ *Religion without Revelation*, p. 329.

of the spiritual life, and the facts and forces of Nature apart from man.⁹ This is a sort of scientific pantheism—and if everything is sacred, nothing is sacred. He confesses that he has no idea how this new scientific religion can be propagated. The only inference that men would be likely to draw from it is that the religious emotion is a fitful affair, and that the sense of sacredness is an illusion. Certain it is that if religion existed in no other form it would speedily vanish from the earth. Science cannot provide man with a religion. As C. E. M. Joad acknowledges, science “clears the boards for religion, but it has no contribution to the writing of the play.”¹⁰ Or in the words of A. E. Taylor: “Once you exclude man’s moral life from the concept of the ‘nature’ to which you make your appeal, and all that ‘nature’ will witness to will be an Author of superhuman power and ingenuity, whose purposes, if He has any, are quite inscrutable, and may be iniquitous.”¹¹

Equally futile is Huxley’s attempt to find a biological basis for ethics. He insists that the high sense of moral obligation has nothing empyrean about it, but is simply “a result of the nature of our infantile mental machinery, combined with later rationalisation and wish-fulfilment.”¹² He claims that ethical standards are provided by the desirable course of the evolution of society,¹³ and that the basic principles of evolutionary ethics are “the intrinsic worth of the individual, the brotherhood of man, and the universal duty of kindness and unselfishness.”¹⁴ Christianity, he says, merely asserts these principles, while science can “prove” them. But it is difficult to see where the “proof” is to be found. If, as he holds, the evolutionary process produced man by chance and will shortly blot him clean out of existence, there is no basis there for a high valuation of human personality. Further, it is patent fact that men have not normally drawn from the evolutionary process the inference that they are brothers who owe one another the duty of kindness and unselfishness—precisely the opposite conclusion has all too often been drawn. What Huxley probably means, therefore, is that the desirable course for the evolution of human society requires the recognition of the intrinsic worth of the individual, of the brotherhood of man, and of the duty of kindness and unselfishness—and that is a very different matter from an inductive proof of these ethical principles. There is no such thing as a biological basis for ethics. As J. D. Bernal asserts: “Scientific knowledge is of use to find the means

⁹ *ibid.*, 33, 35, 48f.

¹⁰ *Guide to Modern Thought*, p. 107.

¹¹ *op. cit.*, p. 14.

¹² *Evolutionary Ethics*, p. 15.

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 43.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 53.

for achieving good things, but it has nothing to do with the determination of what is good."¹⁵

The fundamental fallacy of scientific secularism is the notion that all knowledge is scientific knowledge, in which case we have no knowledge of those imponderables which alone can make life worth living—human love, the appeal of art, of music, of great literature, and, above all, of the facts of ethical and religious experience. But, as A. E. Taylor has pointed out, when anything is known there is a triple presupposition: (1) that about which something is known; (2) the person who knows this something; and (3) the knowing of it. "The last two factors cannot rightly be left out of account. It may be that if the astronomer, who has swept the heavens with his telescope and found no God, had taken into account not only the heavens but himself and his search, he would have found the evidence which he pronounces to be missing."¹⁶ Or, as E. L. Woodward said in the broadcast referred to above: "There seem to be two kinds of knowledge, of which one kind can be accurately measured, and the other kind defies measurement, but has to be considered in terms of the beliefs of the wisest men over many centuries," beliefs which point to "the affirmation of the religious view of the universe."

We can fairly insist that the law of right and wrong is as much part and parcel of the structure of the universe, *and as much an object of knowledge*, as the law of gravitation or the law of the conservation of energy. The high sense of moral obligation is either an illusion or the master-light of all our seeing, and a link which binds us to a spiritual world. Neither alternative is capable of demonstration by the methods of science. Every man simply has to choose, and "evasion of choice is a form of choice." Men inevitably range themselves on the one side or the other. Either they affirm by an act of faith that the sense of moral obligation is the realest thing they know, or they affirm, equally by an act of faith, that it is illusory.

Many of those who deny the reality of the sense of obligation are prepared to concede that we are bound to act AS IF it were real. Huxley's ethical argument, in substance, though not in form, runs thus: "We ought to live AS IF the individual had intrinsic worth; to behave to other human beings AS IF the brotherhood of man was a fact; to cultivate kindness and unselfishness AS IF we were under an absolute obligation to do so." A similar plea was advanced by Arthur Koestler in his broadcast on "The Crisis of Civilisation." "I am not sure," he said, "whether what the philosophers call 'ethical absolutes' exist or not, but I am sure that we have to live AS IF they existed."¹⁷ Such pleas

¹⁵ *Science and Ethics* (Ed. by C. H. Waddington), p. 116.

¹⁶ *op. cit.*, p. 34.

¹⁷ *The Listener*, March 21st, 1946.

remind one of the argument of Hans Vaihinger in his *Die Philosophie des 'Als Ob'* "We know," he says, "that there is no higher spiritual world, but we are bound, in the interests of morality and of an idealism which is essential to life, to live AS IF there were."¹⁸

The fundamental difference, therefore, between the secularist, who seeks to conserve ethical and spiritual values, and the Christian is this: The secularist concedes that we have to live AS IF the sense of moral obligation were real (for an inward necessity makes that conviction part of our thought), while the Christian asserts that it is real, and the realest of the real. In the words of Dean Inge: "There is nothing unscientific in the belief in a higher spiritual order, a kingdom of values, of which the natural order as known to science is a partial and abstract representation. . . . If the world of values floats like a luminous haze over a real world of measurable and ponderable things, it is a mirage, for the existence of which it is impossible to account."¹⁹ The highest witness of the human spirit cannot be scientifically explained, and to dismiss it as a thing of no consequence is sheer arrogance. For anything which science knows to the contrary, it may be, as the Christian Gospel asserts, the most significant fact in the whole world.

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¹⁸ Wobbermin, *Systematische Theologie*, II., p. 447.

¹⁹ *Christian Ethics and Modern Problems*, p. 197.