

ARTICLE II.

THE SUPERNATURAL.

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WE have more occasion to fear peace in the spiritual world than to fear contention. Our thoughts and our affections are so dependent on growth that a perpetual disturbance of the equilibrium of faith becomes a condition of progress. The abundant skepticism to which, in our day, we owe an ever more intelligent belief, has found in the supernatural a chief ground of attack. We should strive, therefore, to see with clearness both the reasons and the limits of this criticism. On the one hand, a vast amount of superstition has been driven back and partially dispelled by it; and, on the other hand, a dreary dogmatism of science, a sense of the inflexible connections of nature, have been left behind by the flood as a barren deposit, and we are compelled again to seek and restore the seeds of life, that we may once more live in a truly spiritual world.

There are certain preliminary convictions in connection with which alone the supernatural can receive rational expression. The first of these is the immanence of God. The activities of nature are the immediate product of the Divine Mind. The world is a perpetual creation, momentarily suffused with divine thought and feeling. It is constantly renewed from within; nothing is governed from without. Matter ceases to be an alien something, between us and God, commanding our constant attention. The omnipresence of God becomes to us a realized fact.

A second initiative conception is the transcendence of God. The thought and feeling of the world are true spiritual products. They imply a divine consciousness, in which they have been begotten, and with which they abide. The world is not simply coming into the light; it is also coming out of the light. Its revelation is real; its rational movement is substantial.

A third conception in connection with which the supernatural takes its proper place is that of physical or natural dependencies as contrasted with intellectual or supernatural dependencies. The fixed region of causes lies over against the variable region of reasons. Causes are the correlatives of reasons: the one the connection of things,—physical phenomena; the other of thoughts,—spiritual phenomena. The natural is the determinate field in which mind, as a creative agent, works out its purposes. The spiritual world is, figuratively, supernatural. It, from above, expresses its purposes in things; and things, as beneath, receive and retain its labors. That which is done is natural, that which remains to be done is supernatural. Here is the central fact, yet central mystery, of life. Man is immersed to his lips in the flow of events, yet his head ever rises above them. We are familiar with the natural and supernatural in the actions of men. Causes and reasons are constantly woven together by him in one web. This fact becomes an interpreting idea in the relation of God to the world. The Divine Mind is no more baffled by matter, no more exhausted in matter, than is the human mind, with which the inflexibility of causes is an immediate condition of power. A mastery which is restricted and partial with man is constant and complete with God.

The supernatural which philosophy has to consider is that incident to human reason; that which religion has to contemplate pertains to the Divine Reason.

Though the Divine Reason is the very substance of the

natural, which is its habitual expression, it affirms itself convincingly to the mind of man only in moments of transcendent power. Once accepted as an indubitable fact at any one point, it afterward becomes the abiding life of the world. It is the omnipresence of the supernatural in the natural that we need to arrive at; and it is to this conclusion that the skepticism of our time forces us.

The supernatural, in its manifest transcendency, assumes three forms: creative increments in the natural world,—which the utmost ingenuity of theory has not been able to escape—miracles, and the answer of prayer. It is the two last which are directly associated with religion. The miracle and the answer to prayer, though they both imply an immediate divine control of events, are very unlike each other in their spiritual relations. The miracle has been thought of as the means of evoking faith, while prayer and the answer of prayer are the product of faith. The one goes before, and the other goes with, the spiritual life.

The miracle includes every variety of wonder, and ranges, therefore, from any intervention to the most weighty affirmation of the Divine Presence. A miracle is some manifest modification of the natural order of events, associated with an immediate spiritual Presence. A miracle cannot subserve its purpose, if its own nature is doubtful, or its connection with a Supreme Presence is uncertain. Nothing can be more irrational than a miracle whose purpose it is to remove doubt, and yet is so ordered as to give rise to new doubts. Clearness and decision are of its very intent.

The entire field of the miraculous has been one of the utmost confusion, in which deception, superstition, and credulity have had free play. It becomes, therefore, in this blind medley of phenomena, no easy task to separate miracles which have been associated with great revelations and assign them a rational service. The miracles of the

Scriptures have been in our time, as regards proof, sources of unbelief rather than of belief, of weakness rather than of strength.

No miracle is an essential part of religious belief. All the fundamental doctrines of faith rest on the framework of the physical and the spiritual world. The significancy of these worlds in no way turns on any momentary intervention in their ongoing. However freely we may admit the miracle, it is the merest incident in the flow of spiritual events. If used at all as proof, it must establish something far deeper than itself in the system of things. The resurrection of Christ is not the ground of immortality; the doctrine of immortality lends probability to the affirmation of his resurrection. The true order of dependence is indicated by Paul in the words, "If there be no resurrection of the dead, then is Christ not risen." It is an antecedent faith that prepares the way for a belief in his resurrection. That resurrection by itself does not disclose the reasons of a future life. The apostle proceeds, indeed, to identify the hope of the Christian with the resurrection; but this connection, which had been established in men's thoughts, indicates the weakness, not the strength, of the proof. When the miracle of the resurrection comes between the mind and the spiritual vision which is the true ground of faith, it obscures, not helps, revelation. It would be a great misfortune to weaken down our belief in immortality to the force of the proof of the resurrection of Christ.

The wonders associated with faith have almost universally wrought confusion, and diverted the mind from the true objects of attention. If every miracle recorded in the Scriptures were omitted, their luster would not be lost, and would be of a more purely spiritual character. When we grant the miracle we are compelled to look upon it as a concession to feeble powers. The most and the best it

can do is to turn the attention to the truths with which it is associated. Once having accepted a miracle as proof, it becomes a shock to our faith to have its validity weakened; but if we look, in the first instance, for the inner light of truth, we can abide in it with no assistance from a miracle. When we are able to stand, we can readily dispense with a staff. The miracle is thus an unessential factor in the growth of faith. It can properly put no restraint on the mind's inner vision, it can make no absolute claim to belief, it cannot modify the truths it is intended to support. We are dealing with the physical and the spiritual world in their real and eternal character. To know these is our only adequate revelation. Any significance the miracle may have can only be found in this inherent truth of things.

The miracle frequently springs up in connection with inadequate spiritual powers, and adds to their weakness. Thus Christ was slow to avail himself of this method of impression, and brought to it exposure and rebuke. A wicked and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign, and no sign shall be given it. The adulterous diversion of the mind from its true spiritual life found expression in a desire for some religious sign, some sensuous impression. To overpower the diverting, bewildering effect of the miracle, calls for a spiritual movement so dominant as to render the miracle unnecessary.

Whatever proof we may attach to the miracle, it remains a transient and inferior resource of faith. Thus Christ says to Thomas, "Because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed; blessed are they who have not seen me, and yet have believed." The highest form of belief does not admit the miracle. Thus again we find Christ seeking a faith antecedent to the miracle, and in connection with which the miracle was wrought. "He did not many mighty works there because of their unbelief." The mir-

acle is not the cure of unbelief, but unbelief is an obstruction to the miracle. The spiritual power of Christ over physical events, which, while it bore the appearance of the miraculous, was deeply planted in the interaction of the higher and the lower nature in man, was held in constant check, lest a series of wonders should take the place of a series of revelations; lest he should be found providing loaves and fishes for an idle, curious multitude, and not feeding eager minds and hungry hearts with divine truth and divine love. The man who was healed of his leprosy was bidden to tell no man. He was left to an immediate performance of his duties and a silent cogitation of the blessing received.

The revealing power of the miracle is nothing. Those persons who have believed most in miracles have often been very slow in finding their way into truth. In the mastery of the spirit over its conditions of life, we must start with the spirit itself, and be able to feel that every concession of physical forces in its presence is a normal concession to the government of ideas, a part of the ultimate power of the supernatural over the natural. The miracle, by the importance we attach to it, serves to belittle and to hide the profound underlying relation of events.

If these are the bearings of the miracle, we see what a step has been taken toward sound thought in bringing back the mind to a peaceful and well-ordered repose on natural law—the habitual method of God. To that more full and accurate knowledge which we term science, we owe a more just conception of that magnificent and untiring march of events which we term nature. Nature has ceased to be to us an obstacle, something but partially and awkwardly adapted to its ends, and putting upon us superfluous burdens in our spiritual growth; it has ceased to be a system calling for intervention, and has become a fixed term of order and beauty between us and God, a constant

revelation of his wisdom and love, and an ever-present condition of our growth into them. The world, in the steadfastness of its laws, lying within easy reach of our hands, has become the basis of our knowledge, the condition of our labor, the ground of our trust, and the ever-present term of our spiritual discipline—the garden in which we walk with God. It lies as a secure expression of thought, a determinate means of interaction, between us and God. Of all the gains to faith none has been greater than that by which we have come to think of the world as the word of God to us.

This great advance has not been made without liabilities to error. We secure an equilibrium of thought under the conflict of extreme tendencies. The ball is sent spinning from the blow of the last player, and must be restored to the field by a counter-stroke. For the meaningless intervention of spiritual agents have been substituted, in many minds, absolute causes, which know no flexibility, and stand on no terms of sympathy with men. This is winning a world of order, but is losing the spiritual life which that order is fitted to secure. As the too impressionable child may, in the stern command of the father, miss the wisdom and the grace of guidance it contains, so we, thrust back suddenly on physical law, find this law to lie as an insurmountable barrier between us and God. The physical world becomes a supreme reality, opaque to love, and chilling with its shadow our higher affections and inspirations. Spirit can thrive only with spirit. To be inclosed in mere matter, to be bound fast by law, is solitary imprisonment. The vitality of the world, its spiritual vitality, is its most essential feature. The unborn child no more needs the enveloping parental life, than the unborn spirit of man a kindred inclosure of the divine life. In the measure in which the world becomes mechanical it becomes dead; its power to beget life forsakes it. No law is

more universal than the law that life springs from life. The moment the world ceases to be spiritually alive, it ceases to be able to beget spiritual life.

The next step of thought restores this power of the world, and gives us the immanence and transcendence of God. Reasons once more underlie causes and are in living fellowship with them. We are not sent into a spiritually barren world, in search of causes only, ultimately lodged in things. A wise and tender Personal Presence is felt to inclose the things themselves, growing up with them into a beautiful and lovable world. The world is a divine world, first infolding the mind of God and then unfolding it.

Even the skeptical thought, to which we have been so much indebted, begins to feel this counter-flow toward a spiritual world. The school of Huxley ceases to affirm any absolute force in physical law which renders intervention impossible, and simply denies the adequacy of the proof. The Unknowable of Spencer takes on more and more of the divine attributes.

The spiritual powers have been enfeebled by abiding too long and too exclusively in the presence of physical relations. Matter gains thereby not only an omnipresent reality, but a reality independent of mind. Its inner rationality is lost in the surface impression. It becomes a struggle to win again for spiritual uses the explanatory powers by which this whole process of inquiry has been carried on. The mind betrays itself in its last steps. We sink into that most unphilosophical skepticism in which convictions become a series of sensuous impressions, impressions constantly vanishing in agnosticism. We need to recover the power of thought; the power to regain the clues of knowledge; the power to reach, even by means of error, deeper and ever deeper into the intellectual substance of things. We are not to be lost in the meaning of

words and the construction of sentences, but to bring to words and sentences the underlying idea which alone unites them.

There is still a remnant of that acute yet stupid nihilism of Hume, disclosed in the assertion that miracles, one and all, must lack proof. If we think this, it is because we have not gotten fully back into a world of reasons; we are still stumbling about among causes. There can be, in a rational world, no physical obstacle in the way of reasons. The procedure of such a world lies in the line of reason. An immediate and gracious purpose accomplishes itself through causes which have no claims as against the wisdom of the mind which employs them. Nothing belongs to law simply as law. Its strength lies only in the purposes it subserves. If the gracious purpose cannot push its way through the law, the law loses its right to be.

The question of the miracle has thus become one of reasons, one of spiritual nurture. There is no invincibility in things which fetters the mind in the discussion, and compels it to sacrifice its own welfare in behalf of a mechanical regularity among things. We have no occasion to demand impossible or extreme proof of miracles; we have occasion to see and to feel most profoundly the orderly and rational ways of spiritual development, and not to suffer some erratic and childish impulse to step between us and the severe training of this school of wisdom. When wisdom utters her voice, we must be ready to hear it, and to accept the new words of instruction. The inner depths of thought, like a living plant, are ever bringing to the light fresh blossoms, and on them the laws which have hitherto given form and color do not rest as a finality. It is not only possible, but most probable, that, at times, the natural shall feel an unusual force of the supernatural, and the thick crowding of events strike out strange light.

In a complex physical and spiritual world like ours, a

waiting attitude, one in which we are not bound to believe, much less to disbelieve,—our only obligation that of a teachable temper—is most rational. Thus are we best able to make out the sweep of the divine thought. We are neither dogmatic in belief nor in unbelief. We are prepared to wait till the progress of the day dispels the mist. We do not deny knowledge in a hasty agnosticism; we wait for it till it comes.

Another form of supernaturalism is found in the answer to prayer. The world is a very different thing spiritually with and without the freedom of prayer—the communion of the finite spirit with the Infinite Spirit. Prayer, unlike the miracle, strikes at once at the very heart of the spiritual world. The primary function of the physical world in reference to man, is to furnish a field of work, and this function is not materially affected by the slight modification of miracles, at remote intervals. The function of the spiritual world in reference to man is spiritual growth, and this function is greatly restricted if prayer, the most direct and spontaneous expression of the mind, is not in order.

In view of human experience, it can hardly be denied that prayer has been a wholesome, uplifting force in life. Man is in so many ways dependent on spiritual influences, cherishes so many hopes, suffers so many fears, needs so much encouragement, feels the necessity for so much patience, that his very existence, like that of a child, is a perpetual petition, and cannot be fulfilled aside from prayer. The words that express it are simply a more distinct and effective realization of the facts which envelop the spirit. Prayer is wholesome, because it increases the power to do and the power to bear, and renews the fountains of life. It is uplifting, because it guides the mind to the spiritual force of the world, leads it to feel its true significance, unites the visible to the invisible, and suffuses each with the other. Men secure by means of prayer a deep, navi-

gable current for all the energies and affections of a higher life. This is expressed in the comprehensive words, Ask, and ye shall receive; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you. Prayer sets in motion and sustains the physical and spiritual elements which concur in its answer. If prayer is thus inevitable, wholesome, and uplifting, it thereby becomes a law of our spiritual life, and implies conditions suitable to it. The need of prayer and the answer of prayer are correlative facts. The widest induction assures us that each form of life, in its tendencies, involves the relations of its environment to it; the two stand in complete adjustment. To deny the validity of prayer and to repress its expression thus become an effort in suspension of spiritual life, and in neglect of its primary dependence. Prayer lies in the line of evolution, if we are to accept this bent of the human heart heavenward.

Prayer may be united, and must be united, to that predominating sense of law in the physical world which our empirical inquiry impresses upon us. Otherwise, it lapses into misdirected impulses, ineffective forms, and indolent ways, all of which so easily beset our resort to the supernatural. Work under natural law goes hand in hand with prayer under spiritual law to make either fully effective. The true affiliation justifies them both.

Prayer is a medium of communication by which we enter into the aims and feelings of the spiritual world and make them our own. The earlier petitions of the Lord's Prayer are preëminently of this tenure. Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. The utterance of these words gives an attitude of mind in the highest degree spiritual.

We can hardly attribute too much freedom, too much flexibility, to the spiritual world. A daily converse of facts, fixed indeed in their general direction, but constant-

ly changeable in their personal form and force, goes on between us and God. The fresh day and the new revelation and the renewed life are all one. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night declareth knowledge. It is in no way inconsistent with the laws of growth in the intellectual world that the Spirit of Truth should bring to us suggestions suitable to our wants. This is what we are hourly doing with each other. Such suggestions give occasions to the mind's action; they in no way embarrass it. It matters not that the manner of this intercourse is not perfectly defined; it belongs to its very nature that it should not be. This is the method of the deeper impulses through the whole world. The highest poetic temperament abides habitually in these subtler reactions. The petition, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil," implies this concurrent movement of outer conditions and inner life, forever walking with each other. "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors," expresses the growing concurrence of the human and the divine temper.

While the spiritual world is the primary field of prayer, we cannot exclude prayer from the physical world. The two skift on each other, in their entire extent, maintain the most continuous and subtle action and reaction, and are, to human experience, quite inseparable. As long as the mind makes the body its instrument, without in any way suspending or escaping its physical laws, we may not imagine, with a process of reasoning more subtle than wise, that God will find any difficulty in infusing his grace into the ongoing of physical events. If we were to ask nothing which involved material conditions, we should quickly fall into confusion and weakness in our petitions. The problem would be much too difficult for us, and the underlying supposition would be found benumbing to faith. We are at liberty to put forth the prayer which lies in the line of our highest apprehension of want, leaving its an-

swer and the method of its answer with God. If prayer does not mean this, it means very little to any purpose in the presence of our mixed experience and confused apprehension.

Yet an event that involves a manifest suspension of natural law does not lie within the purvey of prayer. Natural law, when it has taken effect, is a declaration of the divine will, and that will once expressed may well restrain prayer. David prayed for the life of his child till the child was dead. When it was dead, he arose from the earth, washed and anointed himself, and changed his apparel and came into the house of the Lord. Paul besought the Lord thrice that his thorn in the flesh might depart from him, and then accepted it under the assurance, My grace shall be sufficient for you. This hovering between the possible and the impossible, resting on the divine will, is a most rational discipline, deeply embodied in prayer.

The mind, imbued with a sense of causes simply, may think this attitude of prayer a stupid double-dealing of the mind with itself, a weak hoping for things which natural data do not include. We make answer, that this riddle of God's gift in the external world is no more difficult to read than that contained in our own lives. As spiritual beings we are inclosed in physical dependencies; yet we are aided, not smothered, by them. In a world in which there is this pervasive interplay of matter and mind, mind must seize and retain its initiative. We can only have an illusion of wisdom if we regard the world as physical to its very core. The substance of wisdom at once slips from us. The hawk poised motionless on its wings, using the air as a nest, and looking down composedly on the inferior lives that creep and walk and run beneath it, is not less natural than these prone creatures of whose limitations it makes a mock. Our wisdom is to be true to our own nature. We can no more allow causes to repress reasons than reasons

to forget causes. This subject of the supernatural has offered itself, in many ways, to my mind during a long life, and I still feel that the deepest revelation of the world sustains the spirit in even poise on these two wings of thought—the natural and the supernatural.

The problem of the freedom and the validity of thought repeats itself in closely allied terms in this problem of the supernatural—the Divine Soul of the world present in the world for its momentary guidance and government. It is irrational to think ourselves free and nothing else free in the universe. This is not only to regard ourselves as incomparably superior to all that incloses us, it is to create a suffocating spiritual atmosphere in which our higher powers are sure to perish. If we are to live and move and have a spiritual being, we must live and move and have our being in God. No other correlation is possible to us. We are so in the image of God that without the presence of God we are alien and strangers in the world to which we belong. A sense of the consistency of things, itself the depth of reason, makes us sure of a pervasive spiritual Power.

The two supports of faith are as sure as anything can be in human thought. The first is the certainty of independent power—the mind's ability to seek, to find, and to use the truth. Without this the whole structure of knowledge crumbles into dust. The second is the coherence of the world—rationally apprehended and empirically known—within itself, the constructive harmony of its several parts.

If the relation of the natural and the supernatural is somewhat as we have sketched it, two things follow. The past, in spite of its errors, is gathered up in the present; and the present is passing into a brighter future by virtue of one continuous movement. There has been and is a true spiritual evolution, a perpetual growth toward the light.

It does not do to say that the history of the world has

been continuous superstition, endlessly diversified error. By such an assertion we trip our own feet as certainly as the feet of other people. We must find a path of progress in the past, if we are to have any correction in the present or hope in the future. It is the continuity of human experience, its undeniably evolutionary character, which justifies its successive steps as factors in growth. If men have, from the beginning, been forcing their way into a spiritual world, and that world proves a delusion, then there is small confidence to be placed in their faculties, however employed. We lose the overwhelming induction of validity and reality in the intellectual world.

The sense of the supernatural goes hand in hand with a mastery of the natural. Human skill and human will penetrate far more deeply into causes than ever before. The voice of man runs a thousand miles and is still unwearied. Indeed, the chief value of the recognition of the stability of physical law has been the larger mental scope gained thereby. No matter how much the world towers in strength, the feet of men are still above it.

In the intellectual kingdom the growth of the supernatural is equally marked. Wisdom and love find identification in the character of God, and, as ever-growing forces in society, give promise of the kingdom of heaven. Purity of heart, as a true reconciliation of the wants and powers of men, is becoming a medium of strength, a coalescence of the life of man with the life of God. The world, physical and spiritual, submits to nothing so absolutely as to goodness. We shall never truly interpret the natural, much less master it in its service to man, till it becomes to us a perfect reflection of the supernatural, a limit along which the thoughts of man and the thoughts of God meet in perpetual creation.

The miracles of Christ reach here their highest intelligibility, as spiritual power winning a new and deeper hold

on the physical world. The spirit, ordinarily so checked by ignorance and held back by sin, begins in Christ to force a more beneficent way among things. There is a power in a pure, wise, and comprehensive purpose as yet but partially disclosed to us. The spirit heals the spirit, and in healing the spirit begins to heal the body. The kingdom of heaven is the renovating force of a new life. All real victory is a conquest of inner, spiritual power over external conditions. The natural discloses its true glory as the medium of the supernatural.