

ARTICLE II.

NATURE AND THE SUPERNATURAL, AS TOGETHER
CONSTITUTING THE ONE SYSTEM OF GOD.

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A BOOK by the above title appeared a half-century ago, written by that prince of American theologians, Horace Bushnell. It formed an epoch in the lives of many young men, and became a shaping force in their subsequent thinking. About the same time appeared Darwin's "Origin of Species," which also made an epoch, not only in the world of science, but in that of philosophy and theology as well. Its theory of evolution seemed to make natural law sufficient to explain all the mysteries of the universe, and leave no place for the supernatural. Indeed, the supernatural seemed to be little more than a term for human ignorance.

It is many years since the writer of this article has read Dr. Bushnell's book, and he has forgotten many of its arguments. Indeed, probably many of its arguments would to-day seem out of date. He desires, however, substantially, from his own point of view, to reaffirm Dr. Bushnell's position.

In any discussion it is important that we understand the meaning of the terms that we are using. Therefore we begin by saying that by the term "nature," as used in this article, is meant simply this created universe, with the substances and forces of which it is composed. By "law" is meant the method by which these forces work and these substances are

governed. "Nature," here, does not mean the nature of God, nor does "law" mean the principles by which God is actuated. To say that a miracle may be in accordance with a higher law, and prove some day to be natural, introduces confusion of thought, and mixes things which should be kept apart. By "nature" is meant simply the created universe, and by the "supernatural" the remaining unexpended energy of God, and any other forces which are not embraced in the category of nature.

This universe is measureless both in extent and in duration. The old idea that our world was the largest body in existence, that the sun and stars were made to give it light, and that all were brought into being in six days six thousand years ago, has passed away as one of the childhood conceptions of our race. Instead, we have learned that our world is hardly more than an atom amid millions of suns, each inconceivably larger than itself. Their number staggers thought. The farther telescopes penetrate, the more do new worlds swim into the field of vision. What seemed faint clouds resolve themselves into packed gatherings of stars, each point of light a separate world. Every dark space seems peopled with undreamed-of orbs. The more we gaze, the more their number grows, till the sense of illimitableness overpowers us.

The space they occupy is also inconceivable. Light from many of the nearer stars takes years to reach us; and there are remoter orbs whose light requires a journey toward us of many centuries, while others seem at distances yet greater.

The duration in time of the universe is commensurate with its extent in space. Our world has existed many millions of years, but it is a mere child of the vastly older sun. And there are stars that have already run their course, that, having shone through countless æons, are now dark and silent — blind

giants of a far past epoch, to which our solar system is a thing of yesterday. New stars seem also in process of formation, preparing to run their stupendous courses, to be followed, perhaps, in time by others. So this work of weaving and unweaving the sublime web of the universe goes on. Amid such immensities our thought is overwhelmed.

This universe is filled with the ever-active life of God. We are not to conceive of God as withdrawing from the universe after he had created it, leaving it to the action of its own inherent forces. He is no absentee God. Rather, the forces of nature are the activities of the everywhere present Deity. The universe is not a machine: it is a living organism. Nature is manifested God. Its vastness, splendor, energy, are his modes of self-expression. We are everywhere in contact with him. There is as real putting forth of divine power each springtime, when vegetation issues from its winter hiding-place, as when, of old, Lazarus came from the tomb at the word of Christ; as real divine activity when water is turned into wine each season, by the ministry of the grape, and the chemistry of fermentation, as when it was done by a special miracle at Cana in Galilee.

Wisdom and love are everywhere. Order, beauty, harmony, are universal. Everywhere is found the law of helpfulness, which is but another term for love. Age is linked to age in the unfolding of great purposes, which issue in continually higher forms of being, and promote their welfare. The wash of elemental seas on slowly forming continents, the movement of the world in its orbit, the shining of far-off Sirius, help shy flowers to blossom in forest nooks, and provide a safe environment for helpless infants. There is the same divine thoughtfulness for human needs when, through the processes of agriculture, a few basketfuls of seed grow into harvests, as

when, of old, a few loaves and fishes were multiplied into food for thousands.

These energies of God move along unaltering lines. The laws by which the universe is governed never change. Phenomena, indeed, are diversified. No two plants pursue the same mode of blossoming, nor is any one leaf in the forest precisely like another. No two rivers follow the same curves toward the sea, nor does any cloud repeat another's form and movement. Each human being is unlike all who were before him, and all who shall be after him. Yet beneath this surface changefulness, the substances and forces are themselves unchanging. Each substance has the qualities to-day which were impressed on it at the beginning, and each force acts now as it has acted, at any moment, during immemorial ages. Indeed, every phenomenon is the result of forces each of which has been speeding along its predestined track toward its present goal ever since it was spoken into being. The falling of the raindrop was fixed when the universe began. So interrelated are the forces of nature, that all of them — the cyclone heavings of the sun's fires, the powers that orb our earth into its shape, and hold Sirius in his position in the stellar space — combine to fix the time and way each leaf shall flutter from its twig or the ripple rise on the surface of the pond. Not more are steel bolts driven to their sockets in the engine by the resistless strokes of the trip-hammers, than is every atom forced into its place by the impact of the moving universe. Resistance, alteration of the movements of matter, are absolutely unthinkable.

And this changelessness of God's methods is evidence of his wisdom. On it depends not only the validity of our knowledge, but the continuance of life itself. But for it nothing would be certain. What was true yesterday might be false to-day.

What seemed like realities would come and go like shadows ; we would be in a universe of phantoms.

Is not, then, this universe all-sufficient in itself? Can it need anything outside itself to act upon it or to be added to it? May not what we call "miracles" be really the result of nature's laws of which we are still ignorant? Would it not seem, indeed, a kind of reproach on God's workmanship, to suppose that supernatural interference with it could at any moment be required?

No: for the universe is, after all, a limited thing. It is limited in duration. There must have been a time when it began to be: there will come a time when it will cease. The changefulness of its phenomena is evidence of this. Evolution, the sublimest of modern discoveries, means that all things, by inexorable law, are being driven on from stage to stage of being. There is no stopping and no retrogression. The mighty river of existence moves with an incessant flow, to pour itself into the great gulf. Yggdrasil, the sacred tree of being, unfolds in ever statelier form, till it has put forth its last branch and borne its final fruit. The doom of advance toward an ultimate goal is on all things; and when that goal is reached then comes the end.

The universe is limited in space. Somewhere outside our present searchings there is a boundary; and along it, like the outposts of a mighty army, stand sentinel stars. One day there may be constructed telescopes of power so great that with them we can see the limits of creation.

But outside this universe — before and after it, above, beneath, encompassing it, like the sea encompassing the continent — is the immeasurable life of God, a life of power and thought and love. It is no stagnant sea of being, but forever astir with the tides of the purposes of God.

Now it cannot be but that this surrounding life will affect the universe. This divine activity must have some outlet. Love and wisdom cannot be satisfied with what they achieved millions of ages ago: they must be ever seeking new modes of self-expression. As the tides of the ocean pour themselves far inland, through every creek and inlet of the continent, and its moisture falls upon the soil in showers; so the movements of the encircling life of God must penetrate every part of the universe, and his brooding love descend on it in present benedictions. Creation did not exhaust God, nor is the beneficence of nature the limit of his love. Continually he must be planning new achievements. Perpetually he must be visiting each soul that he has made with new surprises of his tenderness.

The structure of man's being contains activities that are supernatural. Free will, with its related feeling of responsibility, conscience, the qualities of right and wrong, are not the result of the working on man of cunningly concealed exterior forces. They are rather proof that he is not under the dominion of such forces. Compulsion deprives an act of moral quality. Beautiful lives might still be lived, and noble characters be formed; but if they are simply the result of the ordered dancing of atoms in the brain cells, they would be like the arrangement of the cellular tissue that builds up the rose. So would it be with evil. Nero and Judas could no more be condemned for their wrong-doing than the nettle for its stinging or the ivy for its poisoning.

Yet free will and the sense of moral responsibility are among the deepest intuitions of our life. We can no more escape them than we can escape the consciousness of our own existence. Probably we are more certain of them than we are of the surrounding universe. The universe is outside us: this is part of us. And any system which has no place for freedom of will

and sense of right and wrong, confesses its inadequacy to explain the facts of life.

Prayer moves in a supernatural realm. You cannot pray to a machine. If all the events of the universe come through natural laws, prayer is an absurdity. You may admire this mechanism, and love the being who has planned it, but you cannot pray to him. He is imprisoned in the forces he has made, and cannot answer you. Prayer implies freedom in God — the power of acting independently of prearranged forces, of working in a supernatural way.

Yet prayer is one of the deepest instincts of the soul. Being human, we must pray. Difficult though it is to explain how God can answer prayer, yet to say that prayer cannot be answered, and that it is simply a futile cry to an inexorable mechanism, the shriek of the snared wild animal that sees its captor coming, is something against which humanity revolts.

Fellowship with God implies the supernatural. Two automata might be constructed of such cunning workmanship that they would seem to hold conversation with each other; the sparkle of the eye, the tones of voice, the play of expression on the countenance, might be exactly reproduced; but it would be simply the working of two machines: there would be no interplay of thought and feeling. If we are mere automata, and if God himself is simply another and an infinite automaton, he and we can have no fellowship. Yet every true heart longs for fellowship with God, and to many a saint such fellowship is one of the deepest certainties of life.

Our immortality implies that we are supernatural. If nature brought us into being, nature will also one day bring about our extinction. The process by which life has risen from stage to stage, till it has culminated in humanity, implies that when the goal is reached the end will come. We are like men

ascending a staircase in a ruined tower, each step of which as one puts his foot on it trembles and then falls, and he must press on to the next; but when the topmost step is reached and that goes, with it he goes too.

Yet immortality is one of the deepest convictions of the soul. In our highest moments we are certain we shall live forever. But what does that mean, but that, even now, we are in direct relation, not merely to a transient universe, but to an eternal God. All things are adapted to their environment — the eye to light, the ear to sound, the body to the forces which have molded it: that our souls are immortal shows them to be surrounded by an eternal God.

Thus, in the very structure of his being, man is supernatural. In the universe he is, but not of it; wrought on by its forces, and yet not their product; their master, not their slave. He reaches his true dignity only when he asserts his freedom from them, and in conscious independence obeys the voice of conscience, and the messages of God.

Thus there are two supernatural personalities — God and man.

Let no one think it argues imperfection in the universe for God to work on it in a supernatural way. Each realm of being finds its highest use, not merely in obeying its own laws, but in being wrought on by the forces of a higher realm. Rocks crumble into soil, that vegetation may draw from them its nourishment. Vegetation exists, that it may give sustenance to animals. And the world in these two realms gives no hint of its ultimate purpose till the soul of man comes to it and employs it for the uses of his life — constructs by means of it his splendid civilization, with its array of mighty cities, happy homes, its achievements in culture, art, and science, its deeds of courage, wisdom, love. Why not go another step, and say

that this whole universe, with man dwelling in it, is itself imperfect, exists for a purpose, which by itself it cannot reach, and for which it needs the coming of a power higher yet, the present supernatural energies of God? Why may not the limitations both of nature and of man find in this their explanation? Why may not creation be like a musical instrument, whose keys the divine player must touch if they are to give forth their intended harmony?

So far, however, this is simply theory. Have we any evidences that God has wrought on the universe in this supernatural way? We believe that we have many such.

The creation of the universe was a supernatural putting forth of power. Where nothing was, God by his own will caused the universe to be. The origin of life on this planet seemingly must have been supernatural. Its qualities are so unlike the forces that existed hitherto, that we can see nothing in them from which it can have sprung. Its power of organization, of growth, of self-multiplication, of reproduction, of passing through stages of development till it reaches perfection and then sinks into dissolution, indicate the coming into being of an order of existence that only a power from without can have produced. It is inconceivable that death can have given birth to life. The coming of man into existence was supernatural. Man's body may have been developed from that of animals, but so could not his soul. The sense of right and wrong, the power of abstract thought, the discontent with earth and the hunger after God, the consciousness of immortality, show a new order of existence, as absolute a beginning as was that of creation itself.

Sin is supernatural, or more properly subnatural. Neither plant nor animal can sin. Their movements are shaped by forces from without, and they cannot, if they will, break over

them. But man can free himself from his environment. When that environment would work him harm, he can rise above it: when it would do him good, he can sink beneath it. He is master of his fate, and by his own will can make his life a triumph or a tragedy. He chose the tragedy. The beneficent forces of nature could not keep him from rejecting God's purposes and defying God's commands, from choosing evil instead of good. Many call the Eden story, in its present form, a myth; but even if it be a myth, underneath it is a terrible reality. Humanity, newly entered into the domain of nature, reversed its upward movement, and went down, away from God and good. That sin had a self-propagating power. Out of it sprang the wrong, the suffering, the degradation, with which the world is filled. Sin was no negation, a mere defect, to be remedied by calling into play in some superior fashion the forces already in man's soul, nor is it simply one stage in our advancement: it is rejecting good and choosing what it knows to be evil.

Redemption, therefore, must be supernatural. The forces of nature, which could not keep man in the path of righteousness, were insufficient to restore him. His redemption must be by a power from without. Because sin beclouded man's vision, so that he misunderstood God and dreaded him, God gave him a special revelation of both his character and his purpose. He revealed his character, one aspect of it after another coming forth in ever greater fullness as the ages passed till all were summed up in the declaration of his fatherhood, a revelation which the wild disorder of the world cannot refute, and which is the perennial inspiration of the soul. With this came a gradual revelation also of God's purpose. It was hinted at in the primal promise that the seed of the woman should bruise the serpent's head; it grew ever clearer as the

centuries went on till finally came the Apocalypse, that vision of surpassing glory, our earth under the figure of a city coming out of heaven, with gates of pearl and streets of gold, bright with the immediate presence of God, sin and suffering banished from it; and all this God's final purpose for our world. Its very grandeur proves its origin divine. And the recording of this twofold revelation in the Scriptures proves that book also to be from God.

Both revelations, of God's character and his purpose, culminated in the incarnation of Christ. He is man, for all the traits of humanity appear in him: he is compassed with our infirmities, and feels our trials. Yet when we have defined humanity, we have not included all there is in Christ. He overarches and eludes us; he rises into heights before which we can only bow and worship. There is in him no taint of sin: he speaks with a wisdom not of earth: he has a love that surpasses human affection: the forces of nature are subject to him: he claims to have existed from eternity, and to be one with God: he demands the homage of the world, and asserts that he holds in his hands the keys of human destiny: he plans to found a kingdom beside which the ambitions of Napoleon were the visions of a child, a kingdom which shall reach through all time and include the whole race, and require not merely outward obedience but the adoration of the heart. He affirms that his death will be the salvation of the world. Surely such a being is too vast to be human: he can be nothing less than the incarnate God. If he be not God, we know not how God can manifest himself to man.

For such a one the virgin birth seems appropriate. It was fitting that this preëxistent deity should enter human life through the gateway of maternity. Miracles were but the bowing of the forces of nature at the feet of their king. The mani-

festation of his deity would have been imperfect had they not paid him homage. His resurrection was a fitting exit from the world. It was not possible that when his mission was completed, the Lord of life should be kept a prisoner by death.

Since his departure there have been experiences whose only rational explanation is that they are supernatural. The phenomena of Pentecost were no mere awaking of subliminal forces: they were too far-reaching for any such explanation. Then sprang into being the mightiest moral force in history. It transformed a company of timid, ignorant peasants into saints and heroes, such as the world has seldom, if ever, seen. It gave them the loftiest conceptions of God, of man, of eternity, of the purpose of history, of the mode of man's salvation; it filled them with an enthusiasm which the years could not tire, a courage that danger could not appall, a love for man that grew the deeper amid contempt and hate. It was a self-propagating, multiplying power: the little company presently became a mighty host, filled with the same sacred fire. This force has worked on through the ages, transforming civilization. No barriers of race or climate stop it, and the evident outlook before it is that it shall one day rule the world, fulfilling the apocalyptic vision, and that righteousness, peace, and love shall dominate the race.

Strange experiences have also entered human souls through it — love and faith, humility and resignation, a peace which the world cannot give, a joy no trials can disturb, a conscious fellowship with God. Either these are realities, of which our innermost convictions are an all-sufficient proof, or all life is an illusion, heroism, sacrifice, purity, aspiration, are the working of disordered brains, and a scoffing demon has made us but to mock us.

The love that through the ages has been felt for Christ is

inexplicable from a natural viewpoint. Ordinary affection is short-lived: the dear ones whom we lay to rest in bitter grief we presently think of less absorbingly. In spite of ourselves, the living crowd the dead from thought. But this Jesus passed through the skies nineteen centuries ago, and since then no eye has seen him; but the tide of love flows out to him as mightily as when he first departed. Think of the millions who to-day enshrine him in their hearts; no woe so bitter but the thought of him gives relief: no burden so heavy but the remembrance of him helps them bear it. What aspirations he has kindled, what purposes inspired, what encouragement in danger, what patience in trial! Wherever in these centuries you find anything noble in character, or lofty in achievement, directly or indirectly it has come from Christ. How many of the finest men and women to-day have given up home and friends that they may preach of him among the heathen. How many now are dying, life sweet, the thought of the grave making them tremble, but their hearts reach out towards Jesus, and a longing mightier than death makes them pass on unfaltering, in the hope of standing in his presence. There must be in that outer life a reality corresponding to such love: the human heart cannot persist in pouring itself out on nothingness. When the waters of the ocean rise in a tidal wave and flow around the globe, we know that the object in the sky that draws them can be no phantom: it must be a solid globe, with actual gravitating power. The upward drawing of men's hearts proves that there is a real Christ yonder.

Science, too, is breaking from the negations of half a century ago. It recognizes that there are appearances which come with too much testimony to dismiss them as impostures or illusions, and which may be visits from the spirit world. Perhaps we are on the threshold of discoveries in a hitherto

untrodden region, and as the secrets of nature are unfolding to our gaze, so perhaps may be some of the secrets of the supernatural. We leave this, however, for wise and thoughtful further research, believing there is nothing either in Scripture or experience to keep us from accepting it.

Enough for our purpose if we have shown that nature does not comprise the whole of God, nor do the processes of evolution contain all the modes of his activity; that outside this universe there is another realm surrounding it as the ether surrounds the globe, pervaded with the life and thought of God, and throbbing with the movement of his energies; that nature is not intended in itself to carry out the full purposes of God, nor be the complete expression of his character; that it finds its highest function in responding to his touch; and that again and again he has entered it, adding new elements to the sum of its being, guiding it by his superintendence, and lifting it by successive steps to higher stages of advancement.

We are thankful indeed for the lessons that evolution teaches. An awe comes over us as we study the outworking of those forces, which, hidden in the far-away fire-mist, or vortex dance of atoms, have gone on and up, linking all parts of the universe into one, and bringing all ages under the control of one far-reaching purpose, till at last it has produced the splendid universe in which we live to-day. It is one of the grandest evidences of the wisdom and power, the patience and love, of God. Science is no foe to faith, rather her handmaid.

Yet evolution has its limits. It still leaves God imprisoned in his handiwork. He who, of old, entered into the primordial atoms, and by his indwelling has given them their advancement, is held fast within their processes. The vastness, the splendor, the variety of the universe, are only an enlargement

and a beautifying of his prison-house. Immutable walls still shut him in, and there is no doorway through which he can pass to us or we to him.

Sin, too, is simply a stage in man's development: it is the divine in man that in perturbed, chaotic way is seeking outlet; a blind force in the blood, heaving and tossing till it shall emerge in ordered form in sainthood. There is no place or need for repentance, faith, or prayer. Christ did not come into the world because of sin, and to save us from it: he entered into it originally in the atoms, accompanied it in its ascending progress, blossomed forth for a brief period in his incarnate splendor, then sank back to be part of the universe once more. The cosmical Christ thus becomes part of the cosmos, not to emerge from it till its final winding up shall give him liberty.

Wonderful as is evolution, it has not grasped the whole of God. Still he transcends our thought, and reaches out into realms incomprehensible. God stands in an essentially supernatural relation to the soul. By the necessities of our thought he is infinite in every phase of being — eternal, omnipotent, omnipresent. As eternity precedes time, as space surrounds creation, so God as transcendent is prior to, and the condition of, God as immanent. He is centrally the transcendent one. Immanence is an inference; transcendence is an intuition. As Cardinal Newman said, "The two realities which no thinking can destroy, but rather out of which all thinking processes emerge, are myself and God. The two personalities confront each other. Were the universe annihilated, or should the soul awake as from a sleep and find it but a dream, still I would stand before God in the attitude of dependence; and love, worship, service, would be the primal duties of my life." God is everywhere around us.

"Nearer is he than breathing;
Closer than hands and feet."

We are not mere parts of the universe. We did not emerge from atoms. We came from God, and back to him one day we go. And out of our present relationship to him comes the chiefest grandeur of our life.

The distinctive work of the church is supernatural. Welcome as we may the uplift that is coming to man through the discovery and the employment of the forces of nature, and the spread of the sense of brotherhood, yet let us ever affirm that the salvation of man from sin is from above: it comes from the immediate working of a personal God, a risen Christ, an indwelling Holy Spirit. Conversion is the coming of the soul out of the domain of nature into that of supernature. The new birth is a birth from above into the above. Our churches may be institutional: they are bound to be inspirational. We ministers may lead in social and moral activity, yet our distinctive function must be that of prophets of the unseen God.

The advance of history will come in large part from the increasing recognition of the supernatural. Doubtless as the ages pass there will be an increase of the natural forces that work for human welfare; but side by side with these there will come an increased direct relationship to God, a growth in faith, in prayer, in worship. The advance of mankind will be a religious progress. When the vision of the New Jerusalem shall be realized, while that city will be set up firmly on the earth, and its civilization will be the consummation of the age-long processes of natural advancement; yet it will be pervaded by the supernatural; the glory of the personal God will lighten it, its inhabitants shall see his face, and his name will be written in their foreheads.