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SCIENTIFIC LIGHTS ON RELIGIOUS PROBLEMS.

I.

THE MODERN FIGHT OF FAITH.

IT is a familiar aphorism of our day that the battle of life has become more arduous than it was in the days of our fathers. We are told that in every department it is more difficult to live than it used to be—it is harder to make rich at home; it is less easy to make rich abroad; it is impossible to make money go so far anywhere. And what is said of our material finances is with equal pertinacity maintained of our spiritual capital. The cry is something like this: "Men required less faith long ago; a less expenditure of faith would purchase more commodities. It has become more difficult for religion to live upon its original income. The universe on which it speculated has increased in value. To the later centuries Nature has become larger, God smaller. From his place at the centre Man has been driven into a corner—a very remote corner—where he can see nothing and cannot be seen. Instead of being the focus of interest to a Divine Spirit, he has been compelled to view himself as a single grain of sand on an absolutely boundless shore. God, if God there be, is no longer in contact with his spirit. He has been separated from him by an iron chain called Evolution—a chain whose links hold close together so as to preclude the possibility of any Divine intervention. It is of this dread power we must henceforth say what the Psalmist said of the God of Israel, 'Thou hast beset me behind and before, and hast laid Thy hand upon me.'"

Now, I have always doubted the justice of this complaint

as to the increasing difficulty of spiritual subsistence. I do not think the conditions of modern scientific knowledge are more unfavourable to faith than was the condition of scientific ignorance. Nay, let me put it stronger. I think that, to a mind already religious, the modern field of Evolution presents incentives to faith which were wanting to previous fields. Whether in the exchange or in the church, faith is an act of speculation—a trust reposed previous to knowledge. I think that, keeping to the light of Nature alone, there is more ground for such a trust under the new régime than under the old; and I shall try as briefly and clearly as possible to set forth the reasons which have led me to this conclusion.

And first, let me direct attention to a preliminary point. It is generally assumed as an axiom that the trend of modern thought has been to widen man's conception of the outside spaces. That is not my opinion. It has certainly magnified tenfold his sense of the number of objects *in* space; but it has not increased his imagination of space itself. We are apt to reason thus: "The ancients had a very limited view of the mechanism of the starry heavens. Was not Anaxagoras persecuted for saying that the sun was as large as the Peloponnesus! What a blessed world for the religious mind to dwell in! How near man must have felt to the Source of his being, how close to the eye of God!" In point of fact, he did not so feel. His farthest star was indeed at a measurable distance; but his universe remained infinite. Behind his farthest star there was an immensity of space—space that wing had never traversed, space that thought had never compassed, and in one of whose inaccessible recesses dwelt the infinite God.

This is, in point of fact, the prevailing universe of the old world—even of its populace. The ordinary Greek never dreamed of reaching the top of Olympus—the paradise of the gods; it was too far away; his dead were sent to an

under-world. The Indian beheld his deities through such vast spaces that his own personality sank before them. The later Jew himself saw a universe of space so immense that the secret of God's pavilion became unreachable, and he was compelled to seek intermediaries. It was his imagination of the vastness of that space dividing him from the Object of his worship that drove him into the reverence for angels. His sense of the unpassed and impassable chasm between himself and God led him to invoke lower helps than that of the Supreme. The hero of the Book of Job is a man absolutely crushed by the problem of physical infinitude. His world embraces a very small number of *stars*; but he is appalled by the boundlessness of the silent *spaces*. He says of the God of Nature, "How little a portion is *heard* of Him!"—what vast tracts of unoccupied immensity He inhabits, alone! It is this sense of physical vastness that makes him refuse any theological explanation of his sufferings. What was *he* that the great God should single him out for retribution! Even had he sinned above his kind—which he had not—what hurt could he have done to a Majesty so far removed from a moth's wing! Was he even worthy of being such an object of interest as to be *punished* by heaven! Could the creature so break the peace of the Creator as to draw His thunderbolt! Could an atom in the boundless void loom so large in the sight of the Infinite as to be made the subject of a special decree, the object of a particular retribution! Surely to say so was to exalt the pride of Man!

This is the thought which, in my opinion, permeates the greatest book of the Old Testament. You will see how little the belief in the earth's centrality served as a counterpoise to this humility. Why should it! What advantage is it to be the centre of a small cluster of stars if, beyond every one of these stars, there is a universe of immeasurable spaces, at whose greatest conceivable distance reposes in

isolation the Spirit of the Great God! If I am thus far distant from the original Source of my being, it matters not how central I am to the rest of the universe. In vain you make sun, moon, and stars revolve round my world if, beyond sun, moon, and stars, and separating each from the fountain of their light, there is interposed a field of blank space compared with whose immensity all united existing objects are but a single wavelet on the surface of a fathomless sea! It was the contemplation of such a universe that produced in the fulness of time the creed of Epicurus—a creed whose keynote was, not the denial of God, but the nothingness of Man. There might, it said, be powers above, but they must be *exercised* above. Earth had no place for them; Man had no sphere for them; human history was unworthy of their contact. To this deep note of humility, spite of the central point in which they thought their world to dwell, had the minds of men sunk in the days of the Roman Empire.

Now, consider in what respects our modern universe differs from theirs. It differs in two—the filling of the blank spaces with objects, and the surrounding of these objects with a chain. I begin with the former. We say habitually that modern science has extended our view of the universe. It has not; it has extended our view of the material objects *in* the universe. The ancients saw as wide a space as the moderns; but the moderns have filled the space. There is no difference in the size of the room; but to the old world the room is empty, to the new it is full of furniture. It is not merely that the latter sees a hundred stars for every ten witnessed by the former. The most remarkable furnishing of the room is precisely in those parts of it which still look empty. Tell the modern scientist that he has come to the end of the planets, the end of the comets, the end of all suns and systems, he would still see beyond them a furnished, not an unfurnished, room. The

space which once was thought blank is, for him, filled with ether. It is the home of multitudinous forces pulsating and vibrating with the promise and potency of life. Mr. Huxley treads the same spaces which were trodden by the writer of the Book of Job. What does he see? What change has taken place in the interval? Has there been an increase of territory? No; the modern scientist beholds, I think, no wider precincts. But within the old precincts he beholds a vast growth of population. The voids are filled; the deserts are vocal; the places once waste are ringing with the sound of many voices.

Now, what does this mean to the religious life? It means something of great importance. It involves nothing less than a new facility for faith. Supposing the belief in God to exist already, it ought to be strengthened by the filling of waste places. For what does that imply? Simply this, that we can no longer speak of a God *behind* Nature. In these modern times we can imagine nothing behind Nature—nothing where the ether is not, nothing where force is not. The solitudes have all been inhabited—so far, at least, as imagination can travel. Therefore, no more can Man imagine a solitary God. No more can he picture a Deity outside of the material framework. As long as there were void spaces, he could. But now that the void has, to fancy's eye, been filled, there is no vacant recess for God. Henceforth Man must seek Him, not behind Nature, but in Nature. He must seek Him, not where energy pauses, but where energy reigns—not in the scene of isolation, but in the place of contact. Imagination can never again picture God as taking rest. We can never again view Him as reclining in a field behind all physical forces. There is no such field known to science, and therefore there is no such field known to modern fancy. It ceases to be pious to think of God as dwelling apart from the order of the world.

Piety, then, has found in modern times a less distant sphere. If my God exists anywhere, He is not behind Nature—where the Indian sought Him, where the later Jew sought Him. The strain upon faith is lessened. The range of its flight is contracted. It is no longer required to soar beyond the clouds of materialism. It is no longer asked to seek a home where physical forces end, nor even to believe in such a home. It is told that if its God be found anywhere, it will be *within* that circle—in the *heart* of Nature, in the *midst* of the physical forces. The question between the theist and the atheist has altered. It is no longer whether there be a Power outside of Nature; it is, What do you consider the power you call Nature to be? Is it living, or is it dead? Is it thinking, or is it unintelligent? Is it blind, or is it purposeful? That is the question, and the only question. “I do not believe in anything but matter and force,” wrote an eminent author to a friend of mine. I could have devoutly answered, “Neither do I.” I have seen *one* compound of matter and force—personality, and wish for nothing more effectual at the head of the universe. It is not the limitation of my belief to matter and force that makes me an atheist; it is the meagre notion I have of the *powers* of matter and force. Faith has no need to seek a new object. Let it *go on* believing in matter and force; but let it believe in them more fully. Let it give Nature credit for larger powers than those of mere mechanism—for wisdom, foresight, benevolence. Faith’s modern problem is easier than its ancient one. That was to find God *beyond* the veil of sense; this is to find God imprinted *on* the veil of sense. To modern faith the universe has grown smaller instead of larger, for it seeks the object of its worship in the things that are seen and temporal.

But there is another respect in which to the religious eye the world of our day has supplied an aid to faith. This

new and thickly-populated modern universe has been seen to be encircled by a chain. That chain is familiarly known by the name, Evolution. It denotes the fact that every object in nature and every event in life is linked to some foregoing object and some former event. I have said that it has supplied an aid to faith. In truth, it has supplied by a reality the loss of a delusion. In those ancient days when God was supposed to dwell in the depths of unpeopled immensity, men felt keenly their distance from Him. It seemed to them that He was too far removed to be interested. They tried, as we have seen, to span the gulf by believing a fiction. They persuaded themselves that the earth was in the middle of the universe, that it stood there fixed and stationary, and that all the suns and systems were moving round it. The belief seemed to offer some slight hope that from out the depth of creation the eye of God might light on the needs of Man. How little practical influence that hope possessed we have already seen; yet it was really the offspring of an effort to stem the tide of religious despair. But, as to Man's eye the population of the universe thickened, the central position of the earth began to disappear. With the Middle Ages the earth *ceased* to be the middle; it became only the centre of the *Solar System*. With Copernicus, even that light went out, and dense darkness reigned. Man was wheeled back; his world became a speck; his interests seemed nowhere. The chariots of the heavenly host appeared to pass him superciliously by. The sun smote him by day with its greater glory; the stars smote him by night with their brilliant indifference. In the many mansions of the Father's house there seemed no place prepared for *him*. The old cord was broken which bound him to celestial worlds, and the new cord had not yet been found. He felt himself unregarded by heaven; and history proves that he became reckless of earth.

Newton made *some* bridge over the void between man and the universe. He discovered in the principle of gravitation something which constrained the worlds to keep together, which prevented them from travelling too far apart. But that was after all a very slender compensation to the shattered faith of Man. It was the assertion that he and the universe had a common limit. Man wanted more than that. It was not enough to know that the stars as well as he were denied an absolute liberty. The common prohibition did not imply a common importance. It did not alter the fact that Man was a speck in the void. It did not give him back the comforting sense of being the centre of the universe. It did not compensate him for the proud delusion that Earth was the capital of Creation, and that all other parts of Creation were only the provinces. It did not reduce the size of Jupiter or Saturn or Mars. It did not obviate the fact that the light of the nearest fixed star would take three years and a half to reach the human eye. It did not remove the fear that somewhere there might be a *real* metropolis, a veritable city of God, for whose sake alone the realms of space existed, and whose inhabitants were as far above the earth as the spirit of a Shakespeare is above the life of an amœba.

It was while Man was thus brooding that there broke upon his sight that dread system of Evolution which is supposed to have raised new barriers to the religious life. The question whether these new barriers are real I will for the present leave in abeyance. But what I here wish to emphasize is the fact that, whatever *new* difficulties the doctrine of Evolution may have raised, it has supplied the solution of an old one. It has answered the question of the Psalmist, "When I consider the heavens, what is man?" It has answered it in a more effectual way than did the delusion which it has superseded. Man has lost the faith that he is the metropolis of Creation; he can no

longer view himself as the centre of a Divine plan. But, in the light of Evolution, he has gained more than he has lost. He is still denied a distinctive central position; but why? Not because the central position has been given to another, but because it has been equally shared by every one. Evolution says, "If you are not the centre, it is not because another centre has been found, but because there is a centre everywhere." Evolution has abolished the distinction between the centre and the circumference, has annulled the difference between great and small. We can no longer distinguish between "the essence and the accidents." There are no accidents. In this modern scheme every event is not only of the utmost importance but of equal importance. You see a ripple on the surface of a lake; you witness an explosion in the heart of a comet. The one, you say, belongs to our little earth; the other is a part of the universal plan. No, says Evolution, they are both parts of the universal plan; they are both equally parts of that plan. The ripple on the lake was not a whit less inevitable, not a whit less involved in Nature, than the explosion of the comet; on any providential scheme which professes to be a scientific scheme, the one belongs to the cosmos as much as the other.

In past centuries it has been quite a common thing for men to argue thus: "You theologians exaggerate your position in the universe. You manifest an extraordinary pride by your doctrine of sin and redemption. How can you imagine that any little fall of yours, supposing it to have taken place, or any little rise of yours, supposing it to have happened, should have been of any interest whatever to the great Power whom you believe to rule the universe! Is not your theological science founded on the perceptions of a magnifying glass which exhibits your earth and you under false proportions!"

I do not think any scholar would use that argument now;

I am convinced that no evolutionist would. From the standpoint of modern science, there is not on this earth a purely earthly incident—an incident which had not its root in times and worlds far away. The events transacted here were not born here. They had their parentage in a nebulous fire-cloud before the mountains were brought forth or the dry land appeared. It is vain to speak of exaggerating our local surroundings. We have no local surroundings; the peculiarity of our surroundings is that they are not local. The brain-wave which originated our temptation had its birth in a movement of the fire-cloud; the stream of life which set us free was folded in the primitive forces of the universe. When the foundation of the heaven was laid, Man was there—inevitably, inextricably. He was there in his promise and in his potency. He had as sure a place in the constitution of the heavens as the belt of Orion or the signs of the Zodiac. The modern psalmist is no longer overwhelmed by the starry spaces. He feels to them as the transplanted shell would feel could it view from afar the parent sea. He recognises in these spaces the cradle of his birth. They do not inspire him with a sense of nothingness. Rather do they meet him as home memories—remembrances of a life to which he is kindred, and from which he has come out to seek a larger destiny.

And, then, consider the modern doctrine of the unity of species; what a new light this throws upon the dignity of Man! It is so often associated with human degradation that we have lost sight of its elevating side. Yet it has an elevating side. What *is* the doctrine of the unity of species? It is not the belief that the man is kindred to the animal and the animal to the plant; that is a mere symptom of the doctrine, an illustration of its working. To the thoroughgoing evolutionist the unity of species means more than that. It is the averment that man, animal and plant alike are kindred to the forces of Nature which lie

behind them. The process of Evolution is not simply a process by which the man is built upon the animal and the animal upon the vegetable. It is a process by which man, animal and vegetable have been successively evolved by the natural forces themselves. The real kinship, therefore, is not between man and the animal, but between man and all things. The unity of species claimed for him is, in its deepest sense, not a unity with the beast of the field, but a unity with those mighty forces which existed from the foundation of the world.

What, then, of the Force at the back of these—that primal Force which Mr. Spencer calls the Unknowable? On scientific principles, *can* it be the Unknowable! Shall the unity of species break down at the last moment! After claiming a common life for man, animal, plant, crystal, and the whole system of so-called physical forces, is it conceivable that in its final step modern science should desert its favourite doctrine! Is it conceivable that in its last ascent it should deny that unity of species which, all up the ladder, it has strenuously maintained! Shall all the forces of Nature be kindred but the primal Force! Shall this alone be of a different species—of a species so different that it is “unknowable”! Shall the trunk and the leaves and the branches of life’s tree be allied, but the root be alien to all! If so, evolution has denied itself—has at the eleventh hour expelled from its vineyard those who have borne the burden and heat of the day. It has abandoned within reach of the goal that consummation for which it has laboured.

But, if Evolution should carry out its original principle—if it should make the primal Force akin to all forces, how great then will be Religion’s gain! The first doctrine of the creed of science will be the first doctrine of the old creed of Creation—that Man is made in the image of the universe. It will no longer, doubtless, be an *unshared* privilege; but

it will not be less sweet on that account. If you assume the existence of God in Nature and carry out the principle of evolution in science, you will reach by stern logic a conclusion devoutly to be wished. You will decide at the close of many centuries what a primitive writer inferred in the dawn of history—that Man bears the likeness of the primal Force of Nature. It is a conclusion which has often been scouted as a survival of the savage state, which is still stigmatised by the hard name “anthropomorphic.” But it is a conclusion at which you will arrive by no savage instinct, a judgment to which you will be led by no want of culture. You will come to it through the science of the nineteenth century, through the latest phase of that science—Evolution, through the carrying out of that Evolution to its utmost boundary—the complete adoption of the unity of species. It will be on the ground of this final step that you will revert substantially to the doctrine of the old book of Genesis—that the breath of the Creator has been breathed into the creature. An alien power at the head of the universe will, to the developed scientific consciousness, seem a contradiction in terms. It will be a thought at variance with the unity of species. It will be itself an idea which marks the survival of savagery, and therefore to be rejected by every cultured mind. Even so, by the unlikeliest of all roads—that road which to many has appeared the broad way leading to destruction—we may expect to find the Promised Land. We may expect to regain that belief which tradition regarded as the belief constituting Paradise—the faith that to the heart of Man there throbs a responsive Pulse at the heart of the universe.

G. MATHESON.