

***ARTHUR JAMES  
BALFOUR***



***THEISM  
AND  
HUMANISM***

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**Arthur James Balfour**

# **Theism and Humanism**

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*[The paragraph headings in this Table of Contents are not designed to give more than a very imperfect suggestion of the subjects discussed. I have put them in for the convenience of those who, having read the book, wish to refer back to some particular passage. The headings do not appear in the text.]*

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# **PART I**

# ***INTRODUCTORY***

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# LECTURE I

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## I

Those responsible for the selection of Gifford Lecturers have made it clear that, in their interpretation of Lord Gifford's Trust, studies in a very wide range of subjects are relevant to the theme of Natural Religion. Gifford lectures have been devoted to such diverse themes as Comparative Religion, Primitive Mythologies, Vitalism, Psychology of Religious Experiences, the History of Religious Development at particular Epochs. And, in addition to these, we have had expounded to us systems of Metaphysics of more than one type, and drawing their inspiration from more than one school.

When I was honoured by an invitation to take a share in the perennial debate which centres round what Lord Gifford described as Natural Religion, I had to consider what kind of contribution I was least unfitted to make. Perhaps if this consideration had preceded my reply to the invitation, instead of following it, I might have declined the perilous honour. Neither in my own opinion nor in that of anybody else, am I qualified to contribute a special study of any of the scientific, psychological, anthropological, or historical problems which may throw light upon the central issue. This must of necessity be the work of specialists. No metaphysical system, again, am I in a position to provide;—for reasons which will appear in the sequel. A merely critical commentary upon the systems of other people might hardly meet either the expectations of my audience, or the wishes of those who appointed me to the post. Indeed, the



enormous range of modern philosophic literature, and the divergent tendencies of modern philosophic thought would make the task, in any case, one of extreme difficulty. Few, indeed, are those who, by the width of their reading and the quickness of their intellectual sympathy, are qualified to survey the whole field of contemporary speculation; and, assuredly, I am not among them.

The vast amplitude of relevant material daily growing with the growth of knowledge, cannot but hamper the sincerest efforts of those who desire to take a comprehensive view of the great problems which Lord Gifford desired to solve. Most men are amateurs in all departments of activity but the one, be it scientific or practical, or artistic, to which they have devoted their lives. Bacon, indeed, with the magnificent audacity of youth, took all knowledge for his province. But he did so in the sixteenth century, not in the twentieth; and even Bacon did not escape the charge of being an amateur. No one, while human faculty remains unchanged, is likely to imitate his ambitions. More and more does the division and subdivision of labour become necessary for knowledge, as for industry. More and more have men to choose whether they shall be dabblers in many subjects or specialists in one. More and more does it become clear that, while each class has its characteristic defects, both are required in the republic of knowledge.

So far as specialists are concerned, this last proposition is self-evident. Specialists are a necessity. And it may well be that those who have successfully pressed forward the conquering forces of discovery along some narrow front, careless how the struggle towards enlightenment fared elsewhere, may be deemed by the historian to have been not only the happiest, but the most useful thinkers of their generation. Their achievements are definite. Their contributions to knowledge can be named and catalogued.

The memory of them will remain when contemporary efforts to reach some general point of view will seem to posterity strangely ill-directed, worthless to all but the antiquarian explorers of half-forgotten speculation.

Yet such efforts can never be abandoned, nor can they be confined to philosophers. There are for all men moments when the need for some general point of view becomes insistent; when neither labour, nor care, nor pleasure, nor idleness, nor habit will stop a man from asking how he is to regard the universe of reality, how he is to think of it as a whole, how he is to think of his own relation to it.

Now I have no wish to overpraise these moments of reflection. They are not among the greatest. They do not of necessity involve strenuous action, or deep emotion, or concentrated thought. Often they are periods of relaxation rather than of tension, moods that pass and leave no trace. Yet it is not always so; and when the pressure of these ancient problems becomes oppressive, then those who, from taste or necessity, have lived only from hour to hour, seek aid from those who have had leisure and inclination to give them a more prolonged consideration.

Of these there is no lack; some speaking in the name of science, some in the name of religion, some in the name of philosophy. The founder of these lectures regarded philosophy, and (if I mistake not) philosophy in its most metaphysical aspect, as the surest guide to the truths of which he was in search. And certainly I am the last to criticise such a view. It is clearly the business of metaphysicians, if they have any business at all, to provide us with a universal system. They cannot lose themselves in concrete details, as may happen to men of science. They are neither aided, nor trammelled, as all working organisations, whether in Church or State, are necessarily aided and trammelled, by institutional traditions and

practical necessities. They exist to supply answers to the very questions of which I have been speaking. Yet metaphysics does not appeal, and has never appealed, to the world at large. For one man who climbs to his chosen point of view by a metaphysical pathway, a thousand use some other road; and if we ask ourselves how many persons there are at this moment in existence whose views of the universe have been consciously modified by the great metaphysical systems (except in so far as these have been turned to account by theologians), we must admit that the number is insignificant.

Now, I do not think this is due to the fact, so often commented upon, both by the friends of metaphysics and its foes, that in this branch of inquiry there is little agreement among experts; that the labours of centuries have produced no accepted body of knowledge; that, while the separate sciences progress, metaphysics, which should justify them all, seems alone to change without advancing. Mankind is not so easily discouraged. New remedies are not less eagerly adopted because old remedies have so often failed. Few persons are prevented from thinking themselves right by the reflection that, if they be right, the rest of the world is wrong. And were metaphysical systems what men wanted, the disagreements among metaphysicians would no more destroy interest in metaphysics than the disagreements among theologians destroys interest in theology. The evil, if evil it be, lies deeper. It is not so much that mankind reject metaphysical systems, as that they omit the preliminary stage of considering them. Philosophy is now, perhaps has always been, an academic discipline which touches not our ordinary life. A general knowledge of the historic schools of thought may indeed be acquired by the young as part of their education; but it is commonly forgotten by the middle-aged; and, whether forgotten or remembered, is rarely treated as in any vital relation to the

beliefs and disbeliefs which represent their working theories of life and death.

If you desire confirmation of this statement, consider how few men of science have shown the smallest interest in metaphysical speculation. Philosophers, with one or two notorious exceptions, have commonly had a fair amateur acquaintance with the science of their day. Kant, though I believe that his mechanics were not always beyond reproach, anticipated Laplace in one famous hypothesis. Descartes and Leibnitz would be immortalised as mathematicians if they had never touched philosophy, and as philosophers if they had never touched mathematics. In our own day Huxley not only contributed to biology, but wrote on philosophy. Yet, speaking generally, metaphysics has in modern times been treated by men of science with an indifference which is sometimes respectful, more commonly contemptuous, almost always complete.

Nor can we attribute this attitude of mind, whether on the part of scientific specialists or the general public, to absorption in merely material interests. There are some observers who would have us believe that the energies of Western civilisation are now<sup>1</sup> entirely occupied in the double task of creating wealth and disputing over its distribution. I cannot think so; I doubt whether there has been for generations a deeper interest than at this moment in things spiritual—however different be its manifestations from those with which we are familiar in history. We must look elsewhere for an explanation of our problem. There must be other reasons why, to the world at large, those who study metaphysics seem to sit (as it were) far apart from their fellow-men, seeking wisdom by methods hard of comprehension, and gently quarrelling with each other in an unknown tongue.

Among these reasons must no doubt be reckoned the very technical character of much metaphysical exposition. Some of this could be avoided, much of it could not; and, in any case, philosophers might well ask why people should expect metaphysics—to say nothing of logic and psychology—to be easier of comprehension than the differential calculus or the electro-magnetic theory of light. Plainly, there is no reason: and, in so far as the thoughts to be expressed are difficult, and the language required to express them is unfamiliar, the evil admits of no remedy.

But there is something more to be said. It must, I think, be admitted that most men approach the difficulties of a scientific exposition far more hopefully than the difficulties of a metaphysical argument. They will take more trouble because they expect more result. But why? In part, I think, because so much metaphysical debate is not, or does not appear to be, addressed to the problems of which they feel the pinch. On the contrary, it confuses what to them seems plain; it raises doubts about what to them seems obvious; and, of the doubts which they *do* entertain, it provides no simple or convincing solution.

The fact is, of course, that the metaphysician wants to re-think the universe; the plain man does not. The metaphysician seeks for an inclusive system where all reality can be rationally housed. The plain man is less ambitious. He is content with the kind of knowledge he possesses about men and things—so far as it goes. Science has already told him much; each day it tells him more. And, within the clearing thus made for him in the tangled wilderness of the unknown, he feels at home. Here he can manage his own affairs; here he needs no philosophy to help him. If philosophy can speak to him about questions on which science has little to say, he will listen; provided always that the problems dealt with are interesting, and the

treatment of them easily understood. He would like, for example, to hear about God, if there be a God, and his Soul, if he has a Soul. But he turns silently away from discussions on the One and the Many, on Subject and Object, on degrees of Reality, on the possibility of Error, on Space and Time, on Reason and Intuition, on the nature of Experience, on the logical characteristics of the Absolute. These may be very proper topics for metaphysicians, but clearly they are no topics for him.

Now I am far from saying that in these opinions the plain man is right. His speculative ambitions are small, and his tacit assumptions are many. What is familiar seems to him easy; what is unfamiliar seems to him useless. And he is provokingly unaware of the difficulties with which his common-sense doctrines are beset. Yet in spite of all this, he has my sympathy; and I propose, with due qualifications and explanations, to approach the great subject, described by the Trust as Natural Religion, from his—the plain man's—point of view.

## II

But what *is* the plain man's point of view? What *is* the creed of common sense?

It has never been summed up in articles, nor fenced round with definitions. But in our ordinary moments we all hold it; and there should be no insuperable difficulty in coming to an agreement about certain of its characteristics which are relevant to the purposes of my immediate argument. One such characteristic is that its most important formulas represent beliefs which, whether true or false, whether proved or unproved, are at least *inevitable*. All men accept them in fact. Even those who criticise them in theory live by them in practice.

Now this category of “inevitableness” is not often met with in metaphysics; indeed, so far as I know, it is not met with at all. We hear of innate beliefs, *a priori* judgments, axioms, laws of thought, truths of reason, truths the opposite of which is “inconceivable”—and so forth. These various descriptions are all devised in the interests of epistemology, i.e. the theory of knowledge. They are intended to mark off classes of judgments or beliefs which possess peculiar validity. But none of these classes are identical with the class “inevitable.” There are inevitable beliefs which nobody would think of describing either as *a priori* or axiomatic. There are others of which the contradictory is perfectly conceivable; though no one who had other things to do would take the trouble to conceive it. An inevitable belief need not be self-evident, nor even, in the last analysis, self-consistent. It is enough that those who deem it in need of proof yet cannot prove it, and those who think it lacks coherence yet cannot harmonise it, believe it all the same.

But, are there such inevitable beliefs? There certainly are. We cannot, in obedience to any dialectical pressure, suppose the world to be emptied of persons who think, who feel, who will; or of things which are material, independent, extended, and enduring. We cannot doubt that such entities exist, nor that they act on one another, nor that they are in space or time. Neither can we doubt that, in the world thus pictured, there reigns an amount of stability and repetition, which suggests anticipations and retrospects—and sometimes justifies them.

These beliefs are beliefs about what are sometimes called “facts” and sometimes “phenomena”—neither term being either very convenient or very accurate. They are assumed in all sciences of nature, in all histories of the past, in all forecasts of the future, in all practice, in all theory, outside

philosophy itself. But there are two other kinds of beliefs which must, I think, be also regarded as inevitable, of which I shall have to speak in the course of these lectures. They have unfortunately no generic names, and I must defer any description of them till future lectures. It is sufficient for the moment to say that one of them relates to the ends of action, and includes morals; while the other relates to objects of contemplative interest, among which is beauty. In some shape or other—perhaps in shapes which seem to us utterly immoral or disgusting—beliefs of both kinds are, so far as I can judge, entertained by all men. And though they have not the coercive force possessed by such beliefs as those in the independent existence of things and persons, they may be counted, for my purposes, among the inevitable.

Here, then, are three classes of belief which in some shape or other common sense holds, has always held, and cannot help holding. But evidently the shapes in which they may be held are many. They vary from age to age and from person to person. They are modified by education, by temperament, by the general condition of learning, by individual opportunities, and by social pressure. The common sense of the twentieth century A.D. is very different from the common sense of the twentieth century B.C. Yet, different though it be, it possesses unalterable similarities, and up to a certain point submits to the same classification.

If you desire an illustration, consider the case of matter, or of material things. All men believe in what is commonly called the “external world”—they believe in it with evidence, or without evidence, sometimes (like David Hume) in the teeth of evidence, in any case independently of evidence. But as to what this “external world” really is they differ profoundly. The expert of to-day differs from the expert of yesterday, both differ from the average man, the average



man of the twentieth century differs from his predecessors, and they differ from each other according to the stage of general and scientific culture at which they have severally arrived.

### III

But, though all this be granted, to what, you may be disposed to ask, does it lead? What has it got to do with Theism? It is not alleged that in any shape these inevitable beliefs are necessarily true; it is admitted that in most of the shapes in which men have held them they are actually false; it is not even suggested that a belief in God is to be counted among them. How, then, is Natural Theology advanced?

To answer this question would be to anticipate the nine lectures which are still to come. In the meanwhile, it may be enough to say that these beliefs of common sense supply the material on which I propose to work; that I shall treat them as a developing and improving system, of which the present phase is the most developed and the best. It is with this phase that I am chiefly concerned. If, for example, I make use of beliefs about the "external world" they will be (mainly) the beliefs of contemporary or recent science so far as I know them. If I make use of ethics or æsthetics, it will be the ethics and æsthetics of Western civilisation, not of Melanesia. I shall not add to them nor subtract from them. I shall not criticise nor question them. I shall accept them at their face values. But I shall ask what this acceptance implies. I shall ask how these values are to be maintained. And in particular I shall inquire whether the course of development, whose last known stages these beliefs represent, can be regarded as a merely naturalistic process without doing fatal damage to their credit.

The answer I shall give to this last question will be in the negative. And, if the only alternative to Naturalism be Theism, as from the common-sense standpoint it certainly is, then the effect of my argument, for those who accept it, will be to link up a belief in God with all that is, or seems, most assured in knowledge, all that is, or seems, most beautiful in art or nature, and all that is, or seems, most noble in morality.

At this point you will inevitably ask me to explain what sort of Deity He is whose existence I wish to establish. Men have thought of God in many ways. In what way is He thought of in these lectures?

The question is legitimate, though I am in some doubt how far you will regard my answer as satisfactory. I, of course, admit that the conception of God has taken many shapes in the long-drawn course of human development, some of them degraded, all of them inadequate. But this, or something like this, was inevitable on any theory of development; and the subject-matter of theology does not seem to have fared differently in this respect from the subject-matter (say) of physics or psychology. It is in all cases the later stages of the process which mainly concern us.

There is, however, something more to be said. The highest conceptions of God seem to approximate to one of two types, which, without prejudice, and merely for convenience, I may respectively call the religious and the metaphysical. The metaphysical conception emphasises His all-inclusive unity. The religious type emphasises His ethical personality. The metaphysical type tends to regard Him as the logical glue which holds multiplicity together and makes it intelligible. The religious type willingly turns away from such speculations about the Absolute, to love and worship a