

***GEORGE JOHN
ROMANES***



***A CANDID
EXAMINATION
OF THEISM***

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A Candid Examination of Theism

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PREFACE.

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The following essay was written several years ago; but I have hitherto refrained from publishing it, lest, after having done so, I should find that more mature thought had modified the conclusions which the essay sets forth. Judging, however, that it is now more than ever improbable that I shall myself be able to detect any errors in my reasoning, I feel that it is time to present the latter to the contemplation of other minds; and in doing so, I make this explanation only because I feel it desirable to state at the outset that the present treatise was written before the publication of Mr. Mill's treatise on the same subject. It is desirable to make this statement, first, because in several instances the trains of reasoning in the two essays are parallel, and next, because in other instances I have quoted passages from Mr. Mill's essay in connections which would be scarcely intelligible were it not understood that these passages are insertions made after the present essay had been completed. I have also added several supplementary essays which have been written since the main essay was finished.

It is desirable further to observe, that the only reason why I publish this edition anonymously is because I feel very strongly that, in matters of the kind with which the present essay deals, opinions and arguments should be allowed to

produce the exact degree of influence to which as opinions and arguments they are entitled: they should be permitted to stand upon their own intrinsic merits alone, and quite beyond the shadow of that unfair prejudication which cannot but arise so soon as their author's authority, or absence of authority, becomes known. Notwithstanding this avowal, however, I fear that many who glance over the following pages will read in the "Physicus" of the first one a very different motive. There is at the present time a wonderfully wide-spread sentiment pervading all classes of society—a sentiment which it would not be easy to define, but the practical outcome of which is, that to discuss the question of which this essay treats is, in some way or other, morally wrong. Many, therefore, who share this sentiment will doubtless attribute my reticence to a puerile fear on my part to meet it. I can only say that such is not the case. Although I allude to this sentiment with all respect—believing as I do that it is an offshoot from the stock which contains all that is best and greatest in human nature—nevertheless it seems to me impossible to deny that the sentiment in question is as unreasonable as the frame of mind which harbours it must be unreasoning. If there is no God, where can be the harm in our examining the spurious evidence of his existence? If there is a God, surely our first duty towards him must be to exert to our utmost, in our attempts to find him, the most noble faculty with which he has endowed us—as carefully to investigate the evidence which he has seen fit to furnish of his own existence as we investigate the evidence of inferior things in his dependent creation. To say that there is one rule or method for

ascertaining truth in the latter case, which it is not legitimate to apply in the former case, is merely a covert way of saying that the Deity, if he exists, has not supplied us with rational evidence of his existence. For my own part, I feel that such an assertion cannot but embody far more unworthy conceptions of a Personal God than are represented by any amount of earnest inquiry into whatever evidence of his existence there may be present; but, neglecting this reflection, if there is a God, it is certain that reason is the faculty by which he has enabled man to discover truth, and it is no less certain that the scientific methods have proved themselves by far the most trustworthy for reason to adopt. To my mind, therefore, it is impossible to resist the conclusion that, looking to this undoubted pre-eminence of the scientific methods as ways to truth, whether or not there is a God, the question as to his existence is both more morally and more reverently contemplated if we regard it purely as a problem for methodical analysis to solve, than if we regard it in any other light. Or, stating the case in other words, I believe that in whatever degree we intentionally abstain from using in this case what we *know* to be the most trustworthy methods of inquiry in other cases, in that degree are we either unworthily closing our eyes to a dreaded truth, or we are guilty of the worst among human sins—"Depart from us, for we desire not the knowledge of thy ways." If it is said that, supposing man to be in a state of probation, faith, and not reason, must be the instrument of his trial, I am ready to admit the validity of the remark; but I must also ask it to be remembered, that unless faith has *some* basis of reason

whereon to rest, it differs in nothing from superstition; and hence that it is still our duty to investigate the *rational* standing of the question before us by the *scientific* methods alone. And I may here observe parenthetically, that the same reasoning applies to all investigations concerning the reality of a supposed revelation. With such investigations, however, the present essay has nothing to do, although, I may remark that if there is any evidence of a Divine Mind discernible in the structure of a professing revelation, such evidence, in whatever degree present, would be of the best possible kind for substantiating the hypothesis of Theism.

Such being, then, what I conceive the only reasonable, as well as the most truly moral, way of regarding the question to be discussed in the following pages, even if the conclusions yielded by this discussion were more negative than they are, I should deem it culpable cowardice in me *for this reason* to publish anonymously. For even if an inquiry of the present kind could ever result in a final demonstration of Atheism, there might be much for its author to regret, but nothing for him to be ashamed of; and, by parity of reasoning, in whatever degree the result of such an inquiry is seen to have a tendency to negative the theistic theory, the author should not be ashamed candidly to acknowledge his conviction as to the degree of such tendency, provided only that his conviction is an *honest* one, and that he is conscious of its having been reached by using his faculties with the utmost care of which he is capable.

If it is retorted that the question to be dealt with is of so ultimate a character that even the scientific methods are here untrustworthy, I reply that they are nevertheless the

best methods available, and hence that the retort is without pertinence: the question is still to be regarded as a scientific one, although we may perceive that neither an affirmative nor a negative answer can be given to it with any approach to a full demonstration. But if the question is thus conceded to be one falling within the legitimate scope of rational inquiry, it follows that the mere fact of demonstrative certainty being here antecedently impossible should not deter us from instituting the inquiry. It is a well-recognised principle of scientific research, that however difficult or impossible it may be to *prove* a given theory true or false, the theory should nevertheless be tested, so far as it admits of being tested, by the full rigour of the scientific methods. Where demonstration cannot be hoped for, it still remains desirable to reduce the question at issue to the last analysis of which it is capable.

Adopting these principles, therefore, I have endeavoured in the following analysis to fix the precise standing of the evidence in favour of the theory of Theism, when the latter is viewed in all the flood of light which the progress of modern science—physical and speculative—has shed upon it. And forasmuch as it is impossible that demonstrated truth can ever be shown untrue, and forasmuch as the demonstrated truths on which the present examination rests are the most fundamental which it is possible for the human mind to reach, I do not think it presumptuous to assert what appears to me a necessary deduction from these facts—namely, that, possible errors in reasoning apart, the rational position of Theism as here defined must remain without

material modification as long as our intelligence remains human.

London, 1878.

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CHAPTER I.

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EXAMINATION OF ILLOGICAL ARGUMENTS IN FAVOUR OF THEISM.

§ 1. Few subjects have occupied so much attention among speculative thinkers as that which relates to the being of God. Notwithstanding, however, the great amount that has been written on this subject, I am not aware that any one has successfully endeavoured to approach it, on all its various sides, from the ground of pure reason alone, and thus to fix, as nearly as possible, the exact position which, in pure reason, this subject ought to occupy. Perhaps it will be thought that an exception to this statement ought to be made in favour of John Stuart Mill's posthumous essay on Theism; but from my great respect for this author, I should rather be inclined to regard that essay as a criticism on illogical arguments, than as a *careful* or *matured* attempt to formulate the strictly rational *status* of the question in all its bearings. Nevertheless, as this essay is in some respects the most scientific, just, and cogent, which has yet appeared on the subject of which it treats, and as anything which came from the pen of that great and accurate thinker is deserving of the most serious attention, I shall carefully consider his views throughout the course of the following pages.

Seeing then that, with this partial exception, no competent writer has hitherto endeavoured once for all to settle the long-standing question as to the rational probability of Theism, I cannot but feel that any attempt,

however imperfect, to do this, will be welcome to thinkers of every school—the more so in view of the fact that the prodigious rapidity which of late years has marked the advance both of physical and of speculative science, has afforded highly valuable data for assisting us towards a reasonable and, I think, a final decision as to the strictly logical standing of this important matter. However, be my attempt welcome or no, I feel that it is my obvious duty to publish the results which have been yielded by an honest and careful analysis.

§ 2. I may most fitly begin this analysis by briefly disposing of such arguments in favour of Theism as are manifestly erroneous. And I do this the more willingly because, as these arguments are at the present time most in vogue, an exposure of their fallacies may perhaps deter our popular apologists of the future from drawing upon themselves the silent contempt of every reader whose intellect is not either prejudiced or imbecile.

§ 3. A favourite piece of apologetic juggling is that of first demolishing Atheism, Pantheism, Materialism, &c., by successively calling upon them to explain the mystery of self-existence, and then tacitly assuming that the need of such an explanation is absent in the case of Theism—as though the attribute in question were more conceivable when posited in a Deity than when posited elsewhere.

It is, I hope, unnecessary to observe that, so far as the ultimate mystery of existence is concerned, any and every theory of things is equally entitled to the inexplicable fact that something is; and that any endeavour on the part of the votaries of one theory to shift from themselves to the

votaries of another theory the *onus* of explaining the necessarily inexplicable, is an instance of irrationality which borders on the ludicrous.

§ 4. Another argument, or semblance of an argument, is the very prevalent one, "Our heart requires a God; therefore it is probable that there is a God:" as though such a subjective necessity, even if made out, could ever prove an objective existence.^[1]

§ 5. If it is said that the theistic aspirations of the human heart, by the mere fact of their presence, point to the existence of a God as to their explanatory cause, I answer that the argument would only be valid after the possibility of any more proximate causes having been in action has been excluded—else the theistic explanation violates the fundamental rule of science, the Law of Parcimony, or the law which forbids us to assume the action of more remote causes where more proximate ones are found sufficient to explain the effects. Consequently, the validity of the argument now under consideration is inversely proportional to the number of possibilities there are of the aspirations in question being due to the agency of physical causes; and forasmuch as our ignorance of psychological causation is well-nigh total, the Law of Parcimony forbids us to allow any determinate degree of logical value to the present argument. In other words, we must not use the absence of knowledge as equivalent to its presence—must not argue from our ignorance of psychological possibilities, as though this ignorance were knowledge of corresponding impossibilities. The burden of proof thus lies on the side of Theism, and from the nature of the case this burden cannot

be discharged until the science of psychology shall have been fully perfected. I may add that, for my own part, I cannot help feeling that, even in the present embryonic condition of this science, we are not without some indications of the manner in which the aspirations in question arose; but even were this not so, the above considerations prove that the argument before us is invalid. If it is retorted that the fact of these aspirations having had *proximate* causes to account for their origin, even if made out, would not negative the inference of these being due to a Deity as to their *ultimate* cause; I answer that this is not to use the argument from the presence of these aspirations; it is merely to beg the question as to the being of a God.

§ 6. Next, we may consider the argument from consciousness. Many persons ground their belief in the existence of a Deity upon a real or supposed necessity of their own subjective thought. I say "real or supposed," because, in its bearing upon rational argument, it is of no consequence of which character the alleged necessity actually is. Even if the necessity of thought be real, all that the fact entitles the thinker to affirm is, that it is impossible for *him*, by any effort of thinking, to rid himself of the persuasion that God exists; he is not entitled to affirm that this persuasion is necessarily bound up with the constitution of the human mind. Or, as Mill puts it, "One man cannot by proclaiming with ever so much confidence that *he* perceives an object, convince other people that they see it too.... When no claim is set up to any peculiar gift, but we are told that all of us are as capable of seeing what he sees, feeling what he feels, nay, that we actually do so, and when the

utmost effort of which we are capable fails to make us aware of what we are told, we perceive this supposed universal faculty of intuition is but

'The Dark Lantern of the Spirit
Which none see by but those who bear it.'

It is thus, I think, abundantly certain that the present argument must, from its very nature, be powerless as an argument to anyone save its assertor; as a matter of fact, the alleged necessity of thought is not universal; it is peculiar to those who employ the argument.

And now, it is but just to go one step further and to question whether the alleged necessity of thought is, in any case and properly speaking, a *real* necessity. Unless those who advance the present argument are the victims of some mental aberration, it is overwhelmingly improbable that their minds should differ in a fundamental and important attribute from the minds of the vast majority of their species. Or, to continue the above quotation, "They may fairly be asked to consider, whether it is not more likely that they are mistaken as to the origin of an impression in their minds, than that others are ignorant of the very existence of an impression in theirs." No doubt it is true that education and habits of thought may so stereotype the intellectual faculties, that at last what is conceivable to one man or generation may not be so to another;^[2] but to adduce this consideration in this place would clearly be but to destroy the argument from the *intuitive* necessity of believing in a God.

Lastly, although superfluous, it may be well to point out that even if the impossibility of conceiving the negation of God were an universal law of human mind—which it certainly is not—the fact of his existence could not be thus proved. Doubtless it would be felt to be much more probable than it now is—as probable, for instance, if not more probable, than is the existence of an external world;—but still it would not be necessarily true.

§ 7. The argument from the general consent of mankind is so clearly fallacious, both as to facts and principles, that I shall pass it over and proceed at once to the last of the untenable arguments—that, namely, from the existence of a First Cause. And here I should like to express myself indebted to Mr. Mill for the following ideas:—"The cause of every change is a prior change; and such it cannot but be; for if there were no new antecedent, there would be no new consequent. If the state of facts which brings the phenomenon into existence, had existed always or for an indefinite duration, the effect also would have existed always or been produced an indefinite time ago. It is thus a necessary part of the fact of causation, within the sphere of experience, that the causes as well as the effects had a beginning in time, and were themselves caused. It would seem, therefore, that our experience, instead of furnishing an argument for a first cause, is repugnant to it; and that the very essence of causation, as it exists within the limits of our knowledge, is incompatible with a First Cause."

The rest of Mr. Mill's remarks upon the First Cause argument are tolerably obvious, and had occurred to me

before the publication of his essay. I shall, however, adhere to his order of presenting them.

"But it is necessary to look more particularly into this matter, and analyse more closely the nature of the causes of which mankind have experience. For if it should turn out that though all causes have a beginning, there is in all of them a permanent element which had no beginning, this permanent element may with some justice be termed a first or universal cause, inasmuch as though not sufficient of itself to cause anything, it enters as a con-cause into all causation."

He then shows that the doctrine of the Conservation of Energy supplies us with such a datum, and thus the conclusion easily follows—"It would seem, then, that the only sense in which experience supports, in any shape, the doctrine of a First Cause, viz., as the primæval and universal element of all causes, the First Cause can be no other than Force."

Still, however, it may be maintained that "all force is will-force." But "if there be any truth in the doctrine of Conservation of Force, ... this doctrine does not change from true to false when it reaches the field of voluntary agency. The will does not, any more than other agencies, create Force: granting that it originates motion, it has no means of doing so but by converting into that particular manifestation, a portion of Force which already existed in other forms. It is known that the source from which this portion of Force is derived, is chiefly, or entirely, the force evolved in the processes of chemical composition and decomposition which constitute the body of nutrition: the

force so liberated becomes a fund upon which every muscular and every nervous action, as of a train of thought, is a draft. It is in this sense only that, according to the best lights of science, volition is an originating cause. Volition, therefore, does not answer to the idea of a First Cause; since Force must, in every instance, be assumed as prior to it; and there is not the slightest colour, derived from experience, for supposing Force itself to have been created by a volition. As far as anything can be concluded from human experience, Force has all the attributes of a thing eternal and uncreated....

"All that can be affirmed (even) by the strongest assertion of the Freedom of the Will, is that volitions are themselves uncaused and are, therefore, alone fit to be the first or universal cause. But, even assuming volitions to be uncaused, the properties of matter, so far as experience discloses, are uncaused also, and have the advantage over any particular volition, in being, so far as experience can show, eternal. Theism, therefore, in so far as it rests on the necessity of a First Cause, has no support from experience."

Such may be taken as a sufficient refutation of the argument that, as human volition is apparently a cause in nature, and moreover constitutes the basis of our conception of all causation, therefore all causation is probably volitional in character. But as this is a favourite argument with some theists, I shall introduce another quotation from Mr. Mill, which is taken from a different work.

"Volitions are not known to produce anything directly except nervous action, for the will influences even the muscles only through the nerves. Though it were granted,