



## Theism

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Though I have defined the problem of Natural Theology, to be that of the existence of God or of a God, rather than of Gods, there is the amplest historical evidence that the belief in Gods is immeasurably more natural to the human mind than the belief in one author and ruler of nature; and that this more elevated belief is, compared with the former, an artificial product, requiring (except when impressed by early education) a considerable amount of intellectual culture before it can be reached. For a long time, the supposition appeared forced and unnatural that the diversity we see in the operations of nature can all be the work of a single will. To the untaught mind, and to all minds in pre-scientific times, the phenomena of nature seem to be the result of forces altogether heterogeneous, each taking its course quite independently of the others; and though to attribute them to conscious wills is eminently natural, the natural tendency is to suppose as many such independent wills as there are distinguishable forces of sufficient importance and interest to have been remarked and named. There is no tendency in polytheism as such to transform itself spontaneously into monotheism. It is true that in polytheistic systems generally the deity whose special attributes inspire the greatest degree of awe, is usually supposed to have a power of controlling the other deities; and even in the most degraded perhaps of all such systems, the Hindoo, adulation heaps upon the divinity who is the immediate object of adoration, epithets like those habitual to believers in a single God. But there is no real acknowledgment of one Governor. Every God normally rules his particular department though there may be a still stronger God whose power when he chooses to exert it can frustrate the purposes of the inferior divinity. There could be no real belief in one Creator and Governor until mankind had begun to see in the apparently confused phenomena which surrounded them, a system capable of being viewed as the possible working out of a single plan. This conception of the world was perhaps anticipated (though less frequently than is often supposed) by individuals of exceptional genius, but it could only become common after a rather long cultivation of scientific thought.

The special mode in which scientific study operates to instil Monotheism in place of the more natural Polytheism, is in no way mysterious. The specific effect of science is to show by accumulating evidence, that every event in nature is connected by laws with some fact or facts which preceded it, or in other words, depends for its existence on some antecedent; but yet not so strictly on one, as not to be liable to frustration or modification from others: for these distinct chains of causation are so entangled with one another; the action of each cause is so interfered with by other causes, though each acts according to its own fixed law; that every effect is truly the result rather of the aggregate of all causes in existence than of any one only; and nothing takes place in the world of our experience without spreading a perceptible influence of some sort through a greater or less portion of Nature, and making perhaps every portion of it slightly different from what it would have been if that event had not taken place. Now, when once the double conviction has found entry into the mind—that every event depends on antecedents; and at the same time that to bring it about many antecedents must concur, perhaps

all the antecedents in Nature, insomuch that a slight difference in any one of them might have prevented the phenomenon, or materially altered its character—the conviction follows that no one event, certainly no one kind of events, can be absolutely preordained or governed by any Being but one who holds in his hand the reins of all Nature and not of some department only. At least if a plurality be supposed, it is necessary to assume so complete a concert of action and unity of will among them that the difference is for most purposes immaterial between such a theory and that of the absolute unity of the Godhead.

The reason, then, why Monotheism may be accepted as the representative of Theism in the abstract, is not so much because it is the Theism of all the more improved portions of the human race, as because it is the only Theism which can claim for itself any footing on scientific ground. Every other theory of the government of the universe by supernatural beings, is inconsistent either with the carrying on of that government through a continual series of natural antecedents according to fixed laws, or with the interdependence of each of these series upon all the rest, which are the two most general results of science.

Setting out therefore from the scientific view of nature as one connected system, or united whole, united not like a web composed of separate threads in passive juxtaposition with one another, but rather like the human or animal frame, an apparatus kept going by perpetual action and reaction among all its parts; it must be acknowledged that the question, to which Theism is an answer, is at least a very natural one, and issues from an obvious want of the human mind. Accustomed as we are to find, in proportion to our means of observation, a definite beginning to each individual fact; and since wherever there is a beginning we find that there was an antecedent fact (called by us a cause), a fact but for which, the phenomenon which thus commences would not have been; it was impossible that the human mind should not ask itself whether the whole, of which these particular phenomena are a part, had not also a beginning, and if so, whether that beginning was not an origin; whether there was not something antecedent to the whole series of causes and effects that we term Nature, and but for which Nature itself would not have been. From the first recorded speculation this question has never remained without an hypothetical answer. The only answer which has long continued to afford satisfaction is Theism.

Looking at the problem, as it is our business to do, merely as a scientific inquiry, it resolves itself into two questions. First: Is the theory, which refers the origin of all the phenomena of nature to the will of a Creator, consistent or not with the ascertained results of science? Secondly, assuming it to be consistent, will its proofs bear to be tested by the principles of evidence and canons of belief by which our long experience of scientific inquiry has proved the necessity of being guided?

First, then: there is one conception of Theism which is consistent, another which is radically inconsistent, with the most general truths that have been made known to us by scientific investigation.

The one which is inconsistent is the conception of a God governing the world by acts of variable will. The one which is consistent, is the conception of a God governing the world by invariable laws.

The primitive, and even in our own day the vulgar, conception of the divine rule, is that the one God, like the many Gods of antiquity, carries on the government of the world by special decrees, made *pro hac vice*. Although supposed to be omniscient as well as omnipotent, he is thought not to make up his mind until the moment of action; or at least not so conclusively, but that his intentions may be altered up to the very last moment by appropriate solicitation. Without entering into the difficulties of reconciling this view of the divine government with the prescience and the perfect wisdom ascribed to the Deity, we may content ourselves with the fact that it contradicts what experience has taught us of the manner in which things actually take

place. The phenomena of Nature do take place according to general laws. They do originate from definite natural antecedents. Therefore if their ultimate origin is derived from a will, that will must have established the general laws and willed the antecedents. If there be a Creator, his intention must have been that events should depend upon antecedents and be produced according to fixed laws. But this being conceded, there is nothing in scientific experience inconsistent with the belief that those laws and sequences are themselves due to a divine will. Neither are we obliged to suppose that the divine will exerted itself once for all, and after putting a power into the system which enabled it to go on of itself, has ever since let it alone. Science contains nothing repugnant to the supposition that every event which takes place results from a specific volition of the presiding Power, provided that this Power adheres in its particular volitions to general laws laid down by itself. The common opinion is that this hypothesis tends more to the glory of the Deity than the supposition that the universe was made so that it could go on of itself. There have been thinkers however—of no ordinary eminence (of whom Leibnitz was one)—who thought the last the only supposition worthy of the Deity, and protested against likening God to a clockmaker whose clock will not go unless he puts his hand to the machinery and keeps it going. With such considerations we have no concern in this place. We are looking at the subject not from the point of view of reverence but from that of science; and with science both these suppositions as to the mode of the divine action are equally consistent.

We must now, however, pass to the next question. There is nothing to disprove the creation and government of Nature by a sovereign will; but is there anything to prove it? Of what nature are its evidences; and weighed in the scientific balance, what is their value?

### **THE EVIDENCES OF THEISM**

The evidences of a Creator are not only of several distinct kinds but of such diverse characters, that they are adapted to minds of very different descriptions, and it is hardly possible for any mind to be equally impressed by them all. The familiar classification of them into proofs *à priori* and *à posteriori*, marks that when looked at in a purely scientific view they belong to different schools of thought. Accordingly though the unthoughtful believer whose creed really rests on authority gives an equal welcome to all plausible arguments in support of the belief in which he has been brought up, philosophers who have had to make a choice between the *à priori* and the *à posteriori* methods in general science seldom fail, while insisting on one of these modes of support for religion, to speak with more or less of disparagement of the other. It is our duty in the present inquiry to maintain complete impartiality and to give a fair examination to both. At the same time I entertain a strong conviction that one of the two modes of argument is in its nature scientific, the other not only unscientific but condemned by science. The scientific argument is that which reasons from the facts and analogies of human experience as a geologist does when he infers the past states of our terrestrial globe, or an astronomical observer when he draws conclusions respecting the physical composition of the heavenly bodies. This is the *à posteriori* method, the principal application of which to Theism is the argument (as it is called) of design. The mode of reasoning which I call unscientific, though in the opinion of some thinkers it is also a legitimate mode of scientific procedure, is that which infers external objective facts from ideas or convictions of our minds. I say this independently of any opinion of my own respecting the origin of our ideas or convictions; for even if we were unable to point out any manner in which the idea of God, for example, can have grown up from the impressions of experience, still the idea can only prove the idea, and not the objective fact, unless indeed the fact is supposed (agreeably to the book of Genesis) to have been handed down by tradition from a time when there was direct personal intercourse with the Divine Being; in which case

the argument is no longer *à priori*. The supposition that an idea, or a wish, or a need, even if native to the mind proves the reality of a corresponding object, derives all its plausibility from the belief already in our minds that we were made by a benignant Being who would not have implanted in us a groundless belief, or a want which he did not afford us the means of satisfying; and is therefore a palpable *petitio principii* if adduced as an argument to support the very belief which it presupposes.

At the same time, it must be admitted that all *à priori* systems whether in philosophy or religion, do, in some sense profess to be founded on experience, since though they affirm the possibility of arriving at truths which transcend experience, they yet make the facts of experience their starting point (as what other starting point is possible?). They are entitled to consideration in so far as it can be shown that experience gives any countenance either to them or to their method of inquiry. Professedly *à priori* arguments are not unfrequently of a mixed nature, partaking in some degree of the *à posteriori* character, and may often be said to be *à posteriori* arguments in disguise; the *à priori* considerations acting chiefly in the way of making some particular *à posteriori* argument tell for more than its worth. This is emphatically true of the argument for Theism which I shall first examine, the necessity of a First Cause. For this has in truth a wide basis of experience in the universality of the relation of Cause and Effect among the phenomena of nature; while at the same time, theological philosophers have not been content to let it rest upon this basis, but have affirmed Causation as a truth of reason apprehended intuitively by its own light.

#### **ARGUMENT FOR A FIRST CAUSE**

The argument for a First Cause admits of being, and is, presented as a conclusion from the whole of human experience. Everything that we know (it is argued) had a cause, and owed its existence to that cause. How then can it be but that the world, which is but a name for the aggregate of all that we know, has a cause to which it is indebted for its existence?

The fact of experience however, when correctly expressed, turns out to be, not that everything which we know derives its existence from a cause, but only every event or change. There is in Nature a permanent element, and also a changeable: the changes are always the effects of previous changes; the permanent existences, so far as we know, are not effects at all. It is true we are accustomed to say not only of events, but of objects, that they are produced by causes, as water by the union of hydrogen and oxygen. But by this we only mean that when they begin to exist, their beginning is the effect of a cause. But their beginning to exist is not an object, it is an event. If it be objected that the cause of a thing's beginning to exist may be said with propriety to be the cause of the thing itself, I shall not quarrel with the expression. But that which in an object begins to exist, is that in it which belongs to the changeable element in nature; the outward form and the properties depending on mechanical or chemical combinations of its component parts. There is in every object another and a permanent element, viz., the specific elementary substance or substances of which it consists and their inherent properties. These are not known to us as beginning to exist: within the range of human knowledge they had no beginning, consequently no cause; though they themselves are causes or con-causes of everything that takes place. Experience therefore, affords no evidences, not even analogies, to justify our extending to the apparently immutable, a generalization grounded only on our observation of the changeable.

As a fact of experience, then, causation cannot legitimately be extended to the material universe itself, but only to its changeable phenomena; of these, indeed, causes may be affirmed without any exception. But what causes? The cause of every change is a prior change; and such

it cannot but be; for if there were no new antecedent, there would not be a 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 our 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.

But it is necessary to look more particularly into the 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. Now it happens that the last result of physical inquiry, derived from the converging evidences of all branches of physical science, does, if it holds good, land us so far as the material world is concerned, in a result of this sort. Whenever a physical phenomenon is traced to its cause, that cause when analysed is found to be a certain quantum of Force, combined with certain collocations. And the last great generalization of science, the Conservation of Force, teaches us that the variety in the effects depends partly upon the *amount* of the force, and partly upon the diversity of the collocations. The force itself is essentially one and the same; and there exists of it in nature a fixed quantity, which (if the theory be true) is never increased or diminished. Here then we find, even in the changes of material nature, a permanent element; to all appearance the very one of which we were in quest. This it is apparently to which if to anything we must assign the character of First Cause, the cause of the material universe. For all effects may be traced up to it, while it cannot be traced up, by our experience, to anything beyond: its transformations alone can be so traced, and of them the cause always includes the force itself: the same quantity of force, in some previous form. It would seem then that in the only sense in which experience supports in any shape the doctrine of a First Cause, viz., as the primæval and universal element in all causes, the First Cause can be no other than Force.

We are, however, by no means at the end of the question. On the contrary, the greatest stress of the argument is exactly at the point which we have now reached. For it is maintained that Mind is the only possible cause of Force; or rather perhaps, that Mind is a Force, and that all other force must be derived from it inasmuch as mind is the only thing which is capable of originating change. This is said to be the lesson of human experience. In the phenomena of inanimate nature the force which works is always a pre-existing force, not originated, but transferred. One physical object moves another by giving out to it the force by which it has first been itself moved. The wind communicates to the waves, or to a windmill, or a ship, part of the motion which has been given to itself by some other agent. In voluntary action alone we see a commencement, an origination of motion; since all other causes appear incapable of this origination experience is in favour of the conclusion that all the motion in existence owed its beginning to this one cause, voluntary agency, if not that of man, then of a more powerful Being.

This argument is a very old one. It is to be found in Plato; not as might have been expected, in the *Phædon*, where the arguments are not such as would now be deemed of any weight, but in his latest production, the *Lege*. And it is still one of the most telling arguments with the more metaphysical class of defenders of Natural Theology.

Now, in the first place, if there be truth in the doctrine of the Conservation of Force, in other words the constancy of the total amount of Force in existence, 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 causes, 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 even every merely nervous action, as of the brain in 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.

This, however, does not close the discussion. For though whatever verdict experience can give in the case is against the possibility that will ever originates Force, yet if we can be assured that neither does Force originate Will, Will must be held to be an agency, if not prior to Force yet coeternal with it: and if it be true that Will can originate, not indeed Force but the transformation of Force from some other of its manifestations into that of mechanical motion, and that there is within human experience no other agency capable of doing so, the argument for a Will as the originator, though not of the universe, yet of the kosmos, or order of the universe, remains unanswered.

But the case thus stated is not conformable to fact. Whatever volition can do in the way of creating motion out of other forms of force, and generally of evolving force from a latent into a visible state, can be done by many other causes. Chemical action, for instance; electricity; heat; the mere presence of a gravitating body; all these are causes of mechanical motion on a far larger scale than any volitions which experience presents to us: and in most of the effects thus produced the motion given by one body to another, is not, as in the ordinary cases of mechanical action, motion that has first been given to that other by some third body. The phenomenon is not a mere passing on of mechanical motion, but a creation of it out of a force previously latent or manifesting itself in some other form. Volition, therefore, regarded as an agent in the material universe, has no exclusive privilege of origination: all that it can originate is also originated by other transforming agents. If it be said that those other agents must have had the force they give out put into them from elsewhere, I answer, that this is no less true of the force which volition disposes of. We know that this force comes from an external source, the chemical action of the food and air. The force by which the phenomena of the material world are produced, circulates through all physical agencies in a never ending though sometimes intermitting stream. I am, of course, speaking of volition only in its action on the material world. We have nothing to do here with the freedom of the will itself as a mental phenomenon—with the *vexata questio* whether volition is self-determining or determined by causes. To the question now in hand it is only the effects of volition that are relevant, not its origin. The assertion is that physical nature must have been produced by a Will, because nothing but Will is known to us as having the power of originating the production of phenomena. We have seen that, on the contrary, all the power that Will possesses over phenomena is shared, as far as we have the means of judging, by other and much more powerful agents, and that in the only sense in which those agents do not originate, neither does Will originate. No prerogative, therefore, can, on the ground of experience, be assigned to volition above other natural agents, as a producing cause of phenomena. All that can be affirmed by the strongest assertor 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.

To those who, in default of Experience, consider the necessity of a first cause as matter of intuition, I would say that it is needless, in this discussion, to contest their premises; since admitting that there is and must be a First Cause, it has now been shown that several other agencies than Will can lay equal claim to that character. One thing only may be said which requires notice here. Among the facts of the universe to be accounted for, it may be said, is Mind; and it is self-evident that nothing can have produced Mind but Mind.

The special indications that Mind is deemed to give, pointing to intelligent contrivance, belong to a different portion of this inquiry. But if the mere existence of Mind is supposed to require, as a necessary antecedent, another Mind greater and more powerful, the difficulty is not removed by going one step back: the creating mind stands as much in need of another mind to be the source of its existence, as the created mind. Be it remembered that we have no direct knowledge (at least apart from Revelation) of a Mind which is even apparently eternal, as Force and Matter are: an eternal mind is, as far as the present argument is concerned, a simple hypothesis to account for the minds which we know to exist. Now it is essential to an hypothesis that if admitted it should at least remove the difficulty and account for the facts. But it does not account for Mind to refer one mind to a prior mind for its origin. The problem remains unsolved, the difficulty undiminished, nay, rather increased.

To this it may be objected that the causation of every human mind is matter of fact, since we know that it had a beginning in time. We even know, or have the strongest grounds for believing that the human species itself had a beginning in time. For there is a vast amount of evidence that the state of our planet was once such as to be incompatible with animal life, and that human life is of very much more modern origin than animal life. In any case, therefore, the fact must be faced that there must have been a cause which called the first human mind, nay the very first germ of organic life, into existence. No such difficulty exists in the supposition of an Eternal Mind. If we did not know that Mind on our earth began to exist, we might suppose it to be uncaused; and we may still suppose this of the mind to which we ascribe its existence.

To take this ground is to return into the field of human experience, and to become subject to its canons, and we are then entitled to ask where is the proof that nothing can have caused a mind except another mind. From what, except from experience, can we know what can produce what—what causes are adequate to what effects? That nothing can *consciously* produce Mind but Mind, is self-evident, being involved in the meaning of the words; but that there cannot be unconscious production must not be assumed, for it is the very point to be proved. Apart from experience, and arguing on what is called reason, that is on supposed self-evidence, the notion seems to be, that no causes can give rise to products of a more precious or elevated kind than themselves. But this is at variance with the known analogies of Nature. How vastly nobler and more precious, for instance, are the higher vegetables and animals than the soil and manure out of which, and by the properties of which they are raised up! The tendency of all recent speculation is towards the opinion that the development of inferior orders of existence into superior, the substitution of greater elaboration and higher organization for lower, is the general rule of Nature. Whether it is so or not, there are at least in Nature a multitude of facts bearing that character, and this is sufficient for the argument.

Here, then, this part of the discussion may stop. The result it leads to is that the First Cause argument is in itself of no value for the establishment of Theism: because no cause is needed for the existence of that which has no beginning; and both Matter and Force (whatever metaphysical theory we may give of the one or the other) have had, so far as our experience

can teach us, no beginning—which cannot be said of Mind. The phenomena or changes in the universe have indeed each of them a beginning and a cause, but their cause is always a prior change; nor do the analogies of experience give us any reason to expect, from the mere occurrence of changes, that if we could trace back the series far enough we should arrive at a Primæval Volition. The world does not, by its mere existence, bear witness to a God: if it gives indications of one, these must be given by the special nature of the phenomena, by what they present that resembles adaptation to an end: of which hereafter. If, in default of evidence from experience, the evidence of intuition is relied upon, it may be answered that if Mind, as Mind, presents intuitive evidence of having been created, the Creative Mind must do the same, and we are no nearer to the First Cause than before. But if there be nothing in the nature of mind which in itself implies a Creator, the minds which have a beginning in time, as all minds have which are known to our experience, must indeed have been caused, but it is not necessary that their cause should have been a prior Intelligence.

### **ARGUMENT FROM THE GENERAL CONSENT OF MANKIND**

Before proceeding to the argument from Marks of Design, which, as it seems to me, must always be the main strength of Natural Theism, we may dispose briefly of some other arguments which are of little scientific weight but which have greater influence on the human mind than much better arguments, because they are appeals to authority, and it is by authority that the opinions of the bulk of mankind are principally and not unnaturally governed. The authority invoked is that of mankind generally, and specially of some of its wisest men; particularly such as were in other respects conspicuous examples of breaking loose from received prejudices. Socrates and Plato, Bacon, Locke, and Newton, Descartes and Leibnitz, are common examples.

It may doubtless be good advice to persons who in point of knowledge and cultivation are not entitled to think themselves competent judges of difficult questions, to bid them content themselves with holding that true which mankind generally believe, and so long as they believe it; or that which has been believed by those who pass for the most eminent among the minds of the past. But to a thinker the argument from other people's opinions has little weight. It is but second-hand evidence; and merely admonishes us to look out for and weigh the reasons on which this conviction of mankind or of wise men was founded. Accordingly, those who make any claim to philosophic treatment of the subject, employ this general consent chiefly as evidence that there is in the mind of man an intuitive perception, or an instinctive sense, of Deity. From the generality of the belief, they infer that it is inherent in our constitution; from which they draw the conclusion, a precarious one indeed, but conformable to the general mode of proceeding of the intuitive philosophy, that the belief must be true; though as applied to Theism this argument begs the question, since it has itself nothing to rest upon but the belief that the human mind was made by a God, who would not deceive his creatures.

But, indeed, what ground does the general prevalence of the belief in Deity afford us for inferring that this belief is native to the human mind, and independent of evidence? Is it then so very devoid of evidence, even apparent? Has it so little semblance of foundation in fact, that it can only be accounted for by the supposition of its being innate? We should not expect to find Theists believing that the appearances in Nature of a contriving Intelligence are not only insufficient but are not even plausible, and cannot be supposed to have carried conviction either to the general or to the wiser mind. If there are external evidences of theism, even if not perfectly conclusive, why need we suppose that the belief of its truth was the result of anything else? The superior minds to whom an appeal is made, from Socrates downwards, when they professed to give the grounds of their opinion, did not say that they found the belief



in themselves without knowing from whence it came, but ascribed it, if not to revelation, either to some metaphysical argument, or to those very external evidences which are the basis of the argument from Design.

If it be said that the belief in Deity is universal among barbarous tribes, and among the ignorant portion of civilized populations, who cannot be supposed to have been impressed by the marvellous adaptations of Nature most of which are unknown to them; I answer, that the ignorant in civilized countries take their opinions from the educated, and that in the case of savages, if the evidence is insufficient, so is the belief. The religious belief of savages is not belief in the God of Natural Theology, but a mere modification of the crude generalization which ascribes life, consciousness and will to all natural powers of which they cannot perceive the source or control the operation. And the divinities believed in are as numerous as those powers. Each river, fountain or tree has a divinity of its own. To see in this blunder of primitive ignorance the hand of the Supreme Being implanting in his creatures an instinctive knowledge of his existence, is a poor compliment to the Deity. The religion of savages is Fetichism of the grossest kind, ascribing animation and will to individual objects, and seeking to propitiate them by prayer and sacrifice. That this should be the case is the less surprising when we remember that there is not a definite boundary line, broadly separating the conscious human being from inanimate objects. Between these and man there is an intermediate class of objects, sometimes much more powerful than man, which do possess life and will, viz. the brute animals, which in an early stage of existence play a very great part in human life; making it the less surprising that the line should not at first be quite distinguishable between the animate and the inanimate part of Nature. As observation advances, it is perceived that the majority of outward objects have all their important qualities in common with entire classes or groups of objects which comport themselves exactly alike in the same circumstances, and in these cases the worship of visible objects is exchanged for that of an invisible Being supposed to preside over the whole class. This step in generalization is slowly made, with hesitation and even terror; as we still see in the case of ignorant populations with what difficulty experience disabuses them of belief in the supernatural powers and terrible resentment of a particular idol. Chiefly by these terrors the religious impressions of barbarians are kept alive, with only slight modifications, until the Theism of cultivated minds is ready to take their place. And the Theism of cultivated minds, if we take their own word for it, is always a conclusion either from arguments called rational, or from the appearances in Nature.

It is needless here to dwell upon the difficulty of the hypothesis of a natural belief not common to all human beings, an instinct not universal. It is conceivable, doubtless, that some men might be born without a particular natural faculty, as some are born without a particular sense. But when this is the case we ought to be much more particular as to the proof that it really is a natural faculty. If it were not a matter of observation but of speculation that men can see; if they had no apparent organ of sight, and no perceptions or knowledge but such as they might conceivably have acquired by some circuitous process through their other senses, the fact that men exist who do not even suppose themselves to see, would be a considerable argument against the theory of a visual sense. But it would carry us too far to press, for the purposes of this discussion, an argument which applies so largely to the whole of the intuitional philosophy. The strongest Intuitionist will not maintain that a belief should be held for instinctive when evidence (real or apparent), sufficient to engender it, is universally admitted to exist. To the force of the evidence must be, in this case, added all the emotional or moral causes which incline men to the belief; the satisfaction which it gives to the obstinate questionings with which men torment themselves respecting the past; the hopes which it opens for the future; the fears also, since fear as well as hope predisposes to belief; and to these in the case of the

more active spirits must always have been added a perception of the power which belief in the supernatural affords for governing mankind, either for their own good, or for the selfish purposes of the governors.

The general consent of mankind does not, therefore, afford ground for admitting, even as an hypothesis, the origin in an inherent law of the human mind, of a fact otherwise so more than sufficiently, so amply, accounted for.

## THE ARGUMENT FROM CONSCIOUSNESS

There have been numerous arguments, indeed almost every religious metaphysician has one of his own, to prove the existence and attributes of God from what are called truths of reason, supposed to be independent of experience. Descartes, who is the real founder of the intuitional metaphysics, draws the conclusion immediately from the first premise of his philosophy, the celebrated assumption that whatever he could very clearly and distinctly apprehend, must be true. The idea of a God, perfect in power, wisdom, and goodness, is a clear and distinct idea, and must therefore, on this principle correspond to a real object. This bold generalization, however, that a conception of the human mind proves its own objective reality, Descartes is obliged to limit by the qualification—"if the idea includes existence."<sup>[4]</sup> Now the idea of God implying the union of all perfections, and existence being a perfection, the idea of God proves his existence. This very simple argument, which denies to man one of his most familiar and most precious attributes, that of idealizing as it is called—of constructing from the materials of experience a conception more perfect than experience itself affords—is not likely to satisfy any one in the present day. More elaborate, though scarcely more successful efforts, have been made by many of Descartes' successors, to derive knowledge of the Deity from an inward light: to make it a truth not dependent on external evidence, a fact of direct perception, or, as they are accustomed to call it, of consciousness. The philosophical world is familiar with the attempt of Cousin to make out that whenever we perceive a particular object, we perceive along with it, or are conscious of, God; and also with the celebrated refutation of this doctrine by Sir William Hamilton. It would be waste of time to examine any of these theories in detail. While each has its own particular logical fallacies, they labour under the common infirmity, that one man cannot by proclaiming with ever so much confidence that *he* perceives an object, convince other people that they see it too. If, indeed, he laid claim to a divine faculty of vision, vouchsafed to him alone, and making him cognizant of things which men not thus assisted have not the capacity to see, the case might be different. Men have been able to get such claims admitted; and other people can only require of them to show their credentials. But when no claim is set up to any peculiar gift, but we are told that all of us are as capable as the prophet 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:

and the bearers 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.

The inconclusiveness, in a speculative point of view, of all arguments from the subjective notion of Deity to its objective reality, was well seen by Kant, the most discriminating of the

*à priori* metaphysicians, who always kept the two questions, the origin and composition of our ideas, and the reality of the corresponding objects, perfectly distinct. According to Kant the idea of the Deity is native to the mind, in the sense that it is constructed by the mind's own laws and not derived from without: but this Idea of Speculative Reason cannot be shown by any logical process or perceived by direct apprehension, to have a corresponding Reality outside the human mind. To Kant, God is neither an object of direct consciousness nor a conclusion of reasoning, but a Necessary Assumption; necessary, not by a logical, but a practical necessity, imposed by the reality of the Moral Law. Duty is a fact of consciousness: "Thou shalt" is a command issuing from the recesses of our being, and not to be accounted for by any impressions derived from experience; and this command requires a commander, though it is not perfectly clear whether Kant's meaning is that conviction of a law includes conviction of a lawgiver, or only that a Being of whose will the law is an expression, is eminently desirable. If the former be intended, the argument is founded on a double meaning of the word Law. A rule to which we feel it a duty to conform has in common with laws commonly so called, the fact of claiming our obedience; but it does not follow that the rule must originate, like the laws of the land, in the will of a legislator or legislators external to the mind. We may even say that a feeling of obligation which is merely the result of a command is not what is meant by moral obligation, which, on the contrary, supposes something that the internal conscience bears witness to as binding in its own nature; and which God, in superadding his command, conforms to and perhaps declares, but does not create. Conceding, then, for the sake of the argument, that the moral sentiment is as purely of the mind's own growth, the obligation of duty as entirely independent of experience and acquired impressions, as Kant or any other metaphysician ever contended, it may yet be maintained that this feeling of obligation rather excludes, than compels, the belief in a Divine legislator merely as the source of the obligation: and as a matter of fact, the obligation of duty is both theoretically acknowledged and practically felt in the fullest manner by many who have no positive belief in God, though seldom, probably, without habitual and familiar reference to him as an ideal conception. But if the existence of God as a wise and just lawgiver, is not a necessary part of the feelings of morality, it may still be maintained that those feelings make his existence eminently desirable. No doubt they do, and that is the great reason why we find that good men and women cling to the belief, and are pained by its being questioned. But surely it is not legitimate to assume that in the order of the Universe, whatever is desirable is true. Optimism, even when a God is already believed in, is a thorny doctrine to maintain, and had to be taken by Leibnitz in the limited sense, that the universe being made by a good being, is the best universe possible, not the best absolutely: that the Divine power, in short, was not equal to making it more free from imperfections than it is. But optimism prior to belief in a God, and as the ground of that belief, seems one of the oddest of all speculative delusions. Nothing, however, I believe, contributes more to keep up the belief in the general mind of humanity than this feeling of its desirableness, which, when clothed, as it very often is, in the forms of an argument, is a *naïf* expression of the tendency of the human mind to believe what is agreeable to it. Positive value the argument of course has none.

Without dwelling further on these or on any other of the *à priori* arguments for Theism, we will no longer delay passing to the far more important argument of the appearances of Contrivance in Nature.

## **THE ARGUMENT FROM MARKS OF DESIGN IN NATURE**

We now at last reach an argument of a really scientific character, which does not shrink from scientific tests, but claims to be judged by the established canons of Induction. The Design

argument is wholly grounded on experience. Certain qualities, it is alleged, are found to be characteristic of such things as are made by an intelligent mind for a purpose. The order of Nature, or some considerable parts of it, exhibit these qualities in a remarkable degree. We are entitled, from this great similarity in the effects, to infer similarity in the cause, and to believe that things which it is beyond the power of man to make, but which resemble the works of man in all but power, must also have been made by Intelligence, armed with a power greater than human.

I have stated this argument in its fullest strength, as it is stated by its most thoroughgoing assertors. A very little consideration, however, suffices to show that though it has some force, its force is very generally overrated. Paley's illustration of a watch puts the case much too strongly.<sup>[4]</sup> If I found a watch on an apparently desolate island, I should indeed infer that it had been left there by a human being; but the inference would not be from marks of design, but because I already knew by direct experience that watches are made by men. I should draw the inference no less confidently from a foot print, or from any relic however insignificant which experience has taught me to attribute to man: as geologists infer the past existence of animals from coprolites, though no one sees marks of design in a coprolite. The evidence of design in creation can never reach the height of direct induction; it amounts only to the inferior kind of inductive evidence called analogy. Analogy agrees with induction in this, that they both argue that a thing known to resemble another in certain circumstances (call those circumstances A and B) will resemble it in another circumstance (call it C). But the difference is that in induction, A and B are known, by a previous comparison of many instances, to be the very circumstances on which C depends, or with which it is in some way connected. When this has not been ascertained, the argument amounts only to this, that since it is not known with which of the circumstances existing in the known case C is connected, they may as well be A and B as any others; and therefore there is a greater probability of C in cases where we know that A and B exist, than in cases of which we know nothing at all. This argument is of a weight very difficult to estimate at all, and impossible to estimate precisely. It may be very strong, when the known points of agreement, A and B &c. are numerous and the known points of difference few; or very weak, when the reverse is the case: but it can never be equal in validity to a real induction. The resemblances between some of the arrangements in nature and some of those made by man are considerable, and even as mere resemblances afford a certain presumption of similarity of cause: but how great that presumption is, it is hard to say. All that can be said with certainty is that these likenesses make creation by intelligence considerably more probable than if the likenesses had been less, or than if there had been no likenesses at all.

This mode, however, of stating the case does not do full justice to the evidence of Theism. The Design argument is not drawn from mere resemblances in Nature to the works of human intelligence, but from the special character of those resemblances. The circumstances in which it is alleged that the world resembles the works of man are not circumstances taken at random, but are particular instances of a circumstance which experience shows to have a real connection with an intelligent origin, the fact of conspiring to an end. The argument therefore is not one of mere analogy. As mere analogy it has its weight, but it is more than analogy. It surpasses analogy exactly as induction surpasses it. It is an inductive argument.

This, I think, is undeniable, and it remains to test the argument by the logical principles applicable to Induction. For this purpose it will be convenient to handle, not the argument as a whole, but some one of the most impressive cases of it, such as the structure of the eye, or of the ear. It is maintained that the structure of the eye proves a designing mind. To what class of inductive arguments does this belong? and what is its degree of force?

The species of inductive arguments are four in number, corresponding to the four Inductive

Methods; the Methods of Agreement, of Difference, of Residues, and of Concomitant Variations. The argument under consideration falls within the first of these divisions, the Method of Agreement. This is, for reasons known to inductive logicians, the weakest of the four, but the particular argument is a strong one of the kind. It may be logically analysed as follows:

The parts of which the eye is composed, and the collocations which constitute the arrangement of those parts, resemble one another in this very remarkable property, that they all conduce to enabling the animal to see. These things being as they are, the animal sees: if any one of them were different from what it is, the animal, for the most part, would either not see, or would not see equally well. And this is the only marked resemblance that we can trace among the different parts of this structure, beyond the general likeness of composition and organization which exists among all other parts of the animal. Now the particular combination of organic elements called an eye had, in every instance, a beginning in time and must therefore have been brought together by a cause or causes. The number of instances is immeasurably greater than is, by the principles of inductive logic, required for the exclusion of a random concurrence of independent causes, or speaking technically, for the elimination of chance. We are therefore warranted by the canons of induction in concluding that what brought all these elements together was some cause common to them all; and inasmuch as the elements agree in the single circumstance of conspiring to produce sight, there must be some connection by way of causation between the cause which brought those elements together, and the fact of sight.

This I conceive to be a legitimate inductive inference, and the sum and substance of what Induction can do for Theism. The natural sequel of the argument would be this. Sight, being a fact not precedent but subsequent to the putting together of the organic structure of the eye, can only be connected with the production of that structure in the character of a final, not an efficient cause; that is, it is not Sight itself but an antecedent Idea of it, that must be the efficient cause. But this at once marks the origin as proceeding from an intelligent will.

I regret to say, however, that this latter half of the argument is not so inexpugnable as the former half. Creative forethought is not absolutely the only link by which the origin of the wonderful mechanism of the eye may be connected with the fact of sight. There is another connecting link on which attention has been greatly fixed by recent speculations, and the reality of which cannot be called in question, though its adequacy to account for such truly admirable combinations as some of those in Nature, is still and will probably long remain problematical. This is the principle of "the survival of the fittest."

This principle does not pretend to account for the commencement of sensation or of animal or vegetable life. But assuming the existence of some one or more very low forms of organic life, in which there are no complex adaptations nor any marked appearances of contrivance, and supposing, as experience warrants us in doing, that many small variations from those simple types would be thrown out in all directions, which would be transmissible by inheritance, and of which some would be advantageous to the creature in its struggle for existence and others disadvantageous, the forms which are advantageous would always tend to survive and those which are disadvantageous to perish. And thus there would be a constant though slow general improvement of the type as it branched out into many different varieties, adapting it to different media and modes of existence, until it might possibly, in countless ages, attain to the most advanced examples which now exist.

It must be acknowledged that there is something very startling, and *prima facie* improbable in this hypothetical history of Nature. It would require us, for example, to suppose that the primæval animal of whatever nature it may have been, could not see, and had at most such slight preparation for seeing as might be constituted by some chemical action of light upon its cellular structure. One of the accidental variations which are liable to take place in all organic



beings would at some time or other produce a variety that could see, in some imperfect manner, and this peculiarity being transmitted by inheritance, while other variations continued to take place in other directions, a number of races would be produced who, by the power of even imperfect sight, would have a great advantage over all other creatures which could not see and would in time extirpate them from all places, except, perhaps, a few very peculiar situations underground. Fresh variations supervening would give rise to races with better and better seeing powers until we might at last reach as extraordinary a combination of structures and functions as are seen in the eye of man and of the more important animals. Of this theory when pushed to this extreme point, all that can now be said is that it is not so absurd as it looks, and that the analogies which have been discovered in experience, favourable to its possibility, far exceed what any one could have supposed beforehand. Whether it will ever be possible to say more than this, is at present uncertain. The theory if admitted would be in no way whatever inconsistent with Creation. But it must be acknowledged that it would greatly attenuate the evidence for it.

Leaving this remarkable speculation to whatever fate the progress of discovery may have in store for it, I think it must be allowed that, in the present state of our knowledge, the adaptations in Nature afford a large balance of probability in favour of creation by intelligence. It is equally certain that this is no more than a probability; and that the various other arguments of Natural Theology which we have considered, add nothing to its force. Whatever ground there is, revelation apart, to believe in an Author of Nature, is derived from the appearances in the universe. Their mere resemblance to the works of man, or to what man could do if he had the same power over the materials of organized bodies which he has over the materials of a watch, is of some value as an argument of analogy: but the argument is greatly strengthened by the properly inductive considerations which establish that there is some connection through causation between the origin of the arrangements of nature and the ends they fulfil; an argument which is in many cases slight, but in others, and chiefly in the nice and intricate combinations of vegetable and animal life, is of considerable strength.

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John Stuart Mill. "Three Essays on Religion." *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, Volume 10. Ed. John M. Robson. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985.

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