

DARWINISM AND RELIGIOUS
THOUGHT.

BY

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PROBATION

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DARWINISM AND RELIGIOUS THOUGHT.

PREVIOUS to the year 1859 the state of scientific opinion upon the process of development of the organic world was one of chaos; men of science were groping in the dark. Everyone who rejected the special creation hypothesis found himself in the curious predicament of being unable to propose anything in the shape of a theory which would be acceptable to reasoning minds. To the question asked of the Rationalist by the believer in special creation, "What have you to propose that can be accepted by any cautious reasoner?" no satisfactory answer could be given. Professor Huxley says that in 1857 he had no answer ready, and he does not think any one else had.

Darwin came, and there was light. From his quiet Kentish home he launched upon an astonished world "The Origin of Species." The book was a beacon fire, dispelling the darkness and guiding the benighted. Throughout the world it shone, illumining the minds of men with rays of scientific thought.

During the thirty years which have elapsed since the publication of "The Origin of Species"—since the philosophy of Evolution presented itself as claimant to, and seated itself upon, "the throne of the world of thought"—a most remarkable and far-reaching change has taken place in the religious views of the thinking section of Christendom. Indeed, history affords no parallel to the great revolution in religious thought which has been effected by Darwinism. But yesterday the creation story in Genesis was accepted even by educated

men as unquestionably true ; to-day it is regarded as an exploded legend. But yesterday a belief in the government of the world by a special providence received an all but universal consent ; to-day it is rejected by every thoughtful man as a worthless dogma. But yesterday the time-honoured argument from design in nature satisfied the majority of thinking people ; to-day, in the light of the law of natural selection, it completely fails to do so. But yesterday God was conceived to be a terrestrial potentate who governed the world in accordance with his own caprice, who moved

“ in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform,”

and who listened to and answered prayer ; to-day God is the inscrutable power by which “planets gravitate and stars shine,” who moves in fixed and immutable natural laws, and who heeds neither the cry of the oppressed and the down-trodden, the starving widow and her orphans, nor the death agony of the countless millions of creatures who perish annually in the inexorable struggle for existence which is going on in the animal world.

It is quite true that many persons, indeed the majority, calling themselves religious continue to believe in the superstition and the dogma which Darwinism has exploded. By far the larger proportion of those who make up the various sects and denominations in Christendom are of the unthinking class. Born of Christian parents in a country where Christianity is the popular religion, they are Christian for just the same reason that they would have been Mohammedan had they been born in Turkey, Brahman if in Hindustan, Confucian if in China. Their so-called belief in the Christian faith is due solely to geographical antecedents, and not to any well-reasoned conviction. They never think, study, or inquire for themselves, but remain content in their own ignorance, and satisfied with their own credulity. Those of their co-religionists who do think for themselves inevitably become heterodox upon most, if not upon all, of the points of Christianity. And nothing has had such a vast and stimulating effect upon the minds of the thoughtful members of Christian sects, nothing has so

largely contributed to the swelling of the ranks of heterodoxy, as the theory discovered and popularised by Darwin, and which bears his name.

Anterior to Darwin the belief that species were realities, that the various forms of animal and plant life had always been as distinct and separate as they are now, and that all originated by special creation, was held firmly on every hand. Man was regarded as a creature apart by himself; and the human family was believed to be a separate family. Christians believed that, at a period not more remote than six thousand years, Jehovah, the tribal deity of the Jews, had devoted a week to creating all things. He said, "Let us make man;" and he made man "of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul." To disbelieve the account of creation given by Moses was at once a crime and a blasphemy, punishable by imprisonment, at one time death, in this world, and eternal damnation in the next. But what a change has taken place! The whole scientific and literary world, which held a belief in special creation in common with the religious world, even the whole educated public, now accepts, says Dr. Wallace, "as a matter of common knowledge, the origin of species from other allied species by the ordinary process of natural birth. The idea of special creation or any altogether exceptional mode of production is absolutely extinct."*

Man and all the higher forms of life upon our globe are simply the modified descendants of lower forms. The belief that man was created in the image of God, that he was aboriginally placed at the top of the organic scale, and that God gave to him dominion over the whole animal world, can no longer be held by anyone who desires to be considered educated. The relation of man to what is vulgarly termed the brute creation has been so conclusively established as to completely dispose of every argument advanced in favour of his divine origin. "The mode of origin," says Professor Huxley, "and the early stages of development of man are

* "Darwinism," p. 9.

identical with those of the animals immediately below him in the scale." The essential features of agreement between the structure of man's body, the close correspondence of his blood, muscles, nerves, the structure of his heart, its veins and arteries, his lungs and his whole respiratory and circulatory systems, with those of other mammals; the fact that his senses are identical with theirs, and that his organs of sense are the same in number and occupy the same relative position;* the possession of rudiments of organs which are fully developed in other mammals; the fact of certain diseases being common to man and other mammals, and that medical treatment produces precisely the same effect upon us as upon them, thus showing that our whole nervous system is the same as theirs:† these, and a thousand and one equally striking facts given by Darwin, point to but one conclusion—that man, together with the animals which are most nearly allied to him, have descended from a common ancestor.

Seeing that Darwinism deliberately cancelled the theological dogma of creation founded upon the story in Genesis, it would have been strange indeed had not those who were paid to defend it, and the creed of which it is the foundation, assailed it in a manner consistent with the traditions of their cloth. The historic foes of truth did just that which one would expect of them in the circumstances. Powerless to deal with Darwin in true Christian fashion—to throw him into a dungeon as their predecessors did Galileo, or to burn him at the stake as in the case of Giordano Bruno—powerless to confiscate and burn his book, the representatives of mental darkness had to content themselves with making every pulpit in Christendom ring with yells of pious derision. For discovering the law of natural selection, for proving the animal origin of man, Darwin was denounced as a fool and a blasphemer, in just the same way as was Galileo for teaching that the world was round, and that it moved, in opposition to the sanctified ignorance of the Church of Christ, which proclaimed that the world

* Wallace's "Darwinism," pp. 445, 446.

† "Descent of Man," p. 7.

was flat and stationary. As Huxley says, the priests and parsons eked out lack of reason by superfluity of railing. The case of the curate who was overheard roundly abusing Darwin and all his works, and who was asked if he had read "The Origin of Species," or had taken the trouble to make himself acquainted with the theory he abused, replied, with clasped hands and the whites of his eyes turned in the direction of the empty part of his head, "No; and I pray to God that I never shall," is a good sample of Darwin's clerical opponents.

But the yelling and the railing have long ceased. Confronted by unmistakable evidence that Darwinism was being accepted by all educated people—by all who had brains to think and judgment to decide for themselves—its impotent priestly detractors thought it best to see if it were not possible for them to go with the tide, and to patch up their exploded creed in such a manner as to enable them to maintain their dominion over the heads and the pockets of the masses of the people. They have now taken refuge in one of two courses, says Huxley: they either deny that Genesis was meant to teach scientific truth, and thus save the veracity of the record at the expense of its authority; or they expend their energies in devising the crude ingenuities of the reconciler, and torture texts in the vain hope of making them confess the creed of science. But when the *peine forte et dure* is over, the antique sincerity of the venerable sufferer always re-asserts itself. Genesis is honest to the core, and professes to be no more than it is—a repository of venerable traditions of unknown origin, claiming no scientific authority, and possessing none.*

There is no getting away from the fact that Darwinism has completely exploded the Christian creed. Upon the story in Genesis of man's creation and fall rests the whole superstructure of the popular religious faith of Europe. The veracity of that story has been impeached, and all history and scientific analogy point to its falsity, and stamp it as a mere interesting legend, having no

* *Vide* Huxley's chapter, "On the Reception of 'The Origin of Species,'" in "Darwin's Life and Letters."

further value than to illustrate the manner in which men in the childhood of the human race explained the mystery of existence. Take away the story in Genesis, and the Christian creed becomes at once a huge and ludicrous imposture. This fact, however, is far from being generally realised, even by Darwinians themselves. The writer recently met with a typical illustration of this. An enthusiastic disciple of Darwin was still a member of the sect of Wesleyans, and a regular attendant at a Wesleyan chapel. On the manifest incongruity of Wesleyanism and Darwinism being pointed out to him—when it was explained to him that, the story of the creation and the fall of man being false, therefore the sacrifice of Jesus as an atonement for a sin which was never committed became a farce, he exclaimed: "Good heavens! what a fool I have been not to realise this before." And the following week there was a pew to let in the Wesleyan chapel at which he had been an attendant and a worshipper.

It is only by grasping the full significance of Darwinism that its bearing upon Christianity can be understood. There are thousands to-day attending so-called places of worship and calling themselves orthodox Christians who, if they would only put this and that together, so to speak, and compare their scientific convictions with their theological preconceptions, would find themselves in the same position as the gentleman referred to above. Take the case of Darwin himself.

He tells us* that during the years 1836 to 1839 he was led to think much about religion. When on board the *Beagle* he was quite orthodox. But he gradually came to see that the Old Testament was no more to be trusted than the sacred books of the Hindoos. The question continually arose in his mind, and would not be banished: Is it credible that, if God were now to make a revelation to the Hindoos, he would permit it to be connected with the belief in Vishnu, Siva, etc., as Christianity is connected with the Old Testament? This appeared to him incredible. By further reflection upon the matter he saw that the clearest evidence would

* "Life and Letters of Charles Darwin," vol. i., pp. 304-317.

be requisite to make any sane man believe in the miracles by which Christianity is supported, and that the more men knew of the fixed laws of nature the more incredible miracles became. He saw that the men who wrote the Bible were ignorant and credulous to a degree ; that the gospels upon which the Christian Church placed so much reliance could not be proved to have been written simultaneously with the events ; and that they differed in many important details—far too important, it seemed to him, to be admitted as the usual inaccuracies of eye-witnesses. And by such reflections as these, he adds, "I gradually came to disbelieve in Christianity as a Divine revelation."

It may be well to point out here that the oft-repeated statement, that Darwin was an Atheist, is untrue. There is not the smallest ground upon which to justify such a statement being made. Darwin was never an Atheist, in the sense of denying the existence of a God. His attitude towards the question of God was identical with that of all the leading men in science and philosophy of the present century : it was Agnostic. "The mystery of the beginning of all things is insoluble to us," said he ; "and I, for one, must be content to remain an Agnostic." He had no sympathy with the intellectually unsustainable theory of Atheism, and said : "An Agnostic would be the most correct description of my state of mind." Again : "The whole subject of the existence of God is beyond the scope of man's intellect ; but man can do his duty."

Darwinism is not Atheistic, as it is often alleged to be. It is not even antagonistic to Theism, except in so far as it exposes the absurdity of the theological aspect of that theory. Moreover, it may be urged that Darwinism, although essentially Agnostic in regard to the nature and attributes of God, is distinctly Theistic in character, inasmuch as Darwinians, with few and for the most part unimportant exceptions, hold that the process of evolution is the way in which God (the inscrutable power which the universe manifests to us) has made things come to pass, and has brought forth man as the highest and noblest specimen of its handiwork.

The effect which Darwinism has had upon the central

and vital point of Christianity—the immortality of man's soul—is enormous. Theology and metaphysics, both regarding man as a special creation, as a being with a distinct nature and attributes, had done something more than merely affirm the immortality of the soul: they had insisted upon it as the greatest of facts. That God had revealed a future life for man was no more doubted than was the veracity of the multiplication-table.

But in this belief Darwinism does not share. Regarding man in his real character, as a highly-developed animal, whose moral and intellectual attributes are simply the result of evolution, Darwinism holds out not even the shadow of a hope that there is anything in the shape of a conscious existence beyond the grave. Indeed, the trend of scientific thought upon the question is distinctly in the direction of declaring the doctrine of a future life to be at once inconceivable and insupportable.

There are, it is true, many believers in Darwinism who refuse to accept what is called the Materialistic view of man's destiny—that the life of the soul ends with the life of the body. Assuming a purpose in the world—and the assumption is one not necessarily incongruous with the doctrine of Evolution—they refuse to believe that the work which has been done in evolving man "has been done for nothing;" they refuse, as Professor Fiske puts it, "to regard the Creator's work as like that of a child who builds houses of blocks, just for the pleasure of knocking them down;" and, although they admit that, for aught Science can tell us, it may be so, yet they "see no good reason for believing any such thing."*

It must not be understood that Darwinism sanctions a denial of the immortality of the soul. It only renders it impossible to dogmatise upon either one or the other side of the question. As for a revelation, that may be dismissed as no longer worthy of serious argument, or of the attention of serious minds. But "as for a future life," says Darwin, "every man must judge for himself between conflicting vague probabilities." No one can

* "Man's Destiny," p. 114.

reasonably object to a man believing in the immortality of the soul (that is to say, believing that he believes in the immortality of the soul ; for belief properly so-called in such a thing is absolutely impossible) so long as he does not insist upon his "belief" being regarded as anything more than a mere act of faith. The attitude of the intellectual mind upon the question must ever remain one of agnosticism.

If Darwinism has robbed man of his hope in a future life, it has more than compensated him in that it has given to him a higher hope and a deeper interest in the present life. It has effectually disposed of the theological dogma of man's fall—a dogma which was a wretched libel on humanity ; and it has convinced man that he is a risen and not a fallen creature, a regenerate and not a degenerate being. It has made him feel that human progress is not a miserable sham, but a grand reality ; and it has shown to him a nobler view of human existence, and given to him the promise of a higher destiny in the future.

This essay ought not to close without reference being made to the new conception of morality introduced by Darwinism. Morality is so closely identified with religion, if indeed it may not be regarded as inseparable from religion (using the term "religion" in its widest sense), that it would be strange if the totally-changed conception of man's place in nature should not have produced along with it a corresponding change in man's conception of conduct.

The theological conception of morality, a conception which was general before the Darwinian era, was that all human conduct must be regulated in accordance with the will of a supposed Deity as declared in the Bible. All mankind were inherently depraved in consequence of Adam, the first man, disobeying Jehovah's command. And the conduct of every man and woman must be directed, not towards pleasing themselves, not towards their own happiness, but towards pleasing and gratifying the Deity who would reward good conduct by everlasting felicity, and punish bad conduct by eternal misery. A man was not exhorted to lead a righteous life because it was to his earthly interest to do so, but because

righteousness was pleasing in the eyes of the Deity. The same crude ideas of morality and conduct still obtain among certain unprogressive religious sects. That portion of the Christian community which believes in moral and religious progress on the lines of Rationalism has long since abandoned such, as being at once childish and incongruous with the established facts of science and history.

That Christianity exercises an enormous influence in the interests of morality cannot be denied. There are hundreds of thousands of men and women living in our midst to-day the outward morality of whose lives is entirely due to the fact of their minds being under the influence of Christian dogma. The bribe of an eternal Paradise on the one hand, and the threat of everlasting damnation on the other, restrain these men and women from following their own evil inclinations and adopting the vices of society. And there can be no doubt that, in the absence of such restraint, the criminality in this and other civilised lands would be considerably greater than it is at present. But, while admitting all this, it remains to be said that the position taken up on the general question of morality and religion by certain writers of eminence, who protest that the cancelling of theological dogmas, and the substitution of a Rationalist philosophy in the place of a supernatural faith, are certain to undermine and overthrow morality, is one which is both absurd and untenable. Morality does not depend on the acceptance of theological dogmas, or on a belief in a particular phase of religious faith, but on the very laws and conditions of life; and while the observance of these laws and conditions continues it matters little, if anything, what the religious or theological bias of mankind may be. The laws which govern the moral life are as eternal and immutable as those which govern physical being; and in just the same way as a breach of physical law results in pain or in death, so also a breach of moral law results in unhappiness and evil.

Darwinism has placed the whole question of human conduct upon a firm and comprehensive basis. It has revealed man in his real character as a social animal,

explained how his progenitors became social, and has shed a flood of light upon the origin and development of man's moral sense or conscience.* Moral science has enabled us to determine with exactness and precision how and why certain conduct is good and certain other conduct bad. (Good conduct consists in a course of action which results in the well-being and happiness of the individual and of the race; bad conduct consists in a course of action which results in evil and pain.) It has defined morality as being a condition which makes social life possible, and it has enabled us to deduce from the laws of social life and the conditions of social existence what kinds of action necessarily tend to produce happiness, and what kinds to produce unhappiness.† Happiness, considered as the ultimate aim of human life, has been made more possible of realisation by the new conception of morality which Darwinism has introduced. And while the theological dogma of man's inherent depravity, and his inability to do good without the help of a Deity who cursed the human race, has been finally disposed of, science has clearly demonstrated man's capacity for virtue and for moral progress, and has made it possible to accept as a logical certainty that not only the moral but also the physical and mental perfectibility of man will eventually be attained.

There are, of course, those, preferring to dwell in the realms of illusion and unreality rather than give credence to the teachings of science, to whom the immeasurable effect which Darwinism has had upon religious thought will ever appear as a matter for deep lamentation. But to thinking men and women, to those who are prepared to fearlessly embrace the truth and to conform to the realities of human life, it must always be a subject for great rejoicing. The theological libel, of man's hopeless degeneracy, has been exposed and exploded; and the clarion voice of Science has proclaimed that man has risen—risen from barbarism to civilisation, from

* *Vide* "Descent of Man," pp. 97-127.

† *Vide* Herbert Spencer's letter to J. S. Mill in Bain's "Mental and Moral Science," pp. 721, 722.

ignorance to enlightenment, from depravity to culture. And while the past history of man has been revealed to us, and the present life has been rid of the doubts and the fears which for ages had overshadowed it, we have been afforded a glimpse of the hopeful future that lies before our race. Just as we believe that the present generation excels in moral dignity and intellectual grandeur the generations that preceded it, so must we believe that, assuming the human race continues and the conditions of life remain the same, future generations shall excel all that precede them. As Emerson has said, we are but at the cockcrowing of civilisation. The day of Humanity has hardly dawned. In the great light of its glorious noontide, when the brute inheritance will be finally thrown off, and when manhood and womanhood shall be developed in all their fullness and in all their beauty, then will the religion of human love and human duty, to which the intellectual movement of the present century has given birth, find a living utterance in every heart and in every mind.

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