

B 2292
N 121

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

The Atheistic Platform.

VIII.

IS
DARWINISM
ATHEISTIC?

BY

CHARLES COCKBILL CATTELL.

AUTHOR OF "A SEARCH FOR THE FIRST MAN," ETC



LONDON:
FREETHOUGHT PUBLISHING COMPANY,

63, FLEET STREET E.C.

1884.

PRICE ONE PENNY.

THE ATHEISTIC PLATFORM.

UNDER this title is being issued a fortnightly publication, each number of which consists of a lecture delivered by a well-known Freethought advocate. Any question may be selected, provided that it has formed the subject of a lecture delivered from the platform by an Atheist. It is desired to show that the Atheistic platform is used for the service of humanity, and that Atheists war against tyranny of every kind, tyranny of king and god, political, social, and theological.

Each issue consists of sixteen pages, and is published at one penny. Each writer is responsible only for his or her own views.

- 1.—“WHAT IS THE USE OF PRAYER?” By ANNIE BESANT.
- 2.—“MIND CONSIDERED AS A BODILY FUNCTION. By ALICE BRADLAUGH.
- 3.—“THE GOSPEL OF EVOLUTION.” By EDWARD AVELING, D.Sc.
- 4.—“ENGLAND’S BALANCE-SHEET.” By CHARLES BRADLAUGH.
- 5.—“THE STORY OF THE SOUDAN.” By ANNIE BESANT.
- 6.—“NATURE AND THE GODS.” By ARTHUR B. MOSS.
These Six, in Wrapper, Sixpence.
- 7.—“SOME OBJECTIONS TO SOCIALISM.” By CHARLES BRADLAUGH.

IS DARWINISM ATHEISTIC?

In the concluding words of the "Descent of Man," "we are not here concerned with hopes or fears, only with the truth as far as our reason permits us to discover it" (p. 619). It may be said that Darwinism is not Atheism any more than Theology is Astronomy, yet whether one excludes the other is a question which the assertion leaves unanswered. The Theist looks on the earth and living things as a series of fixed and unchangeable forms of existence as unvarying as they were on the first day of their creation. The universe, according to his view, could not have existed, or the activities called life and volition, without an act of creation. The only proper answer he can make to the question: "Given the earth and all its myriad forms of animal and vegetal life, how came they?" is the one with which all civilised nations are familiar: "They exist by an act of creation by an omnipotent God, above, outside, and apart from the existing universe." To put the matter in the briefest form of words, the Theistic theory is that all physical and vital phenomena once did not exist, but were produced by a cause external to them—and, according to orthodox teaching, generally accepted, at some recent period, a few thousand years ago. The Atheistic position is that all this is inconsistent with the unlimited existence in time and extent of physical existences animate and inanimate. I have referred to "the only proper answer" because there are others who assume a first cause for the production of *living* things. They assume the pre-existence of matter in indefinite time, and reserve the creative act to account for plants, animals,

and men only. Others again bring in a bill of divorce-ment for the severance of the universe from the creator, and introduce the *law* of nature to take the place of an active *God*. Hence in most popular works we meet with the first cause and secondary causes. By general agreement scientific men attribute all the present operations of nature to second causes, and express their conclusions based on observation and experience in terms now popular—the laws of nature. Even George Combe, a man of undoubted piety, penned the following sentence:

“Science has banished the belief in the exercise by the Deity in our day of special acts of supernatural power as a means of influencing human affairs.” Baden Powell went still further (*Inductive Philosophy*, p. 67): “There is not, there never has been, any ‘creation’ in the original and popular sense of the term,” which is now adopted as “a mere term of convenience.” To this the appearance of man is no exception, and in no way violates the essential unity and continuity of *natural* causes. Again, “by equally regular laws in one case as in the other, must have been *evolved* all forms of inorganic and equally of organic existence.” Any single instance of birth or origin as an exception to physical laws “is an incongruity so preposterous that no inductive mind can for a moment entertain it. All is subject to *pre-arranged laws*, and the disruption of one single link in nature’s chain of order would be the destruction of the whole.” All this was written before Darwin broached his theory, and I well remember the reply given more than thirty years ago. “Why then cry unto God? There is no God in nature, only an exhibition of his legislative power as evinced in his pre-arranged laws!” This appears to me an answer. Under this head may fittingly be placed Darwin’s predecessors, E. G. St. Hilaire, Lamarck, Erasmus Darwin, and Goethe, all of whom attribute changes and modifications to a *process of nature*. A brief summary of their views may be read in Dr. Aveling’s “Darwinian Theory.”

Strange as it may appear, Professor Mivart quotes Aquinas and Augustine as writing that “in the first institution of nature we do not look for miracles, but for the laws of nature,” and he himself says “that throughout the whole process of physical evolution—the first manifestation of life included—supernatural action is not to be

looked for." Mr. Mungo Ponton holds that no organism can be said to be created. "It is neither necessary nor reasonable to suppose the Creator himself to act *directly* in the organisation of any organism." How such language must shock the pious writer who exclaimed: "The hand that made me is divine."

The genial poet duly shuddered at Baden Powell, who after all only repeated the words of the Saints of the Roman Church:

"Take thine idol hence,
Cold Physicist!

Great Absentee! and left His Agent Law
To work out all results.

Nature, whose very name
Implies her wants, while struggling into birth,
Demands a *Living* and a *Present* God."

I fully enter into the spirit of these words, and in my first work of importance (1864) I urged that such a conception negatives all science. There can be no scientific fact established and reliable, *if it is true* that there is a God

"Whose power o'er moving worlds presides,
Whose voice created, and whose wisdom guides,"

It appears manifest that there can be nothing certain in nature if God ever interferes. No prediction of the appearance of a comet or any description of the motion of a planet is possible, if we allow the possibility of any unknown person interfering with the calculations on which the predictions are based. This is not a matter of opinion or belief—it is a self-evident truth. We understand that two added to two equal four, but the Theistic theory admits the possibility that they may, under divine control, be either more or less. If any say no, they admit the Atheistic position. A God who never interferes is no God at all.

Those who put Law in place of God explain nothing. Law can no more create, modify, or sustain nature than God can. It is, in fact, only removing the Divine operator one step back without any advantage. Such persons think they thus obviate certain objections to terrible calamities

and sufferings by saying instead of "God did it," "the Law did it." It matters not whether it be the landlord or his agent, if we are evicted without compensation, and starve on the highway.

Mr. M. Ponton ("Beginning: How and When?" p. 357) may be quoted as a very good illustration of this view. He contends that God acts in the living organisms only "mediately, through the instrumentality of the organiser. We might as well suppose every instinctive action of an organised being to be a direct act of the creator, as that every unconscious action contributing to the development, growth, maintenance, or reproduction of the organism is a direct act of Divine interference." Certainly, that is so—but why not? If the development, growth, and reproduction goes on without direct interference, there must be some reason for it, and here it is—"the imperfections and occasional monstrosities occurring in individual organisms *forbid* our supposing these to be the immediate products of unerring creative wisdom and power." The blundering is shifted on to the "organiser"—but whence the organiser who or which acts so monstrously?

The parentage is clearly set forth by Mr. Ponton (p. 356) himself, who, in describing all existing organisms, says: "But the first in each series must have been, in the strict sense of the term, a creation—a being brought into existence by the mere will of the creator." Now taking these two statements as an explanation of the mode of origin of living organisms, I contend that the same logic that forbids us to accept monster from "unerring wisdom" equally forbids us attributing the origin of an agent capable of producing them to the same unerring cause. A good designer of a good organism is accepted—while all is plain and fair sailing; but immediately Mr. Ponton stumbles over an imperfect or monstrous one, he sends the unerring cause flying back into the unknown mist, to assist at the formation of things in their primeval innocence and purity. This is exploded theology over again, as taught in our dame schools.

A similar idea is developed in religion. The brutal God of the Jews is transformed into a humane God by the Christians—a God of love.

But if we assume *one source* of power, it follows that all efficient causes of good and evil are traceable to that one

source, so that there is no advantage in a liberal and loving philosophy clothing the modern God with only a humane and beneficent character. Many devout persons have written books to reconcile us to Theism by picturing the design in nature to produce the beautiful and beneficent. If we accept their theory, we are confronted by fact, attested before our eyes and recorded in the rocks up to the earliest time—that animals have been created and sent on the earth for the purpose of devouring each other. There is no design or purpose plainer than this.

The world is one vast slaughter-house—one half the animal kingdom lives in and on other animals. So long as the lion roams the forest and the tigers seek their prey, so long the doctrine of benevolent design in nature will have a living palpable refutation. A power outside nature that can prevent pain is one of the grossest impositions the ingenuity of man has ever attempted to prove the existence of, or by implication to infer, as evidenced by God “in his works which are fair.”

The only answer that can be made is that it is a good thing to be devoured! I have heard naturalists describe the beautiful adaptations by which one creature can and does kill another! All this takes place by the intention of a personal God who directs it, or his under unerring and beneficent laws of nature, according to whichever view is held.

There was a time, not so distant, when the whole of nature was believed to be under the personal direction of God. Thunder, lightning, storms, eclipses of the sun and moon, and the motions of the heavenly bodies, all came under this description. Travellers assure us that savages usually look upon nature with similar eyes.

All attempts to remove a capricious will of God from the operations of nature have been denounced as Atheistic. All discoverers and announcers of new truth have been denounced as Atheists through all time. A Frenchman filled a whole dictionary with their names. All science is necessarily Atheistic in the original sense of the word—Atheist means *without God*. Of course it is used in other senses by some—for instance the denial of God, against God, an active opposition to Theism, &c. The broad distinction I wish to make is: by Theism we understand a

system based upon the *Supernatural*; by Atheism, a system based upon the *Natural*.

As regards the subject of the present enquiry, the only great difficulty all along has been the popular conception of the earth's recent appearance and its transitory nature. Called into existence only yesterday and liable to vanish in smoke to-morrow, it afforded no scope for the evolution of living things during myriads of ages, millions of years. So long as minds were occupied with the fall of man behind them and penal fires before them, and all nature in a state of possible instantaneous combustion, nothing certain could be expected, no science was possible.

In the presence of a first cause and a last cause and secondary causes, only confusion could arise. When it became known that in science a *first* and *last* cause was equally unknown, that changes in nature being interminable, so likewise are causes and effects—the names by which they are known, what we rightly call human knowledge became possible. The first society started in England for the collection and diffusion of this sort of knowledge was the Royal Society for the special study of *Natural*, in contradistinction to *Supernatural*, knowledge. As regards man, the study has been greatly facilitated by the discovery of his high antiquity, but aid to the interpretation of nature in general comes from the chemist.

To explain anything in the terms of science as a process of nature required the evidence afforded by quantitative chemistry. This assures us that, though all nature is constantly changing, nothing is lost—hence the indestructibility of matter is an established fact. What bearing has this on our subject? To my mind it is clear that the indestructible is a never-ending and never-beginning attribute. This being accepted as a logical inference from an indisputable fact, a beginning and a beginner are both dispensed with. All are agreed that there is a self-existent, eternal something—a necessity of human thought; this appears to me to be the indestructible nature we know—by whatever name we call it.

In illustration of this, I have often quoted a beautiful passage from Herschell (*Nat. Phil.*), who, after referring to the fact that one of the great powers, gravitation, the

main bond and support of the universe, has undergone no change from a high antiquity, says: "So that, for aught we know to the contrary, the same identical atom may be concealed for thousands of centuries in a limestone rock; may at length be quarried, set free in the lime-kiln, mix with the air, be absorbed from it by plants, and, in succession, become a part of the frames of myriads of living beings, till some occurrence of events consigns it once more to a long repose, which, however, in no way unfits it for again assuming its former activity."

There are some who admit the indestructibility of matter and its illimitable existence in space and time, who nevertheless allow there may be something underlying or behind the nature we know. I see no advantage in multiplying assumptions, nor do I see where logically we can stop if we do. If I assume a self-existent, eternal universe, and there stop, no one else can do more than repeat the same proposition containing the same idea. I do not profess to *account* for it—no one can account for it. Why anything exists without limit in space and time no man can tell.

In support of this view, let me quote a passage from the voluminous writings of Herbert Spencer: "Those who cannot conceive a self-existent universe take for granted that they can conceive a self-existent creator." The mystery they see surrounding them on every side they transfer to an alleged source, "and then suppose they have solved the mystery. But they delude themselves. . . . Whoever agrees that the Atheistic hypothesis is untenable because it involves the impossible idea of self-existence, must perforce admit that the Theistic hypothesis is untenable if it contains the same impossible idea. . . . So that, in fact, impossible as it is to think of the actual universe as self-existing, we do but multiply impossibilities of thought by every attempt we make to explain its existence." ("First Principles," p. 35.)

Some who do not admit that nature is all in all, reject the notion I have described as a person creating and sustaining all existing things—on the ground that it is anthropomorphic. Be it so, the long name does not alter the fact. I hold that Paley was right and has never been answered, when he said that a designer and contriver of nature *must be a person*. A *Man-God* is the only rational

and intelligible conception the human intellect can form, and they who reject it are manifestly *without God*—Atheist.

Those who place Law where God used to be are in advance of Theism, my only difference with them being as to the meaning they attach to the word Law. I also believe in the laws of nature, but only thereby express the invariable order manifested—the way nature acts. They use Law not to denote the fact that water seeks its own level, but as though they meant the law either pushed or pulled the water down the river. In all their writings they speak of nature, her laws, and the lawgiver. I only know nature and mode or method. When I say nature works thus, I add nothing to the fact; they speak of law as something impressed on matter, something having a separate existence.

Where I speak of living matter, they speak of matter *endowed* with life, *endowed* with intelligence, &c. This leads up to the particular question under discussion—does Darwinism come under the latter view? A few phrases are frequently quoted to prove that it does. Darwin writes that “*probably* all the organic beings which have ever lived on this earth have descended from some *one* primordial form, into which life was *first* breathed by the Creator.” In another place he writes: “The Creator originally breathed life into a few forms, *perhaps four or five.*” Here we have the word Creator, and the work ascribed to him, or it, is breathing life into one or perhaps five organisms. Darwin’s mind was apparently unsettled with regard to theology all his life. If he had devoted as many years to that as he did to the observation of plants and animals, he would doubtless have uttered a more certain sound. But his use of popular modes of expression, theological phrases, must be judged by his later utterances. Theists quote his words about breathing as though he was in accord with Moses. Surely his tracing man’s origin to the quadruped and aquatic animals is slightly at variance with the words of Genesis! Again it is urged that the use of the word Creator implies creation, but he has placed that view beyond all dispute.

The belief in God he traces to natural causes in “Descent of Man,” p. 93, and points out numerous races of men of past and present time, who have no idea of God

and no word to express such an idea. With regard to the existence of a creator and ruler of the universe, he says: "This has been answered in the affirmative by some of the highest intellects," but he does not answer it himself.¹ He mentions a savage who with "justifiable pride, stoutly maintained there was no *devil* in his land."

With regard to organisms being the work of a creator, his later utterances in "Descent of Man," p. 61, are very clear. He states that in writing "Origin of Species" he had two objects in view, "firstly, to show that species had *not* been specially *created*." The concluding paragraph runs: "I have at least, I hope, done good service in aiding to *overthrow* the dogma of separate *creations*." On the same page, I think, he gives ample explanation of his use of current theological phrases. "I was not, however, able to *annul* the influence of my *former belief*, then almost universal, that each species had been *purposely created*." He traces the objections to his theory to the "arrogance of our forefathers which made them declare that they were descended from demi-gods," and says that before long it will be thought wonderful that naturalists should have believed in separate creations. The concluding words of the volume attest his freedom from dogmatism and his considerateness for the feelings of others. His words are: "The main conclusion arrived at in this work, namely, that man is descended from some lowly organised form, will, I regret to think, be highly distasteful to many." In another place, he says, p. 613: "I am aware that the conclusion arrived at in this work will be denounced by some as highly irreligious." Whatever may be said about it, Darwin says (p. 606): "The grounds upon which this conclusion rests will never be shaken." Viewed in the light of our knowledge of the whole organic world: "The great principle of evolution stands up clear and firm," because it is founded on "facts which cannot be disputed." Darwin's anticipation of the judgment passed upon his views has been more than realised. The great objection to his view is commonly expressed in the words—*what it leads to*. There can be no doubt that it leads to the assumption of natural instead of supernatural causes. . I

¹ In conversation reported by Dr. Aveling, he preferred to describe his view as "Agnostic," which means *I don't know*.

well remember the same objection was made to Combe's theory that the brain was the organ of mind—it would lead to materialism. Astronomy was objectionable because it was no longer possible to keep up the dignity of the earth and its inhabitants as occupying the central position in the universe, having all the heavenly host surrounding them as lights and ornaments. It was a manifest degradation to reduce the comparative size of the earth to a pin's nob surrounded by specks two or three miles in diameter. A remarkable illustration of this occurred recently. A gentleman of education and position opened my "First Man" at the page where I place the last glacial period at 100,000 years ago. He said: "I can read no more, not a line." "Why?" "Because I see what it leads to—the giving up of all I have been taught to believe as the infallible word of God." There can be no manner of doubt but that is the honest way to look at it. Either a man must have his mind open to new knowledge and new truth, or remain in ignorance and error. Those who do not wish to relinquish their notion of the supernatural producing, sustaining, and guiding the natural had better leave Darwin alone.

Hugh Miller held that animals preceded each other, man being last, but not that one was produced by the modifications of others. The present Duke of Argyll admits that changes in the forms of animal life have taken place frequently, but not in the course of nature. Professor Owen argued that as all vertebrate animals had rudimentary bones found in the human skeleton they were types of man—the earliest created perhaps millions of years ago, being planned to undergo certain modifications resulting in the appearance of man long before such a creature as man was known. All these whimsical assumptions are overthrown by Darwin's theory, which accounts for the modification by natural processes. He justly lays claim to his theory as the only natural solution of the appearance of rudimentary organs. It is not at all to be wondered at that such a theory should be called Atheistic, and Darwin the Apostle of the Infidels—and that a bishop described him as burning in hell a few days after he was buried. The opposition of ministers of religion of all denominations might reasonably be expected, since, as they say, he banishes the creator as an intruder

in nature, and takes away the foundation on which the Christian religion is built. The difference between the clergy and Darwin is a gulf that can never be bridged over—they find man made in the image of God, whatever that may mean, while Darwin finds him made exactly in the image of the ape of the old world, now supposed to be extinct. The first Adam of Moses is an essential to the second Adam of Christianity—symbols of death and life in the human race. Besides ministers of religion, the Atheistical tendency of Darwinism has been pointed out by Agassiz and Brewster; the latter stating distinctly that his hypothesis has a tendency “to expel the Almighty from the universe.” Reviews, magazines, and many newspapers put it that Darwinism is practically Atheism; in which description I think they accurately represent the fact.

Professor Dawson, who is recognised by all the religious reviewers as a trustworthy exponent of their views, refers to this subject in his “Story of the Earth,” p. 321, 1880. In discussing whether man is the product of an intelligent will or an evolution from lower organisms, he says: “It is true that many evolutionists, either unwilling to offend, or not perceiving the consequences of their own hypothesis, endeavor to steer a middle course, and to maintain that the creator has proceeded by way of evolution. But the bare hard logic of Spencer, the greatest English authority, leaves no place for this compromise, and shows that that theory, carried out to its legitimate consequences, excludes the knowledge of a creator and the possibility of his works.” Again, on page 348, speaking of absolute Atheists who follow Darwin: “They are more logical than those who seek to reconcile evolution with design . . . The evolutionist is in absolute antagonism to the idea of creation, even when held with all due allowance for the variation of all created things within certain limits.” It is evident, therefore, from this orthodox authority, that Darwinism, is in the estimation of popular Theists, undoubtedly Atheistic. This might be explained away on the ground of bigotry, prejudice, or misrepresentation, if the facts adduced by Darwin could be quoted in support of the accusation. But the inexorable logic of facts points in the direction of Professor Dawson’s inference, and, however objectionable the conclusion may be to him, it rests on a basis

which can never be moved, on grounds that will never be shaken.

Still, Asa Gray and George St. Clair think it reconcilable with theology, the latter devoting a large volume to prove his case. Being an acquaintance, and a fellow townsman now, I read Mr. St. Clair three times, but with unsatisfactory result. It is a book which evinces great ability, and is full of information, but as regards the particular point in question, all that bears upon it is assumption and assertion. All theology consists of assumptions and assertions. Every book upon it we open may be described as stating: There must have been a commencement, and that could not be without a causing or creating, and that could not be without a First Cause or Creator.

Simple as this appears, it contains a contradiction, and refutes itself. To account for any existence by assuming a cause before it, implies non-existence, and the transformation of one into the other. If we assume a self-existing, eternal anything, we at once dispose of "there *must* have been a commencement." The evidence of design can only be applied to *forms* (even if there were any evidence that any existing animal or plant had been at any time designed), therefore the matter of which forms are built up, and which in its nature is unchangeable, cannot be referred to any cause limited to time. If the assumption, as applied to *forms* of life, gave us any explanation, it might be tolerated; but, as it does not, it is worthless. To justify the assumption of a commencement, it is necessary that we should have some evidence of destruction.

We are triumphantly referred to the destruction going on in animal and plant life, but the facts connected with it form the foundation of a belief in the order of perpetual change, without which neither could exist at all on this earth. If any live, some must die.

The air we breathe has been breathed before, the particles of our bodies are but the elements of the dead past, as are the luscious fruit we eat and the odorous flowers we smell—even the blood that is the life itself is derived from the same source. Our finely-built towns, our marble halls, the very paths in which we walk, all are made of the rocks which are but the ashes that survive—the tombs of myriads of living things. Composition, decomposition, and recomposition is the order of nature. Times innumerable have

all natural forms passed through the process of corruption, decay, and death—

“ Ever changing, ever new.”

The “ Bard of Avon ” has been quoted, saying that

“ The great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,”

and it is true he does; but the lines which follow should be read in conjunction :—

“ Bear with my weakness : my old brain is troubled.”

Astronomy has been brought into the controversy, and the possibility of Pope’s words being realised has not wanted believers, when he wrote :—

“ Atoms or systems into ruin hurled,
And now a bubble burst, and now a world.”

Some slight weight was given to this by the brilliant Frenchman, who accounted for the earth by a comet, which, having mistaken its way, knocked a piece off the sun.

It is a consolation, however, to be told by Christian astronomers that we do *not* find within itself the elements of destruction in our planetary system, that all is in motion and change everywhere. After millions of years all the planets will return to their original places only to go round again, the great bell of their judgment day will never be sounded. Playfair says : “ In the planetary motions, where geometry has carried the eye so far into the future and the past, we discover no symptom either of a *commencement* or *termination* of the present order” and as regards the latter “ we may *safely* conclude that this great catastrophe will *not* be brought about by any of the laws now existing; and that it is not indicated by anything which we perceive.”

If the “ undevout astronomer is mad,” the devout one surely is not. Name-calling in serious discussions of this kind is, in my judgment, not only offensive, but inexcusable. It is not uncommon to find in expensive works the main proposition of the Theist described as being so simple and familiar that any one who doubts it may be laughed at as a fool or be pitied as insane. To me such language betrays want of thought, ignorance, or vulgarity

of speech. In every case, on whichever side, the writer who steadfastly avoids the use of such expressions is a praiseworthy contributor to a refinement in the interchange of thought so desirable in a civilised community.
