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POSITIVE RELIGION:
ITS BASIS AND CHARACTERISTICS.

LECTURE I.

BY THE LATE

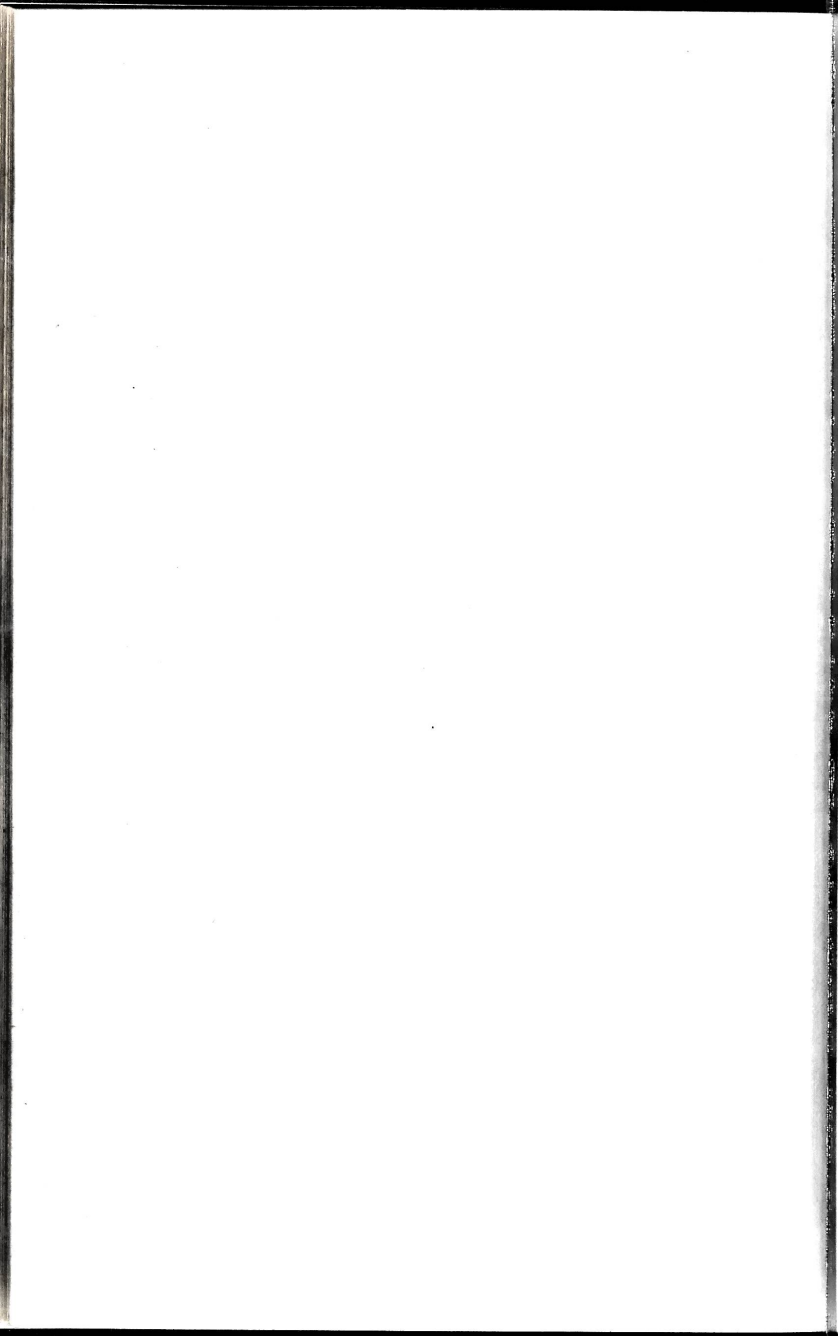
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PUBLISHED BY THOMAS SCOTT,
NO. 11, THE TERRACE, FARQUHAR ROAD,
UPPER NORWOOD, LONDON, S.E.

Price Threepence.



LECTURE I.

IN entering upon a course of lectures upon the basis and characteristics of the only religion I conceive to be possible for those partaking of the spirit of the present day, I must bespeak your patient and very candid attention. For I shall have many things to say which I fear it will be very difficult for those who do not approach the subject from my own point of view, not to misunderstand and misrepresent. I will endeavour, however, to be as explicit and as clear as I can, and I have no doubt, you in return, recognising the importance of the subject, will endeavour to exclude from my words all ideas they do not in themselves express. For this, I apprehend, will constitute your principal difficulty in comprehending what I have to say—the intrusion of other ideas into the words than those which I mean to convey. Whenever an old subject has to be re-discussed this difficulty is sure to arise. People import into it the loose popular ideas that have become associated with it; the mind listlessly allows these ideas to interweave themselves with the new forms of thought: and thus, an interpretation is often given to these new forms of thought which is quite foreign to them. I must ask you, therefore, not to suppose that I mean anything more than I say; and I, upon my part, will promise to do my best to say all I mean.

In attempting to lay a basis for a religion compatible with the culture of the present day, I think it is necessary to begin with a distinct recognition of what

is somewhat unfortunately called the positive philosophy. I think it is unfortunately so called, because there is an ambiguity about the word positive which affords weak wittlings an opportunity to make themselves facetious in their small way over the negations of the philosophy; and also because the term has become so closely connected in the vulgar-literary mind with the name of M. Comte that it is very hard for one, avowing that he adopts the method of the philosophy, to make people believe he does not also adopt that great man's entire system. Now, of course, if the term were a necessary or even a particularly descriptive one in itself, these would not be sufficient reasons for giving it up. But the word positive itself suggests a better. As it is used by the scientific school it simply means that which can be affirmed; the positive philosophy concerns itself only with objects concerning which one can make affirmations. Now, all such objects are phenomenal. What is noumenal lies beyond us, we can only make guesses, from fancies, or constant hypothetical inferences, about it; and consequently all affirmations concerning it are out of the question. The positive philosophy is therefore the phenomenal philosophy, and to call it so would be at once to describe the limits of its enquiries and its aims. Whenever therefore I have to refer to the philosophy distinctively in the course of these lectures I shall call it, not the positive, but the phenomenal philosophy. And I especially hope that by so doing I shall at once guard you against supposing that the system of religion I advocate has any direct relation or resemblance to that of M. Comte. I say this, not because I at all shrink from sharing in the stupid odium attached to his name, but because I think his religious system is so fanciful in its substance, and so entirely French in its form, that it can never obtain but the smallest acceptance with the Anglo-Saxon race.

Well, then, all attempts at ascertaining a basis for the only religion possible in the present day must, as I said, begin by recognising the phenomenal philosophy. And I say so because I everywhere find this philosophy becoming predominant over men's thoughts. Even those who eschew it in words, come unconsciously more or less under its influence, and the most thorough-going metaphysician is seen wriggling and turning in every direction to meet its demands. I believe the time is coming when it will have become universal ; therefore no religion can become permanent which does not recognise its claims.

Now this philosophy is distinguished from others by two essential characteristics. The *first* is the one already referred to and which I have embodied in its name, *i.e.* it limits the objects of its enquiries to the phenomenal. It distinctly avows itself incapable of searching out and knowing anything but phenomena, in their relations of coexistence and succession. It declares that Being, substance, noumenon in itself, lies utterly beyond the reach of the human faculties, and therefore, must ever be utterly unknown.

The *second* characteristic is its method. Confining itself to ascertaining the coexistences and successions of phenomena it rigidly insists that every fact asserted, every inference deduced, every hypothesis formed in explanation, shall be tested, analysed, brought under the laws of experience, and so, thoroughly verified, before it shall be accepted as true. No assumed facts, however plausible ; no process of reasoning however logical ; no theory, however fully accounting for all the known phenomena of a particular subject of enquiry are allowed for one moment to become the substitute for verification ; knowledge consists of what has been verified ; all else lies beyond in the regions of plausibility, conjecture, hypothesis, fancy and faith.

Now, in recognising this phenomenal philosophy thus characterized as true, I think I am doing what both

my knowledge of the character and strength of my own faculties and the history of all attempts to obtain knowledge through all the past ages compel me to do ; for, in the first place, when I examine myself, I find that I have no means of knowing anything but what comes within the range of my outward senses, such as seeing, hearing, &c., and what affects my inner sense, such as objects remembered, pain, pleasure, and so on. And all these objects so known are phenomenal merely. They are the appearances of things, of substances, not the substances themselves. At least I only know them as appearances,—I only know them as of a certain colour, a certain form, a certain hardness and resistance, as producing a certain sensation of heat, &c.—all else is hidden from me. And so, in like manner, I only know the inner objects as appearances to my inner sense ; I only know objects in my memory as of the same though fainter colour, form, &c., as they had in my outer senses, or I know them as combined in new arrangements, and shewing new relations. But the body, the substance, the noumenon in which these appearances, both inner and outer, are supposed to inhere, I know not, and have no faculty for knowing.

Nor do I suppose myself poorer than the rest of my fellowmen in this respect, for when I look back upon the whole history of the race, I find all attempts to discover and know anything more than phenomena ending in contradiction, confusion, fanciful absurdities, and an empty jingle of words. Nothing is presented but a constant succession of philosophers one after the other, the latter only arising to declare the former in error, himself to be denounced in turn by the next coming after him. And the authentic history of these futile attempts, leaving out of consideration those of the Orientals, extends from the 636th year before our era downwards over a space of more than 2500 years. Surely, after such an unquestionable failure as this, one is justified in pronouncing that their attempts were mis-

directed, and the objects they sought beyond their reach. Their failure warns us off the ground they occupied. It teaches us that the knowledge of which we are capable is limited to the coexistence and succession of phenomena alone.

But now, the acceptance of the phenomenal philosophy as the only possible and true one, at once causes a convulsion in our religious beliefs; for all these beliefs are founded upon the supposed knowledge of substance, being in itself God, the being of all beings, the substance of all substances, the one and the all. If we cannot know anything but phenomena, then we cannot know God who transcends all phenomena; and thus religion seems to become impossible. Nor is there any possible escape from this conclusion. Accordingly, it is admitted by all who adopt the philosophy, and is even tacitly admitted by those who come only indirectly under its influence. Thus, *e.g.*, many who are quite orthodox in their religious opinions, acknowledge that they cannot know God in himself, but only through his works, and that revelation they suppose he has given of himself in Jesus Christ. This, however, you will observe, is not, strictly speaking, a knowledge of God at all; it is only a knowledge of certain phenomena which are supposed to represent God. All which, in virtue of such representations, is affirmed about God, is derived by a process of inferential reasoning, and expresses merely a conviction or belief.

There are, however, many convictions or beliefs which are just as powerful, and have just as much practical hold of us as our knowledge has; we must not, therefore, disparage these convictions or beliefs men have about God merely because they are such, but must enquire into their validity by examining the processes of reasoning through which they have been obtained. To this examination I now therefore invite your attention.

And first of all, let us notice that which is so popular in the present day—I mean the argument based upon our asserted intuitions or religious instincts. It is said that as soon as certain phenomena, or any phenomena, are presented to the mind, the idea of God, the Infinite and Absolute, instantaneously springs up in or flashes upon it also, and that the universality and invariableness of the idea prove its truthfulness and validity. Now, there would be some force in this, if it could be shown that this idea did thus invariably, universally, and purely spontaneously, arise upon such occasions. Indeed, all further discussion of the subject would be at an end, because, upon the conditions supposed, those who argued against would be as necessarily the subjects of the idea as those who argued for it.

But, unfortunately, when we come to examine the facts, every one of these supposed conditions is wanting. First, it cannot be shown that the idea is ever purely spontaneous. Those in whom it arises have always been instructed in it. We have no case of a human being, who had never been told of God, for the first time gazing on phenomena and the idea instantaneously springing up in his mind. That in any case it would do so is therefore a gratuitous assumption. For all we can tell, in every case the idea may be the simple result of education, and its apparent spontaneity the consequence of the strong association of ideas.

Then, secondly, this so-called intuition, instinct or law of the mind, is wanting in the essential character of all instincts, invariableness. Its utterances differ in different ages, and amongst different races. The idea of God it presents is always changing. This is not the case with real instincts. A bee always in all countries and ages forms the honey-comb in the same way. Young mammals always obtain their food by the same movements. And the same may be said of every other instinct. How then can we call that an

instinct, and class it with the rest, which differs in such an essential? Nor do I see that this difficulty is in the least degree obviated by calling it a necessary law of the mind instead of an instinct; for a necessary—*i.e.*, an inevitable—law must be as invariable as an instinct. If it be subject to modifications and conditions, it is not inevitable or necessary, and its products therefore become subject to the laws of evidence, to which the products of all other laws are subject. We can never, simply from its deliverances, establish the truth of any conviction.

I do not, however, dwell upon this, for there is the want to this so-called necessary law or instinct of a yet more necessary characteristic still,—universality. It is quite untrue that phenomena spontaneously call forth the idea of God in all minds; for, on the one end of the scale of civilization, there are whole tribes without any notion of God; and on the other, there are numbers of cultivated people who reject the idea and declare that it is never suggested to them by nature. I know that this has been disputed so far as the non-belief of savage tribes is concerned; but there is no justifiable pretence whatsoever for doing so. I have heard, both publicly and privately, Mr Moffat, a Missionary who had resided for upwards of twenty years amongst some of the tribes of South Africa, declare that they had no idea whatsoever of God, and no word in their language by which it could be expressed. And this is the testimony not of a traveller merely passing through the country in a few months, but of one who had become so naturalised amongst them that he had learned to think entirely in their language, and when he made a speech in English had to translate it to himself as he proceeded out of the Bechuana tongue. Here then is a clearly proved case of a people without the idea of God; and upon this case, I deny the universality of the idea, and so show the invalidity of the argument based upon it. The

idea is not spontaneous, for here it has never sprung up at all ; neither is it invariable and universal. It is therefore the result of conditions and not of an original, necessary law. But if so, the conviction or belief which rests upon it must seek some other basis before it can be received as a ruling principle of our life.

Turning then from this argument we meet with another which, although not so fashionable as once it was, is still considered of great force by some, and has received recently the apparent sanction of one of the greatest thinkers of the age. Mr John Stuart Mill has written thus :—" It has been remarked, with truth, that there is not one of the received arguments in support of either natural religion or revelation a formal condemnation of which might not be extracted from the writings of sincerely religious thinkers. . . . But looking at the question as one of prudence, it would be wise in them, whatever else they give up, not to part company with the design argument. For, in the first place, it is the best ; and besides, it is by far the most persuasive. It would be difficult to find a stronger argument in favour of Theism than that the eye must be made by one that sees, and the ear by one who hears." Now, it has been alleged to me that this does not necessarily commit Mr Mill to the validity of the argument from Design ; for, it is said, it may be the best of arguments none of which are good, and the most persuasive where none can persuade. But if Mr Mill merely meant that, he is very censurable for a loose use of words. An argument is not good, and not rationally persuasive at all, unless it be logically correct.* To say therefore that it is the best

* "One circumstance which has misled some persons into the notion that there may be reasoning that is not substantially syllogistic, is this ; that in a syllogism we see the conclusion following *certainly* (or *necessarily*) from the premises ; and again, in any apparent syllogism which on

and the most persuasive is to admit its logical correctness, unless it were meant it is the best to persuade illogical, unwary, unreasoning minds. But Mr Mill's argument throughout the paragraph would not allow one to suppose he meant that, and therefore we must conclude, he gives his sanction to the argument of one design. It becomes us therefore to consider the subject very thoroughly before we venture to question its validity.

Notwithstanding this great authority, however, I must confess that the more I think of it, the more clearly I see the fallacy the argument involves. It seems to me a pure *petitio principii*—an assumption in the premises of that which has to be proved. A very few words will make this plain. Reducing it to the syllogistical form the argument is stated thus : Whatever has marks of design must have had an intelligent designer ; but the world has marks of design ; therefore the world must have had an intelligent designer. Now, what is meant by the word design ? Is it not planning something by the mind to be wrought out in deed ? Is not mind an essential ingredient of it ? In the new edition of Johnson's Dictionary by Dr Latham, the following are the only definitions given of it :—"1st. Intention ; purpose ; scheme ; plan of action. 2nd. Scheme formed to the detriment of another. 3rd. Idea which an artist endeavours to execute or express." Each of these, you will see, examination is found to be not a *real* one, the conclusion does not follow at all. And yet we often hear of arguments which have *some* weight, and yet are not quite *decisive* ; of conclusions which are rendered *probable*, but not absolutely certain, &c. And hence some are apt to imagine that the *conclusiveness* of an argument admits of degrees ; and that sometimes a conclusion may *probably* and *partially*, though not *certainly* and *completely*, follow from its premises. [This mistake arises from men's forgetting that the *premises themselves* will very often be *doubtful* ; and then the conclusions also will be doubtful."—*Whatley's Logic*, Book II., Ch. III., § i.]

directly involves the idea of mind. When therefore the argument in its major premise says, whatever has marks of design must have had an intelligent designer, it merely affirms a truism ; and when it affirms in the minor premise that the world has marks of design ; it quietly assumes all that has to be proved. For the question is whether the world had a creator possessing mind in our sense of the term mind, and to say that it has marks of design is to affirm that it has marks of such a mind's operations since the term design necessarily involves it. This therefore is to assume the whole question in dispute and not to prove it.

Nor would anything be gained by changing the term marks of design for "indications of adaptation" or anything of that kind. They would all fall into the same paralogism of assuming the conclusion in the premises, and could not advance the cause one step. But if in order to avoid this you simply assert the facts, you form no basis whatsoever from which you can rise to the truth one wishes to reach. You say, *e.g.*, the form and conditions of the eye enable it to see, the form and conditions of the ear enable it to hear. Well, and what then? What does that prove? Absolutely nothing. It leaves perfectly untouched the question, How came the eye into this state in which it can see, and the ear into this state in which it can hear?

If any one reply by saying that it is impossible to suppose, imagine, or conceive of such a thing as the eye being able to see unless it had been made by a wise, intelligent mind for the purpose of seeing, that would be only affirming under another form the question at issue. Why is it impossible to conceive otherwise? What is required of one making an assertion of that kind is to prove the impossibility. But that no one could do, for there are many who conceive otherwise. They think of the universe under different modes from those of a creation. So that it is not true,

and can be no argument, to say that it is impossible to suppose, imagine, or conceive of the universe except as created by an intelligent mind. Besides, I should like to know how any one can realize to himself a self-existing first cause, existing in the solitudes of his being through all the past eternity, any more distinctly than he can realize an eternally existing universe? The one conception is quite as impossible as the other.

Mr Mill seems indeed to countenance this argument when in the passage I have quoted from him he says: "It would be difficult to find a stronger argument in favour of theism, than that the eye must have been made by one that sees, and the ear by one who hears." But why *must*? He does not tell us; and I can imagine no other necessity than that which is supposed to arise from this assumed powerlessness in thinking or conceiving otherwise. Yet I feel sure Mr Mill does not mean this, for there is no one who has so thoroughly exposed the worthlessness of such an argument. To me it seems most egregious presumption to argue upon either side from the possibilities of our knowledge, conceptions or imagination, there must be an infinitely deal more in the universe than we can form the remotest notion or fancy of. To say, therefore, that such a thing must be so and not otherwise, because we cannot conceive of it but as so is to be guilty of the egregious folly and presumption of making our ignorance the measure of all possible fact. Men ought long before this to have learned the worthlessness of such arguments; for, the possibilities of our thoughts are continually being modified. Things once possible, in thought, have become impossible; and things once impossible have become necessary conceptions. If you had told an ancient philosopher that bodies put into motion will move on for ever in the same straight line, if there be nothing to interrupt their course he would have laughed at you as a fool. The thing not only would have contradicted his

senses, but would have been absurd in its conception. Now it has become a fundamental law in mechanics. And many other things of the same kind might be named. What, then, I say, is the power we have of conceiving of this thing or that, of imagining this or the other to be an explanation necessary and absolutely imposed by the laws of thought, depends very much upon our culture and can never be brought forward as a proof that the thing is as we conceive it to be. So that when theologians argue that because the world exists in such and such a manner, and we cannot conceive of its so existing unless by the creative act of an intelligent, conscious mind, they are assuming what it is great presumption to assume, *i.e.* that the conceptions of their minds are to be taken as the standard of truth.

And I feel this argument from design all the more fallacious as it is based entirely upon the analogies of human experience. Paley opens his treatise with such an analogy: "If we find a watch we know there must have been a watchmaker, if we find a world with admirable fitnesses and appliances, we, in like manner, infer an intelligent world-maker." But why, in the first case, do we infer a watchmaker? Simply because the watch is an instrument whose whole construction has come under our observation. Paley says, if we had never seen a watch made we should still infer a watchmaker. But upon what ground should we infer it? Simply because we have a large experience of what the undirected forces of nature alone produce, and of what it requires the additional aid and direction of man to produce, and the watch belongs to the latter class of productions. But we have no such experience with regard to the making of worlds. We are therefore extending our experiences beyond the rational limits, when we apply the analogies of watchmaking to the explanation of worldmaking. For all we know, the application of such analogies may be a direct reversal of the truth. Nay, that expression concedes

too much. The application of such analogies *must* be a falsifying of the facts, for, granting the act of creation by an intelligent mind, the act must be altogether unlike the mechanical working of man. The difference in the nature and modes of the existence of the divine and human creators, and the difference of their relations to the materials would determine that. So that the analogies are essentially false at least in one direction, and all arguments based upon them necessarily fall to the ground.

I repeat, therefore, the statement with which I set out respecting this argument from design. As a proof, it utterly fails to establish the doctrine of the Divine existence. It begs the whole question at issue in its very terms. It is founded upon presumptuous assumptions concernings the powers of our knowledge. It is constructed by the unwarranted application of analogies derived from limited human experiences, and some of which we know must, upon the principles of those who contend for the argument, be false. If, indeed, you can arrive at the belief in the Divine existence by other means, then all the wonderful apparent fitnesses and harmonious combinations we find in the world may give strength by the appearance they have of purposed adaptation and design to our convictions of God's creative wisdom and power. For it is one thing to say, these things prove that there is a Creator, and quite another to say, they are all best accounted for by the belief I have already received that there is an infinitely wise and powerful intelligent Creator, and therefore they confirm me in that belief.

I must, however, once more remind you that even if these two arguments which I have criticised were valid, they could not do more than establish grounds of belief, of presumption, of hypothesis with those who hold the phenomenal philosophy; they would not help us to real knowledge. The method of that philosophy would insist that the conclusions should be verified:

and that, from the nature of the case, they could never be. They would be regarded, therefore, merely as establishing a hypothesis more or less probable. The argument might seem so strong that the hypothesis would possess the highest degree of probability, and require us to act upon the assumption of its truth. But still it would not be knowledge, and the feeling would remain that any day it might possibly be proved to be false.

There is one other fallacious argument I shall have to call your attention to before I endeavour to lay the basis of the religion I think to be possible ; but I must reserve that for the commencement of the next lecture.