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POSITIVE RELIGION:
ITS BASIS AND CHARACTERISTICS.

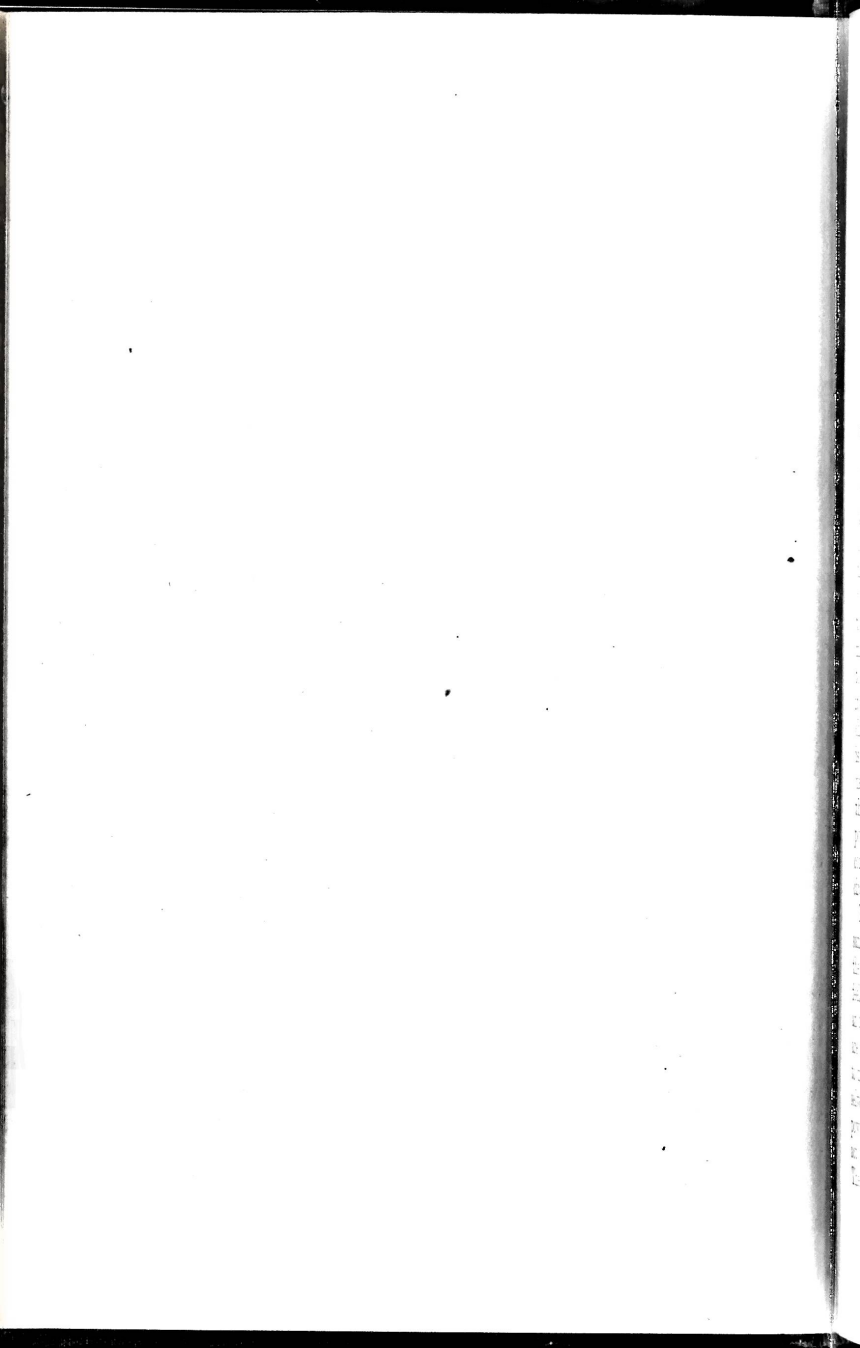
LECTURE II.

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LECTURE II.

THE term "force" enters very largely into modern science, and in philosophy seems very much to occupy the position which "secondary cause" once did. Thus, we are constantly hearing of the mechanical forces, chemical forces, electrical forces, vital forces, the force of gravity, and so on. The word is a very convenient one, and it would be hard if physicists had to give it up; yet I sometimes fear that through the misuse that is already being made of it, they will have to do so. As the word is used by natural philosophers, it simply denotes those conditions upon which certain changes are effected in a substance. But, as the word is taken up by a certain class of writers and as it is used by the public it means very much more than this, viz., a power, energy, or cause, which, by the possession of certain inherent properties, is able to compel the substance it acts upon, independently of all circumstances, to undergo a certain indefinite change.

This metaphysical use of the word arises out of the same experiences as those which led to the misuse of the word "cause." Men transfer the sensations or feelings arising within themselves when they perform an action to external nature, and hence suppose there are the same effort to produce and the same resistance to undergo change that they find in relation to themselves. Hence these forces seem to them energies, powers, a something constraining the substances they act upon to undergo change in spite of themselves. The phenomena of human will gets transferred to the

physical circumstances which condition every change ; and hence the notion arises that there is something corresponding to the human will amongst those conditioning physical circumstances. Formerly men would have looked for that something in the force itself, or, as it would then have been called, the cause. Now, such metaphysical entities are given up, but it is supposed to reside in one absolute, efficient cause, pervading all nature. And out of the supposition an argument is constructed, intended to prove the divine, personal existence.

The argument may be stated thus: Everything, every moment of time, is passing out of one state of being into another, and all the phenomena by which we are surrounded, are subject to constant changes. These changes do not take place at hap-hazard and by irregular order: constancy and law regulate them all. The same antecedent is always followed by the same consequent ; the same conditions, without the shadow of variableness, issue in the same results. Now, in contemplating these facts, the question arises—Why does the same consequent always follow the same antecedent, or the same results the same conditions ? It would be no answer to refer to some still higher or more general physical process which explains the lower, for what is asked for is the reason, cause, or efficient condition of each step in the process. A stone falls, *e.g.*, to the earth. Why ? Because of the force of gravity. What is the force of gravity ? That which causes all bodies to tend to the centre of the earth, according to a given law. What is that ? We know not. But although we know not, it is said that we have a feeling, a conviction that there is a force, a power, a something which causes or determines that tendency. And so of every connection between all phenomena, we ask after something more than physical antecedents, we have a feeling that there is a something more ; we have the feeling or conviction that

there is an efficient force, a power, a something which determines absolutely each special antecedent to be followed by its special consequent. Now this efficient force, in virtue of which every event takes place and every antecedent is followed by its own proper consequent, is God. God, the efficient force, the determining power of the universe, are synonymous terms. And out of the phenomenal, one's belief in the Divine existence emerges. I will not detain you by describing the process through which from these elements his personality and conscious intelligence are eliminated, because my objection goes to the base of the argument, and therefore criticism upon the superstructure would be superfluous.

My objection, then, is this: it is constructed by a transference, as I have already intimated, of the sensations we experience in action to the phenomena of outward nature, and that we are entirely unwarranted in doing. As I showed you in the course of lectures I recently delivered,* the idea of efficient force is purely and simply derived from the sensation of muscular resistance we experience whenever we act. Hence the notion of striving, using energy or force, comes to be associated with all the changes produced by such acts, and we are apt to suppose the striving or energizing an essential condition of the change. But we have no ground whatsoever to transfer our experiences to outward nature, and infer there must be an equivalent to the same striving or energizing in the changes we witness going on around us. We know nothing but the phenomena, *i.e.*, the succession of events, the order and constancy in antecedents and consequents, and all supposed to exist besides, is due to a pure and gratuitous assumption, and is the simple creation of our own fancy.

Nor can I allow the plea which is sometimes put in,

* See "The Founders of Christianity," p. 77. Trübner & Co., London.

viz., that although the existence of an efficient force cannot be logically proved yet that the feeling or conviction of its existence almost universally springs up when we look upon the processes of nature. For, in the first place, the explanation I have given accounts for the feeling and shews it arises out of a illicit process ; and secondly the feeling disappears as soon as you begin to analyse what are the actual phenomena presented by nature, for then you can discover nothing but base facts, and their relations of co-existence and succession.

I do not think therefore this argument from an efficient force any more valuable than those from design and intuition ; not one of the three is logically tenable. Belief in the divine existence cannot rationally come through them, and unless we can find some other basis for it religion becomes impossible. Having cleared the ground for our inquiries let us now proceed to ascertain what of real, rational basis there is.

And I must begin by drawing your attention to some facts of experience, which although they are probably familiar to you I must, because of their importance to the subject, dwell upon with some detail. Amongst the first of these I wish you to notice, because they will enable you to understand some of the rest better, are the feelings which arise when one is in the midst of grand and sublime scenery. I presume you and I are alike in that respect ; besides the sense of grandeur and sublimity a feeling of wonder springs up, a wonder at the grandeur and sublimity, a wonder at its power of affecting us as it does, a wonder at its origin and what we do not understand about it. And this wonder is not the less although we may have a theory about the sublime which seems to explain the other feelings excited ; but the more full the explanation the deeper the wonder grows. There is so much the theory does not explain, so much which lies beyond all explanation, nature as thus presenting

herself to us stands out so far beyond and above us that we cannot but wonder and feel awed.

The same feeling arises when we gaze upon very beautiful scenery. Beyond that sense of the beautiful and the unspeakable happiness and joy it creates there is also this feeling of wonder and mystery about it. I have a theory of my own about the physical conditions (causes) of the sense of the beautiful which would be regarded as of a very materialistic character if I were now to explain it to you, but this theory does not in the least degree prevent that feeling of wonder at the surpassing beauty nature sometimes reveals to me—nay it deepens it when I think of it at the same time, for then I wonder at the existence of those conditions there and at the peculiar effect they are able to produce.

The same effect takes place when I look up at the stars or upon the ocean in a contemplative mood, and allow them to make what impression they can upon my feelings. And the teachings of astronomy and of physical geography when they expound to me the order and constancy, the motions, and the causes of the motions, the immense spaces and times and such like things, make them seem more wonderful still and have sometimes made me thrill with awe, at the sense of the mystery lying all round about them.

But the object need not be upon a grand scale to excite this feeling, or these feelings rather; what is little and minute has the same effect. The other day I was looking at the tiny flower of a small sprig of heath. The exquisite beauty of its petals filled me with an inexpressible sense of enjoyment. I began to think of the process of its formation and the laws which had determined its existence there in such loveliness. But over all these thoughts and all those feelings spread my sense of wonder—a wonder intensified greatly by the recollection of the physiological laws and processes, and as I gazed upon the

flower it became to me full of the deepest mystery. And I suppose every one of you would have felt the same.

Nor, as I have intimated, is it the pure objects of nature alone which excite these feelings, but more deeply still the expositions and revelations of science. Science seems to me to extend and deepen the mystery and the feeling of wonder, nature calls forth, instead of diminishing it. The simplicity of the processes, the unity of the methods, the constancy and order are more mysterious, more wonderful to me than the bare phenomena, however grand and imposing these latter may be ; and that very phenomenal philosophy which forbids an attempt to penetrate to the noumenon and the infinite conducts me to the confines which separate them where I find myself overwhelmed with awe as I gaze into the darkness. Thus, *e.g.*, science tells me that the revolution of the planets around the sun is produced by the two forces termed the centripetal and the centrifugal. I ask an explanation and am informed that it is found that when a body upon earth revolves around another it has two tendencies, one to rush in a straight line towards the centre of that around which it revolves, and the other to go off each moment of time in a straight line from the point of the circle it occupies into a direction which would be away from that centre. Now by the supposition of these same tendencies or directions of motion acting in the planets the form of their orbit is explained. Well, although this supposition is established by most unquestionable facts, and we all believe it to be true, the explanation it gives is more wonderful than the motion of the planets themselves. How wonderful, how mysterious it is that a planet as well as a stone set in motion should tend towards the centre of some other body with a definite momentum. How strange, how wonderful that it should tend to move on in the same straight line for ever ! How unspeakably strange and

wonderful that the course of the planets in their orbits should be determined by the combination of two such simple laws. Surely you cannot but feel as I do that science makes this wondrous, mysterious universe more wondrous and mysterious still!

Here, too, come in the various fitnesses, harmonies and organizations, upon which has been built the argument from design. Science points out to us how all the great results in nature are obtained by the combination of a few simple principles or processes. The eye by means of a lens, a few muscles, and a nerve or two, becomes capable of vision. The ear by construction upon the same principle as a musical instrument for the reception and propagation of sound becomes capable of hearing. Each organ of the body is exactly fitted to perform its special function. Wherever we turn, indeed, we find these fitnesses, congruities, what some call adaptations and marks of design. Now, we have seen that they afford no argument by which we can prove the existence of an intelligent, designing creator; but on that very account they become the more wonderful and mysterious. There they are, patent to every observer but unaccounted for, unexplained: suggesting ten thousand speculations about their origin and determining causes, but for ever by their silence mocking our curiosity. How little, ignorant, and blind, they make us feel ourselves to be! How mysterious, great, and supreme, they make us feel nature is! With all our advancing knowledge we can do nothing before such final facts, but wonder and bow down in reverence.

Hitherto, I have principally referred to external nature as the source of these feelings; but man himself under some conditions, excites them equally within us. Great and heroic actions, extraordinary virtue and excellency, or indeed, the manifestation of great individual power, and especially of great individual mental power, will frequently call them forth. Extra-

ordinary beauty in a woman, which of course, as opposed to mere prettiness depends upon intellectual, æsthetical and moral qualities, and extraordinary nobleness in a man will do it. Such persons excite great wonder, reverence and a sense of mysteriousness in us. I must confess, however, that I do not attribute so much influence to objects of this kind as some writers are disposed to do. The habit of analysing every thing which one acquires in the present day leads to the perception of too many imperfections even in the highest and best, to allow of the possibility of unrestrained hero worship. On the other hand, however, the more rigidly the formation of character is brought under the operation of law, the more deeply wonder at the powers of nature is excited, and the more marvellous one feels her to be.

But it is when human beings are contemplated in their history that these feelings of mystery, wonder, and awe, are the most powerfully called into activity. For it is then that we see that human life is not merely an aggregation of individual existences thrown together at haphazard upon this earth, but that it is a connected, organized whole, each part of which affects the destiny of the rest. Take any of the great epochs in history and you will find illustrations of this fact. Thus, *e.g.* in modern times, movements in Central Asia led to the ascendancy of the Saracens in the Moslem empire, and the oppression of Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land. The oppression aroused the romantic, superstitious spirit of Europe, and organised the crusades. The crusades brought the ignorant barbarous people of the west into contact with Arabian, and other oriental scholars, and reintroduced the study of Aristotle into the west. The study of Aristotle reawakened the scientific spirit, and gave rise to the controversies between the realists and the nomenalists.

The spirit of free inquiry thus revived, became greatly intensified by the taking of Constantinople by

the Turks in the 15th century, and the dispersion of its classical scholars over Europe.* This spirit of free inquiry of nominalism and of science influenced the theological thinking, especially of the Teutonic nations, and gave origin to the Reformation in the beginning of the 16th century. Now, here is a strange combination of independent events, determined by most remote causes and yet leading to definite results affecting the condition of the whole civilized world. No explanation seems to offer itself but that of an overruling intelligent power; and yet when you come to examine such an explanation, you are not only encountered by the logical difficulties, but the real mystery remains untouched and the feelings of wonder and awe keep possession of the mind.

Here then is the basis upon which I rest my religion. I have enumerated a number of cases in which the feelings of wonder, awe, and mystery are originated by the objects presented in nature. The enumerated cases are not exhaustive of the whole, but only specimens of the rest. Whenever or under whatever aspects nature is gazed upon in a contemplative mood, these feelings are awakened. Pick up a common stone off the road, look at it, examine it, ask about its construction, the conditions or laws under which it came to exist as you have found it, and the same feelings of marvellousness, mystery, and awe, will be forced upon you. If all nature do not encompass us with a sense of its mystery and bow us down with feelings of profoundest wonder, it is because we have not thought sufficiently upon the facts it presents.

I have said, it is upon these feelings I base my religion; I may add, it is upon the feelings thus

*The same original movements in Asia too, had led to the establishment of the Moors in Spain, and through them to an introduction of the study of Aristotle and of various sciences from a different quarter, but all tending to augment the same influences which came directly from the East.

excited, all the theologies of the world have been constructed. When men have been moved by nature in this way, they have been aroused to ask for the explanation of the mystery. Not content with knowing that phenomena are as they are, they want to know the cause of their being so, and to convert the feeling of wonder they excite into the complacency which arises from competent knowledge. Never doubting of their power to transcend the phenomenal and ascertain the noumenal cause, they have boldly speculated upon the questions the feelings have aroused and arrived at answers determined in all cases by the character of their culture. Accordingly we find them passing through all the grades of fetishism, polytheism, monotheism, pantheism, and atheism—projecting the shadow of their own thoughts and feelings upon the object they superinduced to explain the mysteries of nature.

Amongst these various methods of explanation, the monotheistic seems the only one which in any measure meets the demands of the case. Pantheism only puts the mystery and the questions one step further back; or rather, I should say, Pantheism, in its usually accepted sense, does so, for a force which only becomes conscious and intelligent in such manifestations and embodiments as man, seems itself to require to be accounted for, and leaves the mystery of existence as dark as ever. On the other hand, the Monotheistic theory will account for the facts, if one be capable of forming the conceptions the theory requires. But there is the difficulty—a difficulty, if I mistake not, becoming greater every day. And the principal, although not the only cause of this increasing difficulty, must be attributed to the progress of biological science. That science daily more and more conclusively proves that the phenomena of thought and feeling, as known to us, arise entirely out of the processes of our nervous organization; so that those who are thoroughly

abreast of the science find it no more possible to conceive of thought and feeling apart from such organization than an electrician could conceive of electricity in a homogeneous substance of equal structure and temperature, or than a natural philosopher could conceive of the existence of the prismatic colours apart from rays of light. There is therefore no fact out of which one can construct the Monotheistic theory, no basis of any kind upon which one could form the conception of a Being possessing thought, feeling, and will independent of organization; the conception is the product of a fancy as wild and as worthless as ever was created in our dreams.

But some will say, The formation of a hypothesis to account for facts is perfectly legitimate; and if it account for all the facts, it may be held as presumably true until it is disproved. Thus, e.g., the hypothesis that Nature abhors a vacuum to account for the rising of water in a well, and the compression of the sides of a cavern, &c., was as legitimate, until it was disproved, as Newton's theory of gravitation—the only difference being, that in the latter case increased knowledge confirmed it, and in the former case increased knowledge proved it to be untrue. So in like manner we may form and hold the hypothesis upon which Monotheism is built until it is disproved. The illustration, however, is founded upon a mistake. That Nature abhors a vacuum was never a legitimate hypothesis, for there never was any evidence that Nature possesses that class of feelings of which abhorrence is one. To assume it as a method of accounting for certain facts, was therefore a wanton act of fancy, altogether unknown to the scientific method. When Newton applied his theory of gravitation to account for the movements of the heavenly bodies, he was merely using known facts as the probable explanation of other facts. He had found bodies upon earth moving according to certain laws. He said, "Suppose the

same laws to regulate the heavenly bodies, it will account for their movements." "Ah, but then," said some objectors, "such and such things would also happen, and that is absurd." "Would they?" said Newton's disciples; "let us see then if they do." They examined, and found that they did. And every discovery since has proved the truth of Newton's supposition.

Now, that is the only way of forming hypothesis science can allow. It does not suffer you to weave fancies at will, and then suppose their actual existence. Your hypothesis must consist of some acknowledged fact or law, which, when applied to the subject, accounts also for its facts. But the theologians have no such known and accepted facts to form the Monotheistic hypothesis upon. They have nothing but a fancy as wild as that of Nature's abhorrence of a vacuum. Whether it account for all the facts or not, therefore, it can never be allowed to do more than amuse the idle hours of the intellect.

It seems to me, then, that none of the theological methods of accounting for the facts I have referred to, and answering the questions they suggest, are tenable; they are all founded on erroneous conceptions and mere fancies. We cannot accept of what does not rest upon certain knowledge.

And equally, I think, you will see that the religious system of A. Comte fails to meet the wants of the case. It ignores the greater part of the facts altogether, and only offers to satisfy the feelings which arise from the contemplation of man under a few special aspects. It has nothing to say to that wonder and deep sense of mystery all nature calls forth; nothing to say even to those feelings as called forth by the contemplation of the history of man; it merely encourages reverence and worship for humanity, as ennobled in some few of the elect of its children; for although it is professedly humanity as a whole, the

great, the sublime Existence which it worships, it is to special forms of it, men and women who have done great and loving deeds to whom the homage is paid. But religion must be wider, truer, more complete than that. It must take up into itself all the mystery around us, all the wonder and awe in ourselves from whatever source they spring. It must allow our feelings free play, whilst it satisfies every demand of the intellect.

What form it must take to do this I next proceed to show ; but I will not do the injustice to myself or system of giving you a part of my doctrine to-night and the rest next Sunday. You must have the whole before you before you can judge of the parts. I therefore shall delay until next Sunday the exposition of the form I consider religion must adopt in the present day.



