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NATURE AND THE GODS

From "The Atheistic Platform", Twelve Lectures

By Arthur B. Moss

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NATURE AND THE GODS

Ladies and Gentlemen,—No word has played a more important part in the discussion of scientific and philosophical questions than the word Nature. Everyone thinks he knows the meaning of it. Yet how few have used it to express the same idea; indeed it has been employed to convey such a variety of impressions that John Stuart Mill asserts that it has been the "fruitful source" of the propagation of "false taste, false philosophy, false morality, and even bad law." Now, I propose in this lecture that we start with some clear ideas concerning the meaning of such words, upon the right understanding of which the whole force of my arguments depends. What, then, is meant by the word Nature? When used by a materialist it has two important meanings. In its large and philosophical sense it means, as Mr. Mill says: "The sum of all phenomena, together with the causes which produce them, including not only all that happens, but all that is capable of happening—the unused capabilities of matter being as much a part of the idea of Nature as those which take effect." But the word Nature is often used, and rightly used, to distinguish the "natural" from the "artificial" object—that is, to indicate the difference between a thing produced spontaneously by Nature, from a thing wrought by the skill and labor of man.

But it must not be supposed that the artificial object forms no part of Nature. All art belongs to Nature. Art simply means the adaptation, the moulding into certain forms of the things of Nature, and therefore the artistic productions of man are included in the comprehensive sense of the term Nature which I just now used.

Now in Nature there is a permanent and a changeable-element, but man only takes cognisance of the changeable or phenomenal element; of the substratum underlying phenomena he knows and can know nothing whatever; that is, man does not know what matter and force are in themselves in the abstract, he only knows them in the concrete, as they affect him through the medium of his senses.

Now I allege that nearly all the mistakes of theology have arisen from the ignorance of man in regard to Nature and her mode of operation. Let us consider for a moment a few facts in reference to man. Of course I don't want to take you back to his origin. But suppose we go back no further than a few thousand years, we shall find that man lived in holes in the earth; that he moved about in fear and trembling; that not only did he fight against his fellow creatures, but that he went in constant fear of animals who sought him as their prey. Under these circumstances he looked to Nature for assistance. He felt how unspeakably helpless he was, and he cried aloud for help. Sometimes he imagined that he received what in his agony he had yearned for. Then it was that he thought that Nature was most kind. Perhaps he wanted food to eat and had tried in vain to procure it. But presently a poor beast comes across his path, and he slays it and satisfies his hunger. Or perhaps he himself is in danger. A ferocious animal is in pursuit of him and he sees no means of escape, but presently comes in view a narrow stream of water which he can swim across, but which his pursuer cannot. When he is again secure he utters a deep sigh of relief. In time he makes rapid strides of progress. He learns to keep himself warm while the animals about him are perishing with cold; he learns to make weapons wherewith to destroy his enemies; but his greatest triumph of all is when he has learned how to communicate his thoughts to his fellows. Up to now it would be pretty safe to say that man was destitute of all ideas concerning the existence of god or gods. But he advances one stage further, and his thoughts begin to take something like definite shape. He forms for himself a theory as to the cause of the events happening about him. And now the reign of the gods begins. Man is still a naked savage; as Voltaire truly says: "Man had only his bare skin, which continually exposed to the sun, rain and hail, became chapped, tanned, and spotted. The male in our continent was disfigured by spare hairs on his body, which rendered him frightful without covering him. His face was hidden by these hairs. His skin became a rough soil which bore a forest of stalks, the roots of which tended upwards and the branches of which grew downwards. It was in this state that this animal ventured to paint god, when in course of time he learnt the art of description." ("Philosophical Dictionary," vol. ii., page 182).

Naturally enough man's first objects of worship were fetishes—gods of wood, stone, trees, fire, water. By-and-bye, however, he came to worship living beings; in fact, any animal that he thought was superior in any way to himself was converted into an object of worship. But none of these gods were of any assistance to him in promoting his advancement in the world. And neither did he receive any assistance from the spontaneous action of Nature. In fact he advanced in the road of civilisation only in proportion as he offered ceaseless war against the hurtful forces of nature, using one force to counteract the destructive character of another. Think what the earth must have been without a solitary house upon it, without a man who yet knew how to till the soil! Must it not have been a howling wilderness fit only for savage beasts and brutal barbarians? In course of time, however, man made great strides. He began to live in communities, which afterwards grew, into nations. He betook himself also to the art of agriculture, and supplied himself and his fellows with good, nutritious food. And with this growth of man the gods underwent a similar transition. Now instead of bowing down before fetishes, man transferred his worship to gods and goddesses who were supposed to dwell somewhere in the sky. And these gods were of a very peculiar kind. Each of them had a separate department to himself and performed only a certain class of actions. One made the sun to shine and the trees to grow; one had a kind of dynamite factory to himself, and manufactured lightning and thunder; another was a god of love; another secretary for war; another perpetual president of the Celestial Peace Society. Some had several heads; some had only one eye or one arm; some had wings, while others appeared like giants, and hurled thunderbolts at the heads of unoffending people. But these gods were of no more service to man than those that preceded them. If man advanced it was by his own effort, by virtue of using his intelligence, by strife, warfare, and by suffering.

Neither Nature nor the gods taught man to be truthful, honest, just, nor even to be clean. No god came to tell him that he must not lie, nor steal, nor murder.. All virtues are acquired, all are the result of education. And it was only after coming together and being criticised by one another; men being criticised by women who no doubt taught them that when they came a-wooing they would have a very slight chance if they were not clean and respectable; living in societies and being governed by the wisest among their fellows, who were able to judge as to what kind of actions produced the most beneficial results, that laws against theft, adultery, and murder, and other evil actions, were established. From Polytheism, or belief in many gods, the next great step was to Monotheism, or belief in one god. This was an important transition, and meant the clearing from the heavens of many fictitious deities. But though the monotheist believed only in one god, that did not prevent others from believing in an entirely different deity. The ancient Jew worshipped Jahveh, but that did not prevent the Baalites from having a god of their own, to whom they could appeal in the hour of need. And just let me here observe that the early monotheist always worshipped an anthropomorphic or man-like deity. And he worshipped such a god because man was the highest being of whom he had any conception. His god was always the counterpart of himself and reflected all the characteristics of his own nature. Was he brutal and licentious? So was his god. Was he in favor of aggressive wars? So was his god. Was he a petty tyrant, in favor of slavery? So was his god. Was he a polygamist? So was his god. Was he ignorant of the facts of life? So was his god. Was he revengeful and relentless? So was his god.

And in whatever book we find a deity described as a malevolent or fiendish wretch depend upon it, by whatever name that book may be known, and by whomsoever it may be revered, it was written by one who possessed in his own person precisely the same characteristics as those he depicted in the character of his deity.

The Jewish god, Jahveh, it must be understood, was not a spiritual being, although it is sometimes pretended that he was. No. He was a purely material being. True he lived somewhere up above, but he made very frequent visits to the earth. Once he walked in the garden of Eden "in the cool of day," or "his voice" did for him (Gen. iii., 8). Once he stood upon a mountain, whither Moses, Aaron, Nadab and Abihu had gone to hold a consultation with him (Ex. xxiv., 10). Once he talked with Moses "face to face" (Ex. xxxiii., 11).

And not only was Jahveh a material being, but on the whole he was not a very formidable deity. In point of truth he was a very little fellow. And by way of diversion he was sometimes drawn about in a small box, or ark, two feet long and three feet wide (Sam. vi., 6, 7). As evidence that even among professional Christians today Jahveh is not looked upon as a very stalwart fellow, Mr. Edward Gibson, in the House of Commons, a short time ago said that if Mr. Bradlaugh were admitted into that assembly the effect of it would be that god would be "thrown out of the window."

And if you want to find a man with "small ideas" on general matters it is only necessary to know the kind of god he worships to be able to determine the intellectual width and depth of such a man's mind.

Why is this? Because all ideas of god were born in the fertile imaginations of men, and a man's idea of god is invariably the exact measurement of himself, morally and intellectually. It may be urged by some Theists that man is indebted to Jahveh for his existence, and that he owes his moral and intellectual advancement to the fact that this deity, through the medium of Moses and the other inspired writers, laid down certain commandments for his guidance in life. When it is remembered, however, that if man is indebted in any way to Jahveh for his existence, he owes him only the exact equivalent of the benefits he has received, I think it will be seen that on the whole man's indebtedness to this deity is very small indeed.

Was Adam indebted to Jahveh for the imperfect nature which compelled him to commit the so-called sin which imperilled the future destiny of human race? Were all the "miserable sinners"—the descendants of the first pair—indebted to Jahveh for their "corrupt" natures?

If yes, what kind of god was man indebted to? To a god who once drowned the whole of mankind except one family? To a god who said that he was a jealous being who "visited the sins of the father upon the children unto a third and fourth generation." (Ex. xx., 5)? To a god who sanctioned slavery (Lev. xxv., 44, 45) and injustice of all kinds? To a god who said "thou shalt not suffer a witch to live" (Ex. xxii., 18), and gave instructions for men to kill the blasphemers among their fellows (Lev. xxiv., 16)? To a god who told Moses to go against the Midianites and slay every man among them, preserving only the virgins among the women to satisfy the lustful natures of a brutal horde of soldiers (Numbers xxxi., 7—18)? To a god to whom, as Shelley says, the only acceptable offerings were "the steam of slaughter, the dissonance of groans, and the flames of a desolate land" (Dialogue between "Eusebes and Theosophus," prose writings, page 300)? I deny that man has ever been in any way indebted to such a god, and I say moreover that such a deity never had any real existence, except in the base imaginations of ignorant and brutal men. But the next stage was from the material to the spiritual god. Many ages must have elapsed before this more elevating though equally absurd belief became to be accepted, even by a small minority of mankind. But the time eventually did come—a time which happily is now rapidly passing away—when intellectual men believed that the proposition of the existence of god could be demonstrated to all rational minds. Some said that god's existence was self-evident to every intelligent mind; others that Nature and men could not have come by "chance"; that they must have had a cause; some said that the harmony existing in the universe proved god's existence; others that everybody except fools "felt in their hearts" that there was a god. But these imaginary proofs did not always convince. At last there came forth philosophers who said that there was a mode of reasoning, the adoption of which "leads irresistibly up to the belief in god," and that that mode was called the mode *à priori*. Another school said that the *à priori*, or reasoning from cause to effect, was an altogether fallacious method, and that the only satisfactory mode of establishing god's existence was the *à posteriori*, or reasoning from effect to cause.

Another school said that taken singly neither of these modes of reasoning established the existence of deity, but that both taken together "formed a perfect chain" of reasoning that was quite conclusive on the point. Neither of these schools, however, showed how two bad arguments could possibly make one good one. But let me just briefly examine these arguments put forward so confidently by leading Theists. The first method—*à priori*—invariably takes the form of an attempt to establish what is called a "Great First Cause."

When it is said that there must be a "first cause" to account for the existence of Nature, such language, to say the least, shows a total misapprehension of the meaning of the word "cause," as used by scientific men. "First cause," as applied to Nature as a whole, remembering the definition I have given, is an absurdity. Cause and effect apply only to phenomena. Each effect is a cause of some subsequent effect, and each cause is an effect of some antecedent cause. The phenomena of the universe form a complete chain of causes and effects, and in an infinite regression there can be no first cause. Let me explain what I mean more fully. For instance, here is a chain; suppose it is to form a perfect circle, every link in which is perfect; now if you were to go round and round this chain from now to doomsday you would never come to the first link. It is the same in Nature. You can go back, and back, and back through successive causes and effects, but you will never come to a "first cause"; you will not be able to say "here is the end of Nature, and here the beginning of something else." There is no brick wall to mark the boundary line of Nature. You cannot "look through Nature up to Nature's God,"—the poet Pope notwithstanding—for Nature seems endless, and you can neither penetrate her heights nor fathom her depths. And I have one other word to say in reference to this *à priori* method, before finally disposing of it. It is this, that it is an altogether unscientific method. Man knows nothing whatever of cause except in the sense that in the immediate antecedent of an effect. Man's experience is of effects; these he takes cognisance of; of these he has some knowledge, but of cause, except as a means to an end, he has none. But this brings me to the second mode of reasoning in proof of God's existence, the *à posteriori* and this has one advantage in its favor, and that is, that it is a scientific method. It reasons from known effects up to the supposed causes of them. Now this generally assumes the form, no matter under what guise, of the famous "design argument." Dr. Paley stated it many years ago, and it has not been much improved since his day. It is generally stated in this way: "The world exhibits marks of design; that design must have had a designer; that designer must be a person; that person is God." A number of illustrations are then brought forward to support this contention. For instance, it is argued that when a man observes a watch or a telescope, or any article that has been made to answer a certain purpose, and the mechanism of which is so adjusted as to effect the desired object, it is said that from the marks of design or contrivance observed in the mechanism, he infers that these articles are the products of some human designer. And so it is said that when we look around the world and see how beautifully things are designed,

the eye to see, the ear to hear; how admirably things are adapted the one to the other, are we not justified by similar reasoning in concluding that these are the productions of an almighty and infinite designer? Briefly stated that is the argument. Now let me examine it. And in the first place it will be observed that it is assumed that there is a great resemblance between the works of Nature and the artistic works of man. But is this really a fact? Man simply moulds natural objects into certain forms; they are then called artificial objects. We know that man designs watches and telescopes; it is a fact within our experience. But there is not the slightest similarity between the process of manufacture and the natural process of growth; so that when we see various objects of Nature, we do not conclude, however harmoniously the parts may work together, that they were designed. We know a manufactured article from a natural object, we could not mistake the one for the other. But let us suppose that we did not know that men made watches; it is very probable that we should then think that a watch was not made at all, but that it was a natural object. Take an illustration. Suppose that I were to lay a watch upon the earth somewhere in South Africa; suppose that in a short time a savage wandering near the spot where the watch was deposited should observe it, should take it into his hand and handle it—I am assuming that the savage had never seen a watch before, and was not aware that men designed and constructed watches—think you that he would for a moment notice that it exhibited marks of design? No, I think he would be more likely to come to the opinion that it was alive. The design argument therefore is purely an argument drawn from experience. But what experience has man of god? Speaking for myself I can say that I have absolutely no experience of him at all, and I am not acquainted with anybody who has. Man does not know god as a designer or constructor; he neither knows of his capabilities, nor his existence; and he therefore cannot reasonably say that god is the designer of anything.

The human eye is very often adduced by the Theist as an illustration of design. Now nobody can deny that the eye is a delicate, complicated, and beautiful structure; nobody could fail to see and acknowledge with feelings of admiration the wonderful adjustment and harmonious working of its various parts; and all would readily acknowledge how admirably it is fitted to perform its functions. But yet to acknowledge all this is not to admit that the eye is designed. To point to the combinations and conditions which produce this result, without showing that these conditions were designed, is to beg the whole question. And it must be distinctly understood that the *onus probandi* as the lawyers say, lies with the affirmer of the design argument and not with him who does not see evidence in it sufficient to command belief. To show that a thing is capable of effecting a certain result does not prove that it was designed for that purpose.

For example. I hold this glass in my hand; I now release my hold from it and it instantly falls to the ground; that does not surely prove either that I was designed to hold up that glass, or that the glass was designed to fall on withdrawing my grasp from it. At most it only proves that I am capable of holding it, and that when I release it, it is impelled by the law of gravitation to fall towards the earth.

But there is another view of this question I wish to present to you. From this argument it is not quite clear that there is only one supreme god of the universe. Admittedly this is an argument based upon experience. What does experience teach us in respect to a person? Simply this. That a person must have an organisation, and a person with an organisation must be a limited being. Has god an organisation? If he has not, he cannot be intelligent, cannot perceive, recollect, judge; and if he has, then an organisation implies contrivance, and contrivance implies a contriver, and this again instead of leading up to one god, leads to an innumerable tribe of deities each mightier and more complicated than the other.

If the Theist retorts that a person need not have an organisation, the Atheist at once replies that neither need the designer of Nature be a person.

But these are not the only objections to be used against the design argument. The *à priori* theologians have some very potent arguments to advance. Mr. William Gillespie has discovered twenty-four defects of *à posteriori* arguments, and I think he has conclusively shown that all the attributes claimed for deity are impeached by this method.

In my humble opinion the design argument has grown out of the arrogance and conceit of man, who imagines that the earth and all the things existing upon it were treated especially for his benefit.

Suppose that I admit that there is design in Nature, the Theist has then to account for some awkward and many horrible designs. How will he get over the fact that Nature is one vast battle-field on which all life is engaged in warfare? What goodness will he see in the design that gives the strong and cunning the advantage over the weak and simple? What beneficence will he detect in the fact that all animals "prey" upon one another? and that man is not exempt from the struggle? Famine destroys thousands; earthquakes desolate a land; and what tongue can tell the anguish and pain endured by the very poor in all great countries of the earth? Think of the "ills to which flesh is heir." Think of the diseases from which so many thousands suffer. Think how many endure agony from cancer or tumor, how many have within their bodies parasites which locate themselves in the liver, the muscles, and the intestines, causing great agony and sometimes death. Think how many are born blind and how many become sightless on account of disease. Think of the deaf and the dumb, and of the poor idiots who pass a dreary and useless existence in asylums. Then think of the accidents to which all men are liable. Think of the many who are killed or injured on railways every year. Think of men and boys who injure or destroy their limbs in machinery during the performance of their daily work. Think of the thousands who find a premature and watery grave. In one of our London workhouses I saw recently a young man who had met with a dreadful accident; who had had his hand frightfully lacerated by a circular saw, which will prevent him from ever working again. Think of his suffering. Think of the misery his wife and children will have to bear on account of it. It almost makes one shed bitter tears to think of it; and yet we are to be told, we who are striving to alleviate suffering and mitigate the evils which afflict our fellow creatures, we are to be told that an infinitely wise and good god designs these things.

Oh the blasphemy of it! Surely an infinite fiend could not do worse; and if I thought that Nature were intelligent, that Nature knew of the suffering she inflicted on all kinds of living beings and had the power to prevent it, but would not, I would curse Nature even though the curse involved for me a sudden and painful death. But Nature heareth not man's protests or appeals—she is blind to his sufferings and deaf to his prayers.

Oh, but it's said: "See what harmony there is in the Universe:" *per se* there is neither harmony nor chaos in

Nature; we call that harmony which pleasantly affects us, and that chaos which does the reverse. Some Theist may say: "Suppose that I grant that I cannot prove that god exists, what then? You cannot prove your own existence, and yet you believe that you exist." I am well aware that I cannot prove my own existence; I don't want to prove it; it's a fact, and it stands for itself—to me it is not a matter of belief, it is a matter of certainty. I know that I exist. Cannot god make the evidence of his existence as clear as my own is to me? If he cannot, what becomes of his power? and if he will not, what of his goodness?

And it must be remembered that there are thousands of intelligent Atheists in the world to-day. Now, either god does not wish man to believe in him, or if he does he lacks the power to produce conviction. O Theist—you who profess to be conversant with the ways of the almighty—explain to me, now, how it is that in proportion as men cultivate their minds and reason on theological questions that the tendency is for them to disbelieve even in the ethereal deity of modern Theism. And it will not do in the nineteenth century to put Jesus forward as a god. He was no god. He possessed many good qualities, no doubt, as a man—but not one attribute which is claimed for god. He was neither all-wise, nor all-good, nor all-powerful, and he was only a finite being. And how can it be pretended by sensible persons that a finite man living on the earth, born of a woman, and dying like any other ordinary being, could possibly be the infinite god of the Universe? Is it not absurd? I cannot believe it, and anybody with brains that devotes a moment's thought to the matter, must acknowledge either that it is incomprehensible, or that it is monstrously absurd.

In this country we are not asked to believe in any of the "foreign gods"—the gods of ancient Greece or Rome—the gods of China, India, or Egypt, etc.—and we need not now discuss as to how far these deities have influenced human conduct for good or for ill. England, as a civilised country, is not very old. And civilisation has always meant a banishment of the gods. While men considered how to please the gods, they neglected in a great measure the work of the world. As Plato said: "The gods only help those who help themselves." Well they are just the persons who do not want help; and I shall never worship any god who leaves the helpless and the unfortunate to perish.

If god only "helps those who help themselves," he might as well leave the helping alone, because even as we find the world to-day, the whole of life seems to be based on the principle that, "unto him that hath shall be given, and he shall have in abundance, and from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he seemeth to have." The man who has a strong constitution may struggle successfully in the world; the man with great affluence may win an easy victory over his fellows; the man who has plenty of "influential friends" has good prospects; but the poor, the weakly, the ignorant, what hope have they—they have to suffer and toil, and toil and suffer from the cradle to the tomb.

How is it, then, you may ask, if man has received no assistance from without, either from Nature or the gods, that he has achieved such splendid results in the world? The answer is simple enough. The great struggle for life—the desire to get food, clothing, habitation, comfort—these have been the motives which have urged men on. The desire to get food caused men to till the soil, and, as the demand increased, the methods of cultivation improved; with improved taste came improved raiment and dwellings for the rich; plain dress and decent habitation for the poor. Men having given up the worship of Nature, began to study her; they found that by diligent investigation, and the application of their augmented knowledge, they were able to beautify the world, and render their lives happy. Then we began to have great scientific discoveries. Navigation, steam-power, telegraphy, electricity; by a knowledge of the use of these powers man has been able to conquer the destructive character of many natural forces, and to transfer a world of misery into a home of comparative comfort. And I say that the world is indebted far more to those who built houses, made clothes, navigated ships, made machinery, wrote books, than to all the gods and their clerical representatives the world has ever known. Belief in god never helped a man to supersede the sailing vessel by the steamship, the old coach by the railroad, the scythe by the reaping machine, nor the fastest locomotion by the telegraph wires. Man's necessities allured him on to all these achievements. One Stephenson is worth a thousand priests—one Edison of more value to the world than all the gods ever pictured by the imagination. And we must not forget the men who freed the human intellect from the fetters of a degrading superstition. We must not forget what the world owes to our Brunos, our Spinozas, our Voltaires, our Paines, our Priestleys; for these, by teaching men to rely on their reason, have opened out channels of thought that were previously closed, and mines of intellectual and material wealth that have since yielded great results. And so it must now be said that man is master of Nature, and he finds that she is just as good as a servant as she was bad as a master.

But the earth is not yet a Paradise. Theology is not yet entirely banished; the debris of the decayed beliefs still cumber our path and impede our progress. There is even now much that remains to be done. Plenty of labor to be performed. Ignorance, poverty, and crime and misery still exist and exert their evil influence in the world. The philanthropist and the reformer have still their work to do. The ignorant have yet to be instructed, the hungry have yet to be fed, the homeless have yet to be provided for. And I have come to the opinion after years of experience, that ignorance is the real cause of all the misery and suffering in the world; that that man is truly wise who sees that it is against his own interest to do a paltry act, to perform an evil deed. All actions carry with them their consequences, and you can no more escape the effects of your evil deeds than you can evade the law of gravitation, or elude the grim monster Death when the dread hour arrives.

No. If you would be happy you must act virtuously—act as you would desire all others to do to promote your happiness. Say to yourselves: "if every one were to act as I am doing, would the world be benefited?" and if you come to the opinion that the world would not be improved by such conduct, depend upon it your actions are not good. Remember that once you perform a deed in Nature it is irrevocable; and if it is bad repentance is worse than useless. All actions either have an evil or a good result. Every deed leaves its indelible impress on the book of Nature, from which no leaves can be torn and nothing can be expunged. And remember, too, that the man who makes his fellow-creatures happy cannot displease a god who is good; and a god who is not good is neither deserving of admiration nor service.

An infinite and all-powerful god cannot need the assistance of man; but man needs the assistance of his brothers and sisters to diffuse the glorious light of knowledge through the world; needs assistance to alleviate

suffering, to remove injustice, and secure the possibility of freedom and happiness for all. Therefore I urge you to abate not your enthusiasm, but work bravely on; and when the evening of your life approaches, with wife by your side and your children playing joyously about you, with many friends to cheer and thank you—then will you know that your life's labor has not been in vain.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK NATURE AND THE GODS ***

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