

AGNOSTICISM AND THE NEW TENDENCIES IN SCIENCE AND PHILOSOPHY

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IT is high time some plain-spoken and candid Agnostic, a vigorous follower, say, of Professor T. H. Huxley and Professor John Tyndall, should challenge some of the loose and vague assertions to be encountered on every side concerning the alleged repudiation of the whole agnostic attitude by the true scientists of today, the alleged new idealistic spirit being manifested by the most exact sciences, the revival of mysticism in philosophy, etc.

We have been told lately that, at last, science is abjuring materialism and becoming at once spiritual and humanistic. We have been felicitated on the re-emergence and recognition of "values"—moral quantities—in a world that threatens to become blind to anything that could not be described in mechanistic terms.

The informed agnostic is wearied—when he is not amused—by such rhetorical and gratuitous statements.

Science *was never materialistic* or anti-social, and nothing has taken place in the scientific world that requires a serious revision of the true Agnostic position.

Our conception of matter has changed, as has our conception of the ultimate atom. The contemporary physicist regards—or has regarded the atom as a center of force. Well, what of that? What is there that is "spiritual" about the sort of forces the physicists deal with—negative and positive electricity, for example? The atom is known to be a miniature solar system, rather than an irreducible quantity of something hard and solid. Again what of it? The solar system itself is not in the least "spiritual"; we do not attribute *mind* or *soul* to the suns and their satellites.

Some thinkers take the position that what we have called the

material is not as material and what we have called the mental is not as mental as we have supposed. This means that there are mental elements in the material and material in the mental. Granting the probability of this statement, we have yet to define the terms material and mental. This, alas, has not been done by the newer physicists or psychologists. For purposes of practical discussion the terms are perhaps sufficiently intelligible, but they are not sufficiently clear or significant to supply a basis for a new theology, or a new philosophical system. Nor is the situation improved by asserting, as some do, that the ultimate stuff of the world is "neutral" neither mind nor matter, but something synthetic. Of the nature and function of that stuff we are wholly ignorant.

Professor Bertrand Russell, in a recent essay (published in the *Saturday Review of Literature*) briefly but lucidly described the changed relation between physics and metaphysics, including philosophy, due to late revolutionary scientific discoveries and theories. I may quote the following striking paragraph from that fine article:

"The older physics was based upon somewhat gross observations of large objects. (I mean by a large object anything bigger than an atom.) It was found that certain precise mathematical laws fitted the behavior of these large objects within the limits of observation as they then were, and it was assumed that these precise laws were not only precise, but exact. This latter assumption is being dropped, and the older laws are being regarded in the light of statistical probabilities analogous to the statement that if you toss a coin often it will come equally often heads and tails. In fact it seems that everything we see is a statistical probability. A colored surface, for example, represents the statistical probability of quantum changes in a certain region. Continuity, which used to be thought to be of the essence of nature, is now thought by some to be only a continuity of probability. The individual phenomena according to these men are discontinuous jumps within atoms, but the probability of a jump occurring in any particular place varies continuously with the place, and this probability is really what we see when we think we see a table or a chair. When Dr. Johnson kicked a stone in order to disprove Berkeley, he was, if we are to believe these physicists, kicking a statistical probability, and the consequent pain in his toe represented the statistical probability of an upset to the atoms in that part of his foot.

"Let us not, however, suppose that we are still to be allowed to believe in atoms and electrons, except as convenient fictions like John Jones. An electron consists of a series of sets of phenomena in places where it isn't. What are these phenomena? The only ones of which we have any direct knowledge are our own perceptions. If there are others we know little about them beyond the mathematical laws which they approximately obey."

Materialism in its crude or naive sense is undoubtedly knocked on the head by such conceptions as these, but, pray, what sort of foundation do they offer to so called Vitalism, or Spiritism, or Mysticism? "Statistical probability" is baffling enough, but we know in a general way what it means. Beyond that meaning we are pathetically ignorant, and we have no alternative but to recognize our ignorance.

Modern physics and modern metaphysics are drawing ever closer together, as Mr. Russell points out, but neither has affected the case of the Agnostic.

What of the field of morals?

We are told that values are independent of the human mind and exist throughout nature. That may be true, but the point is that we do not *know* whether it is true or not, and that the assertion, moreover, is absolutely devoid of any *ethical* significance.

What moral values are to us human beings, we can know and do know. We know that life, health and well-being depend on our appreciation of our own moral values. War and peace, prosperity and adversity, harmony and discord in industry, tolerance and intolerance—these things we can control to a considerable extent if we have a proper sense of moral values. Our treatment of animals, of criminals, of mental and physical defectives depends on our moral ideals and ideas.

On the other hand, when we are assured that there are values in the Cosmos, we have no possibility of bringing them into any conceivable relation with our own social, economic and political values. Therefore, the very hypothesis of cosmic values is utterly futile.

Professor Huxley, we can now see, went too far when he postulated a *conflict* between cosmic ethics and human ethics. That contention is not in the least necessary to Agnosticism, and to make it, is to violate the scientific law of parsimony. Agnosticism merely

takes the position that ethical values are a *product of human evolution and have to do with human needs and human problems*. Humanity is part of the cosmos and obeys the laws of the cosmos. Human morality cannot be *hostile to cosmic laws*. All that reason permits us to affirm is that the conditions of human life—and even of sub-human life—have demanded and still demand a certain compliance with certain principles—justice, beneficence, altruism. Disregard of these principles leads to misery, strife and waste; the more we carry those principles into our conduct, the more happiness we attain and the more abundant and worthy is the life we lead.

Now, no supernatural sanctions are required to justify those principles to mankind. We need no alleged “revelations” from so-called heavenly regions to commend them to us. We may, in fact, love our neighbors as we do our own selves without loving God. Morality is not another name for religion, nor religion another name for morality. Love of one’s neighbor is not a corollary from any theological dogma. The Agnostic cannot love God simply because he does not know what God is, or what he does. The old, childlike, anthropomorphic notion of God having been completely discredited, what meaning are we to attach to the old term? Words are not meanings, pseudo-ideas are not ideas. To say that God is a spirit, or that he is “love,” is to say nothing that suggests even a faint idea. We are simply unable to form any conception of a creator or of a process of “creation.” The Bible uses naive anthropomorphic terms when it speaks of creation, of rest on the seventh day, of God’s appearance to man. The bible writers were not romantic symbolists; *they* thought of God as a sort of superman who could be swayed by prayer and angered by sin or misbehavior.

To us such intellectual babyhood is impossible. We have outgrown the only definite systems of theology we know anything about, and no new system consonant with science and common sense has as yet been vouchsafed us. What but Agnosticism is left to us?

Whether the truth be frankly faced or blinked at, it is undeniable that the modern world is becoming Agnostic. The loud and pathetic complaints of the orthodox—that civilized and educated people are “forsaking religion and philosophy” and putting their faith in the exact sciences alone, sufficiently demonstrate that proposition. But the world is *not* forsaking either religion or philosophy; it is merely

and unavoidably seeking a religion and philosophy it can comprehend, take seriously and apply to life. Science is not worshipped as a fetish; science is found useful and significant, and men live by it. They have little understanding of the assumptions of science, of the metaphysics behind science, but they know that the most abstract and disinterested scientific discoveries sooner or later affect practice. Science verifies its conclusions in the laboratories and clinics of life; it readily abandons disproved ideas or modifies them freely. Why, then, should not humanity trust science? Where has it failed?

Ah, science has not made men completely moral! Science has not answered our ultimate questions regarding purpose in nature, the destiny of man, the relation between nature and the supposititious creator of nature. But when has science promised to do these things? Talk of the bankruptcy of science in the ethical and religious realms is the sheerest moonshine. Science does not *set out to prove anything*; it sets out to investigate and explain phenomena, and in the course of its tasks it is compelled to frame hypotheses or theories. Science has certain theories respecting the origin and development of religion and of social ethics, and that is all. Science traces causal relations when the data are sufficient. Science may predict certain events on the strength of past experience. But all this is tentative and subject to correction. A hypothesis is not a dogma. No theory is sacrosanct.

It is not so much science as the scientific method applied to religion and philosophy that has undermined those branches of speculation. We cannot reason after one fashion about chemistry and physics, biology and psychology, and in another fashion about religion and philosophy. We demand that a formula in religion or philosophy have a definite meaning and offer evidence in its own behalf. To affirm that the existence of God, or the divinity and sonship of Jesus, can be demonstrated in some peculiar way unknown to science, or to common sense, is to talk nonsense.

The editor of a theological journal, in a series of candid essays, once attempted to vindicate Christian ethics by appealing precisely to evidence, to experience, to sound sense. "Try me," he virtually made Christianity say, "see whether or not my precepts and doctrines are sound and beneficial; try to live up to them and compare the actual results with those of any other system; I do not ask

you to believe without evidence or contrary to evidence. I only ask you to submit me to the test of evidence."

Nothing could be more fair or scientific in spirit. Unfortunately no community *has accepted the challenge*. No community has ventured to practice Christian ethics. Indeed, every so-called Christian community proves by its practice that it does *not* believe the basic doctrines of its professed creed to be feasible or possible.

Today a Christian, apparently, is a person who says he believes in God and in Jesus but does not care or dare *to apply in a single direction* the teachings of Jesus, the divine! Was a greater paradox ever known in religion?

However, Christian ethics and Christian theology and mythology are by no means interdependent or organically connected. If a society should practice rigorously and faithfully the teachings of Jesus, and should thrive and prosper morally in consequence, it would not thereby prove the existence of a God or the divinity of Jesus. It could still be maintained that the teachings of Jesus were based on insight into the nature of man and the conditions of human welfare. There *is* such a thing as moral genius, and some religious or ethical teachers possessed it. They were "seers" in the true sense of the term; they saw life steadily and whole; they formulated principles which their contemporaries thought Utopian but which ampler experience may vindicate. These principles do not require any assumption as to the divinity of Jesus, the inspiration of Mohammed, or the inerrancy of this or that book.

I return to my contention at the outset—that nothing in modern science or modern philosophy necessitates a revision of the agnostic position. As Professor J. B. Haldane said recently, *the world believes too much and doubts too little*. Science spells doubt where proof is not abundant and conclusive. Science has no need of mysticism or supernaturalism; it stops where evidence stops. Relativity, the quantum theory, the discoveries of astronomy and astrophysics have already wrought revolutionary changes in some of the sciences, and may produce more such changes; but they have not furnished any new justification for crude, meaningless or empty theological propositions. The Agnostic is watching every move made by science and philosophy, but so far he has not perceived any development in either that dictates the abandonment of doubt, skepticism and agnosticism.

Ah, say some thinkers—Professor James Thurlow Adams, the historian and Pulitzer-prize-winner, for instance—science, then, you admit, is so far “a bind alley!” It has not thrown any light on the why and wherefore of things; it has failed to answer the questions concerning the meaning of life, the purpose of creation, the future of the Universe, the destiny of man. Do not human beings seek such answers? Will they ever be satisfied with science if it admits ignorance of and inability to deal with the deepest, most vital and ultimate problems, Professor Adams thinks they will not, and he is disposed to predict a strong reaction against science and a revival of religion and religious philosophy. Science, he says, will never be discarded, of course, since its utility is indisputable, but it will be used merely “as a tool.” Religion and philosophy will be again preferred and invoked for guidance and for illumination and support.

The comments to be made on Professor Adams’ plaint and forecast are fairly obvious. In the first place, science does not claim to be anything other than a tool. It is justified of its own children. It asks to be judged by its fruits. It advertises and emphasizes its own limitations. It does not answer the ultimate questions simply because it cannot answer them—it has no data, or very few data concerning them and cannot even adopt a tentative hypothesis. This is regrettable, but there is no help for it. Science cannot overstep its bounds and remain science.

In the second place, if philosophy and theology *can* answer the profound, vital and ultimate questions just referred to, *by all means let them do so*. Science will heartily join average humanity in calling them blessed. However, the answers must be real answers, not mere words without meaning. To repeat, science and scientific method have made superstition, juggling with terms, false pretence, self-deception in the name of religion or philosophy practically impossible for intelligent and trained persons.

Agnosticism, finally, is not a child of science alone. Huxley, Tyndall, Spencer, Lecky, Stephens and a hundred other thinkers became Agnostics not because science stopped where it did in their day, but also because they were convinced *that philosophy and theology had nothing of value to offer beyond the limits of science*. Has the situation changed since? Are philosophy and theology today better off as it were, the happy possessors of new knowledge denied

to science? They certainly are not. They have done nothing, discovered nothing, as I have said, that requires the Agnostic substantially to modify his position. There is nothing in the new physics, the new psychology, the new biology, the new metaphysics that takes us one little step beyond agnosticism. As to the future, it will have to speak for itself.