

**THE NINTH
BRIDGEWATER
TREATISE. A FRAGMENT**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649380053

The ninth Bridgewater treatise. A fragment by Charles Babbage

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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CHARLES BABBAGE

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BY

CHARLES BABBAGE, ESQ.

"We may thus, with the greatest propriety, deny to the mechanical philosophers and mathematicians of recent times any authority with regard to their views of the administration of the universe; we have no reason whatever to expect from their speculations any help, when we ascend to the first cause and supreme ruler of the universe. But we might perhaps go farther, and assert that they are in some respects less likely than men employed in other pursuits, to make any clear advance towards such a subject of speculation."—*Bridge-water Treatise*, by the Rev. Wm. WHEWELL, p. 334.

SECOND EDITION.

LONDON:
JOHN MURRAY, ALBEMARLE STREET.

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1838

ADVERTISEMENT TO THE SECOND EDITION.

THE following are the principal alterations in the Second Edition :—

The Chapter on Hume's Argument against Miracles has been nearly re-written, and the Note in the Appendix, to which it refers, has been so enlarged, as to meet all the interpretations which I have been able to suppose of that author's meaning.

The Chapter next following contains an examination of a difficulty which would naturally present itself to any one who had pursued the reasoning in the previous Chapter and its appended Note. I thought it better to state the difficulty, with what I conceive to be an answer, than to leave the reader to the chance of observing it, without the aid which he might justly claim from one who had previously gone over the same ground.

A new Chapter is then introduced, On the Nature of a Superintending Providence.

I have added in the Notes a very interesting letter from Sir John Herschel to Mr. Lyell, on the theory of isothermal surfaces, as connected with Geology.

I have again read, with much attention, the chapters in Mr. Whewell's *Bridgewater Treatise*, which bear upon the question of the effect of the pursuits of science on our belief in natural religion, and I confess that I am unable to alter the opinion I have already expressed upon that subject,—that they give support to those who maintain that the pursuits of science are in general unfavourable to religion. Of the injustice of that opinion, and of the individual injury which it occasionally inflicts, additional evidence has been presented to me, since the publication of the First Edition.

In endeavouring to understand the meaning and spirit of the author, I find it difficult to interpret such passages as the following, which is stated to embody the substance of his opinions:—

“ If the mathematician set out on religious reasonings, thinking that his mathematical knowledge alone must bring him into a nearer proximity to his Maker and Master, he will, I fear, find that the road is interrupted by a wide chasm, and he may, perhaps, turn back frustrated and hopeless. It is only by rising above his mathematics and his

“ physics ;—by recognising the utter dissimilarity of
“ moral and religious grounds of belief, from mathe-
“ matical and physical reasonings upon established
“ laws of nature ;—that he can make his way to the
“ conviction of a moral constitution and providential
“ government of the world ; and if the mathematical
“ or physical philosopher so habituate his mind, that
“ it is difficult for him thus to elevate himself into a
“ higher region than that of mathematical proof and
“ physical consequence, I cannot but think he does
“ damage to his power of judging on those other
“ subjects.”

This passage is one of those which is likely to be misunderstood, and which may be adduced by others in the support of views which it is impossible to suppose Mr. Whewell to entertain. If, by “ rising above his mathematics and physics,” it is meant, that inquiry into the relation of man to his Maker, is of more importance to his welfare than those other subjects, then it is a proposition which scarcely requires to be asserted, because it has never been denied. Even the atheist, who has arrived, by reasoning, at his desolate conclusion, would not fail to admit its truth, by attending to any *new* argument which might be proposed against his creed. But if it is meant, that there is a “ higher region” of *evidence* than that of “ mathematical proof and physical consequence,” then it is in my opinion utterly and

completely erroneous; and as I am confident this erroneous light will be that in which the statement will be understood by many, I think it necessary to state distinctly what appears to me the relative position of the subjects in discussion.

First, The truths of pure mathematics are necessary truths; they are of such a nature, that to suppose the reverse, involves a contradiction.

Secondly, The laws of nature, on which physical reasonings are founded, although some of them are considered as necessary truths, depend, in many instances, on the testimony of our senses. These derive their highest confirmation from the aid of pure mathematics, by which innumerable consequences, previously unobserved, are proved to result from them.

Thirdly, The truths of natural religion rest also on the testimony of our external senses, but united with that internal consciousness of intention or design which we experience in our own breast, and from which we infer similar powers in other beings. Many of the facts on which the conclusions of natural religion are founded, derive their chief importance from the aid supplied by the united power of the two former classes, and the amount and value of this support will be enlarged with the advance of those sciences.

Fourthly, Revealed religion rests on human testimony; and on that alone. Its first and greatest support arises from natural religion. I have endeavoured in one chapter of the present volume to show, that, notwithstanding the weakening effect of transmission upon testimony, a time may arrive when, by the progress of knowledge, internal evidence of the truth of revelation may start into existence with all the force that can be derived from the testimony of the senses.

The first class of truths then (those of Pure Mathematics) appears to rest on necessity. The second, (the Laws of Nature,) on necessity and our external senses. The third, (those of Natural Religion,) on our external senses and internal consciousness. The last, (those of Revelation,) on human testimony. If they admit of any classification, as subjects having a common resemblance, or as possessing different degrees of evidence, I have placed them in the only order which, in my opinion, is consistent with truth; convinced that it is more injurious to religion to overrate, than to undervalue the cogency of the evidence on which it rests.

CHARLES BABBAGE.

DORSET STREET,
MANCHESTER SQUARE,
Dec. 26, 1837.

POSTSCRIPT.

A volume, on the Connexion of Natural Science and Religion, by the Rev. J. Baden Powell, has just reached me; and whilst I am happy in having several of my arguments approved by so candid and competent an inquirer, I will here, at the author's request, correct an oversight into which he has inadvertently fallen, in commenting on the view taken respecting the interpretation of the Mosaic account of the Creation.

It is stated by Mr. Powell that the view I have proposed "amounts to an admission that it is impossible at the present day to fix any certain meaning on compositions of such antiquity, and so entirely destitute of all elucidation from cotemporary writings, as the Mosaic records."

This statement is much more general than the opinion I have expressed, which is, that "the language of the Hebrews in times long subsequent to the date of that book (the books of Moses,) may not have so far changed as to prevent us from rightly understanding generally the history it narrates; but there appears to be no reasonable ground for venturing to pronounce with any confidence on the minute shades of meaning of allied words."—*Ninth Bridgewater Treatise*, 1st Edit. p. 77.