A THEORY OF CREATION: A REVIEW OF "VESTIGES OF THE NATURAL HISTORY OF CREATION"

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FRANCIS BOWEN

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"VESTIGES OF THE NATURAL HISTORY OF CREATION."

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THIS is one of the most striking and ingenious scientific romances that we have ever read. The writer of it is a bold man; he has undertaken to give a hypothetical history of creation, beginning, as the title-pages say, at the earliest period, and coming down to the present day. It is not quite so authentic as that of Moses, nor is it written with such an air of simplicity and confidence as the narrative of the Jewish historian; but it is much longer, and goes into a far greater variety of interesting particulars. It contradicts the Jewish cosmogony in a few particulars, and is at variance with probability and the ordinary laws of human reasoning in many others. But the rather liberal rules of interpretation, which it is now the fashion to apply to the first chapter of Genesis, will relieve the reader from any scruples on the former account; and as to the latter, in these days of scientific quackery, it would be quite too harsh to make any great complaint about such peccadilloes. The writer has taken up almost every questionable fact and startling hypothesis, that have been promulgated by proficients or pretenders in science during the present century, except animal magnetism; and for this omission we have reason to be thankful. The nebular hypothesis, Laplace's or Compte's theory of planets *shelled off* from the sun, spontaneous generation, — some of these vagaries, we admit, are of much older date than the year 1800, — the Macleay system, dogs playing dominoes, negroes

born of white parents, materialism, phrenology, — he adopts them all, and makes them play an important part in his own magnificent theory, to the exclusion, in a great degree, of the well-accredited facts and established doctrines of science.

We speak lightly of the author's plan, as one can hardly fail to do of a scheme so magnificent, and going apparently so far beyond the ordinary sources of information and the range of the human intellect. But the execution of the work is of so high an order, as fairly to challenge attention and respect. The writer, who has not chosen to give his name to the world, is evidently a man of great ingenuity and correct taste, a master of style, a plausible, though not a profound, reasoner, and having quite a general, but superficial, acquaintance with the sciences. His materials are arranged with admirable method, the illustrations are copious and interesting, the transitions are skilfully managed, and the several portions of the theory are so well fitted to each other, and form such a round and perfect whole, that it seems a pity to subject it to severe analysis and searching criticism. It is a very pleasant hypothesis, set forth in a most agreeable manner; and though it contains many objectionable features, these are cautiously veiled and kept in the background, and the reader is seduced into accepting most of the conclusions, before he is aware of their true character and tendency.

Before a just opinion can be formed of the correctness of the writer's views, it is necessary to take to pieces this skilful fabric, and to bring the parts together in a different connection and with greater succinctness, following out each doctrine to its inevitable, but most remote, conclusions, so as to obtain a just idea of the position in which we should be placed by the acceptance of the theory as a whole. For obvious reasons, the author has not chosen to give a general summary of his views, or to mention explicitly all the inferences that may be drawn from them. He merely puts the reader upon the track, indicating its general direction, and leaving it for him to find out what objects will be encountered by the way, and where the journey will end. We propose to finish the work that is thus left incomplete, and to set forth the doctrine in its plainest terms. We would reduce the theory at once to its narrowest compass and simplest expression; but at the same time, would incorporate into it every doctrine which properly belongs to it, and follow out each hypothesis to its

remote, though necessary, inferences and conclusions. To this end, it is requisite to separate, as far as possible, the doctrines themselves from the evidence adduced in support of them; and to consider the former as a whole, before proceeding to discuss the cogency of the latter. The following may be taken as the most concise abstract that we can form of the history of the creation, according to this author.

In the beginning — we use this word in a kind of preter-perfect sense — in the *very* beginning of things, immense portions of infinite space were filled with finely diffused nebulous matter, heated to an intensity that is altogether inconceivable. The particles of this "fire mist," as it is appropriately called, were the true *primordia rerum*, — the elements of the universe, — the principles of all the forms of inorganic matter and all organic things. At the outset, the Creator endowed these particles with certain qualities and capacities, and then stood aside from his work, as there was nothing farther for him to do. The subsequent progress of creation is only the successive *development*, upon mechanical and necessary principles, and as fast as proper occasions were offered, of these qualities thus made inherent in the primitive constitution of matter. The atoms thus marvellously endowed have gone on, without any further aid from Almighty power, to form suns, and astral systems, and planets with their satellites, and worlds tenanted by successive generations and races of vegetable and animal things. And this work of creation, or rather of development, is still in progress all around us, and in all its various stages, though in the portion most directly exposed to the observation of man it is far advanced towards perfection. Upon this earth, the unaided action of these atoms is still evolving all the phenomena of generation, progress, and decay, of vegetable and animal life, of instinct and of mind. In the abyss of space, it is also forming new suns, and solar systems, and worlds that are to pass through the same stages and wonderful transformations to which our own planet has already been subjected. All that has occurred with respect to this earth, and the system of which it forms a part, is but a type of what is constantly going on in the countless other systems of stars that people the firmament.

The first stage in the history of these fiery particles is the formation among them, in some unaccountable way, of

nuclei, or centres of aggregation, like the bright points that are now visible in some of the nebulæ of the heavens. As soon as these centres are formed, gravity, one of the original principles of matter, begins to act, and the atoms in all the neighbouring parts of space are attracted towards the nucleus and heaped upon it. In this manner, a central sun of vast dimensions is formed, which soon assumes a motion of rotation upon its axis from the general law which gives a circular movement to all fluids that are drawn towards a common centre. The centrifugal force thus generated tends to throw off matter from the equatorial regions of the great orb, but is restrained by the attraction of gravitation, which would prevent any separation of the parts, if the sun itself did not now begin to cool down, and consequently to shrink in size. Under this cooling process, a crust is formed upon the surface, too rigid to yield to the force of gravity, and the parts within, continuing to shrink, separate from this envelope; so that there is now a central orb, revolving more rapidly from its greater density and smaller diameter, and surrounded by an exterior shell, or band, like Saturn's ring, rotating at its original speed. As we cannot suppose that the ring would usually be of uniform thickness and strength, it eventually breaks up into fragments, the larger of which attracts the smaller into itself, and the whole is formed by its revolving motion into an oblate spheroid circling round the contracted sun in the centre. In this manner, the planet Uranus was shelled off from our sun, which originally filled the whole of the vast sphere, of which the distance from Uranus to the centre of the present sun is but the radius. The planet itself, by the same process of cooling, shrinking, and thus forming exterior rings, threw off successively all its six satellites; and the sun, also, continuing to contract from the loss of heat, formed another ring, and thus constituted the planet Saturn. In this way were formed successively all the planets and satellites of the present solar system. The original diameter of our earth was equal, of course, to the present diameter of the moon's orbit. In the case of Saturn, the two rings formed around it happened to be of unusual homogeneity and equal thickness, so that they were not broken up, but have preserved their primitive shape. A ring was formed from the sun in the space between the present orbits of Mars and Jupiter; but when it was broken up, the frag-

ments did not congregate into one, but spherified separately, so as to form the four smaller planets which now revolve in that opening.

" We have no means of judging of the seniority of systems; but it is reasonable to suppose, that, among the many, some are older than ours. There is, indeed, one piece of evidence for the probability of the comparative youth of our system, altogether apart from human traditions and the geognostic appearances of the surface of our planet. This consists in a thin nebulous matter, which is diffused around the sun to nearly the orbit of Mercury, of a very oblately spheroidal shape. This matter, which sometimes appears to our naked eyes, at sunset, in the form of a cone projecting upwards in the line of the sun's path, and which bears the name of Zodiacal Light, has been thought a residuum or last remnant of the concentrating matter of our system, and thus may be supposed to indicate the comparative recentness of the principal events of our cosmogony. Supposing the surmise and inference to be correct, and they may be held as so far supported by more familiar evidence, we might with the more confidence speak of our system as not amongst the elder born of Heaven, but one whose various phenomena, physical and moral, as yet lay undeveloped, while myriads of others were fully fashioned and in complete arrangement. Thus, in the sublime chronology to which we are directing our inquiries, we first find ourselves called upon to consider the globe which we inhabit as a child of the sun, elder than Venus and her younger brother Mercury, but posterior in date of birth to Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, and Uranus; next, to regard our whole system as probably of recent formation in comparison with many of the stars of our firmament. We must, however, be on our guard against supposing the earth as a recent globe in our ordinary conceptions of time. From evidence afterwards to be adduced, it will be seen that it cannot be presumed to be less than many hundreds of centuries old." — pp. 22, 23.

Having thus explained the *genesis* of the solar system, we come down to the history of our own earth, since it shelled off the ring which formed our moon. Continuing to cool down and shrink, a thin but rigid crust of primary rocks, still bearing marks of the intense heat to which they have been subjected, was formed upon its surface; and then the vapors, with which the atmosphere had been charged, were condensed, and formed seas, which covered the whole, or the

greater part, of the earth's rind. The continual agitation of these waters, and their high temperature, as they were still nearly at the boiling point, disintegrated and wore down many of these rocks, and, in the lapse of ages, deposited their remains, in thick layers of sand and mud, at the bottom of the seas. Baked by the heat from beneath, and pressed by the weight of superincumbent waters, these layers slowly hardened into stratified rocks. Forms of vegetable and animal life, though only of the lowest type, the origin of which is to be explained hereafter, now began to appear. Some sea-plants, zoöphytes, infusory animalcules, and a few of the molluscous tribe, all low down in the order of being, but important from their immense numbers and joint action, commenced their work of absorbing the carbonic acid with which the air was overcharged, and building up vast piers and mounds of stone from their own remains. Meanwhile, the internal fires of the earth occasionally broke through the rocky crust that imprisoned them, threw up liquid primitive rock through the rents, and distorted and tilted up the strata that had been formed above.

We may remark, in passing, that the chronology of the events of which we now speak is not very accurately determined; the only thing certain about it is, that a series of ages, so protracted that the imagination cannot conceive their number, elapsed between the successive epochs in the history of the earth's crust. Some of the convulsions caused by the fiery mass within threw up rock above the surface of the waters, and thus the dry land began to appear. Islands were formed, and immediately land-plants made their appearance, of excessive luxuriance, under the tropical temperature that still prevailed all over the globe, and began their office of absorbing carbon, and storing it up for future use. Land-animals as yet were not, for the excess of carbonic acid in the atmosphere rendered it incapable of supporting animal life. But the richness of this island vegetation gradually purified the air; while the decaying plants themselves, being accumulated into vast beds and strata, and subjected, through the changes of the earth's surface, to the pressure of mighty waters, gradually formed immense deposits of coal, for the subsequent service of man. Animals of a higher grade were now formed; fishes became abundant, and amphibious mon-