

**ANTITHEISM:
REMARKS ON ITS
MODERN SPIRIT**

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Antitheism: Remarks on Its Modern Spirit by Richard Hill Sandys

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RICHARD HILL SANDYS

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BY

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"They wist not what it was."—*Exodus*, xvi. 15.



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THE birds contended among themselves for the sovereignty; he who flew the highest was to be king; the eagle easily out-soared them all, but when he was dead tired, out slipped the starling from under his wing and beat him at a canter, proclaiming his triumph and declaring his authority with a tongue not his own.

There can be no cause of that which never had a beginning, and the converse must equally hold. If matter always existed, it did not exist in its present, if in any, form. There have been changes infinite, and every change of form is, so far as the present question is concerned, a new existence, the cause of which is to be shown and accounted for. It will not suffice to speak of an infinite potential force biding its time in an infinitely existing matter; the passing from potentiality into act is itself a new creation implying antecedent cause, and what we are wont to call secondary causes are manifestly only effects of some earlier one.

But we are all in these days perfectly competent, and some of us impetuously willing, in advance even of the ever revered Aristotle the equal oracle of truth and

error, to trace back the accretion and succession of all present forms, stripping them off one by one, as it were, until we arrive at the once famous primitive matter without form, that is to say, something beyond our powers of conception waiting for some act or cause to become conceivable.

But it is not the custom in questions of this kind to flinch from any difficulty however insurmountable. We may not, it is true, openly assume the subject to be in terms within the limits of our natural powers, but we may go on with our search negatively for a long way, conscientiously and scientifically cutting down element after element, form after form, property after property, something after something, until far away beyond all reach of definition or contradiction, we arrive at something next to nothing with no dividing line between them; the nearest expression of which is perhaps that old and well-known one of the mathematical point which we remember to have been made first under duress and later on under protest, to call "that which is without parts and without magnitude;" the framer of it possibly not very accurately calling to mind, that before form came there were no such things as magnitude or parts anywhere.

But then, is this inconceivable ever-vanishing next-to-nothing a reality? Do we not in this stripping process, do we not in all our researches in this question, draw continually nearer to an idea? and if to an idea, then to a mind? and if to a mind, then to an infinite sustaining and ruling mind? In fact, we only know matter by hearsay, and only acknowledge it because we think we perceive it. May it not be, that in all its supposed

infinite extension, with all its alleged infinite properties and parts, including our own brains, tongues, and bodies, it is only a notorious idea? May it not be, that all this immeasurable visible universe around us, conventionally called creation, has not been actually created and does not really exist at all? that what was done at the beginning was the gift or imparting of a consciousness and faculty of perceiving and dealing with ideas to certain existences called into being by one and the same creative and sustaining force, and thenceforward standing and to stand in certain established relations both to that force, and each to every other of them, under certain laws and conditions, which, so far as our common experience goes, have never been broken; and so as that all the so-called material universe may be but a seeming embodiment of these ideas, although to us as strong as an actual reality?

If there were none but materialistic philosophers in the world we could, we think, maintain this position from approved axioms and postulates, and other "documents" of their own school. The main, but not always avowed objection to it is, that if all things exist in and depend upon an infinite mind whose thoughts can in no case be drawn into question, a miracle must be at all times a possible event, and that is a position which the modern liberty of thought, or right of framing theories, can never allow even at the point of the sword.

The idealist is plainly first in the list, because until we perceive something there is to us nothing to perceive; and as he presents no atomic details he can lay no snares for himself or others. The materialist is all detail and all surface; for it is only by its supposed superficial

impact on the senses, that we even suspect that there can be such a thing as his so-called matter or material properties. Thus on the great knock-on-the-table argument, we know at once by the feel that the table is hard, but it is only by reason and experience that we get a step further, and learn afterwards that it is also solid, and both reason and experience are very fallacious things.

We have been called upon of late by thinkers of eminence to accept certain material atoms without parts or predicable forms, and of less than assignable dimensions, but possessing in themselves a certain material energy, working under common fixed laws and conditions, as the sole and sufficient creative force and cause of the universe, and to take thus upon trust a force or first cause having its seat in an almighty creative aggregation of atoms. We confess to a counter prejudice in ourselves which is not of the reasoning intellect; but apart from that, we seem to ourselves to have one or two purely intellectual difficulties on the point.

We learn from science very much about the laws of matter, that is to say, of atoms *en masse*; but how can we be sure that all these laws, many of which, that of attraction for instance, are social laws and open to continual and complicated workings from without, can or will follow all these ever-shrinking, self-nullifying atoms, themselves too minute to possess minutiae, without falling out or changing their properties or modes of action by the way? Does not the eccentric chuck in Babbage's calculating machine, converting the series of natural numbers into one of squares or cubes, and letting in other miracles at will, show that they may so change? We really think this argument almost equal to the occasion.

We are, it seems, by common consent relieved from taking stock of our natural powers before entering on these questions, being like certain other smaller irrepressibles well known in natural and domestic histories, able to leap many times our own intellectual lengths, and can only fail through the same want of unanimity. Extravagance or breaking bounds, is the leading privilege of all philosophy, and all philosophy worth its salt disdains apology, and can always frown down refutation.

If there be such a thing as an atom of matter, there is or ought to be such a thing as an atom of an idea, its shadow or philosophical acceptance, as it were, payable, funds or no funds, at sight ; this is on the supposition that nothing exists but matter.

But where is the working energy of these atoms to be found ? There can be no conceivable practical energy in matter, which must have its place in space, not passing from one body, particle or atom of matter to another, and if we could suppose it possible that there should be but one single atom throughout the universe, give it what energy you will, it cannot multiply itself—it must remain inert and without change for ever, for want of means of deploying, as it cannot work with effect on the absolute void surrounding it ; for space of itself is not an existence. If there were nothing but pure spirit existing anywhere, there could be no such thing as space, for pure spirit, though it may have a spiritual body and individuality, has no place ; but the instant you present us a speck of matter, space comes into being as an effect of the common cause of both.

But if there be one, there are countless such atoms, and it has been said that these weaklings, though unable to