

**THE PHILOSOPHIC BEARINGS OF DARWINISM.
AN ADDRESS DELIVERED BEFORE THE
BIOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF WASHINGTON AT
THE DARWIN MEMORIAL MEETING MAY 12,
1882. PP. 1-13; THE THREE METHODS OF
EVOLUTION. FROM THE BULLETIN OF THE
SOCIETY VOL. VI. PP. 27-52**

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JOHN WESLEY POWELL

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JOHN WESLEY POWELL

BEFORE THE

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AT THE

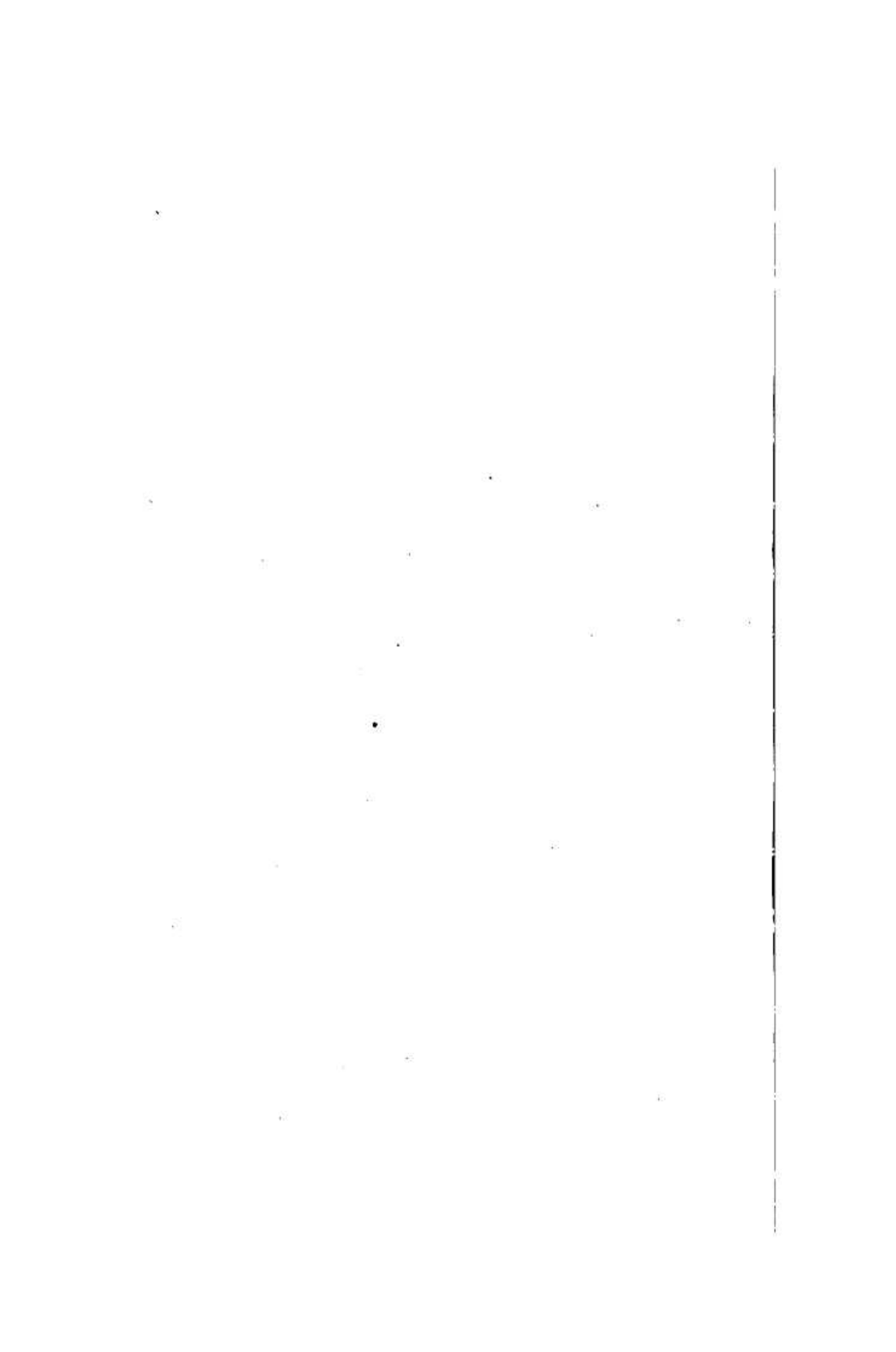
DARWIN MEMORIAL MEETING

MAY 12 1882

WASHINGTON

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1882



DARWIN'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO PHILOSOPHY.

BY JOHN W. POWELL.

Many are the definitions of philosophy. If we wish not to define what is *true* philosophy, but simply to define the term in all its uses when referring to all times and all men, this definition will do: *Philosophy is the explanation of the phenomena of the universe.*

Now, the phenomena of the universe are embraced in many vast categories.

First, we have the constitution of the heavenly bodies, and their real and apparent motions to be explained. What are they, and how came they to be what they are?

Then we have the earth itself; its forms, its lands and seas, its mountains and valleys, its rivers and lakes, the winds which blow about it, the storms which fall upon it, the lightnings that flash athwart the sky, the thunders that roll among the clouds. What are all these things, and whence came they, and why are they? Again, in the constitution of the earth we find rocks with their minerals, and geologic formations with their fossils. What are rocks and minerals, formations and fossils, and whence came they?

Look at the innumerable forms of plants covering the earth with verdure—the whole vegetable kingdom on the land and on the sea; forests, mosses, and confervæ. Who shall explain the meaning of the phenomena of the vegetable kingdom?

The oceans teem with animal life; reptiles crawl over all the land; the hills and the valleys, the mountains and the plains, are all inhabited by beasts; and the air itself is populated. Who shall tell us of all the living things, and then explain life itself?

Turn to the contemplation of man, organized into tribes and nations; man possessed of innumerable languages; man engaged in arts and industries; man endowed with reason and will; man in search of moral principles to guide his conduct. Whence came this man, and whither does he go?

Among all tribes and nations of the globe, and in all times, men have sought to discover the whence, the how, and the why, of all things—the phenomena of the universe.

The explanation of the universe is philosophy.

The philosophies of the world may be classified as—

- I. Mythologic.
- II. Metaphysic.
- III. Scientific.

Mythology and science constitute the two grand systems of philosophy, but between them stands metaphysic philosophy as a stepping-stone from the former to the latter.

In the lower stages of society philosophy is purely mythologic. All savage and barbaric peoples explain the phenomena of the universe by a system of myths. A mythology is always a growth, and among every people there grows up by the employment of diverse and superficial analogies—curious suggestions—a body of mythic explanations which constitute its philosophy.

Among the Wintuns of California the world is three-storied. There is a world—a great chamber—above, and there is this world, and a world below. The waters fall from the world above because the sky, the floor of that upper world, leaks; and the waters come from the world below through the springs that issue from the flanks of the dead volcanoes of that land; so the waters from above and the waters from below meet and flow down the great Sacramento to the sea, where again they divide; the waters from above taking their way to their upper home, and the waters from below taking their way to the lower world.

The mountains were formed by the great mole-god, who crawled under the land and upheaved the mountain ranges that stand on either side of the Sacramento Valley. And so they explain all of the phenomena of the universe, with which they are acquainted, in a system of myths which constitutes the philosophy of the Wintuns.

Now such a system of philosophy, a mythology, is found in every savage and barbaric tribe of the world.

But there came a time in the history of mankind when some of the peoples changed their philosophy—their explanation of the phenomena of the universe—by changing their methods of reasoning.

ORIGIN OF METAPHYSIC PHILOSOPHY.

From three to two thousand years ago Europe, Asia, and Africa established a commerce in ideas—an exchange in philosophies—carried on by the navigation of the Mediterranean. During that and some previous time there were built on the shores of this sea many cities. Through the building of these cities, and through the industries and arts which sprang up therewith, society was reorganized, and placed upon a new basis—tribal society developed into national society—barbarism into civilization.

The peoples of these cities spoke diverse languages, and entertained diverse mythologic philosophies. Through the intercourse which sprang up between them each learned of the philosophy of the other, and the scholars of that day attempted to discover in all of these diverse mythologies a common body of truth upon the theory then widely accepted, that they had all sprung from a common source—a primitive philosophy itself the truth—and that all the philosophies then existing were degenerations therefrom. This line of investigation led to a curious result.

All of the mythologies of the cities of the Mediterranean were found to be baseless—each a fabric of poetic but superficial analogies. In the mental activity of that time many new philosophies were proposed, diverse and contradictory, and the wisest philosophers said, "How shall we know the truth?" And they endeavored to discover some criterion by which truth should be known. This resulted in the development of *formal logic* as a testing machine into which opinions were put for the purpose of sifting truth from error.

Now the machine called logic, the tool of the metaphysician, is curiously constructed. Its chief hypothesis is that man was primitively endowed with fundamental principles as a basis of reasoning, and that these principles can be formulated. These fundamental principles are supposed to be universal, and to be everywhere accepted by mankind as self-evident propositions of the highest order, and of the broadest generalization. These fundamental propositions were called *major* propositions. The machine, in formal logic, was a verbal juxtaposition of propositions with the major propositions at the head, followed by the minor propositions, and from this truth was supposed to flow.

This formal logic of the Aristotelian epoch has lived from that period to the period of science. Logic is the instrument of metaphysics, and metaphysic philosophy, in its multifarious forms, is the product of logic. But during all that time—2,000 years—no truth has been discovered, no error has been detected by the use of the logical machine. Its fundamental assumption is false.

It has been discovered that man is not endowed with a body of major propositions. It is found that in the course of the evolution of mind minor propositions are discovered first, and major propositions are reached only by the combination of minor propositions; that always in the search for truth the minor proposition comes first, and that no major proposition can ever be accepted until the minor propositions included therein have been demonstrated.

The error in the metaphysic philosophy was the assumption that the great truths were already known by mankind, and that by the proper use of the logical machine all minor truths could be discovered, and all errors eliminated from philosophy. As metaphysic methods of reasoning were wrong, metaphysic philosophies were false; the body of metaphysic philosophy is a phantasmagoria.

THE ORIGIN OF SCIENTIFIC PHILOSOPHY.

While metaphysic philosophers have been playing with their logical kaleidoscopes, another body of philosophers have been at

work gathering the materials for the philosophy of science. Their method is to collect facts and to discover their relations, and they accept no conclusions that are not reached by this method. All other conclusions they hold as undetermined or indeterminate.

And now must be given a definition of science. *Science is the discernment, discrimination, and classification of facts, and the discovery of their relations of sequence.* This is a simple statement, but for its full comprehension a little illustration may be necessary.

A savage hears the voice of his fellow-man, he hears the voice of the beast, and of the bird; he also hears the noise of the thunder, and he supposes that the noise is a voice. In these cases he *discerns* noises, but he does not *discriminate* one noise from the other, and supposes them all to be voices, and that the noise of the thunder is the voice of the Thunder Bird. To understand facts we must not only discern, but discriminate.

The next step in the progress of science is classification. Having discerned and discriminated facts, they must be classified—all those of like nature thrown together. All noises made by living beings for conveying intelligence may be grouped into one class and called voices; all noises made by explosions grouped in another class; and so, as we go on discerning, discriminating, and classifying, we collect the materials of philosophy.

But this is not all of philosophy. Facts have genetic relations. If one thing is done something else will follow, and the highest function of scientific philosophy is to discover the order of succession of phenomena—how phenomena follow phenomena in endless procession, how every fact has had its antecedent fact, and every fact must have its consequent fact. This part of science is called *evolution*, and by this expression scientific men mean to be understood that phenomena go on in endless consequences, and that every act has been preceded by some other act, and that every act will be followed by some other act; that the causes of all of the phenomena of the universe that we wish to explain in a system of philosophy run back into the infinite past; that the consequences of all of the