

**LUCRETIUS OR PAUL:
MATERIALISM AND THEISM
TESTED BY THE NATURE AND THE
NEEDS OF MAN; AN ADDRESS**

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Lucretius or Paul: Materialism and theism tested by the nature and the needs of man; an address by Joseph P. Thompson

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JOSEPH P. THOMPSON

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LUCRETIVS OR PAUL.

MATERIALISM AND THEISM

TESTED BY

THE NATURE AND THE NEEDS OF MAN.

AN ADDRESS

DELIVERED IN THE AMERICAN CHAPEL, BERLIN,

ON

THANKSGIVING DAY, NOV. 25th, 1875

BY

JOSEPH P. THOMPSON, D.D., LL.D.

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1875.

*Request of
Prof. M. S. D. Doye
1-13-33*

ADDRESS.

THE favor with which you have received two Thanksgiving Addresses, seemed to bring me under obligation to accept your invitation for a third, in the hope that this might at least serve for the utterance of such sentiments of gratitude, fellowship, and devotion, as to-day are common to us all. With your hearts quickened by the anticipations of the coming year, you might naturally expect that the grateful memories of a hundred years would find vent to-day in an outburst of patriotic joy. But every thing in its season. That debt of gratitude is so great, so high, so deep, that I shall not presume to discount it in advance. Let it come with its whole weight to the heart of the whole nation, in the year and the day that Time has marked as one of the most bright and blessed in its calendar.¹⁾

¹⁾ In commemoration of the first century of the existence of the United States as a nation, I propose to give a course of lectures upon the following topics:

- I. The Grounds and Motives of the American Revolution.
- II. The Doctrines of the Declaration of Independence.
- III. The Adoption of the Constitution, Washington as Head of the Nation.
- IV. The Nation tested by the Vicissitudes of a Century.
- V. The Nation judged by its own Development and its Services to Mankind.
- VI. The Perils, Duties, and Hopes of the Opening Century.

These Lectures will be given in *Sachs's Amusement*, Tauben-Strasse 34, on Monday and Friday evenings, commencing Monday, February 21st. They will be free, and all who take an interest in the philosophical study of American political history, and can give time to the course, will be cordially welcome. As a matter of convenience, however, those who propose to honor the lecturer by their attendance, are requested to send him their address, and they shall receive as a personal invitation, a programme in outline of the course.

As in the days of Chivalry, he who would be enrolled a knight spent the hours preceding his investiture in acts of devotion in the chapel, so if we would be found worthy to bear aloft the shield of liberty decked with the garlands of the century, we should give ourselves the rather now to studies and acts of devotion, which shall lead us to the source of all gratitude, the theme of all praise.

To Americans no sentiment is more normal or more patriotic than the recognition of God in their history. The words with which Washington opened his first address to the first Congress assembled under the Constitution, have but gained in emphasis with succeeding years. "No people," said he, "can be bound to acknowledge and adore the Invisible Hand which conducts the affairs of men more than the people of the United States. Every step by which they have advanced to the character of an independent nation seems to have been attended with some token of Providential agency;" and he who had won the independence of the nation, had shaped its constitution, and was now to order its administration, called upon Congress and the people to join with him, not in patriotic exultation, but in "pious gratitude."

Two years ago, I spoke of the reasons we have for National Thanksgiving, as Americans residing in a foreign country; last year, of the Heroic Age of America and our grateful pride in our fathers. The matter of these addresses was objective—critical and historical; but underneath them both was the religious assumption that from whatever point we view our country we are called to gratitude, and that this gratitude has at once its source and its end in the loving care of a living Father.

Let me now attempt to lead you up to this highest view of Thanksgiving, a view in which rest all reasons of Thanksgiving for ourselves and our country, and which is

equally present and imperative at home and abroad;— God here, God there, God then and now and always—the living Father with his loving care.

But is God here, there, everywhere? Is He anywhere? or is He nowhere? Around this question of a personal God, the battle rages most fiercely in the world of modern thought, and if we look to the clouds, as in the battle of the Huns, we there see the ghosts of ancient philosophy still fighting over the same field. A personal God, Creator, Governor, Redeemer, Father, or, matter, force, motion, evolution, and final extinction—this was the issue in the last generation in the sphere of metaphysics, renewed in our time in the sphere of physics—in one word, Theism or Materialism, the issue which must determine whether Thanksgiving is a reasonable virtue or a foolish superstition.

I need make no apology for handling such a question before an audience having more than an average of thinkers, and more than an average of training in the facts of science and the laws of thought, and especially before minds whose course of study brings them in contact with Materialism, either tacitly assumed or plausibly presented almost as a synonym of Science. But in propounding this theme, I do not propose to make a scientific disquisition, nor to enter the field of modern controversy; but taking the materialistic and theistic schemes of the universe as stated by the foremost advocates of each in ancient times, to test them severally in their adaptation to Man, as an explication both of himself and of that order of things with which he is inseparably connected. This test is strictly scientific. Science would not accept as a definition of a thing or a creature, a statement that failed to include or account for some of its most distinguishing properties; nor would science record as a law a formula that did not fairly cover all the characteristic and undeviating phenom-

ena of the subject-matter. Now, Man is a creature of a certain characteristic and undeviating constitution as to its essential elements and their normal manifestation; he is capable of observation, understanding, reason, imagination, emotion, affection, volition, moral judgment, as truly and universally as he is capable of growth, speech, nutrition, and locomotion. Also, the order of things with which he stands connected—call it Nature, the Cosmos, the Universe—addresses itself not only to his bodily senses, but to each and all of these capacities or faculties that go to make up the man. The scenes and sounds that impress his organs of sight and hearing address themselves also to his imagination and taste, excite within him joy, fear, hope, memory, love, move him to action, or lull him to repose. What an unscientific absurdity, then, is a scheme of the universe which would define its origin, its nature, and its workings simply through its impression upon the physical senses of man, or as known to his observation, and should leave quite out of account the rich and manifold aptitudes of the universe to the nature of man as a being of thought and imagination, of emotion and desire, of affection and will! How shallow the pretense to science, in a definition of the universe, that should ignore all its relations to the nobler and better part of man.

It is to this test of the Universe as related to Man and Man as related to the Universe, that I propose to submit the schemes of Materialism and Theism. In the statement of these schemes, I shall take for each its foremost representative, Lucretius and Paul; each in his kind the highest type of man. I take these because, while they can be contemplated apart from the prejudices and passions of contemporary disputants, they are also fairly balanced, and are unsurpassed by any of the whole race of philosophers, be they scientists or sciologists, of to-day. Lucretius and

Paul were alike in the rare combination in equal measure of the logical and the imaginative faculties; strong-armed for blows of argument, strong-winged for flights of poetry. They were alike in the love of truth, in the desire to free mankind from superstition and error, and in courage to avow their opinions and obey their convictions. They were alike in seeking the foundation of things, and from this to grasp the infinite, and with thought and fancy to girdle the universe. Nearly contemporary — Lucretius having died barely fifty years before Paul was born, — they both grew up amid the culture of the Roman empire in its most brilliant and classic age. That Lucretius enjoyed this culture, his poem furnishes intrinsic evidence in its mastery at once of Greek philosophy and of Latin verse, which last indeed he perfected, as did Shakspeare the English and Goethe the German.

Paul, too, had the best culture of his time; first, at Antioch, then a foremost seat of learning, next at Jerusalem, in the famous school of Gamaliel, where were taught not only the history and laws of Judaism, but philosophy, science, literature from every quarter, especially from the East.¹⁾ That Paul was a man of intellectual rank is evident, not only from the thought and style of his writings, but from his being entrusted at an early age with high responsibilities by the leaders of his nation; by his familiarity with Greek philosophy and Greek authors, as shown for instance at Athens and Lystra; and by his "disputing in the school of one Tyrannus²⁾;" and that he was of a scholarly habit appears from his message to Timothy, "The

¹⁾ In the higher schools of Palestine were taught Law, Ethics, History, Grammar, Languages (Coptic, Aramaic, Persian, Median, Latin, Greek), Mathematics, Astronomy, Botany, Zoology, etc. See a full account of these schools in the "Literary Remains of Emanuel Deutsch," pp. 21—25, and 140.

²⁾ Acts, XIX., 9.

cloak that I left at Troas bring with thee, and the books—but especially the parchments,"¹⁾ which he had written or needed for writing. He could ill afford to lose an outer garment, but like a German professor, he cared more for books and especially his own writings, than for clothes!

Of Lucretius it must be said, that he not only wrought out the doctrine of Materialism with a completeness of statement and profuseness of illustration not attained by any of his predecessors, but also made his system of the universe so comprehensive that modern materialists have added absolutely nothing to his conception, but have simply confirmed at certain points, by observation and experiment, what he had reasoned out from his speculative postulates.²⁾

Did Galileo demonstrate that in a vacuum all bodies fall through equal spaces in equal times? Lucretius had already said that "whenever bodies fall through water and thin air, they must quicken their descents in proportion to their weights, because the body of water and subtle nature of air can not retard every thing in equal degree, but more readily give way, overpowered by the heavier; on the other hand, empty void can not offer resistance to any thing in any direction at any time, but must, as its nature craves, continually give way; and for this reason all things must

¹⁾ 2. Tim. IV., 22.

²⁾ Too little is known of the life of Lucretius to enable us to judge how far he subjected his philosophical theories to experimental tests. His poem exhibits a perfect acquaintance with the discoveries and opinions of the Greek philosophers, and a minute observance of Nature as to her more patent phenomena. But of experimental observation—what the Friar of Messina styled "Observation

Which with *experimental seal* doth warrant

The tenor of my book,"—(Much Ado about Nothing, IV, 1.)

Lucretius seems to have had little or none. The lack of facility for this makes his system the more wonderful, as a structure of vast and logical consistency, a metaphysical creation to so many parts of which physical observation has now put its "experimental seal." Thus, as to the properties of vacuum Lucretius argues not from experiments in an artificial void, but abstractly, from the nature of void—"sua quod natura patit."—L. II, 237.