

**MATERIALISM  
ANCIENT  
AND MODERN**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649274581

Materialism Ancient and Modern by Various

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# MATERIALISM

ANCIENT AND MODERN

BY A LATE FELLOW OF TRINITY COLLEGE  
CAMBRIDGE

London  
MACMILLAN AND CO.  
1881

## I.

### ON NATURE.

**I**N a controversy respecting the relative merits and capabilities of the German and French languages, the advocate for the latter challenged his adversary to translate 'Nature' into pure German. There was no response. It could not be denied that the Teutons had borrowed the word 'Natur' from the Latin, or some Latin dialect; and their language, therefore, stood condemned, as wanting a word to express a conception of the most ordinary character.

I have since been led to inquire into the meaning of this word, so frequently employed both in its original form, as a substantive, and in its derivatives, 'natural' and 'super-



natural,' and I have arrived at the conclusion that a language is not to be hastily convicted of poverty, because it does not offer a word of equivalent sense.

The word 'Nature' is sometimes employed to denote the objects of sense collectively, as when we speak of the 'beauties of Nature;' and when it receives this meaning, it may be rendered by the Teutonic *Welt* with sufficient accuracy. But the word we are considering frequently receives another and a very different signification, even from philosophical writers, who speak of Nature as possessing a generative or directive and foreseeing, if not a creative, power.

We sometimes hear it said that the love of parents for their children is a provision of, or is implanted by Nature, for the preservation of the species. Gravitation is said to be a law of Nature. Such and such things come 'by nature,' 'are natural.' There is a

power by which they are what they are, a power, not intelligent, not independent of material things or energies, but pervading and directing them. Fire burns 'by nature,' and so on.

These forms of expression are so common that we have much difficulty in dispensing with the use of them; but I hold them to involve an erroneous assumption: and it is for the word Nature when so employed that we seek in vain for a Teutonic equivalent, and are forced to employ the Latin '*Natura*.' I propose to inquire whether when so used, when used as something distinct from *Welt*, the word possesses a meaning which deserves to be expressed.

In the first place, we may safely assert that Nature, supposing it to be something other than the objects of sense—<sup>1</sup>external things, as they are called—cannot

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<sup>1</sup> I use the expression, believing it to be generally intelligible, not as philosophically accurate.

itself be an object of sense. It would, otherwise, be an external thing, or a combination of external things. In order that a belief in the existence of Nature in the sense we are considering may be justified, we must show that the supposition or hypothesis of the existence of Nature is probable; or, in other words, we must show that the supposition, if adopted, accounts for and explains observed phenomena. But how can the supposition that an unintelligent power exists account for the phenomena which we observe? We are led to believe that the objects of our senses act upon each other, and upon our senses in modes which, in many instances, we can define. Why they so act we do not know.

Admit that there exists an unintelligent power called Nature, which pervades all things: how does this supposition help us to explain observed phenomena? Bodies attract each other. Why? By a law of