

**MODERN MATERIALISM:
ITS ATTITUDE TOWARDS
THEOLOGY**

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Modern Materialism: Its Attitude Towards Theology by James Martineau

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JAMES MARTINEAU

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Ezra Abbot

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BY

REV. JAMES MARTINEAU.

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MODERN MATERIALISM:

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At the beginning of October, 1874, it was my duty, as Principal of a Theological College, to open a new session with an address, which was afterwards published under the title "Religion as affected by Modern Materialism." It raises the question whether the free and scientific methods of study insisted on in the college involved results at variance with its theological design. It states accordingly three assumptions hitherto implied in that design: "That the universe which includes us and folds us round is the life-dwelling of an Eternal Mind; that the world of our abode is the scene of a Moral Government incipient but not yet complete; and that the upper zones of human affection, above the clouds of self and passion, take us into the sphere of a Divine Communion." With regard to these assumptions the thesis is maintained that they are beyond the contradiction, because not within the logical range, of the natural sciences. In support of this thesis the mischiefs are shown, both to science and to theology, of confusing their boundaries, and treating the discovery of law as the negation of God; and the separating line is drawn, that in their intellectual dealings with phenomena, science investigates the "how" and theology the "whence." Tempted on by two of its indispensable conceptions, *matter* and *force*, science, overstepping this boundary, has of late affected to know not

only the order but the origin of things; in the one case starting them from *atoms* as their source, in the other from mechanical *energy*. I try to show that neither datum will work out its result except by the aid of logical illusions. You will get out of your atoms by "evolution," exactly so much and no more as you have put into them by hypothesis. And, with regard to force, it is contended that observation and induction do not carry us to it at all, but stop with *movements*; that the so-called kinds of force are only classes of phenomena, with the constant belief of causality behind; that of causality we have no cognition but as Will, from which the idea of "physical force" is simply cut down by artificial abstraction to the needs of phenomenal investigation and grouping; and that, in conceiving of the single power hid in every group, we must revert to the intuitive type because the only authorized, and to the highest, because alone covering the highest phenomena. The attempt, under shelter of the unity of energy behind all its masks, to make the lowest phase, besides playing its own part, stand for the whole, is described as a logical sleight of hand by which a heedless reasoner may impose upon himself and others.

After this defensive argument to show that the religious positions are not displaced by natural science, they are traced to their real seat in human nature, and treated as postulates involved in the very existence and life of the reason and conscience. In support of their natural claim to our entire trust, it is contended that, for their ethical power, they are absolutely dependent on their objective truth; and further, that our nature in respect of its higher affections, compassion, self-forgetfulness, moral obligation, is constructed in harmony with a world Divinely ruled, and in utter conflict with the Pessimist's picture of nature.

The address thus epitomized has brought upon me the honor and the danger of a critique by Professor Tyndall,* marked by all his literary skill, and rendered persuasive by happy sarcasm and brilliant description. One fault at least he brings home to me with irresistible conviction. He blames my mode of writing as deficient in precision and

*Fragments of Science: "Materialism" and its Opponents; and, previously, *Fortnightly Review*, November 1, 1875.

lucidity. And I cannot deny the justice of the censure when I observe that my main line of argument has left no trace upon his memory, that its estimate of scientific doctrines is misconstrued, that my feeling towards the order of nature is exhibited in reverse, that I am cross-questioned about an hypothesis of which I never dreamt, and am answered by a charming "alternative" exposition of ascending natural processes which I follow with assent till it changes its voice from physics to metaphysics, and from its premisses of positive phenomena proclaims a negative ontological conclusion. That at every turn I should have put so acute a reader upon a totally false scent rebukes me more severely than any of his direct and pertinent criticisms; for, smartly as these may hit me, they fall chiefly on incidental and parenthetical remarks which might have been absent, or on mere literary form which might have been different, without affecting the purport of my address. Whether the force of these minor thrusts is really disabling, or is only a by-play telling mainly on the fancy of the observer, a brief scrutiny will determine.

(1.) In saying that the college which I represent leaves open to all new lights of knowledge "the special studies which deal with our sources of religious faith," I expanded this phrase by the words, "whether in the scrutiny of nature or in the interpretation of sacred books." This innocent parenthesis, which simply summarizes the growing-grounds of all actual theology, produces in my critic an effect out of all proportion to its significance. Twice he challenges me to show how any "religious faith" can be drawn from "nature," which I regard, he says, as "base and cruel." It suffices to say that "scrutiny of nature" does not exclude "*human* nature," wherein the springs of religion are afterwards traced to their intuitive seats; and that, in what are called my "tirades against nature," as "base and cruel," I am describing, not my own view of the order of the world, but one which I repudiate as utterly sickly and perverse. Then again, I am asked how, after giving up the Old Testament cosmogony, I can any longer speak of "sacred books," without informing my readers where to find them. I have occasionally met with scientific men whose ideas about the

Bible, if going further than the Creation, came to an end at the Flood, and who thought it only loyal to Laplace and Lyell thenceforth to shelve "Moses and the prophets:" but a judgment so *borné* I should not expect from Professor Tyndall. Can a literature then have nothing "sacred," unless it be infallible? Has the religion of the present no roots in the soil of the past, so that nothing is gained for our spiritual culture by exploring its history and reproducing its poetry, and ascending to the tributary waters of its life? The real modern discovery, far from saying there is no sacred literature, because none oracular, assures us that there are several; and, notwithstanding a deepened because purified attachment to our own "Origines" in the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, persuades us to look with an open reverence into all writings that have embodied and sustained the greater pieties of the world. But to my censor it appears a thing incredible that I should find a sanctity in anything human; or deem it possible to approach religion in its truth by intercepting its errors as it percolates through history, and letting it flow clearer and clearer, till it brings a purifying baptism to the conscience of our time.

(2.) In order to give distinctness to that "religion" in relation to which I proposed to treat of "Modern Materialism," I specified "three assumptions" involved in it, of which the first and chief is the existence of the "Living God." I am reproached with making no attempt to verify them, but permitting them to "remain assumptions" "to the end." Be it so, though the statement is not quite exact: still in every reasoned discourse assumptions have their proper place, as well as proofs; and the right selection of propositions to stand in the one position or the other depends on the speaker's thesis and the hearer's needs. My *thesis* was, that natural science did not displace these assumptions, because they lie beyond its range; and the *proof* is complete if it is shown that the logical limit of inductive knowledge stops short of their realm, and is illegitimately overstepped by every physical maxim which contradicts them. To turn aside from this line of argument in order to "verify" the primary matter of the whole discussion would have been to set out for Exeter and arrive at York. My *hearers* con-

sisted of the teachers, supporters, and alumni of a *Theological* College; and to treat them as a body of atheists, and offer proofs of the being of a God, would have been as impertinent as for Professor Tyndall to open the session of a *Geological* society with a demonstration of the existence of the earth.

(8.) A few reluctant words must suffice in answer to the charge of "scorning the emotions." I say "*reluctant* words:" for to this side of our our nature it is given to speak without being much spoken of; to live and be, rather than be seen and known; and when dragged from its retreat it is so hurt as to change its face and become something else. Here, however, little more is needed than to repeat the words which are pronounced to be so "rash" and even "petulant" — "I trust that when '*emotion*' *proves empty*, we shall stamp it out and get rid of it." Do I then "scorn" the "emotion" of any mind stirred by natural vicissitudes or moving realities—the cry of Andromache, "Ἐκτιορ, ἐγὼ δούσσηρος," at the first sight of her hero's dishonoured corpse; the covered face and silent sobs of Phædon, when Socrates had drained the cup; the tears of Peter at the cock-crowing; or any of the fervent forms of mental life—the mysticism of Eckhart, the intellectual enthusiasm of Bruno, the patriotic passion of Vane? Not so; for none of these are "empty," but carry a meaning adequate to their intensity. It is for "emotion" with a vacuum within, and floating *in vacuo* without, charged with no thought and directed to no object, that I avow distrust; and if there be an "over-shadowing awe" from the mere sense of a blank consciousness and an enveloping darkness, I can see in it no more than the negative condition of a religion yet to come. In human psychology, feeling, when it transcends sensation, is not without idea, but is a type of idea; and to suppose "an inward hue and temperature," apart from any "object of thought," is to feign the impossible. Colour must lie upon form; and heat must spring from a focus, and declare itself upon a surface. If by "referring religion to the region of emotion" is meant withdrawing it from the region of truth, and letting it pass into an undulation in no medium and with no direction, I must decline to surrender.

In thus refusing support from "empty emotion," I am said

to "kick away the only *philosophic foundation* on which it is possible to build religion." Professor Tyndall is certainly not exacting from his builders about the solidity of his "foundation;" and it can be only a very light and airy architecture, not to say an imaginary one, that can spring from such base; and perhaps it does not matter that it should be unable to face the winds. Nor is the inconsistency involved in this statement less surprising than its levity. Religion, it appears, has a "philosophical foundation." But "philosophy" investigates the ultimate ground of cognition and the organic unity of what the several sciences assume. And a "philosophical foundation" is a legitimated first principle for some one of these; it is a cognitive beginning—a *datum* of ulterior *quæsitæ*—and nothing but a science can have it. Religion then must be an organism of thought. Yet it is precisely in denial of this that my censor invents his new "foundation." Here, he tells us, we know nothing, we can think nothing; the intellectual life is dumb and blank; we do but blindly feel. How can a structure without truth repose on philosophy in its foundation?

But do I not myself carry religious questions, in the last appeal, to the inward consciousness of man, whether intellectual for the interpretation of causality, or moral for the interpretation of duty? Undoubtedly; and Professor Tyndall thinks it "highly instructive" that I "should have lived so long, thought so much, and failed to recognize the entirely subjective character of this creed." If I may omit the word "entirely" (which implies a gratuitous exclusion of "objective truth"), I not only recognize it, but everywhere insist upon it. The fundamental religious conceptions have no deeper validity than belongs to the very frame of our faculties and the postulates of our thinking. But as this equally holds of the fundamental scientific conceptions, as matter and force have also to retire to consciousness for their witness, nay, as objectivity itself is but an interpretation by the subject of its own experience, is it not "highly instructive" that a critic so compassionate of my "subjective" position should be unaware of the ideality of his own? Or, has he, perhaps, found some "objective knowledge" which has not to fall back upon a "subjective" guarantee?