

**"THE EVIDENCE OF THINGS  
NOT SEEN":  
I. FROM NATURE.  
II. FROM REVELATION**

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"The evidence of things not seen": I. From nature. II. From revelation by J. A. Fleming

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**J. A. FLEMING**

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BY  
J. A. FLEMING, D.Sc., F.R.S.

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THE  
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I.

FROM NATURE.

By common consent the book called the *Principia* by Sir Isaac Newton is acknowledged to be one of the greatest productions of the human mind. At the end of that immortal work, after establishing the principles of mathematical astronomy and applying them to the elucidation of the motions of celestial bodies, Newton concludes with a *Scholium* or Appendix in which he declares his conviction that "the whole diversity of natural things can have arisen from nothing but the ideas and the will of one necessarily existing Being who is always and everywhere God, Supreme, Infinite, Omnipotent, Omniscient, and absolutely perfect."\*

\* Quoted from the Gifford Lectures, 1896-1898, vol. i., p. 3, by Dr. James Ward: "Naturalism and Agnosticism."  
Dr. Ward gives the general sense of Newton's words. The

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One century later, another great mathematician, Laplace, published a treatise, entitled "La Mécanique Celeste," in which, starting from Newton's doctrine of universal gravitation, he applied mathematical analysis of a powerful kind to unravel and explain the more complicated motions of the heavenly bodies, and in particular those of the solar system. The story runs, that on one occasion the author came to present a copy of this book to the Emperor Napoleon I., and

exact phrases used in the *Principia*, omitting a few inter-connecting sentences, are as follows :—

"This most beautiful system of the sun, planets, and comets could only proceed from the counsel and dominion of an intelligent and powerful Being. . . . This Being governs all things not as the soul of the world, but as Lord over all, and on account of his dominion He is wont to be called Lord God or Universal Ruler. . . . The Supreme God is a Being eternal, infinite, absolutely perfect ; but a being however perfect without dominion cannot be said to be Lord God. . . . From his true dominion it follows that the true God is a living, intelligent, and powerful Being, and from His other perfections, that He is supreme or most perfect. He is eternal and infinite, omnipotent and omniscient ; that is, His duration reaches from eternity to eternity ; His presence from infinity to infinity ; He governs all things and knows all things that are or can be done. . . . All that diversity of natural things which we find suited to different times and places could arise from nothing but the ideas and will of a Being necessarily existing. . . . And this much concerning God ; to discourse of whom from the appearances of things does certainly belong to Natural Philosophy."—Extract from the Scholium to Book III. of "The Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy," by Sir Isaac Newton. 1686. From the English translation by Andrew Motte. London. 1819.

the latter, taking it into his hand, said, "M. Laplace, they tell me you have written this great book on the system of the universe, and in it you have not once mentioned the name of its Creator." Laplace is asserted to have replied, "Sire, I had no need of any such hypothesis." \*

These words of Laplace, if the anecdote be true, admit of various interpretations. He may have desired to convey the opinion that the book in question, being a purely scientific work, was not concerned at all with final causes; or they may have been an expression of his idea that such final causes were quite beyond the reach of scientific knowledge, an attitude of mind which we should at present call Agnostic; or, lastly, they can be considered as the utterance of his conviction that no introduction of the notion of a Creator was necessary in connection with the study of Nature.

We find, however, Newton, as the result of a lifetime of research into the laws and structure of the material universe, reverently acknowledging the vast fabric of Nature as the handiwork of one omnipresent Deity, Who is the Maker and Sustainer of it all; whilst, on the other hand, Laplace seems to

\* See "A Short History of Mathematics," by W. W. R. Ball, p. 388. 1888

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have seen in his profound studies of the same universe no strong evidence for the existence of an Intelligent Creator, and no need to make any such supposition. Countless numbers of those who have followed Newton and Laplace as investigators of various portions of the visible and tangible universe of things have openly or secretly followed them also in these diverse opinions on the subject of its authorship and origin.

This question is one of supreme interest, and of the highest practical and personal importance. Every thinking man and woman should examine this matter, as far as possible, independently for themselves; should review carefully the evidence and arguments that have been advanced in support of these opposing opinions, and endeavour to place the issues clearly before the mind.

Assuredly there is no topic which can be made the subject of thought which is at once so profound and so interesting as the consideration of this sublime question of the origin of all things.

Mankind as a whole has wrestled with it throughout the span of its intellectual history. The most powerful minds have grappled with it, the most saintly have had insights into it, the most humble have possessed irrefutable convictions upon it, and have acted up to

the monitions of conscience in regard to it. Whilst it remains for ever true that no man "by searching can find out God," or "find out the Almighty unto perfection" (Job xi. 7, 8), yet unquestionably it is the fool who has "said in his heart," if not with his lips, "there is no God," when he has never attempted to come to close quarters with the evidence, persuasions, indications, cumulative proofs or demonstrations that lie without us and within us, speaking now in faintest whispers or anon in thunder tones, and bearing witness to the fact that "He that built all things is God" (Heb. iii. 4).

It is not to be supposed for a moment that a question which has created vast literatures can be adequately discussed in one short, imperfect attempt to indicate its outlines. But just as each age has to recast fundamental truths into its own forms of thought, so each individual must for himself face the task of clarifying his ideas by examining their foundation if he desires to build up convictions on an ascertained basis.

The present age is one in which the attack on religious belief and revealed religion is not concerned with details only, but with fundamental conceptions; and it is round these last positions that the battle is being fought out and the victory lost or won. It

is, therefore, the undoubted duty of every serious thinker to criticize for himself the chief facts on which all religious faith unquestionably rests. If these are undermined, then whatever may be the superstructure, all will go down; whereas, if the foundation courses are secure, then on them may be erected a structure which will stand because it is established on the Rock of Truth.

We desire, therefore, to collect together, and briefly review, some of the main arguments which support the conviction expressed by Newton, and invalidate the opinion that we have no need for the hypothesis of a Living and Creating God. This, however, involves some preliminary clearing of the ground. We have to place the issues and object of discussion before us without vagueness or obscurity.

Broadly speaking, there are three divisions into which we may cast all that has been said or written on this great subject, excluding, ancient polytheistic systems, and including only the range of modern thought. We have, first, the purely negative or atheistic attitude which denies the existence of any intelligent, self-conscious, self-determined Personal Agency, as the cause, origin, and foundation of the visible and invisible universe of things. We have, in the next place, the