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Nature of the Universe—Eternal or Transient? Caused or Uncaused?

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CHAPTER VII

NATURE OF THE UNIVERSE: ETERNAL OR TRANSIENT? CAUSED OR UNCAUSED?

Scripture Reading Lesson

Analysis

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References

John Stuart Mill's "Three Essays On Religion", chapter on "Argument For a First Cause" pp.142-154.

See enlightening comment on Mill by John Fiske in "Studies In Religion" pp. 81, 126-7; and 177-180; 235-238. *

Science History of the Universe (Ten Vols.) Vol.X Philosophy, especially chs. 2 and 3. *

* It must be understood always, that the work cited in the column of "References" are by no means accepted by the writer as conclusive authorities (except as to citations to the scriptures); or that he agrees with the conclusions of the authors quoted, or that his text in the chapter agrees with them. His text is an independent treatise, often opposite in its conclusions from the works referred to **though** here and there supported by them. The works cited in the reference column are given to encourage a wide reading on the general theme.

Nature of the Universe— Eternal or Transient? Caused or Uncaused?

The universe conceived as eternal. The next step in the development of our theme will be to consider briefly the nature of this universe we have contemplated. What is it by nature? Eternal or transient? Has it had a beginning in time and must it come to an end? Or is it eternal, without beginning and without end? Authorities may be marshaled on both these views, the eternity of the universe and the universe transient. Some claiming on this head to speak from the result of human investigation, human science, and human philosophy; and others giving interpretation of revelations as the ground of their belief. The fact, however, of an eternal or a transient universe may not be satisfactorily settled by quotations of authorities, and so it is for us to search it out as best we may both by consideration of reasoning from what we know, as also (ultimately) from interpretation of revelation.

The conception of the eternity of the universe may be said to run parallel with certain other eternal things that we have considered; namely, space, duration, and the “conservation of mass,” meaning by the last indestructibility of matter, and its twin truth, the uncreatability of it. Here we have eternal things to deal with, and we have already in a previous chapter traced them to the point where the conception of

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their eternity becomes a necessary truth, because the contrary—the bounding of space, the limiting of duration, the destruction and creatability of matter are inconceivable. It may be that the eternity of the universe can be treated in the same manner.

Immensity of the universe suggests eternity of it. From the extent of the universe, already traced in these chapters, the immensity of it—even of the cosmos (**if it is shown that immensity of it is also limitless**)—goes far towards establishing the inconceivability of its beginning in time or ending in time; but the extent of it, we may be sure, as suggested by that which is revealed to us by telescope, supplemented by the eye of science—meaning the photographic eye of science—it is still greater than that to our thought; and thought itself becomes lost, and intelligence a bit confused in trying to grasp the ~~immensity~~ **limitlessness** of it; and the time, and *the* place, and *the* manner of its beginning may not be conceived. Equally true is it that the end of it may not be conceived; but the realization of its eternity may be apprehended when we are reminded that there must be room in infinite space of all matter, organized and unorganized; cosmos and chaos. Room for the endless multiplication of worlds and solar systems of worlds and galaxies, which may be termed local universes—if the paradoxical expression may be pardoned—ad infinitum. Room for the working out of changes that affect the development of all that is, from lower forms of existences to higher forms, and all those endless changes necessary to this development—there is room for all this in boundless space; and time for it in endless duration; and material for it in the existence of exhaustless and enduring matter. An eternal universe, in fact, seems to match these other three eternal things and conditions—space, and time, the matter; and while, as I have said, the existence of an eternal universe is difficult to hold in consciousness, it is not as difficult as it is to form a conception of its having a beginning or of reaching an end. Nay, indeed, beginning and end seem inconceivable and hence impossible; and again we arrive at the establishment of a necessary truth because the opposite is unthinkable. Also the parallel eternities of space, time, and matter seem to require an eternal universe as a necessary concomitant of the whole realm of thought and fact.

The nature of force. Another thing to be considered in our progressive thought is that of Force in the universe, which may be considered the power by which things move which compels, so far as human knowledge knows, the changes that take place in all parts of the known universe. What is this force? Mechanical or intelligent; the effect of

mind upon matter, or is it the blind, mechanical power of “dead matter,” such as the force called gravitation is supposed to be, existing and depending upon masses of matter, and their relative distances from each other for the manifestation of force in attraction or in repulsion?

Causation: “First” or “eternal cause”? With these remarks on the eternity of the universe arises naturally the question of causation or of the “cause” of things, or of events, which are but changes with the universe. The idea of a “first cause” is necessarily eliminated by the conception of the eternity of the universe. “First Cause” implies a time when there was not cause; when there was absolute inaction, or absence of causation; but as the universe is eternal and includes in that eternal existence the existence of force and mind as well as of matter, there can be no “first,” ~~cause~~ but **there may be** “eternal cause”; and that cause eternally present is the cause of events or changes in the eternal universe. The universe itself is uncaused since it has always existed, and is all that is, including all forces of whatsoever, ~~origin,~~ as also all intelligence, or mind—**it is** “the sum of existence!”

Eternal cause the more rational. The operation of an eternal cause constantly present and acting in an eternal universe, is more rational than the conception of a “first cause,” followed by secondary causes. For that “first” presents a mental problem more difficult to account for than an eternal universe in which is operating eternal causation, and that “causation” when regarded as eternal leads up to the conception of the dominance of mind over matter as completely as when the universe and its phenomena are accounted for by the conception of a “first cause,” and all that follows it. For if we could trace all things up to the “first cause,” we would be brought face to face with that which would challenge our question—Whence is this?—this first cause?

~~“First” or “Eternal” Cause:~~ *Of design in the universe.* This “first cause” idea involves us in the whole argument of the designer of the universe, a designer that at once is outside of and transcends the universe; and of which idea the watch illustration of Dean Paley’s *Natural Theology* is usually depended upon to establish; and which briefly is as follows:

A watch is found and learning the complexity of its structure, and finding the adjustments of its parts to be such that it is a measure of passing time, the finder concludes it must have had a designer, it bears so many evidences of that fact. So man beholds the universe; he finds

so many evidences of design in it that he arrives at the conclusion that it, too, must have had a designer, a “cause.” The application of the illustration to the universe will be obvious. To all which some deist makes answer: The watch finder analyzes the watch, notes the adjustment of the parts to the whole, and the end it serves—the measurement of time—and is satisfied that it had a designer, and goes in search of him. He finds that the designer, the “cause” of the watch, to be a man; but the watchmaker, the man, is more wonderful by far than the watch, the thing he created; and the question is—who caused or designed the watchmaker? For if the watch by being so wonderful, and its parts so adjusted as to achieve a certain, useful end, then surely the watch designer, more wonderful than the watch, must be accounted for by causation back of him. And doubtless if the designer of, or the creator of the man could be found, he would yet be more wonderful than the man, and clamor more loudly than the man for an accounting for; and so on *ad infinitum*.¹

This brings home to the consciousness the inadequacy of this argument for a first cause; and also suggests that the mind can not rest in an endless chain of cause-effects; that it can come to rest only in the conception of an “eternal cause” rather than a “first cause.” This “a necessary truth” because the mind can not rationally conceive and hold how it could be otherwise.

Elements of cause. “Cause” is defined as the power or efficient agent producing anything or an event. “In a comprehensive sense,” the “cause” has to do with “all the circumstances (powers, occasions, actions and conditions) necessary for an event, and necessarily followed by it—the entire antecedent of an event.” Causes may be regarded, and are regarded, as efficient, material, formal, and final: efficient cause is the power or agency producing anything or an event, the power to produce completely; material cause is the material out of which, by the efficient causes, anything is made; formal cause is the pattern, place, or form, according to which anything is produced by the operation of efficient causes; final cause is that eternal power within the eternal and uncaused universe, ~~uncreated~~, but existing nevertheless, which is the source of all power producing change, motion and life. “It,” mind or intelligence, is that which acts as eternal cause and produces change and development. The human mind may not rest in an endless chain of causes—effects, as before stated; but it can rest in the thought of the universe being eternal; in having neither beginning nor end, in time, or space, or substance;

¹Paley, *Natural Theology*, 5-8.

because the mind can not conceive the beginning of the universe or the “first cause” of it. But the mind can rest in the conception of an eternal universe as being all that is, the “sum of existence,” including all mind, all intelligence—the light by which truth is discerned—as well as all matter; which is to say, including that which acts—force-mind, as well as the which is acted upon (matter). With mind or intelligence recognized as the eternal power and the eternal cause whence proceeds the ever-changing development within and throughout the universe—this relieves the mind of the perplexities of a “first cause,” and at the same time does no violence to the requirements of the mind for the presence and operation of efficient, material, formal, and final causation in the universe.

So far as human experiences are concerned, it is quite evident from what we know from those experiences, that force, and ultimately mind, dominates matter. In our modern experiences this dominance of mind over matter is being emphasized.

The dominance of man in the world. (a) Over the animal kingdom. It is represented in some ~~alleged~~ revelations that when God had created man he gave him dominion over all the earth, with a commandment to subdue it, and have dominion over all that was upon it (Gen. 1:26-28). And responding to his commandment whether resulting from revelation or from powers inherent in man by nature, he has been carrying out such a decree, and with ever increasing success he is holding and developing his dominion. He has mastered the animal kingdom in air, sea, and earth. Though physically inferior in brute strength to many of earth’s creatures, in all three realms named, he has subdued them to his will; compelled them to receive his mastery; and by the force of mind has created those instrumentalities which make him superior to them even in physical destructive powers, where that becomes necessary to assert his mastery. Many of these creatures he has compelled to be his servants, to carry himself and his belongings with all their speed from place to place; to aid him in his toil of cultivating the earth, and in all his labor. The skins of the animal kingdom yield him clothing, and their flesh, in part, supply his food.

(b) *Over plant life.* In like manner he has taken possession and bent to his using the product of the plant life of the earth. The wild variety of fruits he has improved by cultivation and has created infinite variety to please his taste, and provide the variations in diet essential to his health. The grains and other plant life have received similar treatment: man multiplies and so largely controls their production that in the matter of necessary food products the race may feel fairly secure;

and famines and the possibility of their recurrence are constantly growing less frequent.

From plant life as well as from animal life man takes that which clothes his body. The cotton plant whose bursting bolls whitening in the autumn sun of southern lands, as well as wool from countless thousands of sheep, and the shining thread of the silk worm, combined to give apparel in modern days more glorious than clothed the limbs of a voluptuous Solomon in all his glory.

(c) ***Over the mineral kingdom.*** Man has broken into the coal reserves of the earth's bowels and brought them forth to release the sunshine of past ages stored in them to give him light, to warm his dwellings, and drive his machinery; he has tapped the oil lakes of the earth's interior, and released the stored energy found in oil to drive his trains, his ships, his automobiles, and his aeroplanes. From the silver seams of the mountains and the gold-laden sands of river beds and the ancient quartz-sites, and the gem-laden gravels of great depths—all these he has gathered, and converted into ornaments to beautify his dwellings and his person. Sad to say, also, he has combined chemical substances in such manner as to create explosive forces employed in his destructive wars. He has made conquest over distances by bringing all parts of the world into instant means of communication. He has gradually lessened the inconvenience of distance by rapid means of transportation through express trains, automobiles,—his palatial steam-driven ocean vessels, and now the more rapid means of transportation through the air by Zeppelins and aeroplanes. In a word, in the realm of physical mastery, man has been gaining great victories of late.

(d) ***Dominion in social and civil life.*** Also in the social and the civil spheres as represented by municipal, national, and inter-national life, man has made great gains. In the realm of knowledge, also, he has made advancement—almost miraculously, at least far beyond all progress in former ages. Although, perhaps, less noticeably, man has also made advancement in moral and spiritual things. His social relations are characterized by more kindness than in the past. He is more humane in caring for the unfortunate, than in the past. A truer sense of justice for those occupying the lowly stations in life is improved. There are juster laws operating in human relations than in past times. A wider enjoyment of civil and political rights than heretofore; a wider distribution of material comforts. The race is better housed and fed and clothed than in ~~times past~~ ***ages gone by.*** More have access to the enjoyment of luxuries than ever before, and the trend of all things human is in the direction of the betterment of human lives, both individually and in society at large. There is a note of optimism in human

life that prophesies wider and greater and deeper and more permanent welfare for the children of men, and for the nations, for civilization. Man is evidently fulfilling what is represented in revelation to be the decree of God that man should have dominion over the earth and subdue it.

In man's experiences, intelligence, or mind, is increasingly dominating matter. It leads to the conception that everywhere it must be so. It is so in this world of ours. We know it to be so. And reasoning from what we know, it must be so in other worlds—in all worlds. Has it not always been true? Will it not always be true, that mind, whatever may be conceded to mechanical forces—such as gravitation and chemical reactions—mind will always dominate matter and manipulate eternally existing force in such manner as to achieve its purpose? Great weight will yet attach to the utterance of an ancient American prophet, viz., that phenomena, when traced to their last analysis, rest upon two things; viz., "That which acts, and that which is acted upon" (cf. 2 Ne. 2:13, 14), and that from this fact proceeds all that is; from which action and reaction proceed creations and re-creations within the universe, arising from ever-changing processes, culminating in development in boundless space, and endless time, and indestructible, inexhaustible matter.

From what we know: Man as vera causa. Let us again resort to reasoning from what we know: Undoubtedly man finds in himself a principle of causality in the light of which he interprets the external world. In fact, man finds within himself the nearest approach to a *vera causa*—a true, or real cause. How does this power of causation proceed with and through him? He is in the world with all that environs him—a world of things and forces are about him. He conceives the notion of building a house. If he builds it he will be the efficient cause of its existence; but this power of causation of which he is self-conscious, as resident within himself, he finds to be subject to his will. He may or may not conclude to build the house—it will be just as he chooses. But he concludes to build it, to suit his convenience and to meet his felt needs. He did not have to create out of nothing the things of which he made the house, they already existed; all that he had to do was to effect certain changes in materials about him, assemble them in a certain order, and the house is completed. The builder caused its existence. In all this procedure, the mind of the man that was operating as a power of causation, was operating somewhat as a mind anywhere might act where like conditions obtained—as eternal mind might be found acting or causing. The man was acting as the intelligent factor in causation.

Instead of one man building a house we may think of a large group of men building, or causing to come into existence, a city. To do this, however, the men must be united—that is, their minds must be united as one mind, and when many minds are perfectly united in agreement they can be as effective in that unity as if there was but one mind. They are one mind, though made up of many individual minds. They form a community mind, and may be spoken of as “one.” So the minds or intelligences of the universe may be spoken of, when harmonized as the universal mind, or simple mind, or intelligence. The group of men we have supposed, caused their city as the one man caused his house to come into existence. The group of men, no more than the one man, had to create out of nothing the materials for their city; they as minds united were already existent, and were there. All they had to do was to come to agreement of purpose to effect changes in materials already existing; assemble them in a given manner, by the manipulation of forces already existent, and the city was caused or builded.

In all this procedure the minds of these men united were operating as a power of causation, and operating as minds united anywhere might act, where like conditions obtain; and these conditions obtain in an eternal universe, that comprehends all things, and is the “sum of existence”—all mind or minds; all intelligence or intelligences, with all forces mechanical or chemical existent, as also all matter and conceivable substance in boundless space in endless time, the mass of it constant, so that it can not be created nor annihilated, nothing added to it and not possible to be diminished by so much as a single atom, but subject to infinite change and with force, or energy equally as conserved as matter, and equally impossible for the amount of it to be increased or diminished, but capable of being infinitely transmuted from one thing to another—all this, with eternal mind as eternal power of causation in all its phases present—change and development, what we call creation and progress, may go on as it has eternally been going on without beginning and without end; secure in its eternity, which is to say secure in its existence—and under the guidance of all intelligences—all the intelligence there is—we may be assured that the universe is secure, and progress within it also secure. The universe will not die. It will not sink into chaos. It has been and will be eternal.

Further references recommended by Roberts for this lesson: Fiske, *Studies in Religion*, 81, 126–27, 177–80, 235–38, for “enlightening comment on Mill”; Kaempffort, *Science-History of the Universe*, vol. 10, chs. 2–3; Mill, *Three Essays on Religion*, 142–54. On the theme of eternalism and related topics, see pages 619–22 below.