

EDWARD AVELING

THE GOSPEL
OF EVOLUTION

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The Gospel of Evolution From «The Atheistic Platform», Twelve Lectures:

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THE GOSPEL OF EVOLUTION

A new and better Gospel is now preached to men. That which has for a long time gone by the name of Gospel (good news) is neither news nor good. It is not news, for it has been preached for nearly nineteen centuries. Not that length of time alone could make it old and effete. But the Gospel of Christianity has not within itself that inherent and strong life of reality which makes even old truths to have a perennial freshness, an eternal youth, Nor is the Gospel of Christianity good. In the tales that it tells us of the past, in the advice that it gives us for the present, and in the hopes and threats it holds out for the future, it is a misleading guide, a poor philosopher, a false friend.

The legends have it that on the coming of the central figure of the discredited evangel the angels sang together: "Peace on earth, good will to men." It was a false alarm. Neither peace nor good will was forthcoming. But with the advent

of this scientific gospel, the Gospel of Evolution, comes the possibility of "striking a universal peace through sea and land," the possibility of the universal brotherhood of man.

Perhaps we are all of us too anxious and too hopeful in the feeling that some one idea will save the world. The religious creeds of different races and times are the expression of this anxiety. We that have rejected all belief in the supernatural must take care that the same fancy that has spoiled the lives of so many does not mar our own. We must have a care lest we make too much of some truth, even though it be a scientific conclusion, based on scientific observation and reasoning. And we must not forget that, of all the great generalisations, that of Evolution is the one most likely to be thus regarded, for it is a generalisation of generalisations. The mind of man is always longing for some solid resting-place. Man wants to get back and back, to something certain. He wants to feel that, whatever happens, some one great principle stands fast. The children of the decrepit gospel dreamed that this was found in God. The children of the new Gospel know that in the indestructibility of matter and of motion, and in the infinite nature of the transformations of matter and motion, they have a solid fact on which to fall back when all else fails. Only it is very important to remember that, great as any idea may be, the mental effort needed for its understanding and its acquisition is to the individual of as much moment as the idea itself. The exercise of our faculties is of as great value to us as the results attained by the exercise. The

old parental habit of asking of the school-boy or the school-girl: "What prizes have you gained?" is only one form of a general error. The question is not, "What prizes have you?" but "What have you learned?" We are coming to recognise this in some measure in our estimates of grown men and women. Still, however, to the vulgar, the measure of a man is the banker's balance. But the thoughtful, as yet few in number, although the number grows hourly, and even the commonplace people, if they are in the unaccustomed atmosphere of culture, are estimating the value of a human being by that which he actually does and is, rather than by the magnitude of the cheques he can draw.

What is, then, this Evolution? In the asking this question and in the attempt to answer we see how much happier is the position of the new gospel as compared with that of the old. The good news of Christianity, having no scientific and indeed no natural basis, has been Protean in its forms. These have been indefinitely varied according to the taste and fancy of the age and of the individual. The Gospel as preached by Messrs. Benson, Booth, Baldwin Brown, Spurgeon, Liddon, Moody, is somewhat mixed. But the new evangel is founded wholly on a natural and scientific basis. There may be slight differences of opinion as to matters of detail among its apostles and its disciples, but the fundamental principles are accepted by all. Upon these, no doubt, much less any dispute reigns.

Evolution is the name for the idea of the unity and continuity of phenomena. The popular and unscientific notion was that

there was not only an original effort on the part of the supernatural causing the natural, setting it going, in fact, but a continual interposition of the supernatural from without, controlling the natural. Evolution is the doctrine of non-intervention. According to this gospel, matter and motion are all in all. Matter is the convenient name for all that which can affect the senses of man. Motion is change of place, whether it be of large, palpable masses, as when the arm is raised, or of minute impalpable molecules, as when heat or electricity is at work.

The ordinary notion of movement is wholly confined to that which is called molar, that is, the motion of masses. Moles= a mass . Thus the movements of a running man, or of a football when kicked, or of a railway train when the engine draws it along, are all cases of molar motion. But a finer kind of movement has of late years come within the ken of mankind. It has been at work probably eternally. It is molecular movement, or movement of small masses. But only very recently has the mind of man been able to take cognisance of this form. The researches of the physicists, the chemists, the biologists have demonstrated that there is a whole world of movements that affect only the minute particles of bodies. Thus heat is a mode of motion; electricity is another; magnetism is a third. The familiar phenomena of light are no longer regarded as due to any actual matter that has been thrown from a luminous body. They are the result of waves of a fluid imponderable and universal called ether, and there seems every reason to believe that the phenomena commonly called

vital are of the same or of a Kindred order. Life, it would appear, is but a mode of motion. And though we know life generally only by its manifestations of molar motion, as in the blow of the arm, or the stride of the leg, yet these massive movements are but the outward representatives of a large number of internal movements, of chemical nature in digestion, of nervous nature in the sense-organs and nerve tissues. Every bodily movement visible to the ordinary eye is only the obverse aspect of many molecular motions, not as yet visible to man.

The reasons why we regard matter and motion as all-sufficient in the explanation of all the phenomena of the universe are several. In the first place, no destruction of matter has ever been witnessed. Second, no destruction of motion, has ever been witnessed. The creation of either matter or motion has been equally unseen. Transformations of matter from one of its infinitely many forms to some other are constantly visible, and they are always unattended by the smallest increase or diminution in the actual quantity of matter. So also with motion – transformations without any change in quantity are continually occurring.

Thus, we see the rocks disintegrated by the action of rain and running water, "weathered" by the action of the air. We see the matter of which they consisted worn away and carried down by streams and rivers to be deposited at the mouths of rivers or on the beds of seas. Or we set fire to a candle and watch its matter combining with the matter of the air to form the products of

combustion, carbon, dioxide, steam, and their fellows. Or a dead animal or plant is seen to decay slowly into these same gases that the burning candle gives forth and into certain inorganic salts. And these are all cases of the transformation of matter without any creation or destruction.

Or we see the molar motion of a student's hands bringing together some acid and two metals. At once chemical action, a form of molecular motion, is set up. The molar motion of hands, a piece of silk, and a glass rod results in electricity, a mode of molecular motion. Or we apply heat, a mode of molecular motion, to a bar of metal which expands, to a mixture of hydrogen and oxygen which unite chemically. Or to a crystal of tourmaline, one end of which becomes positively electric, the other negatively. These are all cases of the transformation of motion without any creation or destruction. In all these cases the amount of matter and the amount of motion remain unchanged. Only the quantities of particular kinds vary. The generalisation that the quantity of matter and motion in the universe is the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever, appears to be thoroughly established.

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