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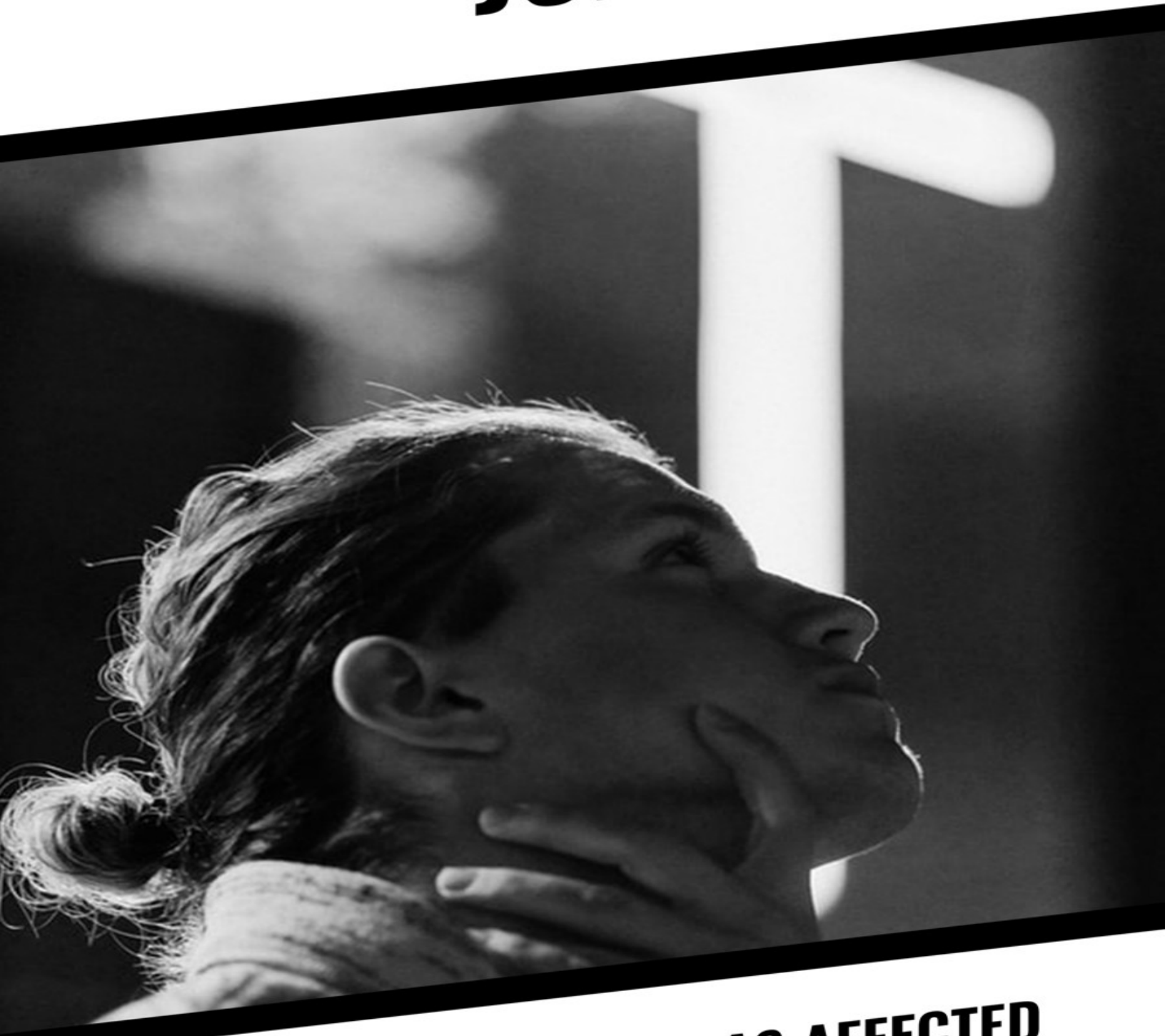
JOHN FISKE



THE IDEA OF GOD AS AFFECTED BY MODERN KNOWLEDGE

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PREFACE.

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WHEN asked to give a second address before the Concord School of Philosophy, I gladly accepted the invitation, as affording a proper occasion for saying certain things which I had for some time wished to say about theism. My address was designed to introduce the discussion of the question whether pantheism is the legitimate outcome of modern science. It seemed to me that the object might best be attained by passing in review the various modifications which the idea of God has undergone in the past, and pointing out the shape in which it is likely to survive the rapid growth of modern knowledge, and especially the establishment of that great doctrine of evolution which is fast obliging us to revise our opinions upon all subjects whatsoever. Having thus in the text outlined the idea of God most likely to be conceived by minds trained in the doctrine of evolution, I left it for further discussion to decide whether the term "pantheism" can properly be applied to such a conception. While much enlightenment may be got from carefully describing the substance of a philosophic doctrine, very little can be gained by merely affixing to it a label; and I could not but feel that my argument would be simply encumbered by the introduction of any question of

nomenclature involving such a vague and uninstructive epithet as "pantheism." Such epithets are often regarded with favour and freely used, as seeming to obviate the necessity for that kind of labour to which most people are most averse,—the labour of sustained and accurate thinking. People are too apt to make such general terms do duty in place of a careful examination of facts, and are thus sometimes led to strange conclusions. When, for example, they have heard somebody called an "agnostic," they at once think they know all about him; whereas they have very likely learned nothing that is of the slightest value in characterizing his opinions or his mental attitude. A term that can be applied at once to a Comte, a Mansel, and a Huxley is obviously of little use in the matter of definition. But, it may be asked, in spite of their world-wide differences, do not these three thinkers agree in holding that nothing can be known about the nature of God? Perhaps so,—one cannot answer even this plain question with an unqualified yes; but, granting that they fully agree in this assertion of ignorance, nevertheless, in their philosophic attitudes with regard to this ignorance, in the use they severally make of the assertion, in the way it determines their inferences about all manner of other things, the differences are so vast that nothing but mental confusion can come from a terminology which would content itself by applying to all three the common epithet "agnostic." The case is similar with such a word as "pantheism," which has been familiarly applied to so many utterly diverse systems of thought that it is very hard to tell just what it means. It has been equally applied to the doctrine of "the Hindu philosophers of the

orthodox Brahmanical schools," who "hold that all finite existence is an illusion, and life mere vexation and mistake, a blunder or sorry jest of the Absolute;" and to the doctrine of the Stoics, who "went to the other extreme, and held that the universe was the product of perfect reason and in an absolute sense good." (Pollock's "Spinoza," p. 356.) In recent times it has been commonly used as a vituperative epithet, and hurled indiscriminately at such unpopular opinions as do not seem to call for so heavy a missile as the more cruel term "atheism." The writer who sets forth in plain scientific language a physical theory of the universe is liable to be scowled at and called an atheist; but, when the very same ideas are presented in the form of oracular apophthegm or poetic rhapsody, the author is more gently described as "tinctured with pantheism."

But out of the chaos of vagueness in which this unhappy word has been immersed it is perhaps still possible to extract something like a definite meaning. In the broadest sense there are three possible ways in which we may contemplate the universe.

First, we may regard the world of phenomena as sufficient unto itself, and deny that it needs to be referred to any underlying and all-comprehensive unity. Nothing has an ultimate origin or destiny; there is no dramatic tendency in the succession of events, nor any ultimate law to which everything must be referred; there is no reasonableness in the universe save that with which human fancy unwarrantably endows it; the events of the world have no orderly progression like the scenes of a well-constructed plot, but in the manner of their coming and going they

constitute simply what Chauncey Wright so aptly called "cosmical weather;" they drift and eddy about in an utterly blind and irrational manner, though now and then evolving, as if by accident, temporary combinations which have to us a rational appearance. This is Atheism, pure and unqualified. It recognizes no Omnipresent Energy.

Secondly, we may hold that the world of phenomena is utterly unintelligible unless referred to an underlying and all-comprehensive unity. All things are manifestations of an Omnipresent Energy which cannot be in any imaginable sense personal or anthropomorphic; out from this eternal source of phenomena all individualities proceed, and into it they must all ultimately return and be absorbed; the events of the world have an orderly progression, but not toward any goal recognizable by us; in the process of evolution there is nothing that from any point of view can be called teleological; the beginning and end of things—that which is Alpha and Omega—is merely an inscrutable essence, a formless void. Such a view as this may properly be called Pantheism. It recognizes an Omnipresent Energy, but virtually identifies it with the totality of things.

Thirdly, we may hold that the world of phenomena is intelligible only when regarded as the multiform manifestation of an Omnipresent Energy that is in some way —albeit in a way quite above our finite comprehension— anthropomorphic or quasi-personal. There is a true objective reasonableness in the universe; its events have an orderly progression, and, so far as those events are brought sufficiently within our ken for us to generalize them exhaustively, their progression is toward a goal that is

recognizable by human intelligence; "the process of evolution is itself the working out of a mighty Teleology of which our finite understandings can fathom but the scantiest rudiments" ("Cosmic Philosophy," vol. ii. p. 406); it is indeed but imperfectly that we can describe the dramatic tendency in the succession of events, but we can see enough to assure us of the fundamental fact that there is such a tendency; and this tendency is the objective aspect of that which, when regarded on its subjective side, we call Purpose. Such a theory of things is Theism. It recognizes an Omnipresent Energy, which is none other than the living God.

It is this theistic doctrine which I hold myself, and which in the present essay I have sought to exhibit as the legitimate outcome of modern scientific thought. I was glad to have such an excellent occasion for returning to the subject as the invitation from Concord gave me, because in a former attempt to expound the same doctrine I do not seem to have succeeded in making myself understood. In my "Outlines of Cosmic Philosophy," published in 1874, I endeavoured to set forth a theory of theism identical with that which is set forth in the present essay. But an acute and learned friend, writing under the pseudonym of "Physicus," in his "Candid Examination of Theism" (London, 1878), thus criticizes my theory: In it, he says, "while I am able to discern the elements which I think may properly be regarded as common to Theism and to Atheism, I am not able to discern any single element that is specifically distinctive of Theism" (p. 145). The reason for the inability of "Physicus" to discern any such specifically distinctive

element is that he misunderstands me as proposing to divest the theistic idea of every shred of anthropomorphism, while still calling it a theistic idea. This, he thinks, would be an utterly illegitimate proceeding, and I quite agree with him. In similar wise my friend Mr. Frederick Pollock, in his admirable work on Spinoza (London, 1880), observes that "Mr. Fiske's doctrine excludes the belief in a so-called Personal God, and the particular forms of religious emotion dependent on it" (p. 356). If the first part of this sentence stood alone, I might pause to inquire how much latitude of meaning may be conveyed in the expression "so-called;" is it meant that I exclude the belief in a Personal God as it was held by Augustine and Paley, or as it was held by Clement and Schleiermacher, or both? But the second clause of the sentence seems to furnish the answer; it seems to imply that I would practically do away with Theism altogether.

Such a serious misstatement of my position, made in perfect good faith by two thinkers so conspicuous for ability and candour, shows that, in spite of all the elaborate care with which the case was stated in "Cosmic Philosophy," some further explanation is needed. It is true that there are expressions in that work which, taken singly and by themselves, might seem to imply a total rejection of theism. Such expressions occur chiefly in the chapter entitled "Anthropomorphic Theism," where great pains are taken to show the inadequacy of the Paley argument from design, and to point out the insuperable difficulties in which we are entangled by the conception of a Personal God as it is held by the great majority of modern theologians who have derived it from Plato and Augustine. In the succeeding

chapters, however, it is expressly argued that the total elimination of anthropomorphism from the idea of God is impossible. There are some who, recognizing that the ideas of Personality and Infinity are unthinkable in combination, seek to escape the difficulty by speaking of God as the "Infinite Power;" that is, instead of a symbol derived from our notion of human consciousness, they employ a symbol derived from our notion of force in general. For many philosophic purposes the device is eminently useful; but it should not be forgotten that, while the form of our experience of Personality does not allow us to conceive it as infinite, it is equally true that the form of our experience of Force does not allow us to conceive it as infinite, since we know force only as antagonized by other force. Since, moreover, our notion of force is purely a generalization from our subjective sensations of effort overcoming resistance, there is scarcely less anthropomorphism lurking in the phrase "Infinite Power" than in the phrase "Infinite Person." Now in "Cosmic Philosophy" I argue that the presence of God is the one all-pervading fact of life, from which there is no escape; that while in the deepest sense the nature of Deity is unknowable by finite Man, nevertheless the exigencies of our thinking oblige us to symbolize that nature in some form that has a real meaning for us; and that we cannot symbolize that nature as in any wise physical, but are bound to symbolize it as in some way psychical. I do not here repeat the arguments, but simply state the conclusions. The final conclusion (vol. ii. p. 449) is that we must not say that "God is Force," since such a phrase inevitably calls up those pantheistic notions of blind

necessity, which it is my express desire to avoid; but, always bearing in mind the symbolic character of the words, we may say that "God is Spirit." How my belief in the personality of God could be more strongly expressed without entirely deserting the language of modern philosophy and taking refuge in pure mythology, I am unable to see.

There are two points in the present essay which I hope will serve to define more completely the kind of theism which I have tried to present as compatible with the doctrine of evolution. One is the historic contrast between anthropomorphic and cosmic theism regarded in their modes of genesis, and especially as exemplified within the Christian church in the very different methods and results of Augustine on the one hand and Athanasius on the other. The view which I have ventured to designate as "cosmic theism" is no invention of mine; in its most essential features it has been entertained by some of the profoundest thinkers of Christendom in ancient and modern times, from Clement of Alexandria to Lessing and Goethe and Schleiermacher. The other point is the teleological inference drawn from the argument of my first Concord address on "The Destiny of Man, viewed in the Light of his Origin."

When that address was published, a year ago, I was surprised to find it quite commonly regarded as indicating some radical change of attitude on my part,—a "conversion," perhaps, from one set of opinions to another. Inasmuch as the argument in the "Destiny of Man" was based in every one of its parts upon arguments already published in "Cosmic Philosophy" (1874), and in the