

## VI.—CRITICAL NOTICE.

*Does God Exist?* By A. E. TAYLOR. London: Macmillan, 1945.  
Pp. vii + 172.

THIS little book was written in the summer of 1939; but its publication was delayed by the war, and the Preface is dated March 1945. It is sad to think that the author is no longer here to instruct us from his vast stores of learning, to stimulate us with his fertility and ingenuity in suggestion, and to edify us by his sincere concern for morality and religion.

The first question that arose in my mind as I read the book was: 'To what kind of readers is Taylor addressing himself?' Plainly not to professional philosophers or theologians. Rather, it would seem, to what I am wont in my private meditations to call the 'clever-sillies' or the 'half-baked intellectuals'; the class of persons who in England are so admirably catered for by the *New Statesman*. Probably a majority of these persons would explicitly assert or implicitly take for granted that 'science' has made theism in general and Christianity in particular unworthy of serious consideration by an enlightened individual nowadays.

If the book is addressed to such readers and is intended to bring about a change in their attitude towards theism and Christianity, it suffers, in my opinion, from serious defects. One is a tendency to chase every hare that crosses the path and thus to be diverted from the main course of the argument. This was noticeable in Taylor's *Gifford Lectures*; but he was such a learned and interesting companion in a by-path that one readily forgave him for dragging one down so many in the course of two large volumes. In a little book of 172 pages it is too much of a good thing. A much more serious fault, which also occurred in the *Gifford Lectures*, is a tendency to shoot at sitting birds and to knock down self-erected Aunt Sallies, and to rest content with a very perfunctory treatment of the main premisses or prejudices of the persons at whom one is directing one's arguments. I will give some examples.

(1) I think it is plain that the anti-theistic bias of the average contemporary 'clever-silly' is determined very largely by what he supposes to have been proved by Pavlov, by Freud, by Marx, and by their disciples. Now there is no reference at all to Dialectical Materialism in the book; and the only reference to Behaviourism and to Psycho-analysis is in a footnote on p. 44, where it is said of the former that the general verdict of psychologists is that it is already *vieux jeu*, and of the latter that it is doubtful whether psycho-analysts are more than able and often successful 'empirics'. Now both these judgments may be true, and I should myself agree

that the facts adduced by behaviourists and psycho-analysts are quite ludicrously inadequate to bear the vast theoretical structure which has been built upon them. But this should be shown with chapter and verse, and not just asserted as an *obiter dictum* in a footnote, if any impression is to be produced on the anti-theism of persons who have imbibed these theories as truths established unquestionably by science.

(2) A great deal of the positive theistic argument in the book admittedly rests on the assumption that the fundamental principles of morality are *a priori* truths, recognisable as such by any rational being who honestly reflects on them. Well, instructed persons are aware that a strong case can be made for this view and that a strong case can be made against it. But what is the use of arguing from this assumption with the kind of persons to whom the book is presumably addressed? It is a commonplace among the 'clever-sillies' that so-called 'moral judgments' are not really *judgments* at all, but disguised commands, or expressions or evocations of emotion.

For such reasons as these I think that the book is likely to appeal only to the already half-converted. It remains for me to give a brief sketch of Professor Taylor's main contentions.

Anyone who asserts that natural science *disproves* God's existence may be invited to indicate any consequences which would certainly follow from the theistic hypothesis and is contrary to observation. It will generally be found that the asserter means either that science disproves some cosmological statement in the Bible or that theism is incompatible with the fact that in this life the good are often unhappy and the bad happy. The former alternative is irrelevant; and we did not need to wait for science to inform us that there is often a divorce in this life between virtue and happiness. The latter fact would be inconsistent with theism only on the supposition that there is no future life and that the only possible aim of a good God in the present life would be to distribute happiness in accordance with merit.

Anyone who asserts that natural science does nothing to establish theism, and assumes that therefore nothing can be done to establish it, may be reminded of the following facts. (i) The methods of natural science are not the only ways of gaining knowledge or rational conviction. (ii) The existence of natural science presupposes certain facts which are no part of its subject-matter. As regards the first point Prof. Taylor says that, in the end, every theory has to be judged in accordance with the principles of 'critical common-sense'. He explicitly mentions two of these, *vis.*, (a) that a theory must take account of *all* the appearances which it professes to unify, and that its account of them must be free from internal inconsistency; and (b) that a theory must not contain propositions which, if true, would be incompatible with anyone knowing or having reason to believe them. As regards the second point Prof. Taylor

says that natural science presupposes that certain events are *cognitions* by persons of certain other things, events, or relationships, which are existentially independent of the cogniser and the cognitive event. Such facts as these, and the criteria by which one assesses the correctness or the reasonableness of cognitions, do not fall within the subject-matter of any natural science. He sums this up by saying that science claims to be knowledge; that knowledge involves a knower, a process of knowing, and an object known; that science is concerned only with the third of these; and therefore that, even if it should provide no ground for theism, it does not follow that the total available data do not.

Do the facts with which science is concerned provide any ground for theism? Prof. Taylor begins by excluding anthropology from his purview on the ground that both its data and its inferences are so doubtful that it can be called a 'science' only by courtesy. The question at issue is whether the facts ascertained by genuine sciences require or suggest the presence of a *directing purpose* which is *morally good*. His answer is as follows.

(1) What is known of inorganic nature, taken by itself, suggests nothing more than that it is composed of agents which tend to behave in definite and ascertainable ways.

(2) There now exist sentient, intelligent, and purposive beings. Prof. Taylor holds, in agreement with Stout, that the supposition that minds and mental processes began at a certain stage in the world's history is unintelligible and must be rejected. The reason given is that there would be a fundamental 'discontinuity' between the alleged product and its alleged generators. He concludes that mind must be 'an original and underived feature in the scheme of things'. But this does not show that there is a single coherent purpose, or that it must be supreme over obstacles, or that it is morally good.

(3) Processes in living organisms are subject to the same general physical conditions, e.g. the Conservation of Energy, as processes in the inorganic part of nature. But these general conditions leave a number of alternatives open. Now it is found that all organic nature exhibits the following two characteristics. (i) The individual organism, while in health and also when not desperately sick, generally responds to a situation in such a way as to preserve itself or to ensure the continuance of its species. (ii) All organic nature is full of 'prospective adaptation', i.e. actions which *will* tend to produce results beneficial to the individual or the species when certain as yet unfulfilled conditions *shall* come to be realised. Prof. Taylor quotes as a typical example a butterfly laying eggs on those leaves which will provide suitable food for the grubs when they shall be hatched. Now in our own case we know that such actions are often determined by the fact that we *perceived* the present situation and *foresaw* the future situation and *deliberately* took appropriate measures in the light of this cognition. When and only when that

is the case we feel that the prospectively adaptive action is satisfactorily accounted for. But we cannot reasonably ascribe this kind of intelligence to the individual insect or animal. (I would add that we also cannot suppose that the nutritive and reparatory processes in our own organisms are guided by our own intelligences or that the elaborate nervous mechanism by which we carry out our intentions has been designed and constructed by ourselves.) Prof. Taylor concludes that animal life involves intelligence, but that, only in man (and, I would add, only very partially there), is the intelligence embodied in the individual. He leaves us to infer that it must be located elsewhere. And he adds that it is hardly possible to suppose that this intelligence began to operate only when there first began to be organisms, if there ever was a time when there were none. For the environment needed to be formed in certain very special ways if life were to be possible.

Professor Taylor then considers whether the theory of natural selection by elimination of the less fitted to survive, even if we granted it all the premisses that it needs, would invalidate the above argument. The main points which he makes are these. (i) The theory presupposes the existence of organisms with all their characteristic peculiarities of nutrition, self-repair and self-adjustment, reproduction, heredity, etc. (ii) We must distinguish between the line of development which leads to creatures with complex special instincts adapted to special situations, and that which leads to creatures with flexible intelligences working by insight and foresight and deliberately transforming the environment. We might expect natural selection to give rise to the former, but one can see no reason why it should lead to the latter.

(4) Prof. Taylor thinks that the argument based on the teleology of organisms, taken by itself, would be compatible with a kind of polytheism which recognises a number of departmental gods. It seems to me that at this level something should be said about the nightmarish appearance of stupid perseveration and meaningless fecundity in organic nature. If the teleologist would consider the ways of the lemming and the locust, he would be a sadder and perhaps a wiser man. However that may be, Prof. Taylor holds that we can get no nearer to theism unless we can find reason to hold that there is an *End of Nature* as distinct from relative ends in nature. At this stage we must introduce specifically moral data ; and it is just here that the argument becomes so thin, in my opinion, that I find it difficult to give a synopsis of it which will not seem unfair.

The main points seems to be these. (i) There is an objective distinction between right and wrong. (ii) This implies that there is a certain kind of life which one ought to lead simply because it is right to live in that way. (iii) This implies that the existence of intelligent and moral persons, living as they ought to live, is an intrinsically good state of affairs. And we know of nothing else that is intrinsically good. (iv) Therefore, if the course of nature

suberves any one absolute end, that end can only be the production, the training, and the maintenance of such persons, and providing them with the necessary conditions for living such a life. (v) Finite rational beings are often ignorant of certain moral laws, and they often disobey those of which they are aware. Yet these laws are 'valid' even when they are unrecognised or when they are recognised and flouted. Prof. Taylor holds that this implies that there is an Intelligence which has always been aware of these rules and always acts in accordance with them. (vi) If nature as a whole is directed to the development and exercise of moral persons, and if that end is to be attained, the Intelligence which directs nature must *know* the whole system of nature and the innermost thoughts and wishes of persons in complete detail and must be in *full control* of nature. The latter requires that this Intelligence shall have *originated* nature and not be related to it merely as a workman to his materials. (vii) On the same supposition we must assume that human beings survive the death of their present bodies and that they will have an unending post-existence.

What are we to say about the argument which I have tried to summarise fairly above? In the first place, I simply do not know what to say about the contention that the validity of moral rules entails the existence of a person who has always been aware of them and always acts in accordance with them. As it stands it does not carry the slightest conviction to my mind. Consider, *e.g.* the following particular application of this general principle:—'No one would be under any obligation to keep his promises unless there were Someone who never fails to keep His promises'. Why should one accept this proposition? As to the rest of the argument I would make the following comments. It has nothing but hypothetical premisses and can lead to nothing but a hypothetical conclusion. If we are to get to anything categorical we need some evidence that the course of nature is *in fact* subservient to some one absolute end. If one reflects on what we know and can reasonably guess about the past history, the present constitution, and the probable future of the material universe in general and man in particular, is there anything in it to suggest strongly that nature is a vast moral nursery and gymnasium? Is there not a great deal to suggest that the conditions under which alone intelligent moral persons can exist and practise morality are exceptional, unstable, and transitory? Take, *e.g.* the question of human survival of bodily death. If there were some evidence for it *independent* of the present argument, the 'moral gymnasium' view would at least have a possible answer to the enormously strong *prima facie* case against itself. Now I think that there is, in the forty-six volumes of the *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, some quite plausible evidence for at least the temporary survival of at least some human beings. And here, perhaps, *ce n'est que le premier pas qui coûte*. But Prof. Taylor makes no appeal to this or any other direct evidence. He postulates

survival, in spite of the appearances against it and the lack of any direct evidence for it, simply to defend his 'moral gymnasium' conclusion against the obvious *prima facie* objections to it. I can hardly imagine a weaker position. Prof. Taylor rightly insists that there is nothing to suggest that the universe is designed or adapted to give us a 'good time' in this life; what he fails to show is that there is any better ground for thinking that it is designed or adapted to produce and train moral beings and in the long run to fulfil their good intentions and frustrate their evil ones.

(5) Finally Prof. Taylor considers whether there is any conclusive objection to accepting certain characteristically Christian doctrines, such as the Resurrection of Christ, the Virgin Birth, and the Last Judgment. Here he seems to me to be on much firmer ground and to make the right points. These doctrines are bound up with a certain view of the universe and God's relations to it. In any case neither natural science nor history can show them to be impossible or to be in fact false; and, relative to their doctrinal background, they are not antecedently so improbable that no amount of evidence could make it reasonable to accept them.

There are only two comments which I wish to make. (i) Prof. Taylor's argument here is sound if and only if these special doctrines, e.g. the Resurrection, are no part of a person's ground for accepting theism in general or the Christian view of God's relations to the world in particular. Otherwise he will be involved, e.g. in the circle of making belief in the Resurrection rest on belief that Christ stood in a unique relation to God and also adducing the latter as a ground for the former. (ii) Prof. Taylor adduces as part of the evidence for the Resurrection the 'sense of personal intercourse with the living Spirit of the Founder' which many Christians have experienced in every age. It is perhaps impertinent for a non-Christian to comment on this. But I shall venture on one remark. Let us suppose that Christians are correct in interpreting their experiences as implying that Christ is, in some sense, still living and active. Surely it does not follow that Christ survived bodily death in the unique way in which he is said to have done so in the Resurrection stories, i.e. that his *body* did not undergo decay, but was miraculously transformed and emerged from the tomb on the third day and was eventually transported to heaven.

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