

Rev. Samuel Cox

BIBLICAL EXPOSITIONS.

I.

The Sceptical Pawn.

PSALM xiv. 1.

67 IT happened on a time that two friends, who had been playing chess together, quitted the board to talk over their last game at their ease before they parted for the night. While they were thus occupied, the following amazing conversation took place between the Black Bishop's Pawn and the White King, who, by the chances of the game, had been left standing on adjacent squares :—

Said the Pawn to the King: "I have heard, Sire, and indeed it is the common belief, that we Chessmen are ruled by a Superior Intelligence which controls our movements and directs them to a foreseen end. But that is all nonsense, is it not? and quite incredible to any rational Piece. For, as no doubt your Majesty has observed, we are all of us the mere creatures of law. An iron and inevitable necessity governs all our acts. Though each of us has a movement peculiar to himself, nevertheless that movement is strictly defined, so that we cannot overstep the limits of the rules by which we are severally governed. We Pawns move, and

can only move, straightforward, a single square at a time, except to take an opponent, and then we can only move on to the next square on either side. The Rook runs forward, or backward, or sideways, at his pleasure, but always in right lines, from which he cannot deviate. The Bishop sweeps across the board, at times very swiftly, but always and inevitably along the diagonals of his own colour. The Knight, indeed, seems more erratic than most of us, and the Queen more free; but after all, the Knight can only jump according to the law of his being, two steps forward and one to either side; and even our lady the Queen is only free to choose between the movements of the Rook and the Bishop; while your Majesty, as becomes your dignity, moves but seldom, and then slowly, and by single squares. In short, as I said at first, we are all the creatures of definite and invariable laws, and can only move each according to his own law; and it puzzles me, I confess, to understand how any observant Piece, with discourse of reason, should give in to the solemn nonsense one so often hears about a Superior Intelligence that uses us at its pleasure, and freely works out through us its own designs."

Now the King, who, like many other potentates, was somewhat slow and dull, and who, moreover, had a steady faith in the accepted traditions, was not a little surprised to hear the pert and garrulous Pawn break into a strain so sceptical and upsetting. But he *was* a king, and held himself bound, therefore, to treat even the humblest mortal with courtesy and consideration. So, after duly pondering what he had heard in his slow brain, he replied to the Pawn: "But what, on your theory, do you make of the strange sounds we sometimes hear from above, 'Ha, the old gambit!' 'Check!' 'Mate!' and so on? And, moreover, have you never felt yourself taken up in a warm strong grasp, and put where you had no thought of going? And, again, how

comes it to pass that, every time we play our several parts, although we move according to definite and unchangeable laws, we are variously combined, and run differently through our brief span to unlike ends? And finally, can you tell me, Pawn, who *made* us, and the board on which we move, and the laws by which we are ruled, and who it is that places us on the board in due order and rank, unless there be a Power above us and an Intelligence superior to our own?"

Thus the King thought to recall the sceptical Pawn to the faith of Chessdom. But the Pawn, in nothing daunted by this formidable array of questions, made instant reply: "*Who made us, and our Board, and ranks us on it? Why, of course, the very laws that govern us when we are here. As for the variety that enters into our life, and the changeful courses through which we run, and the unlike ends we reach, all that results simply from the variety and subtlety of those laws, which are capable, no doubt, of producing far more numerous and surprising combinations than any we have hitherto seen—laws that, unaided, have already evolved us from the vegetable cells in which our species had its origin, and that in the future will probably develop from us species which will rank still higher in the scale of being. And as for the touch we sometimes feel, or think we feel, and the sounds we sometimes hear, or fancy that we hear; well, of course, there must be mysteries in a world so large and complicated as ours. No one will undertake to explain everything. Every hypothesis leaves some 'transcendental element' or 'unexplored remainder' of the problem untouched. But, because we cannot explain the whole mystery of our existence, I for one am not going to believe that which I cannot understand, and that contradicts what I do understand. The laws of our movements, and that we are invariably controlled by them,—this I can see for myself; but this*

Superior Intelligence which is said to use us and our laws freely for ends of its own, who ever saw that ? ”

What the King would have replied to this last outbreak of doubt and unbelief, I am unable to report ; for, at this moment, a large strong hand passed over the Board, and swept all the pieces into a green bag, where they lay down in the dark together.

Now lest any, unfamiliar with the controversies, and even with the great controversy, of the time, should say, “ Declare unto us the parable of the Sceptical Pawn,” we add a few words of exposition and application.

There are many men, then, who, professing themselves to be wise, have become “ fools,” in the Psalmist’s sense, and say in their hearts, “ There is no God.” And the ground they commonly take is this : They have discovered, or they have heard and read, that the great natural forces of the universe act in certain defined and invariable methods or sequences, which are somewhat questionably named “ the laws of Nature.” And these laws, so at least they suppose and affirm, leave no room for the free play of a creative and governing Will. If they admit the possible existence of God, it is only that of a God who, ages and æons ago, set these great natural forces in motion, but who has ever since left them to work out into their due results, according to the invariable methods which science has discovered and formulated. “ There is no God,” they say ; or, “ There is no God who can so use and so vary the use of natural laws as to answer the prayers, or minister to the wants, of individual men.”

That He should have revealed Himself to men, that He should have disclosed his eternal love and goodwill, in supernatural and miraculous acts,—this would have been an interference with the pre-ordained course of Nature, which is wholly incredible to any man who has risen to a scientific

conception of the laws that rule the physical universe and give shape to human life. In short, while some of them wholly deny the existence of God, and conceive that both we and the world we inhabit were produced, in some occult fashion, by the very forces and laws which science has found out and formulated; others, admitting the existence of God to be possible, nevertheless maintain that the laws of Nature and of human life are not pliant to his Will, that they move on in a predetermined course, which cannot be modified to meet the exigencies whether of men or nations. They see law everywhere and the reign of law, and they see nothing else. According to them, there is no Divine Will moving freely through the laws of Nature, giving them their efficacy, using, administering, and modifying them in a thousand different ways, in order to carry out the purposes of an eternal goodness and love. And what is all this but to affirm that the two conceptions of law, and of a Supreme Freewill playing through law, and using it for a foreseen end, are contrary the one to the other, and cannot be reconciled?

The argument has often been met by arguments of a superior force. It has been shewn, for example, how the freewill and activity of man perpetually modify the action of natural laws, how he employs these laws for ends of his own, and compels them to produce results other than those which Nature, left to itself, would have produced; how he works *his* miracles, taking a weed and by culture developing it into a flower; putting a tree into a stove, and so inducing it to bear earlier and richer fruit; using a drug to arrest or modify the natural course of a disease. And it has been asked, "If man, by serving Nature, can thus rule her; if by a wise obedience and a skilful use of her laws, he can control and modify their action, why cannot God—if there be a God, and He be immanent in Nature—so use its laws as to

work even greater miracles than these ? ” We see on how large a scale the volitions of the human will “ interfere ” with the ordinary course of Nature the very moment, for instance, that we compare England as it is with England as it would have been had the foot of man never touched its shores. Why, then, should it be thought a thing incredible that the volitions of the Divine Will should inform, and penetrate, and control, the whole series of physical phenomena ?

And, on the other hand, it has been shewn that science deals only with phenomena, with the shows and appearances of things ; that it is compelled to assume a substance, a reality, a force, underlying all these phenomena—what the schoolmen call a *noumenal*, under or behind the phenomenal world—which it has not grasped, and cannot hope to grasp ; for science, which deals only with phenomena, must ever be unable to find out God, who is not a phenomenon, and, therefore, it has no claim either to assert or to deny his existence. It has never yet found, and never will find, and should not look to find, the soul in man ; how, then, should it find, or expect to find, the animating and informing Spirit of the universe ?

But though we touch these arguments, it is no part of our present purpose to insist upon them. We propose, rather, to set forth, by an apt illustration, a fatal weakness in the position of those who argue, from the scientific point of view, that there is no God. The ground on which their argument rests is, that we are the creatures of fixed and unchangeable laws, which leave no scope for the free play of a Divine Will and Intelligence ; and, for answer to it, we refer them to their Chessboards. Here, too, is a sphere of law, of fixed and invariable laws. Every Piece on the Board has its own clearly defined movement, and cannot vary from it. And surely each of them, had it discourse of

reason, might reasonably argue that, in its circumscribed realm, there was no scope for intelligence and freewill. Any fool of a Pawn might say in its heart, "There is no *man*." Any such Pawn might argue or affirm, "I was never made, but existed from all eternity, and have been evolved or developed into my present form by the very laws which are now at work upon me, and which, in due time, will doubtless carry me forward into some higher and more complex form of existence. The laws by which I am ruled were never devised, nor are they administered, by any creative or superior intelligence; they, also, are eternal, inherent in the very scheme of things." And certainly it might tax even a very wise Pawn to see, not only that he and his fellows had been made by man, and that all the laws of his little realm had been devised by the wit of man; but also that man could freely use these laws, and be helped by them, instead of being hindered, in working out his purpose and design.

To those, then, who conceive that the reign of law necessarily excludes the free play of will and intelligence, we offer this illustration of the Chessboard. We affirm, that just as the strictest observation of its rules leaves full scope to the intelligence and will of man, so the laws of Nature, which cannot be broken, may and do leave full scope to the Divine Intelligence and Goodwill. God both is, and is not, bound by the laws which He Himself has decreed: that is to say, if for the welfare of the universe He is bound to observe them, to observe them does not bring his Will into bondage, nor restrict Him to an absolute uniformity in the choice of the means by which his end is to be reached. He moves freely through those laws, using them at times in the methods we call "natural," and at times in the methods we call "supernatural," because as yet we do not understand them, nor comprehend the whole scheme and course even of physical forces and laws.

If a great Chessplayer moves with a skill, an originality, a decision, which seem miraculous to us, we do not therefore suspect him of breaking the laws of the game. And, surely, when the Inhabitant of Eternity comes within the limits of time, and the Creator of all things descends and tabernacles with men, we should be very slow to suspect Him of violating the laws of Nature, however strange and wonderful the works that attend his steps. May it not be that He knows these laws better than we do, and uses them with a power and a freedom beyond our reach, and even beyond our apprehension?

No doubt there is a scepticism which deserves sympathy and respect, but there is also a spirit of doubt and denial which calls mainly for rebuke. A wise man may say—and, if he be a wise man, he will be sure to say it sadly—that he finds no proof, or no adequate proof, of the existence of God in his scientific reading of the few natural facts and processes with which he has been able to acquaint himself. We can understand that, and can sympathize in his sorrow and disappointment. We can even tell him that he has sought for proofs of God where no adequate proof is to be found, since science deals only with phenomena, and God is not a phenomenon, but the Eternal and Divine Substance. But it takes a fool to say, with an air of knowledge and decision, “There is no God;” for how can *he* tell? Has he searched all Nature through, and exhausted the possibilities of discovery and thought? And it takes a fool still more arrant to announce with complacency, and even with elation, that there is no God. For if there be none, alas for him, and for us! Alas for all previous generations, and for the generations still to come! If there be no Father and Friend above us to whom we may go in trouble and when we die, if there be no pure gracious Will ever working in, and through, our weak and erring wills, for our welfare

and redemption, let us bring to a speedy end the solemn farce, or pitiful tragedy, we call "life" !

But we are not reduced to this dreadful conclusion. The proofs of the Divine Existence are to be found in the spiritual province of being, not in the physical ; and where should we expect to find Him who is a Spirit save in the spiritual realm ? "To find God," said Plato, "look within." And both Moses and St. Paul tell us that the Word of God—*i.e.* the revelation of his will, of Himself—is not far from any one of us ; not in heaven, that we should sigh and say, "Who will go up for us and bring it down ?" nor beyond the sea, that we should say, "Who will cross the deep and bring it over to us ?" But the Word is very nigh unto us, in our mind and in our heart, that we may do it. The fool, whose eyes wander to the ends of the earth, may say, "There is no God ;" but he who looks within, and does what conscience bids, he assuredly will, sooner or later, reach that knowledge of God in which is life eternal.