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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

The present edition of Romanes' *Thoughts on Religion* is issued in response to a request which has been made with some frequency of late for very cheap reprints of standard religious and theological works.

39 Paternoster Row,

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January, 1904.

EDITOR'S PREFACE

The late Mr. George John Romanes—the author within the last few years of *Darwin and After Darwin*, and of the *Examination of Weismannism*—occupied a distinguished place in contemporary biology. But his mind was also continuously and increasingly active on the problems of metaphysics and theology. And at his death in the early summer of this year (1894), he left among his papers some notes, made mostly in the previous winter, for a work which he was intending to write on the fundamental questions of religion. He had desired that these notes should be given to me and that I should do with them as I thought best. His literary executors accordingly handed them over to me, in company with some unpublished essays, two of which form the first part of the present volume.

After reading the notes myself, and obtaining the judgement of others in whom I feel confidence upon them, I have no hesitation either in publishing by far the greater part of them, or in publishing them with the author's name in spite of the fact that the book as originally projected was to have been anonymous. From the few words which George Romanes said to me on the subject, I have no doubt that he realized that the notes if published after his death must be published with his name.

I have said that after reading these notes I feel no doubt that they ought to be published. They claim it both by their intrinsic value and by the light they throw on the religious thought of a scientific man who was not only remarkably able and clear-headed, but also many-sided, as few men are, in his capacities, and singularly candid and open-hearted. To all these qualities the notes which are now offered to the public will bear unmistakable witness.

With more hesitation it has been decided to print also the unpublished essays already referred to. These, as representing an earlier stage of thought than is represented in the notes, naturally appear first.

Both Essays and Notes however represent the same tendency of a mind from a position of unbelief in the Christian Revelation toward one of belief in it. They represent, I say, a tendency of one 'seeking after God if haply he might feel after Him and find Him,' and not a position of settled orthodoxy. Even the Notes contain in fact many

things which could not come from a settled believer. This being so it is natural that I should say a word as to the way in which I have understood my function as an editor. I have decided the question of publishing each Note solely by the consideration whether or no it was sufficiently finished to be intelligible. I have rigidly excluded any question of my own agreement or disagreement with it. In the case of one Note in particular, I doubt whether I should have published it, had it not been that my decided disagreement with its contents made me fear that I might be prejudiced in withholding it.

The Notes, with the papers which precede them, will, I think, be better understood if I give some preliminary account of their antecedents, that is of Romanes' previous publications on the subject of religion.

In 1873 an essay of George Romanes gained the Burney Prize at Cambridge, the subject being *Christian Prayer considered in relation to the belief that the Almighty governs the world by general laws*. This was published in 1874, with an appendix on *The Physical Efficacy of Prayer*. In this essay, written when he was twenty-five years old, Romanes shows the characteristic qualities of his mind and style already developed. The sympathy with the scientific point of view is there, as might be expected perhaps in a Cambridge 'Scholar in Natural Science': the logical acumen and love of exact distinctions is there: there too the natural piety and spiritual appreciation of the nature of Christian prayer—a piety and appreciation which later intellectual habits of thought could never eradicate. The essay, as judged by the standard of prize compositions, is of remarkable ability, and strictly proceeds within the limits of the thesis. On the one side, for the purpose of the argument, the existence of a Personal God is assumed [1], and also the reality of the Christian Revelation which assures us that we have reason to expect real answers, even though conditionally and within restricted limits, to prayers for *physical* goods [2]. On the other side, there is taken for granted the belief that general laws pervade the observable domain of physical nature. Then the question is considered—how is the physical efficacy of prayer which the Christian accepts on the authority of revelation compatible with the scientifically known fact that God governs the world by general laws? The answer is mainly found in emphasizing the limited sphere within which scientific inquiry can be conducted

and scientific knowledge can obtain. Special divine acts of response to prayer, even in the physical sphere, *may* occur—force *may* be even originated in response to prayer—and still not produce any phenomenon such as science must take cognizance of and regard as miraculous or contrary to the known order.

On one occasion the Notes refer back to this essay [3], and more frequently, as we shall have occasion to notice, they reproduce thoughts which had already been expressed in the earlier work but had been obscured or repudiated in the interval. I have no grounds for knowing whether in the main Romanes remained satisfied with the reasoning and conclusion of his earliest essay, granted the theistic hypothesis on which it rests [4]. But this hypothesis itself, very shortly after publishing this essay, he was led to repudiate. In other words, his mind moved rapidly and sharply into a position of reasoned scepticism about the existence of God at all. The Burney Essay was published in 1874. Already in 1876 at least he had written an anonymous work with a wholly sceptical conclusion, entitled 'A Candid Examination of Theism' by *Physicus* [5]. As the Notes were written with direct reference to this work, some detailed account of its argument seems necessary; and this is to be found in the last chapter of the work itself, where the author summarizes his arguments and draws his conclusions. I venture therefore to reproduce this chapter at length [6].

'§ 1. Our analysis is now at an end, and a very few words will here suffice to convey an epitomized recollection of the numerous facts and conclusions which we have found it necessary to contemplate. We first disposed of the conspicuously absurd supposition that the origin of things, or the mystery of existence [i.e. the fact that anything exists at all], admits of being explained by the theory of Theism in any further degree than by the theory of Atheism. Next it was shown that the argument "Our heart requires a God" is invalid, seeing that such a subjective necessity, even if made out, could not be sufficient to prove—or even to render probable—an objective existence. And with regard to the further argument that the fact of our theistic aspirations points to God as to their explanatory cause, it became necessary to observe that the argument could only be admissible after the possibility of the operation of natural causes [in the production of our theistic aspirations] had been excluded. Simi-

larly the argument from the supposed intuitive necessity of individual thought [i.e. the alleged fact that men find it impossible to rid themselves of the persuasion that God exists] was found to be untenable, first, because, even if the supposed necessity were a real one, it would only possess an individual applicability; and second, that, as a matter of fact, it is extremely improbable that the supposed necessity is a real necessity even for the individual who asserts it, while it is absolutely certain that it is not such to the vast majority of the race. The argument from the general consent of mankind, being so obviously fallacious both as to facts and principles, was passed over without comment; while the argument from a first cause was found to involve a logical suicide. Lastly, the argument that, as human volition is a cause in nature, therefore all causation is probably volitional in character, was shown to consist in a stretch of inference so outrageous that the argument had to be pronounced worthless.

'§ 2. Proceeding next to examine the less superficial arguments in favour of Theism, it was first shown that the syllogism, All known minds are caused by an unknown mind; our mind is a known mind; therefore our mind is caused by an unknown mind, — is a syllogism that is inadmissible for two reasons. In the first place, it does not account for mind (in the abstract) to refer it to a prior mind for its origin; and therefore, although the hypothesis, if admitted, would be *an* explanation of *known* mind, it is useless as an argument for the existence of the unknown mind, the assumption of which forms the basis of that explanation. Again, in the next place, if it be said that mind is so far an entity *sui generis* that it must be either self-existing or caused by another mind, there is no assignable warrant for the assertion. And this is the second objection to the above syllogism; for anything within the whole range of the possible may, for aught that we can tell, be competent to produce a self-conscious intelligence. Thus an objector to the above syllogism need not hold any theory of things at all; but even as opposed to the definite theory of materialism, the above syllogism has not so valid an argumentative basis to stand upon. We know that what we call matter and force are to all appearance eternal, while we have no corresponding evidence of a mind that is even apparently eternal. Further, within experience mind is invariably associated with highly differentiated

collocations of matter and distributions of force, and many facts go to prove, and none to negative, the conclusion that the grade of intelligence invariably depends upon, or at least is associated with, a corresponding grade of cerebral development. There is thus both a qualitative and a quantitative relation between intelligence and cerebral organisation. And if it is said that matter and motion cannot produce consciousness because it is inconceivable that they should, we have seen at some length that this is no conclusive consideration as applied to a subject of a confessedly transcendental nature, and that in the present case it is particularly inconclusive, because, as it is speculatively certain that the substance of mind must be unknowable, it seems *à priori* probable that, whatever is the cause of the unknowable reality, this cause should be more difficult to render into thought in that relation than would some other hypothetical substance which is imagined as more akin to mind. And if it is said that the *more* conceivable cause is the *more* probable cause, we have seen that it is in this case impossible to estimate the validity of the remark. Lastly, the statement that the cause must contain actually all that its effects can contain, was seen to be inadmissible in logic and contradicted by everyday experience; while the argument from the supposed freedom of the will and the existence of the moral sense was negated both deductively by the theory of evolution, and inductively by the doctrine of utilitarianism.¹ The theory of the freedom of the will is indeed at this stage of thought utterly untenable [7]; the evidence is overwhelming that the moral sense is the result of a purely natural evolution [8], and this result, arrived at on general grounds, is confirmed with irresistible force by the account of our human conscience which is supplied by the theory of utilitarianism, a theory based on the widest and most unexceptionable of inductions [9]. 'On the whole, then, with regard to the argument from the existence of the human mind, we were compelled to decide that it is destitute of any assignable weight, there being nothing more to lead to the conclusion that our mind has been caused by another mind, than to the conclusion that it has been caused by anything else whatsoever.

§ 3. With regard to the argument from Design, it was observed that Mill's presentation of it [in his *Essay on Theism*] is merely a resuscitation of the argument as presented by Paley, Bell, and

Chalmers. And indeed we saw that the first-named writer treated this whole subject with a feebleness and inaccuracy very surprising in him; for while he has failed to assign anything like due weight to the inductive evidence of organic evolution, he did not hesitate to rush into a supernatural explanation of biological phenomena. Moreover, he has failed signally in his *analysis* of the Design argument, seeing that, in common with all previous writers, he failed to observe that it is utterly impossible for us to know the relations in which the supposed Designer stands to the Designed, — much less to argue from the fact that the Supreme Mind, even supposing it to exist, caused the observable products by any particular intellectual *process*. In other words, all advocates of the Design argument have failed to perceive that, even if we grant nature to be due to a creating Mind, still we have no shadow of a right to conclude that this Mind can only have exerted its creative power by means of such and such cogitative operations. How absurd, therefore, must it be to raise the supposed evidence of such cogitative operations into evidences of the existence of a creating Mind! If a theist retorts that it is, after all, of very little importance whether or not we are able to divine the *methods* of creation, so long as the *facts* are there to attest that, *in some way or other*, the observable phenomena of nature must be due to Intelligence of some kind as their ultimate cause, then I am the first to endorse this remark. It has always appeared to me one of the most unaccountable things in the history of speculation that so many competent writers can have insisted upon *Design* as an argument for Theism, when they must all have known perfectly well that they have no means of ascertaining the subjective psychology of that Supreme Mind whose existence the argument is adduced to demonstrate. The truth is, that the argument from teleology must, and can only, rest upon the observable *facts* of nature, without reference to the intellectual *processes* by which these facts may be supposed to have been accomplished. But, looking to the "present state of our knowledge," this is merely to change the teleological argument in its gross Paleyian form, into the argument from the ubiquitous operation of general laws.'

'§ 4. This argument was thus [10] stated in contrast with the argument from design. "The argument from design says, there must be a God, because such and such an organic structure must have

been due to such and such an intellectual *process*. The argument from general laws says, There must be a God, because such and such an organic structure must *in some way or other have been ultimately due to intelligence*.' Every structure exhibits with more or less of complexity the principle of order; it is related to all other things in a universal order. This universality of order renders irrational the hypothesis of chance in accounting for the universe. 'Let us think of the supreme causality as we may, the fact remains that from it there emanates a directive influence of uninterrupted consistency, on a scale of stupendous magnitude and exact precision worthy of our highest conceptions of deity [11].' The argument was developed in the words of Professor Baden Powell. 'That which requires reason and thought to understand must be itself thought and reason. That which mind alone can investigate or express must be itself mind. And if the highest conception attained is but partial, then the mind and reason studied is greater than the mind and reason of the student. If the more it is studied the more vast and complex is the necessary connection in reason disclosed, then the more evident is the vast extent and compass of the reason thus partially manifested and its reality *as existing in the immutably connected order of objects examined*, independently of the mind of the investigator.' This argument from the universal *Kosmos* has the advantage of being wholly independent of the method by which things came to be what they are. It is unaffected by the acceptance of evolution. Till quite recently it seemed irrefutable [12].

'But nevertheless we are constrained to acknowledge that its apparent power dwindles to nothing in view of the indisputable fact that, if force and matter have been eternal, all and every natural law must have resulted by way of necessary consequence.... It does not admit of one moment's questioning that it is as certainly true that all the exquisite beauty and melodious harmony of nature follows necessarily as inevitably from the persistence of force and the primary qualities of matter as it is certainly true that force is persistent or that matter is extended or impenetrable [13].... It will be remembered that I dwelt at considerable length and with much earnestness upon this truth, not only because of its enormous importance in its bearing upon our subject, but also because no one has hitherto considered it in that relation.' It was also pointed out that the coherence

and correspondence of the macrocosm of the universe with the microcosm of the human mind can be accounted for by the fact that the human mind is only one of the products of general evolution, its subjective relations necessarily reflecting those external relations of which they themselves are the product [14].

'§ 5. The next step, however, was to mitigate the severity of the conclusion that was liable to be formed upon the utter and hopeless collapse of all the possible arguments in favour of Theism. Having fully demonstrated that there is no shadow of a positive argument in support of the theistic theory, there arose the danger that some persons might erroneously conclude that for this reason the theistic theory must be untrue. It therefore became necessary to point out, that although, as far as we can see, nature does not require an Intelligent Cause to account for any of her phenomena, yet it is possible that, if we could see farther, we should see that nature could not be what she is unless she had owed her existence to an Intelligent Cause. Or, in other words, the probability there is that an Intelligent Cause is unnecessary to explain any of the phenomena of nature, is only equal to the probability there is that the doctrine of the persistence of force is everywhere and eternally true.

'As a final step in our analysis, therefore, we altogether quitted the region of experience, and ignoring even the very foundations of science, and so all the most certain of relative truths, we carried the discussion into the transcendental region of purely formal considerations. And here we laid down the canon, "that the value of any probability, in its last analysis, is determined by the number, the importance, and the definiteness of the relations known, as compared with those of the relations unknown;" and, consequently, that in cases where the unknown relations are more numerous, more important, or more indefinite than are the known relations, the value of our inference varies inversely as the difference in these respects between the relations compared. From which canon it followed, that as the problem of Theism is the most ultimate of all problems, and so contains in its unknown relations all that is to man unknown and unknowable, these relations must be pronounced the most indefinite of all relations that it is possible for man to contemplate; and, consequently, that although we have here the entire range of experience from which to argue, we are unable to estimate

the real value of any argument whatsoever. The unknown relations in our attempted induction being wholly indefinite, both in respect of their number and importance, as compared with the known relations, it is impossible for us to determine any definite probability either for or against the being of a God. Therefore, although it is true that, so far as human science can penetrate or human thought infer, we can perceive no evidence of God, yet we have no right on this account to conclude that there is no God. The probability, therefore, that nature is devoid of Deity, while it is of the strongest kind if regarded scientifically—amounting, in fact, to a scientific demonstration,—is nevertheless wholly worthless if regarded logically. Although it is as true as is the fundamental basis of all science and of all experience that, if there is a God, His existence, considered as a cause of the universe, is superfluous, it may nevertheless be true that, if there had never been a God, the universe could never have existed.

'Hence these formal considerations proved conclusively that, no matter how great the probability of Atheism might appear to be in a relative sense, we have no means of estimating such probability in an absolute sense. From which position there emerged the possibility of another argument in favour of Theism—or rather let us say, of a reappearance of the teleological argument in another form. For it may be said, seeing that these formal considerations exclude legitimate reasoning either for or against Deity in an absolute sense, while they do not exclude such reasoning in a relative sense, if there yet remain any theistic deductions which may properly be drawn from experience, these may now be adduced to balance the atheistic deductions from the persistence of force. For although the latter deductions have clearly shown the existence of Deity to be superfluous in a scientific sense, the formal considerations in question have no less clearly opened up beyond the sphere of science a possible *locus* for the existence of Deity; so that if there are any facts supplied by experience for which the atheistic deductions appear insufficient to account, we are still free to account for them in a relative sense by the hypothesis of Theism. And, it may be urged, we do find such an unexplained residuum in the correlation of general laws in the production of cosmic harmony. It signifies nothing, the argument may run, that we are unable to conceive the methods

whereby the supposed Mind operates in producing cosmic harmony; nor does it signify that its operation must now be relegated to a super-scientific province. What does signify is that, taking a general view of nature, we find it impossible to conceive of the extent and variety of her harmonious processes as other than products of intelligent causation. Now this sublimated form of the teleological argument, it will be remembered, I denoted a metaphysical teleology, in order sharply to distinguish it from all previous forms of that argument, which, in contradistinction I denoted scientific teleologies. And the distinction, it will be remembered, consisted in this—that while all previous forms of teleology, by resting on a basis which was not beyond the possible reach of science, laid themselves open to the possibility of scientific refutation, the metaphysical system of teleology, by resting on a basis which is clearly beyond the possible reach of science, can never be susceptible of scientific refutation. And that this metaphysical system of teleology does rest on such a basis is indisputable; for while it accepts the most ultimate truths of which science can ever be cognizant—viz. the persistence of force and the consequently necessary genesis of natural law,—it nevertheless maintains that the necessity of regarding Mind as the ultimate cause of things is not on this account removed; and, therefore, that if science now requires the operation of a Supreme Mind to be posited in a super-scientific sphere, then in a super-scientific sphere it ought to be posited. No doubt this hypothesis at first sight seems gratuitous, seeing that, so far as science can penetrate, there is no need of any such hypothesis at all—cosmic harmony resulting as a physically necessary consequence from the combined action of natural laws, which in turn result as a physically necessary consequence of the persistence of force and the primary qualities of matter. But although it is thus indisputably true that metaphysical teleology is wholly gratuitous if considered scientifically, it may not be true that it is wholly gratuitous if considered psychologically. In other words, if it is more conceivable that Mind should be the ultimate cause of cosmic harmony than that the persistence of force should be so, then it is not irrational to accept the more conceivable hypothesis in preference to the less conceivable one, provided that the choice is made with the diffidence which is required by the considerations adduced in Chapter V [especially the *Canon of probability* laid down in the second paragraph of this section, § 5].

I conclude, therefore, that the hypothesis of metaphysical teleology, although in a physical sense gratuitous, may be in a psychological sense legitimate. But as against the fundamental position on which alone this argument can rest—viz. the position that the fundamental postulate of Atheism is more *inconceivable* than is the fundamental postulate of Theism—we have seen two important objections to lie.

For, in the first place, the sense in which the word "inconceivable" is here used is that of the impossibility of framing *realizable* relations in the thought; not that of the impossibility of framing *abstract* relations in thought. In the same sense, though in a lower degree, it is true that the complexity of the human organization and its functions is inconceivable; but in this sense the word "inconceivable" has much less weight in an argument than it has in its true sense. And, without waiting again to dispute (as we did in the case of the speculative standing of Materialism) how far even the genuine test of inconceivability ought to be allowed to make against an inference which there is a body of scientific evidence to substantiate, we went on to the second objection against this fundamental position of metaphysical teleology. This objection, it will be remembered, was, that it is as impossible to conceive of cosmic harmony as an effect of Mind [i.e. Mind being what we know it in experience to be], as it is to conceive of it as an effect of mindless evolution. The argument from inconceivability, therefore, admits of being turned with quite as terrible an effect on Theism, as it can possibly be made to exert on Atheism.

Hence this more refined form of teleology which we are considering, and which we saw to be the last of the possible arguments in favour of Theism, is met on its own ground by a very crushing opposition: by its metaphysical character it has escaped the opposition of physical science, only to encounter a new opposition in the region of pure psychology to which it fled. As a conclusion to our whole inquiry, therefore, it devolved on us to determine the relative magnitudes of these opposing forces. And in doing this we first observed that, if the supporters of metaphysical teleology objected *à priori* to the method whereby the genesis of natural law was deduced from the datum of the persistence of force, in that this method involved an unrestricted use of illegitimate symbolic concep-

tions; then it is no less open to an atheist to object *à priori* to the method whereby a directing Mind was inferred from the datum of cosmic harmony, in that this method involved the postulation of an unknowable cause,—and this of a character which the whole history of human thought has proved the human mind to exhibit an overweening tendency to postulate as the cause of natural phenomena. On these grounds, therefore, I concluded that, so far as their respective standing *à priori* is concerned, both theories may be regarded as about equally suspicious. And similarly with regard to their standing *à posteriori*; for as both theories require to embody at least one infinite term, they must each alike be pronounced absolutely inconceivable. But, finally, if the question were put to me which of the two theories I regarded as the more rational, I observed that this is a question which no one man can answer for another. For as the test of absolute inconceivability is equally destructive of both theories, if a man wishes to choose between them, his choice can only be determined by what I have designated relative inconceivability—i.e. in accordance with the verdict given by his individual sense of probability as determined by his previous habit of thought. And forasmuch as the test of relative inconceivability may be held in this matter legitimately to vary with the character of the mind which applies it, the strictly rational probability of the question to which it is applied varies in like manner. Or otherwise presented, the only alternative for any man in this matter is either to discipline himself into an attitude of pure scepticism, and thus to refuse in thought to entertain either a probability or an improbability concerning the existence of a God; or else to incline in thought towards an affirmation or a negation of God, according as his previous habits of thought have rendered such an inclination more facile in the one direction than in the other. And although, under such circumstances, I should consider that man the more rational who carefully suspended his judgement, I conclude that if this course is departed from, neither the metaphysical teleologist nor the scientific atheist has any perceptible advantage over the other in respect of rationality. For as the formal conditions of a metaphysical teleology are undoubtedly present on the one hand, and the formal conditions of a speculative atheism are as undoubtedly present on the other, there is thus in both cases a logical vacuum supplied wherein the pendu-