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CRITICAL NOTES ON PROF. A. E. TAYLOR'S THEISM

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IN the last and newly published volume (XII) of the Hastings' *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* appears a lengthy article on "Theism" by Prof. A. E. Taylor, on which I feel impelled to make some critical observations. I am in agreement with the introductory portions, but it would have been more in conformity with theistic philosophy if Prof. Taylor had spoken of "a single supreme Being," instead of "a single supreme reality" (p. 261). If the theism of Plato was, as he rightly remarks, not complete, it was yet in its way real. Prof. Taylor might, with a firmer hand, have shown how, for Plato as a transcendentalist, God is essentially separate from all created things. Plato, as theist, even holds that God cannot mix with man, and his dualism decisively separates spirit from matter. God is to him a personal Being whose substance stands at an infinite remove from material or created substance. So, whether Zeller is right or not in saying that Plato never really faced the question of God's personality, Plato's faith in a personal Deity as the supreme Maker of the universe must be held as theistic, after every allowance for picturesque language. 'Likeness to God' was, in his view, man's prerogative and moral duty. Man's moral relationship had a modifying effect on Plato's doctrine of transcendence.

Prof. Taylor appears content to be quite uncritical of Neo Platonism, which is scarcely a satisfactory attitude. He says Neo Platonism is "strictly creationist," in the sense that it holds "the causal dependence of everything" upon God. It is creationist in a sense distinctly inferior to that of true theism—in that of necessary and involuntary overflow, on the part of an imperfectly self-comprehending and somewhat inharmonious Deity, not in the sense of freely willed, deliberate action. It replaces the creation theory of Plato by an evolution, from the Supreme

One to the lowest forms of matter, which is no result of Divine Will, as in theism. It is not emanative in the pantheistic sense, but, in its wholly unrelated One, it lacks all power of consistent maintenance of the origin of the multiple from the One. That this wholly unrelated One has yet to be conceived as the first cause of all things is an irrationality and absurdity which evokes no criticism from Prof. Taylor.

He says (p. 266) Neo Platonism "worked out for the first time a thoroughgoing metaphysical theism which provided the philosophical basis for the Christian theism of the whole Middle Ages." Well, it was "metaphysical" enough, with the drawback of being inferior to Plato in ethical and religious points of view. One might infer from Prof. Taylor's statement that Christian theology was hugely indebted to this "theism." But I think a different opinion will be formed by anyone who studies, with any depth and care, the effects of Neo Platonic thought on Christian theism from Augustine (inclusive) to Fénelon (inclusive). From the pure standpoint of philosophical system, I give the systems of Plotinus and of Proclus every credit for constructive power and ability. I say "systems," for my theistic instincts do not admit of my calling them "theisms." These systems were, historically, presented in opposition to Christian theism, and were successful in achieving their own destruction. Their influence on the Christian theism of the Middle Ages was a somewhat less direct, less wholesale, and less consistent affair than might be supposed from Prof. Taylor's statement. What he calls the "superficially Christianized version" given by Dionysius the Areopagite, who belonged to the 5th century, had a much greater part in propagating the Neo-Platonist positions than might be supposed. John of Damascus, in the 8th century, carried on the Neo Platonist theology of negation. Erigena, in the 9th century, was deeply influenced by Dionysius, who so largely followed Proclus. Albertus Magnus and Aquinas, both of the 13th century, were deeply influenced by the teaching of Dionysius. But, independent as Scotus Erigena might be, his mystical pantheism was without effect. And, on a

broadly taken estimate, Christian thought was, from the 6th century up into the 12th, practically free from influence by other systems of thought of any importance. And it should not be overlooked how much Neo-Platonism itself owed to Aristotle. Anselm, who died in the early part of the 12th century, and who was the greatest theologian of the time before Aquinas, was not a Neo-Platonist but merely a Platonist of moderate type. Abelard, of course, was a reconciler of Neo-Platonist conceptions, from which the Arabian Aristotelians, Avicenna and Averroës, in the 11th and 12th centuries, were not free. But the mediaeval theology of Anselm, Aquinas, and others, consisted pretty much of Augustinianism reduced to Scholastic form, and it was his blending of Augustine and Aristotle that gave Aquinas his significance. Of real philosophy alongside theology, there was none up to the end of the 12th century. But this was followed by the golden 13th century.

Prof. Taylor says that Neo-Platonism, in making the One, Who is "beyond being," its God, "is committed to theism as against pantheism" (p. 267). This I can only regard as a very misleading and erroneous statement. If it had been committed to "deism," I could have understood it, for in its absolutely unrelated One, who is yet in inexplicable fashion the cause of all things, and not further burdened with responsibility for them, Neo-Platonism is deism of the deepest dye. But "theism" it certainly is not. An absolutely transcendent, wholly unrelated One, above all being, above all knowledge, and above all predication, is assuredly not the God of "theism." It does not even conform to Prof. Taylor's own definition of "theism," in which the single supreme reality "has the characters (*sic*) of being intrinsically complete, or perfect," and is "an adequate object of unqualified adoration or worship." For the point is, that we are not allowed by Neo-Platonism to know that the One has any characters—either consciousness, or thought, or will: we are not allowed to know, or think, or predicate, anything about this Ineffable One. What pretense can there be of "unqualified adoration or worship"—or of any adoration or worship at all—of such

an utterly unknown and unthinkable x ? Plotinus expressly says, "we refuse to attribute Being to the One, in order to avoid establishing a relation between Him and derivative beings." Thus is the religious relation which theism postulates blotted out. Damascus, who belonged to the School, and who should know something of its interpretation, says: "As numerous as is the multitude of individuals by partition, so numerous also is that principle of unity by universal impartibility. For it is not One, as a minimum is one—according to what Speusippus seemed to say—but it is One, as being all things." Not much theism there. Neo-Platonism has, in my view, a deistic head, joined to a pantheistic body, for the pantheistic elements in its speculations are beyond all doubt. But genuine theism it is not: it is a much too eclectic compound for that. It would be a perfectly futile and fallacious thing to suppose that, because God is in Neo-Platonism "the absolute *prius* of everything" (p. 266), any security for theism has been gained from that fact. For if, as in Neo-Platonism, the Deity created out of His own superabundance—that is, out of His nature, not by His will, as in theism—the world of such overflow would be of His own essence, and give rise to an essential pantheism. Only, it would not be a pantheism in which He was absorbed in the world, since the overflow was only of His over-plenitude. But it would be one in which God was the sole Being in the universe—the only real existence. And the Neo-Platonic systems are not without this very tendency. They tend to view life, as a whole, as impersonal. The chasm between the Primal One and the finite being could be transcended only by the absorption of the finite being in the Infinite under conditions in which the individual personality finally lost all consciousness in sinking into the All One. Thus was the religious relation blotted out at this end of the systems also. Hence I cannot regard these systems as furnishing a genuine "theism," and I agree with that solid body of philosophical and theological opinion by which they have never been so regarded. They were *dynamic* pantheism.

Again, Prof. Taylor's treatment of the Ontological argu-

ment in its latest stages does not seem to me very satisfactory, being, in fact, unhistorical and unscientific. He treats the argument in the usual unthinking way which supposes it to have received its death-blow from Kant. But why is Prof. Taylor content to have Kant overthrow the Anselmic and Cartesian proofs, and never go on to inquire why Kant did not support the argument on his own account? There is no discussion as to whether Kant himself, consistently, or inconsistently—the latter many have held—with his own positions, rejected the theory. Hence neither Kant's strength, nor Kant's weakness, in the matter, is brought out as might have been done. Nor is Hegel's form of the argument discussed—a form which was extreme, and hindered the argument which, in other respects, Hegel helped by his support. The great labour and attention bestowed on the argument by German, British, and American thinkers in the 19th century are passed over in silence in very unhistorical fashion, for that century, too, is history. This is an unscientific procedure also, for the ontological argument is the argument as it exists today, in the best formulations of it, not in the time of Anselm or of Kant. No theory of science is considered in its first and crudest projections, but in its perfected or final form; why then is theology to be subjected to different, and unscientific, procedure? The ontological argument in its perfected form is never even stated by Prof. Taylor, much less discussed by him, which is rather disappointing.

Prof. Taylor's article, in whole, is an excellent piece of discursive reasoning, but, as is apt to be the case in that kind of writing, insights are fewer than might have been expected. His theism is abstract rather than vital. But theism has suffered so much from anaemic theisms that Prof. Taylor would have given more cause for gratitude if he had done something more to exhibit theism in its vitality and essentialness. He has taken all too little account of the seductiveness of modern pantheism, which is a standing temptation to the metaphysical mind. That type of thought, which finds its highest religious idea in the world-idea, with which the God-idea is taken to be

identical, offers a pantheistic religious content which, in varying forms of presentation, is decidedly anti-theistic, and is yet proving by no means unattractive to many minds in all countries. The positive fullness and resources of theism ought therefore to be exhibited by any theism that is to be perfectly satisfactory today.