

1901.]

*John Fiske as Thinker.*

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the war — that wall, those names, that youth and death, they remain as the symbol of the other great majesty in the world — one is religion and the other is country." Reading those words I seemed to hear again the illustrious laureate of your illustrious dead, who gave their youth for liberty, and standing here they seem, indeed, to

"Come transfigured back,  
Secure from change in their high-hearted ways,  
Beautiful evermore, and with the rays  
Of morn on their white shields of expectation."

In the spirit of their great sacrifice let us all cherish in cheerfulness and in hopefulness an abiding devotion to both symbols — that of religion and that of country — and let us labor together to the end that all the elevating influences which wait upon civilization may be more widely and generally diffused among all classes of our countrymen, and that we may all more ardently cherish the ethical idealism which seeks after peace and liberty, after equality and fraternity, and after respect and reverence for law.

In these ways, and in others we know not of, our American system of social and political life, by far the best ever yet enjoyed upon earth, may be placed upon the broad and enduring basis of true religion and true patriotism, and then at last the nation long foretold may appear, whose foundations are laid in fair colors and whose borders are of pleasant stones, and to it the promise of the prophet may be redeemed: "All their children shall be taught of the Lord and great shall be the peace of their children."

*Wayne Mac Veagh, h '01.*

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### JOHN FISKE AS THINKER.<sup>1</sup>

In order to do genuine justice to the work and to the personality of John Fiske, one would have to possess all the breadth of human sympathy, all the spirit of judicial fairness, and all the skill in portraying character, which he himself showed nowhere better than in the essays that he was several times called upon to write shortly after the death of noted friends of his own. His beautiful paper on Francis Parkman exemplifies in a most gracious manner all these qualities. The essay on Chauncey

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Wright — a friend with whom Fiske had differed regarding matters of fundamental philosophical importance — illustrates especially how well Fiske could join the sympathetic with the judicial, and could express the warmest admiration for a thinker's ingenuity, while giving up nothing in the way of opinion for the sake of eulogy. Only another John Fiske, then, if such a being were possible — a man as widely read as he was, and with a soul as sweetly humane in sentiment, as clear in vision, as free from pettiness, as childlike in faith in what it had once accepted, and yet as keen in its critical intelligence regarding what it rejected, as was his soul — only such a man could estimate adequately Fiske's beneficent life-work, and his manifold mental accomplishments. Any critic who lacks his range of reading must be easily tempted to regard his literary activities as too miscellaneous, and so must, in some measure, fail to understand in what sense, and to what degree, he had his vast resources of information under control. Any judge whose human sympathies are narrower than his must find it a baffling task to look for the unity of interest, of opinion, and of ideal, which, in his own mind, bound together the many undertakings that marked his career, and the various stages of development through which his thought passed. Any fellow-student whose tests of truth have been the product of some other training than that which expressed itself in Fiske's beautiful union of intuitive faith regarding some matters with joyous enthusiasm in exposing and overthrowing error with regard to other matters, will often fail to be just to the deeper consistency of Fiske's methods as a thinker.

I confess freely that I feel my own limitations as to just the qualifications that I have here set down as essential in any fair critic of the many-sided and delightful scholar and public teacher who has been so sadly and suddenly lost to us. Of one great region where he so long worked, the region of history, I know far too little to have any independent judgment regarding what he accomplished; I can only speak here of his contributions to philosophical and religious discussion, and as I do so, I feel especially the need of his breadth of view, and of his beauty of sentiment, and the hopelessness of my trying to attain either. But since there is no possessor of John Fiske's unique powers and qualities surviving him, one can but do one's best to appreciate that expression of his thought which is now, alas, what we have left to us of this rare man.

The biographical sketches of Fiske which have appeared in the public press since his death have recalled the main facts regarding his career. A precocious childhood laid the basis for that very large range of information and of activity which were the best known characteristics of the man. His college life meant little to him as a means of enlarging the field of his studies; although it indeed meant much in opening the way

for his coming career. But this career, as well as the whole fashion of Fiske's thought, seems to have been determined by a very wholesome relation between the early interests of his precocious childhood and the mature studies of his later years.

There appear to be two sharply distinguished classes of people, — those whose childhood contains the prophecy, the visible beginning, of what their coming life is to be; and those in whose development the child is killed, so to speak, in order that the man may be made. I suppose that the people of the latter type are more numerous than those of the opposite sort; and of course there are great numbers, possibly the majority of average mankind, whose lot is intermediate between the lots of the two sharply distinguished classes that I have defined. But I mention the two more extreme classes, because their contrast is here instructive. People of the second type, in whose character the live man is built over the grave of the dead child, are often peculiarly unable, in their autobiographical confidences, to recall either the facts or the feelings of their childhood. They came to consciousness, in any richer sense, somewhere during youth. Of the child they remember perhaps that he played, ate candy, had measles, fell into the water, saw a circus, stole apples, and was otherwise of no consequence. Life, to their minds, began much later. Now, as a fact, the childhood of such persons may have been, I suppose, as rich in fancy and in what parents called promise, as normal childhood often is; only, worldly fortunes, or organic changes, or the defects of an ill-judged schooling, somehow killed the child. His rich mental life passed away and left no conscious or visible trace in the ideals and customs of the adult. But the people of the first class know that however they have matured, the child is father of the man. Wordsworth and Goethe were both of this class. Many people whom we may meet in daily life and who perhaps are not at all geniuses, are still of the same class in this respect. But of the people who remain thus permanently conscious, or permanently the visible exemplification of their debt to their childhood, there are again two sub-types. For, first, childhood is often, with people of sensitive constitution, a time of disease, when many mental as well as physical mishaps mar experience. Now there are those in whom the fears, or the bad dreams, or the perverse emotional habits of a sickly childhood last over into what may come to be an otherwise relatively robust mature life, and so appear in later consciousness, or in later conduct, as a sort of painful or uncanny foreign self, strongly affecting ideals and even beliefs, and hindering the more rational stability of character, but still always reminding the one concerned, or his friends, that his childhood survives in him. There remain, however, finally, the more fortunate heirs of childhood — those in whom positive ideals, that

were once matters of childish plays, of early dreams, of joyous enthusiasm, are retained as significant and useful possessions for their lifetime. Such people honor their own childhood, and their lives are evidence of its worth. Not the illnesses of childhood, but its intense and wholesome types of devotion, its studious interest in collecting or in memorizing fascinating details, its delights in living, its trust in lovely things, — these are manifest either in the consciousness or in the deeds of the adults. These, the happier preservers of their own childhood, who build upon its perfections rather than upon its mishaps, are often amongst the most highly organized and effective of characters.

Now, on the whole, as I take it, Fiske was an example, in his life-work and in his faith, of this our second sub-type. His childhood is described as having been a healthy one. He developed a very effective and mature mental power upon the basis of interests that date far back into this wholesome early life. He grew to a very high mental level, but he never outgrew that essential sweetness of nature and that childlike fidelity to certain extremely simple and profound ideals which always marked him. This sweetness of nature, this fidelity to such ideals, must have been grounded in the still but half-conscious interests of his busy and precocious boyhood. Now this childlike element in Fiske was in no wise his defect. It was his strength. It was his wisdom. It gave him the collecting child's fondness for vast masses of details, side by side with the philosopher's love for interpreting the universe — the healthy child's deep assurance that life is a lovely thing, in intimate union with the modern investigator's inevitable disposition to observe how much the visible world shows us that is disheartening and evil — the child's love of the unseen and the mysterious, along with the modern skeptical student's scorn for superstition. This childlike quality lighted up all his stores of information with its gentle enthusiasm. It won him the sympathy of numerous hearers to whom his opinions would have been repellent, or to whom his studies would have seemed hopelessly complicated, if his temperament had not assured them, through every tone of his voice, through every quality of his literary style, that his heart was cheerful, and that his faith was simple. His power over the public lay in his thus reassuring the heart while he both liberalized and disciplined the intellect, in his thus spreading the contagion of a gentle faith, even while he seemed to himself and to others to be condemning without mercy the traditions of the fathers. Unless one understands this aspect of Fiske's nature and influence, the unity of his work remains unintelligible.

Premising, then, this fact of the importance of Fiske's childhood studies in literature and history, as involving factors that determined his whole later career, we may next name the main periods of his productive

activity. The first period begins early in youth, shortly after his reading of Darwin's "Origin of Species," and after his first acquaintance with the work of Herbert Spencer. As a boy he had been a wide reader of scientific works. Darwin and Spencer found him well prepared. Their influence made him almost at once an evolutionist. In 1861, at nineteen years of age, he was already publishing an essay on Buckle's "History of Civilization." In 1863, the year of his graduation from college, he printed a paper on the relation of the doctrine of evolution to the science of language. This first period of Fiske's literary activity may be said to extend to 1869, when his too brief career as lecturer in Harvard University began. The second period is the one devoted especially to the preparation of the "Cosmic Philosophy." That work appeared in 1874, and its publication may be taken as marking the close of this second period, which was itself the time when most he gave promise of becoming a constructive and systematic philosophical thinker on a larger scale. Then followed a considerable intermediate period, in which Fiske was once more the essayist. He was also for a time the assistant librarian at Harvard University. This third period passed over, in 1879, into the fourth period, wherein Fiske became predominantly a writer of extended historical works. And this period continued until the end. It was enriched, however, from time to time, by a return to philosophical problems, which Fiske again treated in the form of essays. "The Destiny of Man," "The Idea of God," the collection of papers entitled "Through Nature to God" belong to this extended final period of his career, and will remain, for his readers, the most characteristic and interesting of his utterances upon religious and philosophical issues. They made it indeed evident that Fiske would never undertake further work in philosophy as systematic as "The Cosmic Philosophy" had been. But they revealed, better than any more technical treatises could have done, those personal qualities of his of which I have just made mention. The years, as they passed, only made the more obvious these more winning traits of our thinker. Most of all, as it seems to me, the volume entitled "Through Nature to God" expresses the consciousness which Fiske finally attained of what he really meant by his faith. There was no inconsistency with the spirit of his earlier work, there was only bringing of the whole attitude of the man into clearer light, both for himself and for his readers.

But, to be sure, when one surveys these four periods of Fiske's productive work, it is not at first altogether easy to verify this assertion of the consistency of his spirit as a thinker throughout all of the four periods. In the first period he appears, on the whole, as an active-minded learner, never as a mere disciple of his masters in the study of evolution, always as a seeker for new syntheses; but still, on the whole, as the acquisitive

student, looking for unity. The second period, that of the "Cosmic Philosophy," shows Fiske as having, in a measure, attained what he had sought; namely, the power, and, in his own view, the right, to state a philosophy of evolution in systematic form, and to apply it to all the principal fields of study that he had so industriously surveyed. It is, meanwhile, unfair to regard the Fiske of the "Cosmic Philosophy" as a mere expositor of Spencer. Faithful as he is to his master's main theses, he always interprets them in a spirit of his own; he often gives them a clearness which they probably had not possessed in their creator's mind; and he adds to them a number of new and characteristic doctrines, of which the much-discussed theory regarding the evolutionary significance of the lengthened period of human infancy is the best known. But the most notable contrast between Fiske's attitude towards religious problems in this period, and the attitude which became gradually more obvious in his latest period, relates not so much to his main theses as to the manner in which he asserted them.

The impression produced, not only by the "Cosmic Philosophy," but by Fiske's various shorter essays belonging to this second period, was that of a decidedly aggressive and on the whole negative attitude towards some of the central interests of the religion of even the more liberally disposed of his believing contemporaries. Those were days when the public mind was less used to conciliations between religion and modern science than it has now become. And our own public, in America, at least, was also less used to brief cold plunges into the dark waters of doubt than it has since been rendered by experience. It caught its breath and shivered a long time at shocks that nowadays arouse only an agreeable glow of spiritual reaction. It has at the present moment probably more real and serious beliefs than it had then. But at the same time its official creeds now tend to be shorter, and the kinds of criticism or of expressed doubt that can disturb it or terrify it are fewer than of old. In those more troubled days, however, Fiske helped on popular education by appearing as an aggressive evolutionist, and as a sternly critical foe of prejudice, and often of traditional faith. As such he seemed, above all, a partisan of the value both of certain scientific methods and of certain naturalistic explanations. In defense of these he was occasionally merciless in polemic. His famous paper on Agassiz and Darwinism, with its joyous fury, its defiance of academic conventions, and, above all, with its especial method of argument, is an example of this characteristic attitude of Fiske in those days.

The paper in question was intended to answer an appeal that had then recently been made to the authority of Agassiz as an argument meant to be sufficient, for popular purposes, to bring to naught the credit of the

Darwinian theory. Beginning his answer with the noted protest against the recognition of "a scientific pope in America," Fiske continued, throughout the paper, to deal in an almost wholly general and *a priori* way, not with the scientific questions proper, but with the spirit in which one ought to approach such issues. He insisted that he did this merely because at the moment the case against Darwinism was not being tried on its merits, but on the basis of a prejudiced appeal to authority. He proposed to answer this appeal by insisting upon equally general, if more rational grounds. The question, he insisted, was really one as to the fundamental interests of science. What if Professor Agassiz "preferred" a particular and essentially theological hypothesis as to the origin of species and of man to such a scientific hypothesis as that of Darwin? "A scientific inquirer," so Fiske retorts, "has no business to have 'preferences.' Such things are fit only for silly women of society, or for young children who play with facts, instead of making sober use of them. What matters it whether we are pleased with the notion of a monkey ancestry or not? The end of scientific research is the discovery of truth, and not the satisfaction of our whims and fancies, or even of what we are pleased to call our finer feelings. The proper reason for refusing to accept any doctrine is, that it is inconsistent with observed facts, or with some doctrine which has been firmly established on a basis of fact. The refusal to entertain a theory because it seems disagreeable or degrading, is a mark of intellectual cowardice and insincerity." These are spirited words. They are followed by an equally spirited assertion of the *a priori* inconceivability of the hypothesis of special creation. If man was created, did he "drop down from the sky?" Did the "untold millions of organic particles which make up a man" rush together from the four quarters of the compass, and "by virtue of some divine sorcery," "aggregate themselves into the infinitely complex organs and tissues of the human body?" Fiske argues on general grounds that such an hypothesis is essentially absurd. And so the article closes, nowhere giving more than a hint of the concrete nature of the case for Darwinism, but confining itself to a vigorous assertion of certain principles that, in Fiske's opinion, ought to guide inquiry, and to limit the range of what we assert about the world. This general refusal to let "preferences" count in our opinions about "scientific" matters is of course familiar enough in its type. Only, as one sees, it is here joined with an *a priori* assertion of the inconceivability, the essential absurdity, of the hypothesis of special creation. The latter hypothesis, however, is confessedly a theological, not a scientific one, and Agassiz clung to it, not as to a doctrine about the laws of observable nature, but as to a view that he held for reasons which carried him

beyond the realm of science. Fiske's own thesis, then, seems here to be that we must not make certain "unscientific" hypotheses about God's doings; for, as he seems to argue, the principles of science both forbid our entering a realm that is inaccessible to experience, and require of us a sort of explanation of knowable facts such as shall be consistent with the laws of observed nature, while our "preferences" do not count, even if they are preferences in favor of a certain view about God's doings, since we are required to cling to the tests of science, whether we like the result or not.

It would be easy, were there time, to find a good many other passages in the writings of this period where Fiske seems equally severe in his condemnation of various special efforts to explain the world in accordance with the demands of the heart. In his essay on Chauncey Wright, he vindicates for his own and for Spencer's philosophy a power to find room and scientific explanation for the apparently confused and retrogressive facts upon which Chauncey Wright in his own philosophy had insisted. For evolution, says Fiske, does not need to mean what we call progress. The world is not there to please us; not even to please the evolutionists. Philosophy finds the world often hard, and is primarily sure only that the world is absolutely lawful. The unity of things is causal, not emotional. Similar observations appear in the essays on the laws of history. All such passages seem to discourage, if they do not exclude, a positive interpretation of the world in terms of an explicit religious faith.

But now, in the third period of Fiske's work, as many of his readers will remember, there begins to appear (as in the essay on the "Unseen World") a more distinct insistence upon the right of man to make positive assertions about that deeper nature of things which is hidden from science but which is hinted to feeling — in love, in art, in religion. This insistence upon our right to interpret God grows stronger in the works of the fourth period, — in the "Destiny of Man," in the "Idea of God," and, above all, in the essay entitled, "The Everlasting Reality of Religion." Fiske's critics noticed this apparent change of attitude, regarded it sometimes as a sort of "conversion," and lamented or triumphed over our author's supposed alteration of attitude, according as their own point of view was negative or positive. In return, however, Fiske repeatedly undertook to vindicate his own consistency, and in particular to reconcile his former limitation of "scientific hypotheses" to the world of the verifiable with his present admission of positive religious hypotheses regarding matters lying beyond all human verification. In a fashion characteristic of his native simplicity of mind, he was often inclined to say that the mere recognition of how different a religious hypothesis is from

a scientific hypothesis is enough to prevent a man from confusing his thoughts by the mingling of the two, even although he entertains both. In such moods Fiske seemed simply to feel indifferent to testing critically his religious hypotheses in any way whatever. Tests were for science. Religion was concerned with what lay beyond all science. Keep the two apart, so Fiske seemed now to say, and you endangered your science in no wise by believing in the unseen. But of course the philosopher was sure to go further than this mood. Fiske sought the unity of his own thinking from the first, and he seemed to himself to find this unity, especially towards the end of his life, in the thought that the meaning of evolution has to be read by studying its highest outcome, rather than by merely discovering its general laws. Evolution is One Process — causally continuous, rigidly held together amidst all its boundless variety of special processes. This very unity was one of the original Spencerian theses. Fiske had maintained it from the first. But now this one vast world process — in what does it visibly culminate? In mother love, in the sacrifice of physical power to intellectual elevation, in social harmonies, in ideals, in art, in science, and in the intuitive adjustment of our life to the laws of an unseen and eternal world? This culmination of evolution — must it not have been the meaning of the process from the beginning? Upon an elaboration of thoughts such as these, Fiske, in his later works, founds his readings of the arguments for God and for Immortality, and his explanation of the mission and place even of that very Evil which, taken by itself, seems to make the evolutionary process, in our eyes, so complex and disheartening. Here, then, Fiske based his interpretation of the world, not indeed upon the “preferences” of the “silly women of society,” but upon the ideals of humanity.

That Fiske quite succeeded in vindicating in detail the consistency of his earlier and later expressions, I do not believe. I do believe, however, that in the period of the “Cosmic Philosophy” he was already strongly under the general influence of the religious motives which he later emphasized. In fact, as he himself pointed out, many of his expressions in the “Cosmic Philosophy” already point to the later result, and many of its discussions open the way. What, then, one may ask, is the motive of those other and austere early expressions of Fiske’s, which seem to forbid our making any positive hypotheses, as to the deeper meaning of the divine plan, and as to the unseen world? Why did Fiske permit himself to appear so negative a thinker in those days whenever “supernatural” issues appeared on the scene?

It is easy, in reply, to instance the usual tendency of young men to a hostile attitude towards tradition. But I think that, in case of so essen-

tially broad and kindly a nature as Fiske's, mere youthful skepticism and pugnacity explain little of his early attitude. I find it easier to conceive the process thus: The centre of all Fiske's intellectual interests was always the love and the study of mankind. Widely as he read natural science, his first concern lay always in history, in the humanities, in literature, in art, in human life in all its significant forms. Natural science he learned in his youth to regard with such interest and confidence because it promised him light upon the origin and the nature of mankind. Growing up with the doctrine of evolution, he early turned to that doctrine, as he himself tells us, to get guidance as to the sound methods of historical study. It is this which explains the apparently miscellaneous character of his studies and of his writings. Regard all that he did as a series of episodes in a projected study of human nature and of the laws of human progress, and all his work becomes a connected, if unfinished, series of undertakings, whose great variety never made him lose sight of his central purpose.

Now, as a lover of the study of man, Fiske from the first brought into the field that childlike confidence of which we have already spoken — an intuitive assurance that man's life is essentially good, that its goal is something unseen and ideal and eternal, and that its significance has a religious interpretation. Only Fiske was not only thus an intuitive believer. He became also critic, scholar, thinker, and such a one needs something besides intuitions. He needs clearness, coherence, rigid principles of critical judgment, schooling in method, guidance in systematic thinking. All such helps Fiske found in his early studies of the doctrine of evolution. He followed his new guides earnestly, although never slavishly. Such studies, supplemented by his own reflections, very early freed him from superstitions. They released him from traditional dogmas. They gave him a world of clear conceptions. They harmonized his knowledge of man with the results of the sciences of nature. They enabled him to conceive coherently vast realms of fact that would otherwise have remained incoherent. For the sake of such clearness and unity of conception, Fiske was for a time content never to abandon, but to leave in the background of consciousness his really deeper interests in the very ideals and convictions which gave to his study of man its only genuine meaning. Only later did these intuitive convictions of his temperament — these assurances that man's life is a good, and that its true relations are to an ideal and unseen world — come again into the foreground, and demand a reconciliation with the whole evolutionary view of the world. This reconciliation Fiske attempted in the essays of his closing period. There can be no doubt that the reconciliation of the earlier and later attitudes remained always incomplete as to details.

There can also be no doubt that a genuine unity of spirit ran through all his work.

But did Fiske ever find and express a sufficient positive and rational warrant for his faith? I do not think so; and he himself would have been the last to assert that he had completely done so. Faith with him remained faith — illuminated by its very contrast with science, strengthened by all the results of that search for clearness which his studies exemplified, purified by its abandonment of conventional dogmas. The value of Fiske as a thinker lies not in any systematic philosophy of religion, for that he never attempted; but in his union of learning and of clearness with simplicity of conviction regarding the deepest issues of life. As a contribution to one great need of the modern world, namely, the need for an unconventional religion that is still a hearty religion, Fiske's lifework regarding such topics remains a permanent boon.

*Josiah Royce.*

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#### A SKETCH OF JOHN FISKE'S LIFE.

JOHN FISKE, '63, died at the Hawthorne Inn, East Gloucester, early in the morning of July 4. He had been in his usual health until a few days previous, when the great heat began to tell upon him. As his exhaustion became alarming, he was taken to Gloucester by boat on July 3, but it was too late. John Fiske's name was originally Edmund Fiske Green, and he was born at Hartford, Conn., March 30, 1842, the son of Edmund Brewster and Mary (Fiske) Green. After his father's death, his name was changed to John Fiske, the name of his mother's grandfather. Mrs. Green married, in 1855, Edwin W. Stoughton, who was later American Minister to Russia. The boy's childhood and youth were spent chiefly in Middletown, Conn. He fitted for college at H. M. Colton's school there, at Betts Academy, Stamford, and in Cambridge with Andrew T. Bates, '59.

From infancy he showed remarkable precocity. At seven he had read a large part of Caesar, and was reading Rollin, Josephus, and Goldsmith's "History of Greece." Before he was nine he had read nearly all of Shakespeare, and much of Milton, Bunyan, and Pope. He began Greek at nine. By eleven he had read Gibbon, Robertson, and Prescott, and most of Froissart, and he wrote from memory a chronological table from B. C. 1000 to A. D. 1820, filling a quarto blank book of 60 pages. "At twelve he had read most of the 'Collectanea Graeca Majora,' by the aid of a Greek-Latin dictionary, and the next year had read the whole of Virgil, Horace, Tacitus, Sallust, and Suetonius, and much of Livy, Cicero, Ovid, Catullus, and Juvenal. At the same time he had gone through