

Dialogue on the Problem of God
by Fr. A.D. Sertillanges, O.P.

I: And what do you have to say of the philosophy that goes under the name of materialism?

S: Materialism has two advantages: it makes the universe a magnificent playground for our pride and a free-range pigsty for our passions. Beyond that, it is a philosophy that does not even deserve a place in the catalog of errors.

I: Can you justify such a severe assessment?

S: Materialism is a doctrine that gives imbecilic explanations for visible wonders, and no explanation for invisible ones, such as the soul. It does not address to any degree the order of facts that it seeks to explain.

I: But at least its explanations are simple and not contradictory.

S: Its explanations are simple to the point of naivety. They consist in constructing larger bodies from smaller bodies, “as if one could build houses with houses” (Aristotle). And as far as the mind and things of the mind go, materialism does not explain them. It delves into them and finds itself out of breath when it has just indicated the conditions in which they are found.

You say that it is not contradictory. But isn't there an obvious contradiction between materialism and this simple phrase, “the laws of matter”, which the materialists forever have on their lips? Isn't it putting matter under the dominion of mind to say that matter is ruled by laws? “Law is the dictate of reason”, says St. Thomas Aquinas, and no one can set down as false such a lucid definition. Those who only believe in atoms combined according to certain “laws” should well ask who taught the atoms the authority of those laws and disposed them to obey. And if one proceeds from these elementary laws to the more complex laws of chemistry and mineralogy, of life and the communication of life, of sensation and thought, of psychology and morality, who does not see the growing absurdity of attributing all of them to matter? Matter without immanent purpose, without a directing idea, as Claude Bernard would say, and so without a Thought that precedes it and is higher than it, and without a Creator—since the immanent idea in things is obviously constitutive and not just a motor? Yet, I have still failed to observe that the “matter” of the materialists recedes more and more before the pursuit of modern science, which shows it to be so dominated by the evidence of mind, that it almost seems that eventually it will give way completely to law itself, and so proclaim the universal reign of the idea. Everything here below is form, number, harmony, repetition and rhythm, dance and music; nothing is inert and blind matter. Every being inclines, searches, gravitates, joins with other gravitations, other searchings, other inclinations, and a universe emerges where mind shines forth ever more, revealing a overflowing source of ideal, a fundamental Harmony, a primordial Thought, a sovereign Mind.

I: You seek here to prove God by the order in the world. Is that your only proof or are there others?

S: There are as many proofs of God as you wish and not just one. All come back to this: something exists; therefore God exists. After that, you can break up the something and make of its fragments so many proofs. For the rest, since an intelligent fragmentation must proceed by steps, by the nature of things you will come across privileged and specific proofs. It was in this way that St. Thomas Aquinas recognized five ways for coming to sovereign Being.

I: *What is the most certain proof, in your mind?*

S: They are all certain.

I: *Which one is the most striking?*

S: Precisely the one by the order in nature, and even the most refractory thinkers, such as Immanuel Kant, had to recognize its value.

I: *What is this proof in substance?*

S: "Order is the work of the wise", Aristotle says. We believe in human wisdom because we see its works, i.e. the order that it introduces around itself, in its domain, in the creations of its industry, in the institutions that it establishes, in the rules that it establishes for its activity which it insinuates in the things that it governs. But human wisdom only finds its application because there is another wisdom that goes before it, and this preceding wisdom, that of nature, on which our own is grafted, is of a deeper profundity. Who can hew a rock with as much art as it is hewn within, by its very constitution, so bewildering for science, which gropingly penetrates there? Who can make a cloth out of hemp as wonderful as its stem, and its leaf, and its grain? And so it is with everything. Thus, if I believe in human wisdom, how could I not believe in the wisdom that it uses, in the wisdom that it reveals, and if this wisdom of nature is as unconscious as it is marvelous, how can we not look for its source in some sovereign intelligence of which the entire panoply of nature is just a manifestation? "The visible," says Leon Bloy, "is the trace of the steps of the invisible."

I: *In your opinion, what are the essential indications of order in things?*

S: The order of each thing in itself; the order of production of each thing by the convergence of elements, by a concurrence of causal series; the order of things between themselves so as to form groupings and from groupings to form a cosmos; the order of the cosmos and of the soul, which encounter one another in sensation and thought, the two most sublime realities that exist.

I: *Is there a relation between the order of sprouting and the order of thought itself?*

S: Hegel once said: "A tree grows by syllogism."

I: *And art?*

S: When you feel yourself drawn, by art, by rhythm, by poetry and music, into the order of the world and you commune with its movements, say whether the emotion that you experience in the higher parts of your soul has a religious character to it. Art is "a religion," because beauty is order, and order is divine.

I: *Can you complete the proof?*

S: The relations of things between themselves, of the elements one to another, of the causal series which interact and organize cooperatives, partial groupings which meet up with others in ever growing combinations... all of this is proof of a thought which assembles and fits things to a scheme, a preconception which events realize. The eye is arranged to see, fruit to germinate; the powers of life, just like the powers of the stars, are affianced before the marriage of action and general change. "The world is the product of an infinite understanding", wrote Novalis. These universal interactions appear to us both as phenomenons and as inclinations, as effects and as designs, and the idea of an organizing wisdom bursts out in coming into contact with them. This idea is in us, and order is in things; but to justify the idea and establish things as they are, harmonious and wise, there must be above them some superior ideal, a wisdom, an art, and do we not have there one of the aspects of God?

Nature is like a visage whose physiognomy expresses a secret soul, and this soul is God. Nature is a marvelous machinery, whose mechanic is God. Behind events, you have energy; behind energy there is law; beyond law there is a plan; above the plan is the architect, and the architect is God.

And remark how, in nature, the order is all the more admirable due to the fact that all beings seem to be formed from a very small number of elements, with the laws themselves for these elements being very few. The author of this order seems to be able to do everything with everything, and by means of the same deeds. To deny this divine Author, you have to allow for an unintelligence or a non-intelligence more intelligent than intelligence itself. The universe, such as we know it and especially as we surmise it to be, the universe with an organization of an extension and profundity that is so overwhelming, is a burden that only God can carry. No Atlas, son of Jupiter bound to Destiny, is sufficient for it. If God does not exist, you don't need much imagination nor much sense to be invaded by a feeling of frightening absurdity, by an immense blackness. God is truly the Light of the world, creator of the truth of things and of His reflection in us. He is the Mind hidden beneath all creatures, the Being of their being, the Truth of which they are the phantoms, so to speak, since without Him, without the permanent influx of His presence, they would not exist.

I: Is it well advised to look for the "permanent" in this world where everything dies?

S: We can't say that everything dies. It is true that the things of this world are only understood by us and used by us according as they pass away. It is their flight that registers with us; it is thanks to their death that we assimilate them. But it is necessary that something remain; if everything passed away, there would no place for the passing, no law governing the passing, no powers covering for certain facts, no fabric in the scenery. And it is necessary that what remains has the means to remain, to hold itself so firm, as to be immortal. The necessary must exist, and above that which is only necessary in fact, which is not necessary of itself, there must be a first Necessary, necessary by definition, from which flows everything that flows: all that dies, dies in God.

I: I have heard someone reason thus: There is no need for an Orderer since, with an infinity of time, chance has an infinity of possibilities and this explains everything before our eyes.

S: When a man reasons in this fashion, I don't appeal to mathematics to answer him. I ask him: Are you crazy? Such ideas hold in the realm of ideas, but they crumble in the face of facts. Think about the structure of the eye of a gnat, of the gnat itself, its life, its numberless reproduction, its centuries of heredity, the dynamic stability of the universe where this little species develops in company with millions of others, and you will laugh at such silliness.

I: Others say, with more credibility, that the working of the world is impeccable and has an unbreakable rigor to it, such that there is no need for God.

S: What a praise of God!

I: What do you mean?

S: That this apparent lack of need for God is the very thing which makes him more a requirement, just as the watch proves the watchmaker all the more, ticking away all by itself, better than if one were turning its wheels. The world works with unbreakable rigor, once it has been established, once the marvelous automaton has been wound up in such a way that no jolt in events disturbs it. But I ask once more: who established the world?

I: They say that it is the product of evolution.

S: If the hypothesis of evolution is true, God is proven two times over, once by the world itself and once by evolution.

I: How is that?

S: Because to create a machine/implement of such perfection and power is more difficult than creating an object. The world is an overwhelming object, but what are we to say of this miraculous force of evolution which blindly builds it! Of what a clairvoyant thought is not such a blindness the organ! Evolution pretends to be creator in the place of God. It is a system of occurrences that are successively rich without there being any principle at the root of it all. It is an eternal geometry without an “eternal Axiom.” I truly understand Descartes when he says “The existence of God is more certain than the most certain of the theorems of geometry.” As for me, if evolution exists – and it must exist to some degree – it proves, beyond the super-eminent power of God, the generous discretion by which He acts by His very work, after having made His work active and powerful. It is in this way that Christ peaceably sowed a few immortal grains and confided his hopes for the future to his apostles and his Church.

I: You seem to be attributing immense effort and marvelous plans to nature. But Henri Bergson says the opposite: Nature has not preconceived plan; it invents as needed, and it is as easy for it to make an eye as it is for me to lift my hand.

S: This makes for no contradiction. Nature has no preconceived plan. Nor does the bee, and a model for the hive is to be found nowhere in the world. The hive is an “invention” of the genius of the species, I well know it, a spontaneous invention, without its parts being arranged in advance, in such a way that its plan only exists in us, after the fact, by means of the analyses that we make of this admirable work. That does not bother me in the least. I am still asking for someone to find for me the first origin of this effort of invention, of the invention when it took place, of our mind which analyzes it, of the plan which is the product of our mind, of the whole of this order of facts, which are not explained just by describing them. Bergson is not opposed to this request, on the contrary. As far as the effort of nature goes, it is a way of speaking. Nature is an art, and art makes no effort unless it is imperfect. The eye is not a complicated arpeggio; nature produces it with the exquisite facility of a perfect virtuoso. But the more its art is impeccable and simple in its means, the more it has need of a sublime source.

I: What if the world always existed as such?

S: Duration is no explanation. No matter how old it is, one has to ask for an explanation of what it contains. Would you explain a locomotive by giving the reason for its movement the fact that it has always moved? The reason for the movement is not found by going back in time; the reasons for things are not tied up in their movement. Its movement is explained by the intelligent complexity of its gears, that is, by the art of its architect. It is explained by the properties of steam, of air, of the sun, of the materials that are used, of the surrounding environment in which it is placed, that is, by the art of nature, which the art of the architect knew how to use. The harmony of the entire universe is found to be engaged in this simple fact of movement; just as much is true for every other movement, and all prove in this way an Orderer.