Letters on natural magic

Brewster David
Title: Letters on natural magic

Author: Brewster David

This is an exact replica of a book. The book reprint was manually improved by a team of professionals, as opposed to automatic/OCR processes used by some companies. However, the book may still have imperfections such as missing pages, poor pictures, errant marks, etc. that were a part of the original text. We appreciate your understanding of the imperfections which can not be improved, and hope you will enjoy reading this book.
LETTERS ON NATURAL MAGIC

BY

SIR DAVID BREWSTER, M.A. D.C.L.

WITH

CHAPTERS ON THE BEING & FACULTIES OF MAN, AND ADDITIONAL PHENOMENA OF NATURAL MAGIC

BY J. A. SMITH

A NEW EDITION, WITH ILLUSTRATIONS

London
CHATTO & WINDUS, PICCADILLY
1883
[All rights reserved]
LETTERS ON NATURAL MAGIC.
UNIFORM WITH THE PRESENT VOLUME.

Post 8vo, Cloth Gilt, 4s. 6d. each.

More Worlds than One, the Creed of the Philosopher and the Hope of the Christian. By Sir David Brewster.


The Earth and Man; or, Physical Geography in its Relation to the History of Mankind. By Arnold Guyot. With Additions by Professors Agassiz, Pierce, and Gray, and 12 Maps, &c.

CHATTO & WINDUS, PICCADILLY, W.
Since the 24th of April, 1832, when the last of the accompanying Letters by Sir David Brewster to Sir Walter Scott was written, many circumstances have occurred to extend the importance of that wide and comprehensive subject which Sir David has embraced under the name of Natural Magic; for though education, intelligence, and scientific discovery have been advancing with rapid strides, credulity has not been, and does not seem ever likely to be wholly eradicated by their means, while the ingenious have been armed with immense and varied additional elements to favour deception if they shall choose to employ them for that purpose. It has appeared to the editor of the present edition, therefore, of the highest importance to give the work the benefit of that profounder interest which must arise from a consideration of the physical and metaphysical existence or being of man—the union of these two conditions of his being in their action, through the faculties or powers of human perception and verification, and also from a consideration of the range of natural possibility; for by a proper knowledge of these mankind will be better aware of the extent of their liability to be deceived, and of the means of verification and correction at their command, as well as of the mode in which their liability to deception ought to be guarded against or
protected from the influence of imposture, and verification applied in defeating or exposing delusion.

Much of the ease with which we are deceived by the phenomena of natural magic arises from our want of previous preparation, and our deficient knowledge, for the moment, of the laws within which the true explanation of these phenomena may be found. Hence, very much in proportion to our ready knowledge or intelligence we are either credulous or sceptical—the words are used in a philosophic sense merely; and history has shown that men are often quite as far from the truth in the extremity of their scepticism as they are in the extreme of credulity itself. Mere scepticism has in fact been a great barrier and enemy to the progress of science; and though the credulous have often sunk into superstition and become intolerant, they have more generally recognized than ignored those temporarily incomprehensible facts which the advent of calm science has satisfactorily explained. Indeed, but for this slight difference, these two extremes only too often meet; for the extreme of scepticism is credulity, and the extreme of credulity, or superstition, is scepticism. Both distrust truth; both trust their own prejudices and impressions rather than truth; both misrepresent and persecute it; both obstruct the progress of its intelligible development. Even in this day many facts of science are, in consequence, left, without examination, in the hands of charlatans whose function always is to render them odious by exaggeration and therefore repugnant to scientific study and explanation; for the scientific mind ever recoils from the wares of the quack, and—too hastily ignoring the small grain of genuine and philosophic truth which is necessary and almost in every case present to sustain any enduring pretension—considers the whole elements involved to be as much matters of imposture as the individual by whom they are employed. This is
barely excusable in a thinking age, and it is most certainly not the way to disarm imposture or to put it down. If the thinking and intelligent will not examine and explain what is used to deceive, how can the unthinking and the ignorant be but deceived, and continuously deceived, by it? Nay, we all know the experience of human weakness in this respect to be such that the person whose credulity has given way to deception in one case does not always, where it has been rescued by explanation, resort to greater caution and scepticism for the future, but, on the contrary, that the idiosyncrasy of many individuals is to be deceived in every instance in which competent explanation is wanting. Nor, even when caution and scepticism are produced by detection of imposture, are these the great results which philosophy and truth would desire to achieve. Intelligence is the only bulwark of the human mind, and it is in presence of this great and necessary adjunct to the integrity of our normal being that the additions here made to Sir David Brewster’s excellent and popular work are now offered to the public; for the liability to be deceived, from which we all more or less suffer, ought to be, not a ground for scepticism, but only a stronger incentive to obey that divine injunction: “Get knowledge, get wisdom, and, with all thy getting, get understanding.”

From the nature of the case, as will be readily understood, the eminent author's Letters have in themselves been left intact, as an essential feature of their authenticity, and the new matter has been introduced in the preliminary and additional chapters.

From what is explained in the succeeding chapters, it will be observed that comparison is the great means by which we are enabled to assure ourselves, according to the existing organization of our being, of the truth or falsehood of any phenomenon, and that this comparison extends not only to the evidence of one faculty as compared
with another, but to the comparison afforded by different points of examination in the use of the same faculty, so that we may reasonably assume, where such verification is unfairly excluded, that we are entitled to suspend our judgment in all cases in which immediate decision is not absolutely necessary. But it is a singular fact in connection with this subject that almost all animals are made with duplicates of each of their faculties, as if to supply by comparison a check to the inaccuracy of the faculty within itself. Thus we have duplicate brains as well as duplicate eyes; and while a man with two eyes sees with both, and would detect imperfection in one eye by means of the accuracy of the other, so we have reason to believe that a man thinks in duplicate, or with both lobes of the brain, although from the co-operation of the organs only one single train of thought is apparent; just as by the use of both eyes one subject is alone presented in consequence of the co-operation of both organs of vision: for it has been found that where one of the lobes of the brain has been so injured as to be incapable of action, a perfectly sane and healthy power of mind has been maintained in the individual by the sound action of the other lobe of the brain only, just as accurate vision may be experienced by a person having only one eye, or shutting the other. The explanation of this power is not referrible to the physical, but to the metaphysical part of our being, as will be better understood by what we have introduced on the subject of Consciousness; for there is just as much a duplicate of thought produced in employing both lobes of the brain as there are two physical images when both eyes are used—the unity experienced in each case existing in the combining power of the Consciousness only.

J. A. S.

Sept. 1868.
CONTENTS.

THE BEING AND FACULTIES OF MAN IN REFERENCE TO NATURAL MAGIC.

CHAPTER I.

Material and immaterial nature of man—Body—Mind—Life—Feeling—External matter—Touch—Separation and connection of all these—Plato and the soul—Electricity—Epicurus—Bishop Berkeley—David Hume—Consciousness and matter—Consciousness and the immaterial—Reciprocal contact—Man’s primary perceptive power—Its contact with and knowledge of matter and the immaterial—Its proximity to the infinite—Cause of the Epicurean error—Berkeley’s blunder the other way—Cause of Hume’s error—Self-deception in philosophy—Fallacy in a syllogism.

CHAPTER II.

Consciousness as the primary perceptive faculty of our Being—Its contact with reality and with all our impressions and sensations of reality—Eye and Ear more subject to influence from simulated impressions than the other senses—Touch and Taste possess more positive powers and means of accuracy—Smell intermediate in point of power—Bishop Berkeley and the Eye—Not the Eye that requires education from experience, but the Consciousness—The Eye perfect from the first—Difference between the Consciousness of man and of other animals—Difference between instinct and reason—The Seat of Sensation—Misapprehen-
CHAPTER III.

The senses the physical media of the Consciousness—The evidence of the senses of touch and taste—Its impartiality—Its positiveness—Evidence of the eye and ear comparative and relative—Co-operation of the senses without collusion—Distinctive perceptions or impressions of the senses—The current of ideas—How stimulated—Its importance—Our relative perception of hardness, size, weight, colour, pitch of sound, &c.—Our positive perception of form—Standards of comparison—Size differently seen by different individuals—Erect vision and the inversion of images on the retina—Neither the true size nor true position of objects presented to us by the eye—Accuracy of the eye—Its superiority over photography—A defect of photography—How caused—Further remarks on comparison—Mirrors and mode of vision.

CHAPTER IV.

The limited range of our positive or absolute knowledge of external matter—How much our knowledge is merely comparative—How necessary, therefore, that we should test everything where we can—Difference in the mode in which truth and falsehood demand our credence—Spiritualism and its séances—Its profanation of the dead—Table-turning—Faraday's exposure of it—Simple application of his indicator for the detection of unconscious lateral pressure and of confederacy—Mesmerism—Its more preposterous pretensions abated—Our tendency to neglect the true knowledge of what is familiar—Our ignorance of why or how our hands instantly obey our will—Consciousness can control and direct the operations of matter—Is it the force by which motion is accomplished?—Probability that it is not—The vital forces and the forces of motion distinguished—The blood the life, a mystery—