

# Elihu Palmer On The Origin of Motion (Eternal, Property of Matter) From "Principles of Nature" 1806

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The following is Chapter 24 of Elihu Palmer's "[Principles of Nature](#)" from 1806. If I read this correctly, here he endorses motion as an eternal quality of matter, and he does not look for some cause of motion outside of matter, as did some of the other Deists.

## **CHAPTER XXIV. - MATTER AND POWER; ORIGIN OF MOTION; LIBERTY AND NECESSITY.**

The universe is composed of an infinite mass of matter;(1) or at least, to the human mind, it is infinite, because to this mass no assignable boundary can be affixed. Space is unlimited or infinite, and in this vast expanse, innumerable bodies of matter, of different magnitudes, are continually performing variegated revolutions. Upon these bodies or higher spheres of existence, other smaller bodies are discovered, of specific modification and powers, essentially connected in their natures with the larger orbs to which they respectively belong. In all these bodies, great and small, motion is an essential and inherent property. The inactivity of matter is a doctrine contradicted by the evidence of our senses, and the clear deductions of a sound philosophy. It is impossible to conceive matter without power, or of power without matter; they are essentially connected; their existence is interwoven, and cannot be separated even in thought. The ancient doctrine of matter and motion, so long exploded, and so much calumniated by theological priests, will probably, at some future day, be considered as bearing a very strong relation to a pure and incorruptible philosophy. Supernatural religion has blinded the human understanding, and prevented upon this subject every clear and correct conception.

*[1. The New York Reviewers, in the review which they took of the first edition of this work, after quoting a number of detached sentences from this chapter, make the following observation: "Those who have read the most celebrated atheistical writers, will see that, Mr. Palmer is as determined an Atheist as any of them." It is presumed that these learned Reviewers mean to take the Bible and Testament descriptions of God as the standard of theism. Let us then examine the case upon this ground, and we shall soon discover what it is to be an Atheist in the estimation of the New York Reviewers. "And the Lord spake unto Moses, face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend," (See Exodus chap. xxxiii. 11.) "And I will take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my back parts; but my face shall not be seen." (See Exodus chap. xxxiii. 23.) From these passages it appears, that God is represented in the form and shape of a man, and that such were the ideas of the inspired and chosen people of God concerning the Creator. But there is another passage in the New Testament, which places this matter in a still stronger*

*light. In Paul's Epistle to the Hebrews, speaking of Jesus Christ, he says that he was the brightness of his father's glory, and the express image of his person. Now both believers and infidels agree, that Jesus was in the shape and form of a man; and as he was like God, of course God must be like him; therefore, the Christian God is like a man, perhaps like one of the New York Reviewers. Now the fair deduction from all this is, that whosoever doth not believe that God is like a New York Reviewer, is a most profane and abominable Atheist. What a sublime and majestic spectacle of theism do these "learned" men present to the human mind! In another place they charge the author of this work with "affectation, inordinate vanity, and the want of comprehensive views." How wonderfully comprehensive must be the views of those who can place the material universe upon the shoulders of a God, resembling in his existence a New York Reviewer. Such "literary" heroes ought triumphantly to exclaim, that they have excelled in brilliancy of conception, and in comprehensive views, the story of the Indian, which places the earth upon a turtle's back, and then declares the turtle stands upon nothing! Permit "us" miserable Atheists to bow with great humility before such "splendid" talents, and such "comprehensive views". Go on, gentlemen Reviewers, and console yourselves in the preservation of that Trinitarian or polytheistical scheme of religion to which you are so much attached; but remember, the moment will arrive in the succession of future ages, when those very mental "energies" of the intelligent world, which you sneer at so much, will sweep away the whole bundle of theological nonsense, leaving only the mighty power by which the universe is sustained; and of the shape or form of this power, the New York Reviewers have as little idea as "the author of the Principles of Nature", or any of the profane and abominable Atheists, whom the advocates of Christianity long ago sent down to the dismal abodes of the damned, to dwell for ever in hell fire.]*

A belief in spirits had nearly, at one time, overturned the empire of real existence; the power and excellence of matter were exploded to make room for a world of fictions; of phantoms and things that had in nature no positive, no real, or substantial being. Filled with this idea, the dreams of theology were substituted for philosophic truth, and fanaticism usurped the domination of reason. Philosophers joined in the race of spiritual or material glory, and the united effect of their different opinions constituted the annihilation of nature. The spiritualists contended against the matter, and the materialists against spirits; thus sweeping away, by their opposite systems, every species of existence. Matter, and its diversified modes of operation, are the only things of which human intelligence can take cognizance. It is this vast body of which demands our most serious investigation; it is this in which we are interested, and with which we are most closely connected. Much has been said concerning dead or inactive matter; much concerning its *vis inertia*; but an appeal may be safely made to the phenomena of the physical world for a complete refutation of this opinion. Every fact that strikes our eyes, or presents itself to the contemplation of the understanding; every movement in nature furnishes an argument against a doctrine so unphilosophic and erroneous. Every thing that we behold; all the elements are in continual flux; agitation or motion is a universal and eternal law of nature.

The earth, the ocean, and the atmosphere, are constantly in a high degree of action; the evidence of these facts are presented to every living creature. The raging element of fire is never wholly at rest; it is always powerfully or more silently operating in every part of the world. If these ideas are controverted, let man inquire into their truth by an immediate recourse to the energetic movements of physical existence. In regard to fluids, this opinion, perhaps, will not be controverted; but it will be asked, whether it be equally true in regard to solids? To this, the answer is unequivocally in the affirmative; at least so far as it relates to the question, motion or not motion, action or not action. Beside the general revolutionary motion which the earth has round the sun, the parts of its solid materials are constantly combining and dissolving, as may be proved by the smallest recurrence to the organic structure of vegetable and animal life, and the property of disorganization essential to each specific mode of existence. It will, however, be contended, that if this be true in regard to organic matter, or to vegetable and animal existence, it will not hold equally in regard to other portions of the material world. There is, undoubtedly, a difference in the activity of matter, or in degrees of motion, of which the several parts are capable; but there is no such thing as absolute incapacity of motion; no such thing as absolute and entire rest. For the truth of this, an appeal is made to the power, pressure, and dissolving operation of the most inert and stupid portions of material substance. An appeal is made also to the activity of the most stupid parts of matter, in the composition of vegetable productions. What regular industry do the solids and fluids exhibit in the formation of a common vegetable? The march of each particle to its destined post is with firm and philosophic step; with constancy and physical zeal. There is no such thing as dead matter; all is alive, all is active and energetic. The rays of the sun fructify the earth, and these are considered among the portions of dead matter.

These rays, however, are so active, as to travel 95,000,000 of miles in the space of seven minutes and a half; a celerity of motion which substantiates, beyond all contradiction, their essential power and activity. Every fact, in the physical world, forces conviction in the human mind, and proves the energetic nature of the material system. An investigation of the properties of matter, a full development of its modes of operation, would lead to the most salutary consequences, by instructing man in regard to his true predicament in nature, and reconciling him to his fate. To corroborate the ideas which have already been suggested upon this subject, the following strong and philosophic reflections are taken from an anonymous pamphlet, entitled, An Essay on Matter. "All matter is possessed of life, spirit, action, or motion. What is called inanimate matter, owes its motion of life no more to the elements, than what is acknowledged to be animate. This elementary influence presupposes the animation of bodies; for as these cannot move without that influence, so neither can that influence where there is no life. To say that the elements alone give motion, is to say that the elements give life, which is denying a universal agent, or making him appear to act more by intermediate agents than philosophy will allow. No one, I presume, will doubt the independent motion of matter in that form which we name animal, at least, that it is as independent as man; we allow animals to be a composition of matter without soul, yet we allow them to be possessed of the principle of motion. It is from this motion solely that we allow them to be possessed of life; for there is nothing beside that can or does influence the mind to make it assent to this truth, that animals

have life; and it is from the different combinations of motion and matter that we form our ideas of the different kinds of animals. It is then from motion, and nothing else, that we judge of, and allow matter of a particular kind of composition to be possessed of the living principle; the same evidence must have the same weight in every other kind of composition. Wherever motion is discoverable in matter, be the form of it what it may, we must acknowledge it to entertain the living principle; but it may be said, that though motion be an evidence of life in matter in certain forms, and where the motion is of certain kinds, yet motion of every kind will not prove the existence of life in matter of every form.

This absurdity of supposing a 'caput mortuum', must appear to every one who considers the connection and dependence which exists in all bodies upon each other, the motion which this connection supposes, and life which motion evidences. There is a perpetual exchange of matter with matter of every form. The animal creation, for instance, is constantly exchanging parts with the earth and its atmosphere. If the matter composing animals be animate, and that of the earth inanimate, how can these be united? This would be to suppose that two opposites could exist in one body, whereas it is the nature of opposites to recede from each other, and nothing can be greater opposites than life and death. The independent motion of matter in that form called vegetable, can be as little doubted as in animals. Storms, earthquakes, fires, floods, do not cause vegetation any more than they do generation in animal. The natural or preternatural motion of bodies, no more contributes to the motion of matter in vegetables, than in animals; they, like us, receive only the natural and gentle influence of the elements, and thereby mark a link in that chain which connects all matter, and which is the harmony of creation. We shall be more particular in speaking of motion in vegetables, when we come to treat of the nicer operation of matter in that action which we call thinking. We come now to speak of the motion of matter in those forms where it is less observable upon a superficial view of things; but where, upon a nearer view, it is not less evident than in either of the other forms mentioned."

"Whoever doubts the motion of matter in the form of a stone, let him take the trouble to look upon the first rock in his way, and he will see its surface mouldering. Whatever decays, must be replenished; for matter cannot waste. Stones, then, give to, and receive matter from other bodies. Circulation is a very perfect motion. Will any one assert, that the motion of giving and receiving of its substance, does not exist in the stone, with only that assistance, which, in common with us and animals, it receives from the elements? The motion of matter in the various forms of minerals is more observable, as it is more lively. There is a constant fluctuation of matter in all mineral bodies. When miners open a mine, and do not find the ore they are in pursuit of, in the quantity which they expected, they say the mine is not ripe, and close it up again, that the metal may have time to grow. If matter have not the vital principle, then I have the power of creating. The bulk of my form is increased by the matter which in the action of eating, inspiration, and absorption, I add to myself. If this matter have not the principle of life, how can I make it partake of me, and thereby partake of life? Can I unite dead and living things, or can they be united in me? Chemists tell us that the union of bodies depends upon the affinity, i.e. the likeness which matter in one form has to matter in another form, and tell us no further. We have before mentioned the different kinds of union produced by affinity, the perfect

and imperfect; but what gives the quality of union, and preserves the existence of the compound? It is the living principle in one body, inclining it to associate with the living principle in another body. Without this living principle, that inclination which supposes motion could not exist."

The above observations exhibit, with philosophic clearness, the nature and property of matter. It is by a constant recurrence to the operations of the material world, that man will be able to discover those solemn and important truths on which his happiness is founded. Our bodies are composed of the elements, compounded and organized by the skill and energy of nature; from this organization, certain consequences necessarily result; composition, decomposition, and recomposition, are established in the order, and supported by the laws of physical existence. The materials which are employed in any specific composition possess inherent and indestructible qualities, but the result may be augmented and power increased by organic construction. Thus, for instance, matter in its most simple form, may, perhaps, be destitute of intelligence; but when combined and modified in the form of a man, intellect is a uniform consequence. It is impossible to say, how far the properties or qualities of matter may extend in a simple and uncompounded state. It is impossible from the want of communication, to affirm, or deny with absolute certitude, relative to the internal essence of the particles of material existence. There must be in the essence of matter a capacity, when combined in certain forms, to produce specific results. The principle of life must be essentially inherent in the whole system and every particle thereof; but to attribute to each particle a specific kind of life analogous to that which is discovered in large compositions of matter, cannot, perhaps, be warranted by the knowledge or experience of nature. In all the specific modifications of life, disorganization, or death, is a universal law; but the universality of this law among specific combinations upon the earth, cannot, perhaps, be extended to the earth itself. The analogy is broken, when we go from individuals or particulars to generals or universals. But more of this hereafter.

It is by the laws of motion that combinations are formed, it is by the same laws they are dissolved. Motion is an essential property of universal existence. The following paragraph upon this subject, is taken from the System of Nature, a powerful work, translated from the French of the celebrated and philosophic Mirabaud.

"Every thing in the universe is in motion; the essence of nature is to act, and if we consider attentively its parts, we shall see that there is not a particle that enjoys absolute repose. Those which appear to us to be deprived of motion, are, in fact, only in relative or apparent rest; they experience such an imperceptible motion, and so little marked, that we cannot perceive the changes they undergo. All that appears to us to be at rest, does not remain, however, one instant in the same state. All beings are continually breeding, increasing, decreasing, or dispersing, with more or less dulness or rapidity. The insect called 'Ephemeron' is produced and perishes the same day; of consequence, it very rapidly experiences the considerable changes of its being. The combinations formed by the most solid bodies, and which appear to enjoy the most perfect repose, are decomposed, are dissolved in the course of time. The hardest stones are by degrees destroyed by the contact of air. A mass of iron, which time has gnawed into

rust, must have been in motion from the moment of its formation in the bowels of the earth, until the instant that we see it in this state of dissolution." Mirabaud's System of Nature, Vol. I. page 42.

A philosophic investigation into the laws of nature, would probably furnish a pretty clear solution of all the phenomena of the intellectual world. A certain portion of matter organized upon a certain specific plan, produces, in the animal we denominate man, all the energetic and astonishing effects of mind.

A question has been stated among speculative metaphysicians, whether it be not probable that the earth and all the higher spheres of existence in the planetary world, are possessed of strong intellectual powers? Indeed, this conjecture has been carried so far as to combine the whole of material existence, and attribute to it all the properties, qualities, and powers of intelligent life. Nature is considered as possessing a central power, a brain, or cognitive faculty, whose operations on a higher scale are supposed to be analogous to the brain or thinking faculty of man. And this, perhaps, would be the most philosophic method by which to arrive at the idea of supreme intelligence, or the governing power of the universe. But whether the planets in their individual capacity be considered as intellectual beings, or whether nature in its aggregate combination be thus considered, are questions of speculation, concerning which, perhaps the human mind will never receive any adequate or satisfactory information. Man, however, should not fear to extend his contemplation to the whole of nature, and, if possible, subject the whole to the powerful examination of his intellectual energies.

From the ideas that have been disclosed in this chapter, it will be easy to perceive, that if the inquiry were now made, "where is the origin of motion?" the philosophic answer would be, that it is in matter itself, co-essential and co-eternal with it, and cannot be separated from any part thereof, not even in thought.

A further question, in some measure connected with the present subject, is that which relates to the principle of action in the mind of man, or the opinions relative to Liberty and Necessity. Moralists and metaphysicians have for a long time been in a state of altercation on this subject, nor is the point of discussion between them yet completely settled. Perhaps the preceding reflections may furnish us with some information and aid in the solution of a problem so difficult. The principle of motion and action must exist essentially somewhere; if this principle be in matter itself, or in a foreign agent whose existence is presumed to be wholly extraneous from the body of nature, the same consequence will, however, necessarily follow. Man is an organized being, possessing powers of motion and action; if the motion of which man is susceptible be the result of the essential nature of matter in specific organic construction, the motion in this being must be as independent, absolute, and self-existent, as in the body or any part of nature; that is, it must belong to the thing itself, co-essential with its being, and acting by the internal force of the principle itself. If the principle of motion be sought for in any intellectual agent foreign to the body of nature, it must be independent and absolute there; it must be self-existent, and as man must have proceeded from one or the other of these two sources, he must be like the source itself from which he emanated, and possess, in a partial

degree at least, that independence of power and action, which are so justly to be attributed to these two great sources of all existence. To suppose an infinite series in the principle of causation, exhibits nothing more than a feeble effort of the mind, to get clear of a metaphysical difficulty. The last point that is discovered, includes in it an equal necessity of discovering another point, on which the last may depend for its existence. The links in this chain would become innumerable, its length infinite, and, after all, the difficulty remain as great as ever.

This doctrine, concerning the origin of motion, and of giving a solution to the subject by means of an infinite series in the principle of causation, can never satisfy the mind that is seriously in quest of a first point, or essential spring of every action; in short, it is nothing better than the story of the Indian, who placed the earth upon a turtle's back, and afterwards declared, that the turtle stood upon nothing. The fact is, man is independent in his mind; it is the essence of his nature to act, and he feels, or ought to feel, that he is not the slave of any of the phantoms of superstition, or the fine spun reasonings of metaphysical philosophers.

In a moral point of view, the doctrine of necessity is still more objectionable, and goes to the destruction of all human merit, and with it the dignity of the human character. If man be a moral slave, his actions in relation to himself are neither good nor bad; he is impelled by an irresistible necessity, and can no more in justice be punished for his conduct, than a cannonball, which is propelled forward by the explosion of gunpowder, can be punished for taking off a man's leg. The one upon the doctrine of necessity is as much a moral agent as the other, and punishment, in both cases, equally absurd. It is essential to the dignity of man that he be free and independent, both morally and politically. Political slavery is not more derogatory to the human character, and human energy, than moral slavery. They both sink and brutalize mankind; they both have a tendency to diminish his efforts, and destroy his active zeal in the cause of virtue. It is essential to the true and elevated character of an intellectual agent, that he realize the strength of his powers; *that he be confident in his energies*; that he hold in suitable contempt every species of moral and political despotism. This sentiment will raise him from a degraded condition, and form him into the stature of a perfect man in the glorious system of nature.