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978-1-108-00414-5 - The Method of the Divine Government: Physical and Moral

James McCosh

Excerpt

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METHOD OF THE DIVINE GOVERNMENT.

BOOK FIRST.

GENERAL VIEW OF THE DIVINE GOVERNMENT AS FITTED TO THROW LIGHT ON THE CHARACTER OF GOD.

CHAP. I.—INTRODUCTION.

SECT. I.—SOURCES OF OUR IDEA OF GOD.

SUPPOSE that the sun, rising and setting as at present, had been perpetually hid from the eye by an intervening cloud or shade which concealed his body without obstructing his beams, there might still have been an universal impression that a great luminary existed as the cause of the light which daily illuminated our globe. Different persons might have fixed on different objects as reflecting the light of heaven most impressively; some on the fleecy or gilded clouds; others on the lively verdure of the grass and forests, or on the cerulean ocean, or on the rich grain of autumn glistening in the yellow beams; but all would have rejoiced to conclude, that there was a sun behind the veil.

Though God is invisible to the bodily eye—though he is, as it were, behind a veil—yet the idea of his existence is pressed on the mind from a variety of quarters. Were it not so, the apprehension of, and belief in, a supernatural power or being would not be so universally entertained. The mind which refuses the light that comes from one region, is obliged to receive the light that comes from another quarter of the heavens or earth. It may be interesting to trace to its sources the most important conception which the human mind can form.

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FIRST, THERE IS THE DESIGN EXHIBITED IN THE SEPARATE MATERIAL WORKS OF GOD.

An acquaintance with the depths or the minutiae of science is not needful, in order to enable mankind to appreciate this argument. Every person who has observed the springing of the grass and grain and the budding of flowers, or who has taken but a passing survey of his own bodily frame, or of the motions of the heavenly bodies, has had the idea impressed upon his mind of reigning order and wisdom. The boy who has marked the instincts of birds in building their nests; the shepherd who has watched the habits of his flocks and herds, and of the beasts of prey that attack them; the peasant who has attended to the migration of the swallow, the cuckoo, or any other favourite bird, or who has noted the working of bees, their government and order in the hive in which he and his family feel so deep an interest; each has seen enough to constrain him to acknowledge that there must be higher intelligence to instruct these creatures, which have manifestly nothing in themselves beyond blind and unreasoning instinct.

Socrates representing in this, as he did in every thing else, the philosophy of profound common sense—such as shrewd, observant, unsophisticated men in all ages have delighted in—has led the way in the statement of this branch of the evidence. “Is not the providence of God manifested in a remarkable manner, inasmuch as the eye of man, which is so delicate in its structure, hath provided for it eyelids like doors for protection, and which extend themselves whenever it is needful, and again close when sleep approaches?” “Is it not worthy of admiration that the ears should take in sounds of every sort, and yet not be too much filled with them?” “That the fore-teeth of the animal should be formed in such a manner as is evidently best fitted for the cutting of its food, as those on the side are adapted for grinding it to pieces?”

It is pleasant to reflect that God hath so arranged his providence, and so constituted mankind, that it does not require an acquaintance with abstruse science, to enable them to rise to a knowledge of God. But while scientific attainment is not necessary, in order to produce the conviction in the first instance, it is gratifying to find that research in every department of nature multiplies the evidence, and exhibits an ever-increasing

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number of fresh adaptations. Every new discovery in science yields its contribution to the proofs and illustrations of the wisdom, the power and goodness of God. This scientific argument was prosecuted, as far as ancient physics admitted, by Cicero in his *Treatise on the Nature of the Gods*; in modern times, it was followed out by Derham and Ray; at a later date, Paley became its most elegant and judicious expounder; and it has kept pace with modern science in the *Bridgewater Treatises*, and the fragmentary works of Sir Charles Bell.

There is nothing abstruse, complicated, or mysterious in the chain of reasoning which leads us to believe in a supernatural intelligence, or rather in the single link which connects the works of God and the worker. It is represented by Dr. Thomas Reid, as containing in its logical form two propositions—the major, that design may be traced from its effects; and the minor, that there are appearances of design in the universe.*

* “The argument from final causes,” says Dr. Reid, “when reduced to a syllogism, has these two premises. First, that design and intelligence in the cause may with certainty be inferred from marks or signs of it in the effect. This is the principle we have been considering, and we may call it the major proposition of the argument. The second, which we call the minor proposition, is, that there are in fact the clearest marks of design and wisdom in the works of nature; and the conclusion is, that the works of nature are the effects of a wise and intelligent cause. One must either assent to the conclusion, or deny one or other of the premises.” (Essay vi. c. vi.) The French Atheistical School, headed by M. Aug. Comte, would at times cast doubts on the second proposition, and explain away some of the supposed marks of design, dwelt upon by writers on natural theology. But in doing so, it may be remarked invariably, that they only succeed in referring a given adaptation to a more general cause; and they do not seem to reflect that we are ready to follow them thither, and to point out the adaptation *there*, possibly under a double form, or one adaptation adjusted so as to produce another. When we point, for instance, to the eye, as showing such thought, such care, such refinement, such advantage taken of the properties of natural agents, “and fitted,” as Sir John Herschell remarks, “to force upon us a conviction of deliberate choice and premeditated design, more strongly perhaps than any single contrivance to be found in nature or art,” the Atheist contents himself with saying, that the eye is produced by that law of nature according to which children resemble their parents; and he forgets that we follow him from the child to the parent, and there discover the very same adaptation; with this farther adaptation, that the parent’s frame is so constructed as to be able to produce an offspring after his own likeness. And all the miserable cavils of the Atheistical school leave a host of traces of design undoubted and even untouched. As the second proposition cannot be denied with any appearance of plausibility, they set themselves with most vigour to attack the first, and represent all the apparent traces of design as mere “conditions of existence.” “The provision made for the stability of the solar system,” says M. Comte, “is no evidence of a final cause. The pretended final cause reduces itself, as has been

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It is one of the most common of all kinds of reasoning, and is altogether suited to man's habits of observing and thinking. Every man is obliged to proceed on the argument, in the acquisition of necessary secular knowledge, and in the discharge of the ordinary business of life.

SECONDLY, THERE ARE THE RELATIONS WHICH THE PHYSICAL WORLD BEARS TO MAN, WHICH WE CALL THE PROVIDENTIAL ARRANGEMENTS OF THE DIVINE GOVERNMENT.

In observing these, the mind rises beyond mere isolated material objects and laws, and even beyond the relations between them, to contemplate the grand results in the dealings of God towards his creatures. It is to this latter class of facts that the majority of mankind look rather than to the other. An extended observation of the nice adjustments in material objects requires a kind of microscopic eye and a habit of fixed attention, such as are not possessed by the great body of mankind; who look not so much to these as to prominent events cognizable by the senses without any minute inspection, and which indeed force themselves upon the attention; the providential

seen in all analogous occasions, to this puerile observation—there are no stars inhabited but those that are habitable. They return, in a word, to the principle of the conditions of existence, which is the true positive transformation of the doctrine of final causes, and of which the fertility and bearing are vastly greater." If there be any logical force in this remark, it must be held as affirming that no adjustments, however numerous and strikingly applied to secure an end, can be held as evidential of design. Now, let us apply this to the common illustration. We lift a watch, found lying on a bare common, and examine it, and are about to conclude that it must have had a maker, when M. Comte comes to us and assures us that all this adaptation of wheel and axle, of hand and figure, is but the condition of the existence of the watch. True, it is the condition of the existence of the watch, but it is a proof too of a designing mind arranging the condition. We certainly hold the remark to be sufficiently "puerile," and the sneer reared upon it to be sufficiently profane. "At this present time, for minds properly familiarized with true astronomical philosophy, the heavens display no other glory than that of Hipparchus, of Kepler, of Newton, and of all who have helped to establish these laws." No persons were more willing to admit than the parties here named, that the laws which they discovered must have existed before they could discover them,—that the glory belongs to Him who established these laws, and to *them* but the reflected glory of having first interpreted them to mankind. Once admit, as we think the rational mind cannot but admit, that adjustments towards a given end, if sufficiently numerous and striking, may be held as proving the existence of a designing mind, and the number and nature of such adjustments in the universe will at once force upon us the conclusion, that this world is under a presiding intelligence.—(See Pos. Phil. vol. ii. pp. 28, 39.)

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care of God, and the restraints of his government, being not so much isolated adaptations as the grand results in their bearings upon mankind to which these adaptations lead. The common mind, unaccustomed to dissection, can pursue the scientific argument, and the observation on which it proceeds, but a very little way; but this other it can prosecute to a great length. Inquire into the ground of the belief in the existence of God, entertained by the working man or man of business, and you will probably find it, not an ingenious inspection of his own frame or of any material object, but an observation of the care which God takes of him, and of the judgments with which from time to time he visits the world. It is this more obvious observation which falls in most readily with his habitual train of thought and feeling, and which comes home most powerfully to his heart and experience.

The argument under this second head is not different in its logical nature from the former; but the class of objects on which it is founded is different. It is as we apprehend, the class of phenomena now referred to, which raises the mind to the idea of a God *above nature and ruling over it*. "As the consideration of nature," says a sagacious thinker, "shows an inherent intelligence, which may also be conceived as coherent with nature, so does history, on a hundred occasions, show an intelligence which is distinct from nature, which conducts and determines those things which may seem to us accidental; and it is not true that the study of history weakens the belief in a divine providence. History is of all kinds of knowledge the one which tends most decidedly to that belief."* There is ground for the remark here made, both as to the effect usually produced by the contemplation of nature, and the impression left by the intelligent contemplation of history. He who confines his attention to the mere structure and laws of physical nature, is apt to speak and think of God as merely a kind of intelligent principle inherent in, and coherent with, nature. It is when we contemplate the dealings of God towards the human race, whether in the events of past history, (to which Niebuhr more particularly refers,) or in those which fall under our observation and experience, that we rise to the idea of a God distinct from nature and above nature, controlling and governing

* Niebuhr's Lectures, vol i p. 146.

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it. "God," says Leibnitz, "has the qualities of a good governor, as well as of a great architect."* The physical inquirer discovers the qualities that indicate the latter of these, and speaks of God as a great architect, as an ingenious mechanician, or an unrivalled artist. It is from a survey of the events of providence, being the combination and results of those laws which the man of science investigates severally, that we rise to enlarged views of the Governor of the universe.

THIRDLY, THERE IS THE HUMAN SOUL WITH ITS CONSCIOUSNESS, ITS INTELLIGENCE, AND ITS BENIGN FEELINGS.

A reference is made to these at present, not as the agents by which the process of proof is conducted, but as the objects contemplated, and on which the proof rests. The human reason, with its intuitive or logical laws, must be the instrument employed in every branch of the argument, and whatever be the data on which it proceeds; but in the case now before us, reason finds its data in the mind itself.

It is never to be forgotten, that apart from a reflex contemplation of the human soul, it is impossible to rise to the conception of a living and intelligent God. It is in the human soul, small though it be when compared with the object reflected, that we are to discover most distinctly represented the image of a spiritual God. Without taking human consciousness and intelligence and feeling into view, God could be conceived of as a mere principle of mechanism or order in nature, as a power of fate, or a law of development above nature, (as with Schelling,) rather than a real and living agent. It is the possession of consciousness and intelligent purpose by man that suggests the idea of a conscious and a personal God. From what we have ourselves experienced, we know that intelligence is needful, in order to produce such effects as exist in nature around us; and thence we rise in our conceptions to a living soul presiding over the universe and regulating it, not according to a mere law of mechanism or development, but by the wisdom of spiritual intelligence and love.

The very existence of the human soul as a created object, which it evidently is, implies an intelligent soul as its creator, and that a soul of vast power and great intelligence. If the

* *Essays on the Goodness of God.*—P. iii.

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creation of the beautiful forms of matter argues an extraordinary power and skill, surely the creation of spiritual intelligent being, is fitted to impress us still more with the knowledge and wisdom of the Creator.

Some think that the proof of the existence of God, derived from the human soul, can be stretched much farther; and they find among the depths of the human mind, and among its necessary ideas, what they reckon the most solid and conclusive of all arguments. The attempt of this nature in a former age by Newton and Clarke in this country, is now generally regarded as unsuccessful; but the failure of these giant intellects has not prevented the German philosophers, and those French and English writers who have caught the German spirit, from boldly renewing the attempt so vigorously made by the schoolmen, to construct an argument for the Divine existence, from ideas independent of all experience. In such metaphysical disquisitions, it is often difficult to determine whether the discussion does not turn upon mental abstractions rather than realities.* In this treatise, at least, we are not disposed to push the argument farther than the mind can easily follow it. We are contemplating the arguments which do, in fact, lead mankind in general upwards to the conception of a supernatural power, rather than those speculations which may carry conviction to those who habitually dwell in the profundities of abstract philosophy. For the purpose at present in view, it is enough to insist that it is by the human consciousness and intelligence that the idea of a personal, a spiritual, and an all-wise God is suggested, and by which there is furnished the most convincing evidence of His being and of some of His highest perfections.

FOURTHLY, THERE ARE THE MORAL QUALITIES OF MAN.

We refer more particularly to the conscience. This conscience is in all men. Man has not only powers of understanding, such as the memory, the imagination, and the judgment; not only feelings and emotions, such as love, hope, fear; he has likewise a higher faculty or sense, which judges by its own law of every other principle of the mind, and claims authority over it. Just as all men think and reason by the powers of the under-

* See some remarks on the logical nature of the Theistic argument in Appendix I.

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standing, and as all men feel by their emotional nature, so all men have some sense (it may be very faint and imperfect) of the distinction between good and evil, by means of the moral power or powers with which God has endowed them.

For the proof of the existence of the conscience, we appeal with Butler and Mackintosh to the consciousness. We have only to compare our nature with that of the brute creation, to discover at once that there is some such principle in the human mind. The lower animals we find so far resembling man, that they are possessed of certain appetites and propensities, but they have no regulating, in short, no moral principle. Following and gratifying their spontaneous impulses, they find that no blame attaches to them, and that they are troubled by no reproaches or compunctions of conscience. But let man proceed to gratify the appetites and passions of his nature to excess, and in an irregular way, and he meets with some check, (it may be a feeble one,) warning him at the time, and followed by reproach; something which, if it does not proclaim aloud, at least whispers in accents loud enough to be heard, that he is doing wrong. Unable, it may be, to stem the strong current of the evil passions, this conscience is among them like a breaker in the midst of the stream, which if it does not stop the torrent, at least announces its own existence and its purpose by the agitation which it produces.

Now, the conscience is a ready and powerful means of suggesting the idea of God to the mind. We believe that it is by it, rather than by any careful observation of nature, material or spiritual, that mankind have their thoughts directed to God. It is not so much by what he sees around him, as by what he feels within, that man is led to believe in a ruler of the world. A conscience speaking as one having authority, and in behalf of God, is the monitor by which he is reminded most frequently and emphatically of his Governor and his Judge.

It seems to be possible to build upon the very fact of the existence of the conscience, an independent argument in favour of the being of God. The existence of the law in the heart seems to imply the existence of a lawgiver.

Whatever may be thought of this, it is certain that the conscience affords evidence that God, proven on other grounds to exist, must approve of moral excellence. We are constrained

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to believe that he who planted the conscience in our bosoms, loves the virtue which it would lead us to love. We are forced to the conclusion, that he who stirred up these reproaches in our breasts, himself hates the sin which they would lead us to hate. By the analogy of human design, we infer in the universe the operation of a mightier designer; and by the analogy of man's moral sentiments, we conclude that the Creator of the universe is possessed of those moral qualities by which he is not only the maker and sustainer of all things, but their righteous Governor and their Judge.

Now, such seem to be the four natural sources from which the human mind derives its idea of the Divine Being.* Viewed separately, the arguments drawn from these sources are not all conclusive, or equally conclusive; one may be considered, perhaps, merely as suggestive, and another as confirmatory; one as a proof of the existence of God, and another as an illustration of the existence of certain attributes.

Each class of objects furnishes its quota of evidence. The physical works of God give indications of power and skill. The providence of God exhibits a governing and controlling energy. Our spiritual natures lift us to the conception of a living, a personal, and spiritual God.

These three classes of objects, (deferring the consideration of the fourth for a little,) as bringing before us nature animate and inanimate, and the relation between them, establish the benevolence as well as the wisdom of God. The phenomena which prove the existence of God, also demonstrate that he delights in the happiness of his creatures. For it is conceivable that the world might have been filled with adaptations as wonderful as any of the existing ones, but all of them of a diametrically opposite character. The exquisitely formed joints of the animal frame might, in the very delicacy of their organism, have communicated the more exquisite pain. The plants of the earth might have grown to nourish the bodies of animals only as the food spread through the organs to torture every member. The sunbeams, instead of gladdening all nature,

* We purposely avoid, at this stage, the consideration of the scriptural knowledge of God, which will come in at its proper place. The Scriptures declare, that some knowledge of God can be derived from nature, and they come to us as the word of God. Rom. i. 20.—“For the invisible things of God are clearly seen,” &c.

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might have struck every living being as with a succession of spear points to harass and annoy. How delightful to find that every adaptation indicating design also indicates benevolence, and that we have as clear evidence of the goodness as of the very existence of God.

Let it be observed, too, that, proceeding upon these classes of objects, the mind, as its general conceptions expand, will also have its idea of God expanded. When nature is viewed in a narrow spirit, it may leave the impression that there is an unseemly warfare, and that there are numberless contradictions in the universe. The flowers which spring up to-day are blighted on the morrow. The product of the sunshine and the dews is often destroyed by the storms. The winds of heaven, and the waves of the ocean, look at times as if they delighted in contending with each other. Hence we find the heathens placing a separate God, with a distinctive character and purposes, over every separate element. There is the god of the rivers, the god of the winds, and the god of the ocean, and these are supposed to feel pleasure in thwarting and opposing each other. The light of knowledge, as it rises, dispels these phantoms, and discloses, among apparent incongruities and contentions, a unity of purpose indicating a unity of being in the Creator and Governor of all things.

Modern research has served to expand this conception by pointing out the links—often invisible at the first glance—which connect every one part of God's works with every other, and thereby demonstrates that all nature has been fabricated by one hand, and is governed by one Lord. The same Being who made man, formed, it is evident, the animals which minister to his comfort. Animal life, again, is dependent on vegetable life, and vegetable life is dependent on the soil and atmosphere; and thus the wide earth is seen to be one great whole. But terrestrial objects are also dependent on the seasons, and the seasons are produced by the relation between the earth and the sun; and the great whole is thus enlarged so as to include the sun. The strength of the animal muscles is suited to the size of the earth; and the continued existence of the plants of the earth, and of animal life, is dependent on the length of the day and of the year, and these are occasioned by the laws and adjustments of the solar system. The solar