
ON THE ARGUMENT FOR THEISM

An Unpublished Letter from Robert L. Dabney to Rev. R.E. McAlpine
Dated May 7, 1893, from the University of Texas, Austin (1)

Rev. McAlpine, a missionary to Japan, had written to Dabney consulting him concerning “the argument for Theism” in reply to Japanese objections. In the opening of the letter Dabney suggests the use of his pamphlet on the immortality of the soul (2) in Japan, since, in making the case for immortality, he also deals with the cosmological, teleological and moral arguments for God’s existence. Dabney also recommends the first chapters of his Lectures (3), as well as the latter portion of Alexander’s Moral Science (4) as an excellent refutation of the infinite regress argument. Finally, Dabney commends Natural Theology (5), by M. Valentine, and urges McAlpine to get a copy before returning to Japan. Dabney concludes the letter with the following counsel.

To return now to your caviler: the cosmological argument is perfect to this extent: since a universe now exists *something* must have existed from all eternity, for blank nothing cannot be the causal source of any new beings or effects. Had there ever been one hour anywhere in all the past eternity when blank nothing was universal no universe, no single being, could possibly have come into existence in all subsequent eternity. That is perfect demonstration.

Now that eternal *something* must have been uncaused, unproduced, absolutely independent as to its own being. For a producing cause must be *before* its own effect; but it is a self contradiction to put any thing prior to that which is eternal. What is absolutely eternal must be absolutely uncaused and self existent. That is a second demonstration. Now that eternal something cannot be identical with the things of the present universe, because we know by experience that they are temporal and dependent as well as multiplied, while reason says the eternal something, unbeginning, independent and self existent must be *One*. Here then is a third demonstration that the eternal one must have produced the temporal dependent many. The eternal one then must have *acted*. At least his first actions must have been absolutely self prompted, because nothing can be placed before the eternal, so that at first, there was nothing and nobody to prompt him except himself. *Now self-prompted action is free-agency*. But we cannot conceive of a free agent save as a living and intelligent being. In all human knowledge a case of real free-agency has never been seen except in a living intelligent being. The first principle of all matter is inertia.

I think your Japanese caviler might be justly told that his scheme of a universe is a self-contradiction, an impossible judgment of the mind, just as Dr. Alexander has proved concerning the old atheist scheme of infinite generations of creatures. If this Buddhist imagines a series of pantheistic causes each subsequent one created or produced by a previous one but each previous one dependent, then he has got a series which must be dependent as a whole. The sum of a number of things added together must have the attribute which is common to each and every one

of the things added. If each and every link in this series is dependent then the whole series is dependent. That is unanswerable. But dependency and eternity are self-contradictory, that I have proved above.

I have often heard that the Hindoo and Japanese scholars are very acute. I suppose they invented the greatest refinements of pantheism and idealism long before the Germans are [or?] other Europeans ever thought of them. Of course it is well to show yourself able to meet these metaphysicians on their own ground. Sound philosophy will always be able to do this but I would not expect my metaphysical victory to do much good to their souls. My idea is that the efficient weapon after all is an appeal to the guilty conscience. "Sir I perceive that you are a philosophic thinker, accordingly you must have thought to these practical conclusions, that your judgments of right and wrong, obligation and of merit and demerit are intuitive, necessary, original, universal. In them you have the highest and most certain law of your reason. This intuitive law of personal obligation points as directly to a personal obligator as a needle does to the pole. Here you are brought face to face with a righteous personal God. You know you have violated your duties to him, not to say to your fellow men. So that in spite of yourself you carry in your own intuitive conscience the convictions of a God, of sin, of guilt and of judgment. It is not worth your while to try to deny it. I know *they are there*, you can avoid knowing it only by refusing to think, by befooling yourself. Then, how shall a man be just with God? "Our gospel gives the only answer known in this world." Practically I believe that man comes to an effective knowledge of God by coming to the knowledge of their own sin and guilt. In Christian lands nobody has a fibre of atheism or pantheism left in him after he is convinced of sin by the Holy Ghost.

Yours faithfully,
R.L. Dabney

NOTES:

- (1) The MS of this letter may be found in the collection of the Department of History and Records Management Services, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Montreat, North Carolina.
- (2) "The Immortality of the Soul," *The Presbyterian Quarterly* (October 1892); reprint, in pamphlet form (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1892); reprint, *Discussions by Robert L. Dabney, D.D., LL.D.*, edited by C. R. Vaughan, volume III, *Philosophical* (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1892); reprint (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1980), pp. 569-603.
- (3) *Syllabus and Notes of the Course of Systematic and Polemic Theology Taught in Union Theological Seminary* (Virginia, 1871); 2nd edition, revised (St. Louis: Presbyterian Publishing Company of St. Louis, 1878); reprint of the 2nd edition, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1985), pp. 5-26.
- (4) Archibald Alexander (1772-1851), *Outlines of Moral Science* (New York: C. Scribner, 1852). Alexander was the first professor of theology at Princeton Theological Seminary and taught there for 40 years.
- (5) M. Valentine, *Natural Theology; or, Rational Theism* (Chicago: S.C. Griggs and Company, 1885). Valentine was a President of Pennsylvania College and a professor of theology in the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg, PA.