
FREE THINKING AND MORAL ACCOUNTABILITY

By Robert Lewis Dabney¹

Multitudes of people who think they are governed by truths and principles, are really guided by the mere sound of certain jockeying catch-words. For human nature does not like to be troubled with discriminating thought, and loves to indulge its prejudices and go with its crowd. Thus, many glory in being “progressives,” when in fact their only movement is change, and that backwards, not forwards, from the better to the worse.

America has had her millions of passionate “Union saviours” who knew not whether the Union they shouted for was that of the Constitution or that of the sheep to the wolf. They have fought and died for the flag; but they never stopped to think what were the principles and ends really symbolized by that emblem, nor to remember that when the correct symbolism is lost the flag becomes a rag. Multitudes ardently assert that “all men are created equal,” blind to the fact that there never were but two human beings created at all, of whom one was a woman, and that naturally no two human beings are ever equal to each other, but all differ as endlessly as their countenances. They huzza for freedom while they have no idea whether they mean by it license to indulge their self-will in oppressing other people, or the righteous privilege of doing those things only to which they are morally entitled.

Men who profess to be philosophic ought to be superior to this species of intellectual cheat. But all are not. We have, for instance, numerous skeptics who proudly call themselves “free-thinkers,” and glory in a “liberal” Christianity. Let us see whether these also are not mere jockey catch-words, whether these proud boasters in freedom of thought are not convicted out of their own mouths.

Their cardinal assumption is that no man is morally responsible for his beliefs, even on moral subjects. They insist that if a man honestly believes the moral opinion which he utters, he is equally innocent, whether that opinion be correct or erroneous. Now, what is their great argument for this position? It is this: That when evidence of a proposition is presented to the intellect, credence is an involuntary and necessary result. They urge obstinately that when convincing evidence of a given proposition is placed before any mind, the force of that evidence metaphysically necessitates the acceptance of that proposition into the beliefs of that mind. It has no more freedom of option to refuse credence, than it would have to refuse to feel the smart when struck with a whip, or to refuse to be chilled when ducked with cold water. For, they say, that mind could only escape credence after such evidence is seen by it through the violation and rejection of its own necessary laws of thought. But the mind has no right and no ability to reject these. Hence,

¹ “Free Thinking and Moral Accountability,” *The Christian Observer* 70:30 (Jul. 29, 1891): 1. According to C.N. Dickinson, “This last article I wrote at his dictation while with him at E_____ [Eureka?] Springs, Arkansas, where I spent about two months in the same house with him during the summer of 1891.” Letter from C.N. Dickinson to C.W. Dabney,” Feb. 27, 1901, UTS, Box 3, 1901, “[to Charles W. Dabney]: material for biography of RLD.”

they declare, no man is justly responsible for his honest beliefs, however erroneous in fact, because responsibility is limited by freedom. It is wickedly unjust to hold any man responsible for any result which is necessitated and about which he has not free will.

Such is their own pet argument. Upon it I make two remarks. First, it is an empty and hollow sophism. I am ready to admit that after convincing evidence of a proposition is lodged in the intelligence, credence is logically necessitated. But I assert that the will and free agency have a great deal to do with the question, whether such evidence shall obtain such lodgment. Here is the huge gap which these skeptics skip over so blindly in their pretended reasoning. Let us give them a parallel. Let it be granted, Mr. Skeptic, that, the barrel of my loaded rifle being ranged in a straight line with your heart, the gun being cocked and my finger upon the trigger, the emission of an executive volition from my spirit to contract that finger metaphysically necessitates that muscular motion which in turn mechanically necessitates the descent of the hammer, the explosion of the percussion cap, and the discharge of the load. Therefore I am not morally responsible for your being shot through the heart! That is your logic, Mr. Skeptic: how do you like it? Ah! You see now very clearly how impudent a sophism it is.

You cry: "Grant what you have stated, the question is, did you not exercise a murderous free agency in forming that volition to pull the trigger? Yes! Therefore the shooting is free, responsible and criminal." Just so, say I. And your erroneous moral opinions are responsible for the similar reason. It is your will and free agency which practically decide whether the evidential light for moral truths shall gain your attention and enter your intelligence, or whether it shall be precluded by prejudice, pride, laziness, or hostile will; or whether some false evidence shall be greedily embraced by your preference and thus receive a weight which it ought not to have. Moral questions are precisely the ones which always interest the will. Freedom always directs our acceptance or rejection of their light. Therefore it is that we are responsible for our moral beliefs; and it is we humble believers alone who can rightly claim to be "free-thinkers." It is because we are the free-thinkers that we are responsible for thought.

But now to turn upon the pretended free-thinkers, the skeptics, with this biting question: "How dare they claim to be free-thinkers when their own argument is that they are irresponsible for their errors *precisely because their thought is not free?*" Can there be a balder sophism than theirs? Free-thinkers quotha!² When their very excuse is that their moral thought is not free. Was there ever a corner-grocery politician who bawled himself hoarse with a jockey catch-word more vulgarly hollow?

"Liberality" has a fine, captivating sound. I admit that the liberal man is a fine fellow, provided he is liberal with his own money. But if it is my money which he has stolen, and which he lavishes upon persons who are not in need, and who have no moral right to my charity, he may be prodigal, but he is not liberal; as a philanthropist he is a humbug, and as a citizen, a rogue. The truths I have established bring the claims of the latitudinarians, rationalists and skeptics to the virtue of liberality, under a very short and decisive test. Do moral and religious truths belong to us men, or to God, our Master and Teacher? Are they our property or His? From my point of view I must reply they are His, not mine. For, because I am the real free-thinker and not the counterfeit one, because my attention to an honest admission of moral evidence, are func-

² *Archaic*. Used to express surprise or sarcasm, after quoting the word or phrase of another.

tions of my will and free agency, I am responsible to my God for embracing all the truths which he has revealed to me. But what is responsibility? It is the tie of obligation which binds the inferior to the superior, the servant to his master, the steward to his landlord. As respects my mental heritage of truth it follows that I am only a steward; God is the owner. "Now it is required of stewards that a man be found faithful." The riches entrusted to him are not for him to waste or to give away, but to guard and keep for the owner. If he gives them away without authority he is not "liberal," but a thief. He only is the liberal steward who jealously guards his master's property and its increase, in order that he may have wherewith to impart abundantly to his lord's servants and children according to his lord's injunctions. He only is the "liberal Christian" who preserves the truth received from his divine Master instead of betraying or surrendering it in order to teach it as generously and widely as possible to his fellow-servants. Such is the just inference from the correct principles. And here again I use against my opponents a just argument *ad hominem*. They say they are not responsible for their beliefs because they are not free in accepting them. Then manifestly truth does not belong to them. It is but a sophistical catch-word to talk of their liberality of thought, liberality forsooth in throwing away what does not belong to them.