

Theology I: Borden P. Bowne's Philosophy of Theism

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In writing a summary of this argument for theism, one is bound to limit himself to the positive step, for in most cases the refutation of opposing arguments depends upon premises which do not appear in this book. The refutations are perhaps acceptable in conclusion, but processes are at times uncertain.

The argument and discussion of theism are taken up under three general heads. The first portion of the book² consisting of the Introduction and chapters I, II, III and IV, is concerned with the establishment and expression of an assumed postulate. The 2nd section, chapter V, considers the relation of God to finite things, to the Universe, i.e., God as Creator. Chapters VI and VII deal with the higher moral and spiritual relations of men and God.

The argument runs as follows. We find ourselves in a world which is to a certain extent intelligible to us. We can understand and comprehend certain limited facts and relations. We see these fragmentary facts and events, and formulate "an assumed ideal universe." We, as cognitive beings, "assume that the universe is rational" (See p. 19). Our nature demands this assumption, and as an implied principle of the assumption, it follows that "Whatever our total nature calls for, may be assumed as real in default of positive disproof" (p. 25).

This principle is applied in all arts and sciences, in all the common conditions. It should also be applied to religious

¹ This is from a collection of manuscripts—mostly class papers—written while Davis was a student at Harvard Divinity School, 1902-1904. This manuscript is clearly for the Theology I class he took during the 1902-03 academic year.

² Davis is referring to Borden P. Bowne's *Philosophy of Theism*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1887. Borden P. Bowne (1847-1910) was an American Christian philosopher—on the faculty at Boston University—and a Methodist minister and theologian. He was nominated for the Nobel Prize in literature nine times.

thinking as well, for we find religion a very important factor in our lives. Hence, it follows that in the discussion of theism, we must find some basal postulate upon which all will agree. Then, by logic and metaphysics, this postulate may be confirmed and expounded, reaching this result that "Whatever our total nature calls for may be assumed as real in default of positive disproof."³

[In] a search for such a postulate, upon which we may stand, we find that none of the traditional arguments (cosmological excepted) furnish us a basis, for each one implies in the premise what it proves in the conclusion. But in using the cosmological argument, we find that we have a basis upon which all argument, all investigation must depend. Any argument, any investigation conducted, otherwise than upon the basis of these postulates are ??? and absurd. "These postulates are, Interaction, Law and System" (p. 47).

We have therefore assumed an "interacting system, A.B.C." Now this assumption of an interacting system carries with it the implication of a "unitary being" which posits and maintains the members in natural relations. For if we try to explain this system by saying that each member is independent, we deny interaction, because independent things cannot interact. In saying that A is independent of B+C we destroy the universe and have two systems. On the other hand, if we try to show that the determining power rests in the system, we are simply adding together members and getting the unit. Nor can the determining power rest in the members, for in that case we would only [be] running about in a circle and could find no resting place. There are but two possible adequate explanations. 1st either the system is dependent upon a power, M, without, or it is dependent upon a power, N, within. In either case the power is a unitary being which posits and maintains the system in mutual relations. Which of these two explanations is right will appear later.

Having established the unity of the world ground, we next meet the question of the intelligence of it. Here we introduce two premises from metaphysics. 1st this being is the source of finite and its determinations. 2nd this being is cause, not stuff. But there are two conceptions of cause, either (1) mechanical "which

³ Borden P. Bowne's *Philosophy of Theism*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1887, p. 25.

pushes" or (2) intelligent, which leads. We must accept either mechanical or intelligent, i.e., we must accept either the position that the world-ground is intelligent or non-intelligent. Now the theist holds to intelligence, while the atheist holds to non-intelligence. The theist, in support of his position, points to (1) order and intelligibility of the world; (2) indications of design in things; (3) intelligence in man; (4) the conclusion of reason and cognition upon an atheistic basis.

1st. We have already assumed law and system, but all study assumes that this system is intelligible, for psychology teaches that we formulate this system for ourselves by constructing out of experiences a rational universe and objectifying the universe as real. But if this knowledge is to have any validity, the laws of thought must correspond to the laws of the universe itself. This involves: (1) a rational universe; (2) a knowing human mind; (3) the laws of the mind and the laws of the universe must be identical; (4) there must be an arrangement by which the outer world may be reproduced in the mind accurately; (5) men must have rational natures which are identical.

All science and arts show this precision, this nicety of adjustment and we are led to hold that the world ground is intelligent and works according to intelligible laws.

2nd. The design argument, "Is there a designer?" is the question. While things apparently in their workings show a purpose, do they really show a design, and ideal. The theist says, "Yes, they are as they seem." The atheist says, "No, they may seem to have purpose, but they really do not." Objections to this argument have rested upon misconceptions of design. It is not a cause of events, but simply an ideal towards which things are tending.

3rd. Argument from Theory of Knowledge. We have established the idea of relation of individual knowledge to the universe, and the relation of atheism arises. From the standpoint of the necessitarian, there are no mental acts, only happenings. An idea is merely an event. But the atheist who holds to non-intelligence of the world ground is a necessitarian, yet he assumes mental activities, and tries to reason, even though his whole thesis rests upon the basis, not of mental activity, but of mental passivity. Atheism is self-contradicting and there is

self-destructive and leaves the theist free to hold his position that the argument from the theory of knowledge points to an intelligent world-ground.

Hence the position of the theist is maintained, and our world-ground is seen to be a unitary intelligence.

When the question of the personality of the intelligent world-ground arises, we have to choose between two positions. Either the world-ground is a personal self-conscious intelligence, or it is an impersonal unconscious intelligence. Now intelligence and rationality have been confirmed. Unconscious impersonality is incompatible with a rational intelligence, for an unconscious intelligence is nothing more than a blind force. But a conscious intelligence is a personality. And when the objection is urged that the finite personality is realized only through the objective world, we only affirm that the conscious intelligence of the finite had a beginning, while the conscious intelligence of the infinite did. But an eternal unbegun self is as possible as an eternal unbegun not-self. In fact, it is not through the not-self that we become personal, but the not-self limits our personality, hence the highest personality would be found in the being least conditioned by the not self, or in the world-ground.

Thus far we find our first cause an intelligent personality or God. We proceed to inquire what must be some of the attributes of God.

We find:

1st. Unity, i.e., God is indivisible yet complex. We cannot find the solution of the question from the mechanical point of view, for that cannot account for the manifoldness and complexity, and still maintain the indivisibility of God. We turn, therefore, to free intellect, as the only real unity which can "posit plurality and still by its self-consciousness, maintain its unity as distinct from the plurality. God, therefore, being free intelligence, has unity and he alone has unity in this sense.

2nd. Unchangeability. This attribute cannot be given God, if interpreted from the mechanistic point of view, for it would exclude activity. It must be explained metaphysically, i.e., it simply means the continuity and constancy of God's nature.

3rd. Omnipresence. Again, the mechanical interpretation is excluded. The idea of space cannot be involved, for if God were "spread out" it is evident that a part of him would be in one place and a part in another. Omnipresence can have no meaning if it does not mean concentration of presence. It, therefore, can have no meaning under the idea of space is confirmed to the nature of God as its source, and God's activity is immediately and wholly connected with any particular event. In this sense God is omnipresent.

4th. Eternity. The only limitations which can exist for God are internal. Now time is but a form of change, and a reality, a being, therefore, like God, which is in full possession of itself and does not go through a process of self-revelation, is not in time, so far as the being himself is concerned. He would be the all-inclusive present. He is simply, I am without memory or without expectation. In this sense he is eternal. But his relations to us is in time, but that which is in time to us is without time to God, for he comprehends the whole at once.

5th. Omniscience, i.e., knowledge of past, present and future is incompatible with freedom, and must be denied.⁴

6th. [Omnipotence.] Two views have been held upon this question. 1st that God can do the doable but is limited by certain necessities. 2nd that God can do the impossible. The 2nd is manifestly an absurd position. The first assumes a different meaning after considering the nature of truth and law. The question of freedom and necessity is involved. Now truth and law must be founded in God, for God is the unconditional, i.e., law and truth are but an expression of God's nature. Neither is a reality, but exist only in and through God, and therefore, are dependent upon him, and not he upon them. "God does not exist and then act but exists only in and through his act."⁵ He is exerting his greatest power when he is acting the greatest, therefore, rather than saying that God is limited by certain necessities, we must see that these apparent necessities are but expressions of his omnipotence.

⁴ The professor underlined the words "must be denied," and wrote a question mark in the margin here.

⁵ Borden P. Bowne's *Philosophy of Theism*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1887, p. 169.

God and the World

There have been two general classes of explanations of the relation of the finite to the infinite. One is theistic. The other is pantheistic. Any pantheistic conception involves the idea of God as stuff and is incompatible with our established principle of first cause. Nor can the finite be considered as modes of the infinite, for this is incompatible with unity. There are but two logical conceptions possible. 1st. The conception which regards the finite as a mode of the infinite without any proper thing-hood. 2nd. As a product of God. This conception is illustrated by the relation of thought to mind. "The thoughts are not modes of mind but mental acts."⁶ Finite things are not modes of the infinite, but act of the infinite. There is no more distinction between the finite and the infinite than there is between thoughts and the mind. But whatever may be the relation, the finite must be considered as created. God is the agent, but the process of creation is a mystery. God did not make the world from nothing, but rather he caused that to be which was not before. He is the first cause. This idea of creation is the only one which preserves the unity of God. But there is a possibility of two interpretations here. One way [to] look upon creation as a necessary part of God's nature, or as a product of his free will. The former view is opposed to the idea of freedom, and it, therefore, falls of its own weight. Therefore, we must look upon the finite expression of a divine free will.

But in thinking of God as the creator, we must not permit our notions of temporality enter into the question, for we have seen that God is not subjected to time but is the all-inclusive present. God wills creation, but we must not suppose time to exist previous to the creation. Nor can we admit the idea of an unrealized will in God. Willing with God is the logical, but not chronological, antecedent of creation. The will to create, and the creation are co-extensive. The world was created, therefore, by divine will. As to the present relation of the divine will to the finite, 1st is design which regards God's mission as fulfilled after the first creation. The other extreme sees so little of regularity in the world that a constant

⁶ Borden P. Bowne's *Philosophy of Theism*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1887, p. 176.

creative process seems necessary to keep the world going. Neither of these explanations is adequate. The facts out of which the first grew are real and show the constancy of God's process. Not that they are eternal laws, but that God proceeds along the same lines. It is doubtful if God is creating in the physical world, but simply carries out his long-established system. But when we get beyond the physical world into the spiritual world, we meet with difficulty in applying the principle.

But divine good in its proper sense is applied only to spiritual finite beings, which are free. Good has no meaning when applied to a physical thing. Then free spirits are the subjects of Divine Good. This implies a world good, for such a cosmic movement without aim or purpose could not be the outcome of a self-respecting God. We can find no adequate signs of that final purpose in the world of things; hence we turn to the moral realm.

But there is no way of deducing the ethical ideal from the metaphysical attributes of God. But there is a possibility of moral nature and we find ourselves possessed of a moral nature. Hence, we assume a moral nature. To account for this, we turn to a moral author. Natural thought has generally regarded moral nature in man as pointing to a moral nature in God. Now in as much as we recognize God as the author of our moral nature any sin is a sin against God. We have to take this on faith. There is no logical proof.

The 2nd form for argument for moral life is the idea of progress in history, and the demand of nature for a moral life. But these arguments do not account for the moral nature. Our whole moral idea rests upon the possibility of freedom, it rests upon the assumption that there is some element of chance of self-determination in our lives. Facts would seem to substantiate the non-moral as well as the moral condition, and yet by faith we cling to the moral end. Even experience does not prove the goodness of [the] world-ground, and while these arguments are going on, men speak of good and bad universe, and this is a mere implication of an assumption of a moral good. "But the value of life must be decided by the race."⁷ The things

⁷ Borden P. Bowne's *Philosophy of Theism*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1887, p. 230.

which life asserts worthwhile are the things which count says the optimist. But the pessimist ignores whatever of good there is and goes on his way complaining. But finally, we fall back upon the power and the holy love of God as the highest conception of the moral ideal.

But theism has a bearing on practical morality. Atheism makes void all conception of a moral life, for how can an automaton be anything more than a mere thing, a thing pushed hither and yon, even his ideals and purposes [are] but the product of his past. He can have no moral judgements, for it is not his to judge. He can have no moral ideals, for his ideas are but events, and his only ideal can be the present event in his mind; he can have no system of duties, for it he had a duty, being an automaton, he could not bring it into execution.

A moral life can be only for the theist, only in the thought of the kingdom of righteousness. Ethics must not only afford laws of living but must give ideals.

Criticism

The whole scheme reminds me of the boy's kite. It was a good kite, but it had so much tail that it would not fly.

It seems to me, too, that there are glaring inconsistencies. On page 129 he urges that "consciousness is a consciousness of our states, thoughts, etc." It seems to me that he argues his idea of consciousness of thoughts, states, etc. in the personality of the world-ground. But on page 152,

It would be without memory and expectation, yet in absolute enjoyment of itself. For such a being the present alone would exist; its now would be eternal, and its name, I am. For us the unconditioned world-ground, or God, is such a being; ...⁸

I cannot [see] how the two conceptions are to be reconciled. I think that it is a characteristic error of the whole book that he deals with one topic at a time regardless of all others. He seems to write "without memory and without expectation, yet in absolute enjoyment of himself."

⁸ The quote is on page 153.

Chapter V appears to me as a guarded attempt to avoid inexplainable problems. There was only one place where I felt sure that he knew his line of argument. On page 179 in answer to the question, "How is it possible?" he replies, "there is no rational answer. His argument for the trinity seems to me a denial of everything that he tried to prove in the "attribute of unity." In short, it seems to tack such a long unnecessary tail onto the first three chapters.

A note from the professor at the bottom:

Abstract is good but the criticisms are too much in the style of the worst parts of the book. The inconsistency between p. 129 and p. 152 is not made clear.