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## Divine Attributes

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by R. L. Dabney

From Lecture 4

IT is exceedingly hard for us to return an exact answer to the question, How much reason can infer of the attributes of God? Shall we say: "So much as the wisest pagans, like Plato, discovered of them?" It still remains doubtful how much unacknowledged aid he may not have received from Hebrew sources. Many think that Plato received much through Pythagoras and his Egyptian and Mesopotamian researches. Or if we seek to find how far our own minds can go on this subject, without drawing upon the Scriptures, we are not sure of the answer; because when results have been given to us, it is much easier to discover the logical tie between them and their premises, than to detect unaided both proofs and results. Euclid having told us that the square of the hypotenuse equals the squares of the two remaining sides of every right angled triangle, it becomes much easier to hunt up a synthetic argument to prove it, than it would have been to detect this great relation by analysis. But when we approach Natural Theology we cannot forget the attributes which the Scriptures ascribe to God.



### 1. God's Eternity.

Yet some things are as clear as God's being. The first and most obvious of these attributes is, that He has no beginning, and no end. By God's eternity divines also intend a third thing: His existence without succession. These three propositions express their definition of His eternity: existence not related to time. For the first: His being never had a beginning: for had there ever been a time when the First Cause was not, nothing could ever have existed. So natural reason indicates that His being will never end, by this, that all pagans and philosophers make their gods immortal. The account of this conclusion seems to be, that it follows from God's independence, self-existence, and necessary existence. These show that there can be no cause to make God's being end. The immortality of the First Cause then is certain, unless we ascribe to it the power and wish of self-annihilation. But neither of these is possible. What should ever prompt God's will to such a volition? His simplicity of substance (to be separately proved anon) does not permit the act; for the only kind of destruction of which the universe has any experience, is by disintegration. The necessity of God's existence proves it can never end. The ground of His existence, intrinsic in Himself, is such that it cannot but be operative; witness the fact that, had it been, at any moment of the past infinite duration, inoperative, God and the universe would have been, from that moment, forever impossible.

Is it Unsuccessive?

But that God's existence is without succession, does not seem so clear to natural reason. It is urged by Turretin that "God is immense. But if His existence were measured by parts of

duration, it would not be incommensurable." This is illogical. Do not the schoolmen themselves say, that: *essentia* and *esse* are not the same? To measure the continuance of God's *esse* by successive Parts of time, is not to measure His essence thereby. A similar distinction shows the weakness of Turretin's second argument: "That because simple and immutable, We cannot exist in succession, for the flux of being from past to present and present to future would be change, and even change of composition." I reply it is God's substance which is simple and immutable; that its subsistence should be a continuance in succession does not imply a change in substance. Nor is it correct metaphysics to say that a subsistence in succession is compounded, namely of the essence and the successive momenta of time through which it is transmitted. (See here, Kant.) Nor is Dr Dick's argument even so plausible: That God's being in a past eternity must be unsuccessive, because an infinite past, composed of successive parts, is impossible; and whatever God's mode of subsistence was, that it is, and will be. An infinite future made up of a succession of infinitely numerous finite parts is possible, as Dick admits; and so an infinite past thus constituted is equally as possible. Neither is comprehensible to our minds. If Turretin or Charnock only meant that God's subsistence is not a succession marked off by changes in His essence or states, their reasonings would prove it. But if it is meant that the divine consciousness of its own existence has no relation to successive duration, I think it unproved, and incapable of proof to us. Is not the whole plausibility of the notion hence; that divines, following that analysis of our idea of our own duration into the succession of our own consciousnesses, (which Locke made so popular in his war against innate ideas,) infer: Since all God's thoughts and acts are ever equally present with Him, He can have no succession of His consciousnesses; and so, no relation to successive time. But the analysis is false (see Lecture viii,) and would not prove the conclusion as to God, if correct. Though the creature's consciousnesses constituted an unsuccessive unit act, as God's do, it would not prove that the consciousness of the former was unrelated to duration. But 2d. In all the acts and changes of creatures, the relation of succession is actual and true. Now, although God's knowledge of these as it is subjective to Himself, is unsuccessive, yet it is doubtless correct, I. e., true to the objective facts. But these have actual succession. So that the idea of successive duration must be in God's thinking. Has He not all the ideas we have; and infinitely more? But if God in thinking the objective, ever thinks successive duration, can we be sure that His own consciousness of His own subsistence is unrelated to succession in time? The thing is too high for us. The attempt to debate it will only produce one of those "antinomies" which emerge, when we strive to comprehend the incomprehensible.

## 2. Unity of God.

Does reason show the First Cause to be one or plural? If one: whence the strong tendency to polytheism? This may be explained in part by the craving of the common mind for concrete ideas. We may add the causes stated by Turretin: That man's sense of weakness and exposure prompts him to lean upon superior strength: That gratitude and admiration persuade him to deify human heroes and benefactors at their deaths: And that the copiousness and variety of God's agencies have suggested to the incautious a plurality of agents. Hodge (Theol. P. I. Ch. 3.) seems to regard Pantheism as the chief source of polytheism. He believes that pantheistic conceptions of the universe have been more persistent and prevalent in all ages than any other. "Polytheism has its origin in nature worship: . . . and nature worships rests on the assumption that nature is God."

But I am persuaded a more powerful impulse to polytheism arises from the co-action of two natural principles in the absence of a knowledge of God in Christ. One is the sense of weakness

and dependence, craving a superior power on whom to lean. The other is the shrinking of conscious guilt from infinite holiness and power. The creature needs a God: the sinner fears a God. The expedient which results is, the invention of intermediate and mediating divinities, more able than man to succor, yet less awful than the infinite God. Such is notably the account of the invention of saint-worship, in that system of baptized polytheism known as Romanism. And here we see the divine adaptation of Christianity; in that it gives us Christ, very man, our brother: and very God, our Redeemer. Reason does pronounce God one. But here again, I repudiate weak supports. Argues Turretin: If there are more than one, all equal, neither is God: if unequal, only the highest is God. This idea of exclusive supremacy is doubtless essential to religious trust; Has it, thus far, been shown essential to the conception of a First Cause? Were there two or more independent eternal beings, neither of them would be an infallible object of trust. But has it been proved as yet, that we are entitled to expect such a one? Again, Dr. S. Clarke urges: The First Cause exists necessarily: but (a.) This necessity must operate forever, and everywhere alike, and, (b.) This absolute sameness must make oneness. Does not this savour of Spinozism? Search and see. As to the former proposition: all that we can infer from necessary existence is, that it cannot but be just what it is. What it is, whether singular, dual, plural; that is just the question. As to the 2d proposition, sameness of operation does not necessarily imply oneness of effect. Have two successive nails from the same machine, necessarily numerical identity? Others argue again: We must ascribe to God every conceivable perfection, because, if not, another more perfect might be conceived; and then he would be the God. I reply, yes, if he existed. It is no reasoning to make the capacity of our imaginations the test of the substantive existence of objective things. Again, it is argued more justly, that if we can show that the eternal self-existent Cause must be absolute and infinite in essence, then His exclusive unity follows, for that which is Infinite is all-embracing as to that essence. Covering, so to speak, all that kind of being, it leaves no room for anything of its kind coordinate with itself. Just as after defining a universe, we cannot place any creature outside of it: so, if God is infinite, there can be but one. Whether He is infinite we shall inquire.

Argued from Interdependence of all His effects.

The valid and practical argument, however, for God's unity is the convergency of design and interdependency of all His works. All dualists, indeed, from Zoroaster to Manes, find their pretexts in the numerous cross-effects in nature, seeming to show cross-purposes:—e. g. one set of causes educes a fruitful crop: when it is just about to gladden the reaper, it is beaten into the mire by hail, through another set of atmospheric causes. Everywhere poisons are set against food, evil against good, death against life. Are there not two antagonist wills in Nature? Now it is a poor reply, especially to the mind aroused by the vast and solemn question of the origin of evil, or to the heart wrung by irresistible calamity, to say with Paley, that we see similarity of contrivance in all nature. Two hostile kings may wage internecine war, by precisely the same means and appliances. The true answer is, that, question nature as we may, through all her kingdoms, animal, inorganic, celestial, from the minutest disclosures of the microscope, up to the grandest revelations of the telescope, second causes are all interdependent; and the designs convergent so far as comprehended, so that each effect depends, more or less directly, on all the others. Thus, in the first instance: The genial showers and suns gave, and the hail destroyed, the grain. But look deeper: They are all parts of one and the same meteorologic system. The same cause exhaled the vapor which made the genial rain and the ruthless hail. Nay, more; the pneumatic currents which precipitated the hail, were constituent parts of a system which, at the same moment, were doing somewhere a work of blessing. Nature is one machine, moved by one mind. Should you see a great mill, at one place delivering its meal to the suffering poor, and at

another crushing a sportive child between its iron wheels: it would be hasty to say, "Surely, these must be deeds of opposite agents." For, on searching, you find that there is but one water-wheel, and not a single smaller part which does not inosculate, nearly or remotely, with that. This instance suggests also, that dualism is an inapplicable hypothesis. Is Ormusd stronger than Ahriman? Then he will be victor. Are both equal in power? Then the one would not allow the other to work with his machinery; and the true result, instead of being a mixture of cross-effects, would be a sort of "dead lock " of the wheels of nature.

### God a Spirit.

We only know substance by its properties; but our reason intuitively compels us to refer the properties known to a subjectum, a substratum of true being, or substantia. We thus know, first, spiritual substance, as that which is conscious, thinks, feels, and wills; and then material substance, as that which is unconscious, thoughtless, lifeless, inert. To all the latter we are compelled to give some of the attributes of extension; to the former it is impossible to ascribe any of them. Now, therefore, if this first Cause is to be referred to any class of substance known to us, it must be to one of these two. Should it be conceived that there is a third class, unknown to us, to which the first Cause may possibly belong, it would follow, supposing we had been compelled to refer the first Cause to the class of spirits, (as we shall see anon that we must,) that to this third class must also belong all creature spirits as species to a genus. For we know the attributes, those of thought and will, common between God and them; it would be the differentia, which would be unknown. Is the first Cause, then, to be referred to the class, spirits? Yes; because we find it possessed, in the highest possible degree, of every one of the attributes by which we recognize spirit. It thinks; as we know by two signs. It produced us, who think; and there cannot be more in the effect than was in the cause. It has filled the universe with contrivances, the results of thought. It chooses; for this selection of contrivances implies choice. And again, whence do creatures derive the power of choice, if not from it? It is the first Cause of life; but this is obviously an attribute of spirit, because we find full life nowhere, except we see signs of spirit along with it; The first Cause is the source of force and of motion. But matter shows us, in no form, any power to originate motion. Inertia is its normal condition. We shall find God's power and presence penetrating and inhabiting all material bodies; but matter has a displacing power, as to all other matter. That which is impenetrable obviously is not ubiquitous.

But may not God be like us, matter and spirit in one person? I answer, No. Because this would be to be organized; but organization can neither be eternal, nor immutable. Again, if He is material, why is it that He is never cognizable to any sense? We know that He is all about us always, yet never visible, audible, nor palpable. And last, He would no longer be penetrable to all other matter, nor ubiquitous.

### Simplicity of God's Substance.

Divines are accustomed to assert of the divine substance an absolute simplicity. If by this it is meant that He is uncompounded, that His substance is ineffably homogeneous, that it does not exist by assemblage of atoms, and is not discernible, it is true. For all this is clear from His true spirituality and eternity. We must conceive of spiritual substance as existing thus; because all the acts, states, and consciousnesses of spirits, demand a simple, uncompounded substance. The same view is probably drawn from His eternity and independence. For the only sort of construction or creation, of which we see anything in our experience, is that made by some

aggregation of parts, or composition of substance; and the only kind of death we know is by disintegration. Hence, that which has neither beginning nor end is uncompounded.

But that God is more simple than finite spirits in this, that in Him substance and attribute are one and the same, as they are not in them, I know nothing. The argument is, that as God is immutably what He is, without succession, His essence does not like ours pass from mode to mode of being, and from act to act, but is always all modes, and exerting all acts; hence His modes and His acts are Himself. God's thought is God. He is not active, but activity. I reply, that if this means more than is true of a man's soul, viz: that its thought is no entity, save the soul thinking; that its thought, as abstracted from the soul that thinks it, is only an abstraction and not a thing; it is undoubtedly false. For then we should have reached the pantheistic notion, that God has no other being than the infinite series of His own consciousnesses and acts. Nor would we be far off from the other result of this fell theory; that all that is, is God. For he who has identified God's acts thus with His being, will next identify the effects thereof, the existence of the creatures therewith.

#### 4. God Immense.

Infinitude means the absolutely limitless character of God's essence. Immensity the absolutely limitless being of His substance. His being, as eternal, is in no sense circumscribed by time; as immense, in no wise circumscribed by space. But let us not conceive of this as a repletion of infinite space by diffusion of particles: like, e. g., an elastic gas released in vacuo. The scholastic formula was, "The whole substance, in its whole essence, is simultaneously present in every point of infinite space, yet without multiplication of itself. This is unintelligible; (but so is His immensity:) it may assist: to exclude the idea of material extension. God's omnipresence is His similar presence in all the space of the universe.

Now, to me, it is no proof of His immensity to say, the necessity of His nature must operate everywhere, because absolute from all limitation. The inference does not hold. Nor to say that our minds impel us to ascribe all perfection to God; whereas exclusion from any space would be a limitation; for this is not conclusive of existences without us. Nor to say, that God must be everywhere, because His action and knowledge are everywhere, and these are but His essence acting and knowing. Were the latter true, it would only prove God's omnipresence. But so far as reason apprehends His immensity, it seems to my mind to be a deduction from His omnipresence. The latter we deduce from His simultaneous action and knowledge, everywhere and perpetually, throughout: His universe. Now, let us not say that God is nothing else than His acts. Let us not rely on the dogma of the mediaeval physicks: "That substance cannot act save where it is present." But God, being the first Cause, is the source of all force. He is also pure spirit. Now we may admit that the sun (by its attraction of gravitation) may act upon parts of the solar system removed from it by many millions of miles; and that, without resorting to the hypothesis of an elastic ether by which to propagate its impulse. It may be asked: if the sun's action throughout the solar system fails to prove His presence throughout it, how does God's universal action prove His omnipresence? The answer is in the facts above stated. There is no force originally inherent in matter. The power which is deposited in it, must come from the first Cause, and must work under His perpetual superintendence. His, not theirs, is the recollection, intelligence, and purpose which guide. Now, as we are conscious that our intelligence only acts where it is present, and where it perceives, this view of Providence necessarily impels us to impute omnipresence to this universal cause. For the power of the cause must be where the effect is.

But now, having traced His being up to the extent of the universe, which is to us practically immense, why limit it there? Can the mind avoid the inference that it extends farther? If we stood on the boundary of the universe, and some angel should tell us that this was "the edge of the divine substance," would it not strike us as contradictory? Such a Spirit, already seen to be omnipresent, has no bounding outline. Again, we see God doing and regulating so many things over so vast an area, and with such absolute sovereignty, that we must believe His resources and power are absolute within the universe. But it is practically boundless to us. To succeed always inside of it, God must command such a multitude of Relations, that we are practically impelled to the conclusion, that there are no relations, and nothing to be related, outside His universe. But if His power is exclusive of all other, in all infinite space, we can scarcely avoid the conclusion that His substance is in all space.

### God Infinite.

By passing from one to another of God's attributes, and discovering their boundless character, we shall at last establish the infinitude of His essence or nature. It is an induction from the several parts.

### 5. Immutable.

5. By GOD'S IMMUTABILITY we mean that He is incapable of change. As to His attributes, His nature, his purposes, He remains the same from eternity to eternity. Creation and other acts of God in time, imply no change in Him; for the purpose to do these acts at that given time was always in Him, just as when He effected them. This attribute follows from His necessary existence; which is such that He cannot be any other than just what He is. It follows from His self-existence and independence; there being none to change Him. It follows from His simplicity: for how can change take place, when there is no composition to be change? It follows from His perfection; for being infinite, He cannot change for the better; and will not change for the worse. Scarcely any attribute is mote clearly manifested to the reason than God's immutability.

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