

PHILOSOPHY OF THEISM

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Philosophy of theism by Borden P. Bowne

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BY

BORDEN P. BOWNE

PROFESSOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN BOSTON UNIVERSITY

AUTHOR OF "METAPHYSICS" "INTRODUCTION TO
PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY" ETC.

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PREFACE.

THIS work does not aim to say everything about theism. I have rather sought to give an outline of the essential argument which might serve as a text for teachers and as a somewhat critical survey of the subject for other readers.

Kant pointed out that the ontological argument properly proves nothing, and that the cosmological and the design argument depend on the ontological. The argument, then, is not demonstrative, and rests finally on the assumed existence of a perfect being. In a different form I have maintained the same position; but so far from concluding that theistic faith is baseless, I have sought to show that essentially the same postulate underlies our entire mental life. There is an element of faith and volition latent in all our theorizing. Where we cannot prove, we believe. Where we cannot demonstrate, we choose sides. This element of faith

cannot be escaped in any field of thought, and without it the mind is helpless and dumb. Oversight of this fact has led to boundless verbal haggling and barren logic-chopping, in which it would be hard to say whether the affirmative or the negative be the more confused. Absurd demands for "proof" have been met with absurd "proofs." The argument has thus been transferred from the field of life and action, where it mainly belongs, to the arid wastes of formal logic, where it has fared scarcely better than the man who journeyed to Jericho from Jerusalem. The conclusion is that theism is the fundamental postulate of our total life. It cannot, indeed, be demonstrated without assumption, but it cannot be denied without wrecking all our interests.

This claim has been especially emphasized in considering the bearing of theism upon the problem of knowledge. I have sought to show that our cognitive and speculative interests, as well as our moral and religious interests, are so bound up with theism as to stand or fall with it. If we say, then, that theism is strictly proved by nothing, we must also admit that it is implicit in everything. Anti-theistic schemes are generally

in the instinctive stage of thought, where knowledge constitutes no problem and is taken for granted. In this stage any theory whatever may be held, however self-destructive; and when its suicidal implications are pointed out, the theorist falls back on unreasoned common-sense, and repudiates, not his own theory, which is the real offender, but the critic. He sets up natural selection as the determining principle of belief, and then repudiates the great catholic convictions of the race. He shows how the survival of the fittest must bring thought and thing into accord, and then rejects the beliefs which survive. He defines mind as an adjustment of inner relations to outer relations, and forthwith drifts off into nescience. He presents the Unknown Cause as the source of all beliefs, and then rules out most of them as invalid, and, at times, declares them all worthless. This pitiable compound of instinct and reflection, in which each destroys the other, has even been regarded as the final philosophy. Such performances are both saddening and wearisome. It seems clear that whoever will reason should regard the conditions of reason, and should not set up theories which undermine reason. But it will be a long

step in advance when this simple principle is recognized. Meanwhile the critic must possess his tired soul in patience when he sees suicidal theories parading as science and supreme wisdom. The greater the dearth of thought, the greater the swarm of opinions.

Yet there is some progress. Except in philosophy and theology, there is coming to be a decided conviction that no one has a right to an opinion who has not studied the subject. Off-hand decisions of unstudied questions receive very little consideration nowadays in the sciences. It is to be hoped that this mental seriousness may yet extend to philosophy and theology. At present it is not so. He would be a rare man indeed who could not settle questions in theology or Biblical criticism without previous study; while the small men who could dispose of philosophy and philosophers in one afternoon are legion. Meanwhile the irrelevance, the misunderstanding, the superficiality are so apparent that the student is unavoidably reminded of our first parents, of whom it is said, They were naked and were not ashamed.

That nature when driven out with a fork always comes running back is a discovery of

ancient date. We have an excellent illustration of this law in the way in which language has avenged the attempt to discredit the teleological view of nature. Teleology has taken entire possession of the language of botany and biology, especially when expounded in terms of evolution. Even plants do the most acute and far-sighted things to maintain their existence. They specialize themselves with a view to cross-fertilization and make nothing of changing species or genus to reach their ends. A supply is often regarded as fully explained when the need is pointed out; and evolution itself is not infrequently endowed with mental attributes. Such extraordinary mythology arises from the mental necessity for recognizing purpose in the world; and as it would not be good form to speak of a divine purpose, there is no shift but to attribute it to "Nature" or "Evolution" or "Law" or some other of the homemade divinities of the day.

The atheistic gust of recent years has about blown over. Atheism is dead as a philosophy, and remains chiefly as a disposition. But the origin and history of the late atheistic renaissance are not without both interest and instruction. The crude popular realism, joined with