

## LECTURE XII.

### THE RESPONSIBILITY AND PROVINCE OF REASON IN RELIGION.

#### SYLLABUS.

1. Have dispositions and desires, which are *a priori* to volition, a moral character?

Turretin, Loc. ix, Qu. 2. Dick, Lect. 105, on 10th Com. Dr. Julius Muller, Christian Doctrine of Sin. Hodge, Theology, pt. ii, ch. 5. Alexander's Moral Science, ch. 20, 22, 23, 27. Edwards on the Will, pt. iv, § 1.

2. Is Man responsible for his Beliefs?

Alexander's Moral Science, ch. 9, Lect. on Evidences, Univ. of Va., Lect. 1. Review of the above by Dr. C. R. Vaughan, Southern Lit. Messenger, 1851.

3. What is the proper province of Reason in Revealed Theology?

Turretin, Loc. i, Vol. i, Qu. 8, 9, 10. Thornwell's Lect. Vol. i, Lect. 1. Hodge's Outlines, ch. 2. Hodge's Syst. Theology, pt. i, ch. 3. Milner's "End of Controversy." Hill's Divinity, bk. ii, ch. 5.

**W**IDE difference of opinion has long prevailed, as to man's responsibility for the dispositions, habits and desires tend-

ing to moral volitions. Pelagians and semi-Pelagians say, that since responsibility cannot be more extended than freedom of the will, no praise or blame can be attached to dispositions, which they hold to be involuntary. And they say that Calvinists cannot dispute the latter statement, because they make dispositions causes of volition, and thus going before. Hence, also, is the Pelagian definition of sin and holiness, as consisting only of right or wrong acts of soul. The evangelical Arminian is usually found holding the middle ground, that only those dispositions, habits and desires have a moral responsibility attached to them, which have resulted from a series of acts of free-will. But we hold that man is praise- or blame-worthy for his dispositions, principles and habits, as well as for his volitions; and that his responsibility depends on the nature, and not on the origin, of the disposition which he spontaneously and intelligently entertains.

We make our appeal here to consciousness, which causes us shame and self-reproach for evil propensities not ripened into volitions, and tells us that we would feel equal resentment for evil dispositions towards us and our rights, though never formed into the overt intention of injury. 2d. Our minds intuitively judge that the moral character of an act resides in its motives. Witness the process of investigation in the charge for crime before a jury. Indeed, the act of volition, nakedly considered, is a merely natural effect, and has no more moral character than the muscular motions which follow it. For the volition which extends the hand with alms to an enemy, or with a bribe to one to commit a sin, is the same physical volition: we must go back

of it, to the motive by which it was caused, to settle its moral character. That element is not in the naked volition; says the Pelagian, it is not in the motives prior to volition; then it is nowhere! 3d. The notion is inconsistent with our established idea about character. Here is a man who is said to have a dishonest character. It only becomes cognizable to us by his acts. He must, then, have performed a series of acts, having the common quality of dishonesty. Now, nothing comes from nothing; there must be some cause for that sameness of character; and that cause is the prevalent disposition to steal, separate from, and prior to, each thievish act. For the bad cause cannot be in the will itself; this would be peculiarly objectionable to the Pelagian. This, then, is what is meant when this man is said to have a bad character. Has the word bad here, no proper meaning? Does the family of daughters, the separate acts, bear no relationship to their mother? 4th. On the Pelagian scheme, the wickedness of sins of omission would be inexplicable. For in them, there is often no volition at all; and therein consists their wickedness. A man passing by the water sees an innocent child drowning; the idea of rescue is suggested to his mind; but he comes to no choice, does nothing, and while he hesitates, the child sinks to rise no more. Is he innocent? Our conscience declares that he is not. Now, we can consistently explain wherein he is not, viz., in the state of his selfish and indolent feelings. But the opposite party have no explanation. There has literally been no volition; on their theory they should say, what every sound conscience rejects, that the neglect has been attended with no guilt. 5th. A similar argument is presented by instances of impulsive and unpremeditated acts, done before we have a moment for reflection. We properly approve or blame them, according as they are generous or malignant. But there has been no intelligent, deliberate choice; if we confine our view exclusively to the act of soul itself, it appears as purely irrational as the impulses of mere animal instinct. The moral quality of these acts must be found, then, in the dispositions and principles which prompted them.

Such are the reasonings, drawn from the conscience and consciousness of all men. The conclusion cannot be restricted in the way proposed by the Arminian. For, if original or congenital dispositions have no moral quality, because not created by a series of acts of intelligent free-will, then: 1st. God could never have any moral credit, His holy disposition having been not only original and eternal, but necessary. 2d. Nor could the holy man, Adam, or the holy angels have been approvable, though perfectly innocent, because their holy dispositions were infused into them by their creator. This contradicts both conscience and Scripture. 3d. When mankind see an inherited trait influencing the

Instances.

conduct, like the traditionary bravery of the Briton, or the congenital vengefulness of the American Indian, if they apprehend that the agents are not lunatic, and are exercising a sane spontaneity as qualified by these natural traits, they approve or blame them. This shows that in the judgment of common sense, the responsibility turns only on the question, what the disposition is, and not, whence it is. Last: on this view, it would be impossible that the free agent could ever construct a righteous disposition, or *habitus*, by his own free acts. For all are agreed in that rule of practical law, which judges the moral complexion of the act according to the agent's intention. But a soul as yet devoid of positively righteous principles would harbor no positively moral intentions. Hence, the first act of choice which the philosophers look to, for beginning the right moral habitude, would have no moral quality, not being dictated by a moral motive. Then it could contribute nothing to the habit as a moral one. This very plain demonstration decides the whole matter, by showing that, on either the Pelagian or Arminian scheme, a dependent being could never have a positively righteous character or action at all.

Our opponents argue that the involuntary cannot be sin, and they suppose that they have intrenched themselves in the plainest of moral intuitions. But, objected "That the involuntary cannot be sin." The objection is, none the less, a sophism founded in the ambiguous use of the word involuntary. Man's moral dispositions are involuntary, in the sense that they do not immediately result from volitions as their next cause. But this is not the sense in which our intuitions assert the necessity of the voluntary to our responsibility. There is an entirely different sense, in which we say an act is involuntary, when it occurs against the choice of the will. Thus, the fall of the man over the precipice was involuntary, when he was striving to cleave to the edge of the stone. This is the sense in which we say that, self-evidently, the man was not blamable for his fall. The other meaning, sophistically confounded with this, raises the question whether the state or disposition is spontaneous. If it acts spontaneously, not because a stronger agent forces the man to harbor or to indulge it against his choice, then, in the sense necessary to free agency, disposition is voluntary; that is to say, it is spontaneous; it is as truly a function of self-love as volition itself. The evidence is very near and plain. Does any external compulsion cause us to feel our dispositions? No. From their very nature it cannot be: a compelled tendency would not be our disposition, but a violence put upon it. The main question may be submitted to a very practical test. Would a disposition to a wicked act subsist, even as not consented to or formed into a purpose, in a perfectly holy soul, like that of Gabriel, for one instant? It would die in its very incipency. The attempt to inject concu-

πισcence, would be like an attempt to strike sparks from the flint and steel, in a perfect vacuum. The fire would expire in being born. But if the holiness of the nature thus excluded the birth, this clearly shows that the very birth of wrong desire or tendency is wrong.

Another objection is; that our theory of the immorality of evil dispositions would imply that the soul's essence is altered; or that depravity is a change in the substance of the soul: which would make God the author of sin, and man an unfortunate, sentient puppet. For, say they, there is nothing but the soul and its acts; and if you deny that all morality resides in acts, some of it must reside in the essence of the soul itself. The sophism of this argument would be sufficiently exposed by asking, what is a moral act. If you make it anything more than a mere notional object of thought, an imagination about which we think, is it any thing besides the soul acting? Well: in the same sense, our moral dispositions are but our souls feeling. I reply again, and yet more decisively, that immoral quality is only negative—i. e., *ἡ ἀμαρτία ἐστὶ ἡ ἀνομία*. It is the lack of conformity to God's will, which constitutes sin. The negative absence of this principle of active conformity is all that is necessary to predicate. Thus, the idea of depravity's being a substantial change is seen to be out of the question. We might farther reply to the challenge, whether there is anything before us, save the soul and its acts: Yes. There is the soul's essence, distinguishable from its substance: there is its disposition: there are its liabilities, its affections, its desires. The terms of the cavil are no more than a verbal quibble. What true philosopher ever questioned the existence of qualities, qualifying a spiritual agent, yet not implying either decomposition or change of its simple substance? Then it is possible that it may be qualified morally.

The question whether man is responsible for his belief, is nearly connected with the one just discussed.

2. Man responsible for his beliefs. Many modern writers have urged that he is not, because belief is the necessary and involuntary result of evidence seen by the mind. Further, it is urged; if the doctrine that man is responsible for his belief be held, then the horrible doctrine of persecution will follow; for erroneous beliefs being often very mischievous, if also criminal, it would follow that they ought to be punished by society. To the first, I reply, that while the admission of demonstrative proofs, when weighed by the mind is necessary, and involuntary, the voluntary powers have a great deal to do with the question whether they shall be weighed fairly or not. Inattention, prejudice against the truth or the advocate, heedlessness, guilty and wicked habits of perverting the soul's faculties; all these are voluntary; and I fearlessly assert, that no erroneous belief on

any important moral question can arise in a sane mind, except through the operation of one or more of these causes. In this, then, is the guilt of false beliefs on moral subjects. To the second objection, I reply that it does not follow, because a man is responsible for his beliefs, he is responsible to his fellow-man. There are abundant reasons for denying the latter, which it would be easy to show, if I were going into the subject of freedom of thought.

On the affirmative side, I remark, first: that all the analogies of nature show us a Providence holding man responsible for his beliefs. If prejudice, passion, haste, inattention, prevents a man from attaching due weight to testimony or other evidence, as to the poison of a given substance, he experiences its effects just as though he had taken it of set purpose. So of all other things.

Second: Conscience clearly condemns many acts, based immediately on certain beliefs, which were sincerely held at the time of acting. Now, if the belief had been innocent, the act necessarily dictated thereby could not have been blame-worthy. Witness Paul, confessing the sin of his persecutions. Indeed, since belief on moral subjects ought to, and must dictate conduct, if man is allowed to be a rational free agent, each man's own belief must be his own guide; and hence an act might be right to one man, and wrong to another, at the same time. A would have a right (because he believed so) to a thing which B had a right to; and so B would have a moral right to do A what would be to him a moral wrong? And farther; since whatever a man sincerely believed, would be right to him, truth would cease to be of any essential importance. This consequence is monstrous. Hence we must hold men responsible for their moral beliefs. God could not otherwise govern a world of rational free agents; for since the free dictates of each agent's soul must be, to him, the guide of his conduct, God could not justly condemn him for committing the crime which he supposed at the time to be a right act, after he had been acquitted of all responsibility for the opinion which unavoidably dictated the act. But is every one rash enough to justify all the crimes committed in this world under the influence of moral error heartily held at the time? Then the vilest crimes which have scourged the world, from the retaliatory murders of savages (dictated by stress of tribal honour) to the persecution of God's saints (by inquisitors who verily thought they were doing God service) are made perfectly innocent.

It may be well to say a few more words to relieve the seeming paradox in this truth. To this separate element of the act, that it was conformed to the man's opinion of the right at the time; as that element is

Because Nature and Providence rule thus.

Because all wrong beliefs have a criminal cause.

Paradox resolved.

abstracted in thought from all other features of the concrete sin; we do not suppose any criminality to attach. But we are bound to go back to the prior question: How came a being endowed with reason and conscience, actually to believe the wrong to be right? Could this result have been innocently brought about? To say this, would be to accuse God his Maker. I can apprehend how God's finite handiwork, a rational soul, may remain ignorant of many truths known to larger intelligences; but I cannot admit that it can be betrayed into positive error by the normal, legitimate exercise of its powers. There is then, always a prior account of the mental perversion: The conditions of the erroneous result have been sinful indolence in looking at evidence, or unrighteous self-interest, or criminal prejudice against the truth or its advocate, or some other combination of evil affections. To these, specifically, attaches the guilt of the erroneous mental result. We see thus, that belief is not the involuntary result of evidence apprehended, in any practical moral case. The will (taking that word in its wider sense of the active, optative powers) has a great deal to do with the result, by inclining or disposing the mind to give proper heed to the attainable evidence. So much weight has this fact, that the profound *Des Cartes*, who almost deserves to be called the founder of modern philosophy, actually ranked belief as a function of will, rather than of understanding! Here then I place myself: when an action of soul is spontaneous, it may be, to that extent, justly held responsible.

The question with which we close this brief review of the nature of man's primary judgments, has ever been of fundamental importance in the Church: "What is the legitimate province of Reason, in revealed theology?" The pretended warfare between reason and faith has been waged by all those who wished to make a pretext for believing unreasonably and wickedly. On the one hand, it is possible so to exalt the authority of the Church, or of theology, (as is done by Rome,) as to violate the very capacity of reason to which religion appeals. On the other, it is exceedingly easy to give too much play to it, and admit thus the *virus* of Rationalism in some of its forms.

All the different forms of rationalism, which admit a revelation as true or desirable at all, may be grouped under two classes. 1st. Those who hold the PROTON PSEUDOS of the Socinians; that man is to hold nothing credible in religion which he cannot comprehend. 2d. Those who, like the modern German rationalists, make the interpretations of Scripture square with the teachings of human philosophy, instead of making their philosophy square with the plain meaning of revelation. Under the latter class must be ranked all those who, like Hugh Miller, in his *Testimony of the Rocks*, hold that the interpretation of the Pentateuch, concerning cos-

mogony, must be moulded supremely by the demands of geological theories, instead of being settled independently by its own laws of fair exegesis. Here, also, belong those who, like A. Barnes, say that the Bible must not be allowed to mean what would legitimate American slavery, because he holds that his ethical arguments prove it cannot be right: *Et id omne genus*.

The absurdity of the first class will be shown, more fully, when we come to deal with the Socinian theology. It is enough to say now, that reason herself repudiates such a boast as preposterous. She does not truly comprehend all of anything; not the whole nature and physiology of the blade of grass which man presses with his foot: nor the *modus* of that union of body and soul which consciousness compels us to admit. Every line of knowledge which we follow, leads us to the circumference of darkness, where it is lost to our comprehension; and the more man knows, the more frequently is he compelled to stop humbly at that limit, and acknowledge his lack of comprehension. So that, the most truly wise man is he who knows and believes most things which he does not comprehend.\*

That our comprehension is not the measure of truth appears, again, thus: Truth is one and immutable. But the amount of comprehension any given man has, is dependent on his cultivation and knowledge. Thirty years ago it would have been wholly incomprehensible to a "field-hand," how a message could be sent along a wire by galvanism. It was not incomprehensible to Dr. Joseph Henry, who actually instructed Morse, the nominal inventor, how it might be done. On this Socinian scheme, then, truth would be contradictory for different minds. One man's valid code of truth would properly be, to a less cultivated man, in large part falsehood and absurdity. But this is preposterous.

But does not the Protestant assert, against the Papist, that faith, in order to be of any worth, must be intelligent? Do not we scout the "implicit faith" of the Papist?

There is a distinction which fully solves this question, and which is simple and important. Every judgment in the form of a belief is expressed in a proposition. This, grammatically, consists of subject, predicate, and copula. Now, the condition of rational belief is, that the mind shall intelligently see some valid supporting evidence for the *copula*. If, without this, it announces belief, it is acting unreasonably. But it is wholly another thing to comprehend the whole nature of the predication; and this latter is

\* It is related that the famous Dr. Parr, upon hearing a young Socinian flippantly say, he would believe nothing he could not comprehend, answered: "Then, sir, you will have the shortest creed of any young gentleman in the kingdom."

not at all necessary to a rational faith. The farmer presents me on the palm of his hand, a sound grain of corn, and a pebble. He says: "This is dead, but that is alive." May I not, with him, rationally believe in the vitality of the grain? Yes: because we have some intelligent view of the experimental evidence which supports the affirmation. But suppose now I pass to the predication, "alive;" and demand of the farmer that he shall give me a full definition of the nature of vegetable vitality? The greatest physicist cannot do this. Neither he nor I comprehend the nature of vegetable vitality. We know by its effects, that there is such a force, but it is a mysterious force. Let the student then hold fast to this simple law: In order to rational belief there must be some intelligent view of evidence sustaining the copula; but there may be no comprehension of the nature of the predicate.

Now, if these things are just and true in all natural knowledge, how much more true in the things of the infinite God? The attempt of the Socinian to make a god altogether comprehensible, has resulted in a plan attended inevitably with more and worse incomprehensibilities, yes, impossibilities, than they reject.

To the second class of rationalists, the simple answer which reason gives is, that such a revelation as they admit, is practically no revelation at all. That is, it is no authoritative standard of belief to any soul, on any point on which it may happen to have any opinion derived from other sources than the Bible. For each man's speculative conclusions are, to him, his philosophy; and if one man is entitled to square his Bible to his philosophy, the other must be equally so. Further, it is well known that the deductions of all philosophies are fallible. The utter inconsistency of Rationalism, with any honest adoption of a Revelation, appears thus: It is the boast of Rationalists, that human science is progressive: that our generation is far in advance of our fathers. May not our children be as far in advance of us? Things now held as scientific truth, will probably be excluded; things not now dreamed of, will probably be discovered and explained. When that time comes, it must follow on the Rationalists' scheme, that the interpretation of the Scriptures shall receive new modifications from these new lights of reason. Propositions which we now hold as the meaning of Scripture, will then be shown by the lights of human science to be false! What is it reasonable that we should do, at this time, with those places of Scripture? Will any one say, "Reserve your opinion on them, until the light comes?" Alas! there is now no means for us to know whereabouts in the Bible they are! No; we must attempt to construe the whole Scripture as best we may. Will any one say that our construction is true to us, but will be false to our

more scientific children? Hardly. If, therefore, the Bible is a revelation from the infallible God, reason herself clearly asserts that where the plain teachings of Scripture clash with such deductions, the latter are to be presumed to be wrong; and unless revelation carries that amount of authority, it is practically worthless. Rationalism is the wolf of infidelity under the sheep's clothing of faith.

It follows, then, that reason is not to be the measure, nor the ground, of the beliefs of revealed theology.

But on the other hand: 1st, the laws of thought which necessarily rule in the human soul, were established by the same God who gave the Bible. Hence, if there is a revelation from Him, and if these laws of thought are legitimately used, there must be full harmony between reason and Scripture. But man knows that he is not infallible: he knows that he almost always employs his powers of thought with imperfect accuracy. On the other hand, if revelation is admitted, its very idea implies infallible truth and authority. Hence, it is clearly reasonable that opinion must always hold itself ready to stand corrected by revelation.

The Scriptures always address us as rational creatures, and presuppose the authority of our native, 2d. Necessary laws of thought must be respected by it. fundamental laws of thought. If we think at all, we must do it according to those laws. Therefore, to require us to violate or ignore them fundamentally, would be to degrade us to unreasoning animals; we should then be as incapable of religion as they.

The claim which the Scriptures address to us, to be the one 3rd. Authenticity of Revelation not self-evident. authentic and authoritative revelation from God, is addressed to our reason. This is clear from the simple fact, that there are presented to the human race more than one professed revelation; and that they cannot be authoritative witnesses to their own authority prior to its admission. It appears also from this, that man is required not only to obey, but to believe and love the Bible. Now he cannot do this except upon evidence. The evidences of inspiration must, therefore, present themselves to man's reason; to reason to be employed impartially, humbly, and in the fear of God. He who says he believes, when he sees no proof, is but pretending, or talking without meaning.

Among these evidences, the reason must entertain this question: whether anything asserted in revelation is inevitably contradictory with reason or some other things asserted in revelation. 4th. Revelation cannot authorize self-contradictions. Limitations of this admission. For if a book clearly contained such things, it would be proof it was not from God; because God, who first created our laws of reason, will not contradict Himself by teaching incompatibles in His works and word. And again: in de-

manding faith (always a sincere and intelligent faith,) of us in such contradictories, He would be requiring of us an impossibility. If I see that a thing is impossible to be true, it is impossible for me to believe it. Yet here, we must guard this concession against abuse; asserting first, that the reason which is entitled to this judgment of contradiction concerning the Scriptures, shall be only a right, humble, and holy reason, acting in the fear and love of God; and not a reason unsanctified, hostile, and blind. Second, that the supposed contradiction must be contained in the immediate and unquestioned language of the Scripture itself, and not merely deduced therefrom by some supposed inference. And third, that the truth supposed to be overthrown by it shall be also an express statement of God's word, or some necessary, axiomatic truth, universally held by mankind. For if one should object against the Bible, that some inference he had drawn from its words was irreconcilable with some similar inference, or some supposed deduction of his human logic, we should always be entitled to reply: that his powers of thought being confessedly inaccurate, it was always more probable he had inferred erroneously, than that Scripture had spoken inconsistently.

Reason is also to be employed to interpret and illustrate the Scriptures. To do this, the whole range of man's natural knowledge may be taxed. The interpretation is never to presume to make reason the measure of belief, but the mere handmaid of Scripture. And the mode of interpretation is to be by comparing Scripture with Scripture according to the legitimate laws of language. The Scripture must be its own canon of hermeneutics; and that, independent of all other supposed rival sciences. For otherwise, as has been shown above, it would cease to carry a practical authority over the human mind as a rule of faith. A Bible which must wait to hear what philosophy may be pleased to permit it to say, and which must change its *dicta* as often as philosophy chooses to change, would be no Bible for any sensible man.

Now, the prelatist system of Church-authority stands opposed to this Protestant theory of private judgment. Prelatists claim for the reasonableness of their slavish system, this analogy; that the child, in all its primary education, has to accept things on trust as he is told. Human knowledge, say they, begins in dogma, not in reasoning. So should divine. The reply is, that this is a false analogy, in two vital respects. The secular knowledge which begins absolutely in dogma, is only that of signs; not of things and ultimate truths. The child must indeed learn from dogma, that a certain rafter-shaped mark inscribed on the paper is the accepted sign of the vowel-sound A. The things of God are not mere signs, but essential truths. Second, the

5th Reason and human knowledge ancillary to Revelation.

Faith rests on Evidence, not Dictation.

reception of divine truth is not an infantile, but an adult work. We are required to do it in the exercise of a mature intelligence, and to be infants only in guilelessness.

Prelatists and papists are fond of charging that the theory of private judgement amounts simply to rationalism. For, say they, "to make revelation wait on reason for the recognition of credentials, virtually gives to the revealed dogma only the force of reason. 'The stream can rise no higher than its fountain.' On the Protestant scheme, revelation receives no more authority than reason may confer." The only plausibility of such objections is in the words of a false trope. Revelation it is said, 'submits its credentials to the reason,' according to us Protestants. Suppose I prefer to say (the correct trope,) we hold that revelation imposes its credentials upon the healthy reason. In fact, as when the eye looks at the sun, there are activities of the organ towards the result of vision, such as adjusting the axes of the two balls, directing them, refracting the rays, &c., and yet, the light is not from the eye, but from the sun; so in apprehending the validity of the Bible's credentials, the light is from the revelation; not from the mind. Its activities about the apprehension of the evidence, are only receptive, not productive.

But the simple key to the answer is, that the question that we bring to the human reason, 'Is this book God speaking?' is one, single question, perfectly defined, and properly within the reach of reason. The other question, which the Rationalist wished to make reason answer, is: 'What are the things proper for God to say about Himself and religion?' There is, in fact, a multitude of questions, and mostly wholly above the reach of reason. We may illustrate the difference by the case of an ambassador. The court to which he comes is competent to entertain the question of his credentials. This is implied in the expectation that this court is to treat with him. The matter of credentials is one definite question, to be settled by one or two plain *criteria*, such as a signature, and the imprint of a seal. But what may be the secret will of his sovereign, is a very different set of questions. To dictate one's surmises here, and especially to annex the sovereign's authority to them, is impertinent folly. But the messages of the plenipotentiary carry all the force of the recognized signature and seal.

Moreover, we must remember that man's state is probationary. There is an intrinsic difference between truth and error, right reasoning and sophism, and the purpose of God in revelation is (necessarily) not to supplant reason, but to put man on his probation for its right use.

Last: Let the student, from the first, discard all the false and mischievous ideas generated by the slang of the "contest between reason and faith."—

No strife of reason  
with Faith.

of the propriety of having "reason conquer, faith, or faith conquer reason." There is no such contest. The highest reason is to believe implicitly what God's word says, as soon as it is clearly ascertained to be God's word. The dictate of reason herself, is to believe; because she sees the evidences to be reasonable.\*

I need only add, that I hold the Scriptures to be, in all its parts, of plenary inspiration; and we shall henceforward assume this, as proved by the inquiries of another department.

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