

Reason: The Only Oracle of Man

A Compendious System of Natural Religion

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Chapter I.1 Of Reforming Mankind from Superstition and Error and the Good Consequences of It

A proper conception of God is of first importance to the good order of society. False ideas and superstitions have generally concealed the Divinity from man. From the existence of causes in nature, we can deduce that there is a God. The attributes of God transcend our comprehension, but can be grasped by reflecting on the motion, design, and goodness of nature. An examination of the powers of the human soul gives us further insight into the moral perfections of the Divinity.

THE desire of knowledge has engaged the attention of the wise and curious among mankind in all ages which has been productive of extending the arts

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and sciences far and wide in the several quarters of the globe, and excited the contemplative to explore nature's laws in a gradual series of improvement, until philosophy, astronomy, geography, and history, with many other branches of science, have arrived to a great degree of perfection.

It is nevertheless to be regretted, that the bulk of mankind, even in those nations which are most celebrated for learning and wisdom, are still carried down the torrents of superstition, and entertain very unworthy apprehensions of the BEING, PERFECTION, CREATION, and PROVIDENCE of God, and their duty to him, which lays an indispensable obligation on the philosophic friend an nature, unanimously to exert themselves in every lawful, wise, and prudent method, to endeavor to reclaim mankind from their ignorance and delusion, by enlightening their minds in those great and sublime truths concerning God and his providence and their obligations to moral rectitude, which in this world, and that which is to come, cannot fail greatly to affect their happiness and well being.

Though "none by searching can find out God, or the Almighty to perfection," yet I am persuaded, that if mankind would dare to exercise their reason as freely on those divine topics as they do in the common concerns of life, they would, in a great measure, rid themselves of their blindness and superstition, gain more exalted ideas of God and their obligations to him and one another, and be proportionally delighted and blessed with the views of his moral gov-

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ernment, make better members of society, and acquire, manly powerful incentives to the practice of morality, which is the last and greatest perfection that human nature is capable of.

Chapter I.2 Of the Being of a God

THE laws of nature having subjected mankind to a state of absolute dependence on something out of it, and manifestly beyond themselves, or the compound exertion of their natural powers, gave them the first conception of a superior principle existing; otherwise they could have had no possible conception of a superintending power. But this sense of dependency, which results from experience and reasoning on the facts, which every day cannot fail to produce, has uniformly established the knowledge of our dependency to every individual of the species who are rational, which necessarily involves, or contains in it, the idea of a ruling power, or that there is a God, which ideas are synonymous.

The globe with its productions, the planets in their motions, and the starry heavens in their magnitudes, surprise our senses and confound our reason, in their munificent lessons of instruction concerning God, by means whereof, we are apt to be more or less lost in our ideas of the object of divine adoration, though at the same time every one is truly sensible that their being and preservation is from God. We are too apt to confound our ideas of God with his works, and latter for the former. Thus barbarous and unlearned

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nations have imagined, that inasmuch as the sun in its influence is beneficial to them in bringing forward the spring of the year, causing the production of vegetation, and food for their subsistence, that therefore it is their God: while others have located other parts of creation, and ascribe to them prerogatives of God; and mere creatures and images have been substituted for Gods by the wickedness or weakness of man, or both together. It seems that mankind in most ages and parts of the world have been fond of corporeal Deities with whom their outward senses might be gratified, or as fantastically diverted from the just apprehension of the true God, by a supposed supernatural intercourse with invisible and mere spiritual beings, to whom they ascribe divinity, so that through one means or other, the character of the true God has been much neglected, to the great detriment of truth, justice, and morality in the world that mankind can be uniform in their religious opinions, or worship God according to knowledge, except they can form a consistent arrangement of ideas of the Divine character.

Although we extend our ideas retrospectively ever so far upon the succession, yet no one cause in the extended order of succession, which depends upon another prior to itself, can be the independent cause of all things: nor is it possible to trace the order of the succession of causes back to that self-existent cause, inasmuch as it is eternal and infinite, and cannot therefore be traced out by succession, which operates according to the order of time, consequently can bear no more proportion to the eternity of God,

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than time itself may be supposed to do, which has no proportion at all; as the succeeding arguments respecting the eternity and infinity of God will evince. But notwithstanding the series of the succession of causes cannot be followed in a retrospective succession up to the self-existent or eternal cause, it is nevertheless a perpetual and conclusive evidence of a God. — For a succession of causes considered collectively, can be nothing more than effects of the independent cause, and as much dependent on it as those dependent causes are upon one another; so that we may with certainty conclude that the system of nature, which we call by the name of natural causes, is as much dependent on a self-existent cause, as an individual of the species in the order of generation is dependent on its progenitors for existence. Such part of the series of nature's operations, which we understand, has a regular and necessary connection with, and dependence on its parts, which we denominate by the names of cause and effect.

From hence we are authorized from reason to conclude, that the vast system of causes and effects are thus necessarily connected (speaking of the natural world only), and the whole regularly and necessarily dependent on a self-existent cause: so that we are obliged to admit an independent cause, and ascribe self-existence to it, otherwise it could not be independent, and consequently not a God. But the eternity or manner of the existence of a self-existent and independent being is to all finite capacities utterly incomprehensible; yet this is so far from an objection against the reality of such a being, that it is essen-

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tially necessary to support the evidence of it; for if we could comprehend that being whom we call God, he would not be God, but must have been finite and that in the same degree as those may be supposed to be who could comprehend him; therefore so certain that God is, we cannot comprehend his essence, eternity, or manner of existence. This should always be premised, when we assay to reason on the being, perfection, eternity, and infinity of God, or of his creation and providence. As far as we understand nature, we are become acquainted with the character of God, for the knowledge of nature is the revelation of God.

If we form in our imagination a compendious idea of the harmony of the universe, it is the same as calling God by the name of harmony, for there could be no harmony without regulation, and no regulation without a regulator, which is expressive of the idea of a God. Nor could it be possible, that there could be order or disorder, except we admit of such a thing as creation, and creation contains in it the idea of a creator, which is another appellation for the Divine Being, distinguishing God from his creation. Furthermore, there could be no proportion, figure, or motion, without wisdom and power; wisdom to plan, and power to execute, and these are perfections, when applied to the works of nature, which signify the agency or superintendency of God. If we consider nature to be matter, figure, and motion, we include the idea of God in that of motion: for motion implies a mover as much as creation does a creator. If from the composition, texture, and tendency of the universe in general, we form a complex idea of general

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good resulting therefrom to mankind, we implicitly admit a God by the name of good, including the idea of his providence to man. And from hence arises our obligations to love and adore God, because he provides for, and is beneficent to us.

Abstract the idea of goodness from the character of God, and it would cancel all our obligations to him, and excite us to hate and detest him as a tyrant: hence it is, that ignorant people are superstitiously misled into a conceit that they hate God, when at the same time it is only the idol of their own imagination, which they truly ought to hate and be ashamed of; but were such persons to connect the ideas of power, wisdom, goodness, and all possible perfection in the character of God, their hatred towards him would be turned into love and adoration.

By extending our ideas in a larger circle, we shall perceive our dependence on the earth and waters of the globe which we inhabit, and from which we are bountifully fed and gorgeously arrayed; and next extend our ideas to the sun, whose fiery mass darts its brilliant rays of light to our terraqueous ball with amazing velocity, and whose region of inexhaustible fire supplies it with fervent heat, which causes vegetation, and gilds the various seasons of the year with ten thousand charms: this is not the achievement of man, but the workmanship and providence of God. But how the sun is supplied with materials, thus to perpetuate its kind influences, we know not. But deny the reality of those beneficial influences, because we do not understand the manner of the perpetuity of

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that fiery world, or how it became fire? or will any one deny the reality of nutrition by food, because we do not understand the secret operation of the digesting powers of animal nature or the minute particulars of its cherishing influence? None will be so stupid as to do it. Equally absurd would it be for us to deny the providence of God, by “whom we live, move, and have our being,” because we cannot comprehend it.

We know that earth, water, fire and air, in their various compositions subserve us, and we also know that these elements are devoid of reflection, reason, or design; from whence we may easily infer, that a wise, understanding, and designing being has ordained them to be thus subservient. Could blind chance constitute order and decorum, and consequently a providence? That wisdom, order, and design should be the production of nonentity, or of chaos, confusion, and old night, is too absurd to deserve a serious confutation, for it supposeth that there may be effects without a cause, viz. produced by nonentity, or that chaos and confusion could produce the effects of power, wisdom, and goodness. Such absurdities as these we must assent to, or subscribe to the doctrine of a self-existent and providential being.

Chapter I.3

The Manner of Discovering the Moral Perfections and Attributes of God

HAVING in a concise manner offered a variety of indisputable reasons to evince the certainty of the being and providence of God, and of his goodness to

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man through the intervention of the series of nature's operations, which are commonly described by the name of natural causes, we come now more particularly to the consideration of his moral perfections; and though all finite beings fall as much short of an adequate knowledge thereof as they do of perfection itself, nevertheless through the intelligence of our own souls we may have something of a prospective idea of the divine perfections. For though the human mind bears no proportion to the divine, yet there is undoubtedly a resemblance between them. For instance, God knows all things, and we know some things, and in the things which we do understand, our knowledge agrees with that of the divine, and cannot fail necessarily corresponding with it.

To more than know a thing, speaking of that thing only, is impossible even to omniscience itself; for knowledge is but the same in both the infinite and finite minds. To know a thing is the same as to have right ideas of it, or ideas according to truth, and truth is uniform in all rational minds, the divine mind not excepted. It will not be disputed but that mankind in plain and common matters understand justice from injustice, truth from falsehood, right from wrong, virtue from vice, and praise-worthiness from blame-worthiness, for other wise they could not be, accountable creatures. This being admitted, we are capable of forming a complex idea of a moral character, which when done in the most deliberate, the wisest, and most rational manner in our power, we are certain bears a resemblance to the divine perfections. For as we learn from the works of nature an idea of the

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power and wisdom of God, so from our own rational nature we learn an idea of his moral perfections.

From what has been observed on the moral perfections of God, we infer that all rational beings, who have an idea of justice, goodness, and truth, have at the same time either a greater or less idea of the moral perfections of God. It is by reason that we are able to compound an idea of a moral character, whether applied to God or man; it is that which gives us the supremacy over the irrational part of the creation.