

Reason: The Only Oracle of Man

A Compendious System of Natural Religion

Ethan Allen
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Chapter II.1 Of the Eternity of Creation

Following the science of his time, Allen holds that the world has always existed. God and creation are co-eternal, one dependent on the other. The biblical description of creation is deficient. Observation on the solar system should elicit our wonder at God's tremendous power and goodness. Other worlds must exist, populated by intelligences that are fitted for life under vastly different conditions. Nature displays the Divine Providence through the workings of its laws, but does not interfere with the free will of man.

As creation was the result of eternal and infinite wisdom, justice, goodness, and truth, and effected by infinite power, it is like its great author, mysterious to us. How it could be accomplished, or in what man-

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ner performed, can never be comprehended by any capacity.

Eternal, whether applied to duration, existence, action, or creation, is incomprehensible to us. but implies no contradiction in either of them; for that which is above comprehension we cannot perceive to be contradictory, nor on the other hand can we perceive its rationality or consistency. We are certain that God is a rational, wise, understanding Being, because he has in degree made us so, and his wisdom, power, and goodness is visible to us in his creation, and government of the world. From these facts we are rationally induced to acknowledge him, and not because we can comprehend his being, perfections, creation or providence.

Could we comprehend God, he would cease to be what he is. The ignorant among men cannot comprehend the understanding of the wise among their own species, much less the perfection of a God; nevertheless, in our ratiocination upon the works and harmony of nature, we are obliged to concede to a self-existent and eternal cause of all things, as has been sufficiently argued; though at the same time it is mysterious to us, that there should be such a being as a self-existent and eternally independent one; — thus we believe in God, although we cannot comprehend anything of the how, why or wherefore it was possible for him to be; and as creation was exertion of such an incomprehensible and perfect being, it must of necessary consequence be, in a great measure, mysterious to us. We can be certain, that it has been of an equal eternity and infinitude of extension with God.

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Immensity being replete with creation, the omniscient omnipresent, omnipotent, eternal, and infinite exertion of God in creation, is incomprehensible to the understanding or the weakness of man, and will eternally remain the prerogative of infinite penetration, sagacity, and uncreated intelligence to understand.

Chapter II.2

Observations of Moses' Account of Creation

THE foregoing theory of creation and providence will probably be rejected by most people in this country, inasmuch as they are prepossessed with the theology of Moses, which represents creation to have a beginning. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."

In the preceding part of this chapter it has been evinced that creation and providence could not have had a beginning, and that they are not circumscribed, but unlimited yet it seems that Moses limited creation by a prospective view of the heavens, or firmament from this globe, and if creation was thus limited, it would consequently have circumscribed the dominion and display of the divine providence or perfection; but if Moses's idea of the creation of "the heavens and the earth," was immense, ever so many days of progressive work could never have finished such a boundless creation; for a progressive creation is the same as a limited one; as each progressive day's work would be bounded by a successive admeasurement, and the whole six days' work added together

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could be but local, and bear no manner of proportion to infinitude, but would limit the dominion, and consequently the display of the divine perfections or providence, which is incompatible with a just idea of eternity and infinity of God, as has been argued in the foregoing pages.

There are a variety of other blunders in Moses's description of creation, one of which I shall mention, which is to be found in his history of the first and fourth day's work of God: "And God said, let there be light, and there was light; and God called the light day, and the darkness he called night: and the evening and the morning were the first day." Then he proceeds to the second and third day's work, and so on to the sixth; but in his chronicle of the fourth day's work, he says that "God made two great lights, the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night." This appears to be an inconsistent history of the origin of light. Day and night were ordained the first day, and on the fourth day the greater and less lights were made to serve the same purposes; but it is likely that many errors have crept into his writings, through the vicissitudes of learning, and particularly from the corruptions of translations, of his as well as the writings of other ancient authors; besides, it must be acknowledged that those ancient writers labored under great difficulties in writing to posterity, merely from the consideration of the infant state of learning and knowledge then in the world, and consequently we should not act the part of severe critics, with their writings, any further than to prevent their obtrusion on the world as being infallible.

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Chapter II.3 Of the Eternity and Infinitude of Divine Providence

WHEN we consider our solar system, attracted by its fiery center, and moving in its several orbits, with regular, majestic, and periodical revolutions, we are charmed at the prospect and contemplation of those worlds of motions, and adore the wisdom and power by which they are attracted, and their velocity regulated and perpetuated. And when we reflect that the blessings of life are derived from, and dependent on, the properties, qualities, constructions, proportions and movements, of that stupendous machine, we gratefully acknowledge the divine beneficence. When we extend our thoughts (through our external sensations) to the vast regions of the starry heavens, we are lost in the immensity of God's works. Some stars appear fair and luminous, and others scarcely discernible to the eye, which by the help of glasses make a brilliant appearance, bringing the knowledge of others far remote, within the verge of our feeble discoveries, which merely by the eye could not have been discerned or distinguished. These discoveries of the works of God naturally prompt the inquisitive mind to conclude that the author of this astonishing part of creation which is displayed to our view, has still extended his creation; so that if it were possible that any of us could be transported to the farthest extended star, which is perceptible to us here, we should from thence survey worlds as distant from that as that is from this, and so on 'ad infinitum.'

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Furthermore, it is altogether reasonable to conclude that the heavenly bodies, alias worlds, which move or are situate within the circle of our knowledge, as well all others throughout immensity, are each and every one of them possessed or inhabited by some intelligent agents or other. however different their sensations or manners of receiving or communicating their ideas may be from ours, or however different from each other. For why would it not have been as wise or as consistent with the perfections which we adore in God, to have neglected giving being to intelligence in this world as in those other worlds, interspersed with another of various qualities in his immense creation? And inasmuch as this world is thus replenished, we may, with the highest rational certainty infer, that as God has given us to rejoice, and adore him for our being, he has acted consistent with his goodness, in the display of his providence throughout the university of worlds.

To suppose that God Almighty has confined his goodness to this world, to the exclusion of all others, is much similar to the idle fancies of some individuals in this world, that they, and those of their communion or faith, are the favorites of heaven exclusively; but these are narrow and bigoted conceptions, which are degrading to a rational nature, and utterly unworthy of God, of whom we should form the most exalted ideas.

It may be objected that a man cannot subsist in the sun; but does it follow from thence, that God cannot or has not constituted a nature peculiar to that fiery region, and caused it to be as natural and neces-

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sary for it to suck in and breathe out flames of fire, as it is for us to do the like in air. Numerous are the kinds of fishy animals which can no other way subsist but in the water, in which other animals would perish (amphibious ones excepted), while other animals, in a variety of forms, either swifter or slower move on the surface of the earth, or wing the, air. Of these there are sundry kinds, which during the season of winter live without food; and many of the insects which are really possessed of animal life, remain frozen, and as soon as they are let loose by the kind influence of the sun, they again assume their wonted animal life; and if animal life may differ so much in the same world, what inconceivable variety may be possible in worlds innumerable, as applicable to mental, cogitative, and organized beings. Certain it is, that any supposed obstructions, concerning the quality or temperature of any or every one of those worlds, could not have been any bar in the way of God Almighty, with regard to his replenishing his universal creation with moral agents.

The unlimited perfection of God could perfectly well adapt every part of his creation to the design of whatever rank or species of constituted beings, his Godlike wisdom and goodness saw fit to impart existence to; so that as there is no deficiency of absolute perfection in God, it is rationally demonstrative that the immense creation is replenished with rational agents, and that it has been eternally so, and that the display of divine goodness must have been as perfect and complete, in the antecedent, as it is possible to be in the subsequent eternity.

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From this theological way of arguing on the creation and providence of God, it appears that the whole, which we denominate by the term nature, which is the same as creation perfectly regulated, was eternally connected together by the creator to answer the same all glorious purpose, to wit: the display of the divine nature, the consequences of which are existence and happiness to beings in general, so that creation, with all its productions operates according to the laws of nature, and is sustained by the self-existent eternal cause, in perfect order and decorum, agreeable to the eternal wisdom, unalterable rectitude, impartial justice, and immense goodness of the divine nature, which is a summary of God's providence. It is from the established order of nature that summer and winter, rainy and fair seasons, moonshine, refreshing breezes, seed time and harvest, day and night, interchangeably succeed each other, and diffuse their extensive blessings to man.

Every enjoyment and support of life is from God, delivered to his creatures in and by the tendency, aptitude, disposition, and operation of those laws. Nature is the medium, or intermediate instrument through which God dispenses his benignity to mankind. The air we breathe in, the light of the sun, and the waters of the murmuring rills, evince his providence: and well it is, that they are given in so great profusion, that they cannot by the monopoly of the rich be engrossed from the poor.

When we copiously pursue the study of nature, we are certain to be lost in the immensity of the works

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and wisdom of God we may nevertheless, in a variety of things discern their fitness, happy tendency and sustaining quality to us ward, from all which, as rational and contemplative beings we are prompted to infer, that God is universally uniform and consistent in his infinitude of creation and providence, although we cannot comprehend all that consistency, by reason of infirmity; yet we are morally sure, of all possible plans, infinite wisdom must have eternally adopted the best, and infinite goodness have approved it, and infinite power have perfected it. And as the good of beings in general must have been the ultimate end of God in his creation and government of his creatures, his omniscience could not fail to have it always present in his view. Universal nature must therefore be ultimately attracted to this single point, and infinite perfection must have eternally displayed itself in creation and providence. From hence we infer, that God is as eternal and infinite in his goodness, as his self-existent and perfect nature is omnipotently great.

Chapter II.4

The Providence of God

Does Not Interefere with the Agency of Man

THE doctrine of Fate has been made use of in armies as a policy to induce soldiers to face danger. Mahomet taught his army that the “term of every man’s life was fixed by God, and that none could shorten it, by any hazard that he might seem to be exposed to in battle or otherwise,” but that it should be introduced into peaceable and civil life, and be patronized

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by any teachers of religion, is quite strange, as it subverts religion in general, and renders the teaching of it unnecessary, except among other necessary events it may be premised that it is necessary they teach that doctrine, and that I oppose it from the influence of the same law of fate upon which thesis we are all disputing and acting in certain necessary circles, and if so, I make another necessary movement, which is, to discharge the public teachers of this doctrine, and expend their salaries in an economical manner, which might better answer the purposes of our happiness, or lay it out in good wine or old spirits to make the heart glad, and laugh at the stupidity or cunning of those who would have made us mere machines.

Some advocates for the doctrine of fate will also maintain that we are free agents, notwithstanding they tell us there has been a concatenation of causes and events which has reached from God down to this time, and which will eternally be continued — that has and will control, and bring about every action of our lives, though there is not anything in nature more certain than that we cannot act necessarily and freely in the same action, and at the same time; yet it is hard for such persons, who have verily believed that they are elected (and thus by a predetermination of God become his special favorites), to give up their notions of a predetermination of all events, upon which system their election and everlasting happiness is nonsensically founded; and on the other hand, it is also hard for them to go so evidently against the law of nature (or dictates of conscience) which intuitively evinces the certainty of human liberty, as to reject

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such evidence; and therefore hold to both parts of the contradiction, to wit, that they act necessarily and freely, upon which contradictory principle they endeavored to maintain the dictates of natural conscience, and also their darling folly of being elected and exclusively favorites of God.

