

## LECTURE IX.

*A PRIORI* THEISTIC PROOF.

## I.

THE arguments which we have been considering are not merely proofs that God is, but indications of what He is. They testify to the Divine existence by exhibiting the Divine character. They are expressions of how He manifests Himself, and expositions of how we apprehend His self-manifestations. We have seen that against each of them various objections have been urged, but that these objections when examined do not approve themselves to reason; they leave the arguments against which they have been thrown quite unshaken. These arguments, however, although perfectly conclusive so far as they go, do not, even in combination, yield us the full idea of God which is entertained wherever theism prevails. They show Him to be the First Cause of the world—the Source of all the power, wisdom, and

goodness displayed therein. They do not prove Him to be infinite, eternal, absolute in being and perfection. Yet it cannot be questioned that the cultivated human mind thinks of God as the absolute, infinite, eternal, perfect First Cause, and that no lower idea of God can satisfy it. The intellect cannot accept, and the heart also revolts against, the thought that God is dependent on any antecedent or higher Being; that He is limited to a portion either of time or space; or that He is devoid of any excellence, deficient in any perfection. Such a thought is rejected as at once utterly unworthy of its object, and inherently inconsistent.

Are we, then, rationally warranted to assign to God those attributes which are called absolute or incommunicable? This is the question we have now to answer. What has been proved makes it comparatively easy to establish what is still unproved. We have ascertained that there is a God, the First Cause of the universe, the powerful, wise, good, and righteous Author of all things. We are conscious, also, that we have ideas of infinity, eternity, necessary existence, perfection, &c. We may be doubtful as to whence we obtained these ideas—we may feel that there is very much which is vague and perplexing in them; but we cannot question or deny that we have them. Having them, no matter how or whence we have

obtained them, and knowing that God is, as also in a measure what He is, the remaining question for us is, Must these ideas apply to God or not? Must the First Cause be thought of as eternal or not—as infinite or finite, as perfect or imperfect? Reason, after it has reached a certain stage of culture, has never found this a difficult question. Indeed, often even before freeing itself from polytheism, it has been internally constrained to ascribe to some of the objects of adoration those very attributes of eternity, infinity, and perfection which polytheism implicitly denies. Once it has arrived at the belief that the universe has its origin in a rational and righteous creative Will, it can hardly refuse to admit that that Will must be infinite and eternal. Where it has rejected polytheism without accepting theism, it has been forced to acknowledge the world itself to be infinite and eternal. When it has risen beyond the world, when it has reached an intelligent cause of the world, it cannot, of course, refuse to that cause the perfections which it would have granted to the effect—to the Creator what it would have attributed to the creation. The first and ultimate Being, and not any derived and dependent Being, must obviously be the infinite, eternal, and perfect Being.

The proof that God is absolute in being and perfection should, it seems to me, not precede but follow the proofs that there is a cause sufficiently

powerful, wise, and good to account for physical nature, the mind of man, and the course of history. The usual mode of conducting the theistic argumentation has been the reverse; it has been to begin by endeavouring to prove, from principles held to be intuitive and ideas held to be innate, the necessary existence, absolute perfection, infinity, and eternity of God; or, in other words, with what is called the *a priori* or ontological arguments. This mode of procedure seems to me neither judicious nor effective. If we have not established that there is a God by reasoning from facts, we must demonstrate His existence from ideas: but to get from the ideal to the actual may be impossible, and is certain to be difficult; whereas, if we have allowed facts to teach us all that they legitimately can about the existence, power, wisdom, and righteousness of God, it may be easy to show that our ideas of absolute being and perfection must apply to Him, and to Him only.

Theism, according to the view now expressed, is not vitally interested in the fate of the so-called *a priori* or ontological arguments. There may be serious defects in all these arguments, considered as formal demonstrations, and yet the conclusion which it is their aim to establish may be in no way compromised. It may be that the principles on which they rest do not directly involve the existence of God, and yet that they certainly, although

indirectly, imply it, so that whoever denies it is rationally bound to set aside the fundamental conditions of thought, and to deem consciousness essentially delusive. It may be that the *a priori* arguments are faulty as logical evolutions of the truth of the Divine existence from ultimate and necessary conceptions, and yet that they concur in manifesting that if God be not, the human mind is of its very nature self-contradictory; that God can only be disbelieved in at the cost of reducing the whole world of thought to a chaos. Whether this be the case or not, some of the *a priori* proofs are so celebrated that I cannot pass them over in entire silence.<sup>1</sup>

There is a charge which has been very often brought against the *a priori* proofs, but which may be at once set aside as incorrect. It has been alleged that they proceed on forgetfulness of the truth that the Divine existence is the first and highest reality, and therefore cannot be demonstrated from anything prior to or higher than itself. But in no case that I know of have those who adopted what they supposed to be the *a priori* line of argument been under the delusion that the ground of the existence of God was not in Himself, but in something outside of or above Himself, from which His existence could be deduced. Such a notion is, in fact, so self-contradictory, that no

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix XXXVI.

sane mind could deliberately entertain it. It would imply that theism could be founded on atheism. Whatever *a priori* proof of the Divine existence may be, it has certainly never been imagined by those who employed it to be demonstration from an antecedent necessary cause.<sup>1</sup>

*A priori* proof is proof which proceeds from primary and necessary principles of thought. From its very nature it could only appear at a comparatively late period in the history of intelligence. It is only a profound study of the constitution of thought, only a refined reflective analysis of consciousness into its elements, which can bring to light the principles which necessarily underlie and govern all intellectual activity; and it is only on these principles that *a priori* proof is based. As these principles never exist in an absolutely pure form, as what is universal and necessary in thought is never found wholly apart from what is particular and contingent, no absolutely pure *a priori* argumentation need be looked for, and certainly none such can be discovered in the whole history of speculation.

Plato was, perhaps, the first to attempt to prove the existence of God from the essential principles of knowledge. He could not consistently reason from the impressions of sense or the phenomena of the visible world. He denied that sense is

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix XXXVII.

knowledge, and that visible things can be more than images and indications of truth. He maintained, however, that besides the visible world there is an intelligible world, with objects which reason sees and not sense. These objects are either conceptions or ideas, either hypothetical principles or absolute principles, either scientific assumptions and definitions or necessary and eternal truths which have their reality and evidence in themselves. The mathematical sciences deal with conceptions; but their chief value, according to Plato, is that they help the mind to rise to that absolute science—dialectics—which is conversant with ideas. The apprehension of ideas is the apprehension of the common element in the manifold, the universal in the individual, the permanent in the mutable. Reason contemplates ideas, and participates in ideas, and ideas are at once the essences of things and the regulative principles of cognition. By communion with them the reason reaches objective reality and possesses subjective certainty. They are not isolated and unconnected, but so related that each higher idea comprehends within it several lower ones, and that all combined constitute a graduated series or articulated organism, unified and completed by an idea which has none higher than itself, which is ultimate, which conditions all the others while it is conditioned by none. The

supreme idea, which contains in itself all other ideas, is absolute truth, absolute beauty, absolute good, absolute intelligence, and absolute being. It is the source of all true existence, knowledge, and excellence. It is God. In this part of its course the dialectic of Plato is simply a search for God. It is *a priori* inasmuch as it rests on necessary ideas, but *a posteriori* inasmuch as it proceeds from these ideas upwards to God in a manner which is essentially analytic and inductive. Only when God—the principle of principles—is reached, can it become synthetic and deductive.

The question, Is the Platonic proof of the Divine existence substantially true? is precisely equivalent to the question, Is the Platonic philosophy substantially true? Of course, I cannot here attempt to argue a theme so vast as Spiritualism *versus* Empiricism, Platonism *versus* Positivism. My belief, however, is, that Platonism is substantially true; that the objections which the empiricism and positivism at present prevalent urge against its fundamental positions are superficial and insufficient; that what is essential in its theory of ideas, and in the theism inseparable from that theory, must abide with our race for ever as a priceless possession. The Platonic argument—by which is meant not a particular argument incidentally employed by Plato, but the reasoning which underlies and pervades his entire philosophy

as a speculative search for certainty—has been transmitted from age to age down to the present day by a long series of eminent thinkers. Augustine, for example, argues for the existence of God from the very nature of truth. It is impossible to think that there is no truth. If there were none, to affirm that there was none would be itself true; or, in other words, the denial of the existence of truth is a self-contradiction. But what is truth? It is not mere sensuous perception, not a something which belongs to the individual mind and varies with its moods and peculiarities, but a something which is unsensuous, unchangeable, and universal. The human reason changes and errs in its judgments; but ideas, necessary truths, are not the products, but the laws and conditions, of the human reason—they are over it, and it is only through apprehending, realising, and obeying them, that it enlightens and regulates our nature. These ideas—the laws of our intellectual and moral constitution—cannot have their source in us, but must be eternally inherent in an eternal, unchangeable, and perfect Being. This Being—the absolute truth and ultimate ground of all goodness—is God. Anselm reasoned in altogether the same spirit and in nearly the same manner. In one of his works he institutes an inquiry as to whether the goodness in good actions is or is not the same thing present in all; and when he has

convinced himself that it is the same thing, he asks, What is it? and where has it a real existence? Ascending upwards by these stages, Good is; Good is *perfect*; Good is *one*; the one perfect Good is God,—he comes to the conclusion that the goodness constitutive of good actions has necessarily its source in God, and that the absolutely and essentially good is identical with God. In another of his works he similarly inquires whether there is any truth except mere actual existence. He holds that there is, and argues, as he had done before in regard to the good, that the absolute and ultimate truth must be God. Thomas Aquinas was at one with Anselm thus far. The very nature of knowledge seemed to him to show that it was in man only through the dependence of the human intelligence on an underived and perfect intelligence.

Among the many modern philosophers who have adopted and enforced the same doctrine I shall refer only to a few. Lord Herbert of Cherbury, the founder of English deism, is very explicit on the subject. He thought of the human mind as united in the closest and most comprehensive way to the Divine mind through the universal notions of what he called the rational instinct. These notions are the laws which every faculty is meant to conform to and obey—the laws of all thought, affection, and action. As to nature and origin, they are, in Herbert's view,

Divine ; thoughts of God present in the mind of man ; true revelations of the Father of spirits to His children. In apprehending one of them we have truly an intuition of a Divine attribute, of some feature of the Divine character. It is through contact, through communion with the Divine Intelligence, Love, and Will, that we know and feel and act. The Divine is the root and the law of human thought, emotion, and conduct. Not afar off, not to be realised by great stretch of intellect, not separated by innumerable existences which intervene between Him and us, but close around us, yea, with nothing between Him and our inmost souls, is the Being with whom we have to do. "In Him," really and without any figure of speech, "we live, and move, and have our being."

Among the various metaphysical proofs of Divine existence employed by Cudworth, one is in like manner founded on the very nature of knowledge. Knowledge, it is argued, is possible only through ideas which have their source in an eternal reason. Sense is not only not the whole of knowledge, but is in itself not at all knowledge ; it is wholly relative and individual, and not knowledge until the mind adds to it what is absolute and universal. Knowledge does not begin with what is individual, but with what is universal. The individual is known by being brought under a universal, instead of the universal being gathered

from a multitude of individuals. And these universals or ideas which underlie all the knowledge of all men, which originate it and do not originate in it, have existed eternally in the only mode in which truths can be said to be eternal, in an eternal mind. They come to us from an eternal mind, which is their proper home, and of which human reason is an emanation. "From whence it cometh to pass, that all minds, in the several places and ages of the world, have ideas or notions of things exactly alike, and truths indivisibly the same. Truths are not multiplied by the diversity of minds that apprehend them; because they are all but ectypal participations of one and the same original or archetypal mind and truth. As the same face may be reflected in several glasses; and the image of the same sun may be in a thousand eyes at once beholding it; and one and the same voice may be in a thousand ears listening to it: so when innumerable created minds have the same ideas of things, and understand the same truths, it is but one and the same eternal light that is reflected in them all ('that light which enlighteneth every man that cometh into the world,') or the same voice of that one everlasting Word that is never silent, re-echoed by them."

Malebranche's celebrated theory of "seeing all things in God" is but an exaggeration of the doctrine that "God is the light of all our seeing." It

found a zealous English defender in John Norris of Bemerton. According to Malebranche and Norris, all objects are seen or understood through ideas, which derive their existence neither from the senses nor from the operations of the mind itself but are created in us by the Deity; and which are not drawn from contemplation of the perfections of the soul, but are inherent in the Divine nature. Better guarded statements of the Platonic argument from necessary ideas will be found in Leibnitz, and Bossuet, and Fenelon.

In the hands of Cousin more was again attempted to be deduced from it than it could legitimately yield. We may reject, however, his opinion that reason is not individual or personal, without rejecting with it the substance at least of what he has so eloquently said regarding the necessary ideas which govern the reason, or the reasoning by which he seeks to show that truth is incomprehensible without God, and that all thought implies a spontaneous faith in God. The most recent defenders of theism employ in one form or another the same argument. In the works of Ulrici, Hettinger, and Luthardt, of Saisset and Simon, of Thompson and Tulloch, it still holds a prominent place.

I pass from it to indicate the character of some other arguments, which are of a much more formal nature, but which have by no means commanded

so wide an assent. In fact, the arguments to which I now refer have never laid hold of the common reason of men. They are the ingenious constructions of highly-gifted metaphysicians, and have awakened much interest in a certain number of speculative minds, but they have not contributed in any considerable degree either to the maintenance or the diffusion of theistic belief, and have had no lengthened continuous history. They obviously stand, therefore, on a very different footing from the proofs which have already been adduced—proofs which are as catholic as the conclusions which they support, or as any of the doctrines of the Christian system.

The Stoic philosopher Cleanthes, author of the famous Hymn to Zeus, argued that every comparison, in affirming or denying one thing to be better than another, implied and presupposed the existence of a superlative or an absolutely good and perfect Being. Centuries later, Boethius had recourse to nearly identical reasoning. It is only, he maintained, through the idea of perfection that we can judge anything to be imperfect; and the consciousness or perception of imperfection leads reason necessarily to believe that there is a perfect existence—one than whom a better cannot be conceived—God. Cleanthes and Boethius were thus the precursors of Anselm, who was, however, the first to endeavour to show that from the very idea

of God as the highest Being his necessary reality may be strictly deduced. In consequence, Anselm was the founder of that kind of argumentation which, in the opinion of many, is alone entitled to be described as *a priori* or ontological. He reasoned thus: "The fool may say in his heart, There is no God; but he only proves thereby that he is a fool, for what he says is self-contradictory. Since he denies that there is a God, he has in his mind the idea of God, and that idea implies the existence of God, for it is the idea of a Being than which a higher cannot be conceived. That than which a higher cannot be conceived cannot exist merely as an idea, because what exists merely as an idea is inferior to what exists in reality as well as in idea. The idea of a highest Being which exists merely in thought, is the idea of a highest Being which is not the highest even in thought, but inferior to a highest Being which exists in fact as well as in thought." This reasoning found unfavourable critics even among the contemporaries of Anselm, and has commended itself completely to few. Yet it may fairly be doubted whether it has been conclusively refuted, and some of the objections most frequently urged against it are certainly inadmissible. It is no answer to it, for example, to deny that the idea of God is innate or universal. The argument merely assumes that he who denies that there is a God must have an idea of God. There

is also no force, as Anselm showed, in the objection of Gaunilo, that the existence of God can no more be inferred from the idea of a perfect being, than the existence of a perfect island is to be inferred from the idea of such an island. There neither is nor can be an idea of an island which is greater and better than any other that can ever be conceived. Anselm could safely promise that he would make Gaunilo a present of such an island when he had really imagined it. Only one being—an infinite, independent, necessary being—can be perfect in the sense of being greater and better than every other conceivable being. The objection that the ideal can never logically yield the real—that the transition from thought to fact must be in every instance illegitimate—is merely an assertion that the argument is fallacious. It is an assertion which cannot fairly be made until the argument has been exposed and refuted. The argument is that a certain thought of God is found necessarily to imply His existence. The objection that existence is not a predicate, and that the idea of a God who exists is not more complete and perfect than the idea of a God who does not exist, is, perhaps, not incapable of being satisfactorily repelled. Mere existence is not a predicate, but specifications or determinations of existence are predicable. Now the argument nowhere implies that existence is a predicate; it implies only that reality, necessi-

ty, and independence of existence are predicates of existence; and it implies this on the ground that existence *in re* can be distinguished from existence *in conceptu*, necessary from contingent existence, self-existence from derived existence. Specific distinctions must surely admit of being predicated. That the exclusion of existence—which here means real and necessary existence—from the idea of God does not leave us with an incomplete idea of God, is not a position, I think, which can be maintained. Take away existence from among the elements in the idea of a perfect being, and the idea becomes either the idea of a nonentity or the idea of an idea, and not the idea of a perfect being at all. Thus, the argument of Anselm is unwarrantably represented as an argument of four terms instead of three. Those who urge the objection seem to me to prove only that if our thought of God be imperfect, a being who merely realised that thought would be an imperfect being; but there is a vast distance between this truism and the paradox that an unreal being may be an ideally perfect being.

The Cartesian proofs have been much and keenly discussed. The one which founds on the fact of our existence and its limitations is manifestly *a posteriori*. The other two both proceed from the idea of a perfect being. The first is, that the idea of an all-perfect and unlimited being is

involved in the very consciousness of imperfection and limitation. The imperfect can only be seen in the light of the perfect; the finite cannot be conceived of except in relation to the infinite. But can a finite and imperfect cause—like the human mind or the outward world—be reasonably supposed to originate the idea of an infinite and perfect being? Descartes holds that it cannot; that the idea of an infinite and perfect being can only be explained by the existence and operation of such a being. Was he correct in this judgment? Perhaps not; but what has been urged in refutation of it is probably by no means conclusive. It has been said that the ideas of infinity and perfection are mere generalisations from experience. But this is a statement which can only be proved on the principles of sensationalism, and never has been proved. It has been likewise said that these ideas are purely subjective, or, in other words, that there may be nothing whatever to correspond to them. But this is a meaningless collocation of words. No finite mind can conceive the infinite, for example, as within itself at all. The human mind can only think of the infinite as without itself. If the infinite be not objective, the idea of the infinite is false and delusive. The infinite, it has been further objected, means merely what is not finite; and the perfect what is not imperfect. So be it; the argument is as valid if the words be taken in that

sense as in any other. Only do not add, as some do, that the perfect and the imperfect, the finite and the infinite, are mere verbal correlatives. Such a proposition can be spoken, but it cannot be thought; and it is most undesirable to divorce thought from speech. It has also been urged that all men have not the idea of perfection; that different men have different ideas thereof; and that in each man who possesses it the idea is constantly changing. This must be granted; but it does not affect the argument, which is founded on the existence of the idea of a perfect being, and not on the perfection of the idea itself.

The second form of the Cartesian argument is, that God cannot be thought of as a perfect Being unless He be also thought of as a necessarily existent Being; and that, therefore, the thought of God implies the existence of God. "Just as because," for example, "the equality of its three angles to two right angles is necessarily comprised in the idea of a triangle, the mind is firmly persuaded that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles; so, from its perceiving necessary and eternal existence to be comprised in the idea which it has of an all-perfect Being, it ought manifestly to conclude that this all-perfect Being exists." Kant met this argument thus: "It is a contradiction that there should be a triangle the three angles of which are not equal to two right angles, or that

there should be a God who is not necessarily existent. I cannot in either case retain the subject and do away with the predicate. If I assume a triangle, I must take it with its three angles. If I assume a God, I must grant Him to be necessarily existent. But why should I assume either that there is a triangle or that there is a God? I may annul the subject in both cases, and then there will be no contradiction in annulling the predicate in both cases. There may be no such thing as a triangle, why should there be such a Being as God?"

This reasoning of Kant has generally been accepted as conclusive. It does not appear to me to be so. He ought not merely to have asserted but to have shown that we can annul the subject in either of the cases mentioned. We obviously cannot. I can say "there is no triangle," but instead of annulling that implies the idea of a triangle, and from the idea of a triangle it follows that its three angles are equal to two right angles. In like manner I can say "there is no God," but that is not to annul but to imply the idea of God, and it is from the idea of God that, according to Descartes, the existence of God necessarily follows. Kant should have seen that the proposition "there is no God" could be no impediment to an argument the very purpose of which is to prove that that proposition is a self-contradiction. It is futile to meet this by saying that existence ought not

to be included in any mere conception, for it is not existence but necessary existence which is included in the conception reasoned from, and that God can be thought of otherwise than as necessarily existent requires to be proved, not assumed. To affirm that existence cannot be given or reached through thought, but only through sense and sensuous experience, can prove nothing except the narrowness of the philosophy on which such a thesis is based.

Cudworth, Leibnitz, and Mendelssohn modified the Cartesian argument last specified in ways which do not greatly differ from one another. It may be doubted whether their modifications were improvements.

In the eighteenth century there were elaborated a great many proofs which claimed to be *a priori* theistic demonstrations based on the notions of existence and causality. Assuming that something is, and that nothing cannot be the cause of something, these arguments attempted to establish that there must be an unoriginated Being of infinite perfection, and possessed of the attributes which we ascribe to God. The most famous of them was, perhaps, that of Dr Samuel Clarke, contained in the Boyle Lecture of 1704. But Dr Richard Fiddes, the Rev. Colin Campbell, Mr Wollaston, Moses Lowman, the Chevalier Ramsay, Dean Hamilton, and many others, devised ingenious

demonstrations of a similar nature. It is impossible for me to discuss here their merits and demerits. Probably not one of them has completely satisfied more than a few speculative minds. They are certainly not fitted to carry conviction to the ordinary practical understanding. Yet it is not easy to detect flaws in some of them; and the more carefully they are studied, the more, I am inclined to think, will it be recognised that they are pervaded by a substantial vein of truth. They attempted logically to evolve what was implied in certain primary intuitions or fundamental conditions of the mind, and although they may not have accomplished all that they aimed at, they have at least succeeded in showing that unless there exists an eternal, infinite, and unconditioned Being, the human mind is, in its ultimate principles, self-contradictory and delusive.<sup>1</sup>

There must, for example, unless consciousness and reason are utterly untrustworthy, be an eternal Being. Present existence necessarily implies to the human intellect eternal existence. The man who says that a finite mind cannot rise to the idea of an eternal Being talks foolishly, for all the thinking of a finite mind implies belief in what he says is inaccessible to human thought. No man can thoughtfully affirm his own existence, or the existence even of a passing fancy of his mind, or

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix XXXVIII.

of a grain of sand, without feeling that that affirmation as certainly implies that something existed from all eternity as any mathematical demonstration whatever implies its conclusion. And this truth, that the most transient thing cannot be conceived of as existing unless an eternal being exist, may be syllogistically expressed and exhibited in a variety of ways, because the contradictions involved in denying it are numerous. This is what has been done by the authors above mentioned with much ingenuity, and by some of them in a manner which never has been and never can be refuted. It may be doubted whether they did wisely in throwing their arguments into syllogistic form; but as nobody ventures to undertake the refutation of them, they must be admitted to be substantially valid. The reasonings of men like Clarke and Fiddes, Lowman and Ramsay, have sufficiently proved that whoever denies such propositions as these,—Something has existed from eternity; The eternal Being must be necessarily existent, immutable, and independent; There is but one unoriginated Being in the universe; The unoriginated Being must be unlimited or perfect in all its attributes, &c.,—inevitably falls into manifest absurdities.

This, it may be objected, is not equivalent to a proof of the existence of an infinite and eternal Being. It leads merely to the alternative, either

an infinite and eternal Being exists, or the consciousness and reason of man cannot be trusted. The absolute sceptic will rejoice to have the alternative offered to him; that the human mind is essentially untrustworthy is precisely what he maintains. I answer that I admit that the arguments in question do not amount to a direct positive proof, but that they constitute a *reductio ad absurdum*, which is just as good, and that if they do not exclude absolute scepticism, it is merely because absolute scepticism is willing to accept what is absurd. I am not going to examine absolute scepticism at present. I shall have something to say regarding it when I treat of antitheistic theories. Just now it is sufficient simply to point out that if disbelief in an infinite, self-existent, eternal Being necessarily implies belief in the untrustworthiness of all our mental processes, the absolute sceptic is the only man who can consistently disbelieve in God. Unless we are prepared to believe that no distinction can be established between truth and error—that there is no certainty that our senses and our understandings are not at every moment deceiving us—no real difference between our perceptions when we are awake and our visions when we are asleep—no ground of assurance that we are not as much deluded when following a demonstration of Euclid as any have been who busied themselves in attempting to square the circle,

—we must accept all arguments which show that disbelief of the existence of an infinite and eternal Being logically involves a self-contradiction or an absurdity, as not less valid than a direct positive demonstration of the existence of such a Being. If, although I am constrained to conclude that there is an infinite and eternal Being, I may reject the conclusion on the supposition that reason is untrustworthy, I am clearly bound, in self-consistency, to set aside the testimony of my senses also by the assumption that they are habitually delusive. When any view or theory is shown to involve absolute scepticism it is sufficiently refuted, for absolute scepticism effaces the distinction between reason and unreason, and practically prefers unreason to reason.

## II.

The *a priori* arguments have a value independent of their truth and of their power to produce conviction. True or false, persuasive or merely perplexing, they are admirable means of disciplining the mind distinctly to apprehend certain ideas which experience cannot yield, yet which must be comprehended in any worthy view taken of God. They help us steadily to contemplate and patiently to consider such abstract and difficult thoughts as those of being, absolute being, necessary being, cause, substance, perfection, infinity,

eternity, &c.; and this is a service so great, that it may safely be said—as some writer whose name I cannot recall has said—that they will never be despised so long as speculative thinking is held in repute.

While believing that several of these arguments on the whole accomplish what they undertake, I am not prepared to maintain that any of them are faultless or even conclusive throughout. They are all, probably, much too formal and elaborate, so far as any directly practical purpose is concerned. It ought to be constantly kept in view that they presuppose an immediate apprehension of the infinite, and that their value consists entirely in establishing that that apprehension implies the reality and presence of God. The simplest mode of doing this must be the best. It may be thought that no reasoning at all is needed; that the intuition does not require to be supplemented by any inference; that if the infinite be apprehended, the living God must be self-evidently present to the human mind. But this is plainly a hasty view. Few atheists will deny that something is infinite, or that they immediately apprehend various aspects of infinity. What they refuse to acknowledge is, that the apprehension of the infinite implies more than the boundlessness of space, the eternity of time, and the self-existence of matter. There is certainly some reasoning

needed in order to show that this interpretation of the intuition is inadequate. But such reasoning cannot be too direct, for otherwise the function of the intuition is almost certain to be obscured, and argument is almost certain to be credited with accomplishing far more than it really effects.

According to the view of the theistic argumentation which has been given in the present course of lectures, all that is now necessary to complete the theistic proof is very simple indeed. The universe has been shown to have an inconceivably powerful and intelligent cause, a Supreme Creator, who has dealt bountifully with all His creatures, who has given to men a moral law, and who has abundantly manifested in history that He loveth righteousness and hateth iniquity. We are further conscious of having ideas or intuitions of infinity, eternity, necessary existence, and perfection. We may dispute as to whence and how we have got them, but we cannot deny that we possess them. Were any person, for example, to affirm that he did not believe that there is a self-existent or necessary being—a being which derived its existence from no other and depends upon no other, but is what it is in and of itself alone—we should be entitled to tell him either that he did not know the meaning of what he said, or that he did not himself believe what he said. But if we undoubtedly possess these ideas, they must, unless they

are wholly delusive—which is what we are unable to conceive—be predicable of some being. The sole question for us is, Of what being? And the whole of our previous argumentation has shut us up to one answer. It must be, Of Him who has been proved to be the First Cause of all things—the Source of all the power, wisdom, and goodness displayed in the universe. It cannot be the universe itself, for that has been shown to be but an effect—to have before and behind it a Mind, a Person. It cannot be ourselves or anything to which our senses can reach, seeing that we and they are finite, contingent, and imperfect. The author of the universe alone—the Father of our spirits, and the Giver of every good and perfect gift—can be uncreated and unconditioned, infinite and perfect.

This completes the idea of God so far as it can be reached or formed by natural reason. And it gives consistency to the idea. The conclusions of the *a posteriori* arguments fail to satisfy either mind or heart until they are connected with, and supplemented by, this intuition of the reason—infinity. The conception of any other than an infinite God—a God unlimited in all perfections—is a self-contradictory conception which the intellect refuses to entertain. The self-contradictions inherent in such a conception have been exposed times without number, and in ways which cannot

possibly be refuted. The chief value of most of the *a priori* arguments lies in such demonstration ; and no theologian who has thoughtfully discussed either the immanent or the transitive attributes of God has been able to dispense with as much of *a priori* reasoning as necessary to establish that a denial of the eternity, or immutability, or omnipotence, or ubiquity, or omniscience, or any other attribute implied in the infinity of the Divine Being, logically leads to absurdity. If the infinity of independence, for example, of the First Cause be questioned, whoever would maintain it must return some such answer as that which Mr Spencer, although not assenting to it, puts in these words: " If we go a step further, and ask what is the nature of this First Cause, we are driven by an inexorable logic to certain further conclusions. Is the First Cause finite or infinite ? If we say finite, we involve ourselves in a dilemma. To think of the First Cause as finite is to think of it as limited. To think of it as limited necessarily implies a conception of something beyond its limits : it is absolutely impossible to conceive a thing as bounded without conceiving a region surrounding its boundaries. What now must we say of this region ? If the First Cause is limited, and there consequently lies something outside of it, this something must have no First Cause—must be uncaused. But if we admit that there can be some-

thing uncaused, there is no reason to assume a cause for anything. If beyond that finite region over which the First Cause extends there lies a region which we are compelled to regard as infinite, over which it does not extend—if we admit that there is an infinite uncaused surrounding the finite caused—we tacitly abandon the hypothesis of causation altogether. Thus it is impossible to consider the First Cause as finite. And if it cannot be finite it must be infinite. Another inference concerning the First Cause is equally unavoidable. It must be independent. If it is dependent, it cannot be the First Cause; for that must be the First Cause on which it depends. It is not enough to say that it is partially independent; since this implies some necessity which determines its partial dependence, and this necessity, be it what it may, must be a higher cause, or the true First Cause, which is a contradiction. But to think of the First Cause as totally independent, is to think of it as that which exists in the absence of all other existence; seeing that if the presence of any other existence is necessary, it must be partially dependent on that other existence, and so cannot be the First Cause.”

It is impossible, I think, to show that we are justified in ascribing to God the attributes most essential to His nature without having recourse to a very considerable extent to reasoning of an

*a priori* kind similar to that of which we have a specimen in the passage just quoted. Such reasoning may be perfectly legitimate and conclusive. Mr Spencer, I have said, does not accept as valid the arguments cited. But he admits that from their inferences "there appears to be no escape," characterises their logic as "inexorable," and makes not the slightest attempt directly to refute them. On what grounds, then, does he withhold his assent from them?

One reason is, that the very conclusions which such arguments yield, lead, he thinks, by a logic as inexorable, to self-contradictions as great as those found to be involved in the denial of the infinity, independence, &c., of God. Reasoning from which there appears to be no escape, and in which no logical fallacy can be detected, yields the conclusion that there is an infinite and absolute First Cause; but reasoning as faultless yields also the conclusion that an infinite and absolute First Cause is a self-contradiction—that there is no infinite and absolute First Cause. In other words, an inexorable logic proves both that there is an infinite and absolute First Cause, and that there is none. Therefore it proves nothing at all except the worthlessness of logic when applied to such an idea as that of a First Cause.

Most persons will probably be of opinion that a view like this is its own sufficient refutation; that

the reasoning which tries to prove that reasoning may be necessarily and essentially self-contradictory is self-condemned. And they will be quite right in their opinion. If for any proposition the proof and counter-proof be equally cogent—if for contradictories there may be perfect demonstrations—it is not God only, but everything, that we shall have to cease to believe in. Such a *reductio ad absurdum* of a proposition would be also a *reductio ad absurdum* of the reason itself, leaving no inference, no intuition, no perception, to be rationally trusted. A scepticism more absolute and comprehensive than any human being has dared to advocate, would be the only legitimate result. Our whole nature would have to be regarded as a lie. But we need have no fear of reason thus terminating its existence by committing suicide. If we are disposed to be afraid that the human mind is in danger of so terrible a calamity, an examination of the reasoning by which it has been attempted to show that the idea of an infinite and absolute First Cause involves a variety of contradictions ought speedily to reassure us. Few persons of ordinary reasoning powers, if not committed to a foregone conclusion, will regard as “inexorable logic” the argumentation by which Mr Mansel and Mr Spencer fancy that they show that one and the same Being cannot be a cause, infinite and absolute, or its inferences as those

“from which there appears to be no escape.” On the contrary, ninety-nine men in a hundred will deem them extremely weak, and possessed of no other plausibility than that which they derive from an inaccurate and ambiguous use of language. There are arguments proving that there is a First Cause, and that the First Cause must be infinite and absolute, in which no fallacy can be detected. But the only arguments which have yet been invented to show that the First Cause cannot without contradiction be thought of as infinite and absolute, are good for little else than to exercise students of logic in the examination of fallacies. The two sets of arguments are by no means of equal worth and weight.

They are also notably different in nature. Those which attempt to prove the First Cause to be infinite and absolute imply no more than that the mind may conclude that such a cause is not finite, dependent, and imperfect. In this there is nothing arrogant. Those which attempt to prove that the First Cause cannot be infinite and absolute are of a much less humble character. They imply that we have a positive and comprehensive knowledge of the First Cause, the infinite, and the absolute; that we can define, compare, and contrast them, and thus find out that they are incompatible and contradictory. But we may be quite unable to do anything of the kind, and yet be fully entitled to

hold that the First Cause is not finite, dependent, or imperfect. We may reason *to* the infinite, if we only know what the finite is and is not, without being justified in reasoning *from* the infinite, as if we knew definitely, not to say exhaustively, its nature.

The idea of an infinite First Cause—the idea of the infinite God—contains no self-contradiction ; on the contrary, it solves certain otherwise inevitable self-contradictions of thought. It is only by the apprehension of a Being who passeth knowledge that knowledge can be rendered self-consistent ; only by the admission that all existence is not included within the conditions of the finite that thought can escape self-destruction. But, of course, we may easily put contradictions into our idea of an infinite Being, by assuming that we know more about unoriginated existence, primary causation, infinity, independence, &c., than we really do, and by defining or describing them in ways for which we have no warrant. The idea of an infinite First Cause is, it must not be forgotten, the idea of an incomprehensible Being. No sane mind can refuse to acknowledge that something is eternal and immense ; but we cannot comprehend eternity and immensity, and when we reason as if we comprehended them, we speedily find ourselves involved in absurdities. We may know and believe that God is eternal and immense,

but if He be so, we undoubtedly cannot comprehend Him. We cannot think of God otherwise than as self-existent, yet we certainly cannot comprehend the nature of self-existence. We can think of it negatively as unoriginated and independent existence, and consequently as a positive, most perfect, and peculiar manner of existence, unlike that which is characteristic of ourselves and other finite beings; but we are ignorant wherein its peculiarities and perfections positively consist.

The incomprehensibleness of the Divine perfections is no reasonable objection against their reality. We do not comprehend the manner even of our own existence, although we are quite certain that we do exist. Assent, however, has often been refused to *a priori* theistic argumentation, not on the ground that it is illogical, but on the ground that the conclusions inferred are incomprehensible. Thus the author of whom I have just been speaking urges in favour of the procedure which he adopts the following argument, in addition to the one already specified: "Self-existence necessarily means existence without a beginning; and to form a conception of self-existence is to form a conception of existence without a beginning. Now by no mental effort can we do this. To conceive existence through infinite past-time, implies the conception of infinite past-time, which is an impossibility." "Those who cannot conceive a self-exist-

ent universe, and who therefore assume a creator as the source of the universe, take for granted that they can conceive a self-existent creator. The mystery which they recognise in this great fact surrounding them on every side, they transfer to an alleged source of this great fact, and then suppose that they have solved the mystery. But they delude themselves. Self-existence is rigorously inconceivable; and this holds true whatever be the nature of the object of which it is predicated. Whoever agrees that the atheistic hypothesis is untenable because it involves the impossible idea of self-existence, must perforce admit that the theistic hypothesis is untenable if it contains the same impossible idea."

Now, that we can by no mental effort conceive existence without a beginning is certain, if by conceive be meant to comprehend, or definitely imagine, or sensibly represent; but that we not only conceive but cannot avoid conceiving such existence is equally certain, if by conceive be simply meant to be conscious of, to know to be true, to be rationally convinced. It is impossible seriously to doubt that existence was without beginning. Something is, and something never sprang from nothing. From nothing nothing ever came or can come. Something always was. Being was without beginning. Mr Spencer can no more deliver himself from the sublime and awful necessity of acknow-

ledging an eternal something—a self-existent reality—underlying the whole universe, than any one else. His own Absolute is such a something, such a reality; and although, in accordance with his peculiar use of the words “know” and “conceive,” he denies that that Absolute can be known or conceived, he admits that its positive existence is a “necessary datum of consciousness.” Further, no intelligent theist argues “that the atheistic hypothesis is untenable because it involves the impossible idea of self-existence.” On the contrary, the theist, far from objecting to the idea of self-existence as impossible, admits it to be a necessary idea. He recognises that the universe must be allowed to be self-existent until it is shown to be a creation or event. It is only after an examination of its character—only after having convinced himself that it is an effect—that he transfers the attribute of self-existence to its cause or creator. To say that in doing so he flees from one mystery to another as great, is a statement which admits of no possible justification. In a word, Mr Spencer’s account of the reasoning of the theist is an inexplicable caricature.

The *a priori* reasoning employed in the establishment of theism is independent of any particular theory as to the origin of our ideas of infinity. It presupposes merely that these ideas are valid—are not delusive. It is only as predisposing to, or

implying, scepticism, as to their truth or objective worth, that a theory as to their origin has a bearing on their application. Such scepticism cannot be logically limited to the ideas in question. If we do not accept these ideas as true and trustworthy, absolute scepticism is rationally inevitable. An examination of the nature and principles of scepticism will make this manifest, but I cannot enter on that examination at present.

In conclusion, I remark that the conception of any other than an infinite God—a God unlimited in all perfections—is not only a self-contradictory but an unworthy conception ; it not only perplexes the intellect but revolts the spiritual affections. The heart can find no secure rest except on an infinite God. If less than omnipotent, He may be unable to help us in the hour of sorest need. If less than omniscient, He may overlook us. If less than perfectly just, we cannot unreservedly trust Him. If less than perfectly benevolent, we cannot fully love Him. The whole soul can only be devoted to One who is believed to be absolutely good.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix XXXIX.