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New Validations of Theism

The age-old problem of the rational proofs for the existence of a God has been given prominence in recent philosophical literature. The subject has long been in abeyance, and, in general, interest in philosophical theism has been on the wane ever since the traditional evidences were subjected to the devastating scrutiny of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Only in Roman Catholic handbooks of systematic theology and of metaphysics the time-honored arguments for the existence of God are submitted as scientifically valid. Revival of interest in the subject is chiefly due to contributions of certain English philosophers to the discussion of natural theism. Among these the works of Dr. F. R. Tennant, Cambridge theologian, have aroused considerable discussion.

Dr. Tennant published a volume of lectures in 1902 under the title *The Origin and Propagation of Sin*, and another, entitled *The Sources of the Doctrine of the Fall and Original Sin*, soon after. Among his important later essays were *The Being of God in the Light of Physical Science* (1905), and his *Philosophical Theology* (1928 and 1930) and *Philosophy of the Sciences* (1932) exhibited vast learning and called forth many articles in endorsement and in criticism. The latest contribution to the subject is a volume by Delton Lewis Scudder, Ph. D., entitled *Tennant's Philosophical Theology*, and published by the Yale University Press last year. While our present study is not a complete summary of the arguments either of Dr. Tennant or of his American critic, the analysis of Tennant's argumentation by Mr. Scudder supplied the groundwork for the following discussion.

Modern interest in the proofs for the validation of the concept of God is chiefly apologetic. In one of the chapters of *Philosophical Theology*, Tennant expresses deep concern for the fact that circles of educated people are alienated from the Church and from religious faith. Because much of the doctrinal teaching of the Church "cannot be assimilated by the modern mind"; because "everywhere the suspicion is abroad that religious faith starts somewhere in the air and is wholly distinct, not only in degree but also in kind, from knowledge,"—for these and other reasons liberal thinkers have been led silently to ignore the truth of religious tenets, and the Church's ministrations come to be concerned with the half educated. Tennant particularly finds cause for this tendency in the claim which has been made for religious belief as being derived from "specific emotions or instincts" or from "non-reasonable, immediate, religious experience." The entire argument of Tennant's later works is directed against this position. Unless we give up the notion, he argues, that religion is to be explained only by a natural

instinct or by a mystic religious experience, we have nothing to offer as an answer to the representatives of science. Scientists generally have taken the position that there are two fields of knowledge in which they could become interested. The one is the great body of knowledge based on observed facts or data, enriched by deductions rendered possible by the application of mathematics and possessing all the unconditional certainty or necessity which belongs to the pure sciences, such as mathematics. The second is the realm of "possible knowledge" awaiting invasion and annexation by further application of the method of positive science; this is the field of scientific research. But distinguished sharply from both of these there is "a dreamland of unproven and unprovable theorizing" in which the theologians are laboring. It was from this reproach that Professor Tennant tried to save the rational approach to the belief in a God.

The new apologetics lays heavy stress on the faith element in science. It purposes to show that the particular faith-venture which is theological belief is really not different in kind from the faith which scientific knowledge assumes. Naturally, the term "faith" is here used in the sense of trust, a trust not based on a reasoning process or on observation. For instance, consider such generalizations of science as the law of cause and effect. In this principle, that every event has a cause, several postulates are concealed which "are neither self-evident nor mutually independent, nor are they capable of complete proof or disproof by experience." Then there is the principle of uniformity of nature. These principles are simply taken for granted by science; they are taken on faith. Tennant points out that it is gross dogmatism to insist that materialistic mechanism is the only concept which explains what we call the uniformity of nature; it may be the result of divine will ordering the world according to some end. "But," continues the argument, as restated by Scudder, "if science is not certain knowledge but a matter of faith and probability, faith entering into the very foundation of its so-called facts and pervading its entire generalizations, then it may be that the theistic explanation is not essentially different in type but only in degree from those theoretical and reasonable conceptions which are scientific."¹ And

1) *Tennant's Philosophical Theology*, p. 35. Compare also Hastings, *The Christian Doctrine of Faith*, p. 94: "Before science can proceed to investigate a single question, she must make a number of pure acts of faith. She must make, for example, (1) an act of faith in the trustworthiness of human reason, that is, in its ability to lead the inquirer to true conclusions; (2) an act of faith in the trustworthiness of human memory, for unless memory is trustworthy, it is impossible either to amass facts or to construct a chain of arguments; (3) an act of faith in the trustworthiness of the senses, for unless the senses can be trusted, knowledge of the external world is impossible; (4) an act of faith in a

so it is with the assumption of a world made up simply of dead atoms, without any spiritual force permeating the universe. Tennant "does not think that science can deny the possibility of their being self-active living monads any more than it can state dogmatically that they are microscopic units characterized by inertia and operating according to impressed forces. The entire operating ground-plan of metaphysical nature may be quite as well conceived as moved in process by a supreme end held in view by a world-mind as by a conception of mechanical action."²⁾ The burden of Tennant's analysis of scientific knowledge is to show that no scientific proposition is absolutely certain or true, for scientific conceptions, facts, and generalizations are all derived from an interpretation of a non-logical "given" element in sense perception. Of this reality which is presented in sense-experience for conceptual interpretation by the mind, "the scientist can have only *probable* truth. Propositions about reality are never self-evident but only relatively evident or *probably* certain. They depend objectively upon the control of sense-given data and subjectively upon a volitional faith or trust in the applicability or correspondence of the mind's creative interpretation to external reality."

The argument against making a fundamental distinction between science and religion is summed up with great force by Dr. Scudder as follows: "An unprovable assumption undergirds all scientific endeavor; namely, the assumption that nature is uniform, its sequences regular and repetitious, and, in spite of appearances, its regularities discoverable. Certainly this assumption that nature is orderly and intelligible throughout is not *given* in any one bit of experience. No one has examined nature as a whole to know whether or not uniformity prevails throughout the universe. Furthermore, there are signs of genuine indeterminacy in physical theories of nature which may or may not be assignable to uniform sequence. This assumption, that nature is orderly, goes far beyond

number of unprovable principles, generally summed up in the phrase 'the uniformity of nature.' All these propositions are assented to by acts of faith of the most absolute kind. They are not only not proved by science but never can be proved." Albert Einstein, discussing his "cosmic religion," has said: "There is no doubt that all but the crudest scientific work is based on a firm belief—akin to religious feeling—in the rationality and comprehensibility of the world." And in a *New York Times Magazine* article: "What a deep faith in the rationality of the structure of the world and what a longing to understand even a small glimpse of the reason revealed in the world there must have been in Kepler and Newton to enable them to unravel the mechanism of the heavens in long years of lonely work!" It is clear that Einstein, like all great scientific workers, is deeply imbued with the sense that in reading the fragments of the universe that are intelligible to him, he is deciphering meaningful symbols and catching glimpses of the operation of a universal rationality immeasurably greater than man's.

2) *Op. cit.*, p. 52.

experience. To the naturalist it cannot be derived from *a-priori* factors in mind. To such a person it is a pure act of will based perhaps upon the desire to discover or to explain facts according to the causal sequences and upon the practical need to know such sequences in order to predict future events from observed conditions. This situation gives the lie to any assertion that science is free from assumption and from human interest. As a matter of fact, science is based upon both faith and human needs. Naturalism is unable to prove its claim to absolute certainty and absolute disinterestedness." 3)

The reader will observe that both Tennant and his American interpreter ignore the principle of authority in religion as distinguished from the rational principle governing science. And this is the weakness of the new apologetics. The authority of Scripture is scrapped at the outset and religion made to stand for its vindication on a process of reasoning. Reason, to Tennant as to the Deists, — though Tennant's understanding of reason differs from that of the Deists, — "is to be the sole instrument for the acquisition, appropriation, and judging of truth in religion as in any other field of thought." 4) He goes so far as to say that the truth of religious belief can be established only by philosophical arguments which exclude the data of religious experience. Scudder defines Tennant's position as follows: "Reason is the sole judge of truth in religion because Reason constructs the idea of God by a complex process of synthesizing inferences from empirical facts of the natural world." 5) In other words, science is first. Religion arises by reflection upon the facts ascertained by science. If the resulting conclusion of this reflection is "demonstrated" to be valid on the grounds of a "probability," which is not different in kind but only in degree from that underlying the concepts of scientific fact and theory, then the central object of religion is validated.

Now, even from the standpoint of philosophy this is a very hazardous position, and Scudder has every good reason on his side when he says that from a contemplation of nature as it is interpreted by physics and chemistry, astronomy, biology, etc., "it is impossible to rise to valid thought and experience of God by way of inferences from such data." 6) It is not possible to develop religious ideas out of the facts of scientific research. Scientific theories and interpretations "may lead to a discovery of new facts, but these new facts are always of the same general order as those which suggested the hypothesis. Inferences from *sensa* may lead to a discovery of new *sensa* but never to underlying active causes. In-

3) *Op. cit.*, p. 228.

4) Scudder, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

5) *Op. cit.*, p. 88.

6) *Op. cit.*, p. 98.

ferences from bodies may lead to a discovery of more facts about bodies but not to discovery of other mind."7) In other words, religion cannot be validated by reasoning out the existence of a God and His attributes from a study of the phenomena and laws of so-called nature.⁸⁾ The modern deism has no more rational merit than the deism of the early British freethinkers, against which Kant directed his criticism in the chapter on the "Antinomies of Reason."

With reference to the appeal of theologians to rational proofs of God's existence Scudder quotes Rees Griffiths⁹⁾ as follows:

"The ideal-construction theory of religion makes much use of the theistic proofs. Time was when the philosophy of religion was comprised in an examination of such proofs. The certitude of faith was taken to depend, in the last resort, on rational arguments that could be considered valid on philosophical grounds. This natural inclination to resort to such proofs is evidence that underlying this view of religion there lurks an implied belief that the nature of religious faith is governed by the same logic as that employed in the proofs themselves. The proofs are taken and used as if they were a more explicit application of the categories that are involved in the religious attitude to the world and life. This, I would urge, is a perfectly unwarranted assumption. Though the arguments which produce the proofs may all be legitimate and helpful, constituting an effective defense of faith's citadel, they certainly do not provide a complete and satisfactory vindication of faith. Few indeed would claim perfect cogency for any of them."

In his discussion of Tennant, Dr. Scudder takes up the protest of Tennant against deriving assurance in religious belief from the data of religious experience. By this is meant the immediate, mystical apprehension of God. Scudder suggests that there are two difficulties involved in this line of proof. In the first place, the mystic does not experience any other type of God-concept than the one which he has acquired from tradition or authority before his experience. That is to say, the Christian mystic experiences Christ, God, or the Trinity but never Mohammed, Buddha, Brahma, or Nirvana. He experiences what he thinks, *i. e.*, his particular concept of religious reality. In the second place, who is to distinguish absolutely "valid" from a "fallacious" religious experience? — a line of thought which is not, however, given sufficient attention by Dr. Scudder in his further discussion. His argument finally resolves itself into acceptance of certain evidences of *design in nature*, which demand a "cosmic" explanation, that is to say, make belief in the existence of a Supreme Being unescapable.

He notes first of all the fact that nature is adapted to human thought and reason. Study nature closely, and it becomes a medium through which thought and meaning are conveyed to the

7) *Op. cit.*, p. 130.

8) This may be accepted without in any way weakening the cosmological argument suggested by Rom. 1: 18 ff.

9) *God in Idea and Experience*, pp. 66, 67.

human mind. "It is as if nature itself sought to convey thoughts which are first entertained in a mind within nature." To assume that behind it all is a mindless mechanism is too strong a burden on skepticism. Nature plainly exhibits the powers of intelligence.

Next in order is the marvelous adaptation of the cosmic environment to living organisms. "Out of countless possible elements and distributions just certain elements (carbon, hydrogen, and oxygen) in sufficient quantities and temperatures were selected to compose an environment in which living organisms can dwell. The selection may have been the outcome of chance or of unconscious purpose, but to the theist the collocations are too complex, unusual, and intricate to be the outcome of chance."

In the evolution of organisms from lower to higher types Scudder finds a further validation of purpose since pure chance could not have made the organisms differ according to such pre-arranged order and plan. Other arguments are deduced, also involving purpose, from esthetics and ethics, concerning which Scudder asks: "Whence come these standards which individual minds do not create out of themselves alone, but which they recognize through their judgments and realize in conduct?"

And so we reach the conclusion that "theism comes to be a more reasonable world-explanation than mechanism, chance, or unconscious purpose."¹⁰⁾

The details of the validation of theism from the standpoint of the contemplation of purpose in nature—the "visible things" in which man may contemplate certain attributes of the invisible God, Rom. 1:18 ff.—are supplied by such handbooks of the philosophy of science as Bernard Bavink's *The Natural Sciences* (Century Press, 1936) and Ronald Campbell Macfie's *Science Rediscovered God, or The Theodicy of Science* (Edinburgh: R. & T. Clark, 1930). Macfie's is the more popular presentation. He emphasizes the marvelous adaptation observable in organic life and in the relations of the organic to the inorganic. In each phenomenon of life, he says, "there occur apparently purposive reorientations and rearrangements of structural units which are never seen in any chemical mixtures or compounds and which cannot be explained by chemistry or physics. I refer to processes of growth, of repair, of locomotion, and reproduction. All these processes display a wonderful versatility and a wonderful adaptation of means to ends. Cells that never did such a thing in their lives before reconstruct organs and tissues according to correct plan and, if the old way of reconstruction be debarred, even invent new ways of reconstruction."¹¹⁾ Regarding man and his environment he says that they fit together as

10) *Op. cit.*, p. 247.

11) *Op. cit.*, p. 70.

accurately as a million keys and a million keyholes, though the slightest alteration in a single key or keyhole would render it impossible to unlock all the gates of life, at least as we know life. Regarding the evidence of intelligence in the arrangements of nature, Macfie says: "I can, with some difficulty, imagine a man who had never before seen a typewriter finding one on a desert and saying, 'It is a very wonderful machine, and the parts fit marvelously well together and work well together, but there is no evidence of intelligence in it, all the same,' but I utterly fail to understand how any rational man finding beside the typewriter a beautiful type-written poem could still maintain that there was no intelligent purpose behind the machine. Personally, I can imagine nothing more certain, more scientifically and logically certain, than that no casual variation could have possibly produced the apparatus of vision in its multiform relationships, and the apparitions in consciousness associated with the apparatus." Accordingly he holds that evolution by casual variation and selection is an altogether unreasonable assumption.

Or consider the larger coordinations and adaptations: "The activating correspondence between sun, ether waves, and protoplasm; the synthesizing correspondence between chlorophyll, sunlight, and starch; the chemical correspondence between digestive ferments and foods; the mechanical and chemical correspondences between red blood cells, the blood, the heart, the air, were all necessary to lead to the correspondence between the electrons of the cells of sight and the ether waves of light resulting in sight. A cataclysm, a sun, a planet, volcanoes, clouds, rivers, plant cells, tiny germ cells, red blood cells, digestive cells, eyelids, eyelashes, lacrimal glands, ether waves of certain lengths, are all in relation and correspondence with the visual cells of the brain and all cooperative in the final visual epiphany."¹²⁾ The deeper we delve into the secrets of the universe, the more evidence that a grand teleology runs through the whole. The entire existence of the animal and plant kingdoms depends on ingenious contrivances and on elements and parts that fit together as purposively and precisely as a million locks and a million keys. And this evidence has become so overwhelming, says Macfie, "we are compelled to postulate a Maker's mind to account for the rational world, even as we are compelled to postulate an author's mind to account for rational words."¹³⁾

12) *Op. cit.*, p. 137.

13) *Op. cit.*, p. 261. Even with his own rudimentary knowledge of the universe, Francis Bacon was led to exclaim: "Certainly a little philosophy inclineth man's mind to atheism, but 'depth' in philosophy bringeth man about to religion; for when the mind of man looketh upon secondary causes scattered, sometimes it resteth in them; but when it beholdeth them confederate and knit together, it flieth to providence and Deity."

And so, though the rationalist's insistence on reason may yield but a deistic concept of God, devoid of religious significance, and while the appeal to religious experience for the demonstration of theism involves a begging of the question and is veiled in many uncertainties due to the impossibility to distinguish between genuine and fallacious experiences, there is accumulating a great volume of insight into the constitution of matter and the phenomena of life which compel the student of science to acknowledge the existence of a Supreme Being, the Creator of all things. For the believer in Scripture there is a validation higher than that of any human philosophy. He knows God not only as the Absolute but as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and that by an inner witness-bearing, which comes with an assurance given by the Holy Spirit, who "beareth witness with our spirit that we are the children of God," Rom. 8:16.

THEODORE GRAEBNER

Outlines on the Wuerttemberg Gospel Selections

Invocavit

John 2:13-22

Our text relates a story about Jesus, vv. 13, 19. Jesus means Savior. He is to destroy sin and its corrupting influence and promote spiritual life. To this end He pointed out during His public ministry what was wrong with the Church. Such sore spots were self-righteousness, mechanical observance of the letter of the Law with neglect of its spirit, prayer reduced to empty babbling, and others. Our Gospel-lesson, too, shows Jesus taking issue with forces that wreck the Church from within.

Jesus Deals with Two Ruinous Tendencies in the Church of His Day

1. *He ousts the evidences of commercialism from the Sanctuary*
2. *He meets unbelief with a reference to the miracle of His resurrection*

1

Jesus' pious parents annually journeyed to Jerusalem for the Passover, as commanded Ex. 23:17; Deut. 16:16. The events related Luke 2:41-52 took place on such an occasion. When Jesus reached manhood, He continued the practice in accordance with His principle stated John 4:34.

For the believing Israelite this pilgrimage had a deep spiritual meaning and climaxed the religious observances of the year. The elaborate services in the central Sanctuary with their meaningful