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**The Works Of the late Right Honorable Henry St. John,
Lord Viscount Bolingbroke**

In Five Volumes, complete.

Bolingbroke, Henry St. John

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XLVII.

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He cannot believe a God unjust, cruel, unreasonable; but he may find it as difficult to believe a God who acts against his attributes, and the perfections of his nature, in one system, only to have a reason the more for acting agreeably to them in another. In a word, he may be led by theology, if he does not start back and revert to his former ways of thinking, from theism into atheism. DES CARTES and his followers have been justly censured for resting the truth of God's existence on their favorite proof, drawn from the idea which they assume that the mind can frame of an all-perfect Being, and neglecting or even rejecting every other. Divines are justly liable to the same censure; for tho they admit all the proofs that establish this great truth, yet they rest the validity of them ultimately on the hypothesis here mentioned, and expose such as cannot take this hypothesis for a demonstration, to the danger of mistaking the demonstrations for hypotheses.

XLVII.

THIS danger, great as it is, appears to such a divine as CLARKE, or is represented by him to be none at all. He who does not believe the moral attributes of the Supreme Being, to be just such as the doctor conceives them, and as essential to the divine nature as the natural attributes, has the doctor's consent to believe no God at all. This is the angular stone of artificial theology. Grant to the divine that these attributes and the eternal reason of things are such as he conceives them to be, and he will raise whatever schemes he pleases of divine oeconomy. He will shew you what God was, and is obliged to do as creator and governor of the world*, and

* DEM. 131.

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what he must do to correct his first plan, to set the disorders and inequalities of it right, and to make the whole design appear at its consummation, what it does not appear at present, a design worthy of infinite wisdom, justice, and goodness. Refuse to grant what he assumes, and he proves nothing with all his pomp of argument, and airs of demonstration. This prophane application and impudent abuse of reason is grown so common, that they who are guilty of it do not perceive it to be what it is; and that every little smatterer in artificial theology, who clambers up into a pulpit, talks of the nature, attributes and providence of the supreme, ineffable, incomprehensible Being, with such assurance as would be unpardonable presumption in angels and archangels themselves.

How should it be less? How should finite measure infinite? God's manner of knowing is ours no more than his manner of being. At least, I think, that one of these propositions may be reduced, as well as the other, to absurdity. But if his manner of knowing could be supposed, without absurdity, the same, would it not be still absurd to suppose the objects of omniscience as confined, as the objects of human science? And yet they must be so, if the eternal reason of things, by which the divine wisdom conducts them all, be just the same as it appears to be to the understanding of every rational being, and if God appeals to man himself for his conduct towards man. When God communicates any knowledge to any of his creatures, it is such as he thinks necessary for them, and it is, therefore, communicated in a manner proportionable to their conceptions. Thus he has communicated to mankind in his works some knowledge of himself, more of the world they inhabit, and still more of their state, their duty, and their interest in it. What he has not given them the means of knowing, according to their manner of knowing, they are ignorant

ignorant of: and, therefore, tho the particular reasons and final causes of some few things relatively to themselves, and to their system, are known to them, yet even these are in many more instances unknown, and the reasons relatively to God, for constituting these and all other things as they are constituted, can be known to God alone, who sees them intuitively in himself, who is himself the eternal reason. They cannot be objects of human understanding; for they are not conceivable by human ideas: and it is impossible to hear men with patience, when they endeavour to palm upon us, most impertinently, their notions of glory and honor for instance, and to make them pass for the motives that determine God.

WE receive ideas from sensation and reflection, and we frame others by the several operations of our minds about these. Our minds have no other objects when they exercise the power of thinking, whatever that be. These ideas do not go far into the extent of being, nor our power of thinking, by consequence: and even in this extent our most simple ideas are sometimes fallacious, our most complex always unsteady, and many of them imperfect and inadequate, confused and obscure. There is somewhat more. Our knowledge does not extend even to all our ideas. Let me borrow two examples from Mr. LOCKE. "We have the ideas of a square, a circle, and equality, and yet shall never be able, perhaps, to find a circle equal to a square, and to know certainly that it is so. We have the ideas of matter and thinking, but possibly shall never be able to know whether any mere material being thinks or no." In like manner, and far more strongly, it may be said that supposing us to have ideas of divine wisdom, goodness and justice, there will be various phaenomena still, whereof we may have very clear and distinct ideas, and wherein we shall be never able to discover how wisdom coincides

cides with goodness or justice, nor be able to make the application of the phaenomena to the attributes. Thus the case would stand, supposing our ideas of these attributes in God as adequate as our ideas of a square, a circle, equality, matter, and thought. But it grows much stronger, when we consider how inadequate our ideas of these attributes must necessarily be, not only on account of the infinite distance between the divine and human nature, but on account of the numberless and to us unknown relations, respectively to all which the divine providence acts: which, if we did know them, we should be unable to compare, and in which, therefore, the harmony of divine perfections would not be discernible by us. Upon the whole matter, we may conclude, safely from error, and in direct opposition to CLARKE, that goodness and justice in God cannot be conceived, without manifest presumption and impiety, to be “the same as in the ideas we frame of these perfections, when we consider them in men, or when we reason about them abstractly in themselves; but that in the supreme Governor of the world they are something transcendent, and of which we cannot make any true judgment, nor argue with any certainty about them.”

THUS I think, and if I wanted any authority to justify me I could find it in Dr. BARROW, and in St. PAUL, whom I quote rather as a theologian than an inspired apostle, since we consider this whole matter on principles of reason and not of revelation. The former begins his sermon, on a text taken from the epistle of the latter to the Romans*, how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out? By observing that when God rejected the greatest part of his antient people, for their refusal to embrace the gospel, and took the

* C. II. v. 33.

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gentiles into his favor; the advocates of judaism argued against this proceeding from their ideas of wisdom, as well as of justice, and the other moral attributes. "This proceeding, they said, argued his former affection to them to have been misplaced. It impleaded his antient covenant, and law, of imperfection. It supplanted his own designs. It unravelled all that he had been doing for many ages." St. PAUL answered the advocates of judaism by other arguments taken from "ideas of general equity, of the nature of God, of his attributes, of his relations to men, &c. But after he had steered his discourse through all these rocks," which, I presume, would have been such for CLARKE, if they were such for St. PAUL, "he thought it safe to cast anchor, that is to wind up the contest in this modest intimation, that, whatever he could say, might not perhaps exhaust the difficulty, nor void all scruple; and that, therefore, in this, and in all such cases, for entire satisfaction we should have recourse to the incomprehensible wisdom of God, who frequently in the course of his providence ordereth things in methods transcending our ability to discover or trace." St. PAUL did not pretend that his manner of accounting, for rejecting the Jews and calling in the gentiles, was infallible demonstration, certain and necessary, even as certain as the attributes of God. Much less did he affirm, that if his arguments, concerning the dispensations of providence, were not a demonstration, there was no demonstration of the being of God: and yet, surely, besides the difference between the apostle of the gentiles, and the minister of St. James's, it could not be harder to prove, that the rejection of the Jews, and the vocation of the gentiles were consistent with the goodness and justice of God, than to prove that a future state of rewards and punishments is necessary to justify his attributes, and to render his dispensations in this world consistent with them.

Dr.

Dr. BARROW proceeds to consider several reasons, why we cannot clearly discern the entire congruity of providential dispensations to the divine attributes, as he expresses himself in another place. He could not cut the knot at once, nor bring the same charge as we have done directly against the presumption of men of his own order. He was a divine, he was a preacher, he was to keep up the cant of the pulpit. He gives, therefore, some reasons of a prudential kind, which may have determined God to veil his face with a cloud, and to wrap up his power in some obscurity, such for instance as these, that he may not confound our weak sight, that he may exalt our faith, that he may appear God indeed, or that we may be well assured concerning a future account, and forced in our thoughts to recur thither for a resolution of all emergent doubts and difficulties. Such flimsy stuff is a man like this obliged to vend, when he has put on a black gown and a band. But he lays his stress on another kind of reasoning, and such as is truly decisive. "As the dealings of very wise," he says, and we may add, of very just and good men, are sometimes founded upon maxims, and admit justifications not obvious nor penetrable by vulgar conceit, so may God act according to rules of wisdom and justice which it may be quite impossible by our faculties to apprehend, or with our means to descry. As there are natural modes of being and operation so there may be prudential and moral rules of proceeding, far above our reach peculiar objects of divine wisdom, and not to be understood by any creature especially by creatures who stand in the lowest form of intelligence, one remove from beasts. . . . In fine, those rules of equity and experience which we in our transactions with one another do use if they be applied to the dealings of God will be found very incongruous or deficient, the case being

VOL. V.

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vastly altered from that infinite distance in nature and state between God and us, and from the immense differences which his relations towards us have from our relations to one another. These two great divines are, you see, on my side. They are both of the same opinion that CLARKE censures: and if his censures were as just as they are dogmatical, St. PAUL himself would be one of those men who take in reality the moral attributes of God entirely away, and who may on the same grounds deny his natural attributes*.

XLVIII.

IT is time to have done with CLARKE, especially since I leave this part of the argument in much better hands than my own, in those of Dr. BARROW and St. PAUL, who deny to him the very principle from which, as from a common source, all the accusations of providence are deduced by him, by many other divines, and by the whole tribe of atheists. I proceed to take notice of another writer, and to examine another of those assumptions which are employed by these men, whether divines or atheists, to maintain their charge. That we are very incompetent judges of the moral attributes of God and of the eternal reason of things; that it is unpardonable presumption in us to pronounce what both or either of them required that God should do in the original constitution of our system, or requires that he should do in the government of it; these truths, I say, are so evident, that he who denies them, does not deserve to be argued against any longer. "Quae perspicua sunt longa esse non debent." The determination of them should in reason determine the whole dispute. Infi-

* Evid. p. 26.