

Robert Lewis Dabney's War on Sensualism

By Frank J. Smith

The scars of a literal war were still evident in 1875. The Southland had been ravaged by hordes of Yankees. The results of the devastation were felt for decades, with the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the affected states not attaining their antebellum levels until the 1950s. But the war brought more than mere economic hardship. The concept of private property had been assaulted by fellow travelers, including devoted followers of Karl Marx. There was the loss of Southern leadership—both literally (with the death and maiming of countless men, including the next generation of leaders) and in terms of prestige. Racial tensions increased and spilled over into violence. Corruption characterized state governments, and at the national level, political persecution proceeded apace. Radical ideological notions and educational philosophies were foisted upon Dixie. Society as a whole had turned upside down.

It was at that moment—just prior to the formal end of the Reconstruction era—that one of the most prominent Southern Presbyterian theologians, Robert Lewis Dabney, penned one of his greatest works, *The Sensualistic Philosophy of the Nineteenth Century Considered*. His target was Sensualism. The war that he was fighting had multiple fronts: philosophy, religion, ethics, apologetics, politics, science, and even worship. Underlying the outer skirmishes was something much deeper and ideological. The conflict focused on the way by which truth can be known—an issue which, by definition, touches on everything.

THE ISSUE STATED

Dabney begins his work by noting that “sensualist” is often used “to describe one in whom the animal appetites are predominant.” Though “it is a just charge against the Sensualistic philosophy” that it not infrequently “inclines its advocates to this dominion of beastly lusts,” the issue of Sensualism is much deeper.

The Sensualistic philosophy is that theory, which resolves all the powers of the human spirit into the functions of the five senses, and the modifications thereof. It is the philosophy, which finds all its rudiments in sensation. It not only denies to the spirit of man all innate ideas, but all innate powers of originating ideas, save those given us from our senses. It consequently attempts to account for every general and every abstract judgment, as an empirical result of our sensations, and consistently denies the validity of any *à priori* ideas. Such was the philosophy which was dominant in France at the close of the eighteenth century; and which, untaught by the frightful results it produced there, is now striving again to establish its dominion among us towards the close of the nineteenth age.¹

Those who opposed Sensualism were called “spiritualists”—a name which Dabney would have welcomed to take for his own, except for the fact that that term could be confused with a defiled word, “spiritualism.” The Virginian staked out his position: “Let it then be understood that the philosophy which I maintain against the Sensualistic, or exclusively empirical, . . . shall be called the Rational. It holds that the human intelligence is not a bundle of organs, but a pure spirit; it asserts for man a Reason, and not merely senses and their modifications” (11–12). Though Sensualism can appear in many forms,

it always has its characteristic traits and carries its own dangers to truth, virtue, and happiness. . . . [I]t always

THE AUTHOR: Dr. Frank J. Smith is the pastor of Atlanta Reformed Presbyterian Church (RPCNA) in Atlanta, Ga. and an editor of *The Confessional Presbyterian* (see more in editor biographies).

1. Robert Lewis Dabney, *The Sensualistic Philosophy of the Nineteenth Century Considered* (1875; repr., Dallas, Tex.: Naphtali Press, 2003), p. 11.

involves tendencies to erroneous logic, vitiating even the physical sciences, which it is wont to claim as its peculiar clients; to universal skepticism; to idealism; to nihilism; to the obliterating of moral distinctions, and the destruction of moral responsibility; to materialism; to a denial of the supernatural; and thus, to atheism.... [W]e do not charge that every Sensualistic philosopher holds to all these results, or approves them; we charge that they are all latent in the system, and that one or another of them is continually making itself patent in the outgrowth of this philosophy (12).

Dabney protests against the Sensualistic assumption of denying the validity of any metaphysic. He demonstrates the inconsistency of that position, by noting that Sensualists, who have been “tinctured with ‘Positivist’ errors,” assume their own *à priori* principle, thus adopting a metaphysic (12–13).

THE PROGENITORS OF THE SENSUALISTIC PHILOSOPHY Chapter 2, “The Sensualistic Philosophy of the 18TH Century,” considers the views of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, Claude-Adrien Helvetius, and Jean François de Saint-Lambert. In accordance with Hobbes’ views as expressed in *Leviathan*, there is no possibility of free-agency in his system.

But how can that creature be entitled to civil liberty for whom spiritual freedom is impossible? After denying the very existence of the moral faculty, which defines rights and regulates personal freedom, Hobbes can do nothing less than deny liberty to man in society. Again, if man’s only faculty of cognition is sense-perception, and he has absolutely no ideas save those given from the bodies which he smells, or tastes, or feels, or hears, or sees, it is very clear that there can be no abstract idea, *à priori*, of space, of time, of power, of the infinite, of the moral right, or spirit, or of God. For none of these are properties of bodies; none of them are cognizable by the senses (20).

After pointing out the inconsistencies of Locke’s Sensualism, Dabney declared: “The havoc which the Sensualistic philosophy makes in the foundation of ethics, presents one of the most crushing refutations. It is my purpose to employ this line of opposition to the full; and hence this attempt to familiarize the reader’s mind to it” (27).

Dabney observed:

The philosophy of the infidels and sensualists of France was the storm cloud from which fell the most ghastly

ruin witnessed in modern times. The reign of terror was the offspring of this philosophy. It was under its express guidance that the legislation decreed God a non-entity, and death an eternal sleep; that divine worship was formally abolished, and a courtesan enthroned as the Goddess of Reason; that the *guillotine* stood “*en permanence*,” pouring its stream of innocent blood down the street daily; that the prisons were crowded with the noblest and best of the land, and emptied by indiscriminate massacre; that marriage was superseded, and twenty thousand bastards were born to Paris in one year; that the skins of human victims were actually tanned in the tanneries, and employed for common leather. It scarcely needed the atrocities and frenzy of the Paris Commune in our own days to give every reasonable man assurance that the same tree will ever bear the same fruit. To sum up the whole in one word, the theory which begins by denying to man his spiritual attributes, naturally ends in making him an animal (45–46).

Chapter 3, “Analysis Of The Human Mind, By James Mill,” focuses on the father of John Stuart Mill. Dabney argues that the elder Mill’s approach actually leads to idealism (that is, the denial of physical reality), as well as Nihilism (64). Furthermore, what distinguishes man from beasts is that the latter do not have powers of reason, which fact is why brutes do not have an actual language (69).

Chapter 4, “Sensualistic Ethics In Great Britain,” advances the idea that “moral distinction [that is, distinguishing between right and wrong] is not sensuous.” But if Sensualism is true, then “our souls can have no such original rational function as conscience” (70).

POSITIVISM

Chapter 5, “Positivism,” considers the chief proponent of this approach, viz., Auguste Comte. “All the principles of society founded on psychology and theology are, according to him, worthless; and nothing can be established, to any purpose, until sociology is studied solely as a science of physical facts, and regular physical laws, without concerning ourselves with the vain dreams of laws of mind, free agency and divine providence.” Positivism denies “every supernatural fact” and therefore it must “deny creation as a fact of which the human intelligence cannot possibly have evidence”; the necessary conclusion is that the universe did not have a beginning and so “it must, of course, be from eternity, and therefore, self-existent.” Accordingly, “matter is clothed with the attributes of God” (80–81). Comte’s views on sociology led him to propose that the West

(Europe and America) “be broken up into little States of a few million people each,” which would

be governed by an oligarchy of three wealthy bankers, who were to appoint their successors by their own fiat, and govern absolutely without parliaments, elections, or any restrictions. The fashionable French doctrines of liberty, fraternity, and equality, he utterly flouted. All the wealth of the State was to be centered in a few hereditary hands; and all the rest of the people were to be operatives for these capitalists. Such was to be the social structure, all sustained and operated symmetrically by the potent but gentle influence of the positive philosophy. But alongside of this secular oligarchy, there was to be a “spiritual order,” composed of the positive philosophers and educators.

Ruling over the whole world would be a “Pontiff of Humanity”: “From his scientific dicta there would be no appeal whatever; and after his dominion was erected, there was to be no liberty of dissent whatever for anyone, learned or unlearned. Positivism . . . was thenceforward to reign unquestioned, with all the majestic sway of infallibility, and liberty of thought would be a crime” (82–83).

Dabney posits that Positivism had “become the prevalent type of the Sensualistic philosophy in our day,” and that Comte should therefore be the chief target of those who opposed Sensualism (85).

EVOLUTION

Chapter 6, “Evolution Theory,” lays out various evolutionary schemes, with focus on the views of Charles Darwin. But Dabney also considers the views of Thomas Huxley and John Tyndal, of whom he writes that they

resort to a sort of spiritualizing of matter. That is, they leap from a stark materialism, to a species of idealism. Instead of identifying mind with matter, they would have us identify matter with mind. There is but one kind of power in the universe, and that is *force*; and one kind of effect, which is motion. Mechanical action is motion of masses; and mental action is motion of molecules. Mind-power will some day be literally correlated to material forces, as caloric in water has been to elasticity in steam. We must not, then, think of matter as a something dull, gross, passive, simply ponderable, opaque, and inert; but as the refined *habitat* of force, the invisible extravagance of materialism driving its advocates into the dreams of idealism (93).

MATERIALISM AND THE MIND

Chapter 7, “Physiological Materialism,” is followed by Chapter 8, “Spirituality of the Mind.” Dabney writes that Sensualism in the eighteenth century produced “its legitimate conclusion, a nineteenth century ‘Reign of Terror.’ International Communism has, indeed, already given a prelibation from the pit, in its short-lived reign in Paris; and this society is the avowed patron of this animal philosophy.” The faithful critic of Sensualism is “rendering a priceless service to humanity, to just legislation, to sound morals, and to Christian theology” (107).

In dealing with the topic of this chapter, Dabney presents how philosophy should relate to Revelation: “It is obviously that of an obedient and grateful handmaid. We are not to bend God’s testimonies to our reasonings, but to bend them to His testimony” (108).

He also posits that the mind must be non-material given its singleness and simplicity: “every act and affection of the mind is known in consciousness as having complete unity, and it is impossible to refer any attribute of extension to them even in conception. Endeavor to imagine a concept as found, or ponderous, or colored (as it is a mental act); or an affection triangular, as distinguished from another that is circular; or the top and bottom sides of a judgment; or a volition divided by some tool into halves and quarters; and you feel, inevitably, that the thought is impossible. All the attributes of matter are absolutely irrelevant to spirit and to all its modifications” (111f).

Another key distinction is that of “two different (and often rival) classes of effects; those of material forces being one class, those of free choice the other. Force is blind, unintelligent, and necessitated. Choice is intelligent and free” (114f). Further, “while material force is not transformable into volition, volition is an original spring of material force; and . . . the only original spring of it.” While the “essential attribute of matter” is passivity—a point demonstrated by the laws of inertia and of motion, the origin of force is “always in the volition of a living thing” (117; cf. 129).

EVOLUTION AS MATERIALISM

Chapter 9, “Evolution Theory Materialistic, And Therefore False,” argues that “Atheism and Materialism are twin sisters. This evolution doctrine also leads, like all other atheistic schemes, to the denial of a soul to man.” The end result of this view is that it instructs evolutionism’s devotees “that they are generically brutes. They will act as brutes; in this way they will understand their teachers” (127).

Dabney argues against Professor Tyndal's rejuvenation of the Atomism of antiquity, as well as Dr. Huxley's attempt to appeal to "protoplasm" (127ff). There is a profound difference between physical force (which is "unintelligent, involuntary, measured by weight, velocity, and quantity of matter affected, producing motion or equilibrium, mechanical or molecular") and vital causation (which "has the unique attribute of free-agency, ... self-active and self-directing"). Moreover, there is no example of man having "ever communicated life to dead, compound matter. Let the infidel chemist make a living animal in his laboratory, without a living germ; then only will his hypothesis begin to rise out of the region of dreams" (129).

With respect to Darwin himself, Dabney points out that the term "natural selection" is self-contradictory, since selection implies free-agency and intelligent choice, while "Nature" as conceived by the evolutionist is unintelligent and hap-hazard. Even "survival of the fittest" entails the same absurdity, since "fitness" implies design (131).

Another insurmountable problem with Darwinism is that there are no fossils of intermediate or failed forms: "fossil natural history should present us with both sides of the history of the blind process of this natural selection, with the fossils of the degraded, the unfit, as well as with those of the developed species" (132; cf. also 147f, 149).

And yet another difficulty is that the natural tendency of more developed species is toward degradation back toward the common species. More than that, hybrids, which invariably are infertile, cannot perpetuate themselves. Accordingly, there is a divinely-given barrier to "that disastrous intermingling of types of organization, shading off in every direction into interminable confusions which must have resulted in the fatal degradation of all the *genera*" (133-134).

Dabney attacks Darwin's view as being totally unverified. All that he can allege is "the possibility that species *may have begun*" in an evolutionary way. "But according to the rules of logic, as admitted by all, that 'may be' can never rise to the position of a scientific truth, until it is verified by actual observation."

In fact, verification is not only lacking, but impossible; because, the supposition puts this whole work of natural selection, as to any distinctive results, so far back in the past, that human history has not, and can never have, any record of a single one of its decisive facts. This simple view should leave the whole scheme then, were men imbued with the true spirit of science, among the

mere fancies with which poets amuse their idleness. It is related to science, just as Gulliver's voyage to Lilliput is to geography (134-135).

And what about man's mind? If man has evolved, then his mind is merely "animated matter." This notion would lead to monstrous conclusions.

The holy courage of the martyr, who braves the fire rather than violate the abstract claims of a divine truth, is but the outgrowth of the brutal tenacity of the mastiff, when he endures blows and torments rather than unlock his fangs from the bloody flesh of his prey. The heroic fidelity of the patriot, in the face of the grimdest death, is but the quality of the dog which will fetch and carry at his master's bidding. The disinterested love of Christian mothers, the heavenly charity which delights to bless an enemy, the lofty aspirations of faith for the invisible and eternal purity of the skies, the redeeming love of Jesus, all that has ever thrilled a right soul with deathless rapture of admiration, and elevated man towards his Divine Father, are destined to have neither future nor a reward, any more than the fragrance of rose, or the radiance of the plumage of the bird, or the serpent's scales (137).

Then, various rational objections were presented, "which entirely break the force of any plausible appearances, and place the evolution theory out of the pale of science. The most that can be claimed for it is, that it is an ingenious fancy" (141).

In this regard, Dabney speaks of two types of evidence as given in a courtroom, viz., circumstantial evidence and live witnesses.

Judicial science, charged with the solemn responsibilities of the life and death of the citizens, has exactly ascertained the relations and rights of these two kinds of evidence.... [C]ircumstantial evidence, in order to destroy the testimony of a competent witness, must be an exclusive demonstration. It must not only satisfy the reasons that the criminal act may have been committed by the accused in the supposed way, but that it could not have been committed by another.... If any other hypothesis can be invented, even, that is pretty imaginary and unsupported by a single positive fact, to which all the circumstances given by the prosecutor can be reconciled, that is proof of the incompleteness of the accusing hypothesis; the accused cannot be condemned.

Moreover, circumstantial evidence, which might show a

person might have committed the crime, is overturned by the testimony of an honest man which contradicts the prosecution's hypothesis (142f).

The application to evolution's case is clear, viz., that the testimony of God trumps human theories. While evolutionists want to set forth that theory as "the only hypothesis," in point of fact, the existence of God is another hypothesis. Furthermore, the absence of creative power must be proven in order for evolution to be true (143–144).

Dabney notes the despair that follows from materialism and atheism. If materialism is true, then there is "no God omnipotent to cleanse and deliver"; "no Redeemer, in whom dwell the divine wisdom, power, love, and truth, for man's rescue"; no Providence and Grace, as they are "banished out of the existence of helpless, suffering man"; "no object to whom we can address prayer in our extremity"; "no supreme, rational, or righteous government over man." Instead of God, "our only master is an irresistible, blind machine, revolving forever by the law of a mechanical necessity; and the corn between its upper and nether millstones is this multitude of living, palpitating, human hearts, instinct with their priceless hopes, and fears, and affections, and pangs, writhing and bleeding forever under the remorseless grind" (153–154).

Dabney concludes this chapter this way:

There is an argument, ad hominem, by which this discussion might, with strict justice, be closed. If materialism is true, then the pretended philosopher who teaches it is a beast, and we are all beasts. Brutes are not amenable to moral law; and if they were, it is no murder to kill a beast. But brutes act very consistently upon certain instincts of self-preservation. Even: they learn something by experience. But this teaches us that the propagator of these atheistic ideas is preparing intolerable mischief; for, just so far as they have prevailed, they have let loose a flood of misery upon mankind. Now, then, these teachers are venomous. The consistent thing for the rest of us animals, who are not serpents or beasts of prey, is to kill them as soon as they show their head; just as whenever the stags see a rattlesnake, they cut him to pieces with the lightning thrusts of their keen hoofs. Why is not this conclusion perfectly just? The only logic which restrains it is, that Christianity, which says that we shall not shed man's blood, "because in the image of God made He man;" but which men flout. The only reason we do not justly treat atheists thus is, that we are not, like them, atheists (155).

À-PRIORI IDEAS

Chapter 10, "Validity Of À-Priori Notions," addresses the issue of certain knowledge. Dabney challenges the notion "that our knowledge is all *only a relation*." If that were true, then "the mind can have no guarantee of the validity of any cognition-in-itself, inasmuch as it is impossible for our subjective consciousness to test the validity of its own modes by any judgment."

This doctrine of the mere relativity of knowledge is but another way of stating the doctrine of the pure idealist. Bishop Berkeley was but making a partial application of it, when he reasoned that sensation really gives no certainty of the existence of an external world. Kant was but making a partial application of it, when he concluded that the judgments of the pure reason, though unavoidable, are invalid. J. S. Mill is but doing the same when he concludes the only knowledge we have of matter is of a "permanent possibility of sensations to us." And Hamilton is also traveling the same path of idealism, or, in other words, of (partial) skepticism, when he concludes that our knowledge of the secondary properties of bodies is only relative; while he also holds that our knowledge of substance and of primary qualities is immediate.... If the process with which they all set out were solid, it would prove the mere relativity of all knowledge, as well as of a part. And here is my practical ground for concluding that the process is a cheat. For how can I be required to adopt the self-contradiction: that I certainly know, I certainly do not know, that which I do know? That is consistent skepticism! (157–159)

Dabney posits that idiocy would result from a consistent skepticism.

It results, then, that we are intuitively certain, that while our cognitions are by means of the relation of the object and subject, they are something more than that relation. All that we need be careful about is, that we separate faithfully between veritable intuitions and correct deductions on the one hand and imaginary intuitions and illogical deductions on the other. The mind is possessed of logical *criteria* for making that separation, if we will use them honestly. If our possession of such *criteria* is denied, *then how has the skeptic or idealist ascertained the invalidity of any, or all, of cognitions?* With that *reductio ad absurdissimum*, I leave him (160–161).

Among the *à priori* notions are space and time. These concepts belong necessarily to the rational, not the senses. In arguing this point, Dabney notes:

The finite mind would need to become infinite, in order to contain a complete and exhaustive conception of any infinite being. But we do not claim such a conception. The finite mind may remain finite, and yet contain an incomplete, yet valid, apprehension of infinite being. The dew-drop is but a tiny sphere, yet it can reflect in miniature the glories of the celestial sphere above it. That the finite mind thus thinks the infinite, is what we hold (166f).

In attacking the Hamiltonian position, Dabney is clear: Hamilton's approach "makes a saving knowledge of God impossible. If we cannot think the unconditioned, and God is unconditioned, then how can we know God?" Moreover, the result would be "that the sincere love and worship of God become impossible."

Paul being witness, "the Unknown God" can be only ignorantly and superstitiously worshipped. If I cannot know what I mean, when I call the Father in heaven "merciful," "benevolent," "true," "holy," then I cannot sincerely say that I honor or love Him as such. My religion is reduced to a species of hypocrisy, or else to the mercenary truckling of the courtier, cowering before brute force.... These great truths, that God is really (though not completely) known to them that seek Him, are the practical foundation of all the holiness and all the homage of earth and heaven (171, 173f).

Dabney concludes this chapter by setting forth the idea that faith is reasonable. "Faith is our conviction of a truth from the testimony of another whom we trust. Is it, therefore, unreasoning or contra-rational? By no means. In order that the testimony shall cause belief, it must be credible." But credibility is ascertained "[rationally, and in that mode alone." Therefore, "although belief has the peculiarity of grounding conviction upon the testimony of another, yet this circumstance does not at all make belief a less rational conviction than any other legitimate cognition. There is no strife between sound belief and reason. When the witness is credible, then, to believe is supremely reasonable, and is the very dictate of reason herself" (181).

Chapter 11, "Origin Of *À-Priori* Notions," begins with Dabney setting forth "the center of the battleground between the Sensualistic and the Rational philosophy," which is the derivation of *à priori* notions. The former asserts that they "come from without by the power of the objects of sensation," whereas the latter maintains they are "determined from within by the constitution of the mind" (182). Dabney argues that

the attempt to construct a system of cognitions, on any plan whatsoever, without *à priori* notions and judgments, is, in every instance, a self-contradiction. The mind derives all its ideas from sensation, exclaims the Sensualistic philosopher. No; for here is one judgment with which it must begin. Namely, that sense-perceptions are valid! Here is one axiomatic truth which they assume. This, surely, is not a derived truth. From what can it be derived, without traveling in a vicious circle? Again: the Positivist exclaims, "The fundamental character of the positive philosophy is, that it regards all *phenomena* as subjected to invariable natural laws." Must not the principle which is "fundamental" to a philosophy be a primitive judgment? The foundation is that which is at the bottom, with no other part of the building beneath it. Again: How can this principle be learned empirically concerning "*all phenomena*?" Has any positive philosopher observed them all? Then he would be omniscient and ubiquitous. But a mere inference from partial observations can never give us universal, and much less, necessary truth! If this fundamental law of Positivism is known at all, it is only known as a necessary and primitive judgment (185–186).

Dabney sets forth three accepted tests of a primitive intuition: "That it shall be a first truth: i.e. not learned from any prior premises; That it shall be necessary, i.e. immediately seen to be such, that it not only is true, but must be true. And that it shall be universal, true of every particular case everywhere and always. Hence, these first truths are inevitably believed by all sane men, whenever their attention is called to them in terms which they understand." Sensualism denies these truths—but its said denial is in vain, for "our intuitive convictions cannot be from experiment." Indeed, the Sensualist is totally inconsistent "in attempting to derive first truths from sensational experience, and ignoring the primitive judgments of the reason." For, only by "a primitive judgment of the reason" can he know that "sensational experience is itself true" (191–193). The same inconsistency can be demonstrated with respect to cause and effect.

The correct doctrine here is, that when we see an effect, we intuitively refer it to a cause, as that which produces its occurrence. And this cause is necessarily conceived as having a power to produce it under the circumstances. For it is impossible for the reason to think that nothing can evolve something. Nothing results only in nothing. But the effect could not have produced its own occurrence, for this would imply that it acted before it existed (201).

In Dabney's view, the principle that "like causes must produce like effects" is "the most important of our primitive notions, essential at once to all human science and to natural theology. It is the very key to the study of nature. It is . . . the cornerstone to all the sciences of material nature" as well as "the foundation of that argument for the being of a God, drawn from his works" (206–207).

In concluding this chapter, the churchman notes that an end, or a final cause, is implied by the notion of law. Law, then, "in its proper sense, is the expression of intelligent will; and it implies intelligence and volition in its subjects."

Deny a Providence working to its own (secret) final causes, and the necessary intuition of the reason would be found illegitimate. The logic of the atheistic physicist is uprooted by its own hand, from its very foundation; and here we have the explanation of that chaos of hypothetical license into which physical research in their hands is falling (209–210).

SENSUALISM'S EFFECT ON ETHICS

In Chapter 12, "Refutation Of Sensualistic Ethics," Dabney begins by noting that Sensualism destroys man's free-agency when it maintains that human volitions have external causes. Dabney refutes that view. For instance, in the case of the drunkard, it is his inclination to alcohol that is the motive for his actions. "It is the soul, which is moving toward the liquid, to make it the helpless instrument of its volition, not the liquid which moves the soul. The material is only victim: it is the soul which is agent" (212). Moreover, the soul in its spontaneity "acts according to law"; and volitions thus "are not uncaused; but follow the soul's own view and desire of the preferable; which constitute the true or subjective motive" (216). At the same time, there is a great inner conflict in man: "Our nature is manifestly dislocated. It has obviously been the subject of a catastrophe" (223). Dabney proceeds to deal with various utilitarian schemes of ethics, all of which, he pronounces, are essentially selfish. In point of fact, when Comte sets forth the view that "aggregate humanity is the Great Being," the end result is that "each man is his own properest supreme End—his own God! What more intense expression could be given to the most utter selfishness?" (229).

The Sensualistic approach does not correctly apprehend the nature of consciousness. "Especially is it impossible, on these [Sensualistic] principles, to explain that highest of all obligations, to be grateful to God, to

worship Him, and to honor Him with our offerings" (230). Moreover, Utilitarianism would, if it were true, make it in some cases "utterly impossible to convince a man that it is immoral to 'do evil that good may come'" (231). Dabney also attacks the Utilitarian view of punishment, and concludes that since its notion of punishment is false, therefore Utilitarianism itself must be false (231ff).

Dabney argues from the nature of God with regard to the notions of right and wrong. "To do His will, then, is not obligatory merely because God has commanded it; but He has commanded it because it is obligatory. The distinction of right and wrong is intrinsic." Further, "the morality of the act commanded is *à priori* to the obligation on us: that the act is not right merely because it is commanded by God, but was commanded by Him because it is right" (237).

Dabney states: "In the simple and fundamental ideas of morals, all men agreed. Savages of all continents, for instance, think as we Christians do, on the simple questions, whether gratitude be criminal, whether virtuous acts deserve penalty, whether beneficence is meritorious" (244). He concludes:

The cornerstone of the Sensualistic philosophy is overturned by the establishment of the doctrine, that man's soul does possess primitive rational judgments of right and wrong. For here is one instance, one whole class of mental functions, existing in the teeth of the fundamental assertion of the Sensualist, that sense furnishes all our mental stores; and the instance is of transcendent importance. The Sensualist, losing his battle at this point, has lost it totally; for the moral functions of the soul are regulative of all the others. Second: The decision of this question is virtually decisive against all the worse consequences of the Sensualistic scheme — evolutionism, materialism, and atheism. Let any man apprehend the solemn and unique fact of his own rational, responsible spontaneity. . . ; let him look it in the face until he perceives its true significance, and he will relinquish these errors as self-evident absurdities. No matter, no organism of molecules, no mere organ of animal sensibility, can be the seat of this glorious and awful faculty. It stands above and apart from all these lower forms of being. That substance which is qualified by this power must be as unique as its peculiar endowment. And to assert its evolution by the operation of unintelligent law, out of lower forms of animal or inanimate matter, is as wild as to assert the rise of a universe out of nothing without a First Cause. Soul and God are revealed together in this

otherwise inexplicable fact of responsible, intelligent free-agency (245).

THE SUPERNATURAL DIMENSION

In Chapter 13, “Philosophy And The Supernatural,” Dabney points out the hypocrisy of infidels with respect to professed dispassionate neutrality.

With these men, this license of thought is a holy thing (possibly their only one). And when they imagine it assailed, or in the least restrained, do they entertain the question with that dispassionate calmness? Not at all; they are full of an ardent zeal; and they believe that they “do well to be angry.” They can argue the cause of charity most uncharitably, and can be most intolerant in their advocacy of toleration. Why? Because the encroachment is unrighteous. Aha! Then we have the sanction of the nonchalant gentlemen for the truth, that righteousness ought to be not only professed, but loved; that moral truth and right are the proper object, not only of judgment, but of moral emotion. They have found out that it is good to be “zealously affected” in a good cause! This is precisely my doctrine, provided only one is entitled to be sure that the cause is good. My second answer is: That this species of indifferentism is unnatural and impossible. Man’s soul is formed by its Maker not only to see moral truth, but to love it upon seeing it. It is an unnatural soul, a psychological monstrosity, which does not. But love for that which is reasonably valued must have its counterpart emotion toward the opposite. One might as well demand to have a material mass with a top, but no underside; or a magnet with a North pole to it, but no South, as a reasonable soul which loved the right (as it ought) and yet did not hate the wrong. Last: I argue, that such a state of soul would be criminal, if it were possible. Such moral neutrality would be intrinsic vice. In order to be capable of it, man must be recreant to the positive claims of virtue. If I find a man who is really able to hear the question debated, whether Jesus Christ was an impostor, with the same calmness, the same utter absence of emotion with which he would properly debate the species in botany to which a certain weed should be referred, I shall be very loath to trust my neck or my purse with that man in the dark. The demand for this actual indifferentism as essential to true liberty of thought and philosophic temper, is absurd; it is impossible it should exist. The speculative world needs to be reminded again of that doctrine of liberty of thought which Bible Protestantism enounced when she bestowed that boon on mankind (for it was nobody’s gift but hers.) That men are

responsible for opinions, but responsible not to society, but to God: that charity for evil and error is a universal duty; but, the object toward which we are to exercise it is the *person* and *not the error* of the misleading fellow-creature. Charity had its incarnation in Him, who shed His tears and His blood for the *persons* of the Scribes, while He denounced their principles with inexorable severity (248–249).

Dabney argues that the

most patent signature of error upon the recent godless philosophy is ... that it is arrayed against the rudimental instincts of man so manifested in all ages. That the mind has innate principles of thought, regulative of its own intelligence; that all necessary truth is not inaccessible to it; that a universe does imply a Creator, and that Nature implies the supernatural; that man has consciously a personal will, and that there is a personal will over man’s governing him from above: these are truths which all ages have accepted.

There is a guaranteed way to test “pretended conclusions,” viz., by asking if they “contravene the necessary dictates of the common sense of mankind. If they do, we set them down as false philosophy, whether we can analyze the sophisms and expose them, as we have done with this system, or not.” Accordingly, “when the Sensualistic philosophy proposes to omit the supernatural, it is, fortunately, attempting an impossibility.” The fact that man is a religious being is as certainly known as is the law of gravitation, and obtained by applying “that experimental method in which they boast, by a fair induction from the facts of human nature and history” (250–251).

Furthermore, true science and religion often go hand-in-hand—a fact demonstrated by various noteworthy scientists (such as Bacon, Kepler, Newton, Leibnitz, et al.) who

did not become less devout believers by reason of their splendid additions to the domain of science.... The Christian awakening in France, which followed the tragical atheism of the first revolution, and which Sensualism is now striving to quench in the blood of another Reign of Terror, did not signalize a regression of the exact sciences. Human progress is a chequered scene, in which many causes commingle, working across and with each other, incomplete and confused results. Sometimes there is a partial recession of the truth. The tides of thought ebb and flow, swelling from the secret

fountains which none but Omniscience can fully measure. But amid all the obscurities, we clearly perceive this general result, that the most devout belief in supernatural verities is, the main, coincident with healthy intellectual progress (251–252).

Not only is it true that “the supernatural underlies the natural,” but that “nature necessarily implies the supernatural.... Nature tells us that her causes are second causes; they suggest their origin in a First Cause” (254–255).

At the same time, man would pridefully maintain the notion that “universal observation shows us natural law working always and everywhere uniformly.... I remind the unbeliever, that there is an existing testimony to frequent unusual effects above nature, in the past experience of man,” including Joshua’s crossing of the Jordan River and the resurrection of Christ. Therefore,

all that experience authorizes us to assert is, that nature acts uniformly according to the laws of second causes, in the present age of the world, and within the limited compass of our competent observation.... Let not the physicist now mislead himself by telling us of his telescope, which has made him acquainted with the laws of the planetary and sidereal heavens. About the stars he has found out a few things, while myriads of things which may be going on within or upon them, are totally unknown. He thinks he knows very certainly that the planet Jupiter and his moons regularly obey the same law of orbital motion with the earth. Well. But was the astronomer on that planet able to detect any sign, by his telescope, upon the face of our little planet, on that morning when Christ burst the bands of death in the garden near Jerusalem? Of the vastly larger part of the events now occurring in this universe we know nothing, and we are therefore not entitled by our experience to say whether they are all arising naturally, or some supernaturally. The imagination is overweening (256–257).

Dabney argues that a miraculous event is not violative of or a reversal of or a suspending of natural laws, but “is simply a *new effect wholly above the power of natural second causes*” and “a part of the consistent, all-wise plan of Him who made, and is now steadily ruling, His universe according to His eternal purpose” (257).

In the chapter’s final paragraph, Dabney writes: “If we obey the spirit of true science, it will manifest itself to us the great truth that man was never designed by God for mental independence of Him; that man needs, in these transcendent questions, the guidance of the

infinite understanding; that while a ‘positive philosophy’ may measure and compare his material possessions, the only ‘exact science’ of the spirit is that revealed to us by the ‘Father of Spirits’” (268).

EVOLUTION CANNOT ACCOUNT FOR MAN’S SOUL
Chapter 14 is entitled “The Evolution Of Human Souls From The Instincts And Sensibilities Of Brutes Discussed.” Two sets of arguments are presented, viz., the historical and the psychological. With regard to the historical, there is not “a grain of proof that any intermediate creation has existed.” Evolutionists “have but the known capacity of elephants and apes from which to set out; and the next step must lead to human faculty. How much right have they to assume this as probable, when they themselves confess that it is the nature of these steps to be almost infinitesimal? They think they can get across the chasm by ten thousand leaps. But they must cross it at one or not at all” (271). There is also the problem that there is no evidence for humanity’s existence “for more than a few thousand years.” Moreover, history demonstrates that

no high civilization has been evolved in known ages, from the bosom of savage societies, by the influence of mere physical agencies. All the advancements made have been under the operation of moral causes: and these have always come by conquest, colonization, or in some other way, from higher race without. The condition of all insulated savage tribes in historical times has been stationary or decadent. But had there been at first no men save those evolved from brutes, and existing in a state but little above the bestial, the whole race would have been, in the sense of this argument, insulated, and its modern improvement against every analogy of known facts.

Indeed,

evolution has not a single fact within the whole range of history to verify the ascent of the human faculty out of brute instincts; the reasonableness and likelihood of the Scripture account of the degradation of the savage tribes by sin, is substantiated by actual cases in the observation of every age, and of every observer, actually beholding the imbruiting [*sic*] of persons and families by vice, and the constant and causal connection of the crimes of savage tribes with their squalor and misery. In other words, the exact parallel of the Scriptural account of the matter, that “righteousness exalteth a people, but sin is a reproach to any nation,” is enacted before our

eyes in every generation, while no parallel to the evolutionist hypothesis has been seen by anybody in historical times (272–273).

The Virginian then defends the “intellectual powers of savages.”

These rude and wretched creatures know nothing of our boasted mental activities, and so appear stupid to us. This is true, but they cultivate and use keen intellectual activities on the objects and pursuits which concern their modes of life; in these they surpass us as immeasurably as we surpass them in literature and civilized arts; the European university man thrown among them, when he attempts their savage arts, seems to them as stupid and contemptible as they do to us. We observe also that the ingenious and astute mental operations, by which they carry on their astonishing “woodcrafts,” follow the very same laws of thought, of observation, of induction, and of inference, which regulate our scientific researches.

All the human faculties are there: the only difference is, that circumstances have determined for them a different development. If we go back to the earliest ages, we find man there exercising the noblest faculties in their largest native vigor. The oldest architect in the world was the most wonderful, the unknown building of the great pyramid. The finest poems are those of Job, Moses, and Homer. The greatest of legislators was the earliest Moses. Now, if the doctrine of evolution were true, the same influences which evolved the savage’s faculties out of the brute’s, should also have carried human faculties onward to different and higher power still, in all these thousands of years of intense activity (274).

The final point of the historical argument has to do with animals.

The animal races all continue as they were from the beginning as to their actual and relative places in the scale of native endowment. No lower race or individual in it has essentially advanced on a higher. The highest have not advanced on man. The occasional accomplishment of “dancing dogs” and “learned pigs” have been very amusing, or perhaps mysterious; but similar exploits were just as remarkable three thousand years ago as now. Meantime, dog, pig, and elephant natures have remained, as to the general masses, precisely what they were in the days of Porus and the ancient Indian jugglers.... Now, like causes should

produce like effects. Of all systems the evolutionist should claim this result most invariably; for it professes to give account of immanent, eternal, physical forces, acting as necessarily, as blindly, unmodified by any contingencies of a rational and personal will over nature.... Those inherent forces of “variation,” “heredity,” and “environment,” which are said to have evolved the mind of cave-dwelling men, out of previous ape-mind, ought to be working some similar exploits within historic periods.... If the primeval foxes evolved so much talent out of some prior state of mollusk-like stupidity, by exercising their gifts in hunting poultry, the nineteenth century fox ought to have become quite an accomplished scholar by being so long hunted by intelligent gentlemen (274–275).

With regard to the psychological set of arguments, it is impossible linguistically and psychologically for brutes to evolve. Indeed, the mind is a spiritual monad (i.e., a simple and indivisible unit), not an organism. In addition, all efforts to “generate the ethical functions of the human soul from the animal sensibilities of the brutes” have totally failed. More than that, the evolutionist “can give no account of our judgment of obligation; a judgment of intuitive necessity attending every perception of duty and virtue. For to whom can the evolutionist’s judgment of obligation bind us?” (275–281).

This inability to distinguish humans from animal impulses has horrible consequences.

Why was the pleasure which a Washington felt in giving peace and liberty to an ungrateful country generically different from that which a setter dog feels in seizing the wounded partridge, or the epicurean swine on basking in the sun? Evolutionism has no consistent or tenable answer.

The evolutionary theory not only would

make the serviceable beasts as truly virtuous and meritorious as the beneficent patriot, but, on the other hand, the virtuous human is bound to regard the brutes as just as truly objects of his moral regards and efforts and of the same generic obligations as his fellow-men. The obligation to gratify the pig is just as direct as the obligation to provide for the child: and is an obligation of the same kind. On this species of philosophy how can the morality of eating animal food be granted, and yet the immorality of cannibalism be denied? The pig and the human child are equally mortal beings; and it has been the actual destiny of many a pig to get more animal

enjoyment out of his existence than many a child has derived from his. If then the maximum of enjoyment is the rational end of all conduct, why may not it have been more virtuous to spare the pig and eat the child? (282)

But “the most fatal point in our refutation of this evolution of the moral feelings” is that the notion is “founded on the preposterous plan . . . of making a series of effects determine their own determining causes.”

If the given disposition had not been deposited by nature in the given creature's essentia, the object presented in its environment must have been inoperative upon it. Hence no environment can evolve any non-existent disposition, since the effect cannot determine its own cause (282–283).

Dabney summarizes his criticism by stating that

this evolution of man's ethical powers overlooks entirely the distinction between instinctive and rational motive, as between natural and moral good; thus making true free agency, virtue, moral responsibility, merit, and moral affections impossible. It supposes that as the sense-perceptions and instincts of the beasts have evolved by association and environment the intellect of the sage, so the fear and habit of the brute cowering under its master's lash, or licking the hand that feeds and fondles it, are the sole source of the pure and rational dictates of conscience and virtue. The holy courage of the “noble army of martyrs,” who braved the fire rather than slight the abstract claims of a divine truth, is but the outgrowth of the brutal tenacity of the mastiff, which endures blows and torments rather than unlock its fangs from the bleeding prey. The heroic of the patriot in the stern presence of death, is but the same quality with that of the dog which fetch and carry at its master's word. The spiritual love of Christian mothers, the heavenly charity which delights to bless an enemy, the aspirations of faith for the lofty sanctity of the skies, and even the redeeming love and divine holiness of Jesus of Nazareth are generically but enlargements of animal appetites in apes! (284)

FINAL CAUSES

The final chapter, Chapter 15, is “Final Causes.” Dabney points to the celebrated Francis Lord Bacon, who divided true science into physical and metaphysical. The latter has two parts: The Doctrine of Forms and the Doctrine of Final Causes (288).

Dabney writes: “Each physical cause, as such, is only efficient of the immediate, blind result next to it.” Gravity is an example of a force acting indiscriminately and universally. But in the case of batteries of cannon designed to destroy an enemy's wall,

it is a mere mockery to say that, given the cannon and the balls, the explosive force of gunpowder, and gravity, the fall of these shots is accounted for. These physical causes would account for their random fall, anywhere, or as probably upon the heads of the gunners' friends. The thing to be accounted for is their regular convergence. This is an additional fact: the blind physical causes do not and cannot account for it, — it discloses design (291).

The author then argues that the eye could not have evolved, given its intricate nature. But it is also true that the development of organs such as the eye and the ear could not take place apart from final cause.

The nature of the end proposed has determined the nature of the physical means selected, and the combination thereof. Thus: as the ship is evidently designed and purposed for sailing, so is the ear for hearing, and the eye for seeing. The function of sailing has determined the materials and structure of the ship: the function of hearing those of the ear: the function of seeing those of the eye. But the shipbuilding must be before the sailing: the ear and eye must exist before the hearing and seeing. The facts which we have, then, are these: Here are ends, coming after their means, which yet have acted causatively on their own precedent means! But every physical cause precedes its own effect. No physical cause can act until it exists. Here, however, are ends, which exercise the influence of causes, and yet, against all physical nature, are causes before they have existence, and act backwards up the stream of time! (291–292)

In the final paragraph, Dabney observes:

Nature is uniform, neither chaotic nor fatalistic, because she is directed by a Mind, because intelligence directs her unintelligent physical causes to preconceived, rational purposes. Her uniformities are but the expressions of these purposes, which are stable, because they are the volitions of an infinite, immutable Mind “whose purposes shall stand, and who doeth all His good pleasure,” because all His volitions are guided, from the first, by absolute knowledge and wisdom, perfect rectitude, and full benevolence. Nature is stable, only because

the counsels of the God, who uses her for His ends, are stable (299).

PHILOSOPHICALLY SPEAKING

In evaluating this deep and complex work, one task of the historian is to put it into context, philosophically speaking.

COMMON SENSE

Scottish Common Sense Realism was a powerful philosophical approach in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (and even into the twenty-first century, it has significant adherents), and it permeated Christian and particularly Presbyterian thinking. At first blush, one might think that anti-Sensualism would not comport with something called Common Sense Realism. However, in actuality, the two philosophies—Sensualism and Common Sense Realism—were in opposition. The Scottish school was designed to do battle against the skepticism of David Hume and the Idealism of William Berkeley. It was an inductivist approach, embracing Francis Lord Bacon while celebrating natural science. It was an empiricism which trusted the senses and affirmed the reality of the external world.²

At the same time, in contrast to Sensualism, there was “the assertion of principles in the mind, which though reached by observation, are yet prior to and independent of experience.” Indeed, the

genuine adherents of the Scottish school may use a variety of terms: “principles of common sense,” or “fundamental laws of human belief,” or “simple and original intuitions,” or “*a priori* forms and conditions.” But they all are unified in their view “that there are laws, principles, or powers in the mind anterior to any reflex observation; and that these laws or principles are necessities of the intelligence and the indispensable conditions for organising the facts of observation and experience into systems of philosophy and science.”³

Dabney was committed to this common-sense approach, proof of which can be found sprinkled throughout his

book on Sensualism. At the end of the chapter on “Evolution Theory,” Dabney writes:

Let Mr. [Herbert] Spencer tell the world as much as he pleases, that his materialism levels upward, and not downward; that instead of debasing spirit he would have us refine matter into the universal “Force;” still with all sinners of the common grade, his doctrine will have the simple result of imbruting those who adopt it. For their common sense will persist in believing that force is a mechanical power contrasted with the spiritual; they will not believe the contradiction which would persuade them that the same species of power which obeys the mechanical law in the machine, and the chemical law in the laboratory, is also subjected to the spiritual law of conscience in the man. Mr. Spencer may persuade himself of this “symbolic concept;” the common sense of his pupils will not (102).

Dealing with the “Spirituality Of The Mind,” he writes: “In proceeding to test the nature of the something in us which thinks and wills, by the verdict of consciousness, I shall assume only what is granted on all hands” (109). In writing on “Evolution Theory Materialistic, And Therefore False,” he appeals to “that common sense of mankind which is ... the most solid inductive and empirical logic” (139). Later in that chapter, he writes that “when we eliminate the powers of a combined and adjusted *system of natural causes*, which contains the very point in debate, each blind cause is found to produce results without order, as common sense had always believed.” Indeed, “the common sense of civilized mankind has not been thus mistaken in believing that where design is obvious, there must be a Designer” (151–152). In considering the “Validity of *À-Priori* Notions,” he avers: “All men of common sense will join me in saying: that, if we hold the principles only by faith, then we hold the conclusions therefrom only by faith also. But if we know conclusions, we must also know the premises” (180). In “Refutation Of Sensualistic Ethics,” we read: “The very conception which every man’s common sense gives him of his own rational choice is, he choosing according to his own motive, or acting because he had a reason for so acting” (216). In dealing with “Philosophy and The Supernatural,” Dabney writes: “Now let us be content here, again, with the philosophy of common sense, which regards dependent beings as possessing a true being and permanency” (260). With respect to “The Evolution of Human Souls,” “When the doctrine that men are but refined beasts is preached to the

2. Theodore D. Bozeman, *Protestants in an Age of Science: The Baconian Ideal and Antebellum Religious Thought* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977), pp. 22, 60; cited in Frank J. Smith, “The Philosophy of Science in Late Nineteenth Century Southern Presbyterianism” (doctoral dissertation, City University of New York, 1992), p. 38.

3. “Critical Notices,” review of James McCosh, *The Scottish Philosophy, Biographical, Expository, and Critical, from Hutcheson to Hamilton*, *Southern Presbyterian Review*, Vol. XXVII, n. 1 (January 1876), 167–169, cited in Smith, “The Philosophy of Science,” pp. 38–39.

ordinary person what will be the inference his common sense will draw from it but that he is free to act as the brutes act?" (285). And in terms of the evaluation of "Final Causes,"

Our conclusion has in its favor the decided assent of the common sense of nearly all mankind, and of nearly all schools of philosophy. All common men of good sense have believed they saw in the adjustments of the parts of nature to intended functions, final causes and the presence of a supernatural mind. The only exceptions have been savages like the African Bushmen, so degraded as to have attained to few processes of inferential thought on any subject. All speculative philosophers have been fully convinced of the same conclusion, from Job to Hamilton and Janet, except those who have displayed eccentricity in their philosophy, either by materialism, ultraidealism, or pantheism. This consensus of both the unlearned and the learned will weigh much with the healthy and modest reason (298).

IDEALISM

The notion of Idealism is, in many ways, the opposite of Sensualism. And one could argue that the rise of Idealism was a greater challenge to Scottish Common Sense Realism than is Sensualism. For instance, Perry Miller wrote of the views of Kant and Hegel as constituting a German invasion which triumphed over Scottish Realism in the mid-nineteenth century.⁴

Dabney does deal with thinkers who are Idealists or at least inclined to that philosophy. But he regards the primary enemy as that of materialism, and he traces its roots back into the eighteenth century, much before the influence of Idealism.

APOLOGETICS

Traditionally, Scottish Common Sense Realism has been associated with Evidentialist apologetics. And certainly Dabney employed evidences in his argumentation for the existence of God. At the same time, however, he also could be regarded as a progenitor of Presuppositionalism. Scholars have maintained that he anticipated the views of men like Cornelius Van Til.⁵ Dabney's entire book is an example of answering the fool according to his folly—that is, of pressing the pagan perspective of sensualists to its logical conclusion and thereby demonstrating its total inconsistency. More than that, the very last sentence of *The Sensualistic Philosophy* declares: "None but theists can consistently use induction" (299). On the other hand, it has been argued that "unlike Van Til, who sometimes made disparaging remarks about

propositional truth, these [Southern Presbyterians such as Dabney] were dedicated to the notion of reason—not in a rationalistic way, and certainly not in such a way as would contradict God's revelation. Nevertheless, their commitment to propositional truth would have put them, in some respects, in the camp of the Gordon H. Clark, another twentieth century conservative Presbyterian theologian and philosopher, who, while sharing much in common with Van Til, despised his irrationality."⁶

EPISTEMOLOGY

And speaking of Clark, Dabney argues in a Clarkian manner with respect to the nature of knowledge.

But why should our knowledge of an infinite spiritual being be suspected as untrustworthy because it is attained according to the legitimate forms of human thought? It can only be because it is suspected that the notions of the divine object of thought are transformed, in becoming ours. But, now, let it be supposed that this great first Cause created our spirits "in His likeness, after His image," and the ground of suspicion is removed. If our reason is fashioned after God's, then in thinking "anthropopathically," we are thinking like God. Our conceptions of the Divine Being will then be only limited, and not transformed, in passing into our kindred, but finite, minds: they remain valid as far as they reach.... [T]he principles of our reason compel us to hold that truth is intrinsic and immutable. If a proposition is true, then it is true everywhere, and to all grades of minds. When once we are certain that the angles at the base of an isosceles triangle are equal, then we are obliged to believe that they are equal in any other planet, and in all the heavens, as in earth; true to the angelic mind that knows an isosceles triangle, as to the human; and as true to the divine mind as to the creature. But if truth is true to all minds, then the cognition, by which truth is reached, must have something essential in common for all minds. The first necessarily implies the second. This, then, is the noble prerogative of the Reason, that its very nature, as an agent for the apprehension of Truth, establishes its kinship to all the realms of mind in heaven and earth. In the attainment

4. Perry Miller, ed., *American Thought: Cold War to World War I* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1954), pp. xi-xvi.

5. In his introduction to the 2003 reprint of *The Sensualistic Philosophy*, C. N. Willborn writes that Douglas Kelly "likened Dabney to Cornelius Van Til in the way he consistently showed how non-theists 'reasoned on the basis of unproven, faith assumptions'" (8).

6. Smith, "The Philosophy of Science," pp. 296-297.

of Truth, whose original dwelling-place must be in the eternal bosom of God, the reason sees its heirship and recognizes itself as the offspring of God. Do we, can we, attain unto any assured truth? Then, to that extent, we know that we have been fashioned to think after the pattern of Eternal Truth. It is manifest, then, that the dogma, "God is absolutely unknowable," leads us back to the gulf of absolute skepticism. If we can know nothing of Him, then we can know nothing of anything beneath Him, because we cannot know the validity of a single law of thought according to which cognition seems to take place, for the obvious reason that we cannot know whence those laws are. . . . Assume that Truth is one and eternal, and that, therefore, thought is thought in earth and heaven, and is the same so far as it is truthful, and we see that the coherency of all subsequent conclusions with each other, and with experience, both as to nature, God, and providence, rises continually with a cumulative evidence that we have begun with the right principles (177–178).

In the same context, Dabney also skewers those who assert that faith is unreasonable.

[E]very conviction of mind, worthy of the honorable name of "belief," takes into its account the credibility of the testimony believed. But how can this quality of credibility be ascertained? Rationally, and in that model alone. By this simple view, we learn that, although belief has the peculiarity of grounding conviction upon the testimony of another, yet this circumstance does not at all make belief a less rational conviction than any other legitimate cognition. There is no strife between sound belief and reason. When the witness is credible, then, to believe is supremely reasonable, and is the very dictate of reason herself (181).

Towards the very end of the book, Dabney writes that

the difference between the normal acting of a finite mind, and of an infinite one, can only be a difference of degree, not of essence; that the thinking of the finite when done according to its laws of thought, must be good as far as it goes; only, the divine thinking, while just like it within the narrow limits, goes greatly farther. Sir Isaac Newton knew vastly more mathematics than the schoolchild; yet, when the schoolchild did its little "sum" in simple addition "according to

rule," Newtown would have pronounced it right; nor would he have done that "sum" in any other than the child's method! Once more; the unreasonableness of the demand, that we shall reject any conception of the divine working, though reached by normal (human) inference, merely because it may be anthropomorphic, appears thus. It would equally forbid us to think or learn at all, either concerning God, or any other Being or concept different from man: for, if we are not allowed to think in the forms of thought natural and normal for us, we are forbidden to think at all. All man's cognition must be anthropomorphic, or nothing (295).

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Another magnum opus by Dabney that appeared three years after *The Sensualistic Philosophy* was his *Lectures in Systematic Theology*.⁷ Throughout this volume, the author employs his anti-Sensualistic insights.

For instance, in Lecture I, dealing with the existence of God, Dabney expresses disagreement with Charles Hodge on the issue of innate knowledge. Hodge had maintained that the knowledge of God was innate. But his Southern counterpart distinguishes the power of intuition and the knowledge that comes through intuiting a matter. In making this distinction, Dabney is also reinforcing the notion of *à priori* principles, which is a denial of the essence of Sensualism (7ff).

Lecture II presents several proofs for the existence of God. In refuting the views of David Hume, Dabney writes: "It is not experience which teaches us that every effect has its cause, but the *a priori* reason" (18).

Lecture III, "The Evolution Theory," reflects much of the argumentation in Dabney's book on Sensualism. Among the points made are that the evolutionary scheme tends toward atheism; that the notion of natural selection implies intelligent choice; that selection does not lead to improvement except under a rational providence; that the strongest do not naturally survive; that hybrids do not produce their own kind; that evolution cannot account for the existence of mind; that the theory is dangerous to morals; that circumstantial evidence is trumped by testimony; and that chance cannot evolve design.

Lecture IV, "Divine Attributes," employs the notion of First Cause to point not only to God's eternity but also the unity of the Godhead (in contrast to polytheism) (39–41).

Lecture VI, "Materialism," explores similar themes as found in *The Sensualistic Philosophy*, including the heterogeneity between physical force and vital causation:

7. Robert Lewis Dabney, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (1878; repr., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980).

The former, in all its phases, is unintelligent, involuntary, measurable by weight and velocity, and quantity of matter affected, producing motion, mechanical or molecular, and tending to *equilibrium*. All animal life has some species of spontaneity. Spirit, as a cause, has the unique attribute of free-agency, the opposite of *inertia*, self-active, directive. Mind and its modifications cannot be measured in any physical terms or quantities; and hence they cannot be correlated. Volition controls or directs force; is not transmuted into it. If we descend to the lowest forms of animal vitality, we still find a gulf between it and dead matter, which science never has passed over. No man has ever educed life, without the use of a germinal vital cause. This vital cause, again, resists the material forces. When it departs, caloric and chemical affinities resume their sway over the matter of the body lately living, as over any similar matter; but as long as the vital cause is present, it is distinctly antagonistic to them (57–58).

Lecture VII, “Immortality of the Soul, and Defects of Natural Religion,” in refuting materialism, distinguishes between matter and spirit.

The simplest material substance is constituted by an aggregation of parts, and may be perceived as divided.... But our consciousness tells us intuitively, that the thing in us which thinks, feels, wills, is absolutely simple. Not only does this intuition refer all our mental states and acts to one and the same thinking subject, notwithstanding their wide diversity. But we know that they coexist in that subject, without plurality or partition. We are conscious that the agent which conceives, is the same agent, notwithstanding the diversity of these states. Moreover, every affection and act of a mind has an absolute unity (66).

Materialism is refuted by the reality of free agency and responsibility. Further, though the brain is the “instrument by which I think,” it is “the Ego [spirit] who thinks” (69).

Lectures VIII and IX, both dealing with “The Sources of Our Thinking,” reflect much of the material in Dabney’s book on Sensualism, particularly with regard to the necessity of the mind’s innate powers. Intuitive or primary truths must be primary (i.e., not derived from any other truth); necessary (i.e., they must be true); and universal (i.e., “the mind is obliged to believe them as much true in every relevant case, as in the first; and all people that are sane, when the terms of their enunciation are comprehended with entire fairness, and

dispassionately considered, are absolutely certain, the world over, to accept them as true”) (83). Among the intuitions is the notion of cause and effect, as well as Final Cause.

Lectures IX and X consider various ethical theories propounded by Sensualists and others, and finds them wanting.

Lecture XI, “Free Agency and the Will,” attacks the notion of necessity promulgated by Sensualistic psychology. “If volition is efficiently caused by desire, and if desire is but the passive reflex of objective perception, then, indeed, is man a mere machine.... But inducement is not motive; desire is an activity, and not a passivity of our souls. Our own subjective judgments and appetencies cause our volitions” (128).

THE PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY

One of Dabney’s other major works was published in 1897, several months before he died.⁸ *The Practical Philosophy* was regarded by him as the most significant of his books. He begins by noting that his use of the “Practical” must be taken “in the original and classical sense, as the *πρακτικόν* [practices] of historical philosophy.” Dabney acknowledged that in common parlance, “the word carries a wholly different meaning, and the practical man ... is supposed to be one who applies his experience in opposition to all theorists and psychologists with all the speculative processes of thought.” However, that “derivative meaning must be wholly discarded here. The Practical Philosophy is that which treats of the executive or conative, and the moral powers of the human spirit.” Dabney distinguishes his view from that of the progenitors of Scottish Common Sense Realism, as the Virginian rejects the “shallow and one-sided theory of the mind which describes it as originally a *tabula rasa*, endowed only with the passive powers of receptivity and reflection,” which naturally led to regard “all the processes of intellect as passive.” There was the need of “another word to describe that characteristic and all-important class of functions, feelings and volitions which stand in conscious contrast over against our functions of cognition, and which are the special objects of the judgments and the sentiments of conscience. To express just this great class the word *practical* was, for centuries, appropriated by Philosophy.” He adds: “I wish to render to Philosophy the service of restoring this needed and time-honored term in its proper sense” (xiii–xiv).

8. Robert Lewis Dabney, *The Practical Philosophy: Being the Philosophy of the Feelings, of the Will, and of the Conscience, with the Ascertainment of Particular Rights and Duties* (1897; repr., Harrisonburg, Va.: Sprinkle Publications, 1984).

The volume follows a “natural and logical progression which leads ... from the psychology of the feelings to the theory of volitions, then to the settlement of ethical theory, and then to applied ethics” (xv).

In the second section of the work, “The Will,” Dabney attacks the Sensualistic perspective. “The sensualistic psychologists, as Hobbes, Condillac and James Mill, virtually obliterate the will as a distinct faculty of the spirit by teaching that volition is nothing more than desire predominant.” The “real knot of the problem,” which the sensualists leave “untouched,” is this: “Why and how does one species of desire come to predominate in a given man’s spirit rather than another?” Dabney observes: “If objective causes have determined the dominancy of one desire rather than another, then free-agency has perished. If subjective causes, then what are they?” (142–143).

In the beginning of the third section of the work, “Theories of the Ethical Sentiments,” Dabney raises the notion of *à priori* character of the intuition of right and wrong, and in that context, addresses Sensualism, calling it “a mischievous obstruction and misleader” (196). What follows is a critique of various theories of morals, including the selfish system; the utilitarian, the hedonistic, the benevolent; sentimental; and rationalistic theories.

What we see in *The Practical Philosophy* is a broader and more positive emphasis than the one found in *The Sensualistic Philosophy*. Though Sensualism is still dealt with in the 1897 work, the treatment is not as extensive. Nevertheless, Sensualism remains a key focus, not only with regard to philosophical concerns but because of the implications for ethics.

OTHER PHILOSOPHICAL WRITINGS

In the third volume of Dabney’s collected writings, there are several chapters that either mirror what he wrote in *The Sensualistic Philosophy* or reflect similar sentiments. Among those chapters are “Positivism in England,” “Geology and the Bible,” “A Caution Against Anti-Christian Science,” “The Philosophy of Volition,” “The Emotions,” “Nature of Physical Causes,” “Applications of Induction and Analogy,” “Monism,” and “The Immortality

9. Robert L. Dabney, *Discussions by Robert L. Dabney, D.D., LL.D., Professor of Moral Philosophy in the University of Texas, and for Many Years Professor of Theology in Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, Volume III: Philosophical*, edited by C. R. Vaughan (1892; repr., Harrisonburg, Va.: Sprinkle Publications, 1980).

10. Robert L. Dabney, *A Defense of Virginia, [And Through Her, of the South,] in Recent and Pending Contests Against the Sectional Party* (1867; repr., Harrisonburg, Va.: Sprinkle Publications, 1977), pp. 241–243.

of the Soul.”⁹ In responding to Prof. James Woodrow’s criticism of his article against Anti-Christian Science, Dabney explains that what he was opposing was “that which affects ‘positivism;’ which attempts to construct a ‘sensualistic’ psychology; which refers everything, as effects, to the laws of material nature and of animal life.” The major motif of these Sensualistic schools of philosophers is to “ascribe to the human mind no original functions save those of sensibility and sense-perception. They deny all *à priori* powers to the reason, and disbelieve the existence, in our thinking, of any really primitive judgments of reason. They teach that all logical principles are empirical” (141–142).

ABOLITIONISM

One of the ways by which Dabney applied his anti-Sensualism had to do with regard to the matter of abolitionism. In his *A Defense of Virginia (and the South)* in 1867, the Virginian argued against the position that slavery violated natural liberty, saying that that “ground of opposition to slavery rests upon a radical and disorganizing scheme of human rights, is but Jacobinism in disguise, and involves a denial of all authority whatsoever.” This conception of “man’s natural rights, of the origin of governments, and of the moral obligation of allegiance, is that which traces them to a social contract.” The origin of this idea is found in Hobbes; it was nourished by John Locke; and enthusiastically embraced by “the infidel democrats of the first French revolution.”¹⁰

Dabney objected to this scheme in that it is “atheistic, utterly ignoring the existing of a Creator, and his relations to, and proprietorship in, man. It affects to treat men as though their existence were underived, and independent of any Supreme Being. It boldly discards God’s right to determine under what obligations man shall live, and quietly contemns the great Scriptural fact that He has determined man shall live under social law” (245).

Dabney summed up his critique by the statement, “Abolitionism is Jacobinism.” The true abolitionist is “a Red-Republican, a Jacobin. Is not this strikingly illustrated by the fact, that the first wholesale abolition in the world was enacted for the French colonies by the frantic democrats of the ‘reign of Terror?’ And this hint may serve to explain to the aristocracy of Great Britain the popularity of the authoress of ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin,’ and her slanderous book, among the masses there.” The laboring masses were taken by this novel “because the Jacobinism of the abolitionist theory awakened an echo in the hearts of the lower classes, still seething with the

recent upheaval of 1848.... The noble Lords and Ladies, who patronized the authoress and her book, were industriously fanning the very fires which are destined to consume their vested interests" (262–263).

Indeed, the entire social fabric was threatened should this egalitarianism prevail. Not only would the relationships of husband-wife and parent-child be overturned, but there could be no just objection to female suffrage and even voting by children (265ff).

And, as has been established above, these dire consequences were in Dabney's mind when he attacked Sensualism not only because of its unphilosophical nature and its inevitable tendency toward atheism and materialism, but also because of the inevitable societal results that would arise from this approach.

In the words of a Dabney biographer, "Dabney was convinced that if the sensualistic philosophy won the day, civilization in America would be completely destroyed." Indeed, "Dabney called on Southern Presbyterians to reject the modernistic rationalism driving the egalitarian political doctrines and to stand firm for Bible Republicanism."¹¹

WORSHIP¹²

In 1888, John Lafayette Girardeau, venerable churchman from Charleston, South Carolina, championed the traditional Reformed Protestant view regarding musical instrumentation in public worship. The bulk of his classic book on this topic deals with Scriptural and confessional considerations, but Girardeau also made the point that the reason why the Presbyterian Church was defecting from her ancient position was because she was conforming to "the demands of worldly taste."¹³

Girardeau made a similar point in an article on miracles. Speaking of the great success of the Church in spreading throughout the Roman world as an evident sign of Providential care, Girardeau noted the "antecedent improbability of success arising from the nature of the religion to be propagated":

Its great law was self-denial: the cross was marked into the heart of its adherents. Its promise for this world was tribulation: its rewards were postponed to a future state. Faith, not sense nor carnal reason, was its principle of action, its motive to exertion. It was characterized by utter simplicity: it had no outward pomp, no magnificent temples, no gorgeous ritual, no smoking altars, and no vested priests.¹⁴

It was this sensualism that was the particular concern

of Robert Lewis Dabney in this matter. In 1881, he lamented the rise of musical instrumentation as being a sure sign of spiritual decline, leading inevitably, systematically, to ritualism and Romanism.¹⁵ In a lengthy review of Girardeau's book, Dabney asserted both "the prudential and the doctrino-psychological arguments against the present organ worship." Regarding the latter, he wrote:

... all true worship is rational. The truth intelligently known and intelligibly uttered is the only instrument and language of true worship. Hence all social public worship *must be didactic*....

Once more: man's animal nature is sensitive, through the ear, to certain sensuous, aesthetic impressions from melody, harmony and rhythm. There is, on the one hand, a certain analogy between the sensuous excitements of the acoustic nerves and sensorium and the rational sensibilities of the soul. (It is precisely this psychologic fact which grounds the whole power and pleasure of lyrical compositions.) Now, the critical points are these: That, while these sensuous excitements are purely animal and are no more essentially promotive of faith, holiness, or light in the conscience than the quiver of the fox-hunting horses' ears at the sound of the bugle or the howl of the houndwhelp at the sound of his master's piano, sinful men, fallen and blinded, are ever ready to abuse this faint analogy by mistaking the sensuous impressions for, and confounding them with, spiritual affections. Blinded men are ever prone to imagine that they have religious feelings, because they have sensuous, animal feelings, in accidental juxtaposition with religious places, words, or sights. This is the pernicious mistake which has sealed up millions of self-deceived souls for hell.

11. Sean Michael Lucas, *Robert Lewis Dabney: A Southern Presbyterian Life* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 2003), pp. 178, 182.

12. The material in this section is taken essentially verbatim from Smith, "The Philosophy of Science," pp. 430–433.

13. John L. Girardeau, *Instrumental Music in the Public Worship of the Church* (Richmond, Va.: Whittet & Shepperson, 1888; repr., Havertown, Pa.: New Covenant Publication Society, 1983), p. 205.

14. John L. Girardeau, "The Miracle, The Principle of Unity in the Evidences of a Divine Revelation," *Presbyterian Quarterly*, Vol. II (1888), pp. 375–376. He also wrote of the evidence of the numerous Biblical writers who "maintain[ed] harmony with each other in regard to a regulative principle" (379).

15. Robert L. Dabney, writing in the *Central Presbyterian* (May 18, 1881), cited in E. T. Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, Volume Three: 1890–1972 (Richmond, Va.: John Knox Press, 1973), pp. 429–430.

After excoriating Roman Catholicism for constantly encouraging this delusion, Dabney attacked innovating Protestants:

But these organ-grinding Protestant churches are aiding and encouraging tens of thousands of their members to adopt this pagan mistake. Like the besotted Papist, they are deluded into the fancy that their hearts are better because certain sensuous, animal emotions are aroused by a mechanical machine, in a place called a church, and in a proceeding called worship.

Dabney warned: “Time will prove, we fear by a second corruption of evangelical religion and by the ruin of myriads more of nominally Christian souls, how much wiser is the psychology of the Bible than that of Mrs. Grundy.”¹⁶

Dabney’s concern in this matter was, of course, grounded in his pursuit of the truth. But a European trip in 1880 undoubtedly made a deep impression on his mind, as he witnessed first-hand the superstition of the papists. Describing his visit to Locarno, Italy, he wrote of the old women who thought they had secured salvation by kissing “the holy wax toe” of a replica of the Virgin who had purportedly made an appearance there.¹⁷

Thus the church’s premier theologian utilized the same motifs—opposition to Sensualism and advocacy of a Biblical psychology—that he had in his writings on science in order to oppose the imposition of organs on the church’s worship.

CONCLUSION

Robert Lewis Dabney was a brilliant thinker, theologian, and philosopher. His earliest biographer wrote,

[Dabney’s] “Sensualistic Philosophy of the Nineteenth Century Considered” is one of the greatest philosophic philippics ever penned. He holds up this philosophy, sensational philosophy as set forth by Hobbes, the

“hard-mouthed,” by Condilac, by Helevetius, by St. Lambert, by James Mill, by the school of positivism, by the physiological materialists, and by others, notably the great but wabbling Locke, to contempt. He teaches them with Des Cartes and Leibnitz and Wolf, Bishop Butler and Emmanuel Kant, and Richard Price and T. J. Reid, that there is something in the mind itself with its power to know that class of truths known as *primary cognitions, innate ideas, first truths*; and in his chapter, in this work, on *the validity of a priori notions*, and in that on *the origin of the a priori notions*, he comes close to showing his as the master mind of the Scotch School.¹⁸

And the scintillating nature of his intellect was seen in his ability to perceive the relationship of various matters, and the unity of knowledge. In attacking government-run educational institutions, he wrote:

The human spirit is a *monad*, a single, unit, spiritual substance, having facilities and susceptibilities for different modifications, but no parts. Hence, when it is educated, it is educated as a unit. The moral judgments and acts of the soul all involve an exercise of reason; so that it is impossible to separate the ethical and intellectual functions.

There are implications of the unity and simplicity of the soul (or mind) not only for knowledge as a whole (and hence for education), but also for the application of that knowledge to ethics.

The conscience is the supreme, directive faculty of the soul; so that knowledge bears to moral action the relation of means to end. Man fulfills the ends of his existence, not by right cognitions, but by right moral actions. Hence we are obviously correct in holding that the fundamental value of right cognitions is simply as they are the means of right moral acts—that is, the knowledge is really valuable only as it is in order to right actions. Again: The nature of responsibility is such that there can be no neutrality, or *tertium quid*, between duty and sin.¹⁹

This Virginian was very prescient in confronting Sensualism and also in sensing its ramifications. He would have been shocked by various pagan expressions in the twenty-first century derived from a materialistic worldview—shocked, but not surprised. Transgenderism may not have been a particular issue in the nineteenth century—though Dabney does hilariously refer to early promoters of female suffrage as “a few old women of

16. R.L. Dabney, *Dr. Girardeau’s “Instrumental Music in Public Worship”: A Review* (Richmond, Va.: Whittet & Shepperson, 1889), pp. 6–9. “Mrs. Grundy” was a reference to a narrow-minded individual who watches over others’ propriety—sort of a busy-body.

17. Thomas Cary Johnson, *The Life and Letters of Robert Lewis Dabney* (Richmond, Va.: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1903; rpt. London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), p. 427.

18. Johnson, *The Life and Letters of Robert Lewis Dabney*, p. 559.

19. “The State Free School System Imposed upon Virginia by the Underwood Constitution,” in Dabney, *Discussions, Volume IV: Secular*, pp. 220–221. For a brief encapsulation of the idea of false philosophies impacting morals, see “The Influence of False Philosophies Upon Character and Conduct,” in *ibid.*, pp. 470–476.

both sexes” and also mentions the feminist goal to “disregard the natural distinctions of the sexes” as well as to attain the “assimilation of the garments of the two sexes.”²⁰ Transhumanism per se was not on the horizon in Dabney’s day, but it is an example of the views of Comte in which man becomes his own God. The materialistic future as envisioned in Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* with its baby factories and the cremation of bodies to produce phosphorus for fertilizer is but a few steps from the materialistic worldview of his grandfather, Thomas Huxley. And the tones of a church organ have been replaced by raucous rock music (plus strobe lights, smoke, and videos) as yet another expression of emotion-laden worship that appeals to the senses rather than to the mind. But in these and other instances, Professor Dabney would have understood that the latest fads were simply a logical progression from Sensualistic assumptions.

Major Dabney (C.S.A.), when he served under Stonewall Jackson, certainly experienced through his five senses a flesh-and-blood battlefield—the flash from a muzzle, the sound of explosions, the smell of gunpowder, the feel of hardtack, and the taste of chicory coffee. As manifest in his treatise on Sensualistic philosophy, Dabney also engaged in another war. It was, we might say, total war—not a physical one, fought with cannon and bullets and burning of crops, entailing literal maiming and killing as well as severe deprivations of the civilian populace, but rather an ideological and spiritual war, in which he met the opponents’ “storm of words.”²¹ And in this masterful volume from 1875, he totally reduced all the fortifications of the enemy, and demonstrated the importance of fighting this religio-cultural war for the sake of theology, philosophy, apologetics, science, ethics, morals, education, freedom, government, and worship. ■

In Brief: Robert L. Dabney: The Organ (1849).¹

In the issue for December 8, 1848 of *The Watchman and Observer*,¹ a communication or opinion piece by a reader under the pseudonym of Simplex, was published on the subject of the introduction of the pipe organ into churches of the Presbyterian Church, USA. Since the Reformation, Presbyterian, puritan, and other nonconformist churches generally used no musical instruments in their worship services. However, in the nineteenth century the organ became affordable for affluent churches, when before then it was the exclusive purview of the cathedral. Other instrumentation such as the lowly piano, was seen as low class and for saloons and haunts of the undesirable, but the organ with its pipes and imposing appearance and overwhelming range of sounds became the rage and latest innovation to attract and retain congregants. Mr. Simplex was quite opposed to the innovation. He wrote:

There are few organs in the Presbyterian Churches of the United States. And the number cannot be increased without a contest. Many of the more thoughtful and prayerful members in every congregation will oppose their introduction with firmness, or submit to with regret. And their introduction will be retarded by every improper use of them in churches that are furnished. The commonplace argument in favor of organs, is that they are an elegant accompaniment, and an aid in singing the praises of God in the great congregation. But when serious Christians observe that the praise of God is delayed, by the preludes and interludes fully as long a time as the praises themselves occupy, they will suspect that the instrument was introduced for other purposes than to aid devotion. And especially when they hear a tune (stolen from the opera, perhaps) played on the organ after the benediction is pronounced, on the Sabbath, amidst the under-talk and confusion of a retiring congregation, and without vocal music or any accompanying praises, they will begin to fear that the organ was not intended and is not adapted to aid devotion. They will gradually come to the conclusion that the organ is, like the dance, not sinful in itself, but so prone to evil that those who desire not to be lead into temptation ought to shun it as they do all dangerous companions. And serious Christians have a right to ask what is a breach of the Sabbath, if this disorderly farewell, after divine service, is not?

20. “Women’s Rights Women,” in *ibid.*, p. 489.

21. *The Sensualistic Philosophy*, p. 152. Monte Harrell Hampton employs this term in the title of his book on Southern Presbyterians, *Storm of Words: Science, Religion, and Evolution in the Civil War Era* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2014).

1. The letters making up the debate described here were republished in full in “Organ Grinding Circa 1849, *The Blue Banner, A Publication of First Presbyterian Church, Rowlett, Texas*, Vol. 3, #1–2 (January–February 1994), pp. 4–7 (<https://thebluebanner.com/>).

This communication sparked controversy and debate of a sort involving a handful of writers, all with one exception writing under their chosen nom de plumes. Unlike modern social media debates, these were letters written for publication in the gentlemanly style of the day and published over the subsequent months of January, February and March, 1849, with the writers engaging Mr. Simplex initially and each other as the debate for and against the innovation unfolded in the paper's pages. The first respondent, "H," wrote in arguing against Simplex and for the use of the pipe organ (*Watchman and Observer*, Richmond VA, January 18, 1849, Volume IV, No. 23). The next correspondent, Inquire, wrote in response to H, raising objections to the organ to which if he received answers, he would gladly accept the innovation (February 1, 1849, Volume IV, No. 25). Next appeared a brief letter from Moses D. Hoge, who wished to make it clear that he was not "H," because he had learned what H had written had been assumed to be by his hand (February 22, 1849, Volume IV, No. 28.). In the same issue appeared one of the lengthiest contributions against the innovation, under the name Chorepiscopus. This was Robert L. Dabney, writing under a name that would append several pieces by him that appear in his *Discussions*. Next appeared a contribution under the name Rusticus, who argued against the expediency of the innovation (March 1, 1849, Volume IV, No. 29.). The debate ends with a lengthy reply by H to what Dabney had written (March 15, 1849, Volume IV, No. 31). In the same issue the paper ran an article on Ancient Church Music noting, "The question in dispute between our correspondents as to the propriety or impropriety of using the organ in the worship of the sanctuary, we shall leave with them — contenting ourselves merely with such historical notices of its introduction and use as are not ordinarily accessible. From the writings of Aquinas, who was born in 1221, it would appear that in this time no kind of instrumental music

2. Inquirer first lamented the insulting way opponents of the organ in worship were treated, that it is "often to be taken for granted, that such objections are sufficiently answered, by a complacent smile at old-fashioned bigotry; an equivocal joke about psalm-singing that grates horrible discord to ears polite; and a clinching allusion to log churches, with earthen floors and clap-board benches, as the *reductio ad absurdum*, of the objection to organs." He noted the confusion of elements and circumstances of worship and scrupled the lack of a command, noting that Christian worship is patterned after the OT synagogue which had no musical instruments. The history of their introduction he found problematic, as well as their tendency to prevent congregational singing, not to mention "their expense, which is an item worth remembering when a world is dying for want of the means of grace and suggests the query whether that can be an authorized part of God's worship, which only the rich can enjoy..."

was used in the Western churches", before going on to trace more of the known history. Below is the text of what Dabney wrote in 1849 against the introduction of the pipe organ into the public worship of God.

Mr. Editor.—I have been pleased to see in your paper, some discussion on the use of organs in church-music. This subject cannot be regarded as one, affecting the fundamentals of religious truth; but it has its importance, especially as a *symptom* of the spiritual state and opinions of our churches. And it is well that the views of Presbyterians should be digested and settled on some rational principles, before the silent tide of Fashion has swept them all into an imitation of a thing alien to their institutions.

It has always been common among the advocates of this Popish mode of worship, to meet the objections of simple minded Protestants to the organ, with the retort that their scruples were the relics of fanatical prejudice, and rustic ignorance. Such objections have been treated almost with levity and ridicule, as if they were contrary to taste, refinement and light, although the reading world knows, that they decided the minds of the wisest and most learned Reformers; the fathers of Protestantism. The sensible and just remarks of "Inquirer," in a late number of your paper, under the modest form of doubts, have presented objections to the organ, too solid, too rational, and pious to be thus lightly treated.² They cannot fail of having some effect on every evangelical mind. It is not my purpose to attempt to do again, what *Inquirer* has done so well, by stating the scriptural and historical objections to the use of this instruments, in Protestant worship. But my object is to vindicate the great body of the Protestant church, and the Fathers of Protestantism, from the charge of ill taste, rudeness and blind prejudice, in their opposition. It is not strange that men, such as the present advocates of the organ in Presbyterian churches in America, should bring such a charge against such men; many of them educated amidst the richest specimens of the fine arts in the old world, their youth imbued with the spirit of a gorgeous and poetic age? Is it not rather queer, that the ephemeral aristocracy of our trading towns, whose high life took its rise between the stils of the plough, or behind the tradesman's counter, only a generation or two back, who perhaps, never saw or heard an instrument that deserved to be called *an organ*, and whose taste would not suffice to distinguish a painting of the greatest masters, from the efforts of our peripatetic portrait-takers in these backwoods, or to discern between the eccentric

voluntaries of one of our boarding-school misses, elevated into a temporary organist, and a symphony of Handel, should be charging *rusticity* on such men as the Reformers and founders of Protestant churches. Men educated amidst the splendors of the fine arts, in the Augustan age of Popery, and accomplished with all the polite learning of their age? My purpose is to retort the charge of bad taste on the advocates of organs, and to show that their introduction into Protestant worship is incongruous with its spirit, and contrary to the true principles of musical science, and musical taste.

The music of an organ may be appropriate to Popish worship, and may be in good taste in a Popish cathedral; and yet may be in wretchedly ill taste, when applied to Protestant worship. — All will admit, that to imitate *blindly*, the fashions of the higher classes, without regard to those considerations of fitness, which render them appropriate and tasteful in those whom we follow, is the plainest mark of false taste and vulgarity. For example; we may be informed that Queen Victoria wears, with her evening dress, the thinnest slippers of white Satin. The young miss who should therefore conclude, that *her feet* would be appropriately arrayed in similar shoes, for a ride on horseback, through our country mud, to one of our country churches, would display a ludicrous instance of false taste. We may be told that Prince Albert sports no boots but those radiant with patent varnish, in St. James' Park. To adopt a similar article for hunting or walking boots, to traverse the mud of Virginia, would be a piece of vulgar imitation, unworthy of any one, above the sable *beaux*, who, in the streets of Richmond, so successfully ape, and even out-do, the distinguishing characteristics of the "*Distingues*."

Now these are just illustrations of the false taste shown by the Protestant church, when she apes Popery, in the use of the organ. The instrument is appropriate to the spirit of papal worship; but there is an essential difference between that worship and ours, which makes our blind use of their favorite instrument, a most unfortunate instance of vulgar imitation. Popish worship is addressed to the senses, and the imagination through the senses. According to the Papiests' own theory of his worship, the mass is a grand Action. It is all in an unknown tongue; but this matters not: he asserts that even though there were not an articulate word pronounced in any language, the solemn drama would convey its instructions to the heart, through the genuflections, the pantomime, the adoration of the priests, and the varying harmonies of the music. Their theory of church music is just the same. The hymns are in an unknown language: if the worshipper heard every syllable articulated, he

would not understand the ideas that are sung, nor does it matter that he should. The sentiment of devotion is conveyed sufficiently, by the character of the music.

But the theory of Protestant religious music is, or ought to be, essentially different. We appeal to the understanding and to those intelligent emotions, which are produced by the understanding on the heart. We sing articulate, intelligent words, in a familiar language, conveying to every hearer, instructive ideas and elevating sentiments. The *articulation* of words sung, is the very essence and soul of our musical worship. We recognize the music only as an accessory, to aid in impressing the ideas it accompanies; for we do not believe there is any more religion in the sensations of melody and harmony, separately considered, than in the posture of the declaimer. We conceive that it is only by accompanying intelligent religious ideas, that they can produce any religious effect. The scripture represents religious music as the vehicle of religious instruction, and imply the necessity of distinct articulation. "I will sing with the spirit, and I will *sing with the understanding* also, else when thou shall bless with the spirit, how shall he that occupieth the room of the unlearned, say Amen at the giving of thanks — seeing he understandeth not what thou sayest:" 1st Corinthians 14; 15 and 16. "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, *teaching and admonishing* one another in psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs" — Col. 3:16. These passages fully sustain the assertion that religious music, to be scriptural, *must contain intelligible articulate words*, conveying some pious instruction or emotion.

Now then, we assert that this essential difference between the theory and spirit of Popish church music and Protestant, makes the organ an unfit and ill-judged accompaniment for our vocal religious songs: although it is appropriate and well chosen for the purpose of Papiests. — Those who advocate the use of the organ must submit to the charge of blind, unscientific imitation; or they must adopt the kind of music which Rome uses, appealing only to the ear, inarticulate, and uninformative, and utterly foreign to the intention of the scriptures. The latter thing is, indeed, partly done, in practice, in all Protestant churches, where this instrument is used.

To evince the justice of the charge of false taste, just made, it remains to point out, in what respects, the organ is inconsistent with the spirit and character of scriptural church music. And first; none who are familiar with the use of the organ, can be so hardy as to deny, that it is *unfavorable to distinct articulation*, which is the very essential of religious music. It is the most overpowering of all accompaniments to vocal music, and

most effectually obliterates the distinctions of articulate sound. For himself the writer would affirm that he never, in a single instance, heard an organ used, when he could catch a single connected sentiment of what was sung, except so far as reading of the hymn before the singing, assisted his memory. And it may be fearlessly asserted, that the use of an organ utterly disappoints that, which is the grand purpose of religious music, the comprehension of the sentences sung, with the majority of hearers. Is not this a fatal objection to its use, with any man who values sense more than sound, the kernel more than the shell?

Second: The organ is *incapable of accentuation*. The alternate notes played upon it cannot receive any variety of *ictus* or force, as should be the case in all music. The rhythm of English poetry depends entirely on the occurrence of accented and unaccented syllables, in a certain order. In reading it, the emphasis, or *ictus* of the voice must fall on the alternate syllables, intended to receive it. To neglect this rule, and to pronounce the syllables indiscriminately with equal force, would convert the most spirited lines of Scott or Burns, into an intolerable drawl. Now, this rhythm is equally essential in poetry, when sung. The alternate *notes*, corresponding with the accented syllables of the metre, must receive a heavier or stronger tone. To neglect this, in singing, is as insufferable to a cultivated musical ear, as the neglect of the accentuation in reading poetry, would be to the elocutionists. These are assertions which no man can dare to dispute, without condemning himself, as the crudest of sciolists in musical knowledge. And it is equally undeniable, that the organ is utterly incapable of giving any expression to this *ictus* or accent; for the plain reason, that the force of the tone depends on the operations of the bellows-blower, or the character of the *stop* used, and not on the force of the performer's touch upon the key. Hence the music of an organ, although it may have a certain kind of solemnity, can never be spirited. It is only rescued from the character of drawling, by the power and fullness of its tones. To use it as an accompaniment to vocal music, is *death* to the spirit and expression of the poetry which is sung.

Third: The organ, like all other instruments with fixed stops to mark off the tones of the scale, gives those tones inaccurately; and when used along with that perfect instrument of God's own make, the human voice, must fail in producing a perfect accord, and perfect harmonies. This will be confirmed by any scientific organist.

The long drawn peals of harmony which proceed from this instrument echoing through lofty arches, and the fullness and volume of its sound, may render it

suitable to the purpose of Popish ecclesiastical theatricals. But we assert, for the reasons above, that it is utterly unsuited, ill judged, and in ill taste, as an accompaniment for vocal music, intended to be articulate, and expressive of intelligible ideas. We assert it purely on principles of musical taste, apart from historical or theological objections. We retort the charge of rusticity on the advocates of organs in Protestant worship, and assert that this application of this accompaniment, regardless of the difference of circumstances, and the natural incongruities of the things, is the true breach of enlightened taste, and the true exhibition of prejudice.

There is a fact in the musical world, to which we can appeal for practical confirmation of the principles of taste laid down. The modern Opera is more of an Action and a Pantomime, than the religious music of Protestants was intended to be; though less so than the Mass. — The plot of the play is exhibited, partly by scenery and pantomimes, and partly by words set to music and sung articulately. Its nature is, therefore, not so totally foreign to that of the organ, as the nature of Protestant sacred music which depends wholly on articulation to convey its sentiments. And yet, although I would not claim as much familiarity with the theatricals as some of the admirers of organs in churches, I feel authorized to assert, that such a thing as an organ in the orchestra of an Opera, is never heard of; and that its introduction would be regarded by the whole musical world, as a ludicrous anomaly. All men of taste would feel, that the character of the instrument is unsuitable to the expression, emphasis, and flexibility of articulate, vocal music. The same principles of taste should expel it from our churches.

The manner in which this instrument is almost universally used in our Protestant churches, makes it doubly grievous to devotional feeling, and offensive to good taste. The organs obtained are frequently of inferior construction; and are out of tune, and ill-played. The volume of sound is often utterly disproportioned to the number of voices. Sometimes we see a little, feeble, starveling choir, to which the "accompaniment" has proved almost a fatal incubus, with a dozen voices, and an organ pouring forth tones strong enough to guide a thousand singers. In this connection, it may be remarked, that the use of organs in the Protestant churches of Holland, and in other places in Europe, where the congregational singing is noted as very fine, is no precedent whatever for the manner in which they are used in this country. There, the spirit of the people is generally imbued with a taste for music. All sing; and where a thousand voices are united in a song of praise,

the peculiar faults of the instrument are hidden in the vast volume of sound; and its leading chords subserve some slightly useful purpose, in keeping the air up to the proper pitch. But in a church where the vocal music is confined to thirty or forty voices, the organ is dominant, and all its vices becomes glaring.

The testimony of all concurs in proving, that the use of organs in this country is unfavorable to congregational singing. Unless their introduction can be guarded from this ill effect, more effectually than it has hitherto, let them be kept out forever. Another effect equally general, is to render the choir weak and remiss. Not only do we never see spirited congregational singing in this part of the country in churches where there are organs, we do not often find, in such churches, good choir singing. And surely, it is no slight objection, that an inexperienced private individual must be employed as organist, or some teacher of music, or theatrical musician must be hired. And thus one of the most solemn parts of the worship of a spiritual God, is committed chiefly to the guidance of a professional hireling, commonly a wicked man!

One of the most outrageous sins against good taste and devotional feeling committed by these windy machines, consists of the preludes and symphonies, with which they usually introduce and intersperse the praise of God. These seem to be thrown in, by some arithmetical or mechanical rule, between every two verses, in utter disregard of taste and sense. The nature of scriptural singing should teach us, that there should be nothing of the sort. The only use of the musical sounds, is to accompany and enforce the words expressing pious sentiments. What religious use or sense is there then, in that part of the music which is accompanied by no words? None. It has no business in the church. Just as reasonably might the preacher preface each impressive paragraph with a minute or two of pantomimic gesture. And then, the symphonies are thrown in blindly, after every verse, whether the sentiment of the poetry justifies any pause or not. It may be, that the burning thoughts of the hymn would hurry the devout soul along, without pause, from verse to verse. It may be that the end of a verse leaves a sentence unfinished, the nominative in the former verse waiting for its verb in the latter. Good taste and good sense would dictate, that an unbroken tide of song should bear the wrapt soul along to the climax of the sentiment, before it is required to pause. But no: the glowing thought must hang in it mid flight, or the widowed subject must stand bereaved of its predicate, until the "Performer" has had time to distinguish himself to his hearts' content in a "voluntary." But the

most nauseating thing about the whole exhibition, is to see performers presuming to detain a whole congregation, with their "extemporized voluntaries," when their inventive talent does not extend far enough to justify them in undertaking an original nursery song, and their operative skill does not suffice to perform the air of a common hymn, with sufficient fluency and spirit.—The manner in which these wondrous performances are thrown off, would seem to indicate, sometimes, that they are intended to realize the description of the great English poet of

*Notes with many a winding bout
Of linked sweetness, long drawn out,
With wanton heed and giddy cunning,
The melting voice through mazes running,
Untwisting all the chains that tie
The hidden soul of harmony.³*

But their afflicted hearers doubtless found about as much resemblance between their effusions and the conceptions of a true master, as you, Mr. Editor, would discover between the eccentric bombast of an Arkansas stump orator, and the speeches of Demosthenes. Long may it be, ere I am again subjected to such inflictions. Give me rather, for ever more, the hearty singing of the whole congregation, uniting their voices in some of those solemn strains, sung by sainted parents over our cradles, and linked with all the sweet and solemn recollections of the dreamy past! When all together rise up, "making melody in their hearts unto God," and mingling their voices in one tide of expressive, living, gushing melody, how does the delicious horror send the blood thrilling through the heart? How does the billowy harmony bear the enraptured soul towards heaven? Such were the strains with which the Presbyterian church in our land honored God in earlier days. Such was the songs that swept on the wailing winds, over the moors of Scotland, when the purest of God's people there, braved death to worship him. Such were the strains with which the Republicans of England shook the hearts of their foes, when they drew nigh to the battle, with "the high praises of God in their mouths, and a two edged sword in their hands," to execute vengeance upon the heath and judgments upon the people." Such we believe were the songs of praise sent up to God from that upper chamber, where the primitive church met to

3. Dabney is citing John Milton pastoral poem, "L'Allegro," first published in *Poems of John Milton, both English and Latin, Composed at several times* (London: Printed by Ruth Raworth for Humphrey Moseley, 1645).



The Tinkling Spring Presbyterian Church was designed by Robert L. Dabney, who was pastor there from 1847 to 1853. This photograph is copyright © Philip N. Wheeler, and used under the CC BY-SA 3.0 license, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>. The picture was originally in color and has been lightened and cropped. The churches Dabney designed did not include pipe organs, which he famously was opposed to their introduction and use in public worship, as did fellow Presbyterians such as John L. Girardeau. A pipe organ was installed in 1917 (*Christian Observer*, v. 105, no. 7 (Feb. 14, 1917): (157) 13.

worship. — And wherever they shall be heard, they will elevate the devout, convince the sinful, and make the careless solemn, more effectually than any of the borrowed artifices of a worldly church.

There is one fact connected with the introduction of organs into those of our churches which have adopted them, which is exceedingly distressful. It is *the reason* which we always hear assigned, among other reasons, for their introduction, and which we believe has been in every case the most operative one. It is always urged: “*we must have an organ to keep pace with other churches in attracting a congregation, and in retaining the young and thoughtless.*” Has it come then to this, that the chaste spouse of Christ is reduced to borrow the meretricious adornment of the “scarlet whore,” in order to catch the unholy admiration of the ungodly? Not thus did the Apostles devise to bring sinners to the church. They were taught to go after them, into the highways and hedges, with the wooings of mercy and love; to allure them by the beauty of holiness; to urge them by the terrors of the law. If we are authorized to add to God’s worship, forms purely of human device, in order to make it more palatable to sinners, to what corruptions shall we not give entrance? The Popish church

of South America attracts multitudes of worshippers, by gross theatrical representations. According to this mode of operations, which has introduced organs into our churches, a Presbyterian Church in South American might find it necessary to imitate idolatrous Papiſts, and convert God’s house into a play-house. An excuse which will justify such an enormity as this under different circumstances, is surely no valid excuse for any thing. We believe that all such artifices, of human device, to catch popularity, are inconsistent with the genius of the Presbyterian Church, derogatory of her honor, and blasting to her interests. It was her glory and her strength, that she aimed to commend herself by her firm devotion to truth, by the purity of her discipline, the pre-eminence of her ministry, and the justice of her polity. If she will cleave to these traits and rest upon them in humble faith in her divine Head, she will prosper. But when once she descends from the high vantage ground of intellectual, theological, and moral superiority, to chaffer [barter] for popularity by human devices, and doubtful arts, her *prestige* will be gone. Other churches are better adapted to win in *that* race, and will surely outrun her.

Chorepiscopus. [Robert L. Dabney] ■