

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_bib-sacra\\_01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php)

## ARTICLE VI.

## THE IDEA OF GOD IN THE SOUL OF MAN.

BY PROF. FRANCIS BOWEN, HARVARD COLLEGE.

THE subject which I propose to discuss—the Idea of God in the Soul of Man—belongs at least as much to philosophy as to theology. Every student of philosophy knows that the systems of Descartes, Spinoza, and Malebranche are based upon this idea as their point of departure, and are colored throughout by the interpretation given to it; and nearly as much may be said of Leibnitz and the later German metaphysicians, as well as the most eminent speculatists of our own day; though they often veil his ineffable being and essence under the names of “the Absolute,” “the Universal Will,” “the Unconscious,” and “the Unknowable.” All alike bear testimony to the fact that this idea, in some one of its forms, is primitive in the mind, and upon our conception of it must depend any theory which we may form concerning the nature of pure being, the origin of existence, the source and certainty of knowledge, and the relations of man to the universe. Let us endeavor, then, to bring together and compare with each other the various interpretations which have been given to it, and the manner in which philosophy and theology will be affected by adopting either one of them to the exclusion of the others.

There are, I think, three leading forms of this idea, with which all who have given much thought to the subject are already more or less conversant, and to which all the less prominent varieties of it may easily be reduced. Let me enumerate these briefly at the outset, in order to prepare the way for a subsequent fuller consideration of them.

First, there is the primitive idea of God, which is innate in the human mind, which lies far down and indistinct in

the depths of man's primitive consciousness, which we all at first see, though without looking at it, and which as such is "the true light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world." Of course, this is the germ of all the theories which may subsequently be formed upon the subject. Like our other innate ideas, — like those of space and time, for instance, — it may, sooner or later, more or less, or even not at all, be developed by reflection, instruction, or revelation, though these all presuppose it, virtually appeal to it, never entirely efface its original characteristics, and could no more have first imparted it to man than they could have taught geometry to a brute.

Secondly, this germ is often developed (as we have too often seen), by reflective and deductive reasoning, into what may be called the metaphysician's or philosopher's idea of God, as the Infinite and the Absolute, First Cause and *Causa sui*, — as such, necessarily existent, eternal, immutable, and impassive; creating, indeed, because his very being is *actus purus* (action without passion), and therefore necessarily evolving creation from his own essence, though without designing it, as he is without purpose, without affection, and even without consciousness, or any distinctive attribute of personality.

Thirdly, and lastly, experience and inductive reasoning — especially experience of sorrow, weakness, and sin — have evolved from this innate germ what I am content to call the child's idea of God, — for it is also the traditional and the Christian conception of him, — as an All-wise and All-gracious Providence and Moral Governor of the universe, who hears and answers prayer, who rewards justice and punishes iniquity, is offended by sin and propitiated by worship and obedience, and who makes known his will to man by direct and special revelation and by working miracles, as well as by the inward teachings of his Spirit and by the numberless manifestations of artistic and specific design in the visible universe, — a Father in heaven, with a personality as distinct and as conscious as that which he has imparted to you and me and to all our human brethren.

Now, it is obvious that each of these three forms of the idea, if taken entirely by itself, to the exclusion of both the others, is an inadequate and unworthy conception of him whom it partially represents; and is even illusory and deceptive, as leading, either by plain implication or inevitable inference, to consequences which the heart, at least, if not the reason, instinctively rejects. And yet, as I believe may be easily shown, each of them contains some phase or aspect of the truth which is wanting in both the others; and hence, both reason and revelation imperatively require that all three of these representations be combined before we attain any full and worthy conception of the Infinite and Holy One whom we all seek to know and to adore. But no sooner do we attempt such combination than we are beset with difficulties. Many of the attributes which we strive to grasp together, appear, on closer examination, to be inconceivable to thought and irreconcilable with each other. The conclusions to which we are led seem at variance with established facts, or with our most cherished convictions and hopes, or with those necessary laws of thought on which all our reasonings and investigations in other cases depend. We find ourselves either groping in the dark or blinded by excess of light; and in either case we are compelled to echo the sublime exclamation of the Hebrew seer: "Canst thou by searching find out God? Canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection? It is high as heaven; what canst thou do? Deeper than hell; what canst thou know?"

But here philosophy and revelation alike come to our aid, and assure us that these perplexities and contradictions result from the finiteness of our capacities and the necessary limitations of the human intellect. These difficulties are not inherent in merely this object of thought, or peculiar to a single line of inquiry. They meet and repel us on every hand, whenever we attempt to transcend the sphere of the limited and the finite, to grasp the immeasurable, to descend to the atom, or mount to the absolute beginning of things—to know anything whatever as it really is, or in its inmost

essence. Granted, that we cannot fully comprehend God as he really is ; so neither, if our knowledge be weighed in the same balance, can we understand ourselves. Space and time and causation, pure being and personal being, man and God, must be accepted as ultimate and inexplicable facts. We do not merely believe, we know, that they are, but cannot tell *how* they are. As we cannot go back in an infinite regress, forever deducing one proposition or idea from a preceding one, all that is comprehensible and provable must rest, in the last analysis, on that which is incomprehensible and unprovable. We thus learn, to adopt the language of Sir William Hamilton, that the capacities of our thought are not to be erected into the measure of existence, and that no difficulty emerges in theology which had not previously emerged in philosophy. The first principles of mathematical and physical science are as inconceivable and inscrutable as the first principles of theology.

The first or innate form of the idea of God is crude, indistinct, and wavering. If taken by itself, to the exclusion of both the other forms, and without the aid of revelation, it is as likely to become the basis of gross superstition, to be developed into fetichism or polytheism, as to lead to pure monotheism. The second or metaphysical conception of God, as we have learned from Spinoza, only opens the road to pantheism and fatalism. Pushed to its ultimate results by pure reasoning, — unchecked either by the promptings of conscience, the observation of nature, or the word revealed in scripture, — it denies creation and every other form of miracle, rejects the doctrine of a providence or the moral government of the world, annihilates the distinct personality both of man and God, and, by setting up an *immanent*, instead of an *efficient*, cause of the universe, really accounts for nothing, but leaves us precisely where we were at the outset. The third, the childlike and Christian, idea of God satisfies the heart and conscience indeed, and furnishes an adequate guide to life ; but, if unsupported by submissive faith in the teachings of scripture and the church, it does

not answer all the claims of the cultivated intellect. Its tendency is to anthropomorphism. The Infinite and Perfect One, the Author and Finisher of all things, appears too much under the similitude of a glorified human being, with many of the attributes, and even the passions, which we recognize in ourselves. He wills, desires, and purposes, thus apparently laboring to accomplish something not yet within his reach, instead of resting in his infinite perfections. He is mutable, a jealous God, in turn angry and pleased with his people, inflicting punishment and then again repenting him of the evil which he hath caused. We find it hard to reconcile the evil which is in the world, the inequitable distribution of happiness between the righteous and the wicked, with his omnipotence, his perfect wisdom, justice, and goodness.

But what then? Are we to rest satisfied with either of these three forms of the idea, taken separately? or ought we to seek rather to mould them into one, thus eliminating what is crude and unsound, supplying what is imperfect and defective in each, and appealing to the well-known limitations of human thought to account for what might otherwise seem inexplicable, and to lead us to accept different aspects of the same truth, even when they may appear irreconcilable with each other? In order to answer this question, we must examine each of the three forms of the idea more particularly, and show how the second and third are evolved from the elements of the first.

The innate idea of God has, I think, a threefold root in human nature: first, in man's intellect or cognitive faculties; secondly, in his sensibility and affections; and thirdly, in his conscience or moral nature. The first of these has been clearly and fully stated and illustrated by Descartes. Man needs but little reflection and experience, in order to become fully aware that he is a finite, limited, imperfect, and dependent being. In the eloquent language of Pascal: "Man is the feeblest branch of nature; but he is a branch that thinks"; and this thought soon teaches him the feebleness of his powers, the contingency and shortness of his life, and

the limitations of his knowledge. Yet, by that wonderful law of mind which ordains that no one idea can be fully grasped without revealing to us its opposite or contradictory, man cannot know himself without also knowing God; he cannot recognize his own weakness without contrasting it with omnipotence, or the shortness of his life without setting over against it an eternity, or the uncertainty alike of his continuance and his knowledge without having a glimpse of the necessary existence and omniscience of him from whom his own being is derived. In a word, the imperfections of man reveal the perfections of his Creator; and as these perfections cannot be suggested by outward nature, — where also everything is finite, limited, and contingent, — it must be God's own act which thus lights up in the human soul a revelation of himself. It is this first root of the innate idea which, when taken by itself to the exclusion of the other elements, and rigorously developed, by strict *deductive* reasoning, into all its logical consequences, constitutes what I have called the metaphysician's idea of God.

Again, the sensitive or emotional part of our nature is marvellously adapted to the condition in which we are placed, and the relations in which we stand to other beings. The love of society, the affections of kindred, the thirst for knowledge, the stirrings of ambition, emulation, wonder, sympathy, pity, the appetites, — all are desires and needs *which have their appropriate objects*, and incessantly spur us to exertion, that these objects may be attained and these necessities of our nature be gratified. Foremost among these primitive emotions must be placed *the religious sentiment* — that mingled feeling of awe, veneration, trust, and worship, for which, certainly, no finite being can be an adequate object, and which cannot be of artificial or arbitrary growth; since all religious training, all theology appeals to it, is based upon it, and without it would be impossible. In itself considered, and without culture, it is but a blind impulse or craving, is easily perverted, and is the fruitful mother of countless superstitions. But it is as ineradicable as any of the primi-

tive affections ; and the very evils which have grown out of it when unregulated, or ill-regulated, attest alike its fervor and its force. Of course, when acting separately, or even when somewhat modified by the third root, which we have still to consider, it is the germ of what may be called the child's idea of God.

Lastly, conscience or our moral nature reveals to us a law of inherent and imperative obligation, overriding all considerations of prudence or expediency, assuming to bridle our most vehement desires and strongest passions, and asserting its own supreme authority over all other laws and precepts whatsoever. It speaks not to compel ; it has no constraining force, no outward sanction ; it needs none. It recognizes our absolute free-will. We *may* disobey it, if we will. But even in our disobedience we still recognize its majesty, its rightful rule ; and remorse, the stings of conscience, inevitably come to punish the transgression. It seeks no support from extraneous sources. On the contrary, all human and divine law is based upon it, presupposes it, appeals to it, and without it has no binding force whatsoever. It is not infused by education ; it cannot be taught. I do not admit the precept, *Fiat justitia, ruat coelum*, because I find it written in a book, or because my elders and betters have enjoined it upon me, any more than I accept for such reasons the axioms and the theorems of geometry. It is not derived from observation ; for observation can only teach me what is ; while this law proclaims something entirely different—what ought to be. Its demands are very broad ; it simply requires *perfect* honesty, purity, and truth, not only in outward act or speech, but in inward purpose. There is no such thing as half-way justice or qualified veracity ; for what is wrongly so called is not honesty or veracity at all. Now, what is the very nature of a law ? It is a command—the expression of a will ; it presupposes a lawgiver and a government. That is the very meaning of the word. Then the voice of conscience is the voice of God, or rather of a Providence, that is, of a God who governs the world,

and who, by the contents of this law, reveals to man his own nature and attributes, even perfect holiness, justice, and truth.

This might, perhaps, be regarded as a fourth — the moralist's — idea of God. As it seems to me, however, its distinctive function is not so much to furnish an independent conception of Deity as, under its peculiar form of a supreme law and ultimate standard, to modify and regulate the development of the other roots, and to be the tribunal of final appeal in determining their relative pretensions. Exclusive attention to its dictates, — not modified by any consideration of its extreme fallibility, when diverted from its proper office of regulating one's *own* thoughts and actions to that of passing judgment upon the conduct of others, — is the source of that fretful criticism of the ways of God with man, that discontent with the moral government of the world which so frequently constitutes the sceptic's argument, or rather, his excuse.

These are the three germs which constitute the innate idea of God in the human soul, and without which, as well as when without reason or language, man would not be man, but a brute. Left to themselves, without culture or reflection, their joint product is only some crude form of religious faith and observance, which, bad or imperfect as it is, still embraces some belief in a superhuman Power, who directs the conduct and destiny of man, and to whom worship and obedience, sacrifice and prayer, are due. Even in an enlightened country and age, with all the aids of scientific inquiry and philosophical thought, they may receive only a partial and one-sided development. Their obvious meaning may be more or less perverted in order to buttress dogmas or fill out systems of speculation. Such, in truth, has been their history. What I have called the metaphysician's conception of God, as wrought out by Spinoza and Schelling, is drawn exclusively from the first of the roots here mentioned, — from that which has its origin in the intellect alone, — leaving wholly out of view the two others, of at least equal authority, which are supplied by the heart and the conscience. Pure

reasoning about such abstract conceptions as those of the Infinite and the Absolute, neither of which can be comprehended or fully grasped by the mind, might be expected to lead up to consequences as dreary and appalling as fatalism and pantheism combined. On the other hand, the exclusive cultivation of what I have called the second root, the religious sentiment, that vague and awe-struck consciousness of the omnipresence of "him in whom we live and move and have our being," can only end in an irrational, if not immoral, mysticism and quietism, perhaps in a rabid fanaticism. Purest and least perverted is that conception of the Deity which is furnished or regulated by conscience, the third root of the innate idea. Here, at least, we have the unmistakable announcement of a law which is above all other laws, and of a supreme Lawgiver, whose absolute holiness is clearly indicated in the perfect justice, purity, and truth which he ordains. Herein lies the proof of the conscious personality and will of a supreme Governor and Judge of the universe, in that even the Gentiles, who have not the externally written law of God, yet "do by nature the things contained in the law," and thereby "show the work of the law written in their hearts; their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the meanwhile accusing or else excusing one another." I am not afraid of the anthropomorphism which is involved in such an idea of God, as I see not how otherwise an Infinite Spirit could reveal himself to a finite consciousness. In some sense or other, God must become man, in order that man may know God. This is the probable meaning of the text which declares that we are "made in his image, after his likeness," and also of that which Paul cites and approves, from an old Greek poet, that "we are also his offspring," and that we should seek after him and find him, "though he be not far from every one of us."

This conception harmonizes perfectly with that which we form of him through the argument from design. For instance, in those two miracles of creative wisdom and adaptive skill, the human eye and the human hand, we find a great number

of parts, agencies, and functions, nicely fitted to each other, and all working together by a complex and intricate, yet orderly process towards the attainment of a definite and highly useful end ; and we argue with confidence that there must exist an intelligent and active Being, who had this end in view, and who made this disposition of the parts as a means for its accomplishment. Of course, the God who is thus revealed to us by his works is an intelligent and conscious Being, having foresight and will, acting with a definite purpose, and thus having a personality as distinct as our own. How he can be at the same time both infinite and absolute we cannot tell, solely because the limitations of human thought do not enable us to cognize either of these attributes. But what then? In like manner, we cannot conceive either the infinity of space or the eternity of duration. In spite of this inability, however, we not only believe, but we know, that space is infinite and duration is eternal — a beginning or an end to either being impossible. As elsewhere, so here we find ourselves situated at the confluence of three immensities and two eternities ; and as this incomprehensibility of our position in the universe does not lead us to doubt our own existence, so the perfectly similar incapacity of human thought must not induce us to question either the existence or the perfections of him who made and placed us here.

We must supplement and correct the imperfect conception of God which is drawn from either of the three germs of the innate idea taken singly, by adding to it each of the others. We must not sublimate him into a mere abstract idea, *aliquid immensum infinitumque*, nor humanize him into a likeness of any of the imperfections of man. We must believe that God is both Infinite and Absolute, at the same time that he is personal ; though we know not how he is so. To believe this, as Mr. Mansel remarks, is simply to believe that God made the world. “Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God.” *Then*, before

anything was created, he was All in All, Infinite and Absolute, because nothing then existed which could limit his perfections or to which he could be in relation; One, because the Infinite and Absolute cannot be plural or consist of parts; Cause of all things, because he existed before all things; *Causa sui*, or necessarily self-existent, because there was nothing before him whence his being could be derived; All-holy or perfect, because evil or sin is an imperfection, and therefore cannot co-exist with the Infinite. Hence it is, as Hegel declared, that any philosophy of the Absolute assumes to know God as he is in his eternal essence, before the creation of nature and of a finite spirit. But then creation at any particular moment of time becomes inconceivable to human thought; for if causation is a possible mode of existence, then that which exists before causing is not infinite; and that which becomes a cause has passed beyond that which formerly limited its modes of being. But again, I ask: Is this inconceivability of creation a proof that creation is really impossible, or merely that human thought is limited? If the former, then the doctrine is self-contradictory; for it asserts that there is something which even Infinite Power cannot do, namely, to create. He who assumes to know what an omniscient and omnipotent God can or cannot do really declares that he is omniscient himself. In like manner, I cannot see *how* suffering and sin can exist in a world governed by an infinitely good and infinitely powerful Being; but this is only an assertion of what I cannot think, not of what an Infinite God cannot do. I cannot see even how infinite justice can co-exist with infinite mercy, inasmuch as punishment for sin is absolutely required by the one and absolutely forbidden by the other. But their co-existence is surely not prevented by this inability of my thought; since they must co-exist, or they would not both be infinite.

But the doctrine which we are specially interested to maintain is, that neither of these three forms of the idea of God has any claim to paramount authority, so as to constitute the ultimate standard by which either or both of the others

is to be tried. They stand side by side with equal claims to attention and respect. Each is primitive, innate, having its root in the inmost constitution of our being, and equally corroborated by the teachings of nature and the express declarations of holy writ. Do what we may, we cannot entirely silence either of the three utterances of the divine voice speaking to the soul of man. We cannot eliminate or wholly shut our eyes to any of the aspects under which God is manifested to human consciousness. Each is needed to supplement the others; for either, taken separately, is but a mutilated and unworthy image of the divine essence. Each organ of our spiritual life acts independently, by its own laws, and repudiates encroachments by a foreign power upon its own domain. The intellect, when acting deliberately, refuses its assent to conclusions prompted by the tastes and desires, and, in turn, experiences stout resistance when attempting to eradicate primitive impulses or change the objects of the emotions. Conscience rebels when casuistical reasoning seeks to pervert its dictates, and when appetite or affection lures it to go astray; but the balance of authority shifts to the other side when our matured and well-reasoned convictions declare that the moral nature is acting hastily and impulsively, so as to overleap its natural boundaries and deprive reason of its due. It is mere pedantry to regard man as exclusively a reasoning animal, and logic as the sole guide to truth and right. Frequently our best actions are suddenly prompted by strong affection or by intuitive perceptions of honor and duty, and the highest truths are often spiritually discerned just where the intellect is baffled, or lags behind with a feeble step and an uncertain speech. True, we cannot precisely mark out the boundaries of the provinces within which each of these faculties reigns supreme; but we can still see that these provinces are really distinct, and any decided encroachment upon either of them is both a harm and a wrong.

That conception of Deity which is worked out by the intellect alone has no claim to be considered a fairer likeness of

him than the far different picture presented by the sensibility and the conscience. We are not to throw out the attribute of personality because it is inconsistent with the metaphysician's idea of God, or refuse to believe that he is immutable because he hears and answers prayer, or deny either his omnipotence or his benevolence because there is evil in the world. In either case, the attribute which we vainly seek to eliminate rests upon precisely the same basis of evidence as that which we wrongfully permit to dominate the whole idea. The truth presents itself under a triple aspect; the fact that we cannot reconcile them argues only our ignorance and incompetency, not our power to set bounds to omnipotence.

That the idea of God would be mutilated, and thereby virtually destroyed, by excluding from it either of these attributes, is the doctrine maintained both by Leibnitz and Kant, on the ground of the old scholastic definition of him as *ens realissimum* — the most real of beings. As the unconditioned or absolute First Cause, he is the source and origin of all realities; and since it would be contradictory to suppose that anything should be derived from another which is not already contained in that other, it follows that the sum of all realities, and even of all possibilities, must be comprised within the plenitude of his being. To deny any *positive* attribute of him (all *negative* ones and all imperfections being excluded by the nature of the case) would be to limit, and thereby to deny, his infinite perfection. Nothing is *real* which does not come from him; nothing is *possible* which is not made so by his omnipotence. "If, therefore," argues Kant, "a transcendental substratum lies at the foundation of the complete determination of any idea in our mind, — a substratum which is to form the fund from which all possible predicates of things are to be supplied, — this substratum cannot be anything else than the idea of a sum total of all reality (*omnitudo realitatis*)." And again he tells us, "All negations — and such are the only predicates by means of which all other and finite things can be dis-

tinguished from the *ens realissimum* — are mere limitations of a greater and higher, and finally of the highest, reality. Consequently they presuppose this reality, and their whole significance and existence are derived from it. The manifoldness, the infinite variety of things is only the infinitely various mode of limiting the conception of the highest reality, which is their common substratum; just as all figures are possible only as different modes of limiting infinite space.”

But, although the plenitude of his being thus includes all realities, and thereby all predicates, the absolute oneness or simplicity of our idea of him is not thereby negated. A whole, which is a mere aggregate, indeed, presupposes the existence of all its parts, and is conditioned, as it is constituted by them; since without them it would not exist. But just the reverse holds true in respect to our idea of the absolute First Cause. As the source of all things, all realities and attributes presuppose his previous being, instead of constituting it. Unity is no longer incompatible with totality, when the one is the pre-existing source of the all.

Pure ideas, as such, it is admitted, can never have objective reality, as they represent a completeness and perfection to which no phenomenon of experience, existing under all the limitations of time and space, can possibly correspond. Thus, virtue and wisdom in their perfect purity can never be presented in the world of sense, but exist only in contemplation, as aims of effort or guiding stars pointing out directions of progress. But it is otherwise with ideals considered as actually existing not merely in the concrete, but as individual beings or entities, though determinable or determined by the idea alone which shines out through their acts. As the idea provides only a rule in the abstract, so the ideal serves as an archetype for the perfect determination of the copy. But here the Divine must be mingled with the human before there can be an adequate presentation of the great pattern and exemplar. The Saviour of the world is the only actual ideal that has ever appeared to human vision. And it is precisely on account of his divine character and mission,

because he is God manifest in man, that he is at once the perfect Archetype and the most real of beings. Pure ideas are abstractions, formed by throwing out attributes; such exclusion removing them from the world of realities into the world of pure thought. But God, considered as *ens realissimum*, as the source of being, containing in himself not only the sum, but the unity of all attributes, is the most real of all that the human mind can conceive of; he is the farthest removed from an abstraction; no predicate can be denied of him without defacing or breaking his image in the soul of man. He is not merely the Infinite and the Absolute (*aliquid immensum infinitumque*), but he is also the most real of all realities, the most personal of all conscious beings,—a God who hears and answers prayer, who created and governs the universe.

I accept, therefore, the doctrine of Pascal and Hamilton and Mansel. There is an "absolute necessity, under any system of philosophy whatever, of acknowledging the existence of a sphere of belief beyond the limits of the sphere of thought. We must believe as actual much that we cannot positively conceive as even possible. If mere intellectual speculations on the nature and origin of the material universe form a common ground on which the theist, the pantheist, and even the atheist, may alike expatiate, the moral and religious feelings of man—those facts of consciousness which have their direct source in the sense of personality and free-will—plead with overwhelming evidence in behalf of a personal God, and of man's relation to him as a person to a person. And by our ignorance of the Unconditioned we are led to the further belief that behind that moral and personal manifestation of God there lies concealed a mystery—the mystery of the Absolute and the Infinite; that our intellectual and moral qualities, though indicating the nearest approach to the Divine perfections which we are capable of conceiving, yet indicate them as analogous, not as identical; and that, consequently, we shall be liable to error in judging by human rules of the ways of God, whether manifested in nature or in revelation."