

Skeletons of a Course of Theological Lectures

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Lecture III.

Introductory Lecture.--No. 3. I. The importance of a correct and thorough knowledge of the laws of evidence.

II. What is evidence and what is proof, and the difference between them.

III. Sources of evidence in a course of theological inquiry.

IV. Kinds and degrees of evidence to be expected.

V. When objections are not, and when they are fatal.

VI. How objections are to be disposed of:

VII. On whom lies the burden of proof.

VIII. Where proof or argument must begin.

I. The importance of a correct and thorough knowledge of the laws of evidence.

1. Without correct knowledge on this subject our speculations will be at random.

2. The ridiculous credulity of some, and the no less ridiculous incredulity of others, are owing to ignorance, or a disregard of the fundamental laws of evidence. E.g.; Mormonism is ridiculous credulity, founded in utter ignorance or a disregard of the first principles of evidence in relation to the kind and degree of testimony demanded to establish anything that claims to be a revelation from God.

Every form of religious scepticism, on the other hand, is ridiculous incredulity, founded in ignorance, or a disregard of the fundamental laws of evidence, as will be shown in its place.

II. What is EVIDENCE and what is PROOF, and the difference between them.

1. Evidence is that which elucidates and enables the mind to apprehend truth.

2. Proof is that degree of evidence that warrants or demands belief--that does or ought to produce conviction.

3. Every degree of evidence is not proof. Every degree of light upon a subject is evidence. But that only is proof which under the circumstances can give reasonable satisfaction.

III. Sources of evidence in a course of Theological Inquiry.

This must depend upon the nature of the thing to be proved.

1. Consciousness may be appealed to upon questions that are within its reach, or on questions of experience, but not on other questions.

2. Sense may be appealed to on questions within the reach of our senses, but not on other questions.

3. The existence of God must be proved by his works, as an appeal to the Bible to settle this question would be assuming both the fact of his existence, and that the Bible is his word.

4. The Divine authority of the Bible, or of any book or thing that claims to be a revelation from God, demands some kind of evidence that none but God can give. Miracles, are one of the most natural and impressive kinds. Prophecy another.

5. Without God's own testimony, all other evidence would be uncertain and unsatisfactory upon such a question.

6. Appeals may also properly be made to such other evidences, external and internal, as might be reasonably expected if the revelation in question were really from God.

7. As the universe is a revelation of God, we may legitimately wander into every department of nature, science, and grace, for testimony upon theological subjects.

8. Different questions, must however draw their evidences from different departments of revelation. Some from his works and providence, others from his word, and others still from all these together.

IV. Kinds and degrees of evidence to be expected.

KINDS OF EVIDENCE.

1. No impossible or unreasonable kind is to be expected, e.g.: The evidence of sense is not to be demanded or expected when the thing to be proved is not an object of or within the reach of sensation.

2. Nor of consciousness when the question is not one of experience and does not belong to the exercises of our own minds.

3. It is a sound rule that the best evidence in kind shall be adduced, that the nature of the case admits: for instance,

(1.) Oral testimony is not admissible where written testimony may be had to the same point.

(2.) Of course oral traditions are not to be received where there is written history to the same point.

(3.) But oral testimony is admissible in the absence of written, as then, it is the best that the nature of the case admits.

(4.) So oral traditions may be received to establish points of antiquity, in the absence of contemporary history.

(5.) Any book claiming to be a revelation from God, should, in some way, bear his own seal as a kind of evidence at once possible and demanded by the nature of the subject.

DEGREE OF EVIDENCE.

1. Not, in general, demonstration; as this would be inconsistent with a state of probation under a moral government.

2. Not, in general, such a degree of evidence as to preclude the possibility of cavil or evasion, for the same reason.

But,

1. Such an amount of evidence on all fundamental questions as to afford reasonable satisfaction to an honest and inquiring mind.

2. Such an amount of evidence upon the face of creation itself as should gain the general assent of mankind to the facts of the Divine existence and of human accountability.

3. That the evidence could be more or less, Latent, Patent, Direct, Inferential, Incidental, Full, and Unanswerable according to its relative importance in the system of Divine truth.

V. When objections are not, and when they are fatal.

NOT FATAL.

1. Not when they are not well established by proof.

2. Not when the truth of the objection may consist with the truth of the proposition which it is intended to overthrow.

3. Not when the affirmative proposition is conclusively established by testimony, although we may be unable to discover the consistency of the proposition with the objection.

4. Not always fatal because unanswerable.

BUT AN OBJECTION IS FATAL,

1. When it is an unquestionable reality, and plainly incompatible with the truth of the proposition against which it lies.

2. When the higher probability is in its favour.

3. When the objection is established by a higher kind or degree of evidence than the proposition to which it is opposed. E.g. Consciousness is the highest kind of evidence: an objection founded in, or supported by consciousness will set aside other testimony.

4. The testimony of sense is not always conclusive in the face of other testimony, and an objection founded in, and supported by sensation is not always fatal.

5. An objection is fatal, when it fully proves that the proposition in question is not merely above, but plainly contrary to the affirmations of reason.

VI. How objections are to be disposed of.

This depends upon their nature.

1. If mere cavils without reason or proof, they may remain unnoticed.

2. So, if they appear reasonable, if proved, and are yet without proof, we are not called on to reply.

3. We are not bound to explain the objection and show that it is consistent with the proposition against which it is alleged, but simply that if a fact, it may be consistent with it. It then rests with our opponent to show that if it might be consistent with the proposition, yet as a matter of fact it is not.

4. No objection is competent to set aside first truths, such as that a whole is equal to all its parts. A part is less than a whole etc.

5. No objection can set aside the direct testimony of consciousness.

6. Nor can an objection set aside the unambiguous testimony of God.

7. First, and self evident truths, the affirmations of reason, consciousness, and the testimony of God, can never conflict with each other.

8. There is always a fallacy in whatever is flatly inconsistent with either of these.

VII. Where lies the burden of proof.

1. Always on him who makes the affirmation, unless his affirmation is sufficiently manifest without proof.

2. The onus probandi lies with the affirmative until the evidence fairly amounts to proof in the absence of opposing testimony.

3. When the affirmative evidence amounts to proof, the onus is upon the objector.

4. Every kind and degree of evidence that may as well consist with the negative as the affirmative of the proposition to be proved, leaves the onus unchanged.

5. When the evidence, or an argument, or an objection proves too much, as well as when it proves too little, it leaves the onus unchanged.

6. If an objection needs proof, the onus lies upon the objector.

VIII. Where proof or argument must begin.

1. Proof or argument, must commence where uncertainty commences.

2. Hence, all argument and proof take for granted such truths as need no proof but are either axioms, self evident truths, or such as are already sufficiently apparent.