

A TREATISE BY TOPLADY

Gordon H. Clark

Augustus Montague Toplady (1740-1788) is today been known as the author of Rock of Ages. He is not so well known as the author of perhaps a hundred other hymns, some of which, even if not so tremendous as his overpowering masterpiece, are nonetheless worthy of being sung in our churches. Toplady is hardly known at all for his theological and philosophical treatises. His literary remains fill 900 pages of double columns and include a doctrinal history of the Church of England, ten sermons, a series of essays (among which are articles on Fox, Dr. Jewel, Witsius, Metors, the Solar System, et al.) other items, and finally two treatises of some philosophical interest. Because Toplady's accomplishments have today faded from memory, perhaps an historical and critical article would be appropriate on this Anglican's work, The Scheme of Christian and Philosophical Necessity Asserted in opposition to Mr. John Wesley's Tract on that Subject.¹

The opening section of Toplady's treatise on Christian and Philosophical necessity is at variance with modern norms of philosophical courtesy, yet it is milder than the more virulent language of earlier centuries. It seems that a local preacher had urged his audience to buy a three penny pamphlet as they left the building. Its author was John Wesley. This that was advertised as a spiritual remedy, Toplady compares with the same author's remedy for gout, viz., the application of raw lean beef steaks fresh every twelve hours. Then after quoting a commentary on Juvenal, to the effect that the terms Chance, fortune, and luck, are nothing but disguises for our ignorance of how "even the smallest and most trivial incidents are guided and governed by God's own express and special providence," Toplady begins chapter one of his serious argument.

As a matter of fact there are are two lines of argument, one theological and one philosophical. One must note whether the two are consistent. Let us begin with the latter since it requires a longer discussion.

In reply to Wesley's rhetorical question, "Is man a free-agent, or is he not?" Toplady asserts that he had never met, in conversation or in reading, anyone who denied it.

At first sight, especially to those who incline to Wesley's view, this is a strange assertion, for surely Democritus and Hobbes denied it, the latter of whom at least Toplady must have known. In De

1 The Complete Works of Augustus M. Toplady, B.A., London, 1869; pp. 784-819

Corpore Hobbes promulgates a scientific materialism. His Elements of Philosophy anticipates the universal causation implied in Newton's first law, and this is applied to man in his view of sensation and imagination. Leviathan I i 1., says “All which qualities called sensible, are in the object that causeth them, but so many several motions of the matter, by which it presseth our organs diversly. Neither in us that are pressed, are they any thing else, but divers motions; (for motion produceth nothing but motion.)” Chapter II on Imagination sketches a behaviorism dependent on motions of bodies as causes. It is in this vein that Hobbes defines voluntary motions and distinguishes them from involuntary motions in Leviathan I, i, 6. And because of this use of the term voluntary Toplady can say that he has never read any author who denied free agency.

The difficulty Toplady points up is that Wesley simplistically relied on the naïve term free-agent and ignored the fact that various philosophers and theologians define it variously. Toplady on the other hand proceeds immediately to define it: “All needless refinements apart, free agency, in plain English, is neither more nor less than voluntary agency.” Thus Hobbes does not deny free agency. But the complications enter when necessity, cause, chance, and contingency make their appearance.

Necessity is now to be distinguished from the Ciceronian ideas of chance and luck. “Chance, fortune, accident, and uncertain event are then said to take place, when a thing so comes to pass as that it either might not have come to pass at all, or might have come to pass otherwise than it does. On the contrary, I would define necessity to be that by which whatever comes to pass cannot but come to pass (all circumstances taken into account); and can come to pass in no other way or manner than it does.”

At this point someone might wonder whether Toplady is going to defend Hobbes' materialistic behaviorism, for the definition suits the one as well as the other.

The Reformation, however – and Toplady cites Luther in particular – distinguished between “a necessity of compulsion and a necessity of infallible certainty. The necessity of compulsion is predicated of inanimate bodies ... the necessity of infallible certainty is of a very different kind; and only renders the event inevitably future, without any compulsory force on the will of the agent. Thus it was infallibly certain that Judas would betray Christ: he was therefore a necessary, though a voluntary, actor.”

A few lines below Toplady adds a pointed footnote: “I never knew more than one Arminian who was so tremendously consistent as to maintain, explicitly and in words, that it was possible for Christ himself to have fallen from grace by sin, and to have perished everlastingly. I must, however, do this gentleman the justice to add that he has, for some years past, been of a better judgment. But the shocking principle itself is necessarily involved in, and invincibly follows upon the Arminian scheme of contingency; whether the asserters of that scheme openly avow the consequences or no.”

So natural is the sequence of Toplady's argument that he anticipates the next idea before the first chapter is ended. "Freedom and necessity are not only compatible, but may even coalesce into absolute unity with each other. But 'How do they coalesce?' By the wise appointment of God ... A Christian will be satisfied with this answer, and philosophy itself cannot rise to an higher."

Though philosophy or argumentation cannot rise to a higher, it can descend into some essential details; and in fact Toplady does so. But first let a reference to John Gill be inserted and also some reference to twentieth century terminology. In some discussions, published and oral, the present writer has received the impression that seventeenth and eighteenth century theologians had no notion of twentieth century behaviorism and that therefore they had no distinction between a necessity of compulsion and a necessity of infallible certainty. One should note therefore that John Gill in a chapter of The Freedom of the Will of Man explicitly mentions Thomas Hobbes and makes distinctions essentially similar to those of Toplady. Gill says: "The actions of the holy angels ... are done in obedience to the will of God and proceed from them freely though their wills are immutably determined that they can never do otherwise. ... The question between Mr. Hobbes and Bishop Bramhall ... was plainly this: whether all agents and all events ... be predetermined extrinsically and inevitably without their own concurrence ... The dispute between Mr. Hobbes and his antagonist was not about the power of the will ... but about the natural liberty of his will. ... We say, it is free not only from a necessity of coercion or force, but also from a physical necessity of nature ... whereas Mr. Hobbes affirms that 'every man is moved to desired that which is good to him ... by a certain necessity of nature no less than that by which a stone is moved downwards.'"

It is clear therefore that Gill knew the theory of Hobbes, and it seems unlikely that the authors of the Westminster Confession were ignorant of the main ideas, even though his Leviathan was published a few years after the Confession was composed and his De Cive about the same time.

In the twentieth century the phrase 'natural liberty' and the distinction between 'the necessity of coercion and 'the physical necessity of nature,' have become obscure. But the philosophy of mechanism, which accounts for all events by the mathematical laws of physics, and its application to man in the theory of behaviorism, are with us yet. In these terms it is not hard to see a distinction between mechanical determinism, even when certain complicated motions are called volition, and a spiritual or psychological determinism effected by the omnipotence of God. They are both forms of determinism; but they are mutually exclusive.

Chapter two begins with another rhetorical question from Mr. Wesley: "Is man self-determined in acting, or is he determined by some other being?"

In reply, Toplady, instead of immediately asserting and arguing that God determines man's

actions, takes a more circuitous route. His thesis, lacking all finesse and critical examination, is a blunt, unqualified dualistic interactionism. All ideas are obtained through sensation. They are the results of external bodies affecting the sense organs. Since our ideas are determined by external bodies, and since the existence and the motions of the latter are determined by God, it follows that man cannot be a self-determining agent.

The theory of ideas and the interactionism automatically suggest a relation between Toplady and John Locke. This relationship turns out to be somewhat complex. It cannot be described in one paragraph. Nowhere in this treatise, certainly nowhere in chapter two does Toplady mention Locke. Obvious similarities might lead an impatient student to suppose that the Anglican had copied the Deist almost verbatim. This is exaggeration. Certain differences enter on points so important philosophically that the latter cannot be considered an unoriginal copy of the former.

For one thing, although his argument begins with the assertion that “There is no medium between matter and spirit,” Toplady's matter (in this treatise, perhaps to be modified in a following treatise) is not Locke's abstract idea of an unknowable object. In Locke's system matter cannot be seen, touched, or sensed in any way. The things Toplady has in mind are extended, sensible bodies. Even in the later Dissertation Concerning the Sensible Qualities of Matter, which modifies the present treatise, as we shall see, there is no mention of abstract ideas. In both treatises the examples adduced are bodies. This is at least somewhat of a difference from Locke, perhaps more important than either treatise shows.

One may also wonder whether this difference produces unpleasant consequences for Toplady. Several of his examples of “matter” are parts of the human body, the whole of which he calls a “machine.” It is true that he asserts the existence of spirit - “matter and spirit divide the whole universe between them;” yet because “the soul is conscious of its dependence on that machine, as the inlet and channel of pleasing or disagreeable sensations,” and because “in this very extensive instance man's volitions are swayed this way and that,” and because of “that necessary dependence on the body which the soul cannot possibly raise itself superior to,” one may wonder whether Toplady has really escaped the “necessity of compulsion,” Hobbes' view of volition, and that which Gill called coaction, force, or physical necessity.

But the immediate subject was the influence of Locke, or the last of it. “A second point ins whether Locke subjected the will to a sensory necessitarianism.

Locke discusses the will in his Essay, Book II, chapter 21. The preliminary point is of course Locke's view of ideas of reflection. Thus Locke has two sources of ideas, whereas Toplady has only one. Although his phrase “this very extensive instance” might seem to imply that some ideas do not

come through sensation, Toplady in the very next paragraph says explicitly, “I believe them to be all, originally, let in through the bodily senses only. I cannot consider reflection as, properly, the source of any new ideas.” This is not dependence on Locke: it is explicit contradiction. Hence even if both authors say that ideas control the will, there remains a substantial difference between them.

Furthermore, it is not clear that Locke asserts the will's necessary dependence on ideas. It is not clear because Locke is discussing a somewhat different problem. In doing so his phrases sometimes seem to imply or suggest determinism and sometimes the reverse. For example, he says, man “is in respect of his ideas, as much at liberty, as he is in respect of bodies he rests on: he can at pleasure remove himself from one to another.” (II, xxi, 12). In section 14, however, he refers to “that long agitated, and, I think, unreasonable, because unintelligible question, viz., whether man's will be free or no? ... It is as insignificant to ask whether man's will be free, as to ask whether his sleep be swift, or his virtue square.” Regardless of how students of Locke may attempt to impose consistency upon him, they will either fail or they will take the last quotation at face value. In either case Toplady did not borrow his theory from Locke.

It will not be necessary further to point out that Locke emphasizes the distinction between primary and secondary qualities, while Toplady apparently takes them all as primary. Obviously Berkeley did not impress him. Nor does he address himself to the insuperable objections leveled against the supernatural theory of knowledge.

Chapter two then gives Toplady's original but unfortunate epistemology; and relying on this view – but perhaps not relying on this view, for his philosophy has no essential connection with his theology – he closes.

The chapter with “a few plain and reasonable queries. ... (2) In what respect, or respects, is the Arminian supposition of a fortuitous train of events less atheistical than the Epicurean supposition of a fortuitous concourse of atoms? (3) If man be a self-determining agent, will it not necessarily follow that there are as many first causes (i.e. in other words, as many gods) as there are men in the world?” And four other questions follow.

The third chapter, answering several objections, begins with a preface that asserts the equality of all human souls, and possibly animal souls too. The difference in intelligence between Sir Isaac Newton (Toplady's own example) and an oysterwoman is due to the physical constitution of the person, and if a human soul were incarcerated in the body of a cat, it would probably (Toplady includes the probably) think and act as cats always do. It is less certain what the soul of a cat could do, if given a human body. Now, bodies are the product and gift of God: not a sparrow falleth ... and the hairs of your head are numbered. Sun, moon, and rain obey his command. “And yet there are those who think

that necessity makes not part of the Christian system!”

The author then considers four of Wesley's objections: (1) There can be no moral good or evil, no virtue, and no vice. .. (2) Man is 'neither rewardable nor punishable, neither praise nor blame-worthy.' ... (3) God cannot, in the last day, judge and sentence mankind according to their works. ... 'The Scripture cannot be of divine origin,' if the doctrine of necessity be true.”

Toplady answers the first objection by noting that Mr. Wesley solemnly subscribed to the Calvinistic Articles of the Church of England and hence may be considered guilty of perjury. Then for the substance he continues “If necessary virtue be neither moral nor praiseworthy, it will follow that God himself (who without doubt is necessarily and unchangeably good) is an immoral being.” And a similar consequence applies to the incarnate Christ also. Acts 4:28 applies to necessary evil.

The replies to the other objections, occupying five columns, can be easily deduced from the above, and may be dismissed with one paragraph from the third reply: “it is the doctrine of uncertain self-determination which, by representing events to lie at haphazard, stumps absurdity on the sure expectation of a judgment to come. It is the doctrine of absolute necessity alone which, by refusing to hang any one circumstance on a peradventure, affixes the seal of infallible futurity to “the day itself, to the business of the day, and to all the antecedents, concomitants, and consequences of the whole.”

Chapter four quotes and comments on some fifty or more scripture passages that support necessitarianism. Chapter five quotes and comments on another fifty passages concerning the life of Christ.