I. The Early Life of a Southern Philosopher

The life of Albert Taylor Bledsoe was remarkably varied. He was born in 1809 in frontier Frankfort, Kentucky, to which Baptist minister ancestors had fled to escape attacks for deviationism. His father was an atheist—but one astute enough to succeed as an editor (of the Weekly Commentator) and in gaining local political offices. His mother, on the contrary, was the pious, puritanical daughter of a prominent Virginia law family. Early influences equipped Bledsoe  "

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4 Schneider, op. cit., pp. 235-237.
with "mental power and passionate love of truth," "considerable personal courage," and also an "unstable temper." 6

Brilliant intellectual exploits, especially in mathematics, began at an early age for Bledsoe and continued through West Point training into later life. In his first year at West Point he amazed his mathematics teacher by solving a problem with which the latter perennially humbled his students—a specialized form of the famous "Apollonius Problem." 7

At West Point Bledsoe found a renewed interest in religion. The chaplain of the academy, Charles P. McIlvaine, introduced Bledsoe to the first work he had ever encountered devoted entirely to apologetics, Olinthus Gregory's Evidences of Christianity. Gregory was a Baptist, but, for his time, a liberal. The fact that Gregory was also the author of a mathematics text then in use at West Point made an indelible impression upon Bledsoe. In the course of time Bledsoe united with the Protestant Episcopal Church.

2. Bledsoe as a Teacher and Episcopal Minister

Upon graduation from West Point Bledsoe served only the required two years of military duty, these as a frontier officer. He then studied law for five years with an uncle in Richmond, Virginia, but did not enter practice. Instead he accepted a position teaching mathematics and French at Kenyon College, Gambier, Ohio. William Sparrow, a member of the seminary faculty at Kenyon, challenged Bledsoe with a philosophical question which was to prove insistently provocative: Is there a flaw in the predestinarian thought of Jonathan Edwards? Sparrow stressed the importance of discovering a fallacy in Edwards' seemingly impeccable thought as a step toward establishing rationally and adequately the concept of freedom of the will. Preoccupation with this problem continued with Bledsoe throughout the remainder of his life.

In 1835 Bledsoe went to Miami University, Oxford, Ohio, to the chair of mathematics. He and the wilful, audacious William Holmes McGuffey, however, proved too rigid as disciplinarians for their colleagues, and for the administration and trustees, and resigned, Bledsoe in 1836 and McGuffey a year later.

Bledsoe then entered the active ministry of the Episcopal Church. He showed far less interest in pulpit and pastoral work than in doctrinal study, and for reasons nowhere made explicit he was appointed assistant to the Bishop of Kentucky. He was quite unsuited for this work, for administrative details bored him and doctrinal issues continued to intrigue him. Moreover, Bledsoe was all too often

7 Southern Review, October, 1876, pp. 299-300; January, 1877, pp. 247-248.
doctrinally at odds with his superiors. Eventually his denial of those articles of faith that implied what were to him abhorrent doctrines of original sin and predestination resulted in his resignation from the Episcopal ministry.

3. Bledsoe as Lawyer, Politician and Friend of Lincoln

In 1839 Bledsoe entered upon the practice of law in Illinois. He was eminently successful every way but financially. In numbers of cases won he gained local honors. He won more than sixty per cent of the cases he argued before the Supreme Court of Illinois during the years 1840-1846, seven out of twelve being his score against Abraham Lincoln.

Bledsoe and Lincoln, though opponents at the bar, worked together for the Whig Party. Bledsoe specialized in writing editorials for the Illinois Journal, and campaigned only infrequently for candidates and the party program. The Lincoln and Bledsoe families were on very intimate terms, both living at the Globe Tavern. A story persists that Bledsoe taught Lincoln the use of the broadsword and that he served as Lincoln's second in the famous controversy with James Shields.

The friendship between Bledsoe and Lincoln dissolved under the heat of friction between the North and the South. Bledsoe's sympathies were with the South and led him into positions of responsibility with the Confederacy. More than twenty years later he wrote in strong terms about Lincoln, but he measured his words and denounced writers like Herndon and Weik for exaggerating Lincoln's faults. Bledsoe praised Lincoln's "powerful intellect" and his capacity in legal argument, while deploring Lincoln's moral views as a "bundle of contradictions" which added up to crass opportunism.

During the busy years from 1840 to 1845 Bledsoe found time to continue his philosophical inquiry and to prepare for publication An Examination of President Edwards' Inquiry Into the Freedom of the Will. This work was acclaimed by Bledsoe's non-Calvinist contemporaries as a conclusive refutation of Calvinism in general and Edwardianism in particular. But since the work did not eliminate predestinarianism from American thought and omitted consideration of the growing secular parallel, scientific determinism, one must be content with a more modest judgment. The Examination did, how-

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8 Bledsoe and Lincoln are reported to have experimented with hypnotism and telepathy but since only positive instances are presented this can only be listed as illustrative of interests.
11 Philadelphia: H. Hooker, 1845. The work was republished in the Southern Review with almost no changes in 1877 and 1878.
ever, produced as it was in a spirit both critical of psychological orthodoxy and free of primary concern for religious orthodoxy, contribute to fresh trends in psychological theory in American thought.

4. Bledsoe’s Return to Teaching and the Theological Quest

Bledsoe spent the mid-1840's in an itinerant practice of law, since Mrs. Bledsoe’s health, according to a frequent prescription of the day, required travel. This travel ended when Bledsoe was elected to the chair of mathematics at the newly founded University of Mississippi in 1848. The addition of “Natural Philosophy” to his teaching duties enabled Bledsoe to concentrate again on philosophy. He devoted himself specifically to two problems: one, buttressing his defense of the freedom of man’s will, and, two, reconciling the tenet that God is powerful and good with the fact of evil in the world. The result was the publication of A Theodicy: or Vindication of the Divine Glory, which passed through six printings in three years in this country and one edition in London. Numerous articles debating the merits of this book appeared in religious and philosophical journals both here and abroad. Many attempts have been made to establish a satisfactory theodicy but no effort has proved universally acceptable, though Bledsoe’s ranks among the best.

A Theodicy challenged the theodicies of Calvin, Leibnitz and Edwards—men whose thought was very influential in nineteenth century religious circles in America. The arguments were as telling as any criticism to come from the vantage point of a still later time and deserve concise summary here.

Calvin’s contention that “the will of God is the supreme cause of things” makes God the responsible author of sin, Bledsoe insisted. Even when Calvin anticipated the question, “How could a just God cause man to sin and then inflict punishment upon the sinner?” he begged the question by responding that God’s dealings with men are “guided by equity.” Calvin’s absolving God of responsibility for sin by attributing the source to the devil was, to Bledsoe, a futile maneuver which merely moved the source of corruption from the defection of one creature, man, to another, the devil. To Bledsoe, as to Reinhold Niebuhr nearly a century later, the work of Calvin at this point abounds in “logical absurdities.”

Leibnitz’ argument in his Theodicee was that God has permitted rather than caused evil because evil is “enveloped in the best plan which can be found in the region of possibles.” In this view evil is

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13 A Theodicy, pp. 87-88.
14 Ibid., p. 90.
privative. But evil is not unreal, an absence of something, Bledsoe urged. Evil is real—positive in its nature and painful in its consequences—not just the absence of good. Evil acts are positive, not negative, neutral or non-existent.  

Jonathan Edwards, more influential in American thought at the time than either Calvin or Leibnitz, Bledsoe answered thus. Edwards had argued that “God disposes the state of events in such manner, for wise, holy, and most excellent ends and purposes, that sin . . . will most certainly and infallibly follow.” 17 This, to Bledsoe, was an appalling claim that evil was good—or, more precisely, that evil means might be used to a good end. Evil is thus designed as an inevitable means toward good. Clearly, though, if there is no choice of means to an end, and if the end is good—worthily and inevitably to be accomplished—it is equivocation to call the means evil. 18

Bledsoe resolved the difficulties by claiming that man can cooperate or refuse to cooperate with God. God delegated, at creation, a power that makes man at least partially independent. This independence makes him to some degree a creator. Man can increase the sum of goodness in the universe by the proper exercise of creative choice. Conversely, man can add to evil by failing in creative choice. The responsibility for failure lies with man, not with God. 19 Evil is not a means God uses for some end. Man lives in a state where the possibility of failure or the possibility of success are both present. One possibility implies the other, just as the possibility of winning a game implies the possibility of losing that game. Games are won and winners celebrate their victory. Games are lost and losers suffer chagrin. This is the case with man’s moral choice. Life is more than a game, of course, and mental and spiritual joy and happiness or mental and spiritual suffering are earned in proportion to the seriousness of issues over which man becomes morally exercised.

Man is not justified in using moral evil as a means for securing good ends and God does not use moral evil thus. It is quite a different matter with natural evil. Natural evil sometimes has precisely just such use. Natural evil is the element of strong contrast which makes it possible to enjoy, for example, beauty. Natural evil is that dissonance which makes the melody and harmony of life more inspiring of awe. 20

In creating this one world of many possible words, then, God repudiated the concept of a perfect world in which no contrasts of

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16 A Theodicy, p. 96.
18 A Theodicy, p. 103.
20 A Theodicy, pp. 264-272.
sin, evil and pain could occur as artificial—“a thing deformed.” 21 He did not create the best of possible worlds in a loose sense of the term. He created a world that is reasonable and intelligible and thus the only kind of world He was willing to create.

5. Bledsoe as an Unhappy Soldier and Zealous Apologist for the South

In 1854 Bledsoe succeeded E. H. Courtenay as Professor of Mathematics at the University of Virginia. The esteem held for him at the University of Mississippi is indicated by the action of the board of trustees there in conferring upon him the degree of Doctor of Laws the day after his resignation. Virginians, too, liked Bledsoe. A contemporary praised him as an “earnest and single-hearted man,” “emphatically a scholar,” who was “far in advance of his contemporaries.” 22

Bledsoe’s ability was widely recognized and he was offered the presidency of the University of Missouri, the choice having been made from a number of able men, including Bledsoe’s old friend McGuffey. 23 Bledsoe chose to remain at the University of Virginia, however. He aided in developing facilities for religious instruction, participated in the work of the Y.M.C.A.—one of the first incorporations of the “Y” on a college campus—and fulfilled a variety of public services.

Bledsoe taught at the University of Virginia at the time when education in the South had reached its first high peak and the University was beginning to share honors that had been reserved for such institutions as Yale and Harvard. By now, however, tension was growing in North-South relations and Bledsoe and others used their positions for inculcating social and political as well as religious ideas. Bledsoe “interlarded his lectures on the Calculus with discussions of States’ Rights.” 24

When the Civil War began Bledsoe was forced to make a bitter choice. He finally took his stand, as did many men of his background, with the South. He was appointed Chief of the Bureau of War for the Confederacy in June, 1861. Lack of temperamental fitness for this office, however, led him to resign. Brief service as Secretary of War pro tem led to a shortlived appointment as Assistant Secretary of War. Bledsoe wearied over details of administration, debated military strategy, and finally resigned during a

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21 Ibid., p. 410.
23 Jonas Viles, The University of Missouri (N.Y., 1939), pp. 89-90.
24 P. A. Bruce, History of the University of Virginia, 1819-1919 (N.Y., 1921) III, pp. 141-142.
dispute over the manner of preparing for the defense of Richmond. Bledsoe was recalled to service of the South in a more congenial type of work. He was sent to London to prepare a constitutional defense of the South's right to secede from the Union. Foregoing opportunities for personally pleasurable activities and even associations which might have enabled him to propagandize on behalf of the South, Bledsoe studied with singleness of purpose the development of constitutional law.

The Civil War ended while Bledsoe was in England. When he was readmitted to this country the results of his study were published under the title Is Davis a Traitor? Or Was Secession a Constitutional Right Previous to the War of 1861? Davis' chief counsel, Charles O'Connor, is reported to have told Bledsoe, "You have prepared my brief for me." Thaddeus Stevens and Edwin M. Stanton are quoted as saying it was unanswerable, and A. J. Beveridge commended it as one of the best of presentations of the southern position. Is Davis a Traitor? was not Bledsoe's first treatise on political philosophy. An earlier book, An Essay on Liberty and Slavery, was conceived in the heat of controversy during the decade preceding the Civil War. This work was polemic in nature and reveals an author bound to the manner in which his opponents argued rather than to calm, dispassionate analysis. In deliberative moods Bledsoe demonstrated competence in biblical analysis and a view of the Bible which was ahead of many of his contemporaries. But when drawn into controversy in which opponents used the Bible as an authority he could match proof texts with any man. Bledsoe reveled in such exchanges as much as he delighted in reducing opponents' arguments to absurdity. But mingled with proof text, reductio ad absurdum and invective there are insights revealed in political philosophy which were quite ahead of his time. Some of his political views read like the work of a critic of loose liberalism today.

6. Bledsoe as a Political Philosopher

Bledsoe interpreted democracy as "controlled liberty" and distinguished carefully between liberty and license. He turned this point to questionable usage in defending slavery as an opportunity for those in servitude to develop their wills and intellects in a manner not offered in their former unrestrained lives. But be it said

26 J. B. Jones, A Rebel War-Clerk's Diary (Phila., 1866), p. 49.
29 Liberty and Slavery, III and passim.
for him that he did not own slaves, that he favored their gradual eman­
cipation,30 and, holding the system to have been born of igno-
rance and selfishness, he declined to draw the church into a defense of slavery.31

There is neither dividing line nor conflict between public order and private liberty, Bledsoe held. They are, in fact, mutually de­
pendent. The individual derives much of his liberty from society and society derives its nature from the character of the individuals who comprise it. It is futile to try to imagine a man isolated, in a state of nature. Man is born into society, and no hypotheses about what his existence would be like in a state of nature, Rousseau and his exponents notwithstanding, can be empirically tested. Rousseau's natural state in which a man has "an unlimited right to all that tempts him, and all that he can obtain" 32 would produce a state of war, not congenial, creative men. Hobbes and not Rousseau was right in this case. Society necessarily and properly limits the actions of men who would yield destructively to selfish tendencies. This is not a curbing of freedom but it is society's gift of expanding free­
dom, however seemingly imperfect at times the result.

Contrary to the claim of Locke and Blackstone that the natural liberty of mankind is diminished by laws which restrain man from doing mischief to his fellow citizens, Bledsoe argued that no law gives man a right to harm his fellows.

The laws which protect "the lives, liberties and estates" of men against violence and wrong, are restraints upon the depravity of man­
kind rather than upon their liberty or rights. They are a protection of natural rights, and not a restraint upon them.33

One must distinguish between liberty and license, between rights and depravity. Self-defense illustrates this. If society inevitably abridged human rights it might be supposed that the right of self­
defense would be lost or limited upon entering society. But this is not the case. It is implemented. One does not gain the right, of course, to redress every individual wrong in his own way, but he does find his defense far more adequate than if he were one against the wild or one against many.

Liberty consists not merely in allowing that which the public good does not forbid. Liberty consists in enabling man to do that which he ought to do. One of Bledsoe's most provocative observations is this: "We have, it is true, inherent and inalienable rights, but among these is neither liberty nor life. For these, upon our country's altar,

30 Ibid., p. 54.
31 "What Is Liberty?" Southern Review, April, 1869, p. 266.
may be sacrificed; but conscience, truth, honor may not be touched by man.” 34 It is the function of society to refine the conscience, disseminate truth, and give opportunity for honor to be expressed. In an examination of majority rule Bledsoe held that men “undergo by agglomeration” changes which are more likely to be for the worse than for the better—in matters, at any rate, requiring reasoned action.35 Liberty stands in constant danger, thus, of being “diminished by the enlargement of the state.” 36 It is not a mere pooling of wills that is desired in a democracy but a dialectic process and a division of authority so that the majority, the minority or even just one can be protected. “Such was the belief, and such the design of the authors of the Constitution of 1787.” 37

Those who establish a democratic government cannot fully determine the wills of those who in future years are to administer that government. So they wisely use two devices to preserve free government. They provide suffrage and representation and then they provide a conventional agreement—a constitution. The constitution minimizes the danger of “people in the aggregate” acting unwisely.38 While in the crisis of the 1860’s, he wrote, our own constitutional government had faltered, in Bledsoe’s opinion our form of government still offered the greatest opportunity that a government can offer for the realization of true freedom.

7. Bledsoe as Churchman, Methodist Minister and Editor

Bledsoe’s appreciation of Methodism is clearly reflected as early as 1852 when he contributed an article to The Quarterly Review of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South on “The Divine Government.” 39 Methodist editorial appreciation of Bledsoe’s views is revealed by the considerable space (a total of 77 pages) devoted to his A Theodicy in the three issues of the same journal beginning with the April issue, 1854. His kinship with historical Methodist doctrines in philosophical thought and personal temperament can be sensed from his writings, a sensing which is validated by his own testimony in a number of articles appearing in the later Southern Review, such as “A Methodist in Search of the Church,” 40 “How and Why I Became a Methodist,” 41 and “The Genesis of Methodism.” 42 His devotion to Methodism was not uncritical, however, for he ques-

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34 Liberty and Slavery, p. 111.
36 Ibid., pp. 328-330.
37 Ibid., p. 338.
39 April, 1852, pp. 280-301.
40 April, 1873, pp. 298-327.
41 January, 1874, pp. 105-123.
tioned what he thought to be a superficial acceptance of some doctrines in such articles as "Bishop Kim Versus John Wesley," 43 "Bishop Kim's Double Witness," 44 and "Arminian Inconsistencies and Errors." 45

In analyzing the meaning of church, Bledsoe stressed the fact that Jesus is not reported to have left rules or prescriptions as to polity, government, or ritual. 46 The church is found wherever two or three gather together to repent of their sins and meet in the name of Christ. 47 Intent or purpose, rooted in the sincere, free will of man, is more to the point in defining the character of the church than is either dogma or structure. 48 Ministerial authority in either its Roman Catholic form or Episcopal apostolic lineage form must be rejected. Supporting claims for such are "empty phantoms of a duped imagination." 49 Ritualistic observances, even including baptism, has symbolic value only, and any high regard for them is mere superstition. 50 This position is rather striking in view of the fact that in Bledsoe's time doctrinal differences among churches hinged frequently upon the question of the regenerative power of the rite of baptism.

Unlike some of his contemporaries, Bledsoe did not engage in total condemnation of the Roman Catholic Church, however. He contended that "there has always been a Protestant element in the bosom of the Catholic Church," 51 and that the historical cleavage which had continued to widen was a most unfortunate schism. He discerned a mission for various denominations although in the case of the Catholic Church he did not make his conception of its mission clear. With regard to the continued separation of the Methodist Episcopal Church, however, he was clear as to the mission of the southern branch. The southern body was to bear witness to the doctrine of separation of church and state. 52 Once having fulfilled that mission the branches would be reunited, Bledsoe predicted in dramatic language.

Fifty years hence—we cannot doubt it—there will be a Methodist Church in the land, in poise amid the factions of the hour, pure amid its temptations, her candlestick still in his place . . . ; her children dwelling in peace in the south and in the north, in the west and in the

43 January, 1872, pp. 226-238.
44 April, 1872, pp. 421-444.
45 October, 1877, pp. 464-494.
48 Ibid., July, 1872, p. 38.
49 "History of Infant Baptism," Ibid., April, 1874, p. 353.
51 "The M. E. Churches, North and South," Ibid., April, 1872, p. 390.
east, with Republican and Democrat, Radical and Conservative, alike calling her blessed.\footnote{op. cit., pp. 420-421.}

This will be a Methodist Church

whose breath shall not smell of the potions, of Babylon, whose eye shall not be red from the vigils of the caucus, whose voice shall not be cracked by the mad brawl of the hustings.\footnote{loc. cit.}

Bledsoe missed his estimate of reunion by some 17 years. But this margin might have been narrowed considerably, ironically enough, had not Bishop Collins Denny—upon whom Bledsoe had marked influence otherwise—successfully opposed the initial efforts at unification.\footnote{unpublished correspondence between Bishop Denny and David Rankin Barbee, loaned by the latter.}

In 1867 Bledsoe and William Hand Browne founded the Southern Review as a journal of politics, history, education, religion and philosophy. The nature and predominance of articles of a religious nature led to the adoption of the journal in 1870 as an official organ of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South.\footnote{minutes of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, Baltimore Conference, 1870, p. 30 and 1874, p. 67.} In 1872 Bledsoe was admitted to the ministry of that church, continuing as editor of the Review. His decision to become a Methodist minister, like his earlier admission to the Episcopal ministry, was a rational one unmarked by a “call” or deep emotional experience so frequently the case at the time. He did not serve a charge but continued as editor of the Review. He was more than editor. He was a generous contributor of articles—contributing a proportionately large number of articles during the decade of existence of the Review.

These closing years of Bledsoe’s life continued to be marked by controversy—increasingly over the perennial problems of philosophy and theology, but somewhat less over social and political issues. The scene of controversy sometimes shifted from the printed page to the floor of Methodist conferences, and as always involved challenges from other denominational representatives. Bledsoe anticipated the epithets “liberal” and “radical” and prepared many an argument to refute in advance the concern that he was establishing a “new theology.”\footnote{“our Critics,” October, 1875, pp. 444-484.} Of his critics he sometimes wrote with a bit of biting wit, too.

The Arminians now see with the right eye, and the Calvinists with the left (our Presbyterian brethren can easily transpose the eyes),
only partial views of the truth; but then, all seeing with both eyes, the two partial views shall unite in one, and form a perfect counterpart of the system of the moral world as constituted and governed by the almighty Father of Lights.88

Thus Bledsoe's continuing hope that his ideas would eventually prove unifying and not divisive. Certainly they provoked sufficient thought on all sides to reduce to some small degree at least any threats that anti-intellectualism would prevail in either of the major denominations.

On December 8, 1877, Bledsoe died of paralysis and his body was interred near that of his friend McGuffey at the University of Virginia. His daughter, Sophia Bledsoe Herrick, carried on the work of the Southern Review for a year before becoming editor of Scribner's Magazine. She saw to the publication of some of the articles her father had planned to publish and thus death itself did not block abruptly the spread of his ideas. The Review ceased publication a few issues after Mrs. Herrick left it. Volumes of the Review are items of historical interest in private libraries of a good many ministers and in institutional libraries, perhaps more prized on the order of collectors' items than read. But many of the articles, and especially the profound book, A Theodicy, deserve reading for mental discipline and also for enriched insight into philosophical reasons why man can confidently claim that his will is free.

88 Ibid., p. 466.