

ON THREE LEGS WE STAND



Epicurus and the
Dialogues of
JACKSON BARWIS
Cassius Amicus

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EPICURUS AND THE DIALOGUES
OF
JACKSON BARWIS

Published by Cassius Amicus.

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About the Cover:

The photograph of the tripod on the cover of this edition is taken from the famous skeleton cup unearthed at the Boscoreale villa, which was buried by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 AD. Visible above the tripod is the hand of Epicurus, partaking of the food on the tripod. Below and to the right is visible the snout of a piglet, representative of, as Horace described, “a hog of Epicurus’ herd.”

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Introduction



“*On Three Legs Liberty Stands*” was the original title of this volume. The change to the present title was unfortunate, but necessary: in a world where *submission* is preached from pulpits and minarets, and *liberty* is viewed more often with suspicion than with reverence, it is no longer possible to take for granted that Liberty is a desirable thing in itself.

And in truth the desirability of Liberty is not self-evident, not even in the eighteenth-century world of Jackson Barwis. Barwis composed the dialogues which are included here because he saw that the true foundation of Liberty lies, as it does for all other political and ethical values, at a considerable depth. It is only at this deeper level that Liberty, Equality, Rights – and many other values that are often praised but rarely defined – must be established.

The three legs referred to here are the *three faculties through which all human knowledge is obtained*. The first two faculties are commonly recognized: they are (1) the five bodily senses (vision, hearing, touch, smell, and taste), and (2) the pain / pleasure mechanism (the evaluative faculty which provides an automatic sensation in response to many experiences in life).

The *third* faculty, however, is obscure, and most men of our age deny that it even exists. Ancient in origin, by the time of Jackson Barwis this faculty was referred to as that of principles which are “*innate or natural*,” and these are the terms by which this faculty is referred in the dialogues in this volume. The concept far predates Barwis, however, and in this brief introduction I urge the reader to follow its heritage to its true father – its greatest ancient proponent – *Epicurus*.

It is Epicurus who popularized this notion of a third faculty, which he held to consist – not of explicit knowledge such as that of mathematics or geometry, but of a faculty of forming conceptual knowledge according to certain principles considered *Natural* to men, in the same way that Nature provides more explicit knowledge, generally referred to as *instinctual*, to all other animal life. Epicurus called this third faculty by the name of “Preconceptions” or “Anticipations, and enshrined it in its proper place – *as co-equal with the other two faculties* – as a necessary foundation on which all men must seek out knowledge and act accordingly.

Today, however, and throughout most of the non-Epicurean history of world philosophies, this third faculty is commonly held not to exist at all, and those who accept its existence are dismissed as dreamers or worse.

The fragmentary nature of our remaining Epicurean texts makes it difficult to determine the precise attributes of the Epicurean notion of Preconceptions and Anticipations, but sufficient texts remain to enable us to establish the general outlines of the concept.

Diogenes Laertius, Epicurus’ primary ancient biographer, recorded:

Now in the Canon, Epicurus says that the criteria of truth are the senses, the preconceptions, and the passions.” He continues, “By preconception, the Epicureans mean a sort of comprehension as it were, or right opinion, or notion, or general idea which exists in us; or, in other words, the recollection of an external object often perceived anteriorly.

This definition is hardly satisfying. How can a “recollection” of an external object be perceived “anteriorly?” Laertius offered examples, but unfortunately these raise as many questions as they answer:

Such, for instance, is the idea ‘Man is a being of such and such a nature.’ At the same moment that we utter the word man, we conceive the figure of a man, in virtue of a preconception which we owe to the preceding operations of the senses. Therefore the first notion which each word awakens in us is a correct one; in fact we could not seek for anything if we had not previously some notion of it. To enable us to affirm that what we see at a distance is a horse or an ox, we must have some preconception in our minds which makes us acquainted with the form of a horse or an ox. We could not give names to things if we had not a preliminary notion of what the things

were. *These preconceptions then furnish us with certainty. And with respect to judgments, their certainty depends on our referring them to some previous notion, of itself certain, in virtue of which we affirm such and such a judgment; for instance, 'How do we know whether this thing is a man?'*

In these passages Laertius seems to be focusing on the process which Epicurus highlighted in his Principle Doctrine 25 (Yonge translation):

If you simply discard one sense, and do not distinguish between the different elements of the judgment, so as to know on the one hand, the induction which goes beyond the actual sensation, or, on the other, the actual and immediate notion; the affections, and all the conceptions of the mind which lean directly on the sensible representation, you will be imputing trouble into the other sense, and destroying in that quarter every species of criterion.

As Laertius observed, Epicurus taught that the proper method for a man to use to determine the truth of any particular question is to apply his intelligence to evaluate the impressions he receives from each leg of his three faculties – the data provided by the five senses, the pain/pleasure mechanism, *and* the Preconceptions. This evaluation process is essentially one of comparison, in that new data which has not yet been evaluated must be compared against conclusions previously drawn from data which *has* been evaluated in order to reach conclusions deemed reliable. In this process, Epicurus stressed that the data available on certain questions may not be sufficient to afford us certainty, and we must on those questions be prepared to wait – to *suspend judgment* – until further data becomes available, if it ever does. In the meantime, or even for our entire lives, if necessary, man must never allow himself to accept positions (such as in religion) that would require us to reject or ignore evidence that *has* been established by the available facts.

But these observations leave us largely in the dark as to the nature of the Preconceptions themselves, and why Epicurus elevated them to a co-equal with the other faculties. If a Preconception is nothing more than a conclusion of prior reasoning that has been determined to be true, then a Preconception is purely derivative of the information received from the other faculties. If they are indeed derivative, they would not seem to deserve an equal ranking among the primary criteria in the Canon.¹

If Preconceptions indeed deserve an equal ranking with the other faculties, then it must be because they constitute a third means of knowledge – which supplement the information from the other faculties. This would seem to be the position adopted by Epicurus, and thus he advocated that it is essential that man search out, identify, and employ this third leg of the triad.

Our second most reliable source of knowledge about Epicurus' views, Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*, sheds only a little light on this question. Cicero, however, has preserved for us an illuminating discussion in *On The Nature of The Gods*. In the course of recounting the various opinions held by poets and philosophers about the nature of the gods, Cicero records the following:

“Now whoever reflects on the rashness and absurdity of these tenets [held by other religions and philosophies], must inevitably entertain the highest respect and veneration for Epicurus, and perhaps even rank him in the number of those beings who are the subject of this dispute, for he alone first founded the idea of the existence of the gods on ***the impression which nature herself hath made on the minds of all men***. For what nation, what people are there, who have not, without any learning, a natural idea, or prenotion of a Deity? Epicurus calls this *preconception*; that is, ***an antecedent conception of the fact in the mind, without which nothing can be understood, inquired after, or discoursed on***; the force and advantage of which reasoning we receive from that celestial volume of Epicurus, concerning the Rule and Judgment of things.

Here, then, you see the foundation of this question clearly laid; for since it is the constant and universal opinion of mankind, independent of education, custom, or law, that there are Gods; it must necessarily follow that ***this knowledge is implanted in our minds, or rather innate in us***. That opinion respecting which there is a general agreement in universal nature must infallibly be true; therefore it must be allowed that there are Gods; for in this we have the concurrence, not

only of almost all philosophers, but likewise of the ignorant and illiterate. It must be confessed that the point is established, that *we have naturally this idea*, as I said before, or pre-notion of the existence of the Gods.... On the same principle of reasoning we think that the Gods are happy and immortal; for that nature, which hath assured us that there are Gods, *has likewise imprinted in our minds* the knowledge of their immortality and felicity; and if so, what Epicurus hath declared in these words, is true: "That which is eternally happy cannot be burdened with any labour itself, nor can it impose any labour on another; nor can it be influenced by resentment or favour; because things which are liable to such feelings must be weak and frail."

[emphasis added]

This passage validates the view that Epicurus ranked the Preconceptions as a third coequal faculty of knowledge. Thus Epicurus appears to have held that *Preconceptions are an independent faculty provided by Nature which provides man data which is co-equal the provided by Five Senses and the Pain/Pleasure mechanism.*

This viewpoint is squarely at odds with the standard notion of the "blank slate" – the "unscripted tablet" – which dates at least as far back as Aristotle. The modern exponent of this idea, and the source by which it became enshrined in modern Western thought, was philosopher John Locke. As stated in Wikipedia:

[Our] modern idea of the [tabula rasa] theory is mostly attributed to John Locke's expression of the idea in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* in the 17th century. In Locke's philosophy, *tabula rasa* was the theory that the (human) mind is at birth a "blank slate" without rules for processing data, and that data is added and rules for processing are formed solely by one's sensory experiences. The notion is central to Lockean empiricism.²

Further discussion of Epicurus' view of Preconceptions is beyond the scope of this work. Readers seeking further information on interpretation of the ancient Epicurean texts should refer to Chapter VIII of Norman DeWitt's *Epicurus and His Philosophy*, where this issue is pursued in detail.

The remainder of *this* volume is devoted to the work of Jackson Barwis, an English writer who came some one hundred years after Locke, and who seems to have left to posterity only three significant works. Barwis is little noted today, but according to an 1810 obituary, Barwis died –

...at his seat, Marshall's, near Romford, Essex, aged 71, ... esq. of Walbrook-house; well known in the mercantile world for his honor and integrity, and not unknown in the literary world, having written some Dialogues on Liberty, and other publications, which shewed great vigor of intellect and acuteness of reasoning."³

The works referred to in the obituary are three, and all are included in this volume. In 1776, Barwis published *Three Dialogues Concerning Liberty*. This was followed in 1779, with *Dialogues Concerning Innate Principles, Containing An Examination of Mr. Locke's Doctrine On That Subject*.⁴ In 1793 Barwis published his last significant work, *A Fourth Dialogue Concerning Liberty*.

Although it is by no means contended here that these works are texts of standard Epicureanism, each of these works contains development of arguments that appear to be consistent with Epicurus' themes, and given our lack of source material from the ancients, it is suggested that these arguments will be of great interest to students of Epicureanism who wish to consider the applications of Epicurus' principles.⁴ It is my hope to expand this introduction in future volumes to draw out the parallels between Epicurus' thought and Barwis' arguments. The examples are plentiful, and should be of great help to any student of Epicurus interested in the proper development of the third leg on which a man must stand if he would seek to obtain or preserve liberty – or any other value of importance to him.

-Cassius Amicus

DIALOGUES CONCERNING INNATE PRINCIPLES.

CONTAINING
AN EXAMINATION OF MR. LOCKE'S
DOCTRINE ON THAT SUBJECT.

BY THE AUTHOR OF
THREE DIALOGUES CONCERNING LIBERTY

Maximeque aestimare conscientiam mentis fuae, *quam ab diis
immortalibus accepimus, quae a nobis divelli non potest*: quae
si optimorum consiliorum atque factorum testis in omni vita
nobis erit, sine ullo metu et summa cum honestate vivemus.
CICERO, Oratio pro et CLUENTIO.⁵

LONDON
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CORNHILL, and W. FOX, HOLBOURN.
MDCCLXXIX

DIALOGUE I

AFTER a sultry day, there is something peculiarly grateful and pleasing, said I to my friend, in the cool temperature of the evening air. Let us, then, take a turn, said he, for this I think is such an evening, and after such a day as you describe.

We went out, walking gently on until we reached an agreeable eminence, from whence we contemplated, for some time, the beautiful serenity and clearness of the sky; the softness and stillness of the trees; and the pleasing silence which reigned around us, the sun sensibly descending below the horizon on the one hand; and the enlarged moon ascending on the other. Then, moving downwards into a fine vale, we entered under a long row of very lofty trees, whose tops, joining over a neat walk, cast a thick shade within: along the side flowed slowly on, a deep and limpid stream reflecting the moon, which shot sideways through the trees. We soon found ourselves impressed with that pleasing gloom, and sober thoughtfulness, which such scenes do naturally inspire as night approaches.

I do not wonder, said my friend, at what we hear of the dread and terror with which guilty souls are said so frequently stricken, when alone in the dead of night: for how sensibly are we affected by the mild solemnity of this evening scene! How naturally do our minds turn inward upon themselves, pensive and reflecting!

Darkness and silence exclude the exercise of our two most active and diverting senses, sight and hearing. Those pleasing and amusing faculties, being thus rendered inactive, and their power of diverting our thoughts being thus taken away; conscience will make her attacks with superior advantage, and will be found too hard for impudence to silence, or artifice to keep under. She will shake the weak fabric of a guilty mind to its very foundations. At such times, happy are they who can rejoice in a good conscience; for that alone can give our minds due steadiness and constancy.

All this may be true, said I. But if, as Mr. Locke⁶ advances, conscience be *no innate principle*, but only "our own opinion or judgment of the moral rectitude or pravity of our own actions;" and that opinion be formed in us by the "education, company and customs of our country;" and if "some men can prosecute what others avoid with the same bent of conscience," even to the committing of the most enormous crimes, "without any remorse at all;"⁷ then those terrors which you ascribe to *a guilty*, and that steadiness which you give to *a good* conscience, cannot be understood to prove any thing to be really good, or evil, in the nature of the things for which conscience may thus approve or condemn a man; conscience being nothing more, than what every man for himself fancies it to be; no *innate*, steady, or general, principle in human nature. True, said he ironically. And so a man may be a confirmed villain with a clear and good conscience; and a very honest fellow with a very bad one. What strange errors do the greatest men sometimes run into!

Even the errors of such men, replied I, are respectable, at least so far as to deserve the pains of a serious refutation, on account of their great credit and other extraordinary qualities. I have often heard you disapprove of his arguments against *innate principles*, and of his notions concerning morals in general: and I have on that account very lately read those parts of his essay, which treat of them in particular, and other relative parts: and although I do not find myself convinced by him, yet am I not able, easily, to point out the fallacy of his reasoning on those important subjects. I will now, therefore, beg the favour of you, to show me wherein you differ from him, if it will not be disagreeable to you. Not at all, replied he, unless the great ingenuity and acuteness of our author should happen to make it so.

Do you, then, interrogated I, maintain the reality of innate principles? I do, answered he in a firm tone; and I hope, for the sake of sound morals and of truth, important objects with you, to convince you of that reality.

I bowed. ---- After a long pause, he went on thus:

When I take a general view of the arguments adduced by Mr. Locke against innate moral principles; and when I see what he produces, as the most indisputable innate principles, "if any be so," I am inclined to think there must have been some very great mistake as to the true nature of the things in question: for he lays down certain *propositions*, (no matter whether *moral* or *scientific*, so they be but true) and then

proves that such propositions, *considered merely as propositions*, formed by our rational faculty, after due consideration of things, as all true propositions must be, are not *innate*. Nothing more obvious! But Surely those whom he opposes, must, or ought to have meant, (though I cannot say I have read their arguments, nor do I mean to answer for anyone but myself) not that *the propositions themselves* were innate, but, that *the conscious internal sentiments*, on which such moral propositions are founded, were innate.

He looked on me, interrogatively. I said it might be so, and that I saw a great difference in those things.

Or perhaps, continued he, the mistake may have arisen from following too closely the mode, in which it is necessary to proceed, in order to acquire a knowledge of certain sciences, as in geometry: that is, by laying down some clear and self-evident axioms, or rational propositions. But even here it should be remembered that, in the natures of things, there were *principles* which had existence anterior to the formation of these axioms or propositions, and on which *they* are founded, and on which they depend for *their* existence: as, *extension* and *solidity*. -- I gave an assenting inclination of the head.

I cannot, therefore, conceive, added he, that what we ought to understand by *innate moral principles*, can by any means, when fairly explained, be imagined to bear any similitude to such propositions as Mr. Locke advances as bidding fairest to be innate, nor to any other propositions. That is, I cannot conceive that our innate moral principles, our natural sentiments, or internal conscious feelings, (name them how you please) which we derive, and which result, from our very nature as creatures morally relative, are at all like unto any propositions whatever.

Who can discover any similitude to any conscious sentiment of the soul in these strangely irrelative propositions: *Whatever is, is. It is impossible for the same thing to be, and not to be?* – Nobody. –

The innate principles of the soul, continued he, cannot, any more than those of the body, be propositions. They must be in us antecedently to all our reasonings about them, or they could never be in us at all: for we cannot, by reasoning, create any thing, the principles of which did not exist antecedently. We can, indeed, describe our innate sentiments and perceptions to each other; we can reason, and we can make propositions about them; but our reasonings neither are, nor can create in us, *moral principles*. They exist prior to, and independently of, all reasoning, and all propositions about them.

When we are told that *benevolence* is *pleasing*; that *malevolence* is *painful*; we are not convinced of these truths by reasoning, nor by forming them into propositions: but by an appeal to the innate internal affections of our souls: and if on such an appeal, we could not feel within the sentiment of benevolence, and the peculiar pleasure attending it; and that of malevolence and its concomitant pain; not all the reasoning in the world could ever make us sensible of them, or enable us to understand their nature.

I do not see that it could, said I.

Every being in the universe, continued he, must receive its principles from the Divine Creator of all things. The reason of man can create no principles in the natures of things. It will, by proper application, enable him to know many things concerning them which, without reasoning, he never could have known; and to explain his knowledge, so acquired, to other men: but the principles of all created beings are engendered with, and accompany, the existence which they receive from their Creator. And in a point so truly essential as that of morality is to the nature of such a creature as man; God has not left him without innate and ever-inherent principles. He has not left to the imbecility of human reason to create what he knew it never could create, and what we know it never can create.

Even in the abstracted sciences of arithmetic and geometry, reason can create no principles in the natures of the things treated of. It can lay down axioms, and draw up propositions concerning numbers, extension, and solidity; but numbers, extension, and solidity, existed prior to any reasoning about them.

And here I must observe that the assent or dissent that we give to propositions in these sciences, which are but little interesting *to our nature*, is drawn from a source widely different from that which we give to *moral* propositions. Thus, when we are told that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles, and see the demonstration; we say simply, *true*. That they are equal to three right angles; *false*. These things being irrelative to morals, they move no conscious sentiment, and do therefore only receive our bare assent or dissent as a mere object of sense; in the same manner as when we say a thing is,

or is not, black or white, or round or square; we use our eyes, and are satisfied. But the truth or falsehood of moral propositions must be judged of by another measure; through a more interesting medium: we must apply to our *internal sense*; our divine monitor and guide within; through which the just and unjust, the right and wrong, the moral beauty and deformity of human minds, and of human actions, can only be perceived. And this *internal sense* must most undoubtedly be *innate*, as we have already shown; it could not otherwise have existence in us; we not being able, by reasoning, or by any other means, to give ourselves any *new sense*, or to create, in our nature, any principle at all. I therefore think Mr. Locke, in speaking of innate *moral* principles, ought, at least, to have made a difference between propositions relative to morals, and those which have no such relation.

He paused. -- It seems so, said I; and seeing him ready to say more, I begged he would proceed.

He continued thus:

If we, in this matter, pay any regard to the analogy of nature, can we rationally allow innate principles, or inherent natural laws, to all the beings we have any knowledge of, and deny them to man alone? Were we to consider his

soul and body as distinct natures, and not as too intimately united, perhaps, to be easily separated, could we allow innate principles to the body and none to the soul but what it must create for itself? -- It must be absurd. -- It must be absurd to suppose that man, who is utterly incapable of thoroughly understanding the true natures of those principles by which every other being exists and is actuated; should be left to contrive and create principles for the conduct of the most refined part of the creation that we are acquainted with; for *the human soul*. Assuredly, as all created beings are endued with certain natural principles, *necessarily innate*, and ever-inherent in them; and which make their several different natures to be what they are; so man, or the soul of man, cannot, as a created being, exist without innate and ever-inherent principles.

Seeing he expected a reply; I must confess, said I, that I do not find myself very able to dispute the truth of your doctrine with you; you will, therefore, excuse me if I call in Mr. Locke to my aid. As you please, said he, smiling.

Mr. Locke then, you know, returned I, has used several ways to prove that we have no innate principles: and though I clearly see that your arguments do make generally against them all; yet I shall be better satisfied if you will permit me to particularize some of them, if it be only to hear, from you, a refutation of them.

-- He bowed.--

You know, continued I, Mr. Locke advances that principles cannot be innate unless their ideas be also innate. "For, says he, if the *ideas* be not innate, there was a time when the mind was without those *principles*; and then they will not be innate, but be derived from some other original. For where the *ideas* themselves are not, there can be no knowledge, no assent, no mental or verbal *propositions* about them."⁸

Now is there nothing in what he advances in this place that will affect your doctrine of innate principles? I think not, answered he.

For granting that we have *no innate ideas*, it is by no means from thence follow, as he says, then we have *no innate principles*. *Ideas*, simply considered, are very different things from *innate moral principles*, or from any other principles, which constitute the nature of things. If I have not already shown, I will, by and by, endeavor more clearly to show that the propositions we compose according to our idea of things are *nothing but propositions*; they are not really the *principles* of the things treated of: the principles of the things treated of are naturally inherent and exist perpetually in them whether our ideas or propositions concerning them be true or false.

But in the part quoted there is a fallacy. He says, "if the *ideas* be not unique, there was a time when the mind was without those *principles*." The conclusion, you see, is vague and delusive. The only just conclusion he could have drawn was, that if the *ideas* be not innate, there was a time when the mind was without *those ideas*, out of which the *propositions* are formed, which I call *principles*. I doubt not that you perceive they are very improperly so called in the present question. For Mr. Locke thus confounds the principles of our nature, and the ideas contained in the propositions he names, together, as if they were the same things: but they cannot be so, because the one receives existence from the prior existence of the

other. That is, our moral ideas receive *their existence* from the *prior existence* of our innate moral sentiments or principles: as our ideas of light in figure or derived from the *prior existence* of sight.

In this question the matter, as too frequently happens, has been puzzled and obscured by the misuse of words. Axioms, and allowed propositions, are called *principles*. But they are *only principles* formed by the human mind, in aid of its own weakness; which, in reasoning, can proceed but a little way without proved or granted propositions to rest on. They might, perhaps, with much more propriety, be called helps, assistances, or supports to the imbecility of the human mind, than principles of things. The principles which naturally inhere in every species of created beings are of a nature entirely different.

It seems, then, said I, that you agree with Mr. Locke that neither *ideas* or *propositions* can be innate: but you differ from him by denying any *propositions* what so ever to be properly the *principles* of any species of beings; and by affirming that both *speculative* and *practical* propositions are mere creatures of human invention; which whether they be true or false, that is, founded in the nature of things or not, the true natures and principles of things remain unalterably the same. That is my meeting, replied he, and that, therefore, most of the arguments advanced by Mr. Locke against innate principles are nothing, or but very little, to the purpose; because they only tend to combat things as innate principles which are nothing like innate principles; and, if it be not too bold a thing to say of so penetrating a genius, he seems only to have been fighting with a phantom of his own creating.

Indeed, highly as I think of his genius and integrity, I should have much doubted of his sincerity in this doctrine if we had not frequently seen men of the first rate abilities suffer themselves to be carried into great absurdities by their fondness for a favorite system, or, by too hasty a desire of forming a perfect one.

It is certain, however, that nothing can be more excellent than his work as far as it regards our manner of acquiring ideas by *sensation* and *reflection*. But what should move him to advance that we have no other way of acquiring ideas; why he should exclude our *moral sense* and deny even its existence with the pains of so much acute false reasoning, I shall not, at present, endeavor to explain. But having so determined, he found it necessary to remove all notions of innate *moral* principles (and with them, all other innate principles) out of the way, in the beginning of his book: for had they been granted, *another source* of ideas must have been admitted besides those of *sensation* and *reflection* as explained by Mr. Locke. And I shall not hesitate to affirm that a clear and indisputable explication of this mode of acquiring ideas would have cost him much more pains in trouble than all the rest of his most ingenious work. For human actions and opinions, in the ordinary course of things, pass away in so rapid a succession as to leave no lasting traces behind them; nothing fixed to which we may refer for a renewal or a correction of our moral ideas concerning them, if our memory prove deficient. And, unless they be recorded with extraordinary accuracy, they can seldom be contemplated a second time in precisely the same light in which they were viewed at the first.

But all those ideas which arise in our minds by the impressions which external things make upon our senses being derived from objects of fixed and lasting natures, when our memory fails us, when we doubt the clearness or precision of our ideas, we can, generally, refer with ease to the objects themselves, and can renew, or rectify, our ideas at pleasure. This renders geometry so certain and indisputable as science: for the least variation or incorrectness in our ideas may be discovered and corrected by recurring to the figures themselves, which, through the medium of sight, convey invariably the same ideas to the mind. Nor is there any impediment, anything naturally interesting to our affections, in the nature of the things themselves, that should make us see them falsely or apply them irrationally.

But it is not so in moral science; it more closely concerns and is more deeply interesting to us in every point of view: it therefore throws more impediments in our way to a right understanding and clear comprehension of its truths. Our early-imbibed prejudices, misplaced affections, ill-governed passions, and jarring interests, distort and falsify our ideas in moral subjects extremely, nor can a just and natural representation of our moral sentiments or feelings take place in our minds until those delusive and turbulent enemies to moral truth be subdued or properly corrected. And also to men whose affections and passions are duly tempered, and minds naturally adjusted, moral truths may be as clear as mathematical ones, yet, from the unhappy circumstances above-mentioned, they are generally much more clouded and

obscured; and are, therefore, perpetually subjected to tedious and unpleasant disputations: a very untoward and disgusting circumstance without a doubt.⁹

But which you think, replied I, not enough so to have caused Mr. Lott to deny the existence of *innate moral principles*; things so essentially interesting to the calls of virtue: and which, you consider as a source of ideas, not comprehended in what he understands by *sensation* and *reflection*.

And are you not of the same mind? interrogated he, in a lively tone.

At present I am, answered I, but yet I must bid with Mr. Locke to be more clearly informed concerning the nature of those innate principles;¹⁰ for, says he, "nobody has yet ventured to give a catalogue of them."

By the demand of a catalog of them, said my friend, he seems only to expect a string of moral maxims or *propositions*: but these, we have agreed, with him, are not *innate principles*: we have agreed that they are not *properly* principles of things at all. But, before we attempt to explain farther what we mean by innate moral principles, it may not be improper to endeavor to define what we would be understood to signify by the word *principle*, so far, at least, as it regards our present inquiry: and so, perhaps, when we come to speak of *any innate principle*, after describing it as well as we can, we may be allowed to say what Mr. Locke says of the faculty of *perception*, which I presume is *innate*,¹¹ viz. "who ever reflects on what passes in his own mind cannot miss it; and if he does not reflect, all the words in the world cannot make him have any notion of it."¹² So, our moral principles be innate, and of a simple nature, when we would describe the sensations or sentiments they produce in us; if by turning men's minds inward upon their own feelings we cannot make them perceive what they are, words in any other view will be vain and useless. Yet in essentials all men must be sensible of them, and capable of perceiving them, clearly enough, in plain, practical cases, for all the good purposes of human life: except, indeed, such persons as Mr. Locke very strangely, not to say preposterously, selects as the most likely to preserve a pure and perfect sense of them: viz. idiots, infants, and madmen.

-- He was going to proceed in the definition of his meaning by the word *principle* when finding we were just at home, he declined it to another opportunity; to which I assented, on a promise that it should be early next morning. And thus ended our first dialogue.

DIALOGUE II

On retiring to my chamber, reflecting on the discourse of my friend; I found my mind impressed with a pleasing satisfaction and composure, and, somewhat disburthened of that uncertainty and confusion which the arguments against innate principles produce in moral subjects. It is, certainly, highly inimical to the cause of virtue to introduce doubts concerning the existence of moral principles. If the mind is not perceive such principles to be fixed and general in human nature, and not ever fluctuating and varying according to times, circumstances, customs, fashions, and opinions, it cannot rationally depend upon any principles at all. It must remain ever perplexed and wavering, and utterly devoid of that stability and that mental determination which are the principal supports of all virtuous achievements. That manly firmness and constancy which is so necessary in all great and worthy designs, and which is the effect of a generous affection for truth and justice, requires steady and invariable principles to support it in us. It should seem, therefore, much more consonant to the character of genuine philosophy to endeavor to strengthen and confirm the mind in just principles, than to puzzle and confound it with difficulties and vain objections. Fourth of the human understanding may be, nay must be, incapable of solving many difficulties in the nature of things: yet to stick to those difficulties tenaciously and to apply them continually to prove the uncertainty of our knowledge and to leave us perplexed and confounded is doubtless but a very untoward, left-handed, kind of philosophy. In her genuine course, she leads us gently on as far as our understandings will carry us, and we can see our way clearly: when difficulties occur (and they must frequently occur in works formed by infinite wisdom when examined by such mines as ours) she shows us their nature and extent and explains them (if at all explicable) as well and as far as she can, continually keeping in view the nature of man and his true interest and proper business upon the earth.

In the morning I rose with the sun, and traversed the garden waiting with impatience the rising of my friend. It was not long (though I thought it so) before he came down and joined me, with a smile, in one of the walks. After taking a turn or two and discoursing lightly on the beauties of the objects around us, I reminded him of his promise, and of the subject with which he concluded his discourse the preceding evening.

Your demand is just, said he; and after musing a short time, he began thus:

In all subjects of reasoning, we can never be too careful in fixing the meaning of our words, especially of those words on a clear understanding of which the knowledge of the matter in question principally depends. We will therefore endeavor to explain our ideas of the word *principles*, as employed in our present inquiry, with as much precision as we can.

I humbly conceive, then, continued he, that no thing or being in the universe could possibly exist or be what it is without certain necessarily-inherent qualities, properties, energies, or laws; which together form and constitute its nature and cause it to be specifically what it is. These necessarily-inherent qualities, properties, energies, or laws whatever names they may be called by, or what I would now be understood to signify by the word *principles*, as being *prime*, or *first*, in the constituting of the natures of all things. Thus all the animal creation, all the vegetables, have their *general*, and their *specific*, principles. Earth, water, air, fire, have their *principles*. The Earth as *a whole* in itself, or, as *a part* in our planetary system, has its *principles*. Our planetary system as *a whole*, or, as *relative* to other systems, or to the universe, has its *principles*. The universe as *a whole* must also have its *principles*, by which all its parts are made relative and are chained and united together; although in a manner totally incomprehensible by any but its all-wise and all-powerful Creator. But of him, the great first cause! The principle of all principles! Of Him, from whom the whole universe and all that it contains derive their principles, what shall we say, or how speak, with propriety? So weak, so incompetent, or are we that we are lost in the contemplation of his nature, and hardly know how to discourse of him with tolerable sense or without absurdity and danger of impiety and profanation.

-- I bowed assentingly --

However, we may truly say, continued he, that with regard to the relation we stand in to God and to

his concatenated creation we cannot possibly serve him better or render him juster worship than by paying the strictest attention to those *innate principles* with which he has endued our nature, and by which he has clearly pointed out (if we suffer not our attention to be diverted by default flights) our road to what is most eligible and best both in our *moral* and *physical* conduct in this life.

After a short pause, seeing me deeply engaged in reflection –

I speak of these things, said he, only to explain my meaning by the word *principles* in its most extensive sense: but with all due consciousness of human imbecility, when we presume to discourse concerning things of infinite extent. But I take such to be the notions we must naturally and do most usually entertain of the One general or universal principle whenever we think attentively or rationally about Him. Yet still we must observe that we are not capable of attaining any *certain knowledge* of the *true nature* of such a principle: we can only perceive it as a cause by the effects, but we know not how it causes.

-- He looked on me.

-- I do not object, said I.

-- then we will descend a little, continued he, for our minds are better adapted to more confined his views and to the consideration of parts, than of the whole of the creation.

In nature, things are distinguished from each other and are arranged into *kinds* and *species*, and we do no more than follow her in so considering them. The general laws by which every *kind* exists and is moved and actuated are the general principles of that *kind*. The particular laws by which every *species* exists *differently*, and is moved and actuated *differently* from its kind, are its particular, or *specific, principles*. Thus every *kind* and *species* of beings have *principles* naturally inherent in them.

True, said I, but do we know what those principles are, or how they act in them, so as to produce the varieties which we see in their natures?

Perhaps not, replied he, for of the principles of beings without us, we can only judge by the perceptible effects which they exhibit: nor can *their true internal nature and manner of acting* be ever understood by us any farther than by conjecture from the effects they produce. Yet we are certain of the necessary existence of such principles and their natures as cause the production of such differences and distinctions as mark the various kinds and species. A further knowledge, it seems, was not designed for man: nor indeed does it appear to me that it would be either useful or convenient in our present state and short duration here: it would only draw us more from our true and proper business; from the study of ourselves and of the nature of our *kind*: from which we already find, but too many frivolous occasions to wander. It has long been an applauded fashion to make collections and to roam abroad in search of rarities and monsters for others to gaze at, indulging a sort of idle industry in vain curiosity concerning things but little relative, or perhaps quite foreign, to our nature: and such trifling is dignified with the honorable names of learning and knowledge. So much engaged *without doors*, however, it cannot be but our affairs *at home* must suffer, and our most interesting concerns lie neglected. For though I do by no means agree with those who think the most difficult of all knowledge is the knowledge of ourselves, yet I am very certain that men whose minds are continually employed in extraneous subjects of science, or in those amusing external arts which are irrelative to moral life, are but very rarely even tolerable proficients in the home-science. Indeed, it is not to be expected that a man should be skillful in an art which he has never allowed himself time to think of or leisure to attend to.

I am very sensible of the fashionable folly, said I, and know very well and have cheap a rate literary distinctions are purchased; and I must agree with you that a mind much addicted to extraneous researches is not likely to be very well-informed at home: but I should be glad to know why you think the attainment of a knowledge of ourselves is less difficult than commonly imagined?

I do not think, replied he, that any kind of knowledge can be acquired without attention and study: but the knowledge we may attain of our own nature and principles is more clear and more certain, comes to us easier and with better evidence, then we can possibly acquire concerning the nature and principles of any other creatures. What man can doubt that it is more easy for him to know himself than it is for him to know any other man, or than it is for any other man to know him? If a man be incapable of knowing himself, a subject with which he is so intimately, so sensibly united; whose principles, sentiments,

perceptions, thoughts, and designs he can always inspect and know without disguise whenever he pleases to view them impartially, I say if he be incapable of knowing himself with the aid of so much previous, clear, intelligence, how much more incapable must he be of knowing any other man whose thoughts and designs he cannot be so sure of, or any other creature whose nature and true principles can never with certainty be known to him? In short, the truth is this, that unless a man be a tolerable adept in the knowledge of himself, and can perceive all the various turnings and windings of the human affections and passions and their effects in his own heart, he can have no rule or measure by which he may form and regulate his judgment concerning the actions and intentions of others.

I think you are right, said I.

-- It is probably, therefore, a truer maxim, continued he, to say that it is easier for a man to know himself than to know any other man or any other creature; and that a man's knowledge of other men and of other creatures will very much increase as he advances in the knowledge of himself and of his own nature. For his most rational conjectures concerning the natures of other animals are principally founded on what he is conscious of in himself as an animal.

-- He so I did not incline to object --

Let us then digress no farther, said he, but return to our subject:

There is another kind of principles which is entirely of human creation, and which can only with propriety be called *principles* as they are the *beginnings* of human reasoning. These usually pass under well-known the denominations of data, axioms, maxims, rules, etc. They are invented and formed by the human mind in aid of its own imbecility. They are foundations which it finds itself obliged to lay before it can proceed in the reasoning art to the building of any considerable structure. They may be solid or sandy, true or false. In proportion to *their* truth or falsehood will be the *stability* or *instability* of the structure we raise upon them. In short, they are merely inventions of the human mind to facilitate its own progress in the search of less evident and more important truths, or to enable us to prove to others (granting them to be true) that some other propositions must be true which had been denied, or of which there seemed to be some doubt. But it is important to the matter we at present have in view to remember that this form of principles can only be called *principles* relative to the human mind in the exercise of its reasoning faculty, and that the true and genuine principles of things which are formed and constituted in their natures neither are, nor are at all like unto, those data, axioms, rules, or maxims of human invention; but exist quite independently of and prior to any such things.

-- Well, said I, but what do you infer from all this?

-- Why, do you not see, answered he, that all the *principles* which Mr. Locke advances and refutes as innate (if any, says he, can be so) are of this latter kind?

-- I do, returned I, But what then?

-- Why, then said he, Mr. Locke, with the greatest respect it be spoken, has very much misspent his time and pains, having only proved that certain data or maxims are not **innate principles** of human nature, which I hope you now perceive (though true) was nothing to the purpose; the innate principles of our nature and such data and maxims being quite different things.

-- They seem so, indeed, replied I, and I perceive by your explication that data or axioms are of human invention, but that the principles which constitute the natures of things are of divine origin. But permit me to trouble you a little farther. If certain moral maxims be found to be indisputably just and agreeable to the true interests and happiness of mankind (though of human invention merely) may that not serve us in the regulation of our conduct as effectually as any innate principles whatever? Or, in other words, is nor our reason given us to supply, in some degree, the place of innate moral principles?

This, returned he, is what Mr. Locke would have us to understand, but most certainly it cannot be so, for as we have shown before, we are not able by reasoning to create principles in things. The principles of all things exist in them before we begin to reason about them, or they never could be made to exist at all by any human power.

Our reason must always have some foundation to build upon; that foundation must exist before we begin to reason, or we could not reason at all. We can neither perceive or understand anything as a subject of reasoning whose principles do not exist prior to our reasoning. Thus *moral maxims*, when true,

must be founded on *some principles* in the human nature which are originally inherent in man, and our reasoning in the formation of such maxims must be regulated by those *originally-inherent principles*. Had we not such principles innate or born with us, our reason could have no ground to go upon concerning morals, for reasoning could never make a man, *devoid of innate moral principles*, perceive the justice or truth of any moral maxim. Indeed, without such principles he could never know anything at all of moral maxims, for when any moral maxim is proposed to us we can neither understand it or examine into its truth or falsehood without referring to our internal touchstone, our innate moral sentiments; they alone enable us to understand it, and by them only can we judge of its truth or falsehood, for its truth or falsehood to us depends entirely upon its agreement or disagreement with them.

--- My feelings, said I, will not permit me to contradict you. But Mr. Locke, you know, rather triumphantly demands a catalogue of these principles, which he says no one "has ventured yet to give."

I understand you, replied he: you desire to know what I have to say on that subject?

I do, returned I.

You know, then, continued he, that when Mr. Locke demands a catalogue of *innate principles*, he means a catalogue of *propositions* such as he had before proved to be not *innate*, and such as you and I have agreed cannot properly be called *principles of our nature* at all. These, therefore, can be but little to our present purpose. But nevertheless, we have innate moral principles which do not consist of propositions or maxims, but of internal sentiments or conscious feelings prior to all moral maxims, and without which (as you have seen) morals could have no foundation in nature, nor could be understood.

All right and wrong, just and unjust, which concern the nature and happiness of man is perceived by him through what is innate, and formed in him in the very constitution of his nature, or he could never perceive or understand them at all.

If anyone require *a catalogue*, or rather an exact description of these innate internal sentiments, I can only tell him what I feel within myself, and describe to him how the actions of men and how the relations of their actions, when I hear or read them, affect my nature and move my conscious feelings. Nor can he have any other rule of judging the truth or falsehood of my sentiments but by reference to his own conscience, by which only it is possible for him to form any rational judgment.

Mr. Locke¹³ himself does not think a better explanation can be given of any simple perception, or idea, than that we do perceive it, which is as much as to say, thus I am impressed by the object; thus it affects me; how are you impressed? How does it affect you? This doctrine, you see, supposes that all men being of the same kind have the same natural principles in them (with the degrees only or more or less perfect) and that, therefore, their perceptions must be the same, or very nearly the same; and indeed, were they not so, they could never understand each others' meaning.

We do not, therefore, contend about *innate moral principles*, as if they were *innate propositions* or *innate ideas*, but as principles naturally inherent in mankind, which being excited to action, raise in our minds *ideas* and concerning which we can make *propositions*. We can describe them to each other, and we can compare our feelings and perceptions of them together, as we can those of sight or any other sense. But take away the *innate principles*, the *sight*, and the *moral sense*, and everyone perceives that neither reasoning, argumentation, explanation, or description, in short, that no human contrivance can possibly make the blind man understand any thing concerning the objects of sight, or the unconscious man any thing concerning moral truths. If our conscience, or moral sense, were not born with us, we most certainly never could be made to feel or understand any thing concerning morals, nor could we ever reason at all about them; we should be entirely ignorant of any such thing.

You must now, no doubt, perceive, continued he, how absurd it would be to demand a *catalogue* of our innate moral principles when the true nature of them is rightly understood. It would be to demand a catalogue of all the conscious sentiments excited in us in all the various actions and circumstances which occur to us in human life; in which right or wrong, just or unjust, moral beauty or deformity, are concerned. It were as reasonable to demand a catalogue of all the various sensations excited in us by the operations of outward things on our other senses. The only rational attempt to describe or give a catalogue of our innate moral principles would be to copy to purer sentiments of the best moralists, who have, with the soundest heads, justly and naturally depicted the conscious sentiments of the worthiest

hearts; which would be no more than if, being curious in vision and the nature of sight, we were to consult the ablest masters in optics and were to give a catalogue of their experiments and opinions in that science.

But rather than you should have that trouble, said I, we will talk no more of *a catalogue*. He smiled; and after a short silence, he proceeded to show that conscience, or innate moral principles, must be the same in all men.

You know, said he, that Mr. Locke himself, presuming that creatures of the same species are endued with powers, faculties, or *inborn* principles (though he will not say *innate*) which are the same in every individual of the species, *not defective*, seems not to doubt that the simple ideas conveyed to the mind by the senses (though inexplicable by words) are the same in all men; or so far the same as to enable them very well to understand each others' meaning. And this, no doubt, is true with the exception of more or less perfect faculties, and consequently of more clear or more obscure, more extensive or more confined ideas; for, were it not true, individuals could no more understand each other than if they were creatures of quite *different species*. If their natural faculties had not a very strong similarity, if the manner of their operation were not very much the same, how could they possibly nearly penetrate each others thoughts or conceive ideas enough similar to enable them to hold any communication?

But, this being allowed, it must equally hold in our innate moral principles, which though as to strength or weakness, clearness or obscurity, they be somewhat diversified in different men; yet they must be so much of the *same nature*, as to differ only in *degree*, not in *kind*; otherwise we could hold no intelligible conversation about morals.

-- Certainly not, said I.

How very inconsistent, then continued he, is the doctrine advanced by Mr. Locke when he says that conscience "is nothing else but *our own opinion, or judgment*,"¹⁴ of the moral rectitude or pravity of our own actions. And if conscience be a proof of innate principles, *contraries* may be innate principles, since some men *with the same bent of conscience* prosecute what others avoid."

If this were true, if there were nothing internally the same, nothing common and *inborn* in the human species concerning moral rectitude or pravity, but if every individual in that point were distinct and a species himself, and could form moral sentiments which might or might not according to accidents or his own fancy have relation to or correspondence with those of other men, all intelligible communication on that subject must cease, and all the doctrines of morality among creatures thus distinct and irrelative must not only be impertinent and incomprehensible to each other, but must remain utterly devoid of that general nature, or those specific qualities, which only could render such doctrines useful to us as creatures of the same kind, nature, and constitution.

All those faculties, qualities, or properties, continued he, which are comprised in the formation and constitution of an individual of any species of creatures, must be comprehended in every individual of the *same* species, *not defective*, otherwise he cannot be deemed to be of the *same* species, but *another*. And if any individual be born *defective*, or without some faculty or property common to his species (as we have shown of the blind man) of things acquirable by or relative to that faculty, he can receive no knowledge from, nor have any intelligible communication with, those who are not so defective.

Unless those faculties and qualities which constitute a species were the same in every individual of that species, that consent of nature, or sympathetic charm which arises from the sameness of our feelings, and which draws together and unites the individuals of every species could have no existence. They could by no other means than by the identity of the principles of their nature be thus inclined towards each other; nor could they by any other means conceive any thing of each other's nature, any more than if each individual were a distinct species.

If all men, then, be of the same species, all the faculties, qualities, or properties which go to the constituting or making of a man must be the *same* in all men. That they are the same is clear because men do understand each other when they converse together concerning them; they differ (as we have said) only in degree. Now, conscience must be of this number; it is a quality or property common to human nature, varying only in the degrees of stronger or weaker, clearer or more obscure. Men understand each

other when they speak of conscience, which, were it not the *same* in all, they could not do. It is, therefore, the *same* in all men, or it is nothing that can be useful to them.

If conscience were, as Mr. Locke pretends, only the *opinion* or *judgment* of every individual concerning the moral rectitude or pravity of his own actions, and if those opinions and judgments be various and even *contrary*, as he allows and thinks he proves, it could be no natural, general, principle of the species; but men, in point of conscience, would be naturally quite irrelative to each other: and every individual would be a distinct species, and could no more judge of the conscience of another man than he could judge the conscience of any being whose nature was totally unlike his own.

But our opinions or judgments cannot make or constitute any principle in our nature. If I have an opinion, or if I judge that any thing will be good for, or pleasing to, my nature, which on experiment proves evil and displeasing, my opinion or judgment cannot make it otherwise. Our opinions may be lightly taken up, ill-grounded, and false; but the principles of our nature are the work of infinite wisdom, deep-rooted, and invariably true. And though at the expense of our own misery and vexation we may thwart and oppose them, yet they can never be eradicated by any power of ours, nor can their nature be changed by our erroneous opinions and judgments.

Mr. Locke, I remember, continued he, seems to think the argument conclusive against innate moral principles when he shows us that all our *ideas* included in the *propositions* which he calls moral principals are *acquired*. But this is not going to the bottom of the matter in question. Mr. Locke always carefully avoids the use of the word *innate* whenever he names any of the principles or faculties by which we acquire our ideas of things. Yet, I think, he somewhere has called them *in-born* in the Essay. And in his Treatise of Civil Government he finds it hard to avoid innate principles, and he talks of *the principles of human nature* more than once.

He likens the mind to a piece of white paper, ready to receive any characters or impressions. He informs us that through the medium of the senses the mind is impressed and receives such ideas as they convey; we therefore have no *innate ideas*. True. But can he justly say we have, therefore, no *innate principles*? Certainly not. For *ideas* and *innate principles* are not the same thing. *Ideas* are only the produce, and arise in consequence, of *innate principles*. – Are not our senses *innate* through which we perceive those ideas? Is not the mind itself *innate* which perceives them? Most undoubtedly. And to object that they are dormant and useless until they be excited to action is frivolous, for so are our hands, our feet, and all our members and faculties, yet who can deny them to be innate, or born with us?

Through the senses, which are undoubtedly innate, we receive ideas of external things: through the *moral sense*, no less certainly innate, we receive ideas concerning moral things. Any one born without sight cannot have the least idea of the objects of sight. Any one born without innate moral principles, or a moral sense, cannot have any idea of moral subjects. Reasoning would be as vain and useless in one case as in the other. Reasoning cannot give sight to the blind; reasoning cannot give a moral sense to those born without it – it must be innate, or it cannot be at all.

While I was expressing my satisfaction with my friend's arguments, and going to extend my inquiries farther, some company arrived who joined us, and continued with us till after dinner.

DIALOGUE III

Towards the evening, our company took their leave of us, and my friend and I according to our custom walked in the adjacent fields, where on the first opportunity I renewed the conversation in which we were interrupted in the morning.

You will excuse me, said I, though perhaps by this time I ought to be fully satisfied of the existence of innate moral principles, if I still continue to trouble you with a few more of Mr. Locke's objections, which are thought to carry some weight with them.

-- He smiled assent.

-- You know what stress Mr. Locke¹⁵ lays upon the want of universal consent to those *propositions* which he gives us for *innate moral principles*, if any be so.

I do, replied he. But as I think we agreed that *propositions* were not *innate principles*, nor any way similar to them, it should seem what he hath said upon that head cannot be much to our present purpose. However, continued he, it may not be improper to say somewhat on that subject, if it only be to endeavor to show what sort of universality it is reasonable to expect in human nature, and in this, I think, Mr. Locke will materially help us out.

But to facilitate our inquiry, it will be proper to explain more strictly the sense of some words which we may already have used and may again frequently use in the course of it. I mean the words *conscience*, *moral sense*, and *innate moral principles*, which I think have been and may be generally used promiscuously, as significant of the same things.

By these words, then, I mean an *innate sense*, implanted in our nature, as *moral agents*, by the great Creator of all things: by which we are made *sensible* of the right and wrong, of the just and unjust, of the moral beauty and deformity of human actions and human minds, and to which we must refer *as to the only true criterion* in all our reasonings that concern the just rights of mankind, the natural and moral obligations we are under to others, and to ourselves, and in general, the moral happiness or misery of the human species.

Now I know of no objections against the universal existence of this *moral sense* in mankind which do not lie equally against the universal existence of all our other senses. Total want and privation are objections as far as they extend, but imperfection or defectiveness is no objection against the universality of *the existence* of our senses. Sight and hearing are possessed by men from the greatest human perfection down to the most imperfect and defective. Blindness and deafness are the only exceptions against the universality of sight and hearing. Conscience also is naturally inherent in all mankind, but as in the senses of sight and hearing, with various degrees of sensibility and clearness it may descend from the greatest perfection down to the most defective dullness. But like the sense of feeling, it seems to be so closely inherent in us that it is hard to conceive how a living man can be *totally* deprived of it. *Idiotism* and *madness* may disable him for perceiving its effects, and in *infancy* he may be incapable for good reasons which will be shown hereafter, and these are the only exceptions against its universality in human nature; but they are not exceptions against the universality of its existence, they are only exceptions against the universal *perception* of it.

-- I believe you are right, said I; but do you not think it an objection to this moral sense that men are not equally quick and fine in their feelings of its operations and effects?

-- It can certainly be no objection to its *existence*, replied he, any more than to the existence of the other senses.

-- But do you then suppose, interrogated I, that the perspicacity or dullness of the conscience, or moral sense, bears any proportion to the strength or weakness of our mental faculties?

-- I really cannot say, answered he, what proportion they may bear to each other; but I know that our *perception* of the effects of conscience, as well as the effects of the other senses, will be clear or otherwise according to the strengths or weakness of our understandings. This is a matter of daily and continual experience. And indeed, it is one very rational way of accounting for the seemingly great diversity of men's thoughts and opinions, which certainly does not arise from any difference in their

natural principles (only in the degrees of more or less perfect) or from any natural difference in their way of perceiving things, but from the clearness or obscurity, strength or weakness, of their mental abilities.

-- But does not this argument, demanded I, make against the *efficacy* of the *conscience* as a moral guide?

-- No more, replied he, than it does against the *efficacy* of the *other senses*, for their several uses.

For my part, continued he, I do not pretend to fathom the depths of infinite wisdom. I do not, therefore, ask why every principle of our nature is not precisely and universally the same as to measure and degree in the whole species. I perceive, as to measure and degree, that every principle differs in almost every individual, and I also perceive that there is an *universality in the kind and nature* of every principle given by the Deity to the whole human species, and indeed to every other species of creatures, notwithstanding those differences in degree.

That every single animal of the same species differs from others does not so far shock me as to make me conclude that the principles of their nature are not the *same in kind*. Much less does it affect me in the human species when I consider man as a rational creature in a *higher degree*, as a free agent in point of morals, indued with innate conscious principles, and as the elector and chooser of his own moral happiness or misery. For surely whoever will consider these distinctions, what they are in us, and how we are affected by them, cannot be much surprised to find more diversity in men than in any other kind of creatures whose natures are restrained to instincts, and who are capable of any degree of moral free agency.

To be calling out, therefore, for universality of consent on these occasions seems to me to be only taking an unfair advantage of the almost inexplicable diversity to be found in human minds and in human actions, with which any acute man, if he please, may puzzle others and himself. But amidst all this diversity, when we *candidly* survey the conduct of our species, we can easily perceive them to be actuated, generally and universally, by the same natural principles. And indeed, as we have seen, if it were not so, they could not sympathize; there could be no consent of natures in them, nor could they every understand each others' meaning at all.

But, as I have said, Mr. Locke himself will materially help us out in this argument. Then taking the Essay on Human Understanding out of his pocket, he turned to page 139, and read as follows:

"The knowing precisely what our words stand for, would, I imagine,¹⁶ in this, as well as a great many other cases, end the dispute. For I am apt to think that men, when they come to examine them, find their simpler *ideas* all generally to agree, though in discourse with one another they perhaps confound one another with different names. I imagine that men who abstract their thoughts do well examine the *ideas* of their own minds, *cannot much differ in thinking*, however they may perplex themselves with words, according to the way of speaking of the several schools or sects they have been bred up in: though amongst unthinking men, who examine not scrupulously and carefully their own *ideas*, and strip them not from the marks men use for them, but confound them with words, there must be endless dispute, wrangling and jargon, especially if they be learned bookish men devoted to some sect, and accustomed to the language of it, and have learned to talk after others. But if it should happen that any two thinking men should really have different *ideas*, I do not see how they could discourse or argue one with another."

Here it seems, said he, Mr. Locke does not see how men could discourse or argue together unless their simple ideas were *the same*. Nor do I. But their simple ideas cannot be *the same* unless their senses through which they are perceived are *the same*. If the *senses* be *the same*, the universality of the senses can have no exceptions but those we have already named. And if we have proved the existence of a *moral sense* necessary (as I think we have, from the impossibility of men's discoursing intelligibly about morals without it) there can be no objections to its universality but those we have mentioned.

You are doubtless in the right, said I; yet you know Mr. Locke has been pleased to advance that if we had any innate moral principles, infants, idiots, and madmen would be more clearly sensible of them than other people, because less corrupted by habits and by the prejudices and customs of this world.

-- He has so, replied he, but here it can be of no force, because Mr. Locke's *moral principles*, as I must again repeat, were only *moral propositions*. According to our explication and ideas of innate moral principles, nothing can be more absurd. Would it not be as reasonable to say that *infants*, by their

helpless ignorance and inexperience, that *idiots*, by their total want of understanding and capacity, and that *madmen*, by the distraction and disorder of their minds, are in a better condition on these accounts to distinguish nicely, and to judge accurately, of their sensations and moral sentiments? In truth, minds thus situated are too weak, or too confused and distracted, to be able to judge, or even to be sensible, of their own helpless and miserable condition.

But as Mr. Locke denies that we have any innate moral principles at all, he supposes and assumes what he can neither suppose nor assume of any other principle of our nature: he supposes that if we have any innate principles of morality they must not only be *born with us*, ready moulded and formed into such evident and indisputable *propositions* as no man can deny. This is strange.

Do we say that the sense of hearing is not innate because we are not born perfectly accomplished in music? Do we infer that our sight is not innate because we are not born opticians? Certainly not. Why, then, should we presume that our conscience is not innate because we are not born moral philosophers? If to the sight, to the hearing, and to the other senses, time and experience be allowed necessary, and if, to adjust properly the ideas and thoughts they have conveyed to us, understanding, attention, and judgment be wanting, why may we not, as reasonably, allow the same time and experience, the same understanding, attention, and judgment, to be requisite to the nature and proper conduct of our innate moral sense?

-- It seems reasonable, answered I.

In the imbecility of infancy, and the giddiness of childhood, continued he, we are but poorly qualified for making nice observations on our sensations and ideas of any sort; but so much less on those of the moral kind, because the nature of our condition is, then, such as scarcely, if at all, places us in the circumstances of moral agents. In infancy, it is out of the question, and in childhood there are but few calls for the exercise of conscience, which is wisely ordered, for then we have but little judgment to observe its effects. God has naturally placed us at these times, and much longer, under the care and tuition of parents, clearly indicating thereby our inexperience and want of capacity to govern ourselves. In short, in morals, as in everything else, our knowledge is progressive, and whoever desires to be a proficient in that science will find that experience, application, and good sense are at least as requisite as they are to the learning of any other inferior art or science. Nor does the nature and circumstances of human life by any means require what Mr. Locke assumes to be necessary as an evidence of innate moral principles, i.e., that they should be *so born with us* as to be instantaneously perceptible in the forms of indisputably true propositions. For though all our faculties of mind and body be born with us, yet as the most perfect use, and highest perfection, of any one of them is not naturally requisite or useful in infancy or childhood, God having created both our minds and bodies in a progressive, and not in a perfect or full grown state; to object against any of them as not innate because it is not born with us perfect or full-grown, is only to object against it because it is not what it was never intended to be; the same objection may as reasonably be made against the innateness of every part or faculty of a man's body. Your senses may be as strong, as clear, and as perfect, as every human senses were; your *moral sense* may be as true, as just, and though all be innate, yet is the knowledge acquired by them progressive, and perfected by slow degrees; nor do I see the least reason for excluding the moral sense out of this predicament. For my part, I can perceive nothing in all this but what is entirely natural, and quite consonant to the condition and circumstances of humanity.

Here he paused.

-- I cannot dissent from you, said I. Yet you know Mr. Locke speaks of soldiers in armies,¹⁷ and even of whole nations whom he supposes to be entirely devoid of all conscience or any moral sentiment.

He does so, replied he, but that is but a continuation of the same error, and must be answered by the same kind of reasoning we have already employed; of which, perhaps by this time, you have heard more than enough.

I assured him of his mistake, and begged him to proceed, and he continued thus:

If there were really whole nations, as Mr. Locke contends,¹⁸ (confiding in the wonderful stories of marvelous travelers) that coolly, deliberately, and *without any remorse at all* could destroy their own children, and if such actions were not the effects of some gloomy and horrid superstitions, or some very pressing fears of shame or want, or of some corrupt affections, or violent and unruly passions, it would

certainly be a very extraordinary phenomenon, and so very contrary to the nature and conduct of every other species of creatures in the world that we know of, that it would be a very odious and disgraceful peculiarity in that species of animals which has generally been esteemed the noblest upon earth.

I must own my nature shudders when I read what Mr. Locke seems to describe with so much coldness and indifference. He desires us to “view an army at the sacking of a town, and see what observation, or sense of moral principles, or what touch of conscience (they feel) for all the outrages they do. Robberies, murders, rapes, are the sports of men set at liberty from *censure*.” All the other cruelties which he continues to describe in the same page he very unnaturally presumes to be done *without scruple, without any remorse at all*. Could anything be more cruelly unjust to others than to presume thus much? Could anything be more unphilosophical? Unjust to others because his own heart, I will believe for his honor, could never exhibit to himself a capability of perpetrating the crimes he mentions *without scruple or without any remorse at all*. Unphilosophical, because lightly deeming them the *sports* of men set at liberty from *censure*, he does not endeavor to investigate their causes and show them to be the effects of what they really are effects: in war, of furious passions, heated imaginations, and turbulent appetites; in the other cases, of gloomy and debasing superstitions, of strong fears of shame or want, or, of some other perverted affection, or urgent and forcible passion. But why he should presume that after such actions men feel *no remorse at all* I know not; it is undoubtedly a mere presumption without any rational evidence, for I am certain Mr. Locke could have no evidence of any such thing in himself.

It is true, indeed, that while men continue under the influence of strong affections, violent passions, or enthusiastic illusions, they are but little sensible of the operations of conscience within them; but to infer from hence that they have no *conscience*, no internal *moral sense*, would certainly be a very hasty and injudicious conclusion; because we might with just as much reason infer they have no eyes, no ears, no feeling, for under the same influence of such affections, passions, and illusions men frequently can neither see, hear, or feel.

-- I gave an assenting motion.

When we speak, said he, more within compass of our own experience and knowledge of human nature, we can speak with more certainty and with better evidence to ourselves, to our friends, and to those who are of the same nation, or of the same quarter of the world with ourselves. But when we range about the earth with voyagers and travelers who are generally but too well disposed to fancy things to be wonderful and extraordinary which they are unused to, and who are, most of them, but very unqualified to give us just accounts of the laws, customs, and religions of nations; who, if they were qualified, seldom stay long enough anywhere either to learn the language or understand the manners of the people whom they visit, and who can only judge, and that grossly, of the effects which come under their observation, but of whole causes they must often be ignorant or but very incompetent judges; I say when we range about the earth with them, taking their strange accounts for indisputable facts, we must surely be very well inclined to swallow anything to serve our present purpose.

The truth is this, that if there were such nations, such creatures in the form of men, as these monster-loving voyagers tell us of, and as Mr. Locke seems so easily to believe there are, and who could perpetrate, as he assumes all the unnatural barbarities he names *without scruple, or without any remorse at all*, the only rational inference to be drawn from it is *that they are not of the same species with ourselves*, for they most undoubtedly differ extremely from all that we know of humanity within the compass of our own experience and of our own internal feelings. In short, any unprejudiced man would find it as easy to believe that there were whole nations born deaf or blind, or without any of the senses.

I must confess, replied I, after what has been said on the universality of the senses and of the moral sense, and after what Mr. Locke himself advances concerning the impossibility of men's understanding each other in discourse unless their simple ideas were the same; I think there can be no doubt of his mistake in this question. However, with your leave, I will still trouble you a little longer.

Mr. Locke, after explaining to us the nature of *pain* and *pleasure*,¹⁹ and informing us that “these like other simple *ideas* cannot be described nor their names defined, the way of knowing them being as of the simple *ideas* of the senses, only by experience:” concludes in the next section, “things then are good or evil only in reference to pleasure or pain.”

You mention this, no doubt, said he, as a thing about which you are not satisfied. And it is certainly, in a *moral sense*, but a very gross account of *good* and *evil*, and even in a *physical sense* it will not bear scrutiny.

Though it be true that pain or pleasure do, immediately or ultimately, result from all our actions as moral agents, yet to conclude generally that things are good or evil *only* in reference to pleasure or pain is a very considerable error. For in a moral view things are really good, or really evil, according as they serve or injury, or tend to serve or injure, the true interests of humanity, independently of the pain or pleasure that may accompany them. Pleasure or pain, simply considered, do not *constitute* what is morally good, or evil, in our nature; they are *only concomitants* of our good or evil actions, and more often ultimately than immediately. For the pains of vice and the pleasures of virtue are never so sensibly felt in the pursuit as after the accomplishment.

Many things are morally good and productive of the best moral effects although accompanied with much pain and anxiety. As, when our affections are disordered and misplaced, and our indulged passions are become turbulent and unruly, so that the oppressed voice of nature can hardly be heard in us. Who is not sensible that nature thus overstrained and thrown out of her true and proper course cannot be brought back again to a due temper and just balance without much *painful* attention and perseverance? Things, therefore, are not morally good or evil *only* in reference to pleasure or pain. And as much may be said physically, and with as good reasons, for there are many painful and troublesome operations in physic which are very conducive and even quite necessary to the *good* and health of the body.

-- True, said I. But do you, then, deny that pain is *evil*, and pleasure is *good*, in an abstracted sense?

In these abstruse questions, replied he, we are apt to be puzzled by the abuse of words; and the present difficulty is of that sort. That *pain* is *grievous* there can be no doubt, and if we confine the sense of the word *evil* to signify *grievous* only, then *pain* is *evil*; but when we extend the sense of the word *evil* and make it signify *all evil, moral and physical*, or leave it to signify, indeterminately, what everyone fancies to be *evil*, then to say that pain is *evil* is not true. *Pain* is that *sort of evil* which is *grievous* to the sufferer, but *pain*, as we have shown, both morally and physically, is frequently productive of *very great good* to mankind. So *pleasure*, abstractedly, is *delightful*, which indeed is only saying that pleasure is what it is. But when we say that *pleasure* is *good*, that must depend upon the signification we give to the word *good*. If by *good* we mean only *pleasant*, then it is indisputable, but if by *good* we mean *morally right, just, or reasonable*, or in a physical sense, *conducive to health*, nothing can be more clearly false.

Here we were interrupted by the presence of the ladies who came out to meet us; when our conversation turning upon more agreeable things, our discourses on these subjects ended, and were not renewed during my stay in the country.

FINIS

THREE DIALOGUES CONCERNING LIBERTY.

Libertatem, quam in me requiris, quam ego
neque dimisi unquam, neque dimittam, non
in pertinacia, sed in quadam moderatione
positam putabo.

CICERO, Oratio pro Cn. Pancio.²⁰

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DIALOGUE I

TWO winters have passed since a friend of a studious turn of mind, and fond of retirement, was prevailed on, reluctantly, to pass a few of the winter weeks with me in town.

As with a very good understanding he hath acquired a calmness of mind which enables him to judge of things with great accuracy and disinterestedness, I was frequently delighted by hearing his opinions of those political disputes which take up so much of the time and thoughts of the good people of this great city.

He would say, it is surprising to see so great a number of people as he met with everywhere, so warm and agitated about a subject of which if they were not entirely ignorant, they had certainly given themselves very little trouble to examine into the nature of.

He meant the subject of Liberty.

I thought it but fair that he who laughed at the absurdity and ignorance of others should produce his own opinions on the same subject. I therefore drew him, one evening when we were left together without other company, insensibly to the point I intended, and urged him to give me his thoughts on the subject of Liberty, the nature of which, I said, I had never very nicely considered.

He hesitated a moment, and said he knew I was not one of those who enquire through an impertinent curiosity, or who argue to gain a victory; he would therefore freely give his opinion on the subject, provided I would not fail to interrogate him when he should not sufficiently explain himself; and would not let anything pass unexamined which I might think wrong or not sufficiently clear.

I promised, and he began as follows.

Liberty is a word, taken as it is vulgarly used, of a very indeterminate signification, and, like many others of the moral kind, very few people have *even nearly* the same ideas affixed to it.

But it does not from thence follow that it, as well as others of the same kind, is incapable of definition; but that more care is required to trace out and place it in its true point of view.

Here he stopped –

I begged he would proceed; for that I knew of none more likely than himself to place it in its true point of view.

The doubt of that, he said, was the thing which made him pause; for the research must be deep into the natural constitution of man. Yet he thought the subject much more simple than was commonly imagined; and that the intricacies and uncertainties which some should fancy themselves able to discover in such subjects arose more from prejudice and perversity than from the nature of the things.

He said it appeared to him that the liberty or freedom of man, in an abstracted sense, consisted in a power of doing, or of forbearing to do, any action at his pleasure.

If there were any impediment, either to his doing, or not doing any action, he was in such case not free; he was confined on one side or on the other.

I assented.

It may seem trifling, continued he, to say that man hath not a freedom of choice in things superior to his nature; and that God hath set bounds to the powers of human nature which cannot be exceeded: yet it appears requisite to say so much, because, you know, there have not been wanting many instances of men

whose memories have failed them in that particular.

True, said I, as Alexander when he fancied himself a God.

Aye, said he, and as every one who fancies himself endued with faculties or powers which are either above or below human nature; and they doubtless have been, and are, numerous.

But, he added, the all-wise Creator hath thought fit to circumscribe the powers of Man, and he can act only within a certain sphere: within that sphere the utmost freedom of human actions is necessarily confined: beyond it man can do nothing.

He looked at me.

True, said I, But may a man, then, do all he hath power to do within the circumscribed line? May every capricious fancy be indulged? Or are there reasons why Liberty so extensive should suffer restraint?

There are, answered he, very substantial reasons to be given why the Liberty of man should be restrained within narrower bounds.

But how narrow are those bounds? interrogated I, somewhat sharply; and what should move him to contain himself within them?

It was difficult, he said, to draw precisely the line which ought not to be passed *in all cases*, perhaps almost impossible: yet he thought he could do it well enough to satisfy the mind of any rational man.

I smiled, begged he would go on, and leave the minds of irrational men dissatisfied.

He proceeded thus.

All creatures, every one according to his kind or species, are created subject to laws proper and peculiar to their several natures, and suitable to the ends of the Supreme Being.

— True, said I.

The creature man too, continued he, is created subject to laws equally proper and peculiar to his nature: and the Deity hath not only made him sensibly to feel them, but hath enabled him to understand their reasonableness, and to perceive their beauty and excellence: and in this understanding and perception consists the great difference between man and other creatures. *They*, while left to themselves, seem to be guided by an unerring instinct; but *we* are allowed a larger field, and are capable of *a certain degree* of resistance to *the true and natural impulses or laws of our nature*; which God appears to have allowed to man that he might not be incapable of merit, the merit of freely choosing to obey those true and natural impulses by which God doth point out his will in the soul of man.

I think, said I, I perfectly agree with you; only I do not well understand what you mean when you say “we are capable of *a certain degree* of resistance to the true and natural impulses or laws of our nature.”

I mean, answered he, that we can resist and act contrary to those impulses which would move us to conduct ourselves agreeably to our own true happiness, and to the general good of our kind: but that we can only resist to *a certain degree*; sufficient indeed to torment ourselves and others, and one would think, therefore, sufficient to convince us of our errors; yet the utmost force of human disobedience and perversity is, doubtless, too weak and too much circumscribed to be able to bring about a general destruction of our kind; and surely much too insignificant to disturb the general order and harmony of the universal system.

It would seem then, replied I, (since our power of resistance extends only to the tormenting of ourselves and others) agreeable to the true happiness of individuals, and to the good of all, not to resist,

but to obey, those true and natural impulses or laws you speak of.

Doubtless, rejoined he; and because the true happiness, and the true good of all, and of every individual, require obedience to those laws, therefore the greatest liberty of man ought to be restrained within narrower bounds: within bounds which those laws would prescribe.

I am convinced, said I, that our greatest liberty, or freedom of action, ought not to be exercised in its fullest extent; and it must be acknowledged that restraints are necessary: but what those restraints ought to be, and how far they ought to extend, are points about which mankind seem to be very far from entertaining the same sentiments.

'Tis true, answered he, men do seem to differ widely about those things; but their differences do not arise so much from any natural difficulty of the subject as from the prepossession of established prejudices: such as false religions, unnatural customs, misguided passions, and mercenary contentions. Surrounded by such dark clouds, ignes fatui for their guides, leading various and contrary ways; it is not very surprising that the minds of men do not agree concerning a matter which can only be understood by looking closely into themselves and observing there those laws which God hath impressed on the soul of man. — But to the truth of a proposition, of the existence of a thing, the universal consent of man is not *always* necessary. — However, I do not find that men differ much in material points when they can so far conquer their prejudices as to compare notes with a moderate share of patience: nor, indeed, is it possible they should, since God hath given the same laws to all human nature.

— It seems, replied I, you think those prejudices you speak of (and which doubtless do very strongly influence the minds of many) have cast obscurities around nature through which she is not easily discerned; but could we divest ourselves of those prejudices we should discover much more simplicity in the laws imposed on human nature than is commonly imagined?

— It is just what I think, answered he.

— I believe you were going to explain some of those laws when I interrupted you? said I.

— I was endeavoring to collect my thoughts for that purpose, answered he: and I think we had agreed that our greatest liberty ought to be restrained within bounds which the true laws of nature would prescribe, because the true happiness and good of all required such restraint?

— I answered, we had: and how I want to know what those laws are which may be deemed just restraints on our more extensive liberty; and which it is the true happiness of all to submit to.

— I will endeavor to satisfy you, said he, as well as I can: to do which it will be necessary to take the matter somewhat deeply, as I said before, and to carry our researches into the fundamental principles of human nature: yet I do not mean to enter into all the minute distinctions of some refined moral writers, not only because they would be unnecessary to our present purpose, but because I know you are not unacquainted with them.

— I looked consent, and he went on as follows:

It having been ordained by the Great Creator that the continuation of the human kind should be preserved by generation, and that we should ascend from the lowest degrees of weakness and ignorance, by a very slow and gradual progression, to corporeal strength and a reasonable mind, he hath accordingly endued us with affections and passions (or laws) suitable and subservient to these ends.

— Certainly.—

The passion between the sexes, and the consequent affection toward the offspring, and all the other affections which take their rise from family, have their foundations in human nature, and are evidently intended to continue the being of the kind, and to secure the nurture and support of those who would be

unable to nourish and support themselves.

— True, said I. —

And do not these laws, interrogated he, act upon us with an almost invincible force; as, indeed, the importance of their end and the great difficulties in progress to that end require they should?

— They do indeed, answered I; for nothing seems so much to agitate the human frame as the sense we have of these laws: nothing throws us into so great irregularities as the violation of them. They are the great sources from when we derive all that is pathetic, all that is most affecting and most interesting to human nature.

— Then, said he, I may infer that you will not dispute the authority which all those tender affinities of husband and wife, of parent and child, of brother and sister, and other more distant relatives ought to have over our conduct?

— By all means, replied I.

— So that the moral obligations, continued he, which must naturally arise from those tender affinities, we may justly call *laws*; which the being of our kind, and the concord and stability of families, require that men should submit to?

— I think so, answered I.

— May we not conclude then, demanded he, that the liberty of man ought to suffer such restraints as *these laws* would put on it; and that he can have no just pretense to exercise any liberty contrary to these laws?

— Doubtless, answered I.

— Here then, said he, we see arise many restraints on liberty, which moralists have particularized, and which are so easy to understand that few can be ignorant of them. But these are not all; there are many more, which, in a general way, I will endeavor to point out.

— I desired him to go on.

— All those kind propensities, continued he, which are commonly understood by the words humanity, generosity, benevolence, etc.; why may we not ball them *true and natural laws* of our nature?

— I see no objection, said I.

— In contradistinction, continued he, to inhumanity, selfishness, and malevolence, which are rightly called *unnatural*, as having tendencies contrary and inimical to human nature?

The Deity has so strongly impressed them on the sould of man, and so clearly distinguished them as the true guides of human actions, by the pleasure they yield to the practicer, the love and admiration they draw from men, and the great utility of such virtues to the world, that the man's mind must be strangely perverted from its natural bent who is not sensible of such laws in his soul. For though bad customs, bad education, and unnatural manners may very much deface the original impressions which God hath stamped on the human soul, yet those impressions can never be entirely destroyed as long as man continues subject to the present state of humanity.

— Indeed I think so, said I.

— We can indeed, continued he, render ourselves insensible of a thousand more refined and pleasing emotions of the soul, but not without exchanging them for painful ones. For nature seems constant in this precept; *Obey my laws, they lead to pleasure, or suffer the pains of disobedience*. It is

impossible to extirpate them; it is impossible to oppose them without pain; it is impossible to be indifferent. They are a principal part of our nature, and nothing can destroy their force but death.

— I cannot dissent from you, said I.

— It will then, said he, be unnecessary to our present purpose to moralize more particularly. And we may be permitted to make this inference – That, as obedience to these laws conduces to the good and felicity of every individual and of mankind in general; and as disobedience has a contrary effect; it is but just and reasonable that the liberty of man should suffer such restraints as may be necessary to prevent him from offending against them.

— I am of the same opinion, said I.

— Thus then, said he, we have, in a general way, drawn the outlines of those laws of human nature which it has pleased the Creator to impose on it, for ends which, we have agreed, are entirely for the advantage and felicity of the creature. Nor do we deem it unjust to restrain the liberty of man when he would transgress these laws.

— True, said I, But who shall restrain his liberty? Who shall enforce obedience? Why may he not trample on the laws of his nature and suffer *the pains of disobedience* without being compelled to obey, since nature, it seems, only points out the felicity in obedience, and misery in disobedience, but leaves man to choose?

— Your question, replied he, would be unanswerable if there were but one man on earth at a time; or if men were so situated that they had not the least necessary connection or commerce with each other. But the fact being quite contrary, as we have seen in the preceding part of our discourse, and men being, by the very nature of their existence, necessarily interested in and connected with one another, they thereby acquire a just right to control the actions of each other, so far, at least, as to prevent injury to themselves. But the principal foundation of right in men to enforce obedience on each other, to the true laws of their nature, is derived from their *natural equality*.

“How,” interrogated I, “do you then maintain that levelling principle, that men are naturally equal, when there are natural inequalities among them so very manifest?”

— I do, answered he: but I fancy the ideas which you and I have affixed to the word *equality*, in this instance, are very different. What mine are, with your permission, I will endeavor to explain in as few words as possible.

— I begged he would, and he proceeded thus:

All creatures of the same kind are created under laws peculiar to their kind. All men are of the same kind, and are doubtless created under laws peculiar to *their* kind: and in this respect it is that all men are certainly equal.

— So it appears to me, said I. But are the great differences in the faculties and abilities of men no objection against this equality?

— Not at all, answered he. The possession of great bodily strength, for instance, gives a man no just title to use that strength mischievously and against the laws of humanity: he may possess some of, or all, the faculties of the body in greater perfection than other men: but these faculties are given him subjected to the same natural laws which are common to all men: nor can he by superior force transgress the laws common to his kind by nature, without injustice. He may bear greater burdens, run swifter, show more agility in action, etc., and all the superior advantages resulting from these faculties *justly used*, he hath a right to, but no other.

— Your reasoning seems just, said I. But what say you to superior mental powers? Have they no

better claim than those of the body?

— In this case, answered he, they appear to me to have less. Superior understanding, far from allowing a man to dispense with the laws of human nature, more strictly binds him to a nice observance of them. He is unpardonable if he do no more than common men in practicing and promoting a due obedience to them. Great genius enables him to be more thoroughly convinced of the truth and justice of these laws. He perceives more, understands more, than inferior minds: Can we, from thence, infer he hath a right to transgress these laws which the inferior have not? Or, if the inferior transgress, is he not more pardonable than the superior genius for that very reason, because he is inferior?

— I cannot but confess it, said I.

— No man then, continued he, possessing any quality or property of the human nature in a superior degree can from thence, with the least show of reason, suppose himself not justly bound by the same laws of his nature by which all men are bound: for all degrees of human qualities or properties, from the least to the greatest without exception, are incontestably given by God under the very same natural laws which are common to the human kind. And until a man demonstrate that he is created under laws peculiar to himself, and not those known and felt by other men (which, by the way, would be to prove himself not a man, but some other creature) there cannot be the least reason to suppose him exempted from subjection to those laws which are common to the human nature.

— By no means, said I.

— We have, then, said he, not only discovered that the liberty of man ought to be restrained by the laws peculiar to his nature, but that all men are by nature equally subjected to these laws.

— So it seems, returned I.

I will, continued he, with our leave, say somewhat more of the nature and effects of this equality.

— I am all attention, said I.

He proceeded thus. If a man offend in such a manner against the laws of human nature that the ill effects be *absolutely* confined to his own person, (which is, strictly speaking, hardly possible) and be no way detrimental to others; he does not seem to be accountable to any but to God and himself. But for the least transgression which injures, or tends to injure, his equals and fellow-creatures, he is accountable to them, as well as to his Maker. Men, being injured, or having *just* cause to fear injury, and *being equal*, have *therefore* an indisputable right to use all reasonable means of prevention and correction, regulating their conduct by the laws of their nature, since, otherwise, that just equality of the human kind could never be, in any tolerable degree, preserved.

Nor can it be conceived by what right any man, or number of men, could correct the wrong or unjust accusations of another, if this natural equality had no existence. Ever one would have reason to think he might do anything he could do, without regard to others; as containing in himself specific qualities which made the law of his nature peculiar to himself, and not the same as those which are common to all men. But as no man is a species of himself, but only a part of a species, he cannot have laws peculiar to himself, but must be subjected to those which are common to all of his species. It will not be understood, continued he, that equality in point of property is intended, for that is not only impossible in the natural course of things, but neither reasonable or just. The laws of our nature are not at all infringed by a *just use* of the advantages which superior wisdom, or superior industry, gives one man over another. On the contrary, it would be great injustice and great discouragement to all merit to take from them those advantages and emoluments which they many naturally acquire *without breach of the laws of human nature*.

— Here he paused, seeming to expect some reply.

— I am glad, said I, to find myself by your last observations relieved from the dread I had of the leveling principles which at first I thought would have been the consequence of this natural equality. But now I think I clearly understand you, nor do I know any rational objection to equality thus explained. Yet I do not quite comprehend how the right which men exercise over each other of punishing and correcting transgressions against the laws of their nature is derived from their natural equality. I thought justice gave them that right?

—Tis true, answered he, justice does give them that right. But be pleased to observe that from *equality*, understood as we have explained it, the *notion of justice* takes its rise among men; and the laws of their nature, which equally bind all men, are the principles by which the administration of it should be regulated. An appeal to justice is nothing but an appeal to those natural laws by which the just equality of mankind is to be preserved; and the self-partiality of parties concerned requires that the determination should be left to uninterested judges.

— The notion of justice hath no existence where an equality in nature is not understood.

— Take away that equality in nature (as among creatures of different species) justice is no more seen, nor the claim of justice heard. The superior species (if capable of reason) may exhibit benevolence, but justice is quite out of the question. Nor can a creature of one species administer justice to creatures of a different species, because he cannot be sufficiently sensible of the laws of a different species by which his judgments should be regulated. So that every species of creatures, acting conformably to the laws of its nature, although it may be injurious to other species, is not deemed unjust on that account. No man, for instance, complains of injustice on account of any injurious actions done against himself by beings which he does not believe to be subject to those natural laws which men are subjected to. If a lion devour a man, he is not understood to be unjust; we suppose the creature to act only in conformity to the laws of his nature. If inundations destroy, the sun burn, the frost chill, or the winds carry away, no injustice is attributed to these elements; nor could be, supposing them to be intelligent beings, *actuated by the true laws of their natures*, any more than to the lion who was actuated by the laws of his nature. Nor do we conceive that, in the uses which we make of other creatures, so far at least as our nature seems to require, we do them any injustice. Justice or injustice, then, do not appear to be concerned in the actions of superior natures acting according to their true laws on inferior natures, or vice versa.

— I think I am convinced, said I, only I fear the attribute of justice which we give to the Deity may be called in question by what you say of the incapacity of a superior species to exercise justice over an inferior. May it not?

— Not at all, answered he, for the Deity bears no similitude to created beings in that respect. He is the Creator of all beings, and of the laws of all beings, and must therefore be, without controversy, a most perfect judge of the laws, and of the nature, of all the creatures in the universe, which cannot be said of any created beings.

— Your answer, said I, seems satisfactory, yet now another doubt arises. You have said “The notion of justice hath no existence where an equality of nature is not understood.” Now what equality in nature is there between God and man? Or doth not the notion of justice exist between them?

— This difficulty, answered he, is not so great as first it may appear. The equality which is the foundation of justice between God and man is not to be sought for in the nature of God and the nature of man, for there the difference is infinite and beyond all comprehension. But it is to be sought for, and will be found, in the laws which God has given to human nature and the powers and faculties of man, which he has so nicely and justly proportioned to each other that perhaps there cannot in nature be found a more exact equality. Nor will it, I think, be disputed that the Deity is so just in the laws he has given to every species of creatures as to proportion the faculties of the creatures to their laws, and that more is not expected than is adequate to the faculties any creature may possess. Thus we see that the laws of human

nature, which are *equally* binding on all men, are not only the rule or measure of justice between man and man, but these same laws are also the rule which the God of all wisdom hath been pleased to ordain between man and Himself.

— Your reasoning seems just, said I. But what do you say to a state of future retribution?

— I say, answered he (in few words) that if it shall be found that men be not sufficiently rewarded by the pleasures of obedience, nor enough punished by the pains of disobedience, in this life, there can be no doubt but that in some future existence perfect justice will take place, for the Supreme Judge is almighty and of unerring wisdom and infinite goodness.

— You must be right, said I.

We will therefore conclude, if you please, continued he, that from the equality of mankind, that is, from the equal subjection of all men to the same laws of their nature, they derive a right equally to exact obedience of one another: and that in the practice of a *perfectly equal* obedience, the idea of *perfect justice* consists; and in the enforcing of equal obedience the exercise of justice consists. I will only add one observation more on this head, which is that had the human species, like other animals, been governed by an instinct which would have kept them true to their natural laws, justice had never been heard of among men.

— Well then, said I, supposing us to be agreed on this point?

— Why then, answered he, we have agreed in all points thus far.

— And, I think, from what has been said, we may be able to draw, with some degree of precision, the line by which the liberty of human actions ought to be circumscribed:

First: No man can *justly* violate or transgress those laws which are necessary to the propagation, continuation, and support of our species, with the greatest advantage possible.

Secondly: No man can *justly* violate the laws of humanity, or all those propensities which would prompt us to a benevolent, humane, and reasonable treatment of each other.

Thirdly: No man can *justly* transgress those bounds which justice, regulated by the laws of human nature, doth determine to be the true measures of the rights of mankind to the possession of property of any sort whatsoever.

Fourthly, and lastly: That the nearer men approach to a perfect obedience of all to those laws, the nearer they will approach to that *just natural equality*, and that *just liberty*, which would result from the equal subjection of all men to the same natural laws: and that the idea of perfect human liberty is a perfect and exact obedience of all to those laws.

— So it appears to me, said I.

— And so, replied he, (rising to go to rest) we find nature is no less an enemy to *licentiousness* than she is to *tyranny*.

— And thus ended our first conversation.

DIALOGUE II

The next evening, being left rather early by some company who had spent the day with us, we drew our chairs toward the fire-side. After some light conversation, I took an opportunity, on the mention of something political, to introduce a few observations on the subject of the preceding evening, which produced nearly what follows.

Some things, said I, which all writers on political subjects speak very much of, were by us unnoticed yesterday evening: Such as, *the state of nature, the rise of civil government, a compact, religion, etc.*, in all which things the liberty of mankind is thought to be very much concerned, and doubtless with abundant reason. May I demand some explanation concerning these things?

— By all means, answered he, I shall be very glad to oblige you with any thing in my power.

— After a short pause, he said: You well know how much has been said and written on these subjects by very able men, for which reason you will not expect me to say a great deal. And I shall esteem myself fortunate if, by pursuing the simplicity of my former reasoning, I may happily strike out something new in these matters; or render what in them has been made difficult and tedious more obvious and less tiresome.

— I think then, continued he, a tolerable notion of the state of nature may be formed from what has already been said in our first conversation; for in that was contained a description of the *state of nature* in its earliest period. And you know that writers usually choose to distinguish the earliest period as that in which they conceive man to be in *the state of nature*.

As for those who are so very curious in their researches concerning the *state of nature* as to consider man as a being abstracted from society, and naturally unsociable, as an individual totally unconnected with his fellow creatures, we may leave them to the enjoyment of their own speculations; which, notwithstanding the discovery of a *wild boy or two*²¹, are entirely vain and chimerical, because men never have, *naturally*, existed in such a state at any time whatever.

— I nodded assent.

When, continued he, we discourse of men as being in *the state of nature*, to distinguish their manner of existence before entering into any formal government, it is a phrase which may serve very well for that purpose. But if we conceive (and it is generally so conceived) that as soon as men submit themselves to government they are no longer in *their natural state*, it is a very great mistake. — It is true, they have varied the state they were in before their submission to government, but that variation does not induce an annihilation of the laws of nature; or, in other words, it does not make void *the state of nature*, considered as a state in which men lived obedient to the true laws of nature, not enforced by political government. It is the injurious part of *the state of nature*, (which arises from the want of some certain and sufficient power to enforce an equal and due obedience to the laws of nature) that men mean to get rid of by submission to political government.

All the other parts of *the state of nature* they mean to preserve by that very submission.

So that when men enter into political government (if upon right principles) they are as much in *the state of nature* as they were before they entered, with this difference only: that by the force of a *good government*, the laws of their nature will be preserved in much greater purity than they could be in the state of nature for the want of that force. So much for *the state of nature* considered in this particular light.

But for my part, I cannot but think it a very unphilosophical distinction to suppose men to be *out of a*

state of nature when they submit themselves to government; or indeed ever to suppose them to be out of their natural state at all, *unless when they violate the true laws of their nature*; and that we know they frequently do under government as well as before their submission to government.

Now if the violation of the true laws of nature do (as being an anti-natural thing) put men into an *unnatural state*, and if to correct and reform such violations be to reduce men to their *natural state* again, and if that can only be effectually done by the help of *good* government, must we not conclude that the true end of government is to keep men in their natural state? And that men under such government are really much more in a natural state than they were when under no government at all?

— Your reasoning seems just, answered I.

It has ever appeared strange to me, continued he, to hear men talk of man as being *in the state of nature*, or *not in the state of nature*, in the sense usually affixed to these phrases. Much ambiguity would have been avoided if the words, “Man *in his natural state*, or *not in his natural state*,” had been employed. When any other species of animals is made a subject of inquiry, we always treat of it as being in its *natural state*. And we very justly determine that to be *the natural state* of any species of creatures which is found consonant to the true laws of its nature, and as far as the motives or actions of any creature be dissonant to the same laws (by whatever means such dissonance arise) so far must they be deemed unnatural, and the creature out of its natural state.

Now were we to make man a subject of inquiry on the same ground, I apprehend much perplexity would be avoided, and we should be much more likely to understand his *true natural state*.

— But, interrogated I, would you have us treat of man as we do of other animals, whose nature and faculties are so widely different?

— Why not? answered he. Are not the nature and faculties of every species of creatures widely different? Yet we find an analogy in their natures, and treat of them all in nearly the same method. But what I have to say, continued he, will be short and general; nothing to the disadvantage of man, and perhaps something satisfactory to you.

Suppose, then, we lay it down as a maxim that man, like other animals, is always in his *natural state* when his motives and actions are consonant to the true laws of his nature, and vice versa.

— I see no objection, said I.

— If that be allowed, replied he, then whether we consider him in the most savage and uncultivated state, or in the most refined and polished, or in any state between the two, we shall always find him in his *natural state*, when his conduct is conformable to the true laws of his nature.

— It seems so, said I.

And his conduct, I presume, said he, will be so found more generally under *good* government than in any other period of his progress.

— It is probable, said I.

— But we are so used, added he, to consider the rudest state of our existence as more truly our natural state, that, I fear, I shall with some difficulty find credit for a different opinion. But let us endeavor at a farther explanation, said he. Man in his rudest state bears a nearer resemblance to other animals; other animals, we allow, are kept in their natural state by laws which act *instinctively* upon them, and partake very little, if at all, of the rational faculty; so that we think ourselves certain that they are true to the laws of their nature. And thus making them a measure for man, we suppose him to be more truly in his *natural state* the nearer he approaches to the condition of other animals, and that may be true, as far as concerns his animal functions *merely*. But it ought to be considered that the peculiar and distinguishing

faculties of the human mind, which seem to infer a power of judging of the propriety of human actions, and a power of choosing or refusing to obey the dictates of nature, make a very considerable difference between the nature of man and of other creatures, and prove him to be intended for another and much higher sphere of action. I see no cause therefore to conclude that the rudest and least cultivated is more properly the natural state of man on account of its approximation to the condition of brutes; but rather the contrary.

There is no doubt indeed, as I said before, that man in the animal or instinctive part of his nature hath a great similarity to other creatures. But to pass away a life in the exercise of the animal faculties only would hardly be deemed natural in the human creature: yet such nearly is the savage state. Now what other conclusion can be justly drawn from all this but that man in a savage or uncultivated state is *in the lowest and least improved state of human nature; and in that which approaches the nearest to the brute creation?*

— No other, I think, answered I.

— It is, no doubt, continued he, the proper place to commence at in the history of human nature; and that is the only use that ought to have been made of it. But to suppose men to be *out of their natural state* as soon as they begin to form plans of government, and to invent the useful and ornamental arts of life, is as irrational as to suppose ants out of their natural state when they store up their hoards against winter, or bees when they construct combs for their honey.

A creature formed as man is, with such faculties, senses, and mental powers, is *by nature* moved, according as particular circumstances arise, to form and to submit himself to political institutions; and to invent and cultivate arts useful and ornamental to life and necessary to his well-being. This indeed is done in a progressive way, from a state of barbarity to a state of refinement and elegance. He seldom continues long in any certain state. Sometimes his progress in improvement is quick, sometimes very slow, because it much depends on favorable circumstances and on the auspicious situation of things. In the least cultivated, or savage period of his existence, he is a very necessitous creature, and his time and faculties must be almost entirely engrossed in providing for such wants as are too pressing to be neglected. In such a state he can have but little leisure for contemplation and reflection, and from the rudeness of things about him, his ideas must be few, and his views short and confined.

In his progress toward a more improved state, his urgent wants becoming more easily provided for, and finding more time for the exercise of his mind, he proceeds on, step by step, to the discovery of all the arts and sciences subservient either to the utility or ornament of life, until at length he arrive at the most refined and polished state, from which it has been the usual course of things to decline again into barbarity.

Now were we inclined to determine upon any one period of this progress as more properly the *natural state* of man than any other, where must we fix?

— To say particularly seems difficult, answered I.

— Must it not be just at that period, interrogated he, when his conduct is most conformable to the true laws of his nature?

— It must, answered I.

— Perhaps, continued he, that may not be in the most refined state, and I think we are sure it is not in the most rude; but at whatever intermediate period it may be judged to exist, in all stages above or below that period, man will be more or less *in his natural state*, according as he approaches to, or recedes from, this conformity to the laws of his nature.

And this is what I think concerning *the natural state of man*.

— Remove one difficulty for me, said I, and we perfectly agree. Government, you know, is esteemed a work of *art*: now can men be said to live in their *natural state* when their conduct is regulated by a work of *art*?

— They may, answered he: for if we inquire into the just principles of *that work of art*, we shall find them to be the true laws of human nature, which ought to regulate not only the actions of men, but the construction and conduct of *that work of art* itself. But you will be pleased to observe, added he, that it would be but of little moment here to mark out precisely the line which separates the operations of instinctive nature from the works of human skill: because, in the case before us, the inquiry is concerning the *natural state of man*, which consisting, as we have agreed, in his obedience to the laws of his nature, it matters not whether this obedience be effectuated by instinctive nature simply (though we are pretty sure it is not) or by the force of *that* and art united.

And here I must beg leave to take notice, continued he, that when the word *art* is used to signify something not founded in the *nature* of man, or as something that is not the *natural* result of the nature, constitution, and faculties of man, it is certainly misused.

— Do you mean, demanded I, to say that art is natural to man?

— I do, answered he.

— But it not that a contradiction in terms, interrogated I?

— It may appear so according to the vulgar sense of those terms, replied he, but I believe it is no contradiction in the nature of things, for if it were, it certainly had never existed. It may be very proper on some occasions, continued he, to distinguish the operations of general or instinctive nature from the works of human skill; which, you know, has been done by Mr. Harris, as he does every thing, which admirable perspicuity in his Treatise on Art. But nevertheless it is impossible to consider the wants and desires of man, and the nature, extent, and capacity of the human mind, and not to perceive that the *natural result* must be *art*.

— So indeed it seems, said I.

— *Art* must therefore, in this sense, be *natural* to man, concluded he.

On this head I am satisfied, said I.

Well then, said he, I hope we shall not find so much difficulty in accounting for the origin of civil government. And he continued thus:

Opinions, you know, have been advanced concerning the first formation of political societies no less extravagant than unnatural and contrary to probability: As if the rise of government, in the course of things, were not as *natural* as the existence of the primary principles of human nature. Nay some²² would make us believe that such principles had no existence at all till human laws were invented to give them one. And they find it very difficult to conceive how men could associate and form political societies without a great deal of previous formality. But if the principles of human nature have existed at all times, and in all men (and to believe otherwise must surely be very unphilosophical) is it not easy to perceive that the passion which impels us to the propagation of our species, together with its consequent affections – that the necessitous state of men without reciprocal assistance; that the mutual strength and security which the union of numbers gives to a body of men; and the attracting pleasures of conversation and sociability – do all severally and unitedly draw men, necessarily, into society?

— I looked assent.

— Why may we not believe then, continued he, that a small number of men, in state of pure simplicity, might live amicably together under the sole influence of the laws of their nature, at least for

some time, and that small irregularities might be corrected by shame, by fear, and by reproof?

— I see no objection, said I.

— Greater crimes, added he, from the dread all men would have of their extending to themselves, would naturally excite them to think of the means of prevention. They would doubtless congregate and consult for the general safety, and in their defense would form rules, institutes, or civil laws, by the energy of which they might hope to secure themselves from such enormities in the future. As crimes increased, so would civil institutes, and so a body politic would be as naturally produced as any other effect in nature. This I take to be a true, though but a short account of the rise of civil government.

Though short, said I, it comprehends much, and seems very probable. But is it not hard to conceive how, from so simple an origin, so great a diversity of governments could arise?

— The difficulty of accounting for so great a diversity with precision may be very great, replied he. The impenetrable obscurity in which the origin and earlier times of nations are clouded are the causes of this difficulty. But were the histories of nations exact accounts of the progress of a people from their earliest state upward, and were they written in a circumstantial and philosophical manner, I think from what we know by our own experience, when we thoroughly understand the motives of men's actions, there is but little reason to doubt that a chain of causes and events would be discovered which would sufficiently account for all the varieties which have appeared in political governments.

But great and striking actions and events alone are generally the subject of history, and all the intermediate links which should chain those great events together are slightly passed over or entirely unnoticed. Nay, even the motives and causes which produced the great events themselves are generally far from being thoroughly understood. And indeed it happens, unfortunately for history, that a nation is so complex a body, and every public action is the product of so many and various motives, views, and interests, that the historian must be very happy in his conjectures who does not frequently err in his endeavors to explain them. And for this cause it is that we find but few histories worth the reading, except those in which the writers themselves have been considerable actors.

—I believe your observations are just, said I, and thus far I am satisfied. But what do you say to an *original compact*, so much talked of by political writers?

— I say, answered he, after a short pause, by continuing our inquiries on the same principles on which we have hitherto proceeded we shall probably find that subject much less difficult, and more clear than it is generally found in the usual way of treating it.

— I begged he would proceed in his own way, and he began thus:

Granting the existence of a formal or an implied compact (for the existence of both have been denied) in ever state, what may one naturally suppose to be the foundation and object of such a compact?

—I cannot readily say, answered I.

— I should think, said he, the *object* must be general good or happiness, and, if so, the *foundation* must be on justice.

— It seems so, said I.

— It cannot otherwise, replied he, be a fair compact: for if the interest and advantage of one, or a few only, be aimed at and obtained to the oppression of the rest, it is nothing less than deceiving and over-reaching the oppressed part; and therefore such a compact must be, in its nature, void.

—True, said I.

—There can then, continued he, be no *just* political compact made contrary to the true principles of human nature, because if the foundation of such compact must be on *justice*, the determinations of *justice* must be regulated by these principles, as was shown in our first conversation. Men, from a sense of the excellence of these principles, being moved with a desire of preserving them as pure as possible, first formed civil polities, not to thwart and contradict, but to confirm and strengthen them. No compact can, therefore, be supposed of any force or validity which would oblige men in any manner not consistent with these principles. And thus we find the just measure of every formal or implied political compact to be the true principles or laws of human nature.

— It must be so, said I.

— To assert then, said he, the validity of any political compact, either formal or implied, to oblige men to submit to laws enacted by any authority whatsoever, any longer than such laws be conformable to, or corroborative of, the true principles of human nature, must be a false assertion, and inimical to the just liberties of mankind.

— Your conclusion seems just, said I. Yet in common life, we do not think a contract void and of no force on account of its being, on one side, a foolish or even an injurious bargain.

—The generality do not, replied he, yet that they do not think so does not arise from any conviction that such a contract can possibly be just, but because it is found necessary to prevent eternal litigations and endless uncertainty, to draw a line somewhere that there may be some rule, some standing measure in these matters. Nevertheless, when cases of extraordinary folly or iniquity occur, the obligation of a contract is frequently made void. But the case of a political compact, which comprehends the interests of whole nations, and in which the natural enjoyments and prosperity of a people and their posterity are concerned, must be understood in the most liberal sense, utterly devoid of all those mean artifices which are usually employed in what is called making a *good bargain*. For there is a wide difference between private contracts and this great public one.

But it has been usual, continued he, to view this matter in another light, in which it is presumed that a people can stipulate away the rights and privileges of their nature in favor of their prince, or rulers. In this view of an original compact the wisdom of the prince, or of the rulers, will be thought great in proportion as the compact shall be explained in favor of the establishment of their own power and authority, as a kind of rightful property which they hold independent of the people.

— It is frequently so understood, said I.

— So that by having usurped an authority, continued he, or acquired it by any other more artful means, the use they would make of a compact seems to be only that of confirming, augmenting, or peradventure of regulating that authority so acquired, but which the people are never supposed to have any right to abolish, even if it should be judged absolutely necessary for the general welfare of the community.

— Such doctrines have been advanced, said I.

— But surely, said he, to talk of a compact on such a foundation as this must be esteemed an impudent mockery of the common sense of mankind. We will therefore endeavor farther to explain the nature of this political compact, and to fix it in its *true* point of view.

— I begged he would, and he proceeded thus.

When men first began to disregard the impulses or laws of their nature, and their irregularities and vices pointed out the necessity of political institutions, at the commencement of those institutions the first probable appearances of a compact are discovered. But here we do not perceive any appearance of a compact between parties whose rights, interests, or views are distinct or opposite: it is rather a general

union or agreement of a society of men in defense of the rights of human nature. It is an agreement to submit to such institutes, laws, and regulations as may be deemed adequate to the purposes of reducing men to, and of retaining them in, a proper subjection to the laws of their nature: and the obligations of this agreement, to be just, must be equal on every member of society. Will the advocates for unjust authority, interrogated he, be able to derive much advantage from a compact of this sort?

—Not much, answered I.

But, continued he, it has been affirmed that when men enter into a political society they make a formal, or a tacit, surrender of their natural rights to that society; and as it were, compact or agree so to do. The drift and tendency of this affirmation is to establish the authority of all ruling powers, just or unjust, and to debase and enslave mankind. But no maxim was ever more false, or less founded in nature. Men neither do, nor can mean, by entering into government, to give up any of their essential natural rights: they mean, by the aid of government, to maintain and ensure them. They do not mean to subjugate themselves to the will of tyrannical masters, nor even to political laws, when dissonant and repugnant to the principles of their nature. Their intention, as well as the true end of government, is quite the contrary. For if men had paid a punctual obedience to the laws of their nature, the instituting of civil laws, and consequently of civil magistrates, would have been quite unnecessary. Civil laws were instituted to enforce obedience to the true laws of human nature. Therefore civil laws which contradict or are repugnant to the true laws of human nature are not *in conscience* binding. And all civil laws, all civil magistracies, ought to be formed, altered, corrected, confirmed, or abolished according as they agree with, or are repugnant to, the true laws of human nature.

But were we to grant that under government (through the defectiveness of human policy) some of our natural rights must necessarily be waived, in compliance with a general opinion of its being advantageous to the community at large, it must also be allowed, at the same time, that, in justice, no part of the rights of nature should be given up by any one which ought not to be given up by every member of the same community. The *just equality* of man demands so much. But what are the principal natural rights supposed to be given up in civil society? Are they not the rights of *judging in our own cause, and of avenging our own injuries*?

— They are, said I.

—And these, continued he, we surrender to the state, to be placed in the hands of proper magistrates. But if we consider the tendencies of these rights, as they are called, they will be found so very injurious and unjust, and so inimical to humanity, that it will be hard to allow them the appellation of *natural rights* at all. They are powers necessarily assumed and exercised when the condition of mankind proves so miserable as to have no better way of administering justice. But they are so evidently wrong, so clearly subversive of justice, that no man in his senses would attempt to justify the use of them, *as rights*, but in cases of irresistible necessity.

— Here he paused.

— I assented.

— Well then, he said, should it be still insisted on that men, on entering into government, do agree to surrender up part (or the whole, as some blindly contend) or their natural rights, let it never be forgotten that such agreement cannot be obligatory on *any* one, unless it extend to *every* one, under the same government. But let us, said he, digress no farther, but pursue our subject a little more closely.

I think we had found the first appearance of a compact to be at the commencement of civil society, and that the compact then was not between parties whose interests were opposite or essentially different, but were one and the same, and united and centered in one point, which was *the defense of their natural rights*.

— We had, said I.

— To proceed then, said he.

When such civil laws as may be judged adequate to such defense are agreed on, the manner of putting them into execution becomes the next object of consideration, and produces *another sort of compact*, which is entirely relative to the execution. And hence originate all the various powers and authorities of the magistracy. Let us examine the true nature of the compact in this place, which does indeed not only contain what has generally been understood by a political compact, but it comprehends all that is most important in civil liberty.

— I desired him to go on.

The laws then, continued he, being agreed on, a mode of executing them must necessarily be determined on; and the various powers of magistracy are found requisite for that purpose. We will therefore suppose them to be ordained and established, and their several powers exercised and enforced.

— Very well, said I.

— Now what, demanded he, must we understand the compact to have been between the people and the magistrates in this case? Could it be that the people surrendered themselves to be governed at the discretion of the magistrates, or were the magistrates chosen simply to execute the determinations of the people?

— Undoubtedly the latter, answered I.

It must be so, replied he, for the power of the magistracy in itself is nothing; that force which arises from the general concurrence and consent of the people is absolutely necessary to give it stability. The people, therefore, compact or agree to exert that force (which is always ultimately supreme) in support of the power of their magistrates: And the magistrates agree to exercise their power in the modes prescribed and for the ends proposed by the people. And this seems to me to be the only just and natural purpose of such a compact.

— So it appears to me, said I.

But, continued he, (*humanum est errare*) magistrates long habituated to power not sufficiently controlled are apt to claim such power as their right: And a people long habituated to obedience, without frequent exertions of their supremacy by new delegations of power are apt to forget their own rights. These bad habits, however, cannot annihilate the just rights of mankind. They only discovery to us that frequent assertions of them are very necessary, and that the memories of both magistrates and people want perpetual refreshing on those important points.

The compact then, as explained above, does not give the magistrates any power independent of the people, or independent of the ends proposed by the people to be accomplished by that power. It does not fix them as lords and masters of the people; it only constitutes them executors of the laws or determinations of the people, to which they, with the whole community, are equally subject. Peculiar privileges often claimed by, and sometimes thought necessary to magistracy, are hardly ever justifiable, and never at all but temporarily.

The people, therefore, always retain in themselves as an inherent and unalienable property the right of delegating power to their magistrates, and consequently the right of prescribing the particular modes of exercising such power, and also of recalling that power whenever it may be found necessary so to do; that is, whenever it shall be exercised contrary to the ends proposed, or even when it shall have been exercised strictly according to the ends proposed, and proves not adequate or not satisfactory. For every political institution ought to be considered only as making an experiment, and its permanency ought to depend

entire on its efficiency or non-efficiency for the purposes intended, and not at all on the meritorious conduct of the executive instrument, the magistrate. So that in this view of a compact we do not see the least appearance of a surrender of their natural rights by the people, nor any just foundation for a retention of their authority by the magistrates against the consent of the people. The compact, strictly speaking, on the part of the people extends only to the instructing of the magistrates with certain portions of power, which are to be exercised in certain modes with a view to attain ends which may be deemed beneficial to the community at large, and to support the magistrates in the execution: and the magistrates, on their part, are bound to observe the modes, and to pursue the ends, truly and faithfully.

But, interrogated I, suppose they do not observe the modes and pursue the ends truly?

— If they do not, answered he, they break the compact, and consequently forfeit their authority; may be justly displaced by the people, and their power so disposed of as may be thought most advantageous to the community.

— But what if they do observe the compact strictly, demanded I?

— If they do, replied he, although they will then do no more than was agreed on, nor than they ought as a duty; yet strict integrity being a very estimable quality, they will deserve all the rewards and all the honors due to so meritorious a conduct.

— Perhaps, said I, smiling, you may think it enough to have *deserved well* of the republic. But I hope you will acknowledge that, as long as the magistrates shall *strictly* observe the compact, they will have *some* right to retain and exercise the powers delegated to them, especially if the powers be such as are deemed permanent in the state?

— By no means, replied he. As long as they observe the compact (although the powers they exercise be deemed permanent in the state) the only just conclusion we can draw is that they exercise their power legally, and according to the intent for which it was delegated to them: but that cannot give them the least claim to a right to a perpetual exercise of that power independent of the people from whom it was received, and from whom alone all just power is derived. In short, continued he, somewhat enthusiastically, the just rights of human nature, founded on the divine principles which the all-wise Creator hath originally impressed on the human species, are utterly unalienable *by any means whatsoever!* No rights of princes, no powers of magistracy, no force of laws, no delusive compacts, grants, or charters, can ever entitle any part of mankind to deprive their fellow-creatures of these natural rights! All the nations upon earth (those in the most slavish, as well as those in the most free state) possess an innate, inherent, and indisputable right, to assert their *liberty* at all times! Nor can anything be more glorious than the attempt, founded on just principles, even if it fail: for then we shall feel the sublime satisfaction of being actuated by those divine principles which, from their native truth and beauty, as well as from our inward sense of them, we know to be the laws of God!

— Thus ended our second dialogue.

DIALOGUE III

The succeeding evening we renewed our subject, and after making some cursory observations on what had been said before –

May I now request your opinion on a very grave subject, said I, the subject of religion; I mean, so far, at least, as *liberty* may appear to be concerned in it? I know very well you think on that, as well as on other subjects of less serious import, with great freedom: but I desire nothing so much as that you will express yourself with your usual frankness and sincerity, because we can by no other means come to a true understanding of any subject.

— I will, replied he, endeavor to satisfy you in the way you desire, but *generally*, and without entering into too many particulars on subject so delicate.

— What then, continued he, must we call that general apprehension of superior beings, or of *One Supreme*, which seems so naturally and so universally to possess the minds of all men? Must we not, in a general sense, call it religion? interrogated he.

— To be sure, said I.

— And, replied he, it appears so like an innate principle that will be found hard to imagine it to be anything less. However, it being unnecessary to our present purpose to endeavor to prove it to be so, we will, at this time, pass it by; only we may observe from it, with what prodigious facility and ease men receive religious impressions of various and even opposite kinds: with so much facility, and so necessary does religion seem to the *mind* of man, that *it* cannot rest without possessing itself of such notions of the religious kind (whether justly or rationally founded or not) as may happily prove, in some degree, satisfactory to itself.

Neither do I think it necessary here to enter into any dispute concerning what religion may be fortunate enough to be the only true one; our present business being only to discover, if we can, in what manner religion may be rendered most favorable to the just liberties of mankind.

— Were I inclined to libertine wit, said I, I might answer you “Not in any manner at all.” But I only impertinently interrupt you.

— Not at all, replied he; for I am not quite certain that there may not be some truth in the observation; at least, if we were to be governed by our past experience of all religions, when not properly controlled by the civil power.

There is in religions (or perhaps more properly, in religionists) of every denomination, something *naturally* intolerant and tyrannical, whenever there is any degree of sincerity and zeal in the worshiper. And perhaps it may be an incontestable truth that, the more erroneous and false his notions be, the stronger will these dispositions be in him. And there is nothing in all this but what is very natural, and even in some cases almost meritorious, when we consider the intention, and not the consequences. For there is such a natural charm and beauty in truth that even false images of it, when believed to be the true, warmly engage the affections: and even in very uninteresting and insignificant things, where the mind finds itself through, though perhaps falsely, convinced (and men act freely and devoid of that caution which polite or crafty men possess) it cannot resist its propensity to zeal; which is generally accompanied with an obstinate and positive humor which carries the same marks of tyranny and intolerance.

Now religious truths, or what are believed to be religious truths, being of a much more important nature than any other; the zeal, the intolerance and the tyranny in their behalf must naturally be stronger, and consequently much more troublesome and dangerous to the just liberty of mankind.

It proves indeed unfortunate for mankind that what are generally thought the most important truths of religion are either hidden in impenetrable mysteries or are absolutely beyond the reach of human understanding and nature; so that it is impossible for men to be convinced of their truth by any sound philosophical reasoning. And doubtless on this account it is, among others, that *faith* hath ever been esteemed so very meritorious in all religions; for it saves a world of pains to the worthy tribe of zealous proselyte-makers.

—And here you perceive, continued he, that the sublimer truths of religion are of a kind very different from all other truths. For in other truths the reasoning and evidences are founded in nature, and lie level to the senses, understanding, and capacity of man; so that it is generally not very difficult to prove or disprove any *interesting truth or falsehood*. And if it should happen that some good men (which has very frequently been the case) should be troubled with chimerical and unphilosophical whimsies, which they may zealously endeavor to propagate for truths, there cannot well arise much harm from it; because as no opinions are deemed sacred but religious ones, such whimsies will either fall into the neglect and contempt they may ill-fatedly deserve, or every one will be at liberty to ridicule or refute them.

— But the mysterious truths of religion are not to be treated in this ordinary and familiar manner. Their defenders have, by faith, which is always so much superior to argument, so strong a *sense* of their sublimity; and they attach such very important and interesting consequences to a right or wrong conception and belief of them; that, when in earnest, they cannot choose but feel themselves extraordinarily zealous and strenuous in their propagation and defense.

It were undoubtedly vain, and perhaps foolish, to think of treating men thus enlightened in the ordinary way of argumentation. The just and necessary cautions which prudent men are apt to use on other subjects are branded with opprobrious names, and perhaps themselves too; and wit and ridicule, those cruel enemies to grave imposture, are held in utter detestation and abhorrence. And perhaps indeed we ought to treat with some degree of respect and tenderness so great and serious, and so universal an infirmity of human nature, even when the falsity and absurdity of their notions are indisputable.

Now if this account of religion and its effects, when seriously and zealously embraced, be true (and I trust past experience, and the very nature of the thing when impartially considered, will abundantly evince the truth of it) can we reasonably conclude that religion, in the general sense of the word, is naturally *favorable* to the just liberties of mankind?

— I should think not, answered I.

— Is it not strongly inimical, interrogated he again?

— Why, it seems so, replied I. And you may be right with regard to religion in general, but I hope you make a difference in religions in that respect, for they certainly are not all equally so.

— The thing, answered he, is too evident to be disputed; there are doubtless great differences in their nature and tendencies. But if some be much more moderate than others, we must not forget to attribute a great deal of that moderation to the degree of their subordination to the civil authority. And here I cannot but observe that, without that subordination, experience has taught us that there would be no trusting to the moderation of any set of religionists, how mild soever the religion might profess.

— But, said I, the fault would not then be in the religion, but in its professors.

— It might be so, he replied, but that, in a political view, makes no difference. Politically, our business is with men and their actions; and if — professing a religion the most pure and innocent — they either so misconceive or misapply its precepts and doctrines as to become turbulent and refractory intruders on the just liberties of mankind, it must surely be as reasonable and necessary to keep them in

due subordination as any other disturbers of the public peace, and invaders of the public liberty.

— Do you then, demanded I, allow nothing to the divine authority by which they act, at least in the true religion?

—A well-governed state, answered he, will allow of no authority among men within its own jurisdictions superior to itself. Indeed, a government founded on the just principles we have described in our preceding discourses will act by a divine authority to which nothing can be superior on earth. But men may be allowed the liberty of pretending to what they please so long as they refrain from encroaching on the natural freedom of mankind. But when they will not do that, where is the fault in making them understand that they must?

—Why truly, said I, I cannot very readily tell you: but yet methinks your doctrine makes somewhat too free with so serious a subject.

—”What, when the object is liberty?” interrogated he.

— To be sure, answered I; for have not you (in our first conversation) taught me that liberty should be restrained within certain bounds?

— True, true, replied he: and within those bounds I am content to be restrained. But I cannot allow our religionists more liberty than I do myself, not withstanding their divine pretensions.

But this restraint cannot naturally extend to the thoughts: and speech may be exercised very freely without any dangerous consequences to liberty: and I should think it could never be deemed injurious to the just pretensions of any set of religionists, if they were kind enough to allow the same freedom of thought and of speech to others which they are generally disposed to exercise so liberally themselves. Freedom of thought, in respect of the rights of humanity, is perfectly innocent: and freedom of speech, when employed in the search for truth, is not only beneficial, but it is absolutely necessary, and *equally* the right of all men. What advantage the free exercise of this right hath been of, towards the discovery of many truths in polite literature, is pretty well known; nor has it indeed thrown a little light on religious subjects, although under much restraint, even in the freest countries.

But would you then, said I, take off all restraint in matters of religion? I ask this question because that freedom of speech for which you contend, if exercised on religious subjects, would evidently have such a tendency.

—Undoubtedly, answered he; for I know of no just restraint which can be laid on that freedom but that which ought to restrain men (as we have agreed) in all other cases: I mean *respect for the just rights of human nature*. And besides, men have not a clearer right in nature than that of paying their devotions to their God in their own manner.

Such freedom, continued he, might be productive of still greater diversity in the modes of worship than we are now practiced. But how very favorable that diversity has ever been to liberty, by blunting the edge of that cruel zeal which admits of but one true mode, is known from dear-bought experience: and the causes not being very difficult to understand, it is surprising how men could ever be so wrought on as to think otherwise.

Do we not see the infinite diversity of men’s thoughts and opinion on subjects which are generally thought by no means difficult to understand? And whence does this arise, but from causes which can never be entirely removed? The different degrees of the understandings of men, of the strength or weakness of their affections and passions, of their application to the proper means of information and correction, their jarring interests, and a thousand other various and opposite circumstances, as in other things, so in religion, create differences in the ideas of human minds as utterly irreconcilable to each other as the most contrary things in nature.

This being the case, what can be expected from the endeavors of those who blindly strive to reduce men to an uniformity of opinions and modes in religion? Can there be any thing more tyrannical than the latter, or more impossible in nature than the former?

— He paused.

— I looked assent.

—Commend me, rather than to such a vile tyranny, continued he, to the generous and liberal Pagans, under whose free constitutions every man might choose a religion for himself, and among whom the gods of all countries were admitted, and even courted to come: for such a free tolerance is certainly more favorable to our just liberties than any forced uniformity of worship, even of the most true religion, can be. Besides, I do not conceive that were uniformity established, and that in a mode which may be thought the most pure imaginable, that *mental idolatry*, which is the most faulty part of idolatry, would be at all cured by such uniformity. It never can be cured, for those very causes of the diversity of men's ideas which have been enumerated above.

It has been thought no mean stretch of the human understanding to form *tolerably* just ideas of the sublime perfections of the Deity: and it falls not to the lot of many men to be *nearly consistent* on a subject so dazzling, so immense! Perfect clearness is, doubtless, much beyond the utmost capacity of the most enlarged human mind. If the wisest and ablest then be incapable of attaining notions truly worthy of the Supreme Being, what must we say of that rude and incongruous mixture which possesses and agitates the minds of the mass of mankind, clouded as they are with all the various and numerous obstructions to a just apprehension?

—Indeed I know now, said I; unless that their ideas must be very unworthy of the Supreme Being. But what do you conclude from that?

— I conclude, answered he, that be the modes of worship what they may, the ideas of the Deity, in the minds of vulgar worshipers in general, are, and ever will be, false, erroneous, and idolatrous; and that the case can never be otherwise as long as men form their ideas of the attributes and perfections of the Deity from unjust and ill-founded fears, and senseless hopes, and from all the variable and fluctuating passions and affections with which they feel themselves agitated.

— That is, in short, said I, as long as men shall be men.

— True, it is so, replied he; and for that very reason. I also conclude that it is tyranny to attempt to force men to practice any particular modes of worship, though perfectly right and true; and that they ought to be left free to exercise themselves in the religious way so as may be most suitable to their own capacities and will; provided only that they offend not against the just laws of human nature.

Supposing, said I, all you have said to be true; yet you seem to me to carry your love of religious liberty much farther than would be found advantageous to civil liberty.

—If so, replied he, I must be wrong.

— For I have always understood, continued I, that religion, under the direction of a wise government, might be employed very usefully, as well to strengthen the bonds of civil society as to confirm the morals of men. And certainly its influence would be much more strong and equal where uniformity prevailed than where there was an unbounded diversity; or it would be strong or weak in proportion to the uniformity, or diversity, of the modes of worship.

— I think, replied he, I have nowhere said any thing contrary to your first observation; if I have, I here retract it.

—But as to your last, experience has demonstrated your mistake. Not but what you advance might

be true if an uniformity could be obtained freely, and founded on a thorough conviction of the minds of men. But as that can never be, for the causes which have already been assigned above, I think your observation cannot be supported.

A conviction of the mind is absolutely necessary in all cases in which we would engage the heart. Were men, on such a conviction, without force, to run into an useful uniformity; perhaps it would be a very desirable thing. Yet I cannot but doubt of it, because God (certainly for wise ends) seems to have constituted the nature of man in opposition to it.

—However they are much more likely to be so disposed, after having had time to canvas and examine things in their own way freely, than by any effort of power whatsoever. And I must again repeat that it is a cruel tyranny to attempt to force men in matters of religion as long as their conduct remain inoffensive to the rights of humanity.

But we do not find, by experience, that diversity in religion hath any natural tendency to weaken the force of states; even although that diversity by extravagant and monstrous, as it is represented to have been among the Pagans. We do not find any material divisions among the Greeks or Romans on religious accounts; nor that state affairs were carried on less successfully on account of the great number of their gods and goddesses. Nor do we find in our own country that toleration, so far as it extends, has at all weakened our strength as a nation. Nay we are sure of the contrary.

— I know of but one reason therefore for refusing toleration to any religion, and that is, when we are certain its principles and professors are intolerant themselves. Such was, formerly, the temper of the Jews, and such still is the temper of some religionists, even in these enlightened days.

I will only add, in favor of religious liberty, that an extensive diversity has some great and undeniable advantages over a forced uniformity, or a very limited toleration.

— In a great diversity, men find very little difficulty of unloading their minds of their burdens of superstition in their own way; and this facility must naturally prove a great cooler of religious zeal, which is always more heated by difficulty and opposition. And where a man finds a thousand different modes of worship already formed and established, and a thousand different arguments in favor of each mode, his eagerness to embrace any one must be very much retarded, and a proper moderation and coolness will, most probably, be the result of his delay: an effect the most favorable imaginable to religious liberty, and a preparation indispensably necessary to the clear comprehension of abstruse and difficult truths.

—Here he paused, seeming to expect a reply.

I do not find myself, said I, much disposed to controvert the general tendency of your reasoning; yet I cannot allow myself so much freedom of thought on this subject as to believe it would be beneficial to mankind to allow so extensive a liberty in religious matters as you contend for. You seem desirous of regulating the operation and modes of religion (as well as those of civil Laws) *by the principles or laws of human nature*; which appears to me an inversion of the natural order of things: for certainly religion must be prior in dignity, and given unto mankind to regulate and supply the defects of the laws of nature, and not to be controlled and regulated by those laws.

— I shall not dispute the priority in dignity with you, replied he; it has been too long assumed by priestly modesty. But if I mistake not, a very essential part of the duties of religion consists in a due obedience to the laws of nature: for they are, indubitably, revelations which God hath made of his will in the soul of man. Do we not them so far as we obey the laws of our nature, obey the will of the Deity who hath made those laws? And are they not marks of a truly religious and well-disposed mind to be inclined ourselves to obey, and to endeavor by all reasonable means to promote obedience in others? Obedience to those laws, or those revelations, call them what you will, continued he, is the true and natural felicity of human creatures: the true and only just end of all civil institutions is to enforce the obedience of mankind

to those laws, as indispensably necessary to the general happiness of the species.

And religion, when justly employed, assumes no airs of superiority over the laws of our nature: she finds herself never so well or so usefully employed as when all her influence is exerted in inculcating the true principles of nature, and in confirming and establishing men in obedience to the, This I take to be a sound practical employment of religion, and that part of it which comes within the comprehension of every man; and therefore more immediately relative to the liberty of mankind.

—Here he paused again.

—As far as your doctrine extends, replied I, I believe it may be true; for true religion is not inimical to the laws of nature, as you have described them. But, I observe, you decline speaking of the sublimer part of religion, the contemplative, as not so immediately relative to the subject; some reason for that, if you please, and I have done.

—Because, answered he, the contemplative part, considered as merely contemplative, every man may freely enjoy without any inconvenience to others: nor can it justly come under the regulation of any human institutions.

— But suppose, interrogated I, there should be too much sociability in the nature of men to allow them to enjoy their contemplations in silence, and they will communicate for the good of society?

— Why then, answered he, they must expect to meet with that free sort of examination which every man may use who has as good a right to communicate as they have.

— I could not but agree.

—And thus ended our dialogue on this subject.

FINIS

A FOURTH DIALOGUE CONCERNING LIBERTY.

CONTAINING AN
EXPOSITION
OF THE FALSITY OF THE
FIRST AND LEADING PRINCIPLES
OF THE PRESENT
REVOLUTIONISTS IN EUROPE

By Jackson Barwis, Esq.

Il est vrai que, dans les Democraties, *le Peuple paroît faire ce qu'il veut*; mais la Liberte Politique ne consiste point *a faire ce quel l'on veut*. — Dans un Etat, c'est-a-dire, dans une Societe ou il y a des Loix, *la Liberte* ne peut consister qua'a pouvier faire ce que *l'on doit vouloir*, & *a n'etre point contrait de faire ce que l'on ne dout pas vouloir*
MONTESQUIEU, Tome I, p. 255

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(1793)

DIALOGUE IV

POLITICAL Liberty, for the last twenty years, has been the subject of continual discussion; and there has, doubtless, been much light thrown on it by its numerous advocates and friends, and even by its enemies.

But as it frequently and unfortunately happens that the best things are spoiled, and the best intentions defeated, through intemperate zeal, which determines the mind before it understands its object, and which hurries it to conclusions before it has examined principles, it is hoped that the following Dialogue may have a tendency to abate such zeal, and to reduce the mind to that temper which is indispensably necessary in the investigation and comprehension of truth. Certain it is that so many voluminous works could never have been written on morals and politics had the *same ideas* been affixed to the *same words* by the numerous competitors for literary fame.

It is now seventeen years ago since a friend of mine attempted a correct definition of the moral and political meaning of the word *Liberty* in several conversations which were conveyed to the public in three Dialogues. A fourth is now produced, rather reluctantly, as my friend seemed to think enough had been said in the three former.

Being on a visit at his agreeable retirement in the country, according to our usual custom, we took walks, and held our conversation, of which he always has an inexhaustible fund. We long amused ourselves with general observations on what had been said, written, and done, in these days of revolutions: when, perceiving that he was not at all satisfied either with the doctrines or practices of the leading Champions of the day in the cause of *Liberty*, I drew him at length to explain himself, to nearly the following purport.

Far be it from my thoughts, said he, to impute blame to any of the *true friends* of Liberty; having, you know, always shown myself ambitious of being enrolled among them. But it must be considered as of the greatest importance to the cause that we clearly and truly understand each other; and that, but the word *Liberty*, we signify the *same ideas*, the *same thoughts*, and the *same intentions*; and that we do not entertain *very various*, but even *very opposite ideas*; which may extend to *licentiousness*.

— I assented.

— For moral and political words, continued he, are so indefinitely used that men do not easily understand each other. Hence that eternal writing and reasoning on the *same subjects*: and hence too false eloquence derives her authority, and rules with magic force the illiterate and gaping multitude. But in the search for truth, her falsities must be detected and exposed, and her florid and delusive vanities must be thrown aside, not merely as worthless, but as destructive to the native simplicity of truth.

Amidst the fanciful and endless imaginations of the mind, unsubdued and uncorrected by a pure affection for nature, and for truth; every moral and political word has a thousand shades of meaning, and admits of innumerable combinations; which, under the direction of a *vain and disingenuous wit*, throws a perpetual and almost impenetrable obscurity around the plainest and most undeniable truths.

— Certainly, said I; but proceed.

There can be no just reasoning, continued he, where this variegated verbosity prevails. If we desire to obtain any real knowledge, our ideas must be founded on some *real existences* in nature; our words must be accurately defined, and all epithets, similes, allusions, and figurative expressions of every kind must be read with a very jealous eye: if it were not that most readers like *amusement* much better than *knowledge*, words could not pass so currently and with so little attention to their relative signification.

A few words which have been employed by the several competitors in the present great controversy concerning Liberty, from the want of being accurately defined or from being totally incapable of definition, on account of their representing *no ideas derived from any existence in nature* have been the causes of much error and falsehood, and most certainly tend to much practical mischief.

— I am all attention, said I.

The word *Sovereignty*, continued he, as used by a late French writer²³ to signify the *supreme power*, or *will* of a whole nation *collectively*, and as perceived, felt, and understood by a whole nation, as if it had

but *one mind*, has doubtless not the least foundation in nature, and is a most ridiculous and fanatical imagination.

To endeavor to prove its falsity any otherwise than by desiring any cool-headed man of common sense, to consider only the many thousands of men that must have fallen under his own observation, who never had the least thought, or idea, of this *imaginary sovereignty*, were only to waste his time, and exercise his mind on a mere metaphysical non-entity.

— It seems so indeed, but I will not interrupt you at present, said I.

Several English writers and talkers use the word, the People, in the same, or very nearly the same sense; as if there really did exist a sort of *mental union, and a superiority in the people*, to whose wisdom, and knowledge of human interests, the best and the greatest men that ever assisted in the government of nations, ought to think themselves *so much inferior*, as always to submit not only to the *wisdom*, but to *the will of the people*.

The words, *the People*, when thus employed, convey *no idea* derived from any thing really existent in nature. For the minds of millions of men of various capacities, from the lowest degree of understanding to the highest, never can be so concentered, nor their thoughts so nearly identical, as to form united, correct, and perfect ideas concerning the general interests and happiness of nations.

Those who entertain such wild and extravagant *notions*²⁴ must be regardless of facts unchangeable in human nature, and of every moment's experience; and the contradictory evidence of the histories of all nations and ages. Where have we read, or where do we now find, any confirmation of any such *notions* founded on facts?

Our daily and continual experience cannot but impress our minds with a conviction of the *real inability* of the generality of men to undertake and execute, with propriety and energy, with judgment and success, the great moral and political interests of nations and of mankind.

Is not a great capacity in the sciences, and in the arts, considered as *extraordinary* and above the reach of common men? And is not *true genius*, exerted in beautiful and laudable pursuits, *so rare* as to be the subject of continual admiration and praise of all those who are *capable* of feeling the full force of its powerful influence? And how few are they who are so capable!

If these things be true, and if great abilities be so *uncommon*, and true genius *so rare*, and yet so necessary in the comprehension and successful conduct of the greatest of human affairs; how can it be reconciled with any degree of common sense to contend that the whole body of *the people collectively*, in any nation, are more capable of judging and acting for the interest and felicity of the whole nation than those among them of the most distinguished understanding and integrity? But, as we have shown before, the *notion* of such a *collected wisdom in nations*, or of a *collection of the minds of a whole people, politically capable of thought, or of unity of mind, or of rational consent in action*, is a total impossibility in our nature, as it has been formed by infinite wisdom.

Therefore the words *Sovereignty*, and *the People*, when thus employed, are contradictory to nature, and clearly defective in point of truth; and can have but a merely imaginary signification.

Yet they have been so employed by men whose abilities will not be disputed, and to the most mischievous and cruel purposes; and we cannot but lament (what would be ridiculous, if it were not for the fatal consequences) that they have suffered their enthusiastic zeal to run so high as, like the combatants in religious controversies, to carry them out of all sight of truth or possibility; and have exhibited to the world that raging fanaticism among philosophers and politicians will shortly, perhaps, be no less common than it has been formerly among divines. But, it should seem, Heaven has so ordained it that men must always be fanatical about something.

Well, said I; but what is the conclusion you mean to draw from all this?

I mean, answered he, to show that *these words* not only represent *no ideas derivable from any facts in nature*, but that what *notions* their authors intend them to represent are *false* and *impossible*: and we must conclude also that all reasonings and conclusions founded on them, so intended to be understood, must be false; and must have a pernicious tendency in the search of political truth; and prove ultimately *destructive* of that *true Liberty* which, it is hoped, they were intended to establish.

It is destructive, by fomenting and exciting the ruinous boldness of ignorance, and the hardened

injustice of profligacy; which being once in action and armed with power, *genuine Liberty* is disgraced and vilified by the *Licentiousness* and ferocity of ungovernable passions and brutal appetites. Indeed all falsities, when called in to the aid of truth, which wants them not, will always ultimately produce pernicious consequences in the pursuit of any laudable object.

Though I cannot but think you reason justly, said I; yet I must confess you surprise me, because being, as I am sure you are, *a true friend to Liberty and the natural Rights of Mankind*, you seem to me, in these observations, not to take the most favorable side for *the people*. In short, you seem rather against them. Is it not so?

No! No! Believe me, my dear friend, it is *a true regard for the rights and liberties of my country, and of all mankind*, that creates in me such fear of error and such solicitude for truth. If a man ever desire to understand any truth, he must take no *side* in reasoning.

I shall never change my affection for that *true Liberty* which, *founded on justice*, has the greatest tendency to be productive of the general happiness of nations, and of all mankind. But if we desire to reason, and to act, in conformity with a well-founded affection, we must beware of *false principles* and of hasty and overweening passions. We cannot be too cautious, nor too fearful of errors, in fixing our political principles, because such ruinous and dreadful consequences sometimes follow from such errors as every wise or good man would shudder to load his conscience with.

Indeed, replied I, it is a very serious matter; and I must confess, before a man sets up for a politician, he ought to give himself a most severe examination as to the correctness of his principles and the clearness and extent of his understanding. For my part, I already feel my deficiency, and therefore request the favor of further information. Do you, then, think the people incapable of forming constitutions, and of erecting governments, and of directing, regulating, and controlling them, so as may prove most for their own interest and happiness?

You know, answered he, that the words "*the People*" we have already proved to have been falsely applied as representatives of the impossible ideas of unity. But if by "*the people*" you mean those who constitute the greater body of every nation (with the exception of a few individuals) certainly they are *naturally incapable* of comprehending the general interests of mankind, or forming just constitutions, or of duly executing the great functions of political governments, with that energy and address which is necessary to their own prosperity and felicity.

Are we then to conclude, demanded I, that all those phrases which are so flattering and *seem to be* so favorable to Liberty are either false, or improper, such as "*the majesty of the people*," "*the sovereignty of the people*," "*the will of the people*," or any other phrase that implies the **mental superiority of the people**?

Certainly, replied he, all phrases which imply the *mental superiority of the people collectively*, over a high-gifted and thinly-dispersed *few*, which are always to be found in all nations, are falsities that must be obvious to any man of but moderate information and cool reflection. But we know well enough that such *licentious phrases* are only to be found in the vocabulary of the *weak*, the *wicked*, the *discontented*, and the *seditious*. *The safety of the people, the happiness of the people, and the just liberty of the people* are the sorts of phrases or toasts that out to come out of the mouth of a true citizen and lover of his country.

From the earliest ages, continued he,, we have heard of *law-givers*. We are taught from the early histories of every nation that they had *law-givers*. Even the nations most favored and admired on account of the liberty they enjoyed tell us of their *law-givers*, who formed constitutions and laws for them; which, it would seem, they were *incapable* of forming for themselves. And in the execution of the laws, in conformity to their various constitutions (for their constitutions were very various²⁵), *a few* pre-eminent individuals were always *necessarily* found at the head of affairs: *necessarily*, because the natural incapacity of the *people collectively* is felt so sensibly by themselves that they cannot resist the impulse by which they are moved to submit themselves to *wiser Chiefs*, and to seek protection against their own imbecility and rashness, under *leaders* whom they hope and believe to be wiser and abler than themselves. Such human nature has been, is, and will be, we may safely prophesy, to the end of time.

That those who, under the forms of any constitution, are raised to the executive power, may not be *perfect instruments* of execution in their several departments will always be a probability, considering the

infirmities of men: and that they may sometimes be nearly the very reverse of what they ought to be, we have had, in all times, but too many convincing proofs, however they may have arrived at their elevated fictions; whether by the nomination of *the one*, or of *the few*, or by the election of *the many*: and the people (meaning only as to their incapacity) however ill they may have been treated, however deceived, misled, or abused by their executive offices of government, they still have no resource in their own wisdom: which ever way they turn themselves, it will be only changing *one set* of superiors for *another*, which the hope of being more fortunate in the last.

But if, from tyranny, injustice, and wrongs of all kinds, which violate the natural feelings of men, they be roused to seek refuge *by force*, and by a *total overthrow* of their constitution and form of government, yet they can only exhibit *force* with unregulated indignation and vengeance: they must still have their *few pre-eminent men* to direct and control their fury and to instruct and guide them in their revolt. They understand nothing *collectively*, but the violences done to their *feelings* as men; and their revenge generally falls on a few individuals whom they either know to be, or suppose to be, the causes of them.. But when once they are excited or provoked to exert their irrational and tumultuous violence, all good and peaceable men must have reason to dread the effects of their brutal injustice and ungovernable ferocity, and must lament the cruel necessity of contending *by force* to reduce them again to a rational obedience to justice, and to the laws of their country. They are formed to be governed, because (such is the divine will) their imbecility unfits them for the government of themselves. For, in the destruction of one constitution and government, and in the formation and execution of another, whatever it may be, or however much it may vary from any ever constituted before, whatever happiness they may enjoy under it more than other nations enjoy, we must look for the explication of such advantageous effects to the superior capacity and energy of mind, the wisdom, justice, and fortitude of the more eminent men among them. *The people* can only lend their *force* to be directed and conducted by minds capable of universal views, and which lead to the general felicity of a nation, but which *that people collectively* never could have conceived or acquired for themselves; and the true principles of which they never clearly understood, though they can *feel* the advantages of a more favorable situation.

Though you seem to advance, said I, what cannot easily be denied, yet I do not very readily perceive *the drift* of these arguments, however I may feel *the force* of them: nor can I at all reconcile them to what you have formerly advanced on the subject of Liberty; where, speaking of a *supposed* real²⁶ or implied political compact, you have given every argument in favor of the people, and against pretensions and personal interests of the contracting executive magistrates. But now you endeavor to prove the total inability of *the people collectively* to understand *the enlarged morality of politics*, and consequently to understand the true nature of any such compact.

Your observation, replied he, ,ay probably have more weight in it than may be creditable to my understanding, or to my manner of explaining myself. But it ought to be considered that I spoke on the *supposition of a compact*, which I do not believe hath ever *naturally* taken place; but that, if it ever had taken place, in justice to human nature, I endeavored to show *what it must have been, or what it ought to have been*; for, most certainly, all personal pretensions injurious to the general interests of the liberty and felicity of mankind must ever be indefensible upon any ground whatsoever: and though *the people* be not competent to judge of the means necessary to produce national happiness; yet, to promote and advance the prosperity, peace, and freedom of mankind, as much as possible, must ever produce the greatest satisfaction and glory that it is in the power of the greatest men to acquire.

Therefore it is that, in all reasonings and actions that concern political liberty, the general benefit and felicity of the whole must ever be *a first principle*. But what will be for the general benefit and felicity o the whole, in the various degrees of civilization of nations, it is not always in the power of the ablest and wisest men easily to determine. And, as to *the people*, they and their interests and happiness must *naturally* be the subjects in contemplation, which if they were capable of understanding themselves, *the wise and good of all nations* must have given themselves a great deal of unnecessary toil and trouble.

A truly great man cannot but love mankind, because he is a man himself. He feels the divine laws of human nature in himself more strongly than others of inferior capacity, and is consequently more sensible of the evils and the distresses as well as of the advantages and felicities of human life: he therefore will

be more able to relieve the *one*, and to promote the *other*. The laws of our nature, which are the work of God, and common to all mankind, are held sacred by him as *the only true foundation* on which all moral and political constitutions ought to be built, and by which the right and wrong of all moral and political laws, and of all forms and powers in government, can only be estimated.

With such principles he must *necessarily* be a true friend of *the just liberty* of the people, and of all mankind. He contemplates their interests and happiness generally and universally: his powerful and inventive mind is full of resources to induce and lead *the people*, through the love and practice of *justice*, to the establishment of *genuine liberty*: *for the perfect liberty of all depends on the perfect justice of all*. Hence the necessity in our public institutions of every kind for education and manners, of the greatest care and caution not to introduce any false or *unnatural principles* as grounds of moral conduct, under any pretense whatever; for when their falsities are discovered (and this is the age of discoveries) they serve only to bring all religion and morality into contempt. But, if such institutions were properly conducted, they might inspire the young mind with the most ardent affection for all the talents and virtues of their great predecessors, which have been the causes and the support of *that genuine and just liberty* which in a state of manhood it would be his happiness to enjoy, and his glory to defend.

Though I may very much approve, said I, of what you have been pleased to advance, yet does not this doctrine tend to authorize and establish the power of *the few*, and to diminish the consequence, and annihilate the power, of the people?

By no means, replied he; for *the people* are *necessarily* the only object of great consequence in all governments. Where there are no people, there is nothing to govern. We know it has been said of tyrannical governments (and there have been tyrannical governments of every form, from democracy to despotism), that the tyrants are *all*, and the people *nothing*: that is figuratively spoken, and, like all figurative language, never strictly true; for the consequence and power of the people under such governments are more desperately, and more frequently felt, than under any other more moderated form.

A truly free and happily-constituted government feels less of *the dangerous power* and consequence of the people, because they have no enemy to oppose or contend with. Their security, the consequence of the general equity of their government, and makes them insensible of any distinct interest from the government; and they will always be much more easily moved to exert their force in the defense, than in the attack of good governments. Their vengeance will be directed only against weak, corrupt, or faithless Ministers, whose unpardonable folly or wickedness forces the people to *feel* their maladministration by the evils they bring upon them, but not against the government itself.

As to the establishment of the power of a few, continued he, such establishment has ever been, and ever must be; because it is not in the nature of man, or of human society, to be otherwise. Change and modify constitutions and governments into as many forms as is possible for the human mind to conceive, the legislative and executive parts must always be left in the hands of a few: and, clearly, for the reasons we have given above; i.e., because but a *few* are at all competent to the exercise of such high and important employments. That the government of a nation, therefore, is always in the hands of *a few* can be no objection to its possession of true liberty.

A superior direction in all human affairs, where many are concerned, is naturally necessary; and men insensibly submit to it of themselves: and they certainly are under the highest obligations, and owe the most sensible gratitude, to those who *with ability and integrity* will undertake and execute *faithfully* their public or private concerns for them.

It is but a *sorry return* to a *truly great man*, for such important favors, to be told *malignantly* that he is but a *servant of the people*; and to insinuate that his talents and virtues suffer no degradation in being *contemptuously debased* below the meanest of the people, as if he were of less importance in nature, or in the state, that those whose interests and happiness depend on his superior understanding.

Such language is well suited to licentiousness and sedition; but its unprincipled falsity and callous injustice, the effects of **party rage**, are most violent attacks on *genuine liberty*, and tend only to bring it and every idea of public virtue, into contempt.

The true friends of liberty will be generously just to all men, and with internal satisfaction will acknowledge the merits of all men. They perceive such justice to be necessary to the maintenance,

support, and encouragement of all virtue, and consequently of *true liberty*.

Superior talents with integrity, and superior stations legally and properly filled, will always be objects of respect among the wise and the prudent. They know how necessary to the preservation of order, and good government, such qualifications are; and how vicious and impolitic it is to endeavor to degrade and bring into the contempt of the weak the ignorant, and the debauched those virtues and talents without which no just liberty can exist.

Envy, slander, and the base desire of leveling the best and the wisest men with the most ignorant, vicious, and sordid, are the most prominent features of men who, with the most abandoned *licentiousness* and impudence, have protruded themselves upon the world as *the only true friends of liberty*, when their whole lives, perhaps, have been a continual invasion of the peace, property, and *liberty* of others, by their unbounded extravagance, injustice, and violence; more consonant to rude barbarian *despotism* than to that equity and virtue which are the bonds of affection between man and man, and without which it would be impossible to maintain *the least appearance of liberty among mankind*.

I cannot but acquiesce, said I, in the general tendency of your reasoning: but yet I know you will readily permit me to trouble you with farther inquiries.

There has been lately much said and written about *political Equality*; and *Liberty and Equality* have been coupled together as terms nearly synonymous, and as if generally well understood: but I must confess, I have not yet heard any definition of *Equality* intended; nor in what sense it is meant to be understood. I remember what you have said upon it in your first Dialogue, and am convinced of its truth. But is it possible to give it any other moral or political sense?

It requires, replied he, but very little observation to perceive the *natural inequality of mankind in all their faculties of body and mind*. It is too evident to admit of a moment's doubt. It is also as clearly evident that the exertion of their faculties, in all their numerous inequalities, must be productive of proportionally unequal effects: consequently, no idea of equality, in those respects, can in their nature exist. The only equality, therefore, that can be admitted, and certainly ought to be admitted, is that they are created under the *same laws* of their nature universally; and that they are *equally* entitled to the *use and exercise of their corporeal and mental faculties* in all their various degrees, from the lowest to the highest, *with the utmost freedom*; restrained only by a due regard to the non-infringement of the freedom of each other: and the perfection of political laws, for the same reasons, doubtless, is that they operate *equally* on all men of the same nation with the utmost impartial justice.

But when the word *equality* is employed as an engine of meretricious policy to excite the populace to tumultuous outrage and violence, and to persuade them of a *really natural equality* of men in all respects, mental and corporal, moral and political; and of their right to an *equality* of property, without regard to the just means of acquiring it, what less can it produce than the most unbridled *licentiousness*, and the most uncontrollable wickedness of every description that can be conceived by the most abandoned of mankind?

Is it not, then, disgraceful to the cause of liberty and to the understandings of mankind to find so many who live in a constant and profligate violation of the *liberty, peace, and happiness* of all, who may unfortunately have any personal concerns with them, continually presenting themselves as the most redoubtable patriots; and to find them received, and applauded, as affectionate and strenuous asserters of the just rights and liberties of mankind?

True liberty and vice, continued he, must always be at enmity. — *Licentiousness*, by the vulgar, gross, sensual, and passionate, is generally mistaken for liberty, but it is perfectly the reverse. The friends of liberty, and the friends of peace, moderation, justice, and every benevolent and manly virtue, are the same persons.

That bad men, of considerable parts, have been *instrumentally* beneficial to liberty, by an abandoned hardness of opposition to laws framed for the restraint and punishment of such characters, because such laws might be extended to men of the best intentions by a corrupt government, has been seen in all nations and ages; and it may *perhaps* be prudent to reward and applaud them. But it would be folly in the extreme to believe that those men were possessed of that noble affection which comprehends, *cordially*, the true interests and happiness of a nation, whose whole lives have been stained with the filth of the

meanest vices, and with every sort of injury and injustice to their fellow citizens.

Certainly, said I, it cannot be disputed that unjust and wicked men can do no great honor to any cause; nor will it be denied that to such hands the sacred deposit of the interests and liberties of a nation should never be confided for a moment. But perhaps it will not from thence follow that those who are *frequently* understood to be *virtuous and good men* will always be found the *best statesmen*, or the *truest friends of liberty*. Has it not often been found that men of high pretensions as to ability and character have proved but very inefficient ministers, and have shown themselves by no means favorable to the just liberties of mankind?

Many such men have existed, answered he, and ever will exist; because there will always be men who from education, or from their own inclination and peculiar turn of mind, collect and combine *notions* of moral virtue and goodness with religion, or superstition, which every one mixes in his own way, so as to make up a sort of *system* for himself. If they be sincere, they will be fond of their system; and, if fond, they will be zealous to propagate it; and, in the propagation, the warmth of their zeal will often cause them to be forgetful of the respect due to justice, and to truth, and will also make them unconscious of that forgetfulness.

Hence their unfitness for high stations, and the exercise of great power. They have no universality in their genius and temper. According to their confined views, they cannot resist their pious inclinations *to do good* by enforcing their fanatical systems. If sufficient power were in the possession of *such good men*, the just rights and liberties of mankind must inevitably perish under its holy influence. Their views are too contracted, and their benevolence too limited, to permit them to extend their faculties to a comprehension of the universal rights and liberties of human nature.

These good men are too certain, and too positive, in their aerial knowledge and opinions, to be really favorable to, or even tolerant of, the general liberty of mankind; or of any liberty dissonant in the least from their fond and visionary system. A sort of pious tyranny is inevitable in such minds. They will not so much as allow a man the *liberty* of being contented when he is so, though he may be ever so inclined to it: they will insist upon it that he must be, and ought to be, discontented; and that it is impossible for him to be long really contented unless he can be persuaded to adopt their fanaticism in religion and politics.

This distemper of the mind has been an old affliction among mankind; and has usually shown itself powerfully among false and fanciful philosophers, and among religionists in ten thousand forms. But it is found everywhere, and about every thing, when men have not clear and definite ideas.

— It now rages with a delirious violence in the political world; and all former constitutions and governments are to be despised and contemned: we are no longer to profit by experience, nor to edify by the wisdom of the great men who have gone before us: we are to invert nature, and to be taught the principles of government by the *sovereign wisdom of the people*, who are to be discharged from all the ties of affinity, and from all the most sacred obligations and duties of society, in order to form new constitutions of liberty, which are to be established by violence and injustice, and by the most destructive outrages to *that only true liberty* which disdains the alliance of *licentiousness* and wickedness.

I perceive, said I, that you are no great admirer of *total revolutions*; and that your fears of *evil* are much greater than your hopes of *good* from them.

But in the present situation of the political world, can liberty ever be obtained and secured without such revolutions? And is there any thing so much to be dreaded from a nation's changing, or new modeling its constitution and form of government; especially when it is clearly in favor of its own liberty and happiness, and is the result of *its own will*?

To satisfactorily answer your questions, replied he, will require some attention; and perhaps more clearness and impartiality than I may have the good fortune to possess.

You will consider then what we have already proved as to the non-existence of *a national mind*. A nation knows nothing of an *united rational will*. *Collectively*, as to propositions concerning constitutions and governments, whether just or unjust, a nation rather *feels* than *understands* them. They are taught by their effects, but know nothing of their principles: and acquiescence and submission, with contentment, are the true indications that their *feelings* are properly and justly gratified; and that such constitutions and

governments are good, and true to nature. But if general discontents and complaints arise *naturally* and *unexcitedly* among a people, the fault must be in the constitutions or governments, or in the executive officers. They must certainly be ill constructed, or ill executed, so to wound the feelings of human nature, and to violate the just rights of mankind. But what are we to infer from thence? Entire revolution, complete extirpation? The causes of complaint must be very great indeed to admit of no alteration, no amendment, short of the most violent extremes. This favors too much of the illiterate and presumptuous quack, who is too ignorant to perceive the innumerable concatenated causes and effects which chain mankind together by all the powers and faculties of their nature. They are linked by their affections, passions, interests, pleasures, pains, hopes, and fears in an infinity of ways, which may not be the result of reason, but which are much more powerful than reason. The happiness of mankind arises principally from the agreeable disposition and regulation of all these things, independently of their political situation; which they seldom think about, unless *excited*, or compelled by distress.

Any *entire* revolution, therefore, from one form of government to another (which is always from one extreme to another) even of the *very best kind*, must give most violent and distressing shocks to the customs, habits, manners, modes of living, and trains of thinking, among a people. It is so rash and violent, and so out of *the naturally slow and gradual progression of human minds, and human affairs*, that it must always inevitably be productive of most oppressive injustice, and destructive miseries, in any nation that, unfortunately, may be made the subject of such empirical experiments.

Nor is it easy to be persuaded of of men who can work up in their minds to such extravagant and *the wisdom, knowledge, or good intentions* adventurous undertakings, fearless of guilt and remorse. Their discernment in human affairs is more than to be suspected; and their *fanaticism* in politics must be beyond a doubt, if they expect to make mankind free and happy by such monstrous strides as trample on, and destroy, all who oppose, or stand in the way of, their *imaginary political perfection*.

They are too inconsiderate to perceive that if the *most perfect system of government were known*, and could be made the constitution of any nation, yet that perfection could never be understood by the people; and that they could have no true or correct apprehension of any such perfection: but that the various and unequal *powers*, or rather *imbecilities* of their minds, would deflect and depart from it in an infinity of directions, in conformity to their weakness or strength, their ignorance or knowledge; just as they do in religion, in which, *if* any one man ever had true and perfect ideas of the Deity, and of the ends of infinite wisdom and power in the creation (which, perhaps, it may not be very presumptuous to say no man ever had), and could reveal them to men in the most explicit manner; yet the want of capacity in mankind for such high speculations would totally disable them as to the conception and understanding of any such revealed or communicated knowledge; and through an infinity of error, arising from the endless variety and degrees in their capacities, their minds must ever be so full of false and idolatrous ideas, when measured by the *presumed perfection of the only true*, as would make almost as many Gods as there are minds of men.

And thus it is, and ever will be, with regard to ideas of a *perfect constitution, or form of government*: for, if we can *suppose* such perfection were discovered and established, yet it can only be *supposed* of a mind so superior and extraordinary as to be *single* in the human race; (but it is only a supposition) and consequently the perfection would be so high, and so superior to the ordinary faculties of men, with all the weakness, ignorance, and error that continually float in their minds, as to be scarcely at all applicable to the natural infirmities of the creature; and, if *rigorously* enforced, might become the severest tyranny and oppression, considering his ignorance and inability to understand the practice of any such elevated perfection.

It figures but little what high ideas of *perfection* some men may entertain of constitutions and governments: *the capacity* and progressional improvements of the people who are to receive them must always be the object of *primary consideration*; and there is not *a chance of a whole nation's sensibility of them*, even when arrived at the highest degree of civilization which it is possible for any nation to attain: and at every *inferior degree*, the *high and perfect* constitution and government *must descend to that degree* at which a nation may be found, or it can be of but little practical use, and may prove, if rigorously insisted on, much more injurious than beneficial to the existing circumstances and felicity of a nation.

A nation which has already attained a very high degree of civilization, and a knowledge of the useful, elegant, and ornamental arts of life, *under any form of government*, must, *upon a total revolution* to an opposite extreme, be thrown back to a considerable distance with regard to those advantages; because they could not have attained so much without some rooted and favorable circumstances in their old government, though in some respects it may have been a very bad one.

Men who can believe the possibility of a nation's advancement to a high degree of civilization and knowledge *suddenly, or in a short time*, must be very inattentive to daily experience, and to the experience of all ages. Their *ignorance* is indisputable. But, if such notions be propagated with a view only to create discontent in the minds of men with their present condition, and to prepare them for political revolutions, ruinous to their countries, and destructive to themselves, there cannot be a doubt of the diabolical *wickedness* of such propagators.

Every sort of knowledge in man is progressional and gradual; though very unequally so, among individuals and among nations; yet, the great body of the people in nations being *naturally incapable* of considerable acquirements, their progress is very slow, and very limited: *slow*, because of the dullness and hebetation of their faculties; and *limited*, because the object of such faculties extends very little beyond *present convenience*; and present convenience may be, and has been, enjoyed under almost every form of government. A government entirely inimical to humanity cannot exist.

But, as the civilization and happiness of nations can never be advanced by an indolence that looks no farther than present exigencies, exertion with knowledge is indispensably necessary to their acquirement; and exertion with knowledge must have existed in every nation, and under every form of government, that has ever attained a high degree of civilization and polished humanity of manners. And, if such felicitous advantages could never be obtained in nations without the existence of a very considerable degree of liberty in its constitution, or government (which scarcely admits of a doubt), then there must exist *degrees of liberty*, either legal, or tolerated, in all constitutions or governments in proportion to their advancement in civilization, though perhaps the perfection of liberty may be enjoyed by none. Indeed human nature is incapable of such perfection.

Do you think, then, said I, *with indifference* about the establishment of constitutions and forms of governments? Are not some much more preferable to others, and well worth contending for?

If, as has just been shown (answered he) there be various degrees of liberty in nations, *either legal or tolerated*, in proportion to their civilization, as a lover of *true liberty* you may be sure I would choose the *highest legal degree* that could be obtained without injustice and cruelty. A constitution and form of government, wisely and cautiously established, *such as the English is*, has a natural tendency in itself to produce every *degree of liberty* a nation may be capable of receiving in a regular progression to the *highest degree*, without any guilty violence, and without dangerous interferences from malcontents, who labor to involve a happy people in discontent and misery because they feel themselves dissatisfied with their own ungovernable *fanaticism*, or with a deficiency of all *principle* in morals and politics.

Indifference must, doubtless, be very criminal concerning the constitution and government *of our own country*. But certainly a forward interference in the *internal business and government of other nations unnecessarily* must always be unjustifiable. Reforms and revolutions have expanded into *Quixotism*, and propagation, into *Jesuitism* and *Crusades*, in a neighboring nation.

Coolness is indispensably necessary in the search of truth: we must, therefore, farther observe that every nation *naturally* comprehends in itself a mixture of all the forms of government which men discourse of, under the various names of *monarchy, oligarchy, aristocracy, democracy, and the like*: for *such powers*, in every nation and under every form of government, must find their place of action in which they will exert themselves with such energy as they may severally possess. For however correctly men may form ideas and fix them to these words, as really and accurately significant of the *simple existence* of any such governments as they are usually meant to describe, yet no such correctness ever existed in nations or in human nature.

And this is another instance of the abuse of words which are supposed to represent what has no existence in nature; for there never was a *simple* monarchy, oligarchy, aristocracy, or democracy, in the world.

And as to the word *republic*, though it be usually applied to every government without a King, yet, in its original and true signification (*the public weal*) some Kings, at least, have so well understood and attended to the *public weal* that their governments might much more justly merit the appellation of republican than many of those which are always denominated republican, though often severe and tyrannical enemies to the *public weal* and liberties of their countries.

A King wisely and justly limited (names apart) is but the first republican in a free nation; and it is not very easy to conceive how he can have any substantial interest separate from it; and much less against it, since himself and his successors can have no rational hope of satisfaction or security but in its prosperity and duration. It is his home and his country, at least in as high and as clear a sense, as it can be that of any other man.

It should seem then, said I, that the words *kings, aristocrats, or democrats*, excite but little of your serious attention in a philosophical survey of constitutions and governments; and that you have no very strong partialities for the one, more than the other.

Why, you know, replied he, strong partialities, or any partialities, in the search for truth are just so many obstacles in the way of our perception of it. They are true signs of a deficient judgment and of an intemperate mind. Truth cannot be discerned through such clouds. You need not be told that mere words of uncertain and indefinite signification are not worthy of much respect: for, being indefinite, they are the causes of much confusion and of eternal error.

What a philosopher he must be who can hate or love *kings, aristocrats, or democrats* in the aggregate, with no other distinction than the name, and can arrange a nation at his pleasure under such names, regardless of the infinite variety of the human character, and of every principle of humanity and justice; and then can provoke them to the mutual contempt, hatred, and destruction of each other!

The true philosopher, the true friend of mankind, knows that neither liberty nor happiness can be obtained or secured on such superficial and diabolical principles. *To do evil that good may come of it* seems to be the hardy political *jesuitism* of these adventurous and malignant reformers.

Men who look into themselves must easily perceive that human happiness cannot be found in the exercise of violent, contentious, and malevolent passions; nor in exciting among men in their various orders and stations discontent, envy, and aversion. None but the *enemies of liberty* and of the peace of mankind employ themselves in such wicked and destructive pursuits; and it well becomes every man, in any tolerably free country, to consider them and treat them as enemies.

But in a country like ours, where the *moral liberty* of every man feels no restraint, and where *political liberty* is established more firmly and with fewer faults than in any other nation in the world, it must provoke the indignation and disdain of every rational and honest man among us to suppose such a country, with *so many truly treat men in it*, to stand in need of the aid of *empirical arrogance, and perverse fanaticism*, to enable us to rectify the *few faults* that may have crept into it by the progressive changes which have been wrought by all-corroding time.

Other nations have, doubtless, suffered much and long, under arbitrary and despotic authorities; and considerable alterations may be found necessary to give them *such a degree of liberty* as they ought, *or may be prepared* to receive; for *that* has always been a principal object of consideration among wise legislators. But the *genuine liberty* enjoyed under *the British constitution*, has so long and so universally been acknowledged, admired, and praised by all the wisest and greatest men in all the nations of Europe that nothing can exceed the *folly* of those who can believe the necessity of any material change in our *constitution* is likely to be productive of more perfect liberty; nor can any thing exceed the *ignorance and impudence* of those who affirm that we have no constitution at all; and consequently no legal or established liberty. If it were not for the *dangerous industry* with which such *notions* have been propagated among *the least intelligent of the people*, for the most nefarious and ruinous purposes, could any thing be more ridiculous and contemptible?

Indeed, I begin to think so, answered I, and to be convinced of the *falsity of the boasted popular principles* of the present great political reformers and revolutionists in Europe; for doubtless nothing can be more clear than the incapacity of *the people* in the great moral and political concerns of mankind, as you have explained it. But do not the people *appear* to exercise a very considerable degree of power in

an election of their representatives? And ought we not to believe so favorably of the general intentions of *the people* in their *free and uninfluenced elections* to give them credit for a *sense* of public interest and public virtue?

To refer you, answered he, to the general conduct of *the people* at elections might be thought to short a way of deciding such questions. But experience is the most authentic teacher: and from her we learn the extreme weakness and corruptibility of *the people* at elections. They are still led by *a few*, who can induce them, or overawe them, to give away or sell their votes; and most certainly with very little regard to *public interest, character, or talents*. The various contrivances that are in use among men for balloting and voting to prevent such general corruption are so many proofs of the fact.

In such conduct we perceive but *very little sense* of public virtue. As to the power, individually, it is *small*, but unitedly, it is *great*; and if it could be exercised justly and independently and directed to its proper object, which should be the election of the *best and wisest* men among them for their representatives, it would certainly then become a most respectable power indeed. But here, again, nature opposes our hopeful theory. A nation, it seems, is incapable of such correctness and virtue.

We deny not that *the people* ought to possess *the power*, but the mode in which they should exercise it, with propriety and public utility, must be discovered and prescribed by superior minds. They can perform the simple act of power; but they cannot extend their views to the great political consequences, nor comprehend the general interests and happiness of a nation. It is, doubtless, a power which out always to remain with *the people* in a free country; but certainly the greatest caution and wisdom are required to restrain its *licentiousness* and to direct it to its only proper object, *a free and impartial election*.

I must confess myself thus far satisfied, replied I; yet I could continue my interrogations much longer were it not an unreasonable intrusion on your time and patience. I will therefore only once more trouble you for your opinion on what is *commonly* understood by *opposition to government*. Do you think its tendency beneficial or injurious to Liberty.

As no things can be more incompatible than *contention* and *felicity*, than *injustice* and *liberty*; so *concord* and *affection* among all the various ranks of men into which a nation may be divided (and there always *naturally* will be *various ranks*, whether distinguished by *names* or not) ought surely at all times to be recommended and promoted with the most patriotic attention.

But when continual *opposition to government, whether well or ill conducted*, is encouraged and applauded, and when we can believe that the contentions and rage of parties for power can be productive of good and advantageous national effects, except accidentally; in short, when we can believe that the several branches of a good constitution can act with more public efficiency, utility, and dispatch when thwarted and impeded in all their deliberations and actions by an *Opposition* that can brave truth, justice, and every other virtue in their endeavors to gratify their *unprincipled ambition*; callous to the domestic and foreign evils which they may bring upon their country; our hearts and understandings much be lamentably perverted by the viciousness of such malevolent principles; and we must be insensible of that integrity, justice, and virtue without which neither *the moral nor political liberty of mankind* can be of long duration in any country.

However, a candid and generous *Opposition*, whose employment is to prevent errors, to guard against inefficient or wrong measures, and to defend their country from the evils that might befall it from the weaknesses, follies, or vices of men in power, is not only beneficial, but absolutely necessary to the public safety. But to oppose every thing, *right or wrong*, cannot be *just*; and it must therefore be injurious to *true liberty*. Such hardened unconsciousness may suit well enough with the *licentiousness* of desperadoes in politics, or with the wantonness of an ignorant and felicitous mob: but the *true friends of liberty* disdain to contend against truth; they will generally applaud it, though pronounced by an enemy; well knowing that without such liberality they cannot be at all qualified for great and noble employments.

With many expressions of satisfaction *on my part* we here concluded our conversation.

THE END

¹ This is concern is especially compelling given that “reason,” of which Epicurus thought highly, was itself denied a place in the Canon.

² Wikipedia entry on Tabula Rasa, 02/06/2011.

³ The Gentleman’s Magazine, Volume 80, Part 1.

⁴ Especially if the reader is careful to substitute “Nature” for “Creator” or “God” –terms that Barwis appears to have considered almost synonymous – when these references appear.

⁵ All these things require to be looked at, and also it is the part of a great and wise man, O judges, when he has taken in his hand his judicial tablet, to think that he is not alone, and that it is not lawful for him to do whatever he wishes; but that he must employ in his deliberations law, equity, religion, and good faith; that he must discard lust, hatred, envy, fear, and all evil passions, and must ***think that consciousness implanted in one’s mind, which we have received from the immortal gods, and which cannot be taken from us***, to be the most powerful motive of all. And if that is a witness of virtuous counsels and virtuous actions throughout our whole lives, we shall live without any fear, and in the greatest honour.

[Translation by C.D. Yonge from *Perseus*.]

⁶ Essay, Octavo, p. 34.

⁷ p.34.

⁸ P. 47.

⁹ Mr. Locke, in Essay, Vol. II, pages 174 to 177, has clearly pointed out the difficulty of fixing with precision the meaning of moral words.

¹⁰ Essay, p. 39.

¹¹ P. 105.

¹² See also, p. 185. Chap. XX

¹³ Vol. II, page 28, &c.

¹⁴ P. 34.

¹⁵ Essay XXVI, p. 20, 30, and 31.

¹⁶ See also, p. 185 and 330.

¹⁷ Essay, p. 34.

¹⁸ Essay, p. 34.

¹⁹ Essay, p. 135.

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[Translation by C.D. Yonge from *Perseus*.]

²¹ Peter.

²² Locke.

²³ J. J. Rousseau.

²⁴ By *notions*, he means confused ideas, or ideas not derivable from any things existing in nature.

²⁵ The great Revolutionist admits of but one constitution. England has none, he says.

²⁶ Second Dialogue.