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**The Works Of the late Right Honorable Henry St. John,  
Lord Viscount Bolingbroke**

In Five Volumes, complete.

**Bolingbroke, Henry St. John**

**London, 1754**

IV.

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To conclude therefore, nothing of this kind can deserve our attention more, because nothing can contribute more to keep us within the golden mean of truth, than to observe the strange extremes into which philosophers are carried, by presumption, by an affectation of singularity, and by other motives, little less inexcusable, tho in appearance more plausible. Thus they are carried, in the instance before us, some to set the principles of morality out of our sight and their own too, whilst they assume them to be derived from eternal natures, independent on the will of God; some, to lay these principles as much too low, as low as the level of human policy, whilst they assume them to be nominal natures, dependent on the will of man; some, to insist that God wills we should follow, in our moral conduct, the same eternal rule which he follows himself, in the government of the universe; and some, to affirm, that far from having any rule at all, every thing is indifferent in it's nature, and man by nature a lawless savage.

## IV.

**A**FTER censuring these extremes, it becomes proper to inquire, a little more particularly, what the truth is which lies between them, how the laws of nature develop themselves to the human understanding, how self-love leads to sociability, and the most confined principle extends itself to be that which connects the whole race of mankind. But before I say any thing further on these subjects, I must give some answer to a query which our good friend the B. of C. makes. The query is this, "Whether there is any absurdity in supposing that man should imitate the author of nature, so far as he is able?" This is said to be "not only agreeable to  
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“ the christian plan, but also to that of the Stoics.” See Balbus, in Tully de Nat. Deorum.

IN answer to this query I confess, and think myself obliged in conscience to confess, that I hold it to be absurd, and worse than absurd to assert, that man can imitate God, except in a sense so very remote, and so improper, that the expression should never be used, and much less such a duty be recommended. Divines have distinguished, in their bold analyses, between God's physical and his moral attributes, for which distinction, tho I see several theological, I do not see one religious purpose that it is necessary to answer. But the distinction once made by their supreme authority, tho they admit that we cannot imitate God in the exercise of the former, they insist that we can, and ought to imitate him in the exercise of the latter; and to compleat this proof, that consists of affirmation rather than argument, they maintain, at least CLARKE\* does so very peremptorily, that the divine moral attributes, that is holiness, goodness, justice, righteousness, and truth, are the very same in God as they are in our ideas. Nay he adds, that God, out of a tender and hearty concern for the happiness of man, (strange words to be applied to the Supreme Being!) desires to be imitated by him in those perfections, which are the foundation of his own unchangeable happiness.

WHEN they distinguish thus between the physical and moral attributes, it is plain that they see how absurd they would appear, if they proposed to creatures, conscious of their corporeal and mental weakness, to imitate, even so far as they are able or in any degree, infinite power and wisdom; which

\* Evid. p. 116.

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would be a ridiculous mimickry, not a real imitation. When they propose this imitation of the moral attributes, they flatter themselves that the ridicule will be less liable to observation. These attributes are less so, and they can make, by the help of their precarious metaphysical and logical reasonings, such representations of them as may seem to render them imitable by man. But they would do well to consider, that if the moral attributes were demonstrated by arguments à priori, and they are not so even by them, to be the same in God as they are in our ideas, yet this general assurance would be far from making them objects of human imitation. To be such, they must be known à posteriori, like his physical attributes; for we can have no knowledge of either, except that which sense and Experience give us. They must be discerned in the works of God, and in the conduct of his providence; and it is evident that they are not, cannot be so discerned in them as to be proper objects of our imitation. The divine attributes are exercised in such innumerable relations absolutely unknown to us, that tho we are sure the exercise of them, in the immensity of the universe, is always directed by the all-perfect Being to that which is fittest to be done on the whole; yet the notions of created beings who see them in one relation alone, like us, cannot be applied to them with any propriety, nor with any certainty sufficient to make them objects of their imitation. This is so true, that in many cases we should act in direct contradiction to the law of our nature, if we made the conduct of divine providence the rule of ours. God makes his sun to rise upon the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust. He involves the innocent with the guilty in great calamities: and there is no theme on which divines enlarge more pathetically than on the unjust distribution of good and evil, when they join with the atheists, tho for different purposes, in one common cry.

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Are these appearances, however constant some, and however frequent others of them may be, to stand as objects that we are to imitate in our moral conduct? I think no man will say that they are, except those who have so little regard to consistency that they propose the first to our imitation, whilst they aggravate the two last to such a degree, that they assume the justice and goodness of God's dispensations, in this system, to be capable of no other vindication than that which supposes another. These writers and preachers therefore must mean, when they exhort us to imitate God, not the God whom we see in his works, and in all that his providence orders or permits, but the God who appears in their representations of him, and who is often such a God as no pious thief can acknowledge.

WHEN BALBUS, since BALBUS is cited on this occasion, endeavours to prove the world a wise being and a God, he says, speaking after CHRYSIPPUS, " ipse autem homo ortus est ad mundum contemplandum & imitandum." He is born to do this, so far as he is able; for the world is perfect, and he is only " quædam particula perfecti." He has only a participation, our divines would say, of the divine perfections. Further on, the same BALBUS, being to prove that the world is governed by the providence of the gods, assumes that the gods must be " non solum animantes sed etiam rationis compotes," and that they must live together in a sort of civil society, governing the world like one common republic or city. From hence it follows, he says, that there is the same reason, the same truth, and the same law of right and wrong " utrobique," both in God and man. The wisdom, the reason, the prudence of the gods are greater indeed, tho' of the same kind; and since these are employed by them in " maximis & optimis rebus," they must be employed of necessity

cessity in the government of the world; because nothing can be greater nor better than the world, "nec majus, nec melius mundo." These are all the passages I recollect, where BALBUS speaks of any thing pertinent to the present question; and I cannot find any thing in them that is favorable to the doctrine taught by platonick and christian divines, about our obligation to imitate God. I am sorry to find too, that this doctrine is more extravagant than the extravagancies of the stoicks. To maintain, that the material world is a divine animal, a wise being, and a god, is blasphemous and absurd. But to say, that man is born to contemplate, and imitate the world, may admit of a very good sense, with a little interpretation; since it may be made to signify, what it would be better to express plainly, that man is born to contemplate the world, and to conform his behaviour to the will of God, that is manifested, relatively to man, in the constitution of it. Thus the doctrine of BALBUS may receive a reasonable interpretation, which, I am sure, that of CLARKE and other christian divines cannot; and, besides, it will afford as much pathetic matter "per la predica" with the advantage of being true, as the other, which, however piously intended or heard, is false and prophane.

THE man, who neglects the duties of natural religion and the obligations of morality, acts against his nature, and lives in open defiance to the author of it. God declares for one order of things, he for another. God blends together the duty and interest of his creature; his creature separates them, despises the duty, and proposes to himself another interest. He, who acts in a conformity to the nature of things, carries on the system of God, and cooperates with him: and surely to put the system of divine wisdom in execution, and to cooperate with the creator, is honor enough for the creature.

VOL. V.

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Thus we may attain to the perfection of our nature, and, by pretending to no more, we may do it real honor: whereas, by assuming that we imitate God, we give the strongest proof of the imperfection of our nature, whilst we neglect the real, and aspire vainly at a mock honor; as pride, seduced by adulation, is prone to do; and as religious pride, wrought up by self-conceit into enthusiasm, does above all others. They who encourage and flatter this pride, like CLARKE, are a sort of eunomians, and boast, like the founder of that sect, and the fast friend of the arians, that they know God as well as he knows himself.

HEATHEN divines were very far from having the same presumption. The Gods they pretended to know were inmates in one great house with men, or fellow citizens of one great city. Such Gods they might pretend to know, and to imitate too. But we shall not find that those of them, who acknowledged, besides these inferior generated Gods, one supreme ungenerated Being, presumed to claim any such intimate acquaintance with him. On the contrary, they supposed him to be above all human conception, and therefore above all human imitation. He did not stand, in their ideas of him, even in the relation to man of creator or governor, except he might be said to stand mediately, through these inferior divinities, in that relation: and thus we have another instance of the strange extremes into which philosophers run. These extremes would be avoided, if they could content themselves to know God, as he has thought fit to be known by them: and why are they not, divines especially, so content? He appears in his works, and by easy deductions from our knowledge of them, to be the first, self-existent, intelligent cause of all things, a Being of infinite wisdom and power, and therefore an object, to all rational creatures, not of curiosity but of  
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awe, of reverence, of adoration, of gratitude, of obedience, and resignation. To what purpose then do divines contend to make him an object of human imitation, by deductions from his nature and attributes, independently of his works, by which alone they can have the little, inadequate, general, but sufficient, knowledge of his nature and attributes that has been mentioned? Do they hope to carry theism, and the obligations of natural religion further, by nice metaphysical speculations, hard to understand, and inconclusive when they are understood, than by those obvious proofs which God has proportioned to the comprehension of every man? I conclude therefore my answer to this query, by asking, in my turn, our excellent friend, whether the doctrine of imitating God, even so far as we are able, does not tend to draw men off unnecessarily, and, if I may say so, wantonly, from real knowledge, into those abstractions that have led so many to confound the divine and the human nature, to imagine an uninterrupted scale of intelligence from man up to God, to flatter themselves with notions, not only of imitating him, but of being united to him, and to invent or adopt, in the licentiousness of imagination, all that metaphysical and mystical blasphemy which has passed for the most sublime theology.

## V.

WHAT has been said in answer to the query about imitating God, is not remote from the subject we are upon, tho it may seem a digression, since it tends to lay the principles of natural law on their true foundation. All that can be said, to any real and useful purpose, concerning this law is extremely plain. It lies too in a very narrow compass: and yet what volumes have been written, what disputes have arisen, about

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