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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

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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.

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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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it; whilst men have been, as authors are commonly; much more intent to shew their learning or acuteness, than to set their subject in a clear and sufficient light. A superfluous glare not only tires, but offusques, the intellectual sight; and of this there are examples to be found. But the writers I speak of here, seem oftener to do like the schoolmen, of whom my lord BACON says very wittily and justly, that instead of setting up a light sufficient to enlighten a large room, they go about with a small taper, and, whilst they illuminate one corner, darken the rest. He says very truly, that they break the solidity of science by the minuteness of their questions; and, we may add as truly, that the learned persons I intend here, of both sorts, puzzle and perplex the plainest thing in the world; sometimes by citations little to the purpose, or of little authority; sometimes by a great apparatus of abstract reasoning, and by dint of explanation. Read SELDEN, read GROTIUS, read CUMBERLAND, read PUFFENDORF, to mention no others, if you have leisure and patience for it: and after you have done so, I will appeal to you for the truth of the judgment I make. There are many curious researches, no doubt, and many excellent observations in these writers; but they seem to be great writers on this subject by much the same right, as he might be called a great traveller, who should go from London to Paris by the Cape of Good Hope.

AMONG all the trifling questions, that have been raised concerning the law of nature, none is more trifling than the cavil made at the very expression. It is futile and pedantic, and would not deserve of itself even the little notice that I have taken of it occasionally. But the ill consequence of admitting it, with respect to the original and universal obligation of the law, makes it deserve refutation. HOBBS used the term, tho he denied the thing. His point of view was to
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derive all law from the authority of the civil magistrate; and therefore, tho he acknowledged right reason to be the rule, he would not allow it to be the law, of human actions. But the instances he brings in proof are nothing to the purpose. The laws of nature, taught by philosophers in their writings, are not therefore written laws, nor are the writings of lawyers such, for want of a supreme authority, "ob defectum auctoritatis summæ." No doubt they are not. But if they are conformable to the nature of things, they have an authority superior to HOBBS's supreme authority. Tho philosophers and lawyers collected them, God made them, and civil laws themselves have no real, no intrinsical authority distinct from this. Nay, an avowed atheist might indulge us in the use of this term, like HOBBS, whether he was one or no, tho some divines will not; for the rule of right reason must appear evident to him, if he reflects at all on the nature of things, and not the rule alone, but the happiness or unhappiness of mankind, consequent to the observation or the breach of it: all which together, he must own, would amount to a law, if he could bring himself to acknowledge a lawgiver; and comes very near it, however, in a large but proper sense. How should it not, when we collect this double sanction from the same nature from whence we collect the rule?

SELDEN, much more orthodox than HOBBS, in his first book "De Jure Nat. et Gent. juxta Dif. Ebræor. where he treats this matter with that profusion of learning which he pours forth on every occasion, agrees that the principles of natural law were discovered by the right use of reason. But, after this, he endeavours to shew, from the different and contrary placets of philosophers, as well as institutions of legislators, that reason cannot frame such an uniform stated rule of right and wrong as this has been represented, nor much less a law with-

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out a legislative authority : and he concludes, as every theft must, and as the Jews did, that God, who made the law of nature, published it originally, and publishes it constantly to men. Now that God made the law, is certain; that he gave it, and still gives it "perpetua indicazione," is no less certain; but the manner in which he gave, and continues to give it, according to the Jews, is very far from being so. It is a rhapsody of assumed fact, and of superstitious and enthusiastical notions, common to them, to several heathen philosophers, to christian fathers, to scholastic divines, to mahometan doctors, and arabian metaphysicians. To lay the foundation of the law of nature on such vain hypotheses, is to make the most important of human concerns ridiculous, the most distinct and clearest ideas confused and obscure, and, in a word, to hinder us from seeing truth itself in a clear light.

God gave the law of nature, according to the rabbinical doctrine, by word of mouth to ADAM first, and to NOAH afterwards: and the great principles of it were contained in the seven articles, that are called "septem praecepta Noachidarum," by whom they mean not NOAH and his immediate offspring alone, but the whole race of mankind. How the last of these laws, "de membro animalis viventis non comedendo," came to be given to ADAM, if it was not lawful to eat any flesh, as they say it was not in the antediluvian world, is not easily explained. We may therefore suppose that they did not mean to include this article among the precepts given to ADAM, tho an inconsistency never stopped the talmudists, and tho the rabbins blunder daily through many that are as obvious as this. The distinction they make between themselves and all other people, with respect to the divine communication of this law, is a
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little more intelligible. As they were descendants of NOAH, this law was given to them in common with all men; and since there was no written law before MOSES, their patriarchs themselves could have no other moral law than this tradition. But then, as they were a chosen people, selected and separated from the rest of mankind, God gave them, by his servant MOSES, a peculiar law: and thus they stood distinguished from the rest of the Noachidæ, whom they called the Nations; as the Greeks had the folly to call every man a barbarian who was not a Greek, and as even the modern Italians, to say nothing of the old Romans, have sometimes given the same appellation even to the most civilized of their neighbours.

ANOTHER way, by which, according to the same rabbinical doctrine, the law of nature was and is communicated to man by God, is that of immediate or mediate inspiration, in opposition to mere rational faculties and operations. I call it inspiration, because the Jews imagined an "intellectus agens," or active spirit, by the influence or illumination of which, and in concurrence with which, the human understanding is made capable of knowing, not only the laws of nature, but all the other principles of science, and deductions of reason, which are the objects of it. This "intellectus agens" is sometimes, and to them, God himself, by a particular prerogative belonging to their nation, "ex prerogativâ gentis." To other men it is the minister of God, that illuminates their minds, like an intellectual sun, by a force and with an authority derived from God. It was in the first way, no doubt, that ABRAHAM discovered by philosophical meditation, in the midst of idolatry, the existence of the one true God: and, to say the truth, the Jews should be, by virtue of this prerogative, the most enlightened and the most knowing people on earth; whereas

whereas they seem to have been in all ages the very reverse; before their captivity, indocile and ignorant; after it, credulous and bigot, little curious of the real, much addicted to the imaginary sciences that were cultivated by other nations.

THEY entertained the notion of this second kind of inspiration later than that of the first, "juxta disciplinam recentiorem," says SELDEN: and it is no wonder that they did so. They had been used to think, that the divine presence resided amongst them, and that they consulted God by their high priest; that he spoke immediately to their prophets, and exercised his power immediately in the conduct of their affairs. But afterwards, tho he was near them still, he was not so near them; and mediate inspiration to illuminate their minds became necessary. Besides, it was not till after their captivity that a more refined philosophy, and notions more metaphysical than any they had had before, began to be introduced among them, whilst they lived under the Seleucidæ and the Ptolemys, in ages when the first philosophy was growing up to that pitch of enthusiasm and madness at which it arrived in the school of Alexandria, and wherever the doctrines of the latter pythagoricians and platonicians prevailed. From hence, I suppose, it has happened, that this dogma of the rabbins bears so near a resemblance to the opinions of the greek, and, in imitation of them, of the arabian metaphysicians, who confounded together, with more difference of expression than of meaning, if any of them can be said properly to have had a meaning, the divine and human reason. But however all this may have been, the rabbins assert that the divine illuminating presence, by which alone men are able to discover the law of nature, illuminated chiefly the descendants of SETH and of SEM, till the days in which the law was given by MOSES, when seven other prophets only
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arose among the nations ; and that from this aera the divine illumination has seldom shined on any persons except themselves. So that, on this hypothesis, no great improvement has been made in the sciences since the days of *Moses*, except by the Jews.

I HAVE drawn this sketch from *SELDEN*, in order to contraste the extravagancy of these notions, which are derived from a true principle, that the law of nature is the law of God, with those of *HOBBS*, which are founded on this false principle, that the laws of nature are the laws of civil magistrates : and I conclude upon the whole, that we shall do much better to trust ourselves than such masters, who lead us into error about the origin of natural law, or about the means of arriving at the knowledge of it. One makes the origin independent on God, and some divines do little less. Another makes the means of arriving at the knowledge independent on man, and above the strength of his natural reason ; tho the author of nature has been graciously pleased to proportion them one to the other. If these doctrines are hurtful in different respects, many words and much time are spent about others very little necessary, about abstract notions of moral entities, and about the causes of moral truth, concerning which we may easily fall into error (whilst we can fall into none concerning the great principles of it) unless we have the light of that nature to which our search is directed. The philosopher may, because he does this ; I had almost said must ; but the man of common sense cannot err about these principles, tho he may remain in ignorance about some of them, for want of industry or opportunity to discover them all.