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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**

LVIII.

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orthodoxy change, and must they be governed by events, instead of governing them? If they are favorable to those of your communion, they will be deemed unjust by every good protestant, and God will be taxed with encouraging idolatry and superstition. If they are favorable to those of any of our communions, they will be deemed unjust by every good papist, and God will be taxed with nursing up heresy and schism. God can do nothing more than to furnish arms against himself, by the dispensations of particular providences in the christian world, and every one of these will pass, in the minds of some men, for a proof of injustice, if it passes in the minds of others for a proof of justice. Nay, more. If, in these dispensations, God, who knows the hearts of men, should judge differently from our divines, if he should shew more regard to moral goodness, than to the reputed orthodoxy of any side, it would fare with him -- I say it with reverence -- as it fares with every honest man in civil contests; He would be calumniated by all sides, in the exercise of particular providences, as he is in that of a general providence.

## LVIII.

**H**AVING said thus much to shew the absurdity of assuming that a system of particular providences is necessary to render the government of God, in the present constitution of the physical and moral world, a just government, as it must, indeed, be necessary, if the government of a general providence, according to the established order of things, is unjust; it seems to me, that they who object to this are driven to the greatest of all absurdities. They must either give up their objections, or they must insist that the whole established order of things ought to be changed, and that God cannot govern mankind



mankind with justice, unless he undoes all he has done, and asserts this moral attribute at the expence of his wisdom. To say, as CLARKE says, "that the natural order of things is so perverted that virtue and goodness cannot obtain their proper and due effects," is a mere fallacy. He begs the question, and begging the question he affirms untruly. How, and when, was the natural order of things perverted? What is every natural order, but that which the Author of nature appoints, and how can it be changed for the better, or for the worse, without a new appointment of his? Are we to believe then, that he has undone his work once already after the fall of Adam, and that he must undo it again, to appear either good or just? To think worthily of God, we must think that the natural order of things has been always the same, and that a Being of infinite wisdom and knowledge, to whom the past and the future are like the present, and who wants no experience to inform him, can have no reason to alter what infinite wisdom and knowledge have once done, as I have hinted above. Again. What are the proper and due effects of virtue and goodness? Nay, what are virtue and goodness themselves? They are not, I believe, independent, nor eternal, but they are real natures, resulting from the system of rational beings to which they are agreeable, as their contraries are repugnant, and they must, therefore, be as invariable as the system of which they are parts. Thus I think; for the opinion of the independency of any natures on God, or of their co-eternity with him, are bugbears to me who am a child in philosophy, tho they are none to such full-grown metaphysical giants as CUDWORTH, CLARKE, and others. Now, if virtue and goodness be as invariable as this system, their effects in it must be as invariable as themselves, and, therefore, to say that they cannot obtain their proper and due effects in it is nothing better than cant. They may not obtain all the effects which



these great doctors in metaphysics and artificial theology esteem proper and due to them; but they may, and they certainly do, obtain all those which he, who willed this system and them into being designed, that they should obtain; for if he had designed that they should have obtained more, he would have proportioned different means to a different end, and man would have been a less imperfect creature than he is.

COULD philosophers and divines be persuaded to lay aside the affectation of etching out a little real knowledge, with much hypothesis in matters, where hypothesis should be least employed, many things, which are made intricate by this method, would be extremely plain. Thus, for instance, in the present case, let them not assume, that there are natures which exist independently on God, according to which he proceeds, or should proceed, and that we may judge, by a rule common to him and us, the eternal reason of things. Let them not assume, that the moral attributes are precisely the same in God, as they are in our ideas and notions; that they required man should be the final cause of the world, and his happiness the final cause of man. Instead of reasoning from what they imagine these attributes, and an eternal reason of things required that God should do, let them be content to know what his infinite wisdom and power have done, and to reason from thence. Let them not assume, in short, what they have no sufficient grounds to assume, and they will accuse the Supreme Being of injustice no longer.

IT may be said, and I know it will be said, that we must assume at least thus much that God acts always according to the moral fitness of things, or we must assume something worse, we must assume that he acts arbitrarily; and that, on this supposition, we leave ourselves no rule by which to judge  
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of his proceedings, nor to distinguish certainly between a true and a false revelation. Now, I am far from denying, that there is an eternal reason. God is himself that reason, and there is no doubt that he proceeds with his creatures in all the exertions of his power, determined by infinite wisdom, according to the fitness of things. But the question is, what are the criterions of this moral fitness relatively to man? I think then, that they are to us, and can be only that constitution of things which we call the human system, and the notions which arise naturally in our minds on the consideration of it, or which we are able to deduce immediately, and obviously, from it. When we keep within these bounds, we are in no danger of being imposed upon, concerning the will of God, nor by any false revelation. But when we go beyond them, we are apt to impose on ourselves; for, to return some of CLARKE'S words upon him, tho there is a natural and unalterable difference between good and evil; yet nothing but the extreme stupidity of mind, or perverseness of spirit, and disregard to truth, can possibly make any man affirm, like him, that moral fitnesses and unfitnesses are, even in their applications to our scene of action, (and they will be infinitely less so in their applications to that of God) as manifest as mathematical truths. We may discover moral fitness as we discover natural law, but then we must be on our guard, lest we should pervert our notions of moral fitness and unfitness by wrong applications of them out of our system, as we pervert the principles of natural law by wrong applications of them within it. To suppose, in terms, that the laws of human are the laws of divine nature, would be too absurd, tho some writers have done no less. But it is just as absurd, nay, it is just the same, to suppose that the moral fitness and unfitness of things must be in every instance, whatever it may be in some, exactly the same to God as it is to man. He made our system for us, not for himself; and



tho we are sure he cannot exact that we should believe or practice any thing repugnant to the moral fitness resulting from it, we must not imagine that, by abstracting our notions from it, we can render them adequate to that moral fitness which is the object of omniscience, the omniscience of that Supreme Being who is the author of this, and every other system.

THE men, who attempt to do this, leave to God nothing more than they assume to themselves, except a greater degree of power: and even this they assume to be limited of right by natures as eternal, and as independent as his own, tho executed, in fact, repugnantly to these natures. What these natures are they know as well as he; for they soar up on platonic wings to the first good and the first just. What his attributes must be to be conformable to these natures, and what they require of him consequently, these persons illuminated by an eternal reason cannot, therefore, fail to know: and they seem to exalt them as if they meant only by exalting them to aggravate the want of goodness and justice in the conduct of providence. Let not this pass for any exaggeration. It is, in plain terms, the sum of a doctrine they teach in the cant of metaphysical theology, to which they have accustomed the ears of men, and by which they impose on their understandings. I desire no better proof of what is here advanced than the twelfth section of CLARKE'S demonstration, and the first of his evidences. The subject has been often touched in these essays, and even in some of the last paragraphs, but it may be proper, however, to examine this famous argumentation *à priori* a little more particularly. It is plausible, for it speaks to the pride of the human heart, and submits the whole oeconomy of divine wisdom to the judgment of man. But I apprehend that it supposes some things  
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very doubtful, and affirms others that imply contradiction. I will enter into it, therefore, in this place, further than I have done, and slide or leap from subject to subject, or revert to the same a second, and a third time, in these ill connected minutes, as I used to do in the conversations they are designed to recal.

THAT there is a fitness and unfitness of things to one another, a suitability and unsuitability of circumstances to persons, no reasonable man will deny. But I suspect, that many reasonable men will doubt, whether they are founded in natures and qualifications independently on God, and antecedently to his will. They will find it difficult to conceive how fitnesses, resulting from the natures of things, or from the qualifications of persons, can be called antecedent to these things, and to these persons: and yet they must be so, if they are antecedent to that will, by the act of which these things and these persons first existed\*. It is said that the existence of things, and the argument requires that the same should be said of persons, depends on the arbitrary will of God. But that when they are created, and as long as they exist, their proportions, respects, and relations are abstractly of eternal necessity, according to the different natures of things, and the different qualifications of persons, in one common nature. This I take to be the sense and strength of the argument, which will not appear in my apprehension very intelligible, nor, as far as it is intelligible, very conclusive.

WE consider one thing, or one property, one person, or one qualification, without considering another, and by that

\* Evid. p. 87.

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we make a very real, and, I presume, the sole kind of abstraction our minds are capable of making. But to consider the properties of things, or the qualifications of persons, and the fitnesses and unfitnesses resulting from them, as independent natures existing before there were any such things, or any such persons, any such natures, qualifications, circumstances, seems to me a fictitious abstraction doubly. It assumes that we have ideas which we have not, and that the modes of being, by which things and persons are what they are, may be conceived as adventitious to them, instead of being conceived as so constitutive of them that they could not be without the things, and persons, nor these without them. By assuming one of these imaginary abstractions, men are led to assume the other, and their mistake about the operations of nature is connected with that about the operations of their own minds.

THE modes of being, and the properties of things are inseparable from them, even in imagination, which might be an argument the more to persuade that they are the same specific natures, and that his will, which constituted these natures, constituted, at the same time, all that is essential to them. But tho we cannot separate in this manner, we can take the properties of things, both physical and moral, into distinct consideration. This philosophers have done this with honor to themselves, and advantage to others. But when they have been long accustomed to such abstract considerations, and have established certain mathematical and moral truths upon them, some of these philosophers assume, that these general notions are natures independent on God, and in themselves of eternal necessity. God has made triangles and men. But triangularity they say, and they might say just as well humanity are independent natures, antecedent to his will, and that do not  
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owe their original to arbitrary and positive appointment. That there are necessary truths, mathematical and moral, and that such they must be, as long as there are men, and as the present system of things continues, is certain. But they would not be called, perhaps, eternal truths, nor would these notions be represented like eternal and independent natures, if it was more considered, that the self-existent Being is the fountain of all existence, and that, since every thing exists by his will, it must exist according to his will; for which reason it seems as absurd to say, that when he made man, he could give him no other nature than the human, which was therefore necessarily, not arbitrarily given, as it would be to say, that, when he made a man, he did not make a tree. A man with the properties of a tree would not be a man. A tree with the properties of a man would not be a tree. The same will which made each, made the properties of each. It is one and the same act, and to say that the nature of any thing, or the truths resulting from it, are independent, in any sense, on the will that made them, seems to me, therefore, to imply contradiction.

CLARKE quotes a passage from PLATO, wherein that philosopher says, according to his translation, that "as in matters of sense the reason, why a thing is visible, is not because it is seen, but it is, therefore, seen because it is visible: so in matters of natural reason and morality, that which is holy and good, is not, therefore, holy and good because it is commanded to be done, but it is, therefore, commanded by God because it is holy and good." If I would cavil a little, I might shew that this quotation does not serve the doctor's purpose, nor prove that PLATO was of his mind in asserting, that moral obligations are, primarily and originally, antecedent to the will of God, if by will be meant his determination that they



they should be obligatory, when he made a moral world; and if by will he meant a positive command, signified by revelation, the quotation from PLATO, who knew nothing of any such revelation, is strangely absurd. Things may be seen, because they are visible, they are not visible, because they are seen. Let it be so. Does this prove that the philosopher thought visibility, any more than vision, an eternal independent nature? Might he not think, that God made things to be seen, and creatures to see, and that visibility and vision began when he willed the physical system into existence? Thus, again, that which is good, is not such because it is commanded, but it is commanded because it is good. Will it follow from this expression, that good is, according to PLATO, an eternal independent nature? Will it not follow as naturally, that good and evil began when God willed the moral system into existence, and that he commanded the former by the laws of their nature, at the same time when he created moral agents capable of either? This remark may serve, at least, to shew how apt even the best writers are to amuse themselves, and to impose on others by a mere jingle of words, and to quote what makes against them, or does not make for them.

BUT now, having made this remark, I am ready to acknowledge, that PLATO meant by this passage in his Euthyphro the first good, that independent nature which resides among others in his imaginary region of eternal ideas. This should be his meaning, whatever his words in this place import, to make them consistent with his doctrine, and apposite to the present dispute, wherein PLATO and the platonics run into one extreme, as HOBBS and the hobbits into another. The former assume an eternal morality antecedent not only to any signification, but to any actual determination of the will of God. The latter assume, that there was no moral duty, no  
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difference, no distinction made between just and unjust, moral good and evil, till the will of man made this distinction by civil constitutions, and positive laws. It seems to me, that both these opinions tend to weaken the authority of natural religion. By the first, God published, indeed, a moral law, when he made moral agents. But he was not properly the legislator. The law existed before them, and it binds both him and them. By the second, he has not so much as the appearance of legislature. He made a moral world, indeed, but he made it in confusion, and he left it without any rule, till at last his creatures made one for themselves. He brought order out of the confusion of a physical, they out of that of a moral chaos. How preferable is the middle opinion between these two extremes, that God instituted moral obligations when he made moral agents, that the law of their nature is the law of his will, and that, how indifferent soever we may presume, every thing is to him before his will has determined it to be, it becomes, after this determination, a necessary, tho created, nature? Such justice is in man, tho in God it may be nothing more than one mode of his infinite wisdom. As long as there are men, this nature must exist. Where it will be, and what it will be, when they and this moral system are at an end, let those able persons, who know so well where and what it was before they both began to exist, determine. If I insist much on this point, I do not pretend to clear it from all the difficulties that lye in the way, neither by what is said here, nor by what has been said elsewhere, nor by what I may say hereafter. There are many on either side that have perplexed, and may continue to perplex, much better heads than mine. But, in the first place, I feel an insuperable repugnancy to own that any thing is independent on God; and in the next place, I am shocked at the consequences that are drawn from this doctrine.