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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**

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LIX.

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## LIX.

**H**E who dares to affirm, that there are eternal self-existent natures independent on God, is bold enough. But what shall we say to those who dare to affirm, that these eternal natures resulting from the eternal fitnesses and unfitnesses, agreements and disagreements, proportions and disproportions of things, are absolutely and necessarily, in themselves, what they appear to be to the understandings of all intelligent beings? I do not add the exception, except those who understand things to be what they are not, because it is unnecessary to any other purpose than that of an evasion, which CLARKE, like a cunning disputant, foresaw he might want and did want. What shall we say of those who think it necessary to bring proofs to shew that God must know what his rational creatures may know concerning these eternal natures independent on him, and who conclude from thence, that the rule of divine and human conduct is the same? God disdains not to observe this rule, it is said, as the law of his actions, and he appeals to men for his observation of it; which matter of fact is asserted on the authority of a chapter in EZECHIEL\*, where the prophet, like a prophet and a poet, introduces God expostulating with the Jews in this stile, and appealing to them for the equity of his proceedings. Bishop CUMBERLAND, who is quoted by CLARKE †, carries these notions still further, when he maintains in his seventh chapter ‡, with much obscure subtilty, not only that the rules of this law are the dictates of divine intelligence to God himself, but that the dominion of God over all his creatures is a right derived from these very rules, and from his wisdom, which pre-

\* Cap. 18.

† Evid. p. 88.

‡ de Leg. Naturae.

cribes them to him. I shall not enter on a discussion, which is not immediately necessary to the present purpose. I shall only say, that the wisdom as well as the power of God in the creation, preservation, and government of all things is, without doubt, a true and joint foundation of his dominion over them, and that there seems to be no need of excluding one of the two, God's irresistible power, in order to obviate the consequences which the good bishop suspected that HOBBS intended. Let us keep out of these mists, and pursue our subject in a clearer light.

I ask then, if nothing less than infinite knowledge, infinite wisdom, and absolute independency be necessary to make it impossible that the Supreme Being should be ignorant in any respect of the eternal natures, on which the eternal reason of things is founded, how can it be said with the least appearance of truth, that these assumed natures appear just such as they are absolutely and necessarily in themselves to the understandings of all intelligent beings, and become constantly the rule of their actions? Have we then infinite knowledge, infinite wisdom, and absolute independency? The human mind apprehends clearly enough the gross differences of things in the moral system, as human sense does in the physical. But in the former as in the latter, the nicer differences are not so perceptible. We have not any knowledge of the first qualities of substances. It is enough for us, to have some knowledge of the second, of those which affect us immediately. It is in vain, that we attempt to go higher in search of scientific knowledge, and even about these we are very liable to mistakes. Much in the same manner we know something of moral entities, allow me the use of this metaphysical word for once, as they arise in our moral system, and are able to affirm many general truths concerning them. But it is in vain, that we

attempt to go higher in our search, or to know any thing more about them than God has shewn us in the actual constitution of things, and even when we judge of them thus, and make particular applications of the general laws of our nature, we are very liable to mistakes. We are not liable to these mistakes in such cases only as are very far from occurring frequently, which CLARKE affirms, but we are liable to them in such as occur the most frequently, whether they relate to public or to private life. The contrary laws that legislators have made, the contrary opinions that casuists daily give in matters of morality, wherein some of them must have been mistaken, are evident proofs of this.

THAT there are things fit and unfit, right and wrong, just and unjust, in the human system, and discernible by human reason, as far as our natural imperfections admit, I acknowledge most readily. But from the difficulty we have to judge, and from the uncertainty of our judgments in a multitude of cases which lie within our bounds, I would demonstrate the folly of those who effect to have knowledge beyond them. They pretend dogmatically to deduce from abstract eternal natures what these natures require of God, whilst they are at the same time unable on many occasions to deduce from the constitution of their own system, and the laws of their own nature, with precision and certainty, what these require of them, and what is right or wrong, just or unjust, for them to do. CLARKE employs an allusion to evade this objection, which would be extremely pretty, if it did not make directly against him in the present application of it, and the only application that can make it pertinent. There is justice, and injustice, as certainly as there is white and black\*. But as the painter can, by diluting the two colors,

\* Evid. p. 45.

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not make them terminate in the midst insensibly, for these words are mere expletives and mean nothing; but as he can make them run into one another till no eye can distinguish them, so the casuist in law or divinity dilutes right and wrong, just and unjust, till no mind, not even his own, can unblend and distinguish them again. If white and black were colors as immutable as they are obvious to human sight, and if justice and injustice were abstract natures immutably obvious to the human understanding, this could not be. But neither are the colors immutable, nor the natures so fixed and so obvious as to be always discerned, and in every light alike. This is what I say, and what the doctor would, if he could, deny. His learned men, his men who understand things to be what they are, not what they are not, blunder about, and contradict one another in matters that are certainly objects of human reason, tho they presume to say that they are guided in their judgments, and directed in their conduct, by the eternal reason of things, by a rule that is common to God and them. I will quote the doctor against himself, on this occasion. I might do so, perhaps, on others. If LYCURGUS had made a law to authorize every man to rob, by violence and murder, whomsoever he met with, such a law could not have been justified. But the law which permitted the Spartan youth to steal, as absurd as it was, may bear much dispute, whether it was absolutely unjust or no. Such an opinion delivered by one, who did not reckon himself certainly among those who understand things to be what they are not, may authorize, or excuse, at least, many that have come out of the school of LOYOLA, and, therefore, I think it proper to recall another Spartan institution in this place. The helotes or slaves were made drunk in order to create an aversion to drunkenness in the youth by such ridiculous spectacles. Far be it from me, and from every lover of truth, and of common sense, to wish that the race

of metaphysicians and casuists should encrease, or so much as continue. But since there are, have been, and will be such men in all ages, it is very reasonable to wish that they may serve to the same good purpose that the helotes did at Sparta, and that their delirium, instead of imposing on others, and even infecting many, may be at length laughed out of the world.

It may seem strange to the cool reflections of common sense, that any men, who have the use of their reason, and those especially who would be thought to have cultivated, and improved it most, should attempt to persuade us that complex notions of the moral kind, for I meddle with no other, and such as we call mixed modes, are eternal natures, and independent on God, when these persons must or may know intuitively that they are dependent on man. I have said already, and I must repeat here that the mind frames them as it has occasion for them, gives to each a name, and keeps them in store as artificial instruments of the understanding. They exist variously, in various minds, nay sometimes in the same mind; but when they exist in no mind, these eternal immutable natures exist no where. Yet such as they are, we are to believe them founded in the eternal fitnesses of things; we are to believe the moral attributes of God founded in them; we are to deduce from them, and from these attributes, what God is under a moral necessity of doing, and what it is his will that men should do; nay we are to prove in a circle that there is a God, because there are such natures\*, and that there are such natures because there is a God. These are opinions which common sense will be hardly induced to adopt, and yet metaphysical and artificial theology

\* Vid. CUDWORTH of eter. moral.

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teach them. As proud as we are of our rationality, certain it is that reason unmixed, uninfluenced, has less to do than we imagine in framing the opinions, and directing the judgments of men.

LET us change the image, and observe that it happens to reason, as it happens to instruments ill tuned. The strings are left sometimes too lax, and are sometimes wound up too high. In one case, they give no sound at all, or one that is lifeless and heavy. In the other, the noise they make is great, it fills the ear, but it carries no true harmony to the soul. By the first we may allude to reason weak and unimproved, by the second to reason strained into all the abstractions of metaphysics, and we may discern good sense between these extremes, that is, reason at its proper tone.

THERE is no subject on which it is more important, that reason should be kept strictly to this tone, than that of the first philosophy, and there is no subject on which it is so liable to be let down below it, or wound up above it. I am not to speak here of the first, of that insensibility and stupidity wherein a great part of mankind is immersed, but of that activity of the mind which raises some of them so far above it. Now among these, they who apply themselves to the first philosophy, apply themselves to the noblest objects that can demand the attention of their mind, to the existence of an all-perfect Being, to the infinite wisdom and power that are manifested in his works, and to the significations of his will, concerning the duties we owe to him, and to one another. From these different subjects arise two kinds of philosophy, divine philosophy or theology, moral philosophy or ethics. Like different branches of the same tree, they spring from the same root, and that root is the actual system of things. As high as they

they can be trained up from hence, they bear the genuine fruit of knowledge. But when fantastical gardeners bend the tops of the highest sprigs, like the *ficus indica*, down to earth; if they take root, they bear it of a bastard kind, and serve only to plant a labyrinth wherein the gardeners themselves are lost. Such fantastical gardeners our metaphysicians are. When they have acquired ideas from the actual system of things, and have carried their knowledge up from the creation to that self-existent, intelligent Being, the Creator, they disdain to reason any longer à posteriori. They frame an hypothesis, with much agitation of their minds, out of the ideas and notions they have acquired in this manner, and reason from it without any further regard to the phaenomena. This method of philosophising has produced often nothing more than impudent assertions. Such was the theology of the epicureans, if that may be called so: and that of the stoics too, as much as they opposed the former, and as good theists as they were esteemed on this account, was little better.

## LX.

**W**HILST the folly lasted among the antient philosophers of making universal systems, and of explaining the whole scheme, order and state of things, he who had not given a great part of his system to theology, would have gained little reputation. This PLATO saw, and he put theology into every thing he taught. I can easily imagine, that the same progress was made in composing these spiritual romances, that we see has been made in composing those of a different kind. AMADIS OF GAUL, and many more, which the niece, the curate and the barber threw out of DON QUIXOTE'S windows, and burned in his yard, were writ without any regard  
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