

## CHAPTER 7 Of Natural Religion

IN the preceding chapter, I have endeavored to illustrate the nature of our moral constitution, and to show that, in our present state, conscience, unassisted, manifestly fails to produce the results which seem to have been intended; and which are necessary to our attaining the happiness which is put within our power; and to our avoiding the misery to which we are exposed. That some additional light will be granted to us, and that some additional moral power will be imparted, seems clearly not improbable. This I suppose to have been done by the truths of natural and revealed religion. In the present chapter, I shall treat of natural religion under the following heads:

1. The manner in which we may learn our duty, by the light of nature.
2. The extent to which our knowledge of duty can be carried by this mode of teaching.
3. The defects of the system of natural religion.

### SECTION 1 Of the Manner in Which We Learn Our Duty by the Light of Nature

In treating upon this subject, it is taken for granted,

1. That there is an intelligent and universal First Cause, who made us as we are, and made all things around us capable of affecting us, both as individuals and as societies, as they do.
2. That He had a design in so making us, and in constituting the relations around us as they are constituted; and that a part of that design was to intimate to us his will concerning us.
3. That we are capable of observing these relations, and of knowing how various actions affect us and affect others.
4. And that we are capable of learning the design with which these various relations were constituted; and, specially, that part of the design which was to intimate to us the will of our Creator.

The application of these self-evident principles to the subject of duty is easy. We know that we are so made as to derive happiness from some courses of conduct, and to suffer unhappiness from others. Now, no one can doubt that the intention of our Creator in these cases was that we should pursue the one course, and avoid the other. Or, again, we are so made, that we are rendered unhappy, on the whole, by pursuing a course of conduct in some particular manner, or beyond a certain degree. This is an intimation of our Creator, respecting the manner and the degree in which he designs us to pursue that course of conduct.

Again, as has been said before, society is necessary, not merely to the happiness, but to the actual existence, of the race of man. Hence, it is necessary, in estimating the tendency of actions upon our own happiness, to extend our view beyond the direct effect of an action upon ourselves. Thus, if we cannot perceive that any evil would result to ourselves from a particular course of action, yet, if it would tend to injure society, specially if it would tend to destroy society altogether, we may hence arrive at a clear indication of the will of our Creator concerning it. As the destruction of

society would be the destruction of the individual, it is as evident that God does not intend us to do what would injure society, as that He does not intend us to do what would injure our own bodies, or diminish our individual happiness. And the principle of limitation suggested above, applies in the same manner here: that is, if a course of conduct, pursued in a certain manner, or to a certain extent, be beneficial to society; and if pursued in another manner, or beyond a certain extent, is injurious to it; the indication is, in this respect, clear, as to the will of our Maker respecting us.

To apply this to particular cases. Suppose a man were in doubt, whether or not drunkenness were agreeable to the will of his Maker. Let us suppose that intemperate drinking produces present pleasure, but that it also produces subsequent pain; and that, by continuance in the habit, the pleasure becomes less, and the pain greater; and that the pain affects various powers of the mind, and different organs of the body. Let a man look around him, and survey the crime, the vice, the disease, and the poverty, which God has set over against the momentary gratification of the palate, and the subsequent excitement which it produces. Now, whoever will look at these results, and will consider that God had a design in creating things to affect us as they do, must be as fully convinced that, by these results, He intended to forbid intemperance, as though He had said so by a voice from heaven. The same principle may be applied to gluttony, libertinism, or any other vice.

Another example may be taken from the case of revenge. Revenge is that disposition which prompts us to inflict pain upon another, for the sake of alleviating the feeling of personal degradation consequent upon an injury. Now, suppose a man, inflamed and excited by this feeling of injury, should inflict, upon the other party, pain, until his excited feeling was gratified: the injured party would then manifestly become the injurer; and, thus, the original injurer would be, by the same rule, entitled to retaliate. Thus, revenge and retaliation would go on increasing until the death of one of the parties. The duty of vengeance would then devolve upon the surviving friends and relatives of the deceased, and the circle would widen until it involved whole tribes or nations. Thus, the indulgence of this one evil passion would, in a few generations, render the thronged city an unpeopled solitude. Nor is this a mere imaginary case. The Indians of North America are known to have considered the indulgence of revenge not merely as innocent, but also as glorious, and in some sense obligatory. The result was, that, at the time of the discovery of this continent, they were universally engaged in wars; and, according to the testimony of their oldest and wisest chiefs, their numbers were rapidly diminishing. And, thence, he who observes the effects of revenge upon society, must be convinced, that he who formed the constitution under which we live, must have intended, by these effects, to have forbidden it, as clearly as though he had made it known by language. He has given us an understanding, by the simplest exercise of which, we arrive at this conclusion.

It is still further to be observed, that, whenever a course of conduct produces individual, it also produces social misery; and whenever a course of conduct violates the social laws of our being, it of necessity produces individual misery. And, hence, we see that both of these indications are combined, to teach us the same lesson; that is, to intimate to us what is, and what is not, the will of God respecting our conduct.

Hence, we see that two views may be taken of an action, when it is contemplated in the light of nature: first, as affecting ourselves; and, secondly, as affecting both ourselves and society, but specially the latter. It is in this latter view that we introduce the doctrine of general consequences.

We ask, in order to determine what is our duty, What would be the result, if this or that action were universally practiced among men? Or, how would it affect the happiness of individuals, and of the whole? By the answer to these questions, we ascertain what is the will of God in respect to that action, or that course of action. When once the will of God is ascertained, conscience, as we have shown, teaches us that we are under the highest obligation to obey it. Thus, from the consideration of the greatest amount of happiness, we arrive at the knowledge of our duty, not directly but indirectly. The feeling of moral obligation does not arise from the simple fact that, such a course of conduct will, or will not, produce the greatest amount of happiness; but, from the fact that this tendency shows us what is the will of our Creator; and we are, by the principles of our nature, under the highest possible obligation to obey that will.

It must be evident that a careful observation of the results and tendencies of actions, and of different courses of conduct, will teach us, in very many respects, the laws of our moral nature; that is, what, in these respects, is the will of our Creator. Now, these laws, thus arrived at, and reduced to order and arrangement, form the system of natural religion. So far as it goes, every one must confess such a system to be valuable; and it, moreover, rests upon as sure and certain a basis as any system of laws whatever.

To all this, however, I know but of one objection that can be urged. It is, that pain is not, of necessity, punitive, or prohibitory; and that it may be merely monitory or advisory. Thus, if I put my hand incautiously too near the fire, I am admonished by the pain which I feel to withdraw it. Now, this pain is, manifestly, only monitory, and intended merely to warn me of danger. It is not, of necessity, prohibitory; for, I may hold my hand so near to the fire as to produce great pain, for some necessary purpose, as, for instance, for the sake of curing disease, and yet not violate my obligations to my Creator, nor in any measure incur his displeasure.

Now, the fact thus stated may be fully admitted, without in the least affecting the argument. It is evident, that many of the pains to which we are at present exposed, are, in their nature, intended to warn us of approaching harm, as in the instance just mentioned; or, they may be intimations of mischief actually commenced, of which we could not be otherwise aware, — as in the case of internal diseases. And, it is manifest, that, such being their nature and design they must be intimately connected with, and either accompany or precede, that injury of which they are intended to forewarn or to inform us; and it is natural to expect that they would cease or tend to cessation, as soon as they have accomplished the object for which they were intended. And such, I think, will in general be found to be the fact with respect to those pains which are in their nature monitory.

But I think it will be evident, to every one who will observe, that many of the pains endured under the present constitution, are not of this kind.

Thus, for example:

1. There are many pains which are inflicted in consequence of actions of which we were forewarned by conscience. It would seem that the design of these pains could not be monitory, inasmuch as monition is performed by another faculty.

2. There are many pains which, from the nature of our constitution, are not inflicted until

after the act has been performed, and the evil accomplished. This is the case with drunkenness, and many other vices. Here, the pain cannot be intended as a premonition; for it is not inflicted in its severity until after the injury has actually been done.

3. Not only does the pain, in many cases, occur afterwards; it frequently does not occur until a long time after the offence. Months, and even years, may elapse, before the punishment overtakes the criminal. This is very frequently the case with youthful crimes, which, ordinarily, exhibit their result not until manhood, or even old age. Now, pain must here be intended to signify something else besides warning.

4. We find that the punishment, in many cases, bears no sort of proportion either to the benefit obtained by the individual, or even to the injury, in the particular instance, inflicted upon society. This is manifest in very many instances of lying, forgery, small theft, and the like, in which, by a single act of wrong, a person ruins a reputation which it had taken a whole life to establish. Now, in such a case as this, it is evident that the purpose of warning could not be intended; for this end could be accomplished, at vastly less expense of happiness, in some other way.

5. We find that the tendency of many instances of punishment, is not to leave the offender in the same state as before, but rather in a worse state. His propensities to do wrong are rendered stronger, and his inducement to do well weaker; and thus he is exposing himself to greater and greater punishments. The tendency, therefore, is not to recovery, but to more fatal moral disease.

6. Although a man, by reformation, may frequently regain the standing which he has lost, yet there are manifest indications, in the present constitution, that, after a given amount of time has been granted, a decisive punishment is inflicted which extinguishes for ever all hope, if not all possibility, of recovery. A man may waste part of his youth in idleness, and may by diligence regain the time which he had lost. But he soon arrives at a point, beyond which such opportunity is impossible. Thus also in morals, a man may sometimes do wrong, and return to virtue, and escape present punishment; but every instance of crime renders the probability of escape less; and he at last arrives at a point, beyond which nothing can avert the infliction of the merited and decisive calamity.

7. We find that some actions produce misery which extends to other beings besides those who are actually concerned in committing them.

This takes place sometimes by example, and at other times the pain is inflicted upon those who could not be infected by the example. Illustrations of this are seen in cases of disease propagated by hereditary descent, in misery arising from the misconduct of rulers, in the suffering of men from flagitious crimes of relatives and acquaintances. And in consequence of the constitution under which we exist, these miseries are frequently transmitted down beyond any assignable limit. Thus, the condition of the Jews is by themselves and others frequently believed to be the result of some crime committed by their forefathers, either at or before the time of Christ. The sad effects of the persecution of Protestantism in Spain and Portugal, at the time of the Reformation, can be clearly traced in all the subsequent history of these countries.

Now, all these considerations seem clearly to indicate that there are pains inflicted upon man for other purposes except warning; and that they are of the nature of punishment; that is, of pain

inflicted after crime has been voluntarily committed, in spite of sufficient warning, and inflicted by way of desert, as what the offence really merits, and what it behooves a righteous governor to award transgression.

Nor will it avail, to object that these inflictions are intended to be warnings to others. This is granted; but this by no means prevents their being also punishments in the sense in which we have considered them. Such is the case in all punishments inflicted by society. They are intended to be a warning to others; but this hinders not their being also in the strictest sense punishments; that is, inflictions of pain as the just desert of crime, and as clear indications of the will of society respecting the action of which they are the result.

From what has been said, I think we may safely conclude:

1. That God has given to man a moral and an intellectual constitution, by which he may be admonished of his duty.
2. That He allows man to act freely, and to do either right or wrong, as he chooses.
3. That He, in the present life, has connected rewards with the doing of right, and punishments with the doing of wrong; and that these rewards and punishments affect both the individual and society.
4. And hence that, from an attentive observation of the results of actions upon individuals, and upon society, we may ascertain what is the will of God concerning us.
5. And for all the opportunities of thus ascertaining his will by his dealings with men, that is, by the light of nature God holds all his creatures responsible.

## SECTION 2

### **How Far We May Learn Our Duty by the Light of Nature**

IT has been shown that we may, by observing the results of our actions upon individuals, and upon society, ascertain what is the will of our Creator concerning us. In this manner we may discover much moral truth, which would be unknown, were we left to the guidance of conscience unassisted; and we may derive many motives to virtue which would otherwise be inoperative.

I. By the light of nature we discover much moral truth which could never be discovered by conscience unassisted

1. Conscience indicates to us our obligations to others when our relations to them are discovered; and impels us toward that course of conduct which the understanding points out as corresponding with these obligations. But there are many obligations which conscience seems not to point out to men, and many ways of fulfilling these obligations which the understanding does not clearly indicate. In these respects, we may be greatly assisted by natural religion.

Thus, I doubt whether the unassisted conscience would teach the wrong of polygamy or of

divorce. The Jews, even at the time of our Savior, had no conception that a marriage contract was obligatory for life. But any one who will observe the effects of polygamy upon families and societies, can have no doubt that the precept of the gospel on this subject is the moral law of the system under which we are. So, I do not know that unassisted conscience would remonstrate against what might be called reasonable revenge, or the operation of the *Lex Talionis*. But he who will observe the consequences of revenge, and those of forgiveness of injuries, will have no difficulty in deciding which course of conduct has been indicated as his duty by his Maker.

2. The extent of obligations, previously known to exist, is made known more clearly by the light of nature. Conscience might teach us the obligations to love our friends, or our countrymen, but it might not go farther. The results of different courses of conduct would clearly show that our Creator intended us to love all men, of every nation, and even our enemies.

3. It is by observing the results of our actions that we learn the limitations which our Creator has affixed to our desires, as we have shown in the chapter on happiness. The simple fact that gratification of our desires, beyond a certain limit, will produce more misery than happiness, addresses itself to our self-love, and forms a reason why that limit should not be transgressed. The fact that this limit was fixed by our Creator, and that he has thus intimated to us his will, addresses itself to our conscience, and places us under obligation to act as he has commanded, on pain of his displeasure.

4. In many cases where the obligation is acknowledged, we might not be able, without the light of natural religion, to decide in what manner it could best be discharged. Thus, a man who felt conscious of his obligations as a parent, and wished to discharge them, would derive much valuable information by observing what mode of exhibiting paternal love had produced the happiest results. He would hence be able the better to decide what was required of him.

In this manner it cannot be doubted that much valuable knowledge of moral truth might be acquired, beyond what is attainable by unassisted conscience. But this is not all.

## II. Natural religion presents additional motives to the practice of virtue.

1. It does this, in the first place, by more clearly setting before us the rewards of virtue, and the punishments of vice. Conscience forewarns us against crime, and inflicts its own peculiar punishment upon guilt; but, natural religion informs us of the additional consequences, independent of ourselves, which attach to moral action, according to the constitution under which we are created. Thus, conscience might forewarn a man against dishonesty, and might inflict upon him the pains of remorse, if he had stolen; but her monition would surely derive additional power from an observation of the effect which must be produced upon individuals and societies by the practice of this immorality; and, also, by the contrary effects which must arise from the opposite virtue.

2. Still further. Natural religion presents us with more distinct and affecting views of the character of God than could be obtained without it. One of the first aspirations of a human soul is after an Intelligent First Cause; and the most universal dictate of conscience is, that this First Cause ought to be obeyed. Hence, every nation, how rude soever, be, has its gods, and its religious services. But such a notion of the Deity is cold and inoperative, when compared with that which may be

derived from an intelligent observation of the laws of nature, physical and moral, which we see pervading the universe around us. In every moral law which has been written on the page of this world's history, we discover a new lineament of the character of the Deity. Every moral attribute of God which we discover, imposes upon us a new obligation, and presents an additional motive why we should love and serve Him. Hence we see that the knowledge of God derived from the study of nature, is adapted to add greatly to the impulsive power of conscience.

We see, then, how large a field of moral knowledge is spread open before us, if we only, in a suitable manner, apply our understandings to the works of God around us. He has arranged all things, for the purpose of teaching us these lessons, and He has created our intellectual and moral nature expressly for the purpose of learning them. If, then, we do not use the powers which He has given us, for the purpose for which He has given them, He holds us responsible for the result. Thus said the prophet: "Because they regard not the works of the Lord, neither consider the operation of His hands, therefore, He shall destroy them, and not build them up." Thus, the Scriptures, elsewhere, declare all men to be responsible for the correct use of all the knowledge of duty which God had set before them. St. Paul, Rom. 1:19, 20, asserts, "That which may be known of God, is manifest in (or to) them, for God hath showed it to them: so that (or therefore) they are without excuse." Thus, he also declares, "They that sin without law, (that is, without a written revelation,) shall perish without law." And thus we come to the general conclusion, that natural religion presents to all men a distinct and important means of knowing the character and will of God, and the obligations and duties of man; and that, for this knowledge, all men are justly held responsible.

### SECTION 3

## Prefects of the System of Natural Religion

I. Without any argument on the subject, the insufficiency of natural religion, as a means of human reformation, might be readily made manifest by facts.

1. The facts on which natural religion rests, and the intellectual power to derive the moral laws from the facts, have been in the possession of man from the beginning. Yet, the whole history of man has exhibited a constant tendency to moral deterioration. This is proved by the fact, that every people, not enlightened by revelation, consider the earliest period of their history as the period of their greatest moral purity. Then, the gods and men held frequent intercourse; this intercourse, in consequence of the sins of men, has since been discontinued. That was the golden age; the subsequent ages have been of brass, or of iron. The political history of men seems to teach the same lesson. In the early ages of national existence, sparseness of population, mutual fear, and universal poverty, have obliged men to lay the foundations of society in principles of justice, in order to secure national existence. But, as soon as, under such a constitution, wealth was increased, population become dense, and progress in arts and arms have rendered a nation fearless, the anti-social tendencies of vice have shown themselves too powerful for the moral forces by which they have been opposed. The bonds of society have been gradually dissolved, and a nation, rich in the spoils of an hundred triumphs, becomes the prey of some warlike and more virtuous horde, which takes possession of the spoil, merely to pursue the same career to a more speedy termination.

2. The systems of religion of the heathen may be fairly considered as the legitimate result of all the moral forces which are in operation upon man, irrespective of revelation. They show us,

not what man might have learned by the proper use of his faculties in the study of duty, but what he has always actually learned. Now, these systems, so far from having any tendency to make man better, have a manifest tendency to make him worse. Their gods were of the most profligate and demoralizing character. Had natural religion succeeded in instilling into the minds of men true ideas of virtue and duty, their imaginations, in forming conceptions of deities, would have invested them with far different attributes.

3. The ethical systems of philosophers, it is true, not unfrequently presented sublime and pure conceptions of Deity. But, as instruments of moral reformation, they were clearly inoperative. They were extremely imperfect in everything which relates to our duties to man, and, specially, in every thing which relates to our duty to God; they offered no sufficient motives to obedience; they were established on subtle reasonings, which could not be comprehended by the common people; and they imposed no obligation upon their disciples to disseminate them among others. Hence, they were never extensively known, beyond the small circle of meditative students; and, by these, they were considered rather as matters of doubtful speculation, than of practical benefit; adapted rather to the cultivation of intellectual acuteness, than to the reformation of moral conduct. I think that any one, on reading the ethical disquisitions of the ancients, must be struck with the fact, that honest, simple, and ardent love of truth seems to have furnished no motive whatever to their investigations; and that its place was supplied by mere curiosity, or love of the new, the refined, and even the paradoxical.

And, hence, as might be expected, these ethical systems made no converts from vice to virtue. From the era of which of the systems of ancient ethics, can any reformation be dated? Where are their effects recorded in the moral history of man? Facts have abundantly proved them to be utterly destitute of any power over the conscience, or of any practical influence over the conduct.

4. Nor can this failure be attributed to any want of intellectual cultivation. During a large portion of the period of which we have spoken, the human mind had, in many respects, attained to which state of perfection as it has attained at any subsequent age. Eloquence, poetry, rhetoric, nay, some of the severer sciences, were studied with a success which has never since been surpassed. This is universally confessed. Yet what progress did the classic ages make in morals? And hence, we think, it must be admitted that the human mind, even under the most favorable circumstances, has never, when unassisted by revelation, deduced from the course of things around us any such principles of duty, or motives to the performance of it, as were sufficient to produce any decided effect upon the moral character of man.

And hence were we unable to assign the cause of this failure; yet the fact of the failure alone is sufficient to prove the necessity of some other means for arriving at a knowledge of duty, than is afforded by the light of nature.

II. But, secondly, the causes of this insufficiency may, in many respects, be pointed out. Among them are obviously the following:

1. The mode of teaching natural religion is by experience. We can form no opinion respecting the results of two opposite courses of action, until they be both before us. Hence, we cannot certainly know what the law is, except by breaking it. Hence, the habit of violation must, in some sense, be formed, before we know what the law is which we violate. Consequently, from the

nature of the case, natural religion must always be much behind the age, and must always utter its precepts to men who are, in some manner, fixed in the habit of violating them.

2. There are many moral laws in which the connection between the transgression and the punishment cannot be shown, except in the more advanced periods of society. Such is the fact, in respect to those laws which can be ascertained only by extended and minute observation; and, of course, a state of society in which knowledge is widely disseminated, and the experience of a large surface, and for a long period, may be necessary to establish the fact of the connection between this particular violation and this particular result. In the mean time, mankind will be suffering all the consequences of vice; and the courses of conduct which are the causes of misery, will be interweaving themselves with the whole customs, and habits, and interests, of every class of society. Thus, it too often happens, that the knowledge is with great difficulty acquired, and, when acquired, unfortunately comes too late to effect a remedy.

3. A still more radical deficiency, however, in natural religion, is, that it is, from its nature, incapable of teaching facts. It can teach only laws and tendencies. From observing what has been done, and how it has been done, it can infer that, if the same thing were done again, it would be done in the same manner, and would be attended, in all places, and at all times, if under the same conditions, with the same results. But, as to a fact, that is, whether an action were actually performed at some other place or time, or whether it ever would be, natural religion can give us no information. Thus, we know by experience, that, if a man fall from a precipice, he will be destroyed; but, whether a man ever did so fall, much less whether A or B did fall from it, we can never be informed by general principles. Thus, from the fact that we see guilt punished in this world, we infer, from natural religion, that it will always be punished in this world; we infer, though not so certainly, that it will also be punished in another world, if there be another world; but of the fact whether there be another world, natural religion can give us no certain information; much less, can it give us any information respecting the question whether God has actually done any thing to remedy the evils of sin, and vary those sequences which, without a remedy, experience shows us to be inevitable.

4. Hence, natural religion must derive all its certain! motives from the present world. Those from the other world are, so far as it is concerned, in their nature contingent and uncertain. And, hence, it loses all that power over man, which would be derived from the certain knowledge of our existence after death, of the nature of that existence, and of what God has done for our restoration to virtue and happiness. All these being facts, can never be known, except by language, that is, by revelation. They must always remain in utter incertitude, so long as we are left to the teachings of natural religion.

We see, then, that natural religion is obliged to meet the impulsions from this world, solely by impulsions from this world. Nay, more, she is obliged. to resist the power of the present, of passion strengthened and confirmed by habit, by considerations drawn from the distant, the future, and what may seem to be the uncertain. Hence, its success must be at best but dubious, even when its power is. exerted upon those least exposed to the allurements of vice. Who does not see that it is utterly vain, to hope for success from such a source, in our attempts to reform men in general? Every one, who is at all acquainted with the history of man, must be convinced, that nothing less powerful than the whole amount of motive derived from the knowledge of an endless existence, has ever been found a sufficient antagonist force. to the downward and headlong tendencies of appetite

and passion.

And hence, from the fact of the recorded failure of natural religion, as a means of reformation, and from the defects inherent in its very nature, as a means of moral improvement, there seems clearly to exist a great need of some additional moral force, to correct the moral evils of our nature. It is surely not improbable that some additional means of instruction and improvement may have been granted to our race by a merciful Creator.