

The Moral Nature and Fitness of Things Considered

by John Gill

The nature and fitness of things do not determine moral good and evil, but rather arise from the nature of God and depend on His will and purposes.

Scripture: Genesis 1:3, Psalm 115:3, Isaiah 45:7, Daniel 4:35, Ephesians 1:11

Topics: "Divine Authority", "Moral Law"

Description

John Gill addresses the sermon 'The Moral Nature and Fitness of Things Considered' by Samuel Chandler, critiquing the notion that moral good and evil exist independently of God's will. He argues that if moral distinctions arise from the nature of things, it implies a deity superior to God, which contradicts divine revelation. Gill emphasizes that moral obligations stem from God's will and nature, not from an abstract moral order, and warns against the implications of viewing moral fitness as a separate standard. He concludes that such views could lead to polytheism, deism, antinomianism, and libertinism, undermining the authority of God's law.

Transcript

THE

MORAL NATURE

AND

FITNESS OF THINGS CONSIDERED.

OCCASIONED BY

Some Passages in the Rev. Mr. Samuel Chandler's Sermon, lately preached to the Societies for the Reformation of Manners.

Nothing is more frequently talked of in this enlightened age, this age of politeness, reason and good sense, than the nature and fitness of things; or, the reason and nature of things ; phrases, which to many, at least, that use them, are unmeaning and unintelligible sounds; and serve only as a retreat, when they have been fairly beaten out of an argument by the superior force and evidence of divine revelation. It may

easily be observed, low glibly, and with what volubility of speech, with what a sagacious look, and an air of wisdom, these words are pronounced by some, who, when asked, what things are meant? what the nature of them? and, what the fitness which arises from them? are at once silenced and confounded.

This must be understood of your lower-sized folks, who take up these sayings from others, and use them as parrots, by rote. It must be presumed, that their learned masters, from whom they have received them, better understand them, and are capable of explaining the meaning of them; among these, the Rev. Mr. Samuel Chandler makes a very considerable figure; whose Sermon, lately preached to the Societies for the reformation of Manners, lies before me; upon which I shall take leave to make some few strictures.

This Gentleman, not content to assert that the difference between moral good and evil is certain and immutable, which will be readily granted; further affirms, that "this arises from the nature of things; is strictly and properly eternal; is prior to the will of God, and independent of it; is the invariable and eternal rule of the divine conduct, by which God himself regulates and determines his own will and conduct to his creatures; the great reason and measure of all his actions towards them, and is the supreme original, universal, and most perfect rule of action to all reasonable beings whatsoever: and that there are certain fitnesses and unfitnesses of things arising from hence, which are of the same nature with this distinction; and that. this difference, and these fitnesses and unfitnesses are as easily discerned by mankind, as the differences between any natural and sensible objects whatever."

One would he tempted to think, if all this is true, that this same nature and fitness of things is Deity, and rather deserves the name of God, than he whom we call so; since it is prior to, and independent of his will; is the unerring rule of action to him, and the supreme, universal, and most perfect rule to all reasonable beings whatsoever; and that itself is not directed and influenced by any rule or law from any other. Surely that must be God, which is possessed of such perfections, as necessary existence, eternity, independence, supreme power and authority over all reasonable beings.

And if this is the case, we ought to worship and give homage to this Deity; this should we invoke, bless and adore; and not him, who, under the Old-testament-dispensation, went by the name of he God of Israel, or the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and who, in the New Testament, is styled the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. To this eternal and invariable rule should we yield a cheerful and universal obedience, and not to the law and will of God; unless that shall appear to be directed and conducted by this supreme and most perfect rule of action, But before we fall down, and prostrate ourselves to this new deity, and pay our devoirs to it, it will he proper, first to examine the several magnificent things which are predicated of it; and begin with, 1.

The original of it, The moral nature and fitness of things is represented as something to be considered abstracted from God, and independent of his will, and so consequently as necessarily existing; for whatever exists independent of the divine will, necessarily exists, or exists by necessity of nature: and could this be made out, that the moral nature and fitness of things necessarily exists independent of the will of God, it must be allowed to be a deity indeed; for nothing exists by necessity of nature independent of the will of God, but the being and perfections of God: either therefore this nature and fitness of things is something in God, or something without him; if it is something in him, it must be a perfection of his nature, it must be himself; and therefore ought not to be considered as abstracted from him, if it is something without him, apart from him, which exists independent of his will, that is necessarily; then there must be two necessarily existing beings, that is, two Gods.

It is said, that "the difference between moral good and evil, virtue and vice, as between darkness and light, and bitter and sweet, is a difference not accidental to, but founded in the nature of the things themselves; not merely the result of the determination and arbitrary will of another, but which the very ideas of the things themselves do really and necessarily include." Or, as it is elsewhere expressed, "the distinction between moral good and evil do so arise out of the nature of the things themselves, as not to be originally and properly the mere effect of the divine order and will, so as that it never would have been, had not God willed and commanded it to be."

But from whence do things morally good proceed? Do they not come from God, from whom is every good and perfect gift? As all natural and supernatural good comes from him, the fountain of all goodness; so all moral good takes its rise from him, and the moral perfections of his nature; which, and not the nature of things, are the rule of his will, determinations, and actions. Who puts this nature into things, by which they are morally good, but the God of nature, of his own will and pleasure; and, what settles the difference between those things, and what are morally evil, but the nature and will of God?

Or the will of God, which moves not in an arbitrary way, but agreeable to the moral perfections of his nature. As for things morally evil, which lie in a defect of moral good, are a privation of it, and an opposition to it, though they are not of God, nor does he put that evil nature into them that is in them, for he cannot be the author of any thing that is sinful; yet these things become so by being contrary to his nature and will. The difference between moral good and evil lies in, and the fitnesses and unfitnesses of these things are no other than, the agreement and disagreement of them with the nature and will of God; and whatsoever ideas we have of these things, and of their different natures, fitnesses and unfitnesses, we have from God; who of his own will and pleasure has implanted them in us, and in which we are greatly assisted in this present state of things by his revealed will; consisting of doctrines and instructions, rules and precepts, founded in, and agreeable to the perfections of his own nature.

Besides, if the difference between moral good and evil is founded in, and arises from the nature of the things themselves, and is not originally and properly the effect of the divine order and will, then it cannot be said to be, as it is, 2. Strictly and properly eternal; for these things must exist, and this nature must be in them, from whence this difference arises, ere there can be this difference; wherefore if the things themselves are not strictly and properly eternal, then the nature of them is not strictly and properly eternal: and consequently the difference which is founded in, and arises from that nature, is not strictly and properly eternal.

Moreover, nothing is strictly and properly eternal but God. If the nature and fitness of things is eternal; if there are eternal, everlasting, and unchangeable fitnesses of things those fitnesses must be God. Should it be said, as it is, that "supposing the eternal and immutable existence of God, the ideas of these things (good and evil, virtue and vice) must have been the same in his all-perfect mind from eternity, as they now are; and have appeared to his understanding with the same opposition and contrariety of nature to each other, as they do now--and of consequence, the distinction between moral good and evil, is as eternal as the knowledge of God himself, that is, strictly and absolutely eternal;--and that before ever any created being received its existence, God had within himself the ideas of all possible futurities; of the nature of all beings that should afterwards have life; of their several relations to himself, and one another; and saw what fitnesses, obligations and duties, would, and must result from, and belong to creatures thus formed and constituted;--which fitnesses or unfitnesses were eternally present to the all-comprehensive mind of God, and as clearly discerned by him, as the natural differences of the things themselves, from whence they flow."

It will be allowed, that there is in God an eternal knowledge of all things possible and future; he knows all things possible in the perfection of his almighty power, who could, if he would, bring them into being: but then this knowledge of his does not arise from, and depend upon the nature of the things themselves, which may be, or may not be; but it arises from his own all-sufficiency. Possible futurities, or possible shall-be's, I do not understand. Whatsoever is possible may be, and it may not be; but what is future shall be, and so not barely possible, but certain.

A possible futurity seems to be a contradiction. God knows whatever is possible for himself to do; that is, he knows what his power can do; and also what his will determined to do, or shall be done: the former is called possible, the latter future. God's knowledge reaches to both, but then every thing that is possible is not future. All that God knows might be accomplished by his power, he has not determined that it shall be; and whatsoever he has determined shall be, is future, and ceases to be barely possible.

God sees and knows all things future, in his own will, purposes, and decrees; for as it is the power of God that gives possibility to things possible; it is the will of God that gives futurity to things that shall be. So God saw, knew, and had within himself the ideas of the nature of all beings that should afterwards have life; their several relations to himself, and one another; and all fitnesses, obligations, and duties belonging to them; because he had determined within himself to bring such creatures into being, bestow such natures upon them, put them into such a relation to himself, and others; and make such and such duties fitting for them, and obligatory upon them.

In this sense it will be readily granted, that the ideas of all things that come to pass in time, were in his all-perfect mind from eternity, as they now are; because he determined within himself they should come to pass in the manner they now do. The fitnesses and unfitnesses of things were eternally present to his all-comprehensive mind, because he willed they should be, either by his efficacious or permissive will. But then the eternity of these things in this sense, be the eternal difference of good and evil, as founded upon the eternal knowledge of God, arising from, and depending upon his own will, strongly militates against what is further said of this nature and fitness of things, or of the difference between moral good and evil, as that it is, 3.

Prior to the will of God, and independent of it. By the will of God is meant either his will of purpose, and is what the scripture calls, The counsel of his will; (Eph. 1:11) or will of precept, which is that system of moral laws, God has given to rational creatures as the rule of their actions. The Gentleman I am attending to, uses the phrase sometimes in one sense, and sometimes in another and sometimes takes in both in one and the same paragraph; and plainly suggests, that this difference is prior to the will of God, and independent of it, taken in either sense; his words are these; "this difference did originally and eternally subsist in the mind of God, as certainly as the difference between light and darkness; and was in idea ever present with him, before ever it became the law of his creatures, and appeared to them as the matter of his command and will; and is itself that necessary and invariable rule, by which God himself regulates and determines his own will and conduct to his creatures; and which, therefore, as a rule of action to himself must be supposed to be independent of, and prior to, not the existence of God, which is absolutely eternal, but to the will of the eternal God, and to be, indeed, the great reason and measure of all his actions towards his creatures."

Now, though it should be admitted, that things are fit and proper, just and good, antecedent to the revealed will of God, or his will of command; and that God wills these things, that is, commands them, because they are fit and proper, just and good and not that they are so because he commands them;

though one should think, whatever God commands must be fit and proper, just and good, for that very reason, whether we can discern any other reason or no, because he commands it; since he can command nothing contrary to his nature, and the moral perfections of it; yet nevertheless, these must be subsequent to the secret will of God, or the counsel of his will, as that is within himself determining, settling, constituting, or permitting the order and situation of things, their natures, beings, and relations to himself and others; from whence the fitnesses and unfitnesses of things, and the difference of moral good and evil are said to arise.

Whatever may be said for the independency of these things on the will of God, they can never be prior to it: For if the production of creatures into being is owing to the will of God and follows upon it; if the several relations they stand in to one another are solely of his appointment and forming, then surely what is fit, or not fit to be done, in such a situation, must be fixed by, and be the result of his own will, as determining them according to the moral perfections of his nature; which determinations of his secret will being revealed, become the law of his creatures; and being so, this law is the surest rule of judgment to them, with respect to the difference of moral good and evil; what lays the strongest obligation upon them to do the one and avoid the other; and so must be the best rule of action to them.

Mr. Chandler himself owns, that "God might have formed other creatures than what he hath; or produced some, or all of those which now exist, in a different manner from what he actually hath done; he might, for instance, have stocked our earth with inhabitants at once, and formed them in the same manner as he did our first parents. And of consequence, as the present frame of things is owing to the wisdom, the good pleasure and will of God, so the fitnesses of things which now actually take place, and that particular system of moral virtue which mankind are obliged to regard, and conform themselves to, must, as far as it is a constitution of things actually existing, be resolved into the same good pleasure and will of God?"

Now, as the formation of creatures, and their production in this or the other manner, entirely depends on the will of God, and according to the variations of them, the fitnesses of things must have altered; there would not have been the same fitnesses and unfitnesses, obligations and duties; so it wholly depended on the will of God whether he would create any or no; and if he had never formed any creature, in any manner whatever, as he might not have done, if he would, where had been this eternal nature and fitness of things?

As therefore the formation of creatures follows upon and is owing to the will of God, the nature and fitness of things, with respect to these creatures; cannot be prior, but must be subsequent to the will of God. Yea, this same Gentleman says, that "the will of God is not any thing distinct from the everlasting fitnesses of things; but included in them, and indeed a necessary and essential branch of them. If therefore the will of God is not distinct from them, is included in them, and a necessary and essential branch of them; then the nature and fitness of things is not without the will of God, is not prior to it, and independent of it."

And though this same writer boldly asserts in one place, that the certain and immutable difference of things is entirely independent of the will of God; yet in other places he seems to stagger a little, and says, that this distinction is not originally and properly the mere effect of the divine order and will, and is not merely the result of the determination and arbitrary will of another; as if it was so in part, or in some sense, though not wholly and entirely so. He seems to be fearful, that if the distinction of moral good and evil, and the fitness and unfitness of things, are placed to the will of God, and made to depend upon it, the consequence may be, that these things will not continue the same; vice may be virtue, and virtue vice; "impiety, injustice, and cruelty, may be substituted in the room of piety, justice and charity;" and, "that

there can be, no possible certainty that God shall always will that which is now good, in opposition to what is now called evil; but the one or the other, as caprice and humour shall direct him, which immediately becomes either good or evil; and on the contrary, evil or good, for no other reason, but because he, without reason, wills them to be so."

Not to take notice of indecency, and irreverence of these expressions; the insinuations and suggestions of instability and change in the divine will, are groundless and unreasonable, since the will of God is as immutable as himself; and though it is not determined by the, intrinsic difference of things without him, yet it is determined invariably by the rectitude of his nature; he cannot determine, or do any thing contrary to his moral perfections; he cannot deny himself. There is much more reason to fear these things may change, if the distinction between them lies in the nature and fitness of things, of which not only fallible men, but sinful men, men prone to vice, are the only judges; who being either led into a false way of reasoning, or influenced by their interests and, passions; may put "evil for good, and good for evil."

Moreover, why should not the distinction of moral good and evil be attributed to, and considered as, dependent upon the unalterable will of God, since all moral good flows from, him as the fountain of it? Nor could there have been any moral evil, without his permissive will; even as the productions of light and darkness, of bitter and sweet, are the effects of his will and pleasure. Light and darkness are his own formation; I form the light, and create darkness; I make peace, and create evil; I the Lord do all these things. (Isa. 45:7) It was he that said, by his almighty power, and according to his own will, Let there be light, and there was light.

What difference should we have been capable of discerning between light and darkness, if God, of his own pleasure, had not divided the light from the darkness, as he did? Nor have we any idea of the distinction of these things, but what that God of his will has given to us; who called the light day, and the darkness night. (Gen. 1:3, 4) As natural light and darkness are of God, and the division between them is made by him; so moral light and moral darkness are, the one by his effective, the other by his permissive will; and the difference between them settled by the determinations of his unchangeable mind, agreeable to the perfections of his nature.

It is he that has made bitter and sweet, and of his own will and pleasure has put these different qualities in things; the fitnesses and unfitnesses of which are their agreement and disagreement with those laws and rules of nature, which God, of his own will, has placed in sensitive beings; and even so moral fitnesses and unfitnesses are their agreement and disagreement with those moral laws, which are the determination of God's will according to the rectitude of his nature; which of his own pleasure he inscribed on the heart of man in his creation, and has since delivered in writing, as the rule of his actions.

To all which I only add, in opposition to this notion, that if this distinction of moral good and evil, this moral nature and fitness of things, is prior to, and independent of the will of God, it must be prior to the first cause, which is a contradiction in terms; for the will of God is the first cause of all things; nothing in the whole compass of being exists without the will of God, but his own being and perfections; and if this is coeternal with God and is as independent of his order or will as his own being, perfection, and happiness, it must as has been already observed, necessarily exist, and consequently, must be God; yea, superior to him whom we call so; since, 4.

It is said, that this "is itself that necessary, invariable, and eternal rule, by which God himself regulates and determines his own will and conduct to his creatures,--is the great reason and measure of all his actions

towards his creatures,—is the one certain and unerring rule of God himself;" than which nothing is more contrary to divine revelation, which assures us, that our God is in the heavens; he hath done whatsoever he pleased; (Ps. 115:3) that he works all things after the counsel of his own will; (Eph. 1:11) and, that he does according to his will in the army of the heavens, and among the inhabitants of the earth. (Dan. 4:35) Whereas, according to this notion, not the will of God, but something prior to it, and independent of it, is the necessary, eternal, invariable, unerring rule, reason and measure of all his actions, towards his creatures.

This scents something like the Stoical fate and necessity, which give laws to God and man, and equally bind and oblige both; though sometimes the Stoics indeed consider fate and the nature of things, not as things distinct from God, but as being himself, his own will in which their notion is greatly to be preferred to what is now advanced. Be it so, that the moral nature and fitness of things is a rule of action to men; that which is a rule to them cannot in every thing be thought to be so to God; for instance, let it be admitted, that it is agreeable to the nature and fitness of things, and to the original difference between moral good and evil, that one man should not take away the life of another, and that law, Thou shalt not kill, is established upon this certain and immutable distinction and fitness, and so is a rule of action to men; yet this is no rule to God, nor any measure of his actions; who, as he gives, and has power over, the lives of men, can take them away at his pleasure; as well by ordering one man to slay another, as Abraham to sacrifice his son, (Gen. 22:2) and the Israelites to slay "every man his brother, every man his companion, and every man his neighbour, (Exo. 32:27) when there fell that day, and in that manner, about three thousand men;" as by sending a fever, a dropsy, or any other distemper.

Again, let it be allowed, that it is one branch of this moral nature and fitness of things, that one man should not take away the property of another; and that that law is founded upon it, Thou shalt not steal: yet God is not bound by this law; for, as the earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof? (Ps. 24:1) he disposes of it as he pleases, and takes away that which was one man's property, and gives it to another; which he has done in ten thousand instances of providence; and what is more, and full to our purpose, he could, and did order the Israelites to "borrow of the Egyptians jewels of silver and of gold, and raiment," whereby they were spoiled, (Ex. 12:36) and plundered of their property.

To say no more, if this nature and fitness of things is a rule of action to God, it must be something both before him, and above him; it must be his superior; since it must be considered as giving laws for the regulation and determination of his will and conduct to his creatures; though, as this writer well says, "he hath no superior, can receive laws from none, nor have any external power to oblige and constrain him." And what he further adds is right, "that he hath a reason and rule of action within himself, is as evident as that he ever acts at all; and as certain, as that he will always act wisely and well."

Upon which I would observe then, not any thing without him is a rule unto him; not the nature and fitness of things, as of an abstract consideration from him; as prior to, and independent of his will; nor is it, as is suggested, his all comprehensive knowledge of the nature of things, the relation beings stand in to him and one another, the fitnesses and unfitnesses which belong to them, the measure and degree of their powers and faculties, and all the several circumstances of their being; since these are the determinations of his will, and his knowledge of them arises from thence; he knows all these things will be, because he has determined that they shall be.

It remains then, that nothing can be a rule to God but himself, his own nature, and the perfections of it. In all things of a moral nature, his moral perfection is within himself are the rule of his will and conduct. But,

5. Let us next examine, whether this distinction of moral good and evil, as founded in the nature or things, together with the original and unalterable fitnesses arising from it, is the supreme, original, universal, and most perfect rule of action to all reasonable beings whatsoever, as is asserted.

If this be true, all laws of God and men are to be disregarded and, indeed, they are all plainly superseded by it; for if this is the supreme, original, and universal rule to all reasonable beings, then all inferior, subordinate, and particular laws, as all the after-laws of God and men must be thought to be, merit no regard; at least are no further to be regarded than as they may be thought to agree with, and are reducible to this grand one; and if it is the most perfect rule, then certainly there is no need of another.

Yea, it is affirmed, that "it is impossible that there can be tiny rule of action more excellent in itself, or more worthy the regard of reasonable beings." What need then have we of the law of God? This may lead us to question, whether indeed there is any law binding upon us; at least it tends to weaken our obligation to duty, as arising from the will of God. Indeed we are told, that "the will of God is a real and immutable obligation upon us, to which we should always pay the highest deference and submission."

What, the highest deference and submission? No surely, that must be paid to the most perfect rule, that rule which regulates and determines the will of God itself. And truly, this real and immutable obligation of the will of God upon us, is immediately brought under the general notion of the original fitnesses of things, and is not allowed to be an obligation of a distinct nature and kind for them. So that as all morality is founded in the nature and fitness of things, our obligation to it arises from the same, and our obedience and disobedience to be considered as an agreement or disagreement with that scheme of things.

Sin was therefore wrongly defined by our forefathers, who, in answer to that question, "What, is sin?" say, "Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of any law of God given as a rule to the reasonable creature." They should have said, Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of the nature and fitness of things, which is the unerring rule of God himself, and the most perfect one in all reasonable creatures. How the apostle John himself will come off I see not, who says, that sin is the transgression of the law, (1 John 3:4) unless, by some dexterous management, instead of the law, should be put the nature and fitness of things.

But surely, to derive moral obligation from the will of God, must be of more use and Service to engage persons in the practice of moral virtue, than to derive it from the nature and fitness of things, of which men themselves must be judges. A rule of fitness may be a guide in some cases; but the law of a superior, who has a right and power of enforcing it by sanctions, properly obliges. In the other case there is nothing to hope for in consequence of agreement with it, and nothing to fear by straying from it; so that this immutable, and eternal obligation of moral virtue, will be found to be very little, if any at all, as derived from the nature and fitness of things; at most cannot rise higher than men's perception of the nature and fitness of things; for the nature and fitness of things can be no further a guide unto men, or obliging upon them, than as known by them; and if God had not made some notification of his will, with respect to moral good and evil, by giving us laws as the rule of moral conduct, our perception of these things would, in many cases, have been very deficient in the present state of things; and consequently moral fitness, as perceivable by us, would have been a defective rule, and not that universal and most perfect rule of action it is affirmed to be.

But we are told, 6. That "this difference between moral good and evil, and the fitnesses and unfitnesses which they necessarily infer, is as easily and certainly to be discerned by mankind, as the differences

between any natural or sensible object whatever." The natural and sensible objects particularly referred to, are light and darkness, bitter and sweet; which suppose natural and sensible capacities and powers, suited to the discernment of such natural and sensible objects; otherwise they cannot be easily and certainly discerned: A man blind from his birth, will not be able to distinguish between light and darkness; and one whose natural taste is vitiated, will not easily and certainly discern between sweet and bitter.

So likewise there must be moral capacities and powers in men, suited to the discernment of moral good and evil; if these should be wanting, or impaired and corrupted, the difference between moral good and evil will not be so easily and certainly discerned. Now the moral capacity of man is greatly impaired and corrupted in the present state of things; men destitute of the light of grace, are darkness itself; (Eph. 5:8) the understanding of men, even in things moral, is greatly darkened by sin, and they are alienated from the life of God; averse to living soberly, righteously and godly, through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their hearts. (Eph. 4:18) The moral light of nature is very dim, and has shone out very faintly even in those who have made the greatest advances in moral science, destitute of a divine revelation, and without the assistance of God's grace.

The moral taste of man is vitiated; he favours the things of the flesh; relishes sin, which he rolls in his mouth, and hides under his tongue, as a sweet morsel so that through the blindness of his heart, and the viscosity of his taste, he is far from a clear discerning of the difference of moral good and evil, of the fitnesses and unfitnesses of things; of the amiableness of virtue, and the ugliness of vice. But man is represented in a quite different light, as far from having his moral powers and capacity in the least impaired or corrupted by sin.

It is said, that "nature itself hath seemed to have been friendly to mankind in this respect, which hath implanted a kind of constitutional abhorrence of vice in their mind, an instinctive prejudice against it, and fear to commit it." Who is designed by nature, whether God, or the nature and fitness of things, I shall not stay to inquire; but go on to observe, that unless this is to be understood of man, as he was created by God, as he was in his state of innocence before his fall, the contrary to it is true; for though the God of nature has not implanted it, yet there is in the minds of men, in consequence of the corruption of human nature by sin, to use this author's phrases, a kind of constitutional abhorrence of good and an instinctive prejudice against it; or rather a natural and habitual abhorrence of good and prejudice to it.

Man is shapen in iniquity, and conceived in sin; (Ps. 51:5) he is a transgressor from the womb; (Isa. 48:8) the carnal mind is enmity against God, and all that is good; and is not subject to the law of God, nor can it be; (Rom. 8:7) there is none that doeth good, no not one; nor is there any fear of God before their eyes. (Rom. 3:12, 18) In how many instances has it appeared, that the imagination of the thought of man's heart is evil, and that continually? (Gen. 6:10) such who are renewed by the grace of God, and are enabled to live sober and religious lives, yet were sometimes foolish, disobedient, deceived; serving divers lusts and pleasures; living in malice and envy, hateful, and hating one another. (Titus 3:3) Before their conversion, they walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience; among whom they all had their conversation in times past, in the lusts of their flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh, and of the mind; and were by nature children of wrath, even as others. (Eph. 2:3) Their conversion from darkness to light, from the power of Satan to God, from sin to holiness, from ungodliness to godliness, does not arise from any internal principle in themselves, from any natural will or power in them; nor is it brought about by the force of moral suasion, but is effected by the exceeding greatness of God's power, and the energy of his grace which only gives them the mastery of their corruptions, puts down the old man with his deeds, dethrones sin, so

as that it shall not have dominion over them.

These same persons, after conversion, find in them a proneness to sin, and are, as Israel of old was, bent to backsliding; (Hosea 11:7) and are only preserved from a total one by the power of divine grace. The whole of this is, to clear a point, that he must be a stranger to himself, to human nature, and to divine revelation, who will attempt a confutation of it. We are indeed told, that "vice is really a kind of art that requires some length of time to become dexterous, and grow any considerable proficient in."

Ethic, or morality, is indeed by some defined, "an art of living well and happily." But that vice or immorality should be an art, or a kind of art, to be learned, as arts usually are, by a collection of rules, a train of reasoning, with application of thought, and in length of time, I am inclined to believe, was never heard of before: it looks as if it required sagacity and good sense, some considerable abilities of mind, penetration of thought, diligence and industry, as well as time, to be wicked, at least to be dexterous proficient in sin; whereas persons may be sottish and foolish to every thing else, and yet wise enough to do evil.

It is easy to see what view such expressions are used; that they are calculated to encourage and support the old Pelagian notion, "that sin is only by imitation." After all, supposing that the moral powers and capacities of men are not so corrupted and impaired, as they are by some thought to be; yet notwithstanding the difference of moral good and evil, with all their fitnesses and unfitnesses, may not be so easily and certainly discerned, as the difference between light and darkness, which is done at once, with a glance of the bodily eye; or as the distinction between sweet and bitter, which is discerned immediately; for immoral science, like other sciences, is not to be learned at once, but by degrees; it takes in a very large compass, it consists of various rules, precepts, and instructions, concerning different virtues, which must be considered and examined with their contrary vices, ere the true distinction between them can be clearly seen.

In order to have a clear and certain discernment of the difference of moral good and evil, with all their fitnesses and unfitnesses, we ought to have a knowledge of the several beings, God, and the creatures we stand related to, and of the several relations we stand in to them; all which require time, application of thought, and a train of reasoning; but if the discernment of these things is as easy and certain, as that of light and darkness, bitter and sweet, what need of all that care and pains in the moral education of children? why so much solicitude to instill the notions of virtue into them, and give them an abhorrence of vice?

Since, as they grow up, the perception of the moral nature, fitness and unfitness of these things, will be as easy and as certain as their sight and taste of nature, and sensible objects. What need also either of the laws of God, or of men? And indeed, it is said, that "as they (men) need no command, or law, to enable them to discern the natural difference in these things (moral good and evil) they as little need them to help them to pass a true judgment concerning them, or to teach them which, upon the whole, is fittest for them to choose and refuse."

Moreover, what need is there of moral preaching, or the continuance of a moral ministry? Why so much needless time and pains spent, in opening, inculcating, and enforcing moral duties, and exposing contrary vices? Since without all this men cannot fail of observing the difference of, and of giving the preference to the one above the other? One should think, that gentlemen who have been concerned in supporting readers of morality, should, upon such a principle as this, put their hands in their pockets, and at once pay off and discharge these moral preachers, as useless men.

Such moral guides may easily be spared; since it is affirmed, that as nature and experience are infallible rules of judgment in natural things; they "are equally sure guides in things of a moral nature:" But to proceed, That the difference of moral good and evil, with the fitnesses and unfitnesses of things, has not in fact been so easily discerned as is contended for, will appear from the different sentiments men have entertained of these things, in different ages and dispensations.

The moral philosophers among the heathens, as no one of them ever drew up a complete system of morality, nor is such an one to be collected out of all their writings put together; nor was Mr. Woolaston's celebrated performance, called *The Religion of Nature delineated*, drawn up without the assistance of divine revelation; and, perhaps, is not without its defects. So what one of these philosophers inculcated, another neglected, and what one denied, another affirmed. Some of them taught, that there was no sin in incest and sodomy and thought it was lawful for buyers and sellers to circumvent each other.

Plato, a philosopher that made a considerable figure in moral, science, commended community of wives, and brought it into his commonwealth. The Stoics, a grave and stiff set of moralists, were of opinion, not only that it became a wise man, but in some cases it was his duty, to destroy himself; and, perhaps, many of those unhappy creatures who have been guilty of this sin, have not so clearly seen the evil of it; but have been ready to think, that they have a greater power over their own lives, than over others; and though they may not take away another man's life, may take away their own.

The apostle Paul condemns fornication, filthiness, or obscene language, foolish taking or jesting, as very unbecoming, inconvenient, not fit to be practiced; yea, as criminal, and highly displeasing to God. (Eph. 5:3, 4) Whereas fornication was thought lawful by many; and Cicero asks, "When was not this done? when reprov'd? when not permitted?" The Stoics not only allowed, but pleaded for the use of obscene words; and "the use of jesting, which is translated jesting, is reckoned by Aristotle among moral virtues.

Polygamy, or having more wives than one, was always a moral evil, and is generally understood to be so; yet some have pleaded for it, as not being criminal; and it was certainly practiced by good men under the Old-Testament dispensation, who do not appear to have had any notion of the immorality of it. To come nearer to our own times, the morality of the fourth command, especially that part of it which regards the time of worship, has been, for many years, disputed, and is still a subject of controversy; and the persons on both sides of the question are men of religion, seriousness and morality; and to come nearer still, Mr.

Chandler and I have different sentiments about some things, whether they are strictly criminal or not. "The many methods that are daily taking to debauch the principles, and corrupt the manners of our youth, to inspire them with a love of diversion and pleasure, to lead them into excessive expenses, and costly luxuries and, in a word, to prejudice them not only against the principles of religion, but the plain duties of virtue and social life;" such as the entertainments of the theatre, diversions of music, like those of Israel of old, Isaiah 5:12, when his vices had almost brought him to his final ruin, cards, and fashionable games; these, and the like entertainments, Mr.

Chandler says, may not be strictly criminal in themselves; though he owns they tend to corrupt the manners, and destroy the diligence, integrity, and virtue of the nation, and to be a sensual kind of life. I, for my part, on the other hand, think these things are strictly criminal. Mr. Chandler, doubtless, has, many on his side of the question, in his way of thinking, men of superior genius, and who are of the more polite part of mankind; and I do not at all question, but that there are many of the same mind with myself and though

they may be of a lower size than the others, I will venture to say, they are at least equally as serious, sober, religions, and of as good morals.

I shall not dispute the point who is in the right or wrong; it is enough to my purpose, and for which I take notice of it, that the moral nature and fitness of things is not of so easy and certain a discernment. I had almost like to have forgot what this author tells us, "That this notion of the immutable and eternal obligation of moral virtue, is not one of the peculiar discoveries of the reason and good sense of the present age, but is plainly taught both in the records of the Old and New Testament."

The passages in the Old Testament are, Psalm 119:142, Thy righteousness is an everlasting righteousness, or, is a righteousness for ever; that is, it endures for ever; and thy law is the truth. Verse 144, The righteousness of thy testimonies is everlasting, is for ever. Verse 152, Concerning thy testimonies I have known of old; or, as Mr. Chandler says the words should be rendered, which I do not dislike, I have known of old from thy testimonies, that thou hast founded them for ever.

Verse 160, Thy word is true from the beginning; or as the words may be rendered, The beginning of thy word is truth, and every one of thy righteous judgments is for ever. All which indeed clearly prove the perpetuity of the moral law, its immutable obligation upon us, the veracity and justice of God; which appear in it, and will abide by it, and continue with it, to defend the rights, and secure the honours of it; but, what is all this to the nature and fitness of things? or, How do these passages prove the eternal and immutable obligation of moral virtue, as prior to, and independent of the will of God?

When the Psalmist is only speaking of the will of God as revealed in his law and testimonies from whence, and not from the nature and fitness of things, he had learned of old, many years ago, the truth, righteousness, and continuance of them. The only single passage in the New Testament that is produced, is, Philippians 4:8. Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.

That these expressions necessarily suppose and infer, that truth, honesty, justice, and purity, are essentially different from their contrary vices, are lovely in their nature, praise-worthy in their practice, and which both God and man will approve and commend, will be easily granted; but still the question returns, what is all this to the nature and fitness of things? To the immutable and eternal obligation of moral virtue, as prior to, and independent of the will of God? Does the apostle make moral fitness, in this sense, the rule of action, or of judgment, with respect to truth, honesty, justice, and purity, and not rather the revealed will and law of God?

The latter seems to be manifestly his sense, since he adds, those things which ye have both learned and received, and heard, and seen in me, do, and the God of peace shall be with you. Whence it appears, that the things he advises them to were such as he had taught them, according to the will of God, and which they had received upon that foot, and had seen practiced by himself, in obedience to it. I conclude with observing, that this notion of the moral nature and fitness of things, as prior to, and independent of the will of God, seems to have a tendency to introduce and establish among us, Polytheism, Deism, Antinomianism, and Libertinism. 1.

Polytheism, or the having more gods than one. It seems to favour the distinction of a superior and inferior deity; for, as has been observed, if the moral nature and fitness of things is eternal, does necessarily exist, is prior to, and independent of the will of God, and is the supreme rule of action to all reasonable creatures

whatever, it must be God; yea, since it is the unerring rule of God himself, by which he regulates and determines his own will, it must be both before, and above him; it must be superior to him; he can enact no law but what that is the rule and measure of; his will is no obligation of a distinct kind from it; he appears to have no power or authority but what is derived from it.

I am sorry to observe, agreeable to this notion, how diminutively Mr. Chandler speaks of the divine being. You read nothing throughout the whole discourse of God being a legislator, enacting laws of his own will and pleasure, agreeable to the perfections of his nature; as armed with power and authority to enforce them, and as claiming obedience from his creatures to them, as being his will, and founded in the rectitude of his nature; but on the other hand, he is thrust down into the place of a reformer.

He is indeed called the great reformer of mankind, and has the honour to be accounted the Head of the Societies for the Reformation of Manners in England; though no more is allowed him in this work of reforming mankind, than what the Societies themselves do; namely an "endeavouring to promote their happiness by methods discouraging their vices, and exciting them to the love and practice of universal virtue." After this it is no wonder it should be suggested, that the great design of our blessed Saviours coming into the world, and the mission of his apostles into it, were only the reformation and amendment of mankind; and that there can be no other valuable end of a standing ministry in the christian church, than to carry on the same design.

This strengthens my apprehension, that this notion has a tendency to introduce, 2. Deism, or to explode divine revelation, with all the doctrines and ordinances of it. And indeed, if this nature and fitness of things is the universal and most perfect rule of action to all reasonable creatures whatever, then what necessity is there, or can there possibly be, of a divine revelation? This is universal, and comprehends every thing fit to be known and practiced; it is most perfect, and therefore nothing can be added to it; it is as easily discerned as the distinction between light and darkness, sweet and bitter, and therefore needs no revelation to explain and enforce it.

Admitting a revelation; the things contained in it must be brought to this test and standard, the nature and fitness of things, to be tried by, and judged of. Let the revelation come ever so well supported, and the evidence of things, as they stand in it, be ever so clear; yet if poor, fallible, short-sighted men, cannot see the fitness of them, they must be at once rejected, and consequently the revelation itself. So if Baptism and the Lord's Supper, the peculiar ordinances of the christian revelation; if the doctrines of the divine persons in the godhead; of the decrees of god; of the union of the two natures in Christ; of the expiation of sin, in a way of satisfaction; of justification by the imputed righteousness of Christ; of the resurrection of the same body, or any other doctrines of the christian religion, how clearly soever they may be revealed; yet if men do but once take into their heads, that they do not agree with the nature and fitness of things, they must be exploded; and the next that follows, is revelation itself.

Whether the abettors of this notion really design to encourage and establish Deism, I know not; but this I am sure of, the Deists are capable of improving it greatly to their purpose. 3. Antinomianism, or the setting aside of the law of God as rule of action, seems to be the necessary and certain consequence of this principle. For if the moral nature and fitness of things is the supreme, original, universal, and most perfect rule of action to all reasonable beings whatsoever, prior to, and independent of the will of God, then what need is there of the law of God? or, what regard should be paid, to it?

Since, as it is said, "It is impossible that there can be a rule of action more excellent in itself, or more worthy the regard of reasonable beings." Now, to set aside, and disregard the law of God, as a rule of life and conversation or action, is strictly and properly Antinomianism. For my part, I have been traduced as an Antinomian, for innocently asserting, that the essence of justification lies in the eternal will of God; my meaning is, that God in his all-perfect and comprehensive mind, had from all eternity, at once, a full view of all his elect; of all their sins and transgressions; of his holy and righteous law, as broken by them, and of the complete and perfect righteousness of his Son, who had engaged to be a surety for them; and in this view of things he willed them to be righteous, through the surety-ship-righteousness of his Son, and accordingly esteemed, and accounted them so in him; in which will, esteem, and account their justification lies, as it is an immanent act in God.

By his way of thinking and speaking I no ways set aside, nor in the least oppose the doctrine of justification by faith; I assert, that there is no knowledge of justification, no comfort from it, nor any claim of interest in it, until a man believes. I abhor the thoughts of setting the law of God aside as the rule of walk and conversation; and constantly affirm, that all that believe in Christ for righteousness, should be careful to maintain good works, for necessary uses. The cry of Antinomianism, upon such a principle as this, must be mere noise and stupidity.

But here is a Gentleman that talks of something prior to, and independent of the will of God, and antecedent to any law of his as the supreme, original, universal, and most perfect rule of action to reasonable beings; as the immutable and eternal obligation of moral virtue, or from whence moral obligation is derived; whereby all authority on God's part, and all obedience on ours, are at once entirely destroyed. One should think, for the future, that not John Gill, but Samuel Chandler, must be reckoned the Antinomian. 4.

Libertinism is another consequence, which, it may be justly feared, will follow upon this notion; for if men can once establish such a principle, that something prior to and independent of the will of God, is the rule of action to them, called the nature and fitness of things, of which they themselves are the sole judges, as they may in consequence hereof be led on to explode divine revelation, and set aside the law of God as a rule of action; so what through a false way of reasoning, and the prevalence of their lusts, passions, and interests, they may persuade themselves, that it is most fitting and agreeable to the nature of things, that they should do what makes most for their own pleasure and profit.

This seems to be the source of all that wickedness and licentiousness acted by the Jews in the times of Isaiah, which occasioned the words, the subject of Mr. Chandler's discourse. They were not the meaner sort of the people, the refuse of the nation; they were the politer sort among them, that were wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight; (Isa. 5:21) men of reason and good sense, as such vain mortals love to flatter one another; they were men of bold and strong spirits, as men of atheistical and deistical principles delight to be called; in a haughty and daring manner they said, let him make speed and hasten his work, that we see it; and let the counsel of the holy One of Israel draw nigh and come, that we may know it. (Isa. 5:19) They were indeed the Deists of that generation, the contemnors of revelation; who cast away the law of the Lord, set up something else as prior to it, and despised the word the holy One of Israel; and so being guided by the false reasonings of their minds, and influenced by their own lusts, called evil good and good evil.

I would be far from suggesting any charge of libertinism against Mr. Chandler, or any others, who are in the same way of thinking with him; or that he or they are abettors of any of the above consequences; for

though principles may be charged, persons must not on that account. I judge it most unreasonable to charge persons with holding consequences which they themselves deny, though these consequences may follow never so clearly from principles held by them. But I cannot forbear saying, that for Mr.

Chandler to represent stage-plays, cards, and other fashionable games and diversions, by which the nation is so much debauched, as not strictly criminal in themselves, is acting out of character as a moral preacher; unsuitable to a Reformation Sermon; unserviceable to the design of the Societies to whom he preached; and if these can be thought to be agreeable to the nature and fitness of things, from all such fitnesses the Lord deliver us!

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