The maxim that the knowledge man needs most is knowledge of himself was an article of the religious creed of the Greeks at least two and half millennia ago, and the injunction inscribed upon the temple of Apollo at Delphi has not lacked iteration through the subsequent centuries. But to no generation of men can it have come with more force than to our own. For self-searching is most commonly the offspring of self-distrust and misgivings; it is especially when he feels ill that the plain man becomes curious, and sometimes erudite, about his inward parts. And never before, it is probable, has the reflective portion of mankind suffered a more acute attack of self-distrust or experienced more sudden and disquieting misgivings about its own species. It is the unexpectedness and suddenness of the attack even more than its nature and causes that make our time exceptional. Misgivings of man about himself are nothing new. While his moods, when he thought in general terms about himself at all, have been divided between a tendency to racial self-exaltation and a tendency to a low opinion of himself and of his place in the scheme of things, the latter mood throughout most of Western—not to speak of Eastern—thought has apparently been much the more customary, and certainly the more orthodox; and a thousand religious writers through all ages have seen precisely
in man's propensity to self-esteem—to what was usually called "pride"—his chief folly, his primal sin, his gravest danger, and the principal, though by no means the only, reason why he should live in perpetual self-distrust and self-abasement. Of most Western religion, Greek, Hebrew and Christian, the lowering of man in his own eyes, it may on the whole be said, has been the first, though not always the final, concern; and one of the conspicuous historic functions of the belief in God or gods has been to induce in believers, by contrast, a sort of racial inferiority complex, often accompanied by an unpleasantly sycophantic attitude towards deities who themselves, as frequently portrayed, might well have seemed more formidable than admirable.

The examples of this are countless, and many of them trite. But this self-abasement has assuredly been due not solely, perhaps not primarily, to the humbling sense, among the devout, of man's immeasurable inferiority to his God, nor yet, in the theology of Christendom, to the doctrine of original sin; it has often had more empirical and rationalistic grounds, has been the fruit of observation and introspection, of an actual attempt of men to notice what kind of creatures they were, not merely outwardly but inwardly, to generalize these results of observation, and then to appraise their kind by comparing its average or even its universal character and performance with its professed standards, its ideals, or its potentialities. When the Hebrew prophet in the seventh century B.C. observed that "the heart is deceitful above all things, and exceedingly corrupt," he was uttering

1 Jeremiah, 17:9.
a kind of psychological generalization which may have been already a commonplace, and at any rate remained one for more than two millennia; and the echo of it, and of Augustine, in that monument of Christian doctrine, the Westminster Catechism—"the heart of man is deceitful altogether and desperately wicked"—purported to be evident to the natural understanding even apart from any biblical authority or theological tradition.

Thus Jonathan Edwards shortly before his death, viewing with alarm a tendency which was beginning in the mid-eighteenth century to take a more genial view of human nature, based his refutation of this heresy largely, it is true, upon theological metaphysics and scriptural texts—but also upon more secular considerations. Surveying the course of universal history as he knew it, he concluded that "a view of the successive periods of the past duration of the world, from the beginning to this day, shows that wickedness has . . . had vastly the superiority in the world;" and he offered as his clinching proof the fact that "mankind have been a thousand times as hurtful and destructive as . . . all the noxious beasts, birds, fishes and reptiles in the earth, air, and water put together, at least of all kinds of animals that are visible." "And no creature," Edwards goes on, "can be found anywhere so destructive of its own kind as mankind are. All others for the most part are harmless and peaceable with regard to their own species. . . . Well, therefore, might our blessed Lord say, when sending forth his disciples into the world . . . Behold I send you forth as sheep in the midst
of wolves;—BUT BEWARE OF MEN. As much as to say, I send you forth as sheep among wolves. But why do I say, wolves? I send you forth into the world of men, that are far more hurtful and pernicious . . . than wolves.” If Edwards could have prophetically extended this survey of universal history to the twentieth century, it is unlikely that he would have found reason to change this conclusion.

True, it may be objected that Edwards had a doctrinal axe to grind, that he looked upon his species with the jaundiced eye of a Calvinist. But, except for the quotation—or misquotation—of Scripture, Edwards was repeating an old theme of the classical moralists and satirists. That “man is a wolf to man,” homo homini lupus, which was a current cliché in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, had been said by Plautus in the second century B.C., and Pliny and Juvenal had both declared that no wild animals are so destructive of their own species as man: “in these days there is more concord among serpents than among men; wild beasts are merciful to beasts spotted like themselves. When did the stronger lion take the life of the weaker? The fierce Indian tiger lives in perpetual peace with its fellow tigers, and the wild bear abides in harmony with other bears.”

The theme had been more expansively developed—under

2 Doctrine of Original Sin Defended; Works, 1881, II, p. 34.
3 Luke 10:3, which Edwards is citing, does not say “Beware of men” or that men in general are worse than wolves.
4 Plautus, Asinaria, Act II, sc. lv, line 88: Lupus est homo homini, non homo, quem qualis sit non novit. Juvenal, Satire XV, 159 ff. For the passage in Pliny, see Lovejoy and Boas, Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity, p. 402.
the influence, perhaps, both of theological motives and the classical tradition—more than a century before Edwards in a work by a French religious writer which had been translated into English by Sir Philip Sidney and Arthur Goldring:⁵

What is there more disordered and more contrarie to nature, than is the nature of man himselfe: If beasts of one kind doe kill or eate one another we take it for an ougly thing. What an ouglynesse then ought it to be unto us, when we see how men (who alonly be indued with reason) doe every howre kill one another, and roote out one another: Nay rather, is it not a great wonder to see good agreement and friendship, not among Nations, not between Countries; but even in households, yea and between Chamberfellowes: Wolves are cruell: but yet in what race of wolves shall we find Caribies and Cannibals? Lyons also are cruell: but yet where were they ever seen in Battell one against another: Now what is warre, but a gathering and packing up together of all the sorts of beastlines that are in the world? And yet what is more common among men than that? . . . It is a playne case, therefore, that man hath made himselfe an underling to the beast.⁶

Essentially this orthodox view of the general badness of

⁵ A Worke concerning the Trewnesse of the Christian Religion . . . by Phillip of Mornay, 1587.
⁶ I have omitted other and nontheological examples of the doctrine of “man’s essential badness” in the Renaissance; many apposite illustrations of it in that period have now been collected and illuminatingly analyzed by Mr. Hiram Haydn in his The Counter-Renaissance, 1950, pp. 405-417.
man was still endorsed, two decades after Edwards, by a
writer whom none could suspect of deference to a theologi­
cal tradition. Voltaire wrote in 1769:

Men in general are foolish, ungrateful, jealous, covetous
of their neighbor's goods; abusing their superiority when
they are strong, and tricksters when they are weak. . . .
Power is commonly possessed, in States and in families,
by those who have the strongest arms, the most resolute
minds and the hardest hearts. From which the moralists
of all ages have concluded that the human species is of
little worth; and in this they have not departed widely
from the truth.  

The religious writers, at least, usually did not fail to
insist that man in his original constitution and his potential
supernatural destiny is an admirable creature, made in the
image of God; and disquisitions on the "dignity of human
nature" were not wholly lacking in conventional works of
edification. But in his actual behavior, and still more in his
"heart," that is, in his inner affective and appetitive make­
up, the springs of action which chiefly move man in his
"natural" or unregenerate state, his essential folly and de­
pravity were exhibited as all the more glaring by contrast
with what he was meant to be, conceivably might have been,
and sometimes supposed himself to be.

It is, then, no new or unusual thing for men to think ill
of man, and to have deep misgivings about his nature and
his terrestrial prospects; it has been, on the contrary, the
dominant strain in men's attitude toward man throughout

7 Dieu et les hommes, 1769.
the greater part of history. What differentiates the contemporary phase of this phenomenon from earlier ones is that it has supervened with an effect of shock upon a period in which the opposite way of thinking about man had been becoming dominant. What, in the English-speaking world, we call the Victorian Era might perhaps best be distinguished—if one had to choose a single descriptive name for it—as the Age of Man's Good Conceit of Himself or, in a now more modish terminology, the Age of Man's Narcissus Complex. The germs of this temper go back, it is true, to an earlier date in modern history than our historians have always noted; like most things, it had a long and gradual development. But for a rough historical approximation, we may date its intensification and its wide diffusion from the later part of the eighteenth century, when faith in the "perfectibility" of man, and in the consequent inevitability of continuous (and rapid) progress towards a perfect social order, began to be preached by powerful spokesmen and to gain the general ear; and we may see its climax in the second half of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth—though, once more, various beginnings of a reaction against it may be discerned during the very period of its triumph. But, in general, it is, I take it, evident beyond the need of argument that in the course of the last century Western mankind grew steadily more self-complacent, more self-confident, and more hopeful about both the near and the remote future of the race upon this planet. The belief that man is "naturally good" became a widely accepted premise alike of politics and pedagogics; the taste for satire largely went out of fashion in literature, and
the sense of sin rather largely in religion; and to express a "low view" of human nature became a kind of odious blasphemy. Not among the adherents of the Religion of Humanity alone did man receive a sort of self-apotheosis, and his glorification become an article of the creed. A statue of a Victorian statesman bears upon its pedestal the typically Victorian inscription: "Believing in God, he could not lack faith in man"; and amongst those in whom a belief in God was evanescent, faith in man often seemed to take on some of the same practical and emotional functions.

The phases and causes of this more flattering attitude of man towards himself are various, and many of them obvious, though we still lack an adequate historical analysis of it. Such an analysis would, indeed, be a long story, which I shall not attempt here; to do so would result in far too prolix a preamble to my principal theme. Nor is it to my purpose to elaborate upon the diverse aspects and causes of our present disillusionments. The main fact is evident. We all find the spectacle of human behavior in our own time staggering to contemplate; we are all agreed that the world is in a ghastly mess, and that it is a man-made mess; and there is no theme of public discourse now more well worn than the tragic paradox of modern man's amazing advance in knowledge of and power over his physical environment and his complete failure thus far to transform himself into a being fit to be trusted with knowledge and power. The more influential newer tendencies in theology are conspicuously marked by a preoccupation with the reality of evil—of an evil "in the centre of human personality," in Reinhold Niebuhr's words—and by a return to the old empha-
sis upon the idea of sin. Emerson has become a prophet little congenial to the present dominant mood of mankind.

A generation which has thus been so largely stripped of its late illusions and its too hasty confidence in humanity may naturally be expected to turn to self-examination, and to seek an answer—if it can be had—to the most searching and pressing of all contemporary questions: What is man, and what's the matter with him? If he is to be saved by knowledge, or not without knowledge, it is, as the oracle declared, to the knowledge of himself that he must look. For therapeutics is but rarely successful unless preceded by anatomy and pathology. Pure moralizing, ethical theories, the preaching of elevated ideals, have not proved adequate, though they are indispensable, remedies for man's disorders; for we have had many centuries of such preaching and moralizing, and while it has produced some considerable, though local and transient, improvements in human behavior, the total result, when one views the contemporary scene, seems amazingly incommensurate with the ambitions, the magnitude, and the duration of the effort and the genius that have been spent in it. The Christian ethics has been taught for almost two thousand years; the present spectacle of Christendom is, or should be, a profoundly thought-provoking commentary on that fact. The presentation of excellent ideals, in short, has not been lacking; the question is, why they have so little efficacy in shaping the actual life of

For an illuminating survey and critical discussion of these changes, see The hanging Reputation of Human Nature, by James Luther Adams, Chicago, 1943.
man. And if we are to find an answer to that question, we shall need a better knowledge of his inner constitution, of the nature, interaction, effects, and relative potency of human motives or springs of action—the emotions and desires that determine men's behavior as individuals and (especially) as groups, since it is as groups, and in particular as political groups, that their behavior is now most atrocious and destructive. Such a knowledge, if or in so far as we had it, might best be called the theory of human nature; it is not yet, I think, sufficiently systematically and penetratingly pursued. It might be expected to be the principal field of inquiry of what is called the science of psychology; yet that discipline, until recently, has had strangely little to say about it. Thirty years ago Leonard Troland began his *The Fundamentals of Human Motivation* with the remark that

when the layman thinks of psychology, he is usually interested in the nature and interplay of human motives. He looks to psychology for some explanation of some peculiarity in the behavior of a fellow man, or in his own desires and impulses. He believes that psychology should tell him why people act as they do, and how their tendencies of action can be modified in desirable directions... [But] anyone who opens a modern text-book of psychology with this interest in mind is doomed to sore disappointment.9

And Troland noted as a significant fact that his own book

was apparently the first "to incorporate the word motivation in its title." More recently the late Professor William McDougall could write that, though literature has dealt copiously with "facts of this order, . . . this part of psychology"—which should be "the most important part"—"remains almost ignored by the majority of psychologists."\(^{10}\) The reason for this—although not, perhaps, the whole reason—McDougall found in "the unfortunate convention which has assigned the study of our intellectual development to the psychologists, and that of our moral development to the ethical philosophers"\(^{11}\)—who, McDougall perhaps intended to imply, being often bent upon edification, have not usually approached the subject in a sufficiently detached, realistic, and systematic way.

In this respect, however, there has been a notable change within the past two or three decades, a change which McDougall and Troland, among others, had a part in bringing about. It has owed still more to the influence upon psychologists of the work of certain new schools of psychopathology. The psychiatrist, by the very nature of his calling, is inevitably brought face to face with some of the data most suggestive for the normal psychology of motivation. And about the beginning of the century there appeared, first in Vienna, a group of psychopathologists, led by Freud, who not only propounded new hypotheses about the nature of the subjective determinants explaining abnormal mental states and behavior, but also extended this into a general

\(^{10}\) *The Energies of Men*, 1933, p. 226, n. 1.

theory (in the end, several partially conflicting theories) of human motivation. However incomplete, deficient in scientific caution, and (in some of its details) extravagant Freud's own theory may be considered—with its essentially mythic description of the battles between three metempirical (because "subconscious") entities, the Ego, the Id, and the Super-Ego—it was his great service to have powerfully promoted inquiry into these problems and to have contributed to it some highly original and suggestive conceptions. It must be added, however, that the effect of these recent developments has hardly been to provide man with a more flattering portrait of himself.

It is not, however, the purpose of the present lectures to attempt even the sketch of a general theory of human nature, though I hope some essential elements of any such theory may be found in them. They are to be concerned primarily with a portion of the history of the subject. For men—at least the reflective sort of men—have long had theories, though usually rather casual and unsystematic ones, of human nature, its principal springs of action, and the modus operandi of volition or deliberate choice. Such theories, implicit if not explicit, can be discerned, if you look for them, in a considerable part of literature, especially in the drama and the novel; in many of the great didactic poems and in some lyric poetry; and, often explicitly, in the writings of theologians, moral philosophers, satirists,
and political theorists. And there are few more important things to know about a writer than what his express view or his tacit but controlling assumptions concerning human nature and its dominant motives were, or to know about a period than what ideas on these subjects were prevalent in it. The history of the theory of human nature—of men's ideas about man—therefore, is, or should be, one of the major fields of investigation for the student of the history of ideas. Such a study would seek to ascertain, with respect to a writing, a school of doctrine, a movement, or a period—so far as evidence on the matter is available—what type or types of motive it expressly recognizes or tacitly assumes as actuating men's behavior, which of them it regards as the more potent or more usually operative, how it conceives them to interact with one another, upon which of them the writers appear to rely, in so far as they themselves aim at influencing opinion or conduct—and whether, on the whole, they think well or ill of human nature. With this should be associated a historical inquiry into the evaluation of motives and of human qualities, or of types of human personality conceived as the embodiments of such qualities. This last would be, in great part, a history of men's admirations (or contempts) of other men, or of the characters portrayed in fiction; it would include an examination of the fluctuations of taste in heroes and of the historical conditions under which these fluctuations took place.

These, patently, are important phenomena in the history of the human mind, interacting with and often powerfully influencing other phenomena—most evidently of all political movements and political constitutions. Yet this part of
that history has received little distinct and connected study from intellectual historians, and specialists in the several provinces pertinent to it—i.e., in the history of philosophy, of theology, economics, sociology, politics, and literature—have not, as a rule, been aware of the relations of the particular facts with which their researches are concerned to the theory of human nature as a subject matter common to them all, and needing, for its adequate historical treatment, to be pursued through them all. However, some valuable special studies relevant to parts of it—which is perhaps all that is for the present possible—have of late begun to appear. Mr. Dixon Wecker, for example, has written illuminatingly of The Hero in American Politics, Mr. Eric Bentley of the diversities of hero-worship in the past century, and Professor Sidney Hook of The Hero in History. But the general notion of such a field of historical study, and an understanding of its problems, is for the most part, so far as I can see, still lacking. We have many works, under various titles, on the history of the idea of God, but none that I can recall on the history of the idea of man. And there is an immense body of learned writing on the changes of taste in literary styles and in other arts, but no comparable investigation of men’s changes of taste in human character. The latter is doubtless the more difficult subject, but hardly the less important.

Of the history of the theory of human nature these lectures will have to do with one definitely limited chapter. It will be limited both chronologically and topically—to a
certain period, and to a certain group of ideas about the dominant and distinctive motives of man which were extremely widely held and especially influential in that period, but were not, of course, the only ones then current. The period is, roughly, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The earlier part of this period was the time in which the unfavorable general appraisal of man may be said to have reached, if not its climax, at any rate its most frequent and most notable expression outside the writings of theologians. The theologians, Protestant and Catholic, continued, of course, to dilate upon the theme; and their writings were probably more copious, and pretty certainly were read by a larger fraction of the public, than in any previous period. But the theme of man's irrationality and especially of his inner corruption was no longer a specialty of divines; it became for a time one of the favorite topics of secular literature. For the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries were, among other things, the great age of satire; and many of the examples of this genre were by implication, and some of them explicitly, satires on man in general, not merely on peculiar individuals or exceptional types. Boileau's *Eighth Satire* is typical of a number of less familiar examples:

De tous les animaux qui s'élèvent dans l'air,  
Qui marchent sur la terre, ou nagent dans la mer,  
De Paris au Pérou, du Japon jusqu'au Rome,  
Le plus sot animal, à mon avis, c'est l'homme.

Though endowed with reason, he is not at all guided by it, but
. . . dans tout ce qu’il fait n’a ni raison, ni sens.
Tout lui plait et déplait, tout le choque et l’oblige,
Sans raison il est gai, sans raison il s’afflige;
Sans raison au hasard aime, évite, poursuit,
Défait, refait, augmente, ôte, élève, détruit.

Exhibiting *homo sapiens* as inferior to the other animals is one of the customary features of the satires on man.\(^{12}\)

It was usually admitted that man’s reason, if he used it, would enable him to surpass the other creatures in happiness and in good behavior towards his fellows; but since he doesn’t use it, he “lets instinct better guide the brute.”

The principal actual effect of his possession of intellect is to put him out of harmony with “nature,” by engendering artificial desires and exorbitant ambitions, while increasing his ridiculousness and fatuity by feeding his vanity. This general vein of satire, earlier exemplified by Machiavelli in his *Asino d’Oro*, is continued by La Rochefoucauld, La Bruyère, Oldham, Mme. Deshoulières, Pope, Swift, Gay, Francis Fawkes, Robert Gould, the Earl of Rochester, Henry Brooke, Shenstone, and Goldsmith. Mme. Deshoulières, the French poetess whom some of her admiring contemporaries called “the Tenth Muse,” in her *Idylle des Moutons* (1692?) envies the silly sheep, in comparison with man who proudly boasts of his rationality:

Cette fière Raison dont on fait tant de bruit,
Elle s’oppose à tout, et ne surmonte rien.
Sous la garde de votre chien
Vous devez beaucoup moins redouter la colère

\(^{12}\) Cf. *The Happy Beast in French Thought of the Seventeenth Century* by George Boas, 1933.
Des loups cruels et ravissans,
Que sous l'autorite d'une telle chimere
Nous ne devons craindre nos sens.\textsuperscript{13}

Robert Gould's \textit{Satire on Man} (1708) outdoes Boileau in violence:

What beast beside can we so slavish call
As \textit{Man}? Who yet pretends he's lord of all.
Whoever saw (and all their classes cull)
A dog so snarlish, or a swine so full,
A wolf so rav'nous, or an ass so dull?
Slave to his passions, ev'ry several lust
Whisks him about, as whirlwinds do the dust;
And dust he is, indeed, a senseless clod
That swells, and yet would be belie'd a God.\textsuperscript{14}

\textit{Gulliver's Travels} is, of course, the most elaborate, as it is the most famous, development of this theme. Though usually described as an expression of Swift's own proud, scornful, and bitter temperament, which it is, it is also, especially in the chapter on the Houyhnhnms, an illustration of one of the literary fashions of the time. Its purpose, as summarized by Swift's first editor, Hawkesworth, was the same as that of the writers I have previously quoted: "To mortify pride, which, indeed, was not made for man, and produces not only the most ridiculous follies but the most extensive calamity, appears to have been one general view of the

\textsuperscript{13} The lines are quoted (and approved) by Bayle, \textit{Dict.}, art. "Ovide," Remark H. The entire poem may be found in Boas, \textit{The Happy Beast}, pp. 147 ff. See also F. Lachèvre, \textit{Les derniers Libertins}, pp. 5-9, and 96-100.

author in every part of these travels.” And the amiable author of *The Vicar of Wakefield*—his temperament was certainly not in the least like Swift’s—conforms to the same fashion, in his verses “The Logicians Refuted. In Imitation of Dean Swift” (1759):

Logicians have but ill defin’d
As rational the human mind;
Reason, they say, belongs to man,
But let ’em prove it if they can. . . .
[I] must in spite of ’em maintain,
That man and all his ways are vain,
And that this boasted lord of Nature
Is both a weak and erring creature.
That instinct is a surer guide
Than reason—boasting mortals’ pride;
And that brute beasts are far before ’em.
*Deus est anima brutorum.*

In all this, it is evident the satirists and other painters of human nature in black were collaborators with the theologians, and continuers, in their own fashion, of a part of the orthodox religious tradition; as a seventeenth-century apologist of La Rochefoucauld observed of the *Maximes* of that author, its unflattering portrait of man’s heart in its natural state is essentially identical with that drawn by “some of the Fathers of the Church and the great saints.”¹⁵ There is little in La Rochefoucauld with which Pascal would have disagreed, however much he might have added.

¹⁵ In the *Discours* prefixed to the 1665 edition, suppressed in the second (1666). Long attributed to Segrais, its authorship is now regarded as uncertain.
The wide prevalence in this period of a taste for such satire, an apparent pleasure in the denigration or ridicule of man in general, may seem psychologically curious; but one may conjecture that since the thesis of man’s inner corruption and perversity was so generally admitted, the average man not only became rather indurated to it and accepted it as one of the normal and proper topics for poetical and other literary exercises, but found in these at least the satisfaction of seeing vigorously and shrewdly expressed what appeared to him to be true—true, at least, of other men. Addison, however, for one, characteristically disliked the whole genre, and attacked it on the ground that it was one-sided and exaggerated and could not possibly be useful. Satires of particular types of evil or folly might be serviceable for their correction. But

such *levelling* satires are of no use to the world, and for this reason I have often wondered how the French author [Boileau], ... who was a man of exquisite judgment and a lover of virtue, could think human nature a proper subject for satire in one of his celebrated pieces, which is called the Satire upon Man. What vice or frailty can a discourse correct, which censures the whole species, and endeavors to show by some superficial strokes of wit, that brutes are the most excellent creatures of the two?\(^\text{16}\)

But, as is apparent from examples already mentioned, Addison’s protest did not put such satires or other general and sweeping invectives against human nature out of fashion in the ensuing half-century.

\(^{16}\) *Spectator* 209; italics mine.
Vauvenargues in 1746 commented shrewdly on the motivation of this taste, and predicted that it probably would not last.

We like to malign human nature, in order to try to raise ourselves above our species, and to gain for ourselves the respect of which we strive to rob it. We are so presumptuous that we imagine we can separate our personal interest from that of humanity in general, and malign the human race without implicating ourselves. This absurd vanity has filled the books of the philosophers with invectives against human nature. Man is at present in disgrace with all thinking men, who rival one another in charging him with depravities. But perhaps he is on the point of rising up and getting his virtues restored to him. For nothing is permanent, and there are changes of fashion in philosophy as well as in dress, music, architecture, etc.¹⁷

Vauvenargues' prediction was measurably true; the change of fashion had, indeed, already begun, though it was still far from abolishing the older mode in the appraisal of human nature. The denigration of man had been carried too far and been repeated too often; it is not surprising that a reaction against it and a swing in the opposite direction set in. Vauvenargues himself is one of the evidences, and one of the promoters, of this change. He is a typical transitional figure and consequently an inconsistent writer. Some of his comments on the motives from which men's actions spring are as acid as La Rochefoucauld's; but oftener he is manifestly attacking the most famous of his precursors in the same literary genre. To dwell upon les ridicules et les faib-

¹⁷ Réflexions et maximes, p. 218.
lesses de l'humanité sans distinction does not tend to improve human nature but to deprave it;\textsuperscript{18} "for with whatever vanity one may reproach us, we have need sometimes of being assured of our merit."\textsuperscript{19} And on the whole, he argues, the picture which had been so often drawn of man is not and cannot be true: "If order prevails in the human race, it is proof that reason and virtue are the stronger forces in it."\textsuperscript{20} This last argument, it may be remarked parenthetically, many theorists of human nature both before and after Vauvenargues deliberately rejected; for, as we shall see, one of their principal theses was that the good order of human society (so far as it exists) is attributable neither to reason nor to virtue. But Vauvenargues, expressing the incipient new temper, declares confidently that "real virtue, . . . which is the work of nature, and consists mainly in kindness and fortitude of soul (la vigueur de l'ame), will subsist forever with ineffaceable characters."\textsuperscript{21}

4.

It is, however, the older fashion in the appraisal of man that is more pertinent to the special subject of these lectures. This fashion as such, is not, I hasten to add, itself the theme of the remaining lectures; the illustrations of it already given are only by way of prelude. We shall be mainly occupied with more specific and concrete and (as I think) more constructive observations upon human nature than this sweeping vilification of it. Nevertheless, the general tendency of

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., p. 285.  
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., p. 242.  
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., p. 193.  
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., p. 296.
which I have been speaking is not only an essential part of the background of the particular movement of ideas which we are to examine; it is also, as will presently appear, causally related to that movement, at least in its early phase —though the causal relation probably worked both ways.

Meanwhile, it is of some historical interest to note—still by way of prelude—that the period was perhaps, in at least one pertinent respect, more like our own than any before or since. Mr. Max Lerner, presumably having in mind the effect of certain of the new tendencies in psychology to which I have already cursorily referred, in 1939 declared that “the discovery of the irrational marks the genius of our age. . . . The intellectual revolution of the twentieth century is likely to prove the charting of the terra incognita of the irrational and the extraction of its implications for every area of human thought.” It is, he tells us, “nothing short of a Copernican revolution in ideas,” since it means that “the rational, right-thinking man has as surely ceased to be considered the center of our intellectual system as the earth has ceased to be the center of our planetary system.”

There is some exaggeration, I think, but also a good deal of truth in this, in so far as it relates to our own time; but “the intellectual revolution of the twentieth century”—though it is a revolution as against the preceding century—had its counterpart in the seventeenth and eighteenth. The writers of that age whose ideas about man’s motives are to be reviewed here were also much occupied with the attempt to chart the terra incognita of the irrational and to extract its

22 The Nation, Oct. 21, 1939.
implications. In view of their acceptance of the general premise about human nature which we have noted, they could hardly have failed to engage in that sort of exploration. If man is, by hypothesis, in the main an irrational creature, then, if you wish to understand man—and the age was one in which the desire to understand him was peculiarly eager—it is evidently for irrational (or at any rate, nonrational) elements and forces in his nature that you must look; and, as I have said, if you wish to control him, and to improve his condition, it is still upon such forces that you must rely. It is true that these older writers were usually much less systematic about it than their twentieth-century successors; they did not, of course, anticipate all of the conclusions of the latter; and they did not deduce complex systems of psychopathology and psychotherapy from their premises. That they were less penetrating is, I think, questionable; and it is not questionable that they anticipated what is, I suppose, rather widely conceived, at least by the general educated public, to be one of the most pregnant of contemporary discoveries in psychology. It is apparently assumed by many in our time, including Mr. Lerner, that it is a relatively recent view which holds that men's so-called “reasons” for most of their beliefs, as well as for their actions, are determined by their alogical or nonrational desires; and an American expositor of Pareto has lamented that this view still receives even from the learned so little application in the study of human behavior.

Even the most judicious students of history and the social sciences [Mr. L. J. Henderson has observed] hardly ever consistently avoid the traditional assumption that the actions of men are logical. . . . Under the influence of the
desire for logical explanations, . . . which is perhaps one of the most uniform traits of educated men, they unconsciously neglect a question that should always be considered at the outset of an inquiry: Is a certain action logical or non-logical?  

The part the reaction against this assumption plays in certain contemporary theories in sociology as well as psychology is well known. So regarded, man appears as a being who is forever "rationalizing" but—at least in matters in which his sentiments, passions, prejudices, or supposed interests are involved—is scarcely ever rational. He is eagerly addicted to the use of "logic," but nearly all his logic is upside-down; he first embraces the conclusion which is emotionally welcome to him and then ingeniously discovers reasons for accepting it. But, in the main, he does not do this consciously; he believes that his ostensible reasons really determine his conclusions or motivate his actions. He is thus not merely nonrational but a perpetual victim of self-deception.

But to imagine that there is anything novel in this idea is a historical error into which no one who is even moderately read in the theology and literature of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is likely to fall. I shall cite some of the principal evidence of the fact that the explorers of human nature in that period were generally insistent upon the enormous part played in human affairs by "wishful thinking" and upon the conception of man as usually—or as some went so far as to declare, invariably—a nonrational rationalizer.

Here too it was the theological writers who seem to have started the fashion. For the doctrine of man's total depravity was a great stimulator of the quest for not only irrational but hidden motives behind even outwardly good acts; whatever else be said of it, it historically produced a good deal of psychological ingenuity, and a considerable amount of psychological penetration. Its defenders were bound in consistency to view with suspicion any surface show of virtue, however impressive. Men's overt behavior, it could hardly be denied, was frequently respectable, considerate, and sometimes heroic; if it were not so, if all individuals were literally and habitually "wolves," or worse, towards one another, even a moderately orderly and peaceful society could not exist. Men also professed to be actuated by reasonable or disinterested grounds of action and presumably were sometimes sincere in believing that they were. It would have been extravagant to maintain that all men are always deliberate and conscious hypocrites. To vindicate the doctrine it was necessary to penetrate below the surface of the individual's consciousness and discover the truth, of which most men were themselves unaware, about their "inward parts," about "the heart." And it was precisely the corruption of "the heart" of man, and not necessarily the invariable badness of his social conduct, that the dogma of his essential depravity usually maintained. The subtler champions of the dogma, therefore, insistently dwelt upon the thesis that, though man has undeniably been endowed by his Creator with the divine gift of reason, it is the "heart"—with a bad connotation—that controls the operations of the reason, but that in doing so the heart hides from itself, so that men are self-
deceivers ever. Thus “the late faithful Minister of God’s Word, Daniel Dyke,” wrote, before 1614, a thick volume on The Mystery of Selfe-Deceiving; or A Discourse and Discovery of the Deceitfulnesse of Man’s Heart, published posthumously in 1630—a long preachment on the text of Jeremiah, 17: 9. “Peter well sayes of these corrupt lusts that they fight against the soule; yea, even the principall part thereof, the Understanding; by making it servilely to frame its judgement to their desire.” “Our affections when they would have a thing, sharpen our wits, and set them to devise arguments to serve their turn.” “Our hearts do privily and secretly (we scarce perceiving it) foist in and closely convey some corruption in our good actions.”

The gentle Malebranche noted that

The passions always seek to justify themselves and persuade us insensibly that we have reason for following them. The gratification and pleasure to which they give rise in the mind which should be judging them, corrupt its judgment in their favor; and thus it is that one might say that it is they which cause it to reason. . . . The passions act on the imagination, and the imagination, being corrupted, works upon the reason, always representing things to it, not as they are in themselves, . . . but as they are in relation to the present passion, so that it may pronounce the judgment that they desire.

The Abbe Jacques Esprit published in 1678 an entire book

on this theme, *De la Fausseté des vertus humaines*,26 which attained considerable celebrity in its time and appeared in an English translation in 1706.27 Esprit especially well illustrates the theological motivation of this endeavor to show that good deeds are always prompted by unworthy motives; and it is to be borne in mind that he was not a Calvinist but a Catholic, though of Jansenist sympathies. That the general thesis which he proposed to elaborate in detail was already a commonplace he admits. “Everybody owns that [men] commonly act by Interest, or Vanity.” There are virtuous actions, but these do not imply virtuous motives. “One who is Mild, Peaceable, Indulgent, Good and Officious is not truly Virtuous, if he be so to get Men’s Love, and not to obey God’s Commands.” “It may always be said with Montagne: ‘A virtuous action cannot be known; those that have the Good, have not the Essence of it.’ For Profit, Glory, Fear, and such other Foreign Causes egg us on to produce them. Valour, Justice, and Goodness may be thus called with Relation to others; but in those of whom they are asserted they are by no means Virtues, since they have some By-End and Motive (il y a une autre fin proposée, une autre cause mouvante).” “This,” says Espirit, “I design to show in this Book”; and he accordingly seeks out the hidden causes (les principes cachés) of the imperturbability of philosophers; the probity and fidelity of men of honor, “who are so up-

26 Paris, 1678. The book was reprinted as late as 1730.
right in their actions and fair in their proceedings”; the
“kindness (bonté) of officious and charitable persons; and
the magnanimity of great captains who remain undaunted in
the midst of the greatest dangers.”

I wish that those in whom these Moral, Civil and Heroick
Virtues shine, seeing the Vanity and Meanness of the
Motives of their actions, may correct their Errors, and
conceive that the Virtues they glory in are only false and
sham Virtues, and that far from fancying themselves
Hero’s and demy Gods, they may acknowledge that they
are covetous, envious, vain, weak, fickle and inconstant
as other men are; . . . and that, despairing to draw any
pure, solid and true virtues from so corrupt a Spring as
our Nature, they may apply themselves to God to obtain
them.28

Not even the man who goes to the scaffold rather than betray
a friend can be credited with real virtue: for if you should
thoroughly “probe the heart” even of so seemingly supreme
an exemplar of courage and loyalty, you would find that
“friendship had much less part in the action than vanity.”29

Jean La Placette in his Traité de l’orgueil (1643) con­
cisely formulated the concept of what is now called “ration­
alization” as follows:

When one loves, hates, fears, desires, one has an impera­
tive wish (on veut absolument) to have a reason for lov­
ing, hating, fearing, desiring . . . and by the force of one’s

28 Deceitfulnesse of Humane Virtues, 1706 ed.; Beauvoir’s
English tr., end of Preface.
29 De la fausseté, etc., p. 459.
wish for it, one imagines that one has found it—since, in truth, when one is so disposed, the weakest conjectures pass for demonstrations and the slightest surmises for certain and indubitable truths.\textsuperscript{30}

A contemporary of Pascal had innocently remarked that his reasons (for a belief or an action) “came to him afterwards, but first the thing itself was acceptable or was offensive to him”; nevertheless, “it was offensive for the reasons which he discovered subsequently.” Pascal curtly comments: “I think, not that a thing offends us for the reasons which we find afterwards, but that we find the reasons because the thing offends us.”\textsuperscript{31}

Jacques Abbadie, a French Protestant theologian famous in his day, and of considerable influence, especially in England, to which he emigrated, in his \textit{L'Art de se connoistre soy-même} (1692) dwells at length upon “the inventiveness of the mind in discovering reasons favorable to what it desires”; for such reasons, when invented, give it pleasure, whereas “it is very slow to perceive the reasons contrary to its desire, even though they leap at the eyes, because it is irritated at finding what it was not seeking.”\textsuperscript{32} Abbadie undertakes to enumerate the principal forms of this deception of the mind by the heart: “voluntary inattention” (\textit{les inaplications volontaires}, presumably, turning away from unwelcome evidence or the logic of an argument), “ignorances which one finds pleasurable, the errors which arise from the

\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Tr. de l'orgueil}, pp. 33-34.
\textsuperscript{31} \textit{Penseées}, ed. V. Giraud, 1924, No. 277.
\textsuperscript{32} \textit{Art de se connoistre soy-même}, p. 241. There were three English editions of this book.
great desire that one has of being able to deceive himself, and the *penchant* which turns our mind away from everything that is painful to it and attaches it strongly to everything that pleases it.”

The “light of the understanding,” in short, is like physical light: “it illuminates everything, but it of itself moves nothing. It shines (*elle a du brillant*), but it has no strength. . . . If men were controlled by reason, they would be persuaded by philosophers rather than by orators. . . .

*C'est que l'âme ne balance point les raisons, mais ses intérêts; et qu'elle ne pèse point la lumière, mais seulement son utilité.*”

This is shown by *une expérience ordinaire:* namely that “a man who has an admirable rectitude of mind and exactitude of reason for understanding what is most complex and most recondite in the sciences” — who knows when to doubt, when to affirm, when merely to opine concerning bare probabilities — “such a man is no sooner involved in some business with another, in which his own interest is involved, than his rectitude of mind deserts him, *sa raison fléchit au gre de ses désirs, et l'évidence se confond avec l'utilité.* . . . But let the same man discuss other people's affairs, and he will be found reasoning with the same correctness as before.”

Abbadie is here expressing, and confusing, two distinct theses: first, the usual one, that it is the proper function of the reason to control action but that, in practice, it usually is itself controlled by the passions; and second, the much more radical proposition,

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33 Ibid., p. 229.
34 Ibid., p. 220 f.
35 Ibid.
which was to be the fundamental theorem of Hume’s ethical doctrine that it is psychologically inconceivable that “reason” as such should influence volition or behavior at all. Its function is solely cognitive; it can make us acquainted with facts. But knowledge apart from desire can not determine choice:

The good attracts us; the bad repels us (nous fait fuir). The reason by itself does neither the one nor the other, but exists only in so far as it enables us to perceive objects [i.e., the objects open to our choice].

In this persistent topic of the theologians, then, the lay satirists of man found a theme upon which endless elaboration was possible; and a great part both of La Rochefoucauld and La Bruyère consists simply in illustrations of and variations upon a single famous maxim of the former: “l’esprit est toujours la dupe du coeur” or, as his contemporary editor put it, “nature in man does not sincerely declare the motives which cause his actions.”

Among Eng-

\[36\] Ibid., p. 220.

\[37\] Discours prefixed to first edition; Flammarion ed., p. 58. Evidence of a direct transmission of the idea from the English Puritan country parson, Dyke, to the mondain Duke de La Rochefoucauld, has been suggested by several French scholars. For Dyke’s Mystery of Self-Deceiving was translated into French in 1634 by a Huguenot refugee in England, Jean Verneuil, under the title La Sonde de la Conscience, and the French version was apparently known and admired in Jansenist circles; and the work of Esprit, a close friend of La Rochefoucauld’s—he has even been called his “mentor”—was probably inspired by it. A contemporary, in an unpublished manuscript discovered in the Bibliothèque Nationale in the 1880’s, declared that “the greater
lish secular writers, Lord Halifax tersely summed up the thesis: "Most men put their Reason out to service to their will." Soame Jenyns, usually an echoer of current commonplaces of the mid-eighteenth century, did not omit this one:

Men's opinions much oftener proceed from their actions than their actions from their opinions: they act first, and then with great facility reconcile their principles to their conduct; for which reason we find . . . very few who can ever be convinced that anything is wrong from which either pleasure or profit accrues to themselves.

John Adams was the principal American exponent in the later eighteenth century of this way of thinking, in which he was not least a child of that era—and not least an Adams. He seems to have been much impressed by the whole group of related ideas which I have been recalling. His earliest published writing, with one exception, was a little essay (1763) in which he elaborated upon the proposition that

There is nothing in the science of human nature more

part of these Maxims [of La Rochefoucauld] have been taken from an English book, rather badly translated into French, entitled 'La Sonde de la Conscience,' by an English minister . . . M. de la Rochefoucauld has merely put them into beautiful French." See E. Jovy, Deux inspirateurs peu connus de la Rochefoucauld, Daniel Dyke et Jean Verneuil; F. Brampton Harvey, "An English Source of La Rochefoucauld's 'Maxims,'" The Nineteenth Century and After, Nov., 1933, pp. 612 ff.

curious, or that deserves a critical attention from every man so much, as that principle which moral writers have distinguished by the name of self-deceit. This principle is the spurious offspring of self-love.  

By "self-deceit" Adams meant "rationalization" as a derivative from self-esteem—men's "disposition to flatter themselves," and consequently to "deceive themselves" to believe anything which will help them to cut a pleasing figure in their own eyes or in the eyes of others, and to present their very deficiencies in a favorable light. This "disposition" seemed to Adams to "pervade mankind from the worst to the best"—from "abandoned minds" to "those few favorites of Nature, who have received from her clearer understandings and more happy tempers than other men, who seemed designed, under Providence, to be the great conductors of art and science, war and peace, the laws and religion of this lower world."

In this propensity Adams saw "perhaps the source of far the greatest and worst part of the calamities of mankind"; but, incidentally, he characteristically pointed out—what is worth reflecting upon—the dangers, not of unconscious self-delusion, but of the consciousness of the possibility of self-delusion. A wise man is aware of the fact that his own judgments, opinions, and even moral sentiments, may, like other men's, be really formed in him, not by reason, but by "prejudices, appetites and passions which ought to hold

40 Adams is probably here referring to a passage in Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, pp. 183 f., to which I shall later refer.
a much inferior rank in the intellectual and moral system.”
And, as a result, the wisest men may be the most self-distrustful; “the greatest genius, united to the best disposition, will find it hard . . . to be certain of the purity of his own intentions.” If all men were vividly and constantly aware that the operations of their reason are but “rationalizations,” he implies, all men would be Hamlets. But Adams’ reflections on self-delusion chiefly serve to explain, for him, how it was possible for others to hold views so different from his own in the political controversies then beginning in Massachusetts, and why those controversies largely took the form of “attempts to blacken and discredit the motives of the disputants on both sides,” rather than “rational inquiries into the merits of the cause, the truth and rectitude of the measures contested.”41 The reader of the essay can hardly doubt in the end that Adams was, after all, pretty certain that his own position on these issues was based upon such rational considerations; and it seems evident that he strongly resented the “blackening” of his motives for holding that position.

41 In The Works of John Adams, III, pp. 433 ff., “On Self-Delusion.” Adams may be said, I think, to have been the most assiduous American student of “social psychology” in the eighteenth century. For a later, and different, view of his on this subject, see Lecture VII, pp. 197 ff.