The American Deists

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Ethan Allen (1737–89) is primarily remembered today as the romantically flamboyant leader of the “Green Mountain Boys.” But during his lifetime he was also notorious for his authorship of what is America’s first systematic treatise on deism: *Reason the Only Oracle of Man* (or, in some editions, *Oracles of Reason*). This work, first published in 1784, quickly earned Allen the dubious reputation, as Yale’s Ezra Stiles put it, of a “profane & impious Deist.” Allen himself pretended not to be so sure. As he says in the preface to his book, “I am generally denominated a Deist, the reality of which I never disputed, being conscious I am no Christian, except mere infant baptism makes me one; and as to being a Deist, I know not strictly speaking, whether I am one or not, for I have never read their writings.” There is little reason, however, to take this disclaimer at face value. Allen’s rejection of Christianity is clearly based on deistic principles. Moreover, many of his central arguments in support of rational religion are reminiscent of those employed by such British deists as Toland and Charles Blount (1654–93), who in the final year of his life published an anti-Christian tract entitled *Oracles of Reason*.

The future “profane & impious Deist” was born 10 January 1737 in Litchfield, Connecticut, but spent his formative years on the southwestern frontier, to which his family had moved shortly after his birth. Although echoes of the Great Awakening’s religious fundamentalism must have reached those settlements during his childhood, Allen appears not to have been overly influenced by them. By the time his father died in 1755, he seems to have already lost whatever fidelity to orthodoxy he might at one time have possessed.

His father’s death left Allen the sole support of his mother and seven siblings, thus ending his chances for a college education. But after working a couple of years on the family farm, he enlisted in the army and served in the French and Indian War. He afterward relocated to Vermont, where by 1769 he had become “colonel commandant” of the Green Mountain Boys, a local militia called up in response to a boundary dispute between New York, New Hampshire, and Vermont. His leadership of the militia was so successful that by 1771 the governor of New York had offered a twenty-pound reward for his capture; in 1774 it was increased to a full hundred. Past sins appear to have been forgiven if not entirely forgotten with the outbreak of war between the colonies and England, and Allen was quickly catapulted to the status of a hero
after his capture of Fort Ticonderoga in 1775. Six months later he was a prisoner of war in Canada, captured during a rather foolhardy assault on Montreal, and sat out much of the remaining hostilities in a cell. After the war, he devoted himself to local Vermont politics and farming until his death from apoplexy, reportedly after a night of heavy drinking, in 1789.

Allen was the author of several pamphlets and numerous articles, but the only one of his works to stand the test of time is his *Reason the Only Oracle of Man*. Ironically, however, it is also the most poorly written one. It is too long, redundant, and sometimes impenetrably convoluted. Allen himself seems to have been aware of its cumbersome style, as indicated in the following confession with which he prefaced the treatise:

> In my youth I was much disposed to contemplation, and at my commencement in manhood, I committed to manuscript such sentiments or arguments as appeared most consonant to reason, lest through the debility of memory my improvement should have been less gradual: This method of scribbling I practised for many years, from which I experienced great advantages in the progression of learning and knowledge, the more so as I was deficient in education, and had to acquire the knowledge of grammar and language, as well as the art of reasoning, principally from a studious application to it, which after all I am sensible, lays me under disadvantages, particularly in matters of composition.

Although Allen was straightforward about his lack of expertise in composition (a confession of no great sacrifice, since its truth was apparent in the book), he may have been less candid about a much more significant issue: the true authorship of *Reason the Only Oracle*. There is some debate about whether he or a friend, Thomas Young, actually wrote it. Young was a free-thinking physician whom Allen had known in his youth, and it seems evident that Young, a relatively well-educated man, introduced Allen to the British deistic tradition. *Reason the Only Oracle* was published after Young’s death, and his widow maintained that Allen had plagiarized from her husband’s manuscripts. Allen’s defenders responded that at worst the manuscript had been coauthored by the two men with the understanding that the one who outlived the other would publish it. Allen himself chose to remain silent and carried the truth about the treatise’s authorship to his grave.

Regardless of who wrote the book, however, it became the young Republic’s first sustained defense of deism. Moreover, it exerted an immense influence on American free thought—despite the fact that the Bennington, Vermont, printer who typeset the manuscript refused to release it for two years and that when he did a possibly arsonous fire in his warehouse destroyed all but
thirty copies. But the few issues that survived circulated widely and were soon pirated at an alarming rate. In fact, the book was reprinted (in conservative Boston, no less) as late as 1854. It seems certain, then, that for every Ezra Stiles who dismissed the book as a pack of "scurrilous Reflexions," for every Timothy Dwight who insisted that its author "In Satan’s cause . . . bustled, bruised and swore," there were hundreds of people in the Early Republic who read, pondered, and applauded Allen’s homespun defense of rational religion.

The selections here from Allen’s *Reason the Only Oracle* revolve, in typical deistic fashion, around the ideas of God, reason, and morality.

In writing about the deity, Allen argues that its existence is demonstrated a posteriori. Experience teaches that all events are causally dependent on preceding ones, so it follows that the “vast system of causes and effects are [likewise] necessarily connected.” This points to a First Cause of the entire set of perceptible events. The First Cause maintains providential regularity in reality—indeed, Allen goes so far as to identify the natural harmony with God. Of course, the perceived dependency of individual events does not entail an analogous causal dependency of reality in general, but this is a logical point that escaped Allen as well as many other American deists. For him and them, the causal argument remained a sufficient demonstration of divine existence. In Allen’s words, “The display of God’s providence is that by which the evidence of his being is evinced to us.”

But the rational investigation of nature does not merely establish God’s existence. It also provides insight into divine and human nature. Experience shows that physical reality exhibits constancy, uniformity, regularity; it is, in short, rational. If God is the First Cause of reality, God must possess the attributes characteristic of it, since the effect of a cause always reveals the cause’s essence. Consequently, God is likewise rational, constant, and perfectly wise and benevolent. Similarly, since humans themselves are effects of divine causation, they must also reflect, albeit imperfectly, its nature. The human species, then, possesses reason, eternal although finite, which enables it to read and understand the laws of nature that constitute God’s revelation of himself.

Like so many of the later American deists, Allen goes to great pains to defend human reason against orthodox Christianity’s charge of depravity and insufficiency as an epistemological criterion. For Allen, since natural law is “co-extensive and co-existent with reason, and binding on all intelligent beings in the universe,” there is a direct symmetry between the mental faculty of reason and the rational nature of the universe. Hence, when humans think and act rationally, they comprehend reality and at the same time reflect divine wisdom and goodness. It follows for Allen, then, that the moral and physical sciences are promoted by the exercise of reason and corrupted by a denial of it. True, the book of nature can be misread if humans allow their prejudices and
unexamined opinions to sully their judgments. But nature, not supernaturalistic doctrine, nonetheless remains the sole reliable guide for the promotion of science, morality, and happiness.

In keeping with his Enlightenment-based panrationalism, Allen denounces scriptural revelation as “beyond human understanding” and thus as an illegitimate form of knowledge; the doctrine of the Trinity as a logical absurdity, since its postulation of three separate but undivided substances in the deity violates the law of identity; and miraculous interventions, because they “imply mutability in the wisdom of God” and offer no cogent explanation for the phenomena they claim to describe. Moreover, in a reformulation that set the stage for later deistic apologies, he denies that faith is mystical or that the person of faith is ethically superior to others. In a very empiricist move indeed, Allen redefines faith as “the last result of the understanding, or the same which we call the conclusion, it is the consequence of a greater or less deduction of reasoning from certain premises previously laid down.” As such, faith in the correct sense of the word denotes the last claim in a chain of inferential reasoning. It is only the proponents of revealed religion who accept a corrupted version of faith as a mysterious and logically gratuitous illumination. Since, however, the word properly refers to logical deduction, and since humans are incapable of assenting to propositions “contrary to their [rational] judgments,” there is no special merit in acquiescing to faith-based propositions. Such assent is only to be expected of rational individuals.

Just as reason is the sole arbiter in the investigation of natural philosophy and theological speculation, so it is also the necessary condition for ethical behavior and human happiness. Morality, says Allen, “does not derive its nature from [holy] books, but from the fitness of things.” It is “acquired from reason and experience.” The latter tells us which actions are conducive and which detrimental to our well-being; the former enables us to prescribe ethical codes and principles reflecting that knowledge. An ethical system grounded in religion, on the other hand, “subjects mankind to sacerdotal empire; which is erected on . . . imbecility.” Allen concedes that traditional religious creeds have sometimes defended admirable ethical principles, but such instances represent a rational reaction to the light of nature rather than a mysteriously revealed inspiration. Since genuine religious sensibility is in essence the knowledge of virtue and the desire to pursue it and avoid wickedness, religion should be based on rational contemplation of physical and human nature, not on “arbitrary ceremonies, or mere positive institutions, abstractly considered from the moral rectitude of things.” Although Allen failed to elaborate on the precise principles that support ethical behavior—a task left to the more able Elihu Palmer—his naturalistic orientation was to resound in later deistic theories of morality.

A good portion of Allen’s treatise is concerned with arguments denying the
divinity of Jesus. He attacks this central Christian doctrine from two fronts. First, and less convincingly, he insists that Jesus’ own words as recorded in Scripture reveal that he never claimed to be divine. Second, and more substantially, Allen argues that insofar as God by definition is essentially one and possesses unlimited attributes such as infinitude, eternality, and omnipotence, it is logically impossible that “God should become a man . . . and that man should become a God.” There is an “infinite disproportion” between two such entities that precludes the possibility—much less likelihood—of that contradictory union. Such a being would have to simultaneously exhibit limited and unlimited attributes—a situation repugnant to reason.

Allen is not content simply to gainsay the divinity of Jesus. He also assails the God of Scripture as being an arbitrary and immoral deity who violates every norm of distributive justice known to humans. The Christian God, for example, unwarrantedly sentences humans to eternal punishment for what must necessarily be finite crimes. In addition, he countenances and performs actions in both the Old and New Testaments that transgress the moral “fitness of things.” Such an incongruity is not possible for the Grand Architect, because “the same reasons cannot fail to hold good in the divine mind as in that of the human, for the rules of justice are essentially the same whether applied to the one or to the other, having their uniformity in the eternal truth and reason of things.”

In the final analysis, cumbersome and long-winded as it is, Allen’s *Reason the Only Oracle of Man* is an able synthesis of the central tenets of Enlightenment deism. He was probably the least acute of all the American deists, yet the issues he raised and the arguments he presented served as prototypes for later and more sophisticated defenses of rational religion.

*Reason the Only Oracle of Man,*
*or a Compendious System of Natural Religion*

I.1. *The Duty of Reforming Mankind from Superstition and Error and the Good Consequences of It.*

The desire of knowledge has engaged the attention of the wise and curious among mankind in all ages, which has been productive of extending the arts and sciences far and wide in the several quarters of the globe, and excited the contemplative to explore nature’s laws in a gradual series of improvement, till philosophy, astronomy, geography and history, with many other branches of science, have arrived to a great degree of perfection.

It is nevertheless to be regretted, that the bulk of mankind, even in those

*Ed.: The numbers indicate locations in Allen’s original text—here, for example, chapter 1, section 1.*
nations which are most celebrated for learning and wisdom, are still carried down the torrent of superstition, and entertain very unworthy apprehensions of the BEING, PERFECTIONS, CREATION and PROVIDENCE of GOD, and their duty to him, which lays an indispensable obligation on the philosophic friends of human nature, unanimously to exert themselves in every lawful, wise and prudent method, to endeavour to reclaim mankind from their ignorance and delusion, by enlightening their minds in those great and sublime truths concerning God and his providence, and their obligations to moral rectitude, which in this world, and that which is to come, cannot fail greatly to affect their happiness and well being.

Though “None by searching can find out God, or the Almighty to perfection”; yet I am persuaded, that if mankind would dare to exercise their reason as freely on those divine topics, as they do in the common concerns of life, they would, in a great measure rid themselves of their blindness and superstition, gain more exalted ideas of God and their obligations to him and one another, and be proportionally delighted and blessed with the views of his moral government, make better members of society, and acquire many powerful incentives to the practice of morality, which is the last and greatest perfection that human nature is capable of.

1.2. Of the Being of a God

The Laws of Nature having subjected mankind to a state of absolute dependence on something out of, and manifestly beyond themselves, or the compound exertion of their natural powers, gave them the first conception of a superior principle existing; otherwise they could have had no possible conception of a superintending power. But this sense of dependency, which results from experience and reasoning on the facts, which every day cannot fail to produce, has uniformly established the knowledge of our dependence to every of the species who are rational, which necessarily involves or contains in it the idea of a ruling power, or that there is a GOD, which ideas are synonymous.

This is the first glimpse of a Deity, and powerfully attracts the rational mind to make farther discoveries, which, through the weakness of human reasonings opens a door for errors and mistakes respecting the divine essence, though there is no possibility of our being deceived in our first conceptions of a superintending power. Of which more will be observed in its order.

The globe with its productions, the planets in their motions, and the starry heavens in their magnitudes, surprise our senses, and confound our reason, in their munificent lessons of instruction concerning GOD, by means whereof we are apt to be more or less lost in our ideas of the object of divine adoration, though at the same time every one is truly sensible that their being and preservation is from GOD. We are too apt to confound our ideas of god with his works, and take the latter for the former. Thus barbarous and unlearned na
tions have imagined, that inasmuch as the sun in its influence is beneficial to them in bringing forward the spring of the year, causing the production of vegetation, and food for their subsistence, that therefore it is their God: while others have located other parts of creation, and ascribe to them the prerogatives of God; and mere creatures and images have been substituted to be Gods by the wickedness or weakness of man, or both together. It seems that mankind in most ages and parts of the world have been fond of corporeal Deities with whom their outward senses might be gratified, or as fantastically diverted from the just apprehension of the true God, by a supposed supernatural intercourse with invisible and mere spiritual beings, to whom they ascribe divinity, so that through one means or other, the character of the true God has been much neglected, to the great detriment of truth, justice, and morality in the world; nor is it possible, that mankind can be uniform in their religious opinions, or worship God according to knowledge, except they can form a consistent arrangement of ideas of the Divine character. This therefore shall be the great object of the following pages, to which all others are only subordinate; for the superstructure of our religion will be proportionate to the notions we entertain of the divinity whom we adore. A sensibility of mere dependence includes an idea of something, on which we depend (call it by what name we will) which has a real existence, in as much as a dependency on nonentity is inadmissible, for that the absence or non-existence of all being could not have caused an existence to be. But should we attempt to trace the succession of the causes of our dependence, they would exceed our comprehension though every of them, which we could understand, would be so many evidences (of the displays) of a God. Although a sense of dependency discloses to our minds the certainty of a Supreme Being, yet it does not point out to us the object, nature or perfections of that being; this belongs to the province of reason, and in our course of ratiocination on the succession of causes and events. Although we extend our ideas retrospectively ever so far upon the succession, yet no cause in the extended order of succession, which depends upon another prior to itself, can be in the independent cause of all things: nor is it possible to trace the order of the succession of causes back to that self-existent cause, inasmuch as it is eternal and infinite, and therefore cannot be traced out by succession, which operates according to the order of time, consequently can bear no more proportion to the eternity of God, than time itself may be supposed to do, which has no proportion at all; as the succeeding arguments respecting the eternity and infinity of God will evince. But notwithstanding the series of the succession of causes cannot be followed in a retrospective succession up the self-existent or eternal cause, it is nevertheless a perpetual and conclusive evidence of a God. For a succession of causes, considered collectively, can be nothing more than effects of the independent cause, and as much dependent on it, as those dependent causes are upon one another; so that we may with
certainty conclude that the system of nature, which we call by the name of natural causes, is as much dependent on a self-existent cause, as an individual of the species in the order of generation is dependent on its progenitors for existence. Such part of the series of nature's operations, which we understand, has a regular and necessary connection with, and dependence on its parts, which we denominate by the names of cause and effect. From hence we are authorised from reason to conclude, that the vast system of causes and effects are thus necessarily connected, (speaking of the natural world only) and the whole regularly and necessarily dependent on a self-existent cause; so that we are obliged to admit an independent cause, and ascribe self-existence to it, otherwise it could not be independent, and consequently not a God. But the eternity or manner of the existence of a self-existent and independent being is to all finite capacities utterly incomprehensible; yet this is so far from an objection against the reality of such a being, that it is essentially necessary to support the evidence of it; for if we could comprehend that being, whom we call God, he would not be God, but must have been finite, and that in the same degree as those may be supposed to be, who could comprehend him; therefore so certain as God is, we cannot comprehend his essence, eternity or manner of existence. This should always be premised, when we assay to reason on the being, perfection, eternity and infinity of God, or of his creation and providence. As far as we understand nature, we are become acquainted with the character of God; for the knowledge of nature is the revelation of God. If we form in our imagination a compendious idea of the harmony of the universe, it is the same as calling God by the name of harmony, for there could be no harmony without regulation, and no regulation without a regulator, which is expressive of the idea of a God. Nor could it be possible, that there could be order or disorder, except we admit of such a thing as creation, and creation contains in it the idea of a creator, which is another appellation for the Divine Being, distinguishing God from his creation. Furthermore there could be no proportion, figure or motion without wisdom and power; wisdom to plan, and power to execute, and these are perfections, when applied to the works of nature, which signify the agency or superintendency of God. If we consider nature to be matter, figure and motion, we include the idea of God in that of motion; for motion implies a mover, as much as creation does a creator. If from the composition, texture, and tendency of the universe in general, we form a complex idea of general good resulting therefrom to mankind, we implicitly admit a God by the name of good, including the idea of his providence to man. And from hence arises our obligation to love and adore God, because he provides for, and is beneficent to us: abstract the idea of goodness from the character of God, and it would cancel all our obligations to him, and excite us to hate and detest him as a tyrant; hence it is, that ignorant people are superstitiously misled into a conceit that they hate God, when at the same time it is
only the idol of their own imagination, which they truly ought to hate and be ashamed of; but were such persons to connect the ideas of power, wisdom, goodness and all possible perfection in the character of God, their hatred toward him would be turned into love and adoration.

For mankind to hate truth as it may bring their evil deeds to light and punishment, is very easy and common; but to hate truth as truth, or God as God, which is the same as to hate goodness for its own sake, unconnected with any other consequences, is impossible even to a (premised) diabolical nature itself. If we advert to the series of the causes of our being and preservation in the world, we shall commence a retrospective examination from son to father, grand-father and great-grandson, and so on to the supreme and self-existent father of all: and as to the means of our preservation or succeeding causes of it, we may begin with parental kindness in nourishing, succouring and providing for us in our helpless age, always remembering it to have originated from our eternal father, who implanted that powerful and sympathetic paternal affection in them.

By extending our ideas in a larger circle, we shall perceive our dependence on the earth and waters of the globe, which we inhabit, and from which we are bountifully fed and gorgeously arrayed, and nextly extend our ideas to the sun, whose fiery mass darts its brilliant rays of light to our terraqueous ball with amazing velocity, and whose region of inexhaustible fire supplies it with fervent heat, which causes vegetation and gilds the various seasons of the year with ten thousand charms: this is not the achievement of man, but the workmanship and providence of God. But how the sun is supplied with materials thus to perpetuate its kind influences, we know not. But will any one deny the reality of those beneficial influences, because we do not understand the manner of the perpetuity of that fiery world, or how it became such a body of fire; or will any one deny the reality of nutrition by food, because we do not understand the secret operation of the digesting powers of animal nature, or the minute particulars of its cherishing influence, none will be so stupid as to do it. Equally absurd would it be for us to deny the providence of God, by “whom we live, move, and have our being,” because we cannot comprehend it.

We know that earth, water, fire and air in their various compositions subserve us, and we also know that these elements are devoid of reflection, reason or design; from whence we may easily infer, that a wise, understanding, and designing being has ordained them to be thus subservient. Could blind chance constitute order and decorum, and consequently a providence? That wisdom, order, and design should be the production of non-entity, or of chaos, confusion and old night, is too absurd to deserve a serious confutation, for it supposeth that there may be effects without a cause, viz: produced by non-entity, or that chaos and confusion could produce the effects of power, wisdom and goodness; such absurdities as these we must assent to, or subscribe to the
doctrime of a self-existent and providential being. Chaos itself would necessarily include the idea of a creator, inasmuch as it supposes a positive existence, though it precludes the idea of a Providence, which cannot exist without order, tendericy and design.

But Chaos could no more exist independent of a Creator than the present aptly disposed system of nature. For there could be no fortuitous jumble, or chaos of original atoms, independent of or previous to creation, as nonentity could not produce the materials. *Nothing from nothing and there remains nothing, but something from nothing is contradictory and impossible.* The evidence of the being and providence of a God, is so full and compleat, that we cannot miss of discerning it, if we but open our eyes and reflect on the visible creation.

The display of God’s providence is that by which the evidence of his being is evinced to us, for though mere Chaos would evince the certainty of a Creator, yet that abstracted method of argument could not have been conceived of, or known by us, was it not for the exercise of God’s Providence, (by whom we have our being;) though that argument in itself would have been true whether it had been used by us or not: for the reason of propositions and just inferences in themselves, are in truth the same, independent of our conceptions of them, abstractedly considered from our existence.

The benefit accruing to us from reasoning and argument, as it respects our knowledge and practice, is to explore the truth of things, as they are in their own nature, this is our wisdom. All other conceptions of things are false and imaginary. We cannot exercise a thought on any thing whatever, that has a positive existence, but if we trace it thoroughly it will center in an independent cause, and be evidential of a God. Thus it is from the works of nature that we explore its great author; but all inquisitive minds are lost in their searches and researches into the immensity of the divine fullness, from whence our beings and all our blessings flow.

III.1. The Doctrine of the Infinite

Evil of Sin Considered

That God is infinitely good in the eternal displays of his providence has been argued in the seventh section of the second chapter, from which we infer, that there cannot be an infinite evil in the universe, inasmuch as it would be incompatible with infinite good; yet there are many who imbibe the doctrine of the infinite evil of sin, and the maxim on which they predicate their arguments in its support, are, that the greatness of sin, or adequateness of its punishment, is not to be measured, or its viciousness ascertained by the capacity and circumstances of the offender, but by the capacity and dignity of the being against whom the offence is committed; and as every transgression is against the authority and law of God, it is therefore against God; and as God is infinite, therefore sin is an infinite evil; and from hence infer the infinite and vindictive
wrath of God against sinners, and of his justice in dooming them, as some say, to infinite, and as others say, to eternal misery; the one without degree or measure, and the other without end of duration.

Admitting this maxim for truth, that the transgressions or sins of mankind are to be estimated, as to their heinousness, by the dignity and infinity of the divine nature, then it will follow, that all sins would be equal; which would confound all our notions of the degrees or aggravations of sin; so that the sin would be the same to kill my neighbour as it would be to kill his horse: For the divine nature, by this maxim, being the rule by which man’s sin is to be estimated, and always the same, there could therefore be no degrees in sin or guilt, any more than there are degrees of perfection in God, whom we all admit to be infinite, and who for that reason only cannot admit of any degrees of enlargement. Therefore as certain as there are degrees in sin, the infinity of the divine nature cannot be the standard whereby it is to be ascertained; which single consideration is a sufficient confutation of the doctrine of the infinite evil of sin, as predicated on that maxim; inasmuch as none are so stupid as not to discern that there are degrees and aggravations in sin.

I recollect a discourse of a learned Ecclesiastic, who was labouring in support of this doctrine, his first proposition was: “That moral rectitude was infinitely pleasing to God.” From which he deduced this inference, viz: “That a contrariety to moral rectitude was consequently infinitely displeasing to God and infinitely evil.” That the absolute moral rectitude of the divine nature is infinitely well pleasing to God, will not be disputed; for this is none other but perfect and infinite rectitude; but there cannot in nature be an infinite contrariety thereto, or any being infinitely evil, or infinite in any respect whatever; except we admit a self-existent and infinite diabolical nature, which is too absurd to deserve argumentative confutation. Therefore, as all possible moral evil must result from the agency of finite beings, consisting in their sinful deviations from the rules of eternal unerring order and reason, which is moral rectitude in the abstract; we infer, that, provided all finite beings in the universe, had not done any thing else but sin and rebel against God, reason and moral rectitude in general; all possible moral evil would fall as much short of being infinite, as all finite capacities, complexly considered, would fail of being infinite; which would bear no proportion at all. For tho’ finite minds, as has been before argued, bear a resemblance to God, yet they bear no proportion to his infinity; and therefore there is not and cannot be any being, beings, or agency of being or beings, complexly considered or otherwise, which are infinite in capacity, or which are infinitely evil and detestable in the sight of God, in that unlimited sense; for the actions or agency of limited beings are also limited, which is the same as finite; so that both the virtues and vices of man are finite; they are not virtuous or vicious but in degree; therefore moral evil is finite and bounded.

Though there is one and but one infinite good, which is God, and there can
be no dispute, but that God judges, and approves or disapproves of all things and beings, and agencies of beings, as in truth they are, or in other words judges of every thing as being what it is; but to judge a \textit{finite evil} to be \textit{infinite}, would be \textit{infinitely erroneous} and disproportionable: for so certain as there is a distinction between \textit{infinity} and \textit{finitude}, so certain finite \textit{sinful agency} cannot be \textit{infinitely evil}; or in other words \textit{finite offences} cannot be \textit{infinite}. Nor is it possible that the greatest of sinners should in justice deserve infinite punishment, or their nature sustain it; \textit{finite beings} may as well be supposed to be capable of \textit{infinite happiness} as of \textit{infinite misery}, but the rank which they hold in the universe exempts them from either: it nevertheless admits them to a state of agency, probation or trial, consequently to interchangeable progressions in moral good and evil, and of course to alternate happiness or misery. We will dismiss the doctrine of the \textit{infinite evil of sin} with this observation, that as no \textit{mere creature} can suffer an \textit{infinitude} of misery or of punishment, it is therefore incompatible with the wisdom of God, so far to capacitate creatures to sin, as in his constitution of things to foreclose himself from \textit{adequately} punishing them for it.

\textbf{III.2. The Moral Government of God Incompatible with Eternal Punishment}

Having considered the doctrine of the infinite evil of sin, we proceed to the consideration of that of eternal damnation. Though it is in the nature of things impossible, that an infinite weight of punishment should be inflicted on the wicked, nevertheless, admitting a never ending punishment on them to be just and consistent with the moral government of God, it would be in itself possible. Therefore in order to determine the question concerning eternal punishment, (which cannot be eternal with respect to the preceding eternity, though it may be possible with respect to that which succeeds the aera of the existence of the wicked,) we must advert to the providence of God, as it respects the moral world particularly. That God in his creation and providence ultimately designed the good of being in general, has been clearly evinced in the preceding pages; nor can this doctrine of the divine munificence be objected to, except it is disputed whether God be a good and gracious being or not, which to do would be highly criminal: for a good being would have good purposes the ultimate end of its conduct, though it be supposed to be a mere creature, but perfectly so as applicable to the economy of God, who must be supposed to have had the good and happiness of his creation, the ultimate end and design of his providence.

The wisest and best of men may not succeed in their benevolent purposes to serve mankind, for want of wisdom, opportunity or power; but this is no ways applicable to God, who can and will effect the ultimate purposes of his providence. Such expressions as these may be thought to militate against the
agency of man; but it ought to be considered, that though God has implanted a principle of liberty in our minds, it is in some respects limited; he has not put it in our power eternally to ruin ourselves, for our agency is as eternal as our existence; so that the agency of this life cannot constitute an eternal happiness or misery for us in this world or worlds to come, but our agency in its particular periods is temporary, and so are its rewards and punishments. For as our minds cannot comprehend eternity, so neither can the consequences of our agency, which is happiness or misery[,] extend to it; for we are limited beings and act in certain circumstances in all and every respect, except as to existence without end; and this it is which renders our agency eternal as it respects the succeeding eternity: God’s government of the natural and moral worlds is the same as his providence, so that when we speak of the moral government of God, we mean that display of his providence which respects moral beings: The former is governed by fate, but the latter by rewards and punishment.

It is from the knowledge of right and wrong, good and evil that we are capable of moral government; and it is from the deficiency of this principle of knowledge, in the natural world, that it is subjected to mechanical laws, so that the natural world includes every part of the creation, which is below the dignity of a rational nature, which cannot be subject to mechanical operations, but is in the order of things more exalted than gross creation, consisting of elements or matter variously compounded, tempered and modified, with its cohesion, attraction and all other of its qualities, properties, proportions, motions and harmony of the whole. And as the natural world is made subservient to the moral, the government of it may therefore be truly and properly said to belong to the providence of God, which it otherwise could not, inasmuch as rational beings are benefited thereby; but the government of mere material, inanimate and unintelligent beings, abstractly considered from moral beings, could not have been an object of divine providence, nor would such a supposed government constitute a providence; inasmuch as it would be void of sensibility, happiness and goodness. This being premised, we proceed more particularly to the consideration of the moral government of God, in the exercise whereof it is not to be supposed, that he would counteract his eternal plan of doing good to, and happyifying being in general; and inasmuch as eternal punishment is incompatible with this great and fundamental principle of wisdom and goodness, we may for certain conclude, that such a punishment will never have the divine approbation, or be inflicted on any intelligent being or beings in the infinitude of the government of God. For an endless punishment defeats the very end of its institution, which in all wise and good governments is as well to reclaim offenders, as to be examples to others; but a government, which does not admit of reformation and repentance, must unavoidably involve its subjects in misery; for the weakness of creatures will always be a source of error and inconstancy, and a wise governor, as we must admit God to be, would suit his
government to the capacity and all other circumstances of the governed; and instead of inflicting eternal damnation on his offending children, would rather interchangeably extend his beneficence with his vindictive punishments, so as to alienate them from sin and wickedness, and incline them to morality; convincing them from experimental suffering, that sin and vanity are their greatest enemies, and that in God and moral rectitude their dependence and true happiness consists, and by reclaiming them from wickedness and error, to the truth, and to the love and practice of virtue, give them occasion to glorify God for the wisdom and goodness of his government, and to be ultimately happy under it. But we are told that the eternal damnation of a part of mankind greatly augments the happiness of the elect, who are represented as being vastly the less numerous, (a diabolical temper of mind in the elect:) Besides, how narrow and contracted must such notions of infinite justice and goodness be? Who would imagine that the Deity conducts his providence similar to the detestable des­pots of this world. O horrible most horrible impeachment of divine goodness! rather let us exaltedly suppose that God eternally had the ultimate best good of being, generally and individually in his view, with the reward of the virtuous and the punishment of the vicious, and that no other punishment will ever be inflicted, merely by the divine administration, but what will finally terminate in the best good of the punished, and thereby subserve the great and important ends of the divine government, and be productive of the restoration and felicity of all finite rational nature.

Mankind in general seems to be evidently impressed with a sense and strong expectation of judgment to come, after animal life is ended; wherein the disorders, injustice and wickedness, which have been acted by rational agents, shall be fully and righteously adjusted, and the delinquents punished; and that such, who obey the laws of reason, or moral rectitude, may be rewarded according to their works: this apprehension is so general with all denominations and secretaries of men, that it is rather the intuition of nature than mere tra­dition. It is nevertheless to be considered, that this notion of accountability, and judgment to come, has not gone so far as to determine, whether the incorrigible sinner, from the close of human life, shall be everlastingly debarred from reformation and repentance, and precluded from the favour of God or not; but having taught a just and righteous judgment, left it as the prerogative of God to proportion the rewards of the virtuous and the punishments of the wicked, with their respective durations, which we find by reasoning cannot be eternal, and consequently must be temporary; but in what degrees, manner or proportions of intenseness, or of duration, we cannot comprehend, but must wait the decision of the righteous judge, whose omniscience takes cognizance of the thoughts, designs and actions of his creatures; and whose impartial jus­tice will hold the balance and extend interchangeable happiness or misery to them, according to their respective merits or demerits, or the virtues or vices
of their minds, in certain temporary periods coextensive with our immortality: and though the judgments of God may be vastly more severe and terrible to incorrigible sinners beyond the grave, than such as can be inflicted, or conceived of in this life, yet we may by reasoning from the wisdom and goodness of God and the nature and capacity of the human mind determine, that its happiness or misery cannot be perpetual and eternal.

The most weighty arguments deducible from the divine nature have been already offered, to wit, the ultimate end of God, in creation and providence, to do the greatest possible good and benignity to being in general, and consequently, that the great end and design of punishment, in the divine government, must be to reclaim, restore, and bring revolters from moral rectitude back to embrace it, and to be ultimately happy; as also, that an eternal punishment, would defeat the very end and design of punishment itself; and that no good consequences to the punished could arise out of a never ending destruction; but that a total, everlasting, and irreparable evil would take place on such part of the moral creation, as may be thus sentenced to eternal and remediless perdition; which would argue imperfection either in the creation, or moral government of God, or in both.

Furthermore, provided there was, in the nature of things, a liability of eternal destruction to any one intelligent being, there must consequently have been the same liability in all, or the justice and goodness of God would not be equal or uniform. But if there could have been, in the nature and fitness of things, a possibility of perpetually and eternally happifying the moral world, without agency, probation or trial, there can be no dispute, but that the God of nature would have adopted such a measure, and have made it needless and impossible for us to have speculated on the causes of our misery: and inasmuch as such a plan has not taken place, we may infer, that it was not possible, in the reason and fitness of things, that it should; and as imperfection opened the door to error and wickedness, or to a deviation from moral rectitude; which has actually taken place in the system of rational beings, and punishment also as a necessary consequence of it, it therefore follows, that if eternal punishment was possible, to any one of the rational creation, it must hold equally so to the whole, or the divine system of fitness would be unequal. From which we infer, that though God in his creation and providence, designed the ultimate best good and felicity of the moral world, he had nevertheless so far departed from his eternal plan, or intention, that it was liable to be frustrated, and that universal misery and eternal damnation was possible to overspread the whole; all this necessarily follows on the position, that any rational natures are liable to eternal destruction; and therefore the doctrine of the possibility, or liability, of eternal punishment, is inadmissible.

Furthermore, accountability, probation or trial, are in nature inseparably connected with the existence of moral beings, and must eternally remain so to
be, for weakness and imperfection is that which subjects all finite rational beings to trial and is the only ground of the possibility of it. All intelligent agents therefore, except the most high God, are probationers. A state of improvement is necessarily connected with that of trial and proficiency. What reason can be given to make it appear, that the immortal souls of mankind, in their succeeding state of existence, may not err, and more or less deviate from the rules of eternal unerring order and reason; they must be admitted to be capable of moral action, for it is essential to their existence; and though the next state of being may be ever so much dissimilar from this, in the mode or manner of it, yet we shall be but creatures in that state, and why not liable to error, transgression and blame, and also to punishment for the same; for as finiteness or imperfection are the grounds of the liability of our present offences, that liability will eternally continue, and that in proportion to our future imperfection.

Could God have established any creature, or race of creatures, in a confirmed and perpetual happiness, by a sovereign act of omnipotence, consistent with his moral perfections, and the nature of intelligent agents themselves, we should have experienced such a confirmation in this life. But a confirmed and perpetual state of blessedness, will agree to no character short of God's: this is therefore his prerogative, and it is the absolute perfection of his nature, which confirms him in that state. But as to finite cogitative beings, they cannot in the nature of things, be any more confirmed in happiness, than they can in moral rectitude, which is the ground and source of it; nor is it possible for an imperfect nature to attain to perfection, though they may be eternally improving; nor can they be perpetually morally good, for perpetual uniformity is perfection itself; but they are always liable to change, to error and sin, and consequently to misery, which is inseparably connected with it, as the only certain means of repentance, reformation and restoration.

Moral good is the only source from whence a rational mind can be supplied with a happiness agreeable to the dignity of its nature. It would be impossible for omnipotence itself to make a vicious mind taste the ecstatic felicity of a moral happiness, so long as it may be supposed to be vicious, inasmuch as morality, in the nature of the thing itself, is prerequisite to such a happiness, without the possession and actual enjoyment of which the mind cannot be mentally happy, or enjoy itself agreeable to its discerning, conscious and sentimental nature; but must disapprove of the erroneous departure (or its vicious pursuits) from the amiable rules of moral fitness, and feel proportionably guilty and miserable. Nor could pardon or atonement alter the condition of a vicious mind, for miserable it must be, as long as it remains vicious, whether God be supposed to forgive the wickedness of it or not; for it is the conscious exercise of moral goodness only, which is capable of happifying the rational mind; therefore such reflections, pursuits and habits, which are comprised in our agency, as will in their own nature admit of a rational happiness, make us happy;
and such agency of man as is inadequate and improper to constitute such happiness, and which naturally tends to misery will involve us therein; and miserable we must be, until the bias and disposition of the mind is turned from moral evil to moral good, which is the same as repentance and restoration. This is the eternal law of nature, respecting the agency and the happiness or misery of imperfect rational nature, throughout its never ending agency and trial; and consequently, our eternity, will be as much diversified with happiness and misery, as our agency may be supposed to alternately partake of moral good and evil. So certain as we retain our rational nature, in our succeeding state of existence, we shall be capable of moral actions, which admit of proficiency, agency and trial; and not only so, but subjects us to agency and accountability, as much as in this life, or in any condition of finite reason whatever; and every improvement of a rational mind, alters the consciousness of it, and consequently the happiness or the misery of it. Absolute power may inflict physical evils, but is utterly incapable of inflicting those of a moral nature; nor can mere positive injunction by law affect the consciences of rational beings, who must be either happy or miserable on the basis of their own agency, and consciousness of merit or demerit.

It has been owing to improvement that we have progressively advanced from the knowledge and capacity of childhood to that of manhood, and to our improvement, which is the same as agency, in moral good and evil, that has alternately made us happy or unhappy in a mental sense; from hence we infer, that if rational nature, in the world to come, is essentially analogous to what it is in this life, agency and probation will be continued with the immortality of the soul, be the manner of its existence, or of its communicating or receiving ideas as it will.

Furthermore, the doctrine of a future improvement, or agency, may be argued from the death of infants and children. None will pretend that they have an opportunity of proficiency in this life, therefore we infer, that if such a state be requisite to fit and improve their feeble minds for the enjoyment of a rational happiness, agency must be continued to the future state; and admitting that they are immortal, and that agency is precluded from the world to come, they would remain children in knowledge eternally; nor could any departed soul, on such a position, expand its rational functions beyond its size of understanding at the time of departing this life which would make immortality to man a cypher, except as to the perpetuation of their powers of cogitation in a limited circumference; the reflection whereof would be more or less rude and incoherent; which at best would be but a small fund for an eternal contemplation.

But if it be admitted, that the souls of mankind, of every age and denomination, will in their futurity be progressive in knowledge, (which must be the case with cogitative beings) then it necessarily follows, that agency and trial
proceed hand in hand with it. Therefore it is impossible, that there should be a particular day of judgment, in which mankind, or any, or either of them, shall receive their eternal sentence of happiness or misery; for such a sentence is inconsistent with any further trial or agency, and therefore is inadmissible.

Furthermore, proficiency or agency, is inconsistent with a confirmed state of happiness or of misery; for in the same proportion as our ideas, pursuits, intentions and habits vary, so does our happiness or misery.

Finite minds cannot be confirmedly happy or miserable, any more than they can be absolutely identical which is the prerogative of the divine mind: finite intelligences gain ideas by a succession of thinking, and are happy or miserable in proportion as the succession of ideas will admit; and every succession in the multiplicity of thinking, is incompatible with a proper identity of mind, (except as to the principle of thinking itself) was it to be perfectly identical, it could not admit of a succession of ideas, which is the same as addition, nor of a diminution of them, but would be confined to one perception only, and in this case, the happiness or misery, resulting from it, would be as identical as the perception itself may be supposed to be, and incapable of enlargement or diminution; which might be denominated a confirmed state. But a confirmed state is utterly incompatible with a state of improvement, and is applicable to the divine perfection only. Inasmuch as succession of thinking cannot be ascribed to God, he is therefore identically the same, but progressive agents, are always capable of additional knowledge, which lays them under additional obligations to moral government, and thus duty is always co-extensive with the improvement of rational agents; and inasmuch as agency, proficiency and accountability, are in nature co-existent, or concomitant with intelligent finite beings, we infer, that the doctrine of eternal damnation is without foundation, for that it would, if true, put a final end to any further agency, trial or accountability, therefore, so certain as our agency is eternal our condemnation cannot be so.

V.1. Speculations on the Doctrine of the Depravity of Human Reason

In the course of our speculations on divine providence we proceed next to the consideration of the doctrine of the depravity of human reason; a doctrine derogatory to the nature of man, and the rank and character of being which he holds in the universe, and which, if admitted to be true overturns knowledge and science and renders learning, instruction and books useless and impertinent; inasmuch as reason, depraved or spoiled, would cease to be reason; as much as the mind of a raving madman would of course cease to be rational: admitting the depravity of reason, the consequence would unavoidably follow, that as far as it may be supposed to have taken place in the minds of mankind, they could be no judges of it, in consequence of their supposed depravity; for
without the exercise of reason, we could not understand what reason is, which would be necessary for us previously to understand, in order to understand what it is not; or to distinguish it from that which is its reverse. But for us to have the knowledge of what reason is, and the ability to distinguish it from that which is depraved, or is irrational, is incompatible with the doctrine of the depravity of our reason. Inasmuch as to understand what reason is, and to distinguish it from that which is marred or spoiled, is the same to all intents and purposes, as to have, exercise and enjoy, the principle of reason itself, which precludes its supposed depravity; so that it is impossible for us to understand what reason is, and at the same time determine that our reason is depraved; for this would be the same as when we know that we are in possession and exercise of reason, to determine that we are not in possession or exercise of it.

It may be, that some, who embrace the doctrine of the depravity of human reason, will not admit, that it is wholly and totally depraved, but that it is in a great measure marred or spoiled. But the foregoing arguments are equally applicable to a supposed depravity in part, as in the whole. For in order to judge whether reason be deprived in part, or not, it would be requisite to have an understanding, of what reason may be supposed to have been, previous to its premised depravity; and to have such a knowledge of it, would be the same as to exercise and enjoy it in its lustre and purity; which would preclude the notion of a depravity in part, as well as in the whole; for it would be utterly impossible for us to judge of reason undepraved and depraved, but by comparing them together. But for depraved reason to make such a comparison, is contradictory and impossible; so that, if our reason had been deprived, we could not have had any conception of it any more than a beast. Men of small faculties in reasoning cannot comprehend the extensive reasonings of their superiors, how then can a supposed depraved reason, comprehend that reason which is uncorrupted and pure? To suppose that it could, is the same as to suppose that depraved and undepraved reason is alike, and if so there needs no further dispute about it.

There is a manifest contradiction in applying the term depraved, to that of reason, the ideas contained in their respective definitions will not admit of their association together, as the terms convey heterogeneous ideas; for reason spoiled, marred, or robbed of its perfection, ceaseth to be rational, and should not be called reason; inasmuch as it is premised to be deprived, or degenerated from a rational nature; and in consequence of the deprivation of its nature, should also be deprived of its name, and called subterfuge, or some such like name, which might better define its real character.

Those who invalidate reason, ought seriously to consider, "Whether they argue against reason with or without reason; if with reason, then they establish the principle, that they are labouring to dethrone:" but if they argue without reason, (which, in order to be consistent with themselves, they must do) they
are out of the reach of rational conviction, nor do they deserve a rational argument.

We are told that the knowledge of the depravity of reason, was first communicated to mankind by the immediate inspiration of God. But inasmuch as reason is supposed to be depraved, what principle could there be in the human irrational soul, which could receive or understand the inspiration, or on which it could operate, so as to represent, to those whom it may be supposed were inspired, the knowledge of the depravity of (their own and mankind’s) reason (in general:) For a rational inspiration must consist of rational ideas; which presupposes, that the minds of those who were inspired, were rational, previous to such their inspiration; which would be a downright contradiction to the inspiration itself; the import of which was to teach the knowledge of the depravity of human research, which without reason could not be understood, and with reason it would be understood, that the inspiration was false.

Will any advocates for the depravity of reason suppose, that inspiration ingrafts or superadds the essence of reason itself, to the human mind? Admitting it to be so, yet such inspired persons could not understand any thing of reason, before the reception of such supposed inspiration; nor would such a premised inspiration, prove to its possessors, or receivers, that their reason had ever been depraved. All that such premised inspired persons could understand, or be conscious of, respecting reason, would be after the inspiration may be supposed to have taken effect, and made them rational beings, and then instead of being taught by inspiration, that their reason had been previously depraved, they could have had no manner of consciousness of the existence or exercise of it, till the imparting the principle of it by the supposed energy of inspiration; nor could such supposed inspired persons communicate the knowledge of such a premised revelation to others of the species, who for want of a rational nature, could not be supposed, on this position, to be able to receive the impressions of reason.

That there are degrees in the knowledge of rational beings, and also in their capacities to acquire it, cannot be disputed, as it is so very obvious among mankind. But in all the retrospect gradations from the exalted reasonings of a Locke or a Newton, down to the lowest exercise of it among the species, still it is reason, and not depraved; for a less degree of reason by no means implies a depravity of it, nor does the impairing of reason argue its depravity, for what remains of reason, or rather of the exercise of it, is reason still. But there is not, and cannot be such a thing, as depraved reason, for that which is rational is so, and for that reason cannot be depraved, whatever its degree of exercise may be supposed to be.

A blow on the head, or fracture of the perecranium, as also palsies and many other casualties that await our sensorium; retard, and in some cases wholly prevent the exercise of reason, for a longer, or shorter period; and sometimes
through the stage of human life; but in such instances as these, reason is not
depraved, but ceases in a greater or less degree, or perhaps wholly ceases its
rational exertions or operations; by reason of the breaches, or disorders of the
organs of sense, but in such instances, wherein the organs become rectified,
and the senses recover their usefulness, the exercise of reason returns; free from
any blemish or depravity. For the cessation of the exercise of reason, by no
means depraves it.

There is in God’s infinite plenitude of creation and providence, such an
infinite display of reason, that the most exalted finite rational beings, fall infin­
itely short of the comprehension thereof. For though the most inconsiderable
rational beings, who can discern any truth at all, bear a resemblance or likeness
to God, as well as every rational nature of whatever degree in the scale of being,
yet neither the greatest or least of them can bear any manner of proportion to
God; inasmuch as no possible degree of reason or knowledge, can bear any
proportion to that reason and knowledge, which is eternal and infinite, as has
been before argued. And though human reason cannot understand every
thing, yet in such things, which it does understand, its knowledge which is
acquired by reasoning, is as true and certain, as the divine knowledge may be
supposed to be: for to more than understand a thing, speaking of that particu­
lar, is impossible even to omniscience itself. For knowledge is but knowledge,
and that only whether it is in the divine mind, or ours, or in any other intelli­
gences; therefore knowledge is not imperfect; for a knowledge of any thing is
the same as to have right ideas of it, or ideas according to truth, and as all
knowledge of things in general must be predicated on truth, it will agree in the
divine or human mind.

From what has been argued on this subject, in this and the preceding
chapters, it appears, that reason is not, and cannot be depraved, but that it bears
a likeness to divine reason, is of the same kind, and in its own nature as uniform
as truth, which is the test of it; though in the divine essence, it is eternal and
infinite, but in man it is eternal only, as it respects their immortality, and finite,
as it respects capaciousness. Such people as can be prevailed upon to believe,
that their reason is depraved, may easily be led by the nose, and duped into
superstition at the pleasure of those, in whom they confide, and there remain
from generation to generation: for when they throw by the law of reason, the
only one which God gave them to direct them in their speculations and duty,
they are exposed to ignorant or insidious teachers, and also to their own irregu­
lar passions, and to the folly and enthusiasm of those about them, which noth­
ing but reason can prevent or restrain: Nor is it a rational supposition that the
commonality of mankind would ever have mistrusted, that their reason was
depraved, had they not been told so, and it is whispered about, that the first
insinuation of it was from the Priests; (though the Arminian Clergymen in the
circle of my acquaintance have exploded the doctrine.) Should we admit the
depravity of reason, it would equally affect the priesthood, or any other teach­ers of that doctrine, with the rest of mankind; but for depraved creatures to receive and give credit to a depraved doctrine, started and taught by depraved creatures, is the greatest weakness and folly imaginable, and comes nearer a proof of the doctrine of a total depravity, than any arguments which have ever been advanced in support of it.

V.2. Containing a Disquisition of the Law of Nature, as it Respects the Moral System, Interspersed with Observations on Subsequent Religions

That mankind are by nature endowed with sensation and reflection, from which results the powers of reason and understanding, will not be disputed. The senses are well calculated to make discoveries of external objects, and to communicate those notices, or simple images of things to the mind, with all the magnificent simplicity of nature, which opens an extensive field of contem­plation to the understanding, enabling the mind to examine into the natural causes and consequences of things, and to investigate the knowledge of moral good and evil, from which, together with the power of agency, results the human conscience. This is the original of moral obligations and accountability, which is called natural religion; for without the understanding of truth from falsehood, and right from wrong, which is the same as justice from injustice, and a liberty of agency, which is the same as a power of proficiency in either moral good or evil; mankind would not be rational or accountable creatures. Undoubtedly it was the ultimate design of our creator, in giving us being, and furnishing us with those noble compositions of mental powers and sensitive aptitudes, that we should, in, by, and with that nature, serve and honor him: and with those united capacities search out and understand our duty to him, and to one another, with the ability of practising the same, as far as may be necessary for us, in this life. To object against the sufficiency of natural religion, to effect the ultimate best good of mankind, would be derogating from the wisdom, justice and goodness of God, who in the course of his providence to us has adopted it: besides, if natural religion may be supposed to be deficient, what security can we have that any subsequent revealed religion should not be so also? For why might not a second religion from God, be as insufficient or defective as a first religion from him may be supposed to be? From hence we infer, that if natural religion is insufficient to dictate mankind in the way of their duty, and make them ultimately happy, there is an end to religion in general. But as certain as God is perfect, in wisdom and goodness, natural religion is sufficient and complete; and having had the divine approbation, and naturally resulting from a rational nature, is as universally promulgated to mankind as reason itself. But to the disadvantage of the claim of all subsequent religions, called revelations, whether denominated inspired, external, supernatural, or what not, they came too late into the world to be essential to the well being of
mankind, or to point out to them the only way to heaven and everlasting blessedness: Inasmuch as far the greatest part of mankind, who have ever lived in this world, had departed this life previous to the aeras and promulgations of such revelations. Besides, those subsequent revelations to the law of nature, began the same as human traditions have ever done, in very small circumferences, in the respective parts of the world where they have been inculcated, and made their progress as time, chance and opportunity presented. Does this look like the contrivance of heaven and the only way of salvation? or is it not more like this world and the device of man? Undoubtedly the great parent of mankind laid a just and sufficient foundation of salvation for every of them, for otherwise such of them, who may be supposed not to be thus provided for, would not have whereof to glorify God for their being, but on the contrary would have just matter of complaint against his providence or moral government, for involuntarily necessitating them into a wretched and miserable existence, and that without end or remedy; which would be ascribing to God a more extensive injustice than is possible to be charged on the most barbarous despots that ever were among mankind.

But to return to our speculations upon the law of nature. That this divine law surpasses all positive institutions, that have been ushered into the world since its creation, as much as the wisdom and goodness of God exceeds that of man, is beautifully illustrated in the following quotation; “But it may be said, what is virtue? it is the faithful discharge of those obligations which reason dictates. And what is wisdom itself? but a portion of intelligence” with which the creator has furnished us, in order to direct us in our duty. It may be further asked, what is this duty? whence does it result? and by what law is it prescribed? I answer, that the law which prescribed it is the immutable will of God; to which right reason obliges us to conform ourselves, and in this conformity virtue consists. No law which has commenced since the creation, or which may ever cease to be in force, can constitute virtue; for before the existence of such a law, mankind could not be bound to observe it, but they were certainly under an obligation to be virtuous from the beginning. Princes may make laws and repeal them, but they can neither make nor destroy virtue, and how indeed should they be able to do what is impossible to the Deity himself: virtue being as immutable in its nature as the divine will, which is the ground of it. * A Prince may command his subjects to pay certain taxes or subsidies, may forbid them

*Virtue, did not derive its nature merely from the omnipotent will of God, but also from the eternal truth and moral fitness of things; which was the eternal reason, why they were eternally approved by God, and immutably established by him, to be what they are; and so far as our duty is connected with those eternal measures of moral fitness, or we are able to act upon them, we give such actions, or habits, the name of virtue or morality. But when we in writing or conversation say, that virtue is grounded on the divine will, we should at the same time include in the complex idea of it, that the divine will, which constituted virtue, was eternally and infinitely reasonable.
to export certain commodities, or to introduce those of a foreign country. The
faithful observance of these laws makes obedient subjects, but does not make
virtuous men: and would any one seriously think himself possessed of a virtue
the more for not having dealt in painted calicoe; or if the prince should by his
authority abrogate these laws, would any one say he had abrogated virtue. It
is thus with all positive laws: they all had a beginning, are all liable to excep-
tions, and may be dispensed with, and even abolished. That law alone, which
is ingraven on our hearts by the hand of the creator, is unchangeable and of
universal and eternal obligation. That law, says Cicero, is not a human inven-
tion, nor an arbitrary political institution, it is in its nature eternal and of uni-
versal obligation. The violence Tarquin offered to Lucretia, was breach of that
eternal law, and though the Romans at that time might have no written law
which condemned such kind of crimes, his offence was not the less heinous; for
this law of reason did not then begin, when it was first committed to writing: its original is as antient as the divine mind. For the true, primitive and supreme
law, is no other than the unerring reason of the great Jupiter. And in another
place he says; this law is founded in nature, it is universal, immutable and
eternal, it is subject to no change from any difference of place, or time, it
extends invariably to all ages and nations, like the sovereign dominion of that
being, who is the author of it.

The promulgation of this supreme law to creatures, is co-extensive and co-
existent with reason, and binding on all intelligent beings in the universe; and
is that eternal rule of fitness, as applicable to God, by which the creator of all
things conducts his infinitude of providence, and by which he governs the
moral system of being, according to the absolute perfection of his nature. From
hence we infer, that admitting those subsequent revelations, which have more
or less obtained credit in the world, as the inspired laws of God, to be conson-
ant to the laws of nature, yet they could be considered as none other but mere
transcripts therefrom, promulgated to certain favorite nations, when at the
same time all mankind was favoured with the original. The moral precepts
contained in Moses's decalogue to the people of Israel, were previously known
to every nation under heaven, and in all probability by them as much practised
as by the tribes of Israel. Their keeping the seventh day of the week as a
sabbath, was an arbitrary imposition of Moses (as many other of his edicts
were) and not included in the law of nature. But as to such laws of his, or those
of any other legislator, which are morally fit, agree with, and are a part of the
natural law, as for instance; "Thou shalt not covet," or "Kill." These positive
injunctions cannot add any thing to the law of nature, inasmuch as it contains
an entire and perfect system of morality; nor can any positive injunctions or
commands enforce the authority of it, or confer any additional moral obliga-
tion on those to whom they are given to obey; the previous obligation of
natural religion, having either been as binding as reason can possibly conceive
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of, or the order and constitution of the moral rectitude of things, as resulting from God, can make it to be.

To illustrate the argument of the obligatory nature of the natural law, let us revise the commandments of the decalogue, by premising that Moses had said thou shalt covet, thou shalt steal and murder; would any one conclude, that the injunctions would have been obligatory, surely they would not, for a positive command to violate the law of nature could not be binding on any rational being, how then came the injunctions of Moses, or any others, to be binding in such cases, in which they coincide with the law of nature? We answer, merely in consequence of the obligatory sanctions of the natural law, which does not at all depend on the authority of Moses or of any other Legislator, short of him who is eternal and infinite: nor is it possible that the Jews, who adhere to the law of Moses, should be under greater obligation to the moral law, than the Japanese; or the Christians than the Chinese; for the same God extends the same moral government over universal rational nature, independent of Popes, Priests and Levites. But with respect to all mere positive institutions, injunctions, rites and ceremonies, that do not come within the jurisdiction of the law of nature, they are political matters, and may be expected, perpetuated, dispensed with, abolished, reenacted, compounded or diversified, as conveniency, power, opportunity, inclination, or interest, or all together may dictate; inasmuch as they are not founded on any stable or universal principle of reason, but change with the customs, fashions, traditions and revolutions of the world; having no centre of attraction, but interest, power and advantages of a temporary nature.

When we reflect on the state and circumstances of mankind in this world, their various languages and interchangeable methods of communicating intelligence to each other, (which are subject to perpetual alterations and refinements) the insuperable difficulties in translating antient writings, with any considerable degree of perfection; as also our being exposed to the villainous practices of impostors, with a variety of other deceptions, blunders and inaccuracies, which unavoidably attend written and diverse or variously translated revelations; we cannot too much admire the wisdom and goodness of God in imparting his law to us in the constitution of our rational nature, to point out our duty in all circumstances and vicissitudes of human life; which a written revelation would not be able to do, admitting, that it had sustained no serious alterations from its first composure, which we will premise to have been perfect: for human affairs are so constantly changing and varying, that the same action, or conduct, would, under different circumstances, be alternately good and evil; and to have our duty in every of the multiplicity of incidental circumstances and changes of life, pointed out to us by a written revelation, would compose a Bible of a monstrous size. Furthermore, as every individual of the human race is attended with more or less diversity of circumstances of action
in life, therefore in order for us to be taught our duty by a written revelation, it would be requisite, that each individual of mankind should have their particular, and diverse revelation; in which their particular duty might be known in all cases: so that we should suspend our actions, until we may be supposed to have turned to the particular paragraph of our respective revelations, and consulted them, in order to conduct our agency thereby (in which case printing would be in great demand.) Still there would be a difficulty in understanding an external printed revelation, or which paragraph of the bulky volume would be applicable to the various parts of the conduct of human agency; so that we should be obliged finally to make use of (depraved) reason, to understand it, or, in other words, should be obliged to make use of the deistical Bible to explain and understand our own, which brings us back again to the religion of nature or reason. Was it not that we were rational creatures, it would have been as ridiculous to have pretended to have given us a Bible, for our instruction in matters of religion or morality, as it would to a stable of horses. And on the other hand, admitting that we naturally understand moral good and evil, it renders such a book no ways essential to us, though if it be admitted to be argumentative and instructive, it might, like other sensible writings, subservie mankind; but if it is supposed to be in part defective in reason, and interspersed with superstition, it would, under the sanction of divine authority, be vastly more prejudicial to mankind, than as though it was stamped merely by the authority of man; for an error in that which is received as infallible, can never be confuted or rectified; inasmuch as it usurps the authority of human reason. Furthermore, admitting that the copies of written revelation, which are now extant in the world, perfectly accord with their several original manuscripts (which is impossible to be true) yet they could not be equally instructive to mankind with the productions of a variety of modern authors, who have written since their epocha, inasmuch as the world has ever since been improving in learning and science; and as those written revelations must necessarily have been (as to their subject matter and all and every other particular) accommodated to the state, circumstances and degrees of learning and knowledge, of those, to whom the revelations were first supposed to have been communicated, and also to those to whom it was afterwards taught, and it would reduce it below the understanding of this age. For it appears from the scripture accounts, that shepherds, fishermen, and the illiterate of those early ages of the world, were principally made use of as the promulgators thereof to the rest of mankind, and that “Not many wise or noble,” were “Called,” or embraced their revelations in the early times, “But the weak things of this world” were “Chosen,” for which reason they were called “Babes:” Though after such religion became popular, princes and politicians of several parts of the world promoted it as an instrument of state-policy. Be this as it will, the first promulgators of written revelations could not reveal to the world more than they
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knew themselves; nor could they be made to know any more than their capacity (under their then circumstances) was capable of receiving: any external written revelation is therefore utterly incompatible with a progressive or increasing state of knowledge. We will premise, that the world's dissolution will be postponed one hundred thousand million of years from this epocha, or that it will eternally remain, what an idle conceit would it be for us to suppose, that the succeeding generations of mankind, in their religious knowledge, will be chained down to the theology of those positive written revelations, which were introduced into the world, in its early, illiterate, and superstitious age; this would be utterly subversive of a state of proficiency, much the same as for a man to consult his nonage for rules of knowledge, and instruction to govern his manhood.

Was the creator and Governor of the universe to erect a particular academy of arts and sciences in this world, under his immediate inspection, with tutors rightly organized, and intellectually qualified to carry on the business of teaching, it might like other colleges (and possibly in a superior manner,) instruct its scholars. But that God should have given a revelation of his will to mankind, as, his law, and to be continued to the latest posterity as such, which is premised to be above the capacity of their understanding; is contradictory and in its own nature impossible. Nor could a revelation to mankind, which comes within the circle of their knowledge, be edifying or instructive to them, for it is a contradiction to call that which is above my comprehension, or that which I already, (from natural sagacity) understand, a revelation to me: to tell me, or inspire me, with the knowledge of that which I knew before, would reveal nothing to me and to reveal that to me which is supernatural or above my comprehension, is contradictory and impossible. But the truth of the matter is, that mankind are restricted by the law of nature to acquire knowledge or science progressively, as before argued. From which we infer the impropriety, and consequently the impossibility, of God's having ever given us any manuscript copy of his eternal law: for that to reveal it as first would bring it on a level with the infancy of knowledge then in the world, or (fishermen, shepherds, and illiterate people could not have understood it) which would have brought it so low, that it could not be instructive or beneficial to after generations in their progressive advances in science and wisdom.

VII.5. Miracles Could Not Be Instructive to Mankind
Should we admit the intervention of Miracles, yet they could not enlarge our ideas of the power of God. For that to unmake nature universally, and to impress it with new and opposite laws from those of its eternal establishment, could require no greater exertion of power, than that which is Omnipotent, and which must have been exerted in the eternal creation, regulation and support of the universe. But any supposed miraculous alteration of nature,
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must imply mutability in the wisdom of God; and therefore is inadmissible. Should God miraculously raise a dead person to life again, would the restoring life argue a greater exertion of power in God than in first giving existence to that life? surely it could not: From all which we infer, that miracles cannot enlarge our ideas of the power of God. We proceed next to enquire, what advantages could accrue to mankind by them in the way of teaching and instruction? For this must be the great end proposed by them. That they cannot teach us anything relative to the omnipotence of God, has been evinced; but that they militate against his wisdom: and furthermore, that they cannot prove the divine authority of written revelation, or the mission of its respective teachers to any country, people or nation, any farther or longer than the miraculous works are actually continued, has been sufficiently argued in the preceding section. It remains farther to be considered, that they are incapable of instructing us in the subject-matter, doctrine, proposition or inference of any premised written revelation; or of giving us any insight into the precepts or injunctions thereof, or to communicate any sort of intelligence or knowledge respecting its contents. The premised, sudden and miraculous alterations of the common course of nature might astonish us; but such alterations or changes, do not evince that they have anything to do with us, or we with them in the way of teaching and instruction; for truth and falsehood, right and wrong, justice and injustice, virtue and vice, or moral good and evil are in their distinct natures diametrically opposite to each other, and necessarily and eternally will remain so to be, and that, independent of miracles or revealed religion. It is by reason we investigate the knowledge of moral good and evil, it is that which lays us under a moral obligation, and it is not a miracle or revelation that can alter the moral rectitude of things, or prove that to be truth, which in its nature is not so. Therefore admitting ever so many miracles, and revelations, we should still have to recur to reason and argument, the old and only way of exploring truth and distinguishing it from falsehood, or understanding true religion from imposture or error. For though miracles might evince the divine mission of the clergy, and the divinity of the Christian revelation, to us, were they in fact wrought in this enlightened age for that purpose, yet they are not calculated to expound or explain it, but would perplex and confound us, in our logical and doctrinal speculations, nature and reason being opposed to them as before argued. Such supposed miraculous changes in nature, would to us be mysterious, and altogether unintelligible, and consequently could not come within our deliberation on the right understanding, or comments on a supposed written revelation; the understanding of which, after all the bustle about miracles, must be investigated by reason: and revelation itself be either approved or disapproved by it. From the foregoing reasonings we infer, that miracles cannot be edifying or instructive to us; and though they are strenuously urged as a proof of the divine legation of the first promulgators of rev-
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elation, and their successors; nevertheless, where the premised miracles became extinct, their divine authority and the evidence of the infallibility of revelation, became extinct also.

IX.1. Of the Nature of Faith and Wherein It Consists

Faith in Jesus Christ and in his Gospel throughout the New-Testament, is represented to be an essential condition of the eternal salvation of mankind. “Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law, for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.” Again, “If thou shalt confess the Lord Jesus Christ, and believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou mayest be saved.” And again, “He that believeth and is baptised shall be saved, but he that believeth not shall be damned.” Faith is the last result of the understanding, or the same which we call the conclusion, it is the consequence of a greater or less deduction of reasoning from certain premises previously laid down; it is the same as believing or judging of any matter of fact, or assenting to or dissenting from the truth of any doctrine, system or position; so that to form a judgment, or come to a determination in one’s own mind, or to believe, or to have faith, is in reality the same thing, and is synonymously applied both in writing and speaking; for example, “Abraham believed in God.” Again, “for he,” speaking of Abraham, “judged him faithful who had promised” and again, “his faith was counted unto him for righteousness.” It is not only in scripture that we meet with examples of the three words, to wit, belief, judgment and faith, to stand for the marks of our ideas for the same thing, but also all intelligible writers and speakers, apply these phrases synonymously, and it would be good grammar and sense for us to say that we have faith in a universal providence, or that we believe in a universal providence, or that we judge that there is a universal providence. These three different phrases, in communicating our ideas of providence, do every of them exhibit the same idea, to all persons of common understanding, who are acquainted with the English Language. In fine every one’s experience may convince them, that they cannot assent to, or dissent from the truth of any matter of fact, doctrine or proposition whatever, contrary to their judgment; for the act of the mind in assenting to, or dissenting from any position, or in having faith or belief in favor of, or against any doctrine, system or proposition, could not amount to any thing more or less, than the act of the judgment, or last dictate of the understanding, whether the understanding be supposed to be rightly informed or not; so that our faith in all cases is as liable to err, as our reason is to misjudge of the truth; and our minds act faith in disbelieving any doctrine or system of religion to be true, as much as in believing it to be so. From hence it appears, that the mind cannot act faith in opposition to its judgment, but that it is the resolution of the understanding
itself committed to memory or writing, and can never be considered distinct from it. And inasmuch as faith necessarily results from reasoning, forcing itself upon our minds by the evidence of truth, or the mistaken apprehension of it, without any act of choice of ours, there cannot be any thing, which pertains to, or partakes of the nature of moral good or evil in it. For us to believe such doctrines or systems of religion, as appear to be credibly recommended to our reason, can no more partake of the nature of goodness or morality, than our natural eyes may be supposed to partake of it in their perception of colours; for the faith of the mind, and the sight of the eye are both of them necessary consequences, the one results from the reasonings of the mind, and the other from the perception of the eye. To suppose a rational mind without the exercise of faith, would be as absurd as to suppose a proper and compleat eye without sight, or the perception of the common objects of that sense. The short of the matter is this, that without reason we could not have faith, and without the eye or eyes we could not see. But once admitting that we are rational, faith follows of course, naturally resulting from the dictates of reason.

Furthermore, it is observable, that in all cases wherein reason makes an erroneous conclusion, faith is likewise erroneous, and that in the same proportion as the conclusion may be supposed to be faulty and irregular: for it is the established order of human nature, that faith should always conform to the decrees of the judgment, whether it be right or wrong, or partly both. From hence it follows, that errors in faith, and consequently in practice, are more or less unavoidable. We are therefore obliged to substitute sincerity in the room of knowledge, in all cases wherein knowledge is not attainable, for we cannot look into the eternal order of unerring reason and perfect rectitude, so as in all cases to regulate our minds and consciences from thence. We must therefore adopt the principle of sincerity, since it is always supposed to aim at perfection, and to come as near it as the infirmities of our nature will admit, (for otherwise it could not be sincerity) which is the highest pretension to goodness, that we can lawfully aspire to. There are therefore good or bad designs and intentions, which crown all our actions, and denominate them to be either good or bad, virtuous or vicious. Those who are vicious and abandoned to wickedness, may, and often do, possess more knowledge, and consequently a more extensive faith than those who are ignorant and virtuous: their sin does not consist in the want of understanding or faith, but in their omission of cultivating in their own minds the love and practice of virtue, or in not bringing their designs, intentions, dispositions and habits to a conformity thereto. A good conscience, predicated on knowledge as far as that is attainable, and on sincerity for the rest of our conduct, always was and will be essential to a rational happiness, which results from a consciousness of moral rectitude, and thus it is that mankind, by seeking after the truth, and conforming (as far as human frailty will permit) to moral rectitude, may attain to the enjoyment of a good conscience, although
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in doctrinal or speculative points of religion, or in creeds, they may be supposed
to be ever so erroneous.

X.3. The Imperfection of Knowledge in the Person of Jesus Christ,
Incompatible with His Divinity, with Observations
on the Hypostatical Union of the Divine and Human Nature

That Jesus Christ was not God is evident from his own words, where, speaking
of the day of judgment, he says, “Of that day and hour knoweth no man, no not
the angels which are in Heaven, neither the Son, but the Father.” This is giving
up all pretension to divinity, and acknowledging in the most explicit manner,
that he did not know all things, but compares his understanding to that of man
and of angels; “of that day and hour knoweth no man, no not the angels which
are in heaven, neither the son.” Thus he ranks himself with finite beings, and
with them acknowledges, that he did not know the day and hour of judgment,
and at the same time ascribes a superiority of knowledge to the father, for that
he knew the day and hour of judgment.

That he was a mere creature is further evident from his prayer to the father,
saying, “Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me, nevertheless, not my will
but thine be done.” These expressions speak forth the most humble submission
to his father’s will, authority and government, and however becoming so sub­
missive a disposition to the divine government would be, in a creature, it is
utterly inconsistent and unworthy of a God, or of the person of Jesus Christ,
admitting him to have been a divine person, or of the essence of God.

What notions can we entertain that the divine essence should be divided,
and one part assume an authority over the other; or that the other should wield
obedience; this is a contradiction, inasmuch as essence cannot be divided, but
is the same, without distinction, either in its nature, authority or government.

To suppose one part of the divine nature to exercise authority over another,
is the same as to suppose, that part of the essence of God was weak and imper­
fect, and not capable of holding a share in the divine government, which would
reduce it to the state and condition of a creature, and divest it of its divinity.
Nor would the consequences of such a supposed imperfection in the essence
of God end here, but would necessarily involve the divine nature, in weakness,
misery and imperfection; and extinguish every idea of the existence of a God:
This is the necessary consequence of deifying Christ. But if Jesus Christ was not
of the essence of God, he must have been a mere creature: as there cannot be
any being but who is either finite or infinite, as has been before argued.

But we are told of a hypostatical union of the divine and human nature. But
wherein does it consist? Does it unite the two natures so as to include
the human nature in the essence of God? If it does not it does not deify the person
of Christ; for the essence of God is that which makes him to be what he is; but
if the hypostatical union includes human nature in the divine, then there would
be an addition of the human nature to the essence of God, in which case the
divine nature would be no longer perfectly simple, but compounded, and
would be diverse from what it may be supposed to have been the eternity
preceding such premised union; in which connection the divine nature must
have changed from its eternal identity. He could not be the same God he was
previous to his union with humanity; for if the union of natures is supposed to
have made no alteration in the divine essence, it is a contradiction to call it a
union; for the hypostatical union must be supposed to be something or noth­
ing, if it be nothing, then there is no such union, but if it is any thing real, it
necessarily produces mutability in the divine nature. Now, if the divine nature
was eternally perfect and compleat, it could not receive the addition of the
nature of man, but if it was not perfect in the eternity preceding the premised
hypostatical union, it could not have been perfected by the addition of another
imperfection.

The doctrine of the *incarnation* itself, and the *virgin mother*, does not
merit a serious confutation and therefore is passed in silence, except the mere
mention of it.

**XII.6. The Person of Jesus Christ, Considered in a Variety of Different
Characters, Each of Which Are Incompatible with a Participation of
the Divine Nature. That a Redemption, Wrought Out by Inflicting
the Demerits of Sin upon the Innocent, Would Be Unjust, and
That It Could Contain No Mercy or Goodness to the Universality
of Being, Considered Inclusively**

It is impossible that God should suffer or change, or the person of Jesus Christ,
as far as he may be supposed to be of the essence of God; for the absolute
perfection of the divine nature exempts it from suffering, weakness, or any
manner of imperfection. Therefore Jesus Christ, in the nature in which he is
premised to have suffered, could not be God.

But on the position that Christ was a mere creature, as the *Arians* believe,
though ever so exalted, all the obedience or righteousness he could have ac­
quired or attained to, would have been necessary for the discharge of his own
duty as an accountable creature. Admitting that he had imputed it to others,
he must have been miserable himself for the deficiency thereof, except his
righteousness had been acquired by works of supererogation, or except he is
supposed to be capable of a moral happiness without righteousness or good­
ness, and if he may be supposed to have been capable of such a happiness
without those moral qualifications requisite thereto, why might not mankind
in general have been capable of it upon the same footing of deficiency, without
his imputed righteousness? however it is no way probable admitting it to be
possible, that any exalted, wise and understanding being would part with the
essentials of his own happiness; *viz.* his morality to others; and for them, and
in their stead, actually suffer a great and dreadful weight of misery, and thus at an equal expence of his own happiness and goodness, redeem a race of sinful and guilty creatures; for there could not on this thesis, be any advantage to the system of finite beings, considered collectively, or any mercy or goodness displayed to being in general. What mercy would there be in reprieving or restoring a race of condemned creatures from misery, by inflicting an equal condemnation or punishment on a premised innocent and exalted finite being, which should have been inflicted on the guilty? Humanity obliges us to be kind and benevolent, but never obliges us to suffer for criminals (nor could such a suffering excuse them from their just demerits) but justice and self-preservation forbids it; for all finite beings are under greater obligations to themselves than to any other creature or race of creatures whatever; so that there could be no justice or goodness in one being’s suffering for another, nor is it at all compatible with reason to suppose, that God was the contriver of such a propitiation.

The practice of imputing one person’s crime to another, in capital offences among men, so that the innocent should suffer for the guilty, has never yet been introduced into any court of judicature in the world, or so much as practised in any civilised country; And the manifest reason in this, as in all other cases of imputation, is the same, viz. it confounds personal merit and demerit.

The murderer ought to die for the demerit of his crime, but if the court exclude the idea of personal demerit (guilt being always the inherent property of the guilty and of them only) they might as well sentence one person to death for the murder of another; for justice would be wholly blind was it not predicated on the idea of the fact of a personal demerit, on the identical person who was guilty of the murder: nor is it possible to reward merit abstractly considered from its personal agents. These are facts that universally hold good in human governments. The same reasons cannot fail to hold good in the divine mind as in that of the human, for the rules of justice are essentially the same whether applied to the one or to the other, having their uniformity in the eternal truth and reason of things.

But it is frequently objected, that inasmuch as one person can pay, satisfy and discharge a cash debt for another, redeem him from prison and set him at liberty, therefore Jesus Christ might become responsible for the sins of mankind, or of the elect, and by suffering their punishment atone for them, and free them from their condemnation. But it should be considered, that comparisons darken or reflect light upon an argument according as they are either pertinent or impertinent thereto; we will therefore examine the comparison, and see if it will with propriety apply to the atonement.

Upon the Christian scheme, Christ the son was God, and equal with God the father, or with God the Holy Ghost, and therefore original sin must be considered to be an offence equally against each of the persons of the premised Trinity, and being of a criminal nature could not be discharged or satisfied by
cash or produce, as debts of a civil contract are, but by suffering; and it has already been proved to be inconsistent with the divine or human government, to inflict the punishment of the guilty upon the innocent, though one man may discharge another’s debt in cases where lands, chattels or cash are adequate to it; but what capital offender was ever discharged by such commodities?

Still there remains a difficulty on the part of Christianity, in accounting for one of the persons in the premised trinity’s satisfying a debt due to the impartial justice of the unity of the three persons. For God the son to suffer the condemnation of guilt in behalf of man, would not only be unjust in itself, but incompatible with his divinity, and the retribution of the justice of the premised trinity of persons in the godhead (of whom God the son must be admitted to be one) toward mankind; for this would be the same as to suppose God to be judge, criminal and executioner, which is inadmissible.

But should we admit for argument’s sake, that God suffered for original sin, yet taking into one complex idea the whole mental system of being, universally, both finite and infinite, there could have been no display of grace, mercy, or goodness to being in general, in such a supposed redemption of mankind; inasmuch as the same quantity or degree of evil is supposed to have taken place upon being, universally considered, as would have taken place, had finite individuals, or the race of Adam, suffered according to their respective demerits.

Should we admit that there is a trinity of persons in the divine essence, yet the one could not suffer without the other, for essence cannot be divided in suffering, any more than in enjoyment. The essence of God is that which includes the divine nature, and the same identical nature must necessarily partake of the same glory, honor, power, wisdom, goodness and absolute uncreated and unlimited perfection, and is equally exempted from weakness and suffering. Therefore, as certain as Christ suffered he was not God, but whether he is supposed to be God or man, or both, he could not in justice have suffered for original sin, which must have been the demerit of its perpetrators as before argued.

Supposing Christ to have been both God and man, he must have existed in two different essences, viz. the essence of God and the essence of man. And if he existed in two distinct and separate essences, there could be no union between the divine and human natures. But if there is any such thing as an hypostatical union between the divine and human natures, it must unite both natures in one essence, which is impossible: for the divine nature being infinite, could admit of no addition or enlargement, and consequently cannot allow of a union with any nature whatever. Was such an union possible in itself, yet, for a superior nature to unite with an inferior one in the same essence, would be degrading to the former, as it would put both natures on a level by constituting an identity of nature: the consequences whereof would either deify man, or divest God of his divinity, and reduce him to the rank and condition of a
creature; inasmuch as the united essence must be denominated either divine or human.

That God should become a man, is impossible, and that man should become a God, is equally impossible and absurd. But if the divine nature retains its absolute perfection, and the nature of man its infirmity, then a premised hypostatical union between them would imply a union of weakness and imperfection to the nature and essence of God; for so certain as human nature is imperfect and united with the divine, so certain perfection must be supposed to unite with imperfection, but it is contradictory and unworthy of the divine nature to form such a hypostatical junction. Furthermore to suppose that two essences are contained in one, is as great a contradiction, as to suppose, that two units are one, and one unit is two: for if two essences have a positive existence, they must exist in two distinct and separate natures, for that, which constitutes but one nature, is and necessarily must be contained in but one essence, so \( \text{vice versa} \), that which constitutes two essences, at the same time gives existence to two natures, for a nature cannot exist without an essence, nor an essence without a nature; for essence is identity itself. But that there should be two identities in the same nature or essence, is impossible and contradictory, therefore Jesus Christ could not be both God and man, for this plain reason, that if he was one of them, he could not be the other; for God and man are not and cannot be one and the same, for that there is an infinite disproportion between them; for which reason they cannot be hypostatically united in one nature or essence. The divine mind comprehends all possible knowledge, with one entire and infinite reflection without a succession of thinking. Nor is it compatible with the omnipresence of God to ascribe motion to him, for it would imply absence in him from place, and be a downright contradiction to his being everywhere present; therefore that mind, which intuitively understands all things, and is everywhere present, is exalted above our narrow conceptions or traditions of uniting with the animal or cogitative nature of man, any more than with the universe in general. Our intelligence would contribute nothing to his mind, and the body of man would be but a circumscribed and inconsistent vehicle to enrol, or inclose that mind, which is eternal and infinite. A man is finite and cannot be in but one place at the same time, his motion from one place to another as regularly and necessarily excludes him from one place, as it introduces him into another; he thinks by succession and by parts, and is liable to errors and mistakes in theory and practice; and ignorance, vanity and infirmity are more or less the lot of humanity. How arrogant is it then in man to pretend a union with the divine nature, who is infinitely above our praises or adoration? But we are told, that the hypostatical union is a mysterious one. Nevertheless it is a union or not a union, if it is a union of the divine and human natures, they must be comprised in one and the self-same essence, or otherwise it is such a mysterious union, that it is not a union,
which is no mystery at all, but a barefaced absurdity. For that which we can comprehend to be unreasonable and contradictory, is by no means mysterious. That only is mysterious, which we cannot understand to be reasonable or unreasonable, true or false, right or wrong, which is not the case respecting the hypostatical union: for admitting it to be true, the human mind must reflect, reason and judge of things in and with the divine mind. But as the divine mind does not think or reflect by succession, and the human mind cannot exert its thinking faculty any otherwise than by succession, it could not think or reflect in or with the divine mind at all; for the divine omniscience, comprehending all things, would also comprehend the thoughts and reasonings of the human mind, whether they are supposed to be right or wrong. But the finite mind would be lost and swallowed up in the divine, without adding any thing to it, except it be imperfection. Nor is it possible in itself, that an intelligent finite being, who thinks by succession, should be united in one essence with that mind, which is infinite, and does not think by succession: For infinity of intelligence cannot admit of addition, nor could the infinite and finite mind think together in one and the same mind, as the manner of their perceptions, as well as the extent of them, would be infinitely different, and consequently there could be no union between them. But the human mind, by a progressive and finite mode of reflection, would act and judge of things, not only distinctly from, but opposite to the eternal mind, which naturally obstructs or precludes the union. Besides, if the human mind acts separately and individually from the divine mind, it acts in the same manner as our minds do, and like them would be liable not only to imperfection, but to sin and misery; a union too wretched to be ascribed to the divine nature. But admitting the union between the infinite and finite minds, they would be but one mind, and conscious of the same consciousness, for otherwise they could not be the same, or pertain to the same essence. But that a finite mind could be conscious of an infinite or all comprehending consciousness, or compose any part of it, is absurd; as a consciousness is not compounded of parts, as parts cannot comprise infinity. And as to moral and physical evil, the infinite mind is at as great a remove therefrom as from finiteness itself, and consequently could not jointly suffer with the person of a supposed mediator.

But it may be objected that Jesus Christ was not possessed of a human mind, and that the hypostatical union consisted in the uniting of the divinity with the animal part of the nature of man only. But such a union would of consequence subject the divine nature to a state of suffering, and obnoxiously expose it to physical evils. To suppose that it did not, is the same as to suppose, that there was no such union, for if it be really a union, it must be attended with the necessary consequences of a union of the divine nature with the animal part of the nature of man, or otherwise it is a contradiction to call it a union. But if the divine nature did not suffer in the person of Christ, and he was by nature
void of a human mind, then it follows, that it was the mere animal body of Christ that suffered for original sin, in which, intelligent nature, either divine or human, did not bear a part. But if it be supposed, that the hypostatical union united the divine nature with that of the human, consisting of cogitation and sensation, then the previous arguments stand fairly opposed to the doctrine of the hypostatical union, which is submitted to the reader.

XIV.2. Morality Derived from Natural Fitness, and Not from Tradition

Such parts or passages of the scriptures as inculcate morality, have a tendency to subserve mankind, the same as all other public investigations or teachings of it, may be supposed to have; but are neither better or worse for having a place in the volume of those writings denominated canonical; for morality does not derive its nature from books, but from the fitness of things; and though it may be more or less, interspersed through the pages of the Alkoran, its purity and rectitude would remain the same; for that it is founded in eternal right; and whatever writings, books or oral speculations, best illustrate or teach this moral science, should have the preference. The knowledge of this as well as all other sciences, is acquired from reason and experience, and (as it is progressively obtained) may with propriety be called, the revelation of God, which he has revealed to us in the constitution of our rational natures: and as it is congenial with reason and truth cannot (like other revelations) partake of imposture. This is natural religion, and could be derived from none other but God. I have endeavoured, in this treatise, to prune this religion from those excrescences, with which Craft on the one hand, and Ignorance on the other, have loaded it; and to hold it up to view in its native simplicity, free from alloy; and have throughout the contents of the volume, addressed the reason of mankind, and not their passions, traditions or prejudices; for which cause, it is no wise probable that it will meet with any considerable approbation.

Most of the human race, by one means or other are prepossessed with principles opposed to the religion of reason. In these parts of America, they are most generally taught, that they are born into the world in a state of enmity to God and moral good, and are under his wrath and curse, that the way to Heaven and future blessedness is out of their power to pursue, and that it is incumbered with mysteries which none but the Priests can unfold, that we must “be born again,” have a special kind of faith, and be regenerated; or in fine, that human nature, which they call “the old man,” must be destroyed, perverted, or changed by them, and by them new modeled, before it can be admitted into the Heavenly kingdom. Such a plan of superstition, as far as it obtains credit in the world, subjects mankind to sacerdotal empire; which is erected on the imbecility of human nature. Such of mankind, as break the fetters of their education, remove such other obstacles as are in their way, and
have the confidence publicly to talk rational, exalt reason to its just supremacy, and vindicate truth and the ways of God's providence to men; are sure to be stamped with the epithet of irreligious, infidel, profane, and the like. But it is often observed of such a man, that he is morally honest, and as often replied, what of that? Morality will carry no man to heaven. So that all the satisfaction the honest man can have while the superstitious are squibbing hell fire at him, is to retort back upon them that they are priest ridden.

Most people place religion in arbitrary ceremonies, or mere positive institutions, abstractly considered from the moral rectitude of things, and in which religion does not and cannot consist, and thus delude themselves with an empty notion of religion, which, in reality is made up of tradition and superstition, and in which moral obligation is not concerned; not considering that a conformity to moral rectitude, which is morality in the abstract, is the sum of all religion, that ever was or can be in the universe; as there can be no religion in that in which there is no moral obligation; except we make religion to be void of reason, and if so, all argument about it is at an end.

The manner of the existence, and intercourse of human souls, after the dissolution of their bodies by death, being inconceivable to us in this life, and all manner of intelligence between us and departed souls impracticable, the priests have it in their power to amuse us, with a great variety of visionary apprehensions of things in the world to come, which, while in this life, we cannot contradict from experience, the test of great part of our certainty (especially to those of ordinary understandings) and having introduced mysteries into their religion, make it as incomprehensible to us, (in this natural state) as the manner of our future existence; and from scripture authority, having invalidated reason as being carnal and depraved, they proceed further to teach us from the same authority, that "the natural man knoweth not the things of the spirit, for they are foolishness unto him, neither can he know them for they are spiritually discerned." A spiritualizing teacher is nearly as well acquainted with the kingdom of Heaven, as a man can be with his home lot. He knows the road to heaven and eternal blessedness, to which happy regions, with the greatest assurance, he presumes to pilot his dear disciples, and unfold to them the mysteries of the canonical writings, and of the world to come; they catch the enthusiasm and see with the same sort of spiritual eyes, with which they can pierce religion through and through, and understand the spiritual meaning of the scriptures, which before had been "a dead letter" to them, particularly the revelations of St. John the Divine, and the allusion of the horns therein mentioned. The most obscure and unintelligible passages of the Bible, come within the compass of their spiritual discerning, as apparently as figures do to a mathematician: Then they can sing songs out of the Canticles, saying, "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine;" and being at a loose from the government of reason, please themselves with any fanaticisms they like best, as that of their
being “snatched as brands out of the burning, to enjoy the special and eternal favour of God, not from any worthiness or merit in them, but merely from the sovereign will and pleasure of God, while millions of millions, as good by nature and practice as they, were left to welter eternally, under the scalding drops of divine vengeance;” not considering, that if it was consistent with the perfections of God to save them, his salvation could not fail to have been uniformly extended to all others, whose circumstances may be supposed to be similar to, or more deserving than theirs, for equal justice cannot fail to apply in all cases in which equal justice demands it. But these deluded people resolve the divine government altogether into sovereignty; “even so Father, for so it seemed good in thy sight.” And as they exclude reason and justice from their imaginary notions of religion, they also exclude it from the providence or moral government of God. Nothing is more common, in the part of the country where I was educated, than to hear those infatuated people, in their public and private addresses, acknowledge to their creator, from the desk and elsewhere, “hadst thou, O Lord, laid judgment to the line and righteousness to the plummet, we had been in the grave with the dead and in hell with the damned, long before this time.” Such expressions from the creature to the creator are profane, and utterly incompatible with the divine character. Undoubtedly, (all things complexly considered) the providence of God to man is just, inasmuch as it has the divine approbation.

The superstitious thus let up a spiritual discerning, independent of, and in opposition to reason, and their mere imaginations pass with each other, and with themselves, for infallible truth. Hence it is, that they despise the progressive and wearisome reasonings of philosophers (which must be admitted to be a painful method of arriving at truth) but as it is the only way in which we can acquire it, I have pursued the old natural road of ratiocination, concluding, that as this spiritual discerning is altogether inadequate to the management of any of the concerns of life, or of contributing any assistance or knowledge towards the perfecting of the arts and sciences, it is equally unintelligible and insignificant in matters of religion: and therefore conclude, that if the human race in general, could be prevailed upon to exercise common sense in religious concerns, those spiritual fictions would cease, and be succeeded by reason and truth.

XIV.3. Of the Importance of the Exercise of Reason, and Practice of Morality, in Order to the Happiness of Mankind

The period of life is very uncertain, and at the longest is but short: a few years bring us from infancy to manhood, a few more to a dissolution; pain, sickness and death are the necessary consequences of animal life. Through life we struggle with physical evils, which eventually are certain to destroy our earthly composition; and well would it be for us did evils end here; but alas! moral evil has been more or less predominant in our agency, and though natural evil is
unavoidable, yet moral evil may be prevented or remedied by the exercise of virtue. Morality is therefore of more importance to us than any or all other attainments; as it is a habit of mind, which, from a retrospective consciousness of our agency in this life, we should carry with us into our succeeding state of existence, as an acquired appendage of our rational nature, and as the necessary means of our mental happiness. Virtue and vice are the only things in this world, which, with our souls, are capable of surviving death; the former is the rational and only procuring cause of all intellectual happiness, and the latter of conscious guilt and misery; and therefore, our indispensable duty and ultimate interest is, to love, cultivate and improve the one, as the means of our greatest good, and to hate and abstain from the other, as productive of our greatest evil.

And in order thereto, we should so far divest ourselves of the incumbrances of this world, (which are too apt to engross our attention) as to enquire a consistent system of the knowledge of religious duty, and make it our constant endeavour in life to act conformably to it. The knowledge of the being, perfections, creation and providence of God, and of the immortality of our souls, is the foundation of religion. . . . And as the Pagan, Jewish, Christian and Mahometan countries of the world have been overwhelmed with a multiplicity of revelations diverse from each other, and which, by their respective promulgators, are said to have been immediately communicated to them by the intervening agency of angels (as in the instance of the invisible Gabriel to Mahomet) and as those revelations have been received and credited, by far the greater part of the inhabitants of the several countries of the world (on whom they have been obtruded) as supernaturally revealed by God or Angels, and which, in doctrine and discipline, are in most respects repugnant to each other, it fully evinces their imposture, and authorizes us, without a lengthy course of arguing, to determine with certainty, that not more than one if any of them, had their original from God; as they clash with each other; which is ground of high probability against the authenticity of each of them.

A revelation, that may be supposed to be really of the institution of God, must also be supposed to be perfectly consistent or uniform, and to be able to stand the test of truth; therefore such pretended revelations, as are tendered to us as the contrivance of heaven, which do not bear that test, we may be morally certain, was either originally a deception, or has since, by adulteration become spurious. Furthermore, should we admit, that among the numerous revelations on which the respective priests have given the stamp of divinity, some one of them was in reality of divine authority, yet we could no otherwise, as rational beings, distinguish it from others, but by reason.

Reason therefore must be the standard, by which we determine the respective claims of revelation; for otherwise we may as well subscribe to the divinity of the one as of the other, or to the whole of them, or to none at all. So likewise
on this thesis, if reason rejects the whole of those revelations, we ought to return to the religion of nature and reason.

Undoubtedly it is our duty, and for our best good, that we occupy and improve the faculties, with which our Creator has endowed us, but so far as prejudice, or prepossession of opinion prevails over our minds, in the same proportion, reason is excluded from our theory or practice. Therefore if we would acquire useful knowledge, we must first divest ourselves of those impediments; and sincerely endeavour to search out the truth; and draw our conclusions from reason and just argument, which will never conform to our inclination, interest or fancy; but we must conform to that if we would judge rightly. As certain as we determine contrary to reason, we make a wrong conclusion; therefore, our wisdom is, to conform to the nature and reason of things, as well in religious matters, as in other sciences. Preposterously absurd would it be, to negative the exercise of reason in religious concerns, and yet, be actuated by it in all other and less occurrences of life. All our knowledge of things is derived from God, in and by the order of nature, out of which we cannot perceive, reflect or understand any thing whatsoever; our external senses are natural and so are our souls; by the instrumentality of the former we perceive the objects of sense, and with the latter we reflect on them. And those objects are also natural; so that ourselves, and all things about us, and our knowledge collected therefrom, is natural, and not supernatural. . . .

We may and often do, connect or arrange our ideas together, in a wrong or improper manner, for the want of skill or judgment, or through mistake or the want of application, or through the influence of prejudice; but in all such cases, the error does not originate from the ideas themselves, but from the composer; for a system, or an arrangement of ideas justly composed; always contain the truth; but an unjust composition never fails to contain error and falsehood. Therefore an unjust connection of ideas is not derived from nature, but from the imperfect composition of man. Misconnection of ideas is the same as misjudging, and has no positive existence, being merely a creature of the imagination; but nature and truth are real and uniform; and the rational mind by reasoning, discerns the uniformity, and is thereby enabled to make a just composition of ideas, which will stand the test of truth. But the fantastical illuminations of the credulous and superstitious part of mankind, proceed from weakness, and as far as they take place in the world, subvert the religion of REASON and TRUTH.