The Comte de Volney (1757–1820) was American neither by birth nor adoption; indeed, he resided in the United States only three short years. But he is included here because no other continental contemporary of the American deists exerted a greater influence on them. His major work, *Ruins; or, Meditations on the Revolutions of Empires* (1791), was required reading for deists on this side of the Atlantic. Its deistic rejection of revealed religion, and its defense of naturalistic religion and morality, impressed Freneau, Paine, Palmer, and other American advocates of deism. Thomas Jefferson was so struck by the book that he began a translation, which was eventually completed by Joel Barlow, another admirer of Volney. As late as the mid-nineteenth century, the *Ruins* was still being castigated by orthodox theologians who claimed that it had served “to unchristianize” thousands of American readers. It is, of course, true that other French freethinkers were studied and endorsed by American deists: Voltaire, d’Holbach, and Claude Helvétius spring readily to mind. But Volney was clearly the favorite and molded the temperament of American deism to a far greater degree than did his better-remembered fellow savants.

Volney was born in Craon, France, the son of a well-to-do member of the landed gentry. In his youth he roamed extensively throughout the Middle East, studying its customs, languages, and religions, and subsequently published two popular accounts of his travels (*Voyage en Égypte et en Syrie*, 1787; and *Considérations sur la guerre des Turcs et de la Russie*, 1788). *Ruins* appeared three years later and was clearly influenced by his exposure to non-European cultures. Imprisoned during the French Terror, he later regained favor and was sent to the United States in 1795 as an agent of the French government. While in America, he became a close associate of Jefferson’s, who subsequently suffered no little political embarrassment when Volney was accused of planning the French reoccupation of Louisiana and sent packing back to Europe in 1798. But Volney seems to have possessed a remarkable talent for surviving political intrigues and crises, and his failure as an agent provocateur did not overly damage his career. Although no admirer of Napoleon, he served under him and was rewarded with the title of comte. After the Restoration, he equally well served the House of Bourbon, which gratefully elevated him to
the peerage. Despite his flexibility in cooperating with a variety of political
regimes, Volney remained a moderate liberal, faithful to Enlightenment ideals,
to the end of his life. At his death in 1820, he was one of France’s most
respected intellectuals.

The Ruins is a curious work. Its praise of reason and natural religion places
it squarely in the Enlightenment tradition, but its fanciful style and mode of
presentation are startlingly romantic in flavor. The book is best described as a
study in what would today be designated as comparative religion. Volney
guides the reader, with the aid of a mythical “legislator” or “Genius,” through
a survey of the various creeds and doctrines of the world’s religions. The book’s
central thesis is that all sectarian religions are expressions of geographical locale,
environment, and tradition and as such are contingent on not only historical
contexts but temporal ones as well. In arguing along these lines, Volney con­
cludes that no particular creed—including Christianity—has a monopoly on
universal and immutable religious truth. Instead, each is relative to its own time
and place, even if all do share a common and hence trustworthy core of belief.
The purpose of Ruins is to point out precisely what that core is and to establish
around it a religion worthy of human rationality and divine dignity. What
Montesquieu’s Spirit of the Laws did for theories of human nature, then,
Volney’s Ruins did for religious belief. It is not surprising that the book was
detested by orthodox Christians and applauded by heterodox deists.

The selections here from Volney’s Ruins open on a fanciful assembly of
representatives from each of the world’s revealed religions. The gathering is
presided over by the mysterious “legislator,” who seems to be a personification
of the spirit of Reason. Each sect is invited to explain why it is superior to all
others. The ultimate purpose of the debate is to ascertain why there exists
conflict and disagreements between adherents of different religions and
whether or not they can be reconciled. As the legislator tells the assembly,
“Truth is one, your persuasions are various; many of you therefore are in error.”

In the debate that follows, each of the devotees offers a brief for the uni­
versal truth of one tradition. All, for example, insist that the foundations of
their faiths rest on unquestionable divine revelation, as recorded in their various
sacred scriptures. But the legislator reminds them that their respective revela­
tions contradict one another and that there are no living witnesses to attest to
the truth of the original putative communication. Each religious spokesperson
then insists that the truth of his tradition is attested to by the willingness of
individuals to suffer martyrdom in its defense. The legislator’s response is quite
Lockean in tenor: Sincerity and fervor of belief do not guarantee the truth of
that which is believed. The clergy parry by pointing to accounts of miracles
demonstrating divine favor. The legislator replies that since each tradition ap­
peals to a different set of conflicting miraculous interventions, it is impossible
to decide which to trust. A similar criticism is made when the sectarians turn
to their separate doctrinal beliefs. The conclusion is that the contradictions between the varieties of revealed religion cannot be resolved so long as the devotees of those traditions "prejudicially" insist that their path is the only correct one. Sectarian opinions are accidents of birth, reflections of historical context erroneously transmitted from one generation to the next as absolute truth. "How is it," asks the legislator, "that such a hazard should be a ground of conviction, an argument of truth?"

How is the puzzle of religious contradiction to be solved? By accepting, answers the legislator, only those beliefs that are "capable of verification" through either experience or reason, and by suspending judgment—and especially conviction—about the rest. Dispute arises between sectarians about tenets they can in no way verify but cling to out of fear and attachment to tradition. As such, affectations, prejudices, and vanity blind them to the contingency of their doctrinal beliefs and foment mutual charges of heresy and savage persecution. There is, however, a way out of the impasse: the recognition that nature provides a more reliable guide to both the divine and morality than supernaturalist (and nonverifiable) mysteries. As Volney puts it, "The only means of establishing harmony is to return to nature, and take for a guide and regulator the order of things which she has founded." In order to steer the various sectarians out of their morass of superstition and prejudice, the legislator then drills them in a catechism of natural religion—"The Law of Nature."

The law of nature, the legislator tells the assembly, "is the constant and regular order of facts, by which God governs the universe; an order which his wisdom presents to the senses and to the reason of men, as an equal and common rule for their actions, to guide them, without distinction of country or of sect, towards perfection and happiness." A close study, then, of natural philosophy reveals the nonhistorical universal principles that serve as the foundation for the different varieties of justified belief—Theological, scientific, ethical, political. It improves the felicity of individuals and the utility of society and does not sully the worship of God, as do supernaturalist doctrines, "with the foul ingredients of all the weaknesses and passions entailed on humanity."

Especially interesting within the context of American deism is the naturalistic ethics Volney derives from his law of nature. It clearly influenced Elihu Palmer's later systematic analysis of moral principle; along with Palmer's, Volney's is the only serious attempt to elaborate a uniquely deistic ethic. According to Volney, the law of nature points to one human imperative: self-preservation. To act in conformity to the natural order of things is to ensure survival; to rebel against it leads to disaster. Sensation, or the capacity for pleasure and pain, serves as the physical barometer for determining whether one's actions are compatible with the natural order. Violations of that order bring pain to oneself and others and are accordingly evil. But conformity to it enhances pleasure for all and is thereby virtuous. Vice and virtue, then, originate
with human behavior and need not be reduced to supernatural explanations. Humans thus are absolute masters of their fates, artisans of their own destinies. A judiciously rational compliance with nature furthers human progress and happiness. But a prejudicial retreat from reason into superstition and bigotry will ultimately collapse the fruits of human labor into pitiful and ghostly ruins.

**Ruins; or, Meditations on the Revolutions of Empires**

*Problem of Religious Contradiction*

The various groups having taken their places, an unbounded silence succeeded to the murmurs of the multitude, and the legislator said: "Chiefs and doctors of mankind! you remark how the nations, living apart, have hitherto followed different paths, each believing its own to be that of truth. If however, truth is one, and opinions are various, it is evident that some are in error. If then such vast numbers of us are in the wrong, who shall dare to say, I am in the right? Begin therefore by being indulgent in your dissensions. Let us all seek truth as if no one possessed it. The opinions which to this day have governed the world, originating from chance, propagated in obscurity, admitted without discussion, accredited by a love of novelty and imitation, have usurped their empire in a clandestine manner. It is time, if they are well founded, to give a solemn stamp to their certainty, and legitimate their existence. Let us summon them this day to a general scrutiny, let each propound his creed, let the whole assembly be the judge, and let that alone be acknowledged true which is so for the whole human race."

Then, by order of position, the first standard on the left was allowed to speak: "You are not permitted to doubt," said their chiefs, "that our doctrine is the only true and infallible one. First it is revealed by God himself—"

"So is ours," cried all the other standards, "and you are not permitted to doubt it."

"But at least," said the legislator, "you must propose it; for we cannot believe what we do not know."

"Our doctrine is proved," replied the first standard, "by numerous facts; by a multitude of miracles, by resurrections of the dead, by rivers dried up, by mountains removed, etc."

"And we also," cried all the others, "we have numberless miracles:" and each began to recount the most incredible things.

"Their miracles," said the first standard, "are imaginary; or the fictions of the evil spirit, who has deluded them."

"They are yours," said the others, "that are imaginary," and each group, speaking of itself, cried out: "None but ours are true; all the others are false."

The legislator asked: "Have you living witnesses?"
“No,” replied they all: “the facts are ancient, the witnesses are dead, but their writings remain.”

“Be it so,” replied the legislator; “but if they contradict each other, who shall reconcile them?”

“Just judge!” cried one of the standards, “the proof that our witnesses have seen the truth is that they died to confirm it, and our faith is sealed with the blood of martyrs.”

“And ours too,” said the other standards: “we have thousands of martyrs who died in the most excruciating torments, without ever denying the truth.” Then the Christians of every sect, the Mussulmen, the Indians, the Japanese, recited endless legends of confessors, martyrs, penitents, etc.

And one of these parties having denied the martyrology of the others: “Well,” said they, “we will then die ourselves to prove the truth of our belief.”

And instantly a crowd of men of every religion and every sect, presented themselves to suffer the torments of death. Many even began to tear their arms, and to beat their heads and breasts, without discovering any symptom of pain.

But the legislator preventing them: “Omen!” said he, “hear my words with patience: if you die to prove that two and two make four, will your death render this truth more evident?”

“No,” answered all.

“And if you die to prove that they make five, will that make them five?”

Again they all answered, “No.”

“What then is your persuasion to prove, if it changes not the existence of things? Truth is one, your persuasions are various; many of you therefore are in error. Now, if man, as is evident, can persuade himself of error, what does his persuasion prove?

“If error has its martyrs, what is the criterion of truth?

“If the evil spirit works miracles, what is the distinctive character of God?

“Besides, why resort forever to incomplete and insufficient miracles? Instead of changing the course of nature, why not rather change opinions? Why murder and terrify men, instead of instructing and correcting them?

“O credulous, but opinionated mortals! none of us know what was done yesterday, what is even doing today under our eyes, and we swear to what was done two thousand years ago!

“Oh, the weakness, and yet the pride of men! the laws of nature are immutable and profound, our minds are full of illusion and frivolity, and yet we would comprehend everything, determine everything! Verily, it is easier for the whole human race to be in an error, than to change the nature of an atom.”

“Well then,” said one of the doctors, “let us lay aside the evidence of fact, since it is uncertain; let us come to argument, the proofs inherent in the doctrine.”
Let Man Study Nature's Laws!

Then came forward, with a look of confidence, an Imam of the law of Mahomet; and, having advanced into the circle, turned towards Mecca and recited with great fervor his confession of faith: “Praised be God,” said he, with a solemn and imposing voice! “The light shineth with full evidence, and truth has no need of examination.” then showing the Coran: “Here,” said he, “is the light of truth in its proper essence. There is no doubt in this book; it conducts with safety him who walks in darkness, and who receives without discussion the divine word which descended on the prophet to save the simple, and confound the wise. God has established Mahomet his minister on earth; he has given him the world, that he may subdue with the sword whoever shall refuse to receive his law: infidels dispute and will not believe; their obduracy comes from God, who has hardened their hearts to deliver them to dreadful punishments—”

At these words, a violent murmur arose on all sides, and silenced the speaker. “Who is this man,” cried all the groups, “who thus gratuitously insults us? What right has he to impose his creed on us as conqueror and tyrant? Has not God endowed us, as well as him, with eyes, understanding, and reason? And have we not an equal right to use them, in choosing what to believe and what to reject? If he attacks us, shall we not defend ourselves? If he likes to believe without examination, must we therefore not examine before we believe?

“And what is this luminous doctrine that fears the light? What is this apostle of a God of clemency, who preaches nothing but murder and carnage? What is this God of justice, who punishes blindness which he himself has made? If violence and persecution are the arguments of truth, must gentleness and charity be looked on as signs of falsehood?”

A man then advancing from a neighbouring group, said to the Imam: “Admitting that Mahomet is the apostle of the best doctrine, the prophet of the true religion; have the goodness at least to tell us, in the practice of his doctrine, whether we are to follow his son-in-law Ali, or his vicars Omar and Aboubekre?”

At the sound of these names a terrible schism arose among the Mussulmen themselves: the partisans of Omar and of Ali, calling out heretics and blasphemers, loaded each other with execrations. The quarrel became so violent, that the neighbouring groups were obliged to interfere to prevent their coming to blows.

At length, tranquillity being somewhat restored, the legislator said to the Imams: “See the consequences of your principles! If you yourselves were to carry them into practice, you would destroy each other to the last man; is it not the first law of God that man should live?” Then addressing himself to the other groups: “Doubtless,” said he, “this intolerant and exclusive spirit shocks every idea of justice, and overturns the whole foundation of morals and society; but before we totally reject this code of doctrine, is it not proper to hear some
of its dogmas, in order not to pronounce on the forms, without having some knowledge of the substance?"

The groups having consented, the Imam began to expound how God, after having sent to the nations, lost in idolatry, twenty-four thousand prophets, had finally sent the last, the seal and perfection of all, Mahomet, on whom be the salvation of peace: how, to prevent the divine word from being any longer perverted by infidels, the supreme bounty had itself written the pages of the Coran: then explaining the particular dogmas of Islamism, the Imam unfolded how the Coran, partaking of the divine nature, was increate and eternal, like its author: how it had been sent leaf by leaf in twenty-four thousand nocturnal apparitions of the angel Gabriel: How the angel announced himself by a gentle knocking, which threw the prophet into a cold sweat; how, in the vision of one night, he had travelled over ninety heavens, riding on the animal Boraq, half a horse and half a woman: how, endowed with the gift of miracles, he walked in the sunshine without a shadow, turned dry trees to green, filled wells and cisterns with water, and split in two the body of the moon: how, by divine command, Mahomet had propagated, sword in hand, the religion the most worthy of God by its sublimity, and the best adapted for man by the simplicity of its practice, since it consisted in only eight or ten points: to profess the unity of God; to acknowledge Mahomet as his only prophet; to pray five times a day; to fast one month in the year; to go to Mecca once in our life; to pay the tenth of all we possess; to drink no wine; to eat no pork; and to make war upon the infidels; he taught that by these means every Mussulman, becoming himself an apostle and a martyr, should enjoy in this world many blessings; and at his death, his soul weighed in the balance of works, and absolved by the two black angels, should pass the infernal pit on the bridge as narrow as a hair and as sharp as the edge of a sword, and should finally be received to a region of delight, watered with rivers of milk and honey, and embalmed in all the perfumes of India and Arabia; and where the celestial houris, virgins always chaste, are eternally crowning with repeated favors the elect of God, who preserve an eternal youth.

At these words, an involuntary smile was seen on every countenance; and the various groups, reasoning on these articles of faith, exclaimed with one voice: "Is it possible that reasonable beings can admit such reveries? would not you think it a chapter from the Arabian nights?"

A Samoyed advanced into the circle: "The paradise of Mahomet," said he, "appears very desirable; but one of the means of gaining it is embarrassing: for if we must neither eat nor drink between the rising and setting sun, as he has ordered, how are we to practice that fast in my country, where the sun continues above the horizon four months without setting?"

"That is impossible," cried all the Mussulman doctors, to support the
honor of the prophet; but a hundred nations having attested the fact, the infallibility of Mahomet could not but receive a severe shock.

"It is singular," said an European, "that God should be constantly revealing what takes place in heaven, without ever instructing us what is doing on the earth!"

"For my part," says an American, "I find a great difficulty in the pilgrimage; for suppose twenty-five years to a generation and only a hundred millions of males on the globe: each being obliged to go to Mecca once in his life, there must be four millions a year on the journey; and as it would be impracticable for them to return the same year, the numbers would be doubled, that is, eight millions: where would you find provisions, lodging, water, vessels for this universal procession? Here must be miracles indeed!"

"The proof," said a Catholic doctor, "that the religion of Mahomet is not revealed, is that the greater part of the ideas which serve for its basis existed a long time before, and that it is only a confused mixture of truths disfigured and taken from our holy religion and from that of the Jews; which an ambitious man has made to serve his projects of domination, and his worldly views. Peruse his book, you will see nothing there but the histories of the Bible and the Gospel, travestied into absurd fables; a tissue of vague and contradictory declamations, and ridiculous or dangerous precepts. Analyze the spirit of these precepts, and the conduct of their apostle, you will find there an artful and audacious character; which to obtain its end, works ably, it is true, on the passions of the people it had to govern. Speaking to simple and credulous men, it entertains them with miracles; they are ignorant and jealous, and it flatters their vanity by despising science; they are poor and rapacious, and it excites their cupidity by the hope of pillage; having nothing at first to give them on earth, it tells them of treasures in heaven; it teaches them to desire death as the supreme good; it threatens cowards with hell; it rewards the brave with paradise; it sustains the weak with the opinion of fatality; in short, it produces the attachment it wants by all the allurements of sense and all the power of the passions.

"How different is the character of our religion! and how completely does its empire, founded on the counteraction of our natural inclinations, and the mortification of all our passions, prove its divine origin! how forcibly does its mild and compassionate morality, its affections altogether spiritual, attest its emanation from the divinity? Many of its doctrines, it is true, soar above the reach of the understanding, and impose on reason a respectful silence; but this more fully demonstrates its revelation, since the human mind could never have imagined such mysteries." Then, holding the Bible in one hand and the four Gospels in the other, the doctor began to relate, that in the beginning, God (after having passed an eternity in inaction) took the resolution, without any
known cause, of making the world out of nothing; that having created the whole universe in six days, he found himself fatigued on the seventh; that having placed the first human pair in a garden of delight, to make them completely happy, he forbade their tasting a particular fruit which he left within their reach; that these first parents, having yielded to the temptation, all their race (yet unborn) had been condemned to bear the penalty of a fault which they had not committed; that, after having left the human race to damn themselves for four or five thousand years, this God of mercy ordered a dearly beloved son, whom he had engendered without a mother, and who was as old as himself, to go and be put to death on the earth; and this, for the salvation of mankind, of whom much the greater portion, nevertheless, have ever since continued in the way of perdition; that to remedy this new difficulty, this same God, born of a virgin, having died and risen from the dead, assumes a new existence every day, and in the form of a piece of bread, multiplies himself by millions at the voice of one of the vilest of men; then passing on to the doctrine of the sacraments, he was going to treat at large of the power of absolution and reprobation, of the means of purging all sins by a little water and a few words, when, uttering the words indulgence, power of the pope, sufficient or efficacious grace, he was interrupted by a thousand cries. "It is a horrible abuse," exclaimed the Lutherans, "to pretend to remit sins for money." "The notion of the real presence," cried the Calvinists, "is contrary to the text of the gospel." "The pope has no right to decide anything of himself," cried the Jansenists; and thirty other sects, rising up and accusing each other of heresy and error, it was no longer possible to hear anything distinctly.

Silence being at last restored, the Mussulmen observed to the legislator: "since you have rejected our doctrine as containing things incredible, can you admit that of the Christians? is not theirs still more contrary to common sense and justice? a God, immaterial and infinite, to become a man? to have a son as old as himself! this god-man to become bread, to be eaten and digested! have we anything equal to that? Have the Christians an exclusive right to exact implicit faith? and will you grant them privileges of belief to our detriment?"

Some savage tribes then advanced: "What?" said they, "because a man and woman ate an apple six thousand years ago, all the human race are damned? and you call God just! What tyrant ever rendered children responsible for the faults of their fathers! What man can answer for another’s actions: Is not this subversive of every idea of justice and of reason?"

Others exclaimed: "Where are the proofs, the witnesses of these pretended facts? Can we receive them without examining the evidence? The least action in a court of justice requires two witnesses; and we are ordered to believe all this on mere tradition and hearsay!"

A Jewish rabbin then addressing the assembly, said; "As to the fundamental facts we are sureties; but with regard to their form and application, the case is
different, and the Christians are here condemned by their own arguments; for they cannot deny that we are the original source from which they are derived, the primitive stock on which they are grafted; and hence the reasoning is very short: either our law is from God, and then theirs is a heresy, since it differs from ours; or our law is not from God, and then theirs falls at the same time."

"But you must make this distinction," replied the Christian: "your law is from God, as typical and preparative, but not as final and absolute; you are the image of which we are the substance."

"We know," replied the rabbin, "that such are your pretensions; but they are absolutely gratuitous and false. Your system turns altogether on mystical meanings, on visionary and allegorical interpretations: with violent distortions on the letter of our books, you substitute the most chimerical ideas to the true ones, and find in them whatever pleases you, as a wild imagination will find figures in the clouds. Thus you have made a spiritual Messiah of that which, in the spirit of our prophets, is only a temporal king: you have made a redemption of the human race out of the simple reestablishment of our nation; your conception of the virgin is founded on a single phrase, which you have misunderstood. Thus you make from our scriptures whatever your fancy dictates, you even find there your trinity, though there is not the most distant allusion to it, and it is an invention of profane writers, admitted into your system with a host of other opinions of every religion and of every sect, during the anarchy of the three first centuries of your era."

At these words, the Christian doctors crying sacrilege and blasphemy, sprang forward in a transport of fury to fall upon the Jew. And a troop of monks in motley dresses of black and white, advanced with a standard, on which were painted pincers, gridirons, lighted fagots and the words justice, charity, mercy: "We must," said they, "make an example of these impious wretches, and burn them for the glory of God." They began even to prepare the pile, when a Mussulman answered in a strain of irony: "This then is your religion of peace, that meek and beneficent system which you so much extol! This is that evangelical charity which combats infidelity with persuasive mildness, and repays injuries with patience! Ye hypocrites! it is thus that you deceive mankind; thus that you propagate your accursed errors! When you were weak, you preached liberty, toleration, peace; when you are strong, you practise persecution and violence." —And he was going to begin the history of the wars and slaughters of Christianity, when the legislator demanding silence, suspended this scene of discord.

The monks, affecting a tone of meekness and humility, exclaimed, "It is not ourselves that we avenge, it is the cause of God, it is his glory that we defend."

"And what right have you, more than we," said the Imams, "to constitute yourselves the representatives of God? Have you privileges that we have not? Are you not men like us?"
"To defend God," said another group, "to pretend to avenge him, is to insult his wisdom and his power. Does he not know better than men what befits his dignity?"

"Yes," replied the monks, "but his ways are secret."

... Then the legislator having commanded silence and recalled the dispute to its true object, said, "Chiefs and instructors of the people, you came together in search of truth; at first, every one of you, thinking he possessed it, demanded of the others an implicit faith; but receiving the contrariety of your opinions, you found it necessary to submit them to a common rule of evidence, and to bring them to one general term of comparison; and you agreed that each should exhibit the proofs of his doctrine. You began by alleging facts; but each religion and every sect, being equally furnished with miracles and martyrs, each producing an equal cloud of witnesses, and offering to support them by a voluntary death, the balance on this first point, by right of parity, remained equal.

"You then passed to the trial of reasoning; but the same arguments applying equally to contrary positions; the same assertions, equally gratuitous, being advanced and repelled with equal force, and all having an equal right to refuse assent, nothing was demonstrated. What is more, the confrontation of your systems has brought up new and extraordinary difficulties; for amidst the apparent or adventitious diversities, you have discovered a fundamental resemblance, a common groundwork; and each of you pretending to be the inventor, and first depositary, you have taxed each other with adulterations and plagiarisms; and thence arises a difficult question concerning the transmission of religious ideas from people to people.

"Finally to repeat the embarrassment, when you endeavoured to explain your doctrines to each other, they appeared confused and foreign, even to their adherents; they were founded on ideas inaccessible to your senses; of consequence you had no means of judging of them, and you confessed yourselves in this respect to be only the echoes of your fathers; hence follows this other question, how came they to the knowledge of your fathers, who themselves had no other means than you to conceive them: so that, on the one hand, the succession of these ideas being unknown, and on the other, their origin and existence being a mystery, all the edifice of your religious opinions becomes a complicated problem of metaphysics and history. . . ."

Solution of the Problem of Contradictions
The legislator then resumed his discourse. "O nations!" said he, "we have heard the discussion of your opinions; and the different sentiments which divide you have given rise to many reflections, and furnished several questions which we shall propose to you to solve.

"First, considering the diversity and opposition of the creeds to which you
are attached, we ask on what motives you found your persuasion; is it from a
deliberate choice that you follow the standard of one prophet rather than
another? Before adopting this doctrine rather than that, did you first compare?
did you maturely examine them? Or have you received them only from the
chance of birth, from the empire of education and habit? Are you not born
Christians on the banks of the Tiber, Mussulmen on those of the Euphrates,
Idolaters on the Indus, just as you are born fair in cold climates and sable under
the scorching sun of Africa? And if your opinions are the effect of your fortu-
titous position on the earth, of consanguinity, of imitation, how is it that such
a hazard should be a ground of conviction, an argument of truth?

"Secondly, when we reflect on the mutual proscriptions and arbitrary intol-
erance of your pretensions, we are frightenened at the consequences that flow
from your own principles. Nations! who reciprocally devote each other to the
bolts of heavenly wrath, suppose that the universal Being whom you revere,
should this moment descend from heaven on this multitude and, clothed with
all his power, should sit on this throne to judge you, suppose he should say to
you: 'Mortals! it is your own justice that I am going to exercise upon you. Yes,
of all the religious systems that divide you, one alone shall this day be preferred;
all the others, all this multitude of standards, of nations, of prophets shall be
condemned to eternal destruction; this is not enough—among the particular
sects of the chosen system, one only can be favored, and all the others must be
condemned; neither is this enough: from this little remnant of a group, I must
exclude all those who have not fulfilled the conditions enjoined by its precepts:
O men! to what a small number of elect have you limited your race! to what
a penury of beneficence do you reduce the immensity of my goodness! to what
a solitude of admirers do you condemn my greatness and my glory?"

"But," said the legislator rising: "no matter; you have willed it so; Nations!
here is an urn in which all your names are placed: one only is a prize—approach
and draw this tremendous lottery—" And the nations, seized with terror, cried:
"No, no; we are all brothers, all equal; we cannot condemn each other."

Then said the legislator, resuming his seat: "O men! who dispute on so
many subjects, lend an attentive ear to one problem which you exhibit,
and which you ought to decide yourselves." And the people, giving great attention,
he lifted an arm towards heaven; and pointing to the sun, said, "Nations, does
that sun which enlightens you appear square or triangular?" "No," answered
they with one voice, "it is round."

Then taking the golden balance that was on the altar: "This gold that you
handle every day, is it heavier than the same volume of copper?" "Yes," an-
swered all the people, "gold is heavier than copper."

Then taking the sword: "Is this iron," said the legislator, "softer than lead?"
"No," said the people.

"Is sugar sweet, and gall bitter?"—"Yes."
“Do you love pleasure, and hate pain?”—“Yes.”

“Thus then you are agreed in these points and many others of the same nature.

“Now, tell us, is there a cavern in the centre of the earth, or inhabitants in the moon?”

This question occasioned an universal murmur; every one answered differently, some yes, others no; one said it was probable; another said it was an idle, ridiculous question; some, that it was worth knowing; and the discord was universal.

After sometime, the legislator having obtained silence, said: “Explain to us, O nations, this problem. We have put to you several questions which you have answered with one voice, without distinction of race or of sect; white men, black men, followers of Mahomet and of Moses, worshippers of Boudda and of Jesus, all have returned the same answer. We then proposed another question, and you are all at variance! Why this unanimity in one case, and this discordance in the other?”

And the group of simple men and savages answered and said: “The reason of this is evident: in the first case we see and feel the objects; and we speak from sensation: in the second, they are beyond the reach of our senses; we speak of them only from conjecture.”

“You have resolved the problem,” said the legislator: “and your own consent has established this first truth:

“That whenever objects can be examined and judged of by your senses, you are agreed in opinion;

“And that you only differ when the objects are absent and beyond your reach.

“From this first truth flows another equally clear and worthy of notice. Since you agree on things which you know with certainty, it follows that you disagree only on those which you know not with certainty, and about which you are not sure; that is to say, you dispute, you quarrel, you fight for that which is uncertain, that of which you doubt. O men! is not this folly?

“Is it not then demonstrated that Truth is not the object of your contests? that it is not her cause which you defend, but that of your affections, and of your prejudices? that it is not the object, as it really is in itself, that you would verify, but the object as you would have it; that is to say, it is not the evidence of the thing that you would enforce, but your own personal opinion, your particular manner of seeing and judging. It is a power that you wish to exercise, an interest that you wish to satisfy, a prerogative that you arrogate to yourselves; it is a contest of vanity. Now, as each of you, on comparing himself to every other, finds himself his equal and his fellow, he resists by a feeling of the same right. And your disputes, your combats, your intolerance, are the effect
of this right which you deny each other, and of the intimate conviction of your
equality.

"Now, the only means of establishing harmony is to return to nature, and
take for a guide and regulator the order of things which she has founded; and
then your accord will prove this other truth:

"That real beings have in themselves an identical, constant and uniform
mode of existence; and that there is in your organs a like mode of being af­

fected by them.

"But at the same time, by reason of the mobility of these organs as subject
to your will, you may conceive different affections, and find yourselves in dif­
f erent relations with the same objects; so that you are to them like a mirror,
capable of reflecting them truly as they are, or of distorting and disfiguring
them.

"Hence it follows that, whenever you perceive objects as they are, you
agree among yourselves and with the objects; and the similitude between your
sensations and their manner of existence, is what constitutes their truth with
respect to you;

"And on the contrary, whenever you differ in your opinion, your disagree­
ment is a proof that you do not represent them such as they are, that you
change them.

"Hence also it follows, that the causes of your disagreement exist not in the
objects themselves, but in your minds, in your manner of perceiving or judg­
ing.

"To establish therefore an uniformity of opinion, it is necessary first to
establish the certainty, completely verified, that the portraits which the mind
forms are perfectly like the originals; that it reflects the objects correctly as they
exist. Now, this result cannot be obtained but in those cases where the objects
can be brought to the test, and submitted to the examination of the senses.
Everything which cannot be brought to this trial is for that reason alone, im­
possible to be determined; there exists no rule, no term of comparison, no
means of certainty, respecting it.

"From this we conclude, that, to live in harmony and peace, we must agree
never to decide on such subjects, and to attach to them no importance; in a
word, we must trace a line of distinction between those that are capable of
verification, and those that are not, and separate by an inviolable barrier, the
world of fantastical beings from the world of realities; that is to say, all civil
effect must be taken away from theological and religious opinions.

"This, O people! is the object proposed by a great nation freed from her
fetters and her prejudices; this is the work which, under her eye, and by her
orders, we had undertaken when your kings and your priests came to interrupt
it. —O kings and priests! you may suspend, yet for awhile, the solemn publi-
A general shout then arose from every part of the assembly; and the nations universally, and with one voice, testified their assent to the proposals of the legislator: "Resume," said they, "your holy and sublime labors, and bring them to perfection! Investigate the laws which nature, for our guidance, has implanted in our breasts, and collect from them an authentic and immutable code; nor let this code be any longer for one family only, but for us all without exception! Be the legislator of the whole human race, as you shall be the interpreter of nature herself; show us the line of partition between the world of chimeras and that of realities: and teach us, after so many religions of error and delusion, the religion of evidence and truth!"

Then the legislator, having resumed his inquiry into the physical and constituent attributes of man, and examined the motives and affections which govern him in his individual and social state, unfolded in these words the laws on which nature herself has founded his happiness.

The Law of Nature

Q. What is the law of nature?
A. It is the constant and regular order of facts, by which God governs the universe; an order which his wisdom presents to the senses and to the reason of men, as an equal and common rule for their actions, to guide them, without distinction of country or of sect, towards perfection and happiness. . . .

Q. Do such orders exist in nature?
A. Yes.

Q. What does the word nature signify?
A. The word nature bears three different senses. 1st. It signifies the universe, the material world: in this first sense we say the beauty of nature, the richness of nature, that is to say, the objects in the heavens and on the earth exposed to our sight; 2dly. It signifies the power that animates, that moves the universe, considering it as a distinct being, such as the soul is to the body: in this second sense we say, "The intentions of nature, the incomprehensible secrets of nature." 3rdly. It signifies the partial operations of that power on each being, or on each class of beings; and in this third sense we say, "The nature of man is an enigma; every being acts according to its nature." Wherefore, as the actions of each being, or of each species of beings, are subjected to constant and general rules, which cannot be infringed without interrupting and troubling the general or particular order, those rules of action and of motion are called natural laws, or laws of nature.

Q. Give me examples of those laws.
A. It is a law of nature, that the sun illuminates successively the surface of the terrestrial globe;—that its presence causes both light and heat;—that heat acting upon water, produces vapors;—that those vapors rising in clouds into the regions of the air, dissolve into rain or snow, and renew incessantly the waters of fountains and of rivers.

It is a law of nature, that water flows downwards; that it endeavours to find its level; that it is heavier than air; that all bodies tend towards the earth; that flame ascends towards the heaven;—that it disorganizes vegetables and animals; that air is necessary to the life of certain animals; that, in certain circumstances, water suffocates and kills them; that certain juices of plants, certain minerals attack their organs, and destroy their life, and so on in a multitude of other instances.

Wherefore, as all those and similar facts are immutable, constant, and regular, so many real orders result from them for man to conform himself to, with the express clause of punishment attending the infraction of them, or of welfare attending their observance. So that if man pretends to see clear in darkness, if he goes in contradiction to the course of the seasons, or the action of the elements; if he pretends to remain under water without being drowned, to touch fire without burning himself, to deprive himself of air without being suffocated, to swallow poison without destroying himself, he receives from each of those infractions of the laws of nature a corporeal punishment proportionate to his fault; but if on the contrary, he observes and practises each of those laws according to the regular and exact relations they have to him, he preserves his existence, and renders it as happy as it can be: and as the only and common end of all those laws, considered relatively to mankind, is to preserve, and render them happy, it has been agreed upon to reduce the idea to one simple expression, and to call them collectively the law of nature.

(II)

Q. What are the characters of the law of nature?
A. There can be assigned ten principal ones.
Q. Which is the first?
A. To be inherent to the existence of things, and, consequently, primitive and anterior to every other law: so that all those which man has received, are only imitations of it, and their perfection is ascertained by the resemblance they bear to this primordial model.
Q. What is the second?
A. To be derived immediately from God, and presented by him to each man, whereas all other laws are presented to us by men, who may be either deceived or deceivers.
Q. Which is the third?
A. To be common to all times, and to all countries, that is to say, one and universal.
Q. Is no other law universal?
A. No: for no other is agreeable or applicable to all the people of the earth; they are all local and accidental, originating from circumstances of places and of persons; so that if such a man had not existed, or such an event happened, such a law would never have been enacted.
Q. Which is the fourth character?
A. To be uniform and invariable.
Q. Is no other law uniform and invariable?
A. No: for what is good and virtue according to one, is evil and vice according to another; and what one and the same law approves of at one time, it often condemns at another.
Q. Which is the fifth character?
A. To be evident and palpable, because it consists entirely of facts incessantly present to the senses, and to demonstration.
Q. Are not other laws evident?
A. No: for they are founded on past and doubtful facts, on equivocal and suspicious testimonies, and on proofs inaccessible to the senses.
Q. Which is the sixth character?
A. To be reasonable, because its precepts and entire doctrine are conformable to reason, and to the human understanding.
Q. Is no other law reasonable?
A. No: for all are in contradiction to the reason and the understanding of men, and tyrannically impose on him a blind and impracticable belief.
Q. Which is the seventh character?
A. To be just, because in that law, the penalties are proportionate to the infractions.
Q. Are not other laws just?
A. No: for they often exceed bounds, either in rewarding deserts, or in punishing delinquencies, and consider as meritorious or criminal, null or indifferent actions.
Q. Which is the eighth character?
A. To be pacific and tolerant, because in the law of nature, all men being brothers and equal in rights, it recommends to them only peace and toleration, even for errors.
Q. Are not other laws pacific?
A. No: for all preach dissension, discord, and war, and divide mankind by exclusive pretensions of truth and domination.
Q. Which is the ninth character?
A. To be equally beneficent to all men, in teaching them the true means of becoming better and happier.
Q. Are not other laws beneficient likewise?
A. No: for none of them teach the real means of attaining happiness; all are confined to pernicious or futile practices; and this is evident from facts, since after so many laws, so many religions, so many legislators and prophets, men are still as unhappy and as ignorant, as they were six thousand years ago.

Q. Which is the last character of the law of nature?
A. That it is alone sufficient to render men happier and better, because it comprises all that is good and useful in other laws, either civil or religious, that is to say, it constitutes essentially the moral part of them; so that if other laws were divested of it, they would be reduced to chimerical and imaginary opinions devoid of any practical utility.

And such is the power of all these attributes of perfection and truth, that when in their disputes the theologians can agree upon no article of belief, they recur to the law of nature, the neglect of which, say they, forced God to send from time to time prophets to proclaim new laws; as if God enacted laws for particular circumstances, as men do, especially when the first subsists in such force, that we may assert it to have been at all times and in all countries the rule of conscience for every man of sense or understanding.

Q. If, as you say, it emanates immediately from God, does it teach his existence?
A. Yes, most positively: for, to any man whatsoever, who observes with reflection the astonishing spectacle of the universe, the more he meditates on the properties and attributes of each being, on the admirable order and harmony of their motions, the more it is demonstrated that there exists a supreme agent, an universal and identical mover, designated by the appellation of God; and so true it is that the law of nature suffices to elevate him to the knowledge of God, that all which men have pretended to know by supernatural means, has constantly turned out ridiculous and absurd, and that they have ever been obliged to recur to the immutable conceptions of natural reason.

Q. Then it is not true that the followers of the law of nature are atheists?
A. No, it is not true; on the contrary, they entertain stronger and nobler ideas of the Divinity than most other men; for they do not sully him with the foul ingredients of all the weaknesses and passions entailed on humanity.

Q. What worship do they pay him?
A. A worship wholly of action; the practice and observance of all the rules which the supreme wisdom has imposed on the motion of each being; eternal and unalterable rules, by which it maintains the order and harmony of the universe, and which, in their relations to man, constitute the law of nature.

Q. Was the law of nature known before this period?
A. It has been at all times spoken of; most legislators pretend to adopt it as the basis of their laws; but they only quote some of its precepts, and have had only vague ideas of its totality.

Q. Why?
A. Because, though simple in its basis, it forms in its developments and consequences, a complicated whole which requires an extensive knowledge of facts, joined to all the sagacity of reasoning.

Q. Does not instinct alone teach the law of nature?

A. No; for by instinct is meant nothing more than that blind sentiment by which we are actuated indiscriminately towards everything that flatters the senses.

Q. Why then is it said that the law of nature is engraved in the hearts of all?

A. It is said for two reasons: 1st, because it has been remarked, that there are acts and sentiments common to all men, and this proceeds from their common organization; 2dly, because the first philosophers believed that men were born with ideas already formed, which is now demonstrated to be erroneous.

Q. Philosophers then are fallible?

A. Yes, sometimes.

Q. Why so?

A. 1st, Because they are men; 2dly, because the ignorant call all those who reason, right or wrong, philosophers; 3dly, because those who reason on many subjects, and who are the first to reason on them, are liable to be deceived.

Q. If the law of nature be not written, must it not become arbitrary and ideal?

A. No; because it consists entirely in facts, the demonstration of which can be incessantly renewed to the senses, and constitutes a science as accurate and as precise as geometry and mathematics; and it is because the law of nature forms an exact science, that men, born ignorant and living inattentive and heedless, have had hitherto only a superficial knowledge of it.

Q. Explain the principles of the law of nature with relations to man.

A. They are simple; all of them are comprised in one fundamental and single precept.

Q. What is that precept?

A. It is self-preservation.

Q. Is not happiness also a precept of the law of nature?

A. Yes: but as happiness is an accidental state, resulting only from the development of man's faculties and his social system, it is not the immediate and direct object of nature; it is, in some measure, a superfluity annexed to the necessary and fundamental object of preservation.

Q. How does nature order man to preserve himself?

A. By two powerful and involuntary sensations, which it has attached, as two guides, two guardian Geniuses to all his actions: the one, a sensation of pain, by which it admonishes him of, and deters him from, everything that tends to destroy him; the other, a sensation of pleasure, by which it attracts and carries
him towards everything that tends to his preservation and the development of his existence.

Q. Pleasure therefore is not an evil, a sin, as casuists pretend?
A. No, only in as much as it tends to destroy life, and health, which, by the avowal of those same casuists, we derive from God himself.

Q. Is pleasure the principal object of our existence, as some philosophers have asserted?
A. No; not more than pain; pleasure is an incitement to live, as pain is a repulsion from death.

Q. How do you prove this assertion?
A. By two palpable facts; one, that pleasure when taken immoderately, leads to destruction; for instance, a man who abuses the pleasure of eating or drinking, attacks his health, and injures his life. The other, that pain sometimes leads to self-preservation: for instance, a man who suffers a mortified member to be cut off, endures pain in order not to perish totally.

Q. But does not even this prove that our sensations can deceive us respecting the end of our preservation?
A. Yes; they can momentarily.

Q. How do our sensations deceive us?
A. In two ways; by ignorance, and by passion.

Q. When do they deceive us by ignorance?
A. When we act without knowing the action and effect of objects on our senses: for example, when a man touches nettles without knowing their stinging quality, or when he swallows opium without knowing its soporific effects.

Q. When do they deceive us by passion?
A. When, conscious of the pernicious action of objects, we abandon ourselves, nevertheless, to the impetuosity of our desires and appetites: for example, when a man who knows that wine intoxicates, does nevertheless drink it to excess.

Q. What is the result?
A. It results that the ignorance in which we are born, and the unbridled appetites to which we abandon ourselves, are contrary to our preservation; that consequently the instruction of our minds and the moderation of our passions are two obligations, two laws which derive immediately from the first law of preservation.

Q. But if we are born ignorant, is not ignorance a law of nature?
A. No more than to remain in the naked and feeble state of infancy. Far from being a law of nature, ignorance is an obstacle to the practice of all its laws. It is the real original sin.

Q. Why then have there been moralists who have looked upon it as a virtue and a perfection?
A. Because, from a whimsical or misanthropical disposition they have con-
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founded the abuse of knowledge with knowledge itself: as if, because men
abuse the power of speech, their tongues should be cut out: as if perfection and
virtue consisted in the nullity, and not in the development and proper employ
of our faculties.

Q. Instruction is therefore indispensably necessary to man’s existence?
A. Yes, so indispensable, that without it he is every instant assailed and
wounded by all that surrounds him; for if he does not know the effects of fire,
he burns himself; those of water, he drowns himself; those of opium, he poi­
sions himself; if, in the savage state, he does not know the wiles of animals, and
the art of seizing game, he perishes through hunger; if, in the social state, he
does not know the course of the seasons, he can neither cultivate the ground,
or procure nourishment; and so on, of all his actions, respecting all the wants
of his preservation.

Q. But can man separately by himself acquire all this knowledge necessary to
his existence, and to the development of his faculties?
A. No, not without the assistance of his fellow men, and by living in society.

Q. But is not society to man a state against nature?
A. No: it is on the contrary a necessity, a law that nature imposed on him by
the very act of his organization: for 1st, nature has so constituted man, that he
cannot see his species of another sex without feeling emotions and an attrac­
tion, the consequences of which induce him to live in a family, which is already
a state of society; 2nd, by endowing him with sensibility, she organized him so
that the sensations of others reflect within him, and excite reciprocal senti­
ments of pleasure and of grief, which are attractions, and indissoluble ties of
society; 3rd, and finally, the state of society, founded on the wants of man, is
only a further means of fulfilling the law of preservation; and to pretend that
this state is out of nature, because it is more perfect, is the same as to say, that
a bitter and wild fruit of the forest, is no longer the production of nature, when
rendered sweet and delicious by cultivation in our gardens.

Q. Why then have philosophers called the savage state, the state of perfec­
tion?
A. Because, as I have told you, the vulgar have often given the name of phi­
losophers to whimsical geniuses, who, from moroseness, from wounded van­
ity, or from a disgust to the vices of society, have conceived chimerical ideas of
the savage state, in contradiction with their own system of a perfect man.

Q. What is the true meaning of the word philosopher?
A. The word philosopher signifies a lover of wisdom: wherefore, as wisdom
consists in the practice of the laws of nature, the true philosopher is he who
knows those laws extensively and accurately, and who conforms the whole
tenor of his conduct to them.

Q. What is man in the savage state?
A. A brutal, ignorant animal, a wicked and ferocious beast, like bears and Ourang-outangs.
Q. Is he happy in that state?
A. No: for he only feels momentary sensations; and those sensations are habitually of violent wants which he cannot satisfy, since he is ignorant by nature and weak by being insulated from his species.
Q. Is he free?
A. No: he is the most abject slave that exists; for his life depends on everything that surrounds him; he is not free to eat when hungry, to rest when tired, to warm himself when cold; he is every instant in danger of perishing; wherefore nature offers but fortuitous examples of such beings; and we see that all the efforts of the human species, since its origin, solely tend to emerge from that violent state, by the pressing necessity of self-preservation.
Q. But does not this necessity of preservation engender in individuals egotism, that is to say self-love? and is not egotism contrary to the social state?
A. No: for, if by egotism you understand a propensity to hurt our neighbour, it is no longer self-love, but the hatred of others. Self-love, taken in its true sense, not only is not contrary to society, but is its firmest support by the necessity we lie under of not injuring others, lest in return they should injure us.

Thus man’s preservation and the unfolding of his faculties, directed towards this end, are the true law of nature in the production of the human being: and it is from this simple and fruitful principle that are derived, referred, and in its scale are weighed, all ideas of good and evil, of vice and virtue, of just and unjust, of truth or error, of lawful or forbidden, on which is founded the morality of individual, or of social man.

(IV)

Q. What is good, according to the law of nature?
A. It is everything that tends to preserve and perfect man.
Q. What is evil?
A. It is everything that tends to man’s destruction or deterioration.
Q. What is meant by physical good and evil, and by moral good and evil?
A. By the word physical is understood, whatever acts immediately on the body. Health is a physical good; and sickness a physical evil. By moral, is meant what acts by consequences more or less remote. Calumny is a moral evil; a fair reputation is a moral good, because both one and the other occasion towards us, on the part of other men, dispositions and habitudes, which are useful or hurtful to our preservation, and which attack or favor our means of existence.
Q. Everything that tends to preserve or to produce is therefore a good?
A. Yes; and it is for that reason that certain legislators have classed amongst the
works agreeable to the divinity, the cultivation of a field and the fecundity of a woman.

Q. Whatever tends to give death is therefore an evil?
A. Yes: and it is for that reason some legislators have extended the idea of evil and of sin even to the murdering of animals.

Q. The murdering of a man is therefore a crime in the law of nature?
A. Yes: and the greatest that can be committed: for every other evil can be repaired, but murder alone is irreparable.

Q. What is a sin in the law of nature?
A. It is whatever tends to trouble the order established by nature, for the preservation and perfection of man and of society.

Q. Can intention be a merit or a crime?
A. No: for it is only an idea void of reality; but it is a commencement of sin and evil, by the tendency it gives towards action.

Q. What is virtue according to the law of nature?
A. It is the practice of actions useful to the individual and to society.

Q. What is meant by the word individual?
A. It means a man considered separately from every other.

Q. What is vice according to the law of nature?
A. It is the practice of actions prejudicial to the individual and to society.

Q. Have not virtue and vice an object purely spiritual and abstracted from the senses?
A. No: it is always to a physical end that they finally relate, and that end is always to destroy or preserve the body.

Q. Have vice and virtue degrees of strength and intenseness?
A. Yes: according to the importance of the faculties which they attack or which they favor; and according to the number of individuals in whom those faculties are favored or injured.

Q. Give me some examples.
A. The action of saving a man’s life is more virtuous than that of saving his property; the action of saving the life of ten men, than that of saving only the life of one, and an action useful to the whole human race is more virtuous than an action that is only useful to one single nation.

Q. How does the law of nature prescribe the practice of good and virtue, and forbid that of evil and vice?
A. By the very advantages resulting from the practice of good and virtue for the preservation of our body, and by the losses which result, to our existence, from the practice of evil and vice.

Q. Its precepts are then in action?
A. Yes: they are action itself considered in its present effect and in its future consequences. . . .
Q. What is society?
A. It is every reunion of men living together under the clauses of an expressed or tacit contract, which has for its end their common preservation.

Q. Are the social virtues numerous?
A. Yes: they are in as great number as the kinds of actions useful to society; but all may be reduced to one only principle.

Q. What is that fundamental principle?
A. It is justice, which alone comprises all the virtues of society.

Q. Why do you say that justice is the fundamental and almost only virtue of society?
A. Because it alone embraces the practice of all the actions useful to it; and because all the other virtues, under the denominations of charity, humanity, probity, love of one's country, sincerity, generosity, simplicity of manners and modesty, are only varied forms and diversified applications of the axiom, Do not to another what you would not wish to be done to yourself; which is the definition of justice.

Q. How does the law of nature prescribe justice?
A. By three physical attributes inherent in the organization of man.

Q. What are those attributes?
A. They are equality, liberty, and property.

Q. How is equality a physical attribute of man?
A. Because all men having equally eyes, hands, mouths, ears, and the necessity of making use of them in order to live, have, by this reason alone, an equal right to life, and to the use of the aliments which maintain it; they are all equal before God.

Q. Do you suppose that all men hear equally, see equally, feel equally, have equal wants and passions?
A. No; for it is evident and daily demonstrated, that one is short and another long sighted; that one eats much, another little; that one has mild, another violent passions; in a word, that one is weak in body and mind, whilst another is strong in both.

Q. They are therefore really unequal.
A. Yes, in the development of their means, but not in the nature and essence of those means; they are made of the same stuff, but not in the same dimensions; nor are the weight and value equal. Our language possesses no one word capable of expressing the identity of nature, and the diversity of its form and employment. It is a proportional equality; and it is for this reason I have said, equal before God, and in the order of nature.

Q. How is liberty a physical attribute of man?
A. Because all men having senses sufficient for their preservation, no one want-
ing the eye of another to see, his ear to hear, his mouth to eat, his feet to walk, they are all, by this very reason, constituted naturally independent and free; no man is necessarily subjected to another, nor has he a right to dominate over him.

Q. But if a man is born strong, has he not a natural right to master the weak man?
A. No; for it is neither a necessity for him, nor a convention between them. It is an abusive extension of his strength; and here an abuse is made of the word right, which in its true meaning implies, justice or reciprocal faculty.

Q. How is property a physical attribute of man?
A. In as much as all men being constituted equal or similar to one another, and consequently independent and free, each is the absolute master, the full proprietor of his body and of the produce of his labor.

Q. How is justice derived from these three attributes?
A. In this, that men being equal and free, owing nothing to each other, have no right to require anything from one another, only in as much as they return an equal value for it; or in as much as the balance of what is given is in equilibrium with what is returned: and it is this equality, this equilibrium which is called justice, equity; that is to say that equality and justice are but one and the same word, the same law of nature, of which the social virtues are only applications and derivatives. . . .

(VI)

Q. What do you conclude from all this?
A. I conclude from it that all the social virtues are only the habit of actions and useful to society and to the individual who practises them; That they all refer to the physical object of man’s preservation; That nature having implanted in us the want of that preservation, has made a law to us of all its consequences, and a crime of everything that deviates from it; That we carry in us the seed of every virtue and of every perfection; That it only requires to be developed; That we are only happy in as much as we observe the rules established by nature for the end of our preservation; And that, all wisdom, all perfection, all law, all virtue, all philosophy, consist in the practice of these axioms founded on our own organization:

Preserve-thyself; Instruct-thyself; Moderate-thyself;
Live for thy fellow citizens, that they may live for thee.

Condition of Man in the Universe

After a short silence, the Genius resumed in these words:

I have told you already, O friend of truth, that man vainly ascribes his misfortunes to obscure and imaginary agents; in vain he seeks for mysterious
and remote causes of his ills. . . . In the general order of the universe, his condition is doubtless subject to inconveniences, and his existence overruled by superior powers: but those powers are neither the decrees of a blind fatality, nor the caprices of whimsical and fantastic beings; like the world of which he forms a part, man is governed by natural laws, regular in their course, consistent in their effects, immutable in their essence; and those laws, the common source of good and evil, are not written among the distant stars, or hidden in mysterious codes: inherent in the nature of terrestrial beings, interwoven with their existence, they are at all times and in all places present to man, they act upon his senses, they warn his understanding, and dispense to every action its reward or punishment. Let man then study these laws! let him comprehend his own nature, and the nature of the beings that surround him, and he will know the regulators of his destiny; the causes of his evils, and the remedies he ought to apply.

When the secret power, which animates the universe, formed the globe of the earth, he implanted in the beings by whom it is inhabited, essential properties which became the law of their individual motion, the bound of their reciprocal relations, the cause of the harmony of the whole; he thereby established a regular order of causes and effects, of principles and consequences, which, under an appearance of chance, governs the universe, and maintains the equilibrium of the world: thus, he gave to fire motion and activity; to air, elasticity; weight and density to matter; he made air lighter than water, metal heavier than earth, wood less cohesive than steel; he ordered the flame to ascend, stones to fall, plants to vegetate; man, who was to be exposed to the action of so many different beings, and whose frail life was nevertheless to be preserved, was endowed with the faculty of sensation. By this faculty, all action hurtful to his existence gives him a feeling of pain and evil; and every favorable action an impression of pleasure and happiness. By these sensations, man, sometimes averted from that which wounds his senses, sometimes allured towards that which soothes them, has been obliged to cherish and preserve his own life. Thus, self-love, the desire of happiness, aversion to pain, are the essential and primary laws imposed on man by nature herself; the laws which the directing power, whatever it be, has established for his government, and which, like those of motion in the physical world, are the simple and fruitful principle of whatever happens in the moral world.

Such then is the condition of man: on one side exposed to the action of the elements which surround him, he is subject to many inevitable evils: and if in this decree Nature has been severe, on the other hand, just and even indulgent, she has not only tempered the evils with equivalent good, she has even enabled him to augment the good and alleviate the evil: she seems to say: “Feeble work of my hands, I owe you nothing, and I give you life; the world wherein I placed you was not made for you, yet I grant you the use of it; you will find in it a
mixture of good and evil; it is for you to distinguish them, and to direct your footsteps in the paths of flowers and thorns. Be the arbiter of your own lot; I put your destiny into your hands." —Yes, man is made the artisan of his own destiny; it is he who has alternately created the successes or reverses of his fortune: and if, on a review of all the pains with which he has tormented his life, he finds reason to weep over his own weakness or imprudence, yet, considering the beginnings from which he set out, and the height attained, perhaps he has more reason to presume on his strength, and to pride himself on his genius.