



The Origins of Man's Ideas of God

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If man possessed the courage, if he had the requisite industry to recur to the source of those opinions which are most deeply engraven on his brain; if he rendered to himself a faithful account of the reasons which make him hold these opinions as sacred; if he coolly examined the basis of his hopes, the foundation of his fears, he would find that it very frequently happens, those objects, or those ideas which move him most powerfully, either have no real existence, or are words devoid of meaning, which terror has conjured up to explain some sudden disaster; that they are often phantoms engendered by a disordered imagination, modified by ignorance; the effect of an ardent mind distracted by contending passions, which prevent him from either reasoning justly, or consulting experience in his judgment; that this mind often labours with a precipitancy that throws his intellectual faculties into confusion; that bewilders his ideas; that consequently he gives a substance and a form to chimeras, to airy nothings, which he afterwards idolizes from sloth, reverences from prejudice.

A sensible being placed in a nature where every part is in motion, has various feelings, in consequence of either the agreeable or disagreeable effects which he is obliged to experience from this continued action and re-action; in consequence he either finds himself happy or miserable; according to the quality of the sensations excited in him, he will love or fear, seek after or fly from, the real or supposed causes of such marked effects operated on his machine. But if he is ignorant of nature, if he is destitute of experience, he will frequently deceive himself as to these causes; for want of either capability or inclination to recur back to them, he will neither have a true knowledge of their energy, nor a clear idea of their mode of acting: thus until reiterated experience shall have formed his ideas, until the mirror of truth shall have shewn him the judgment he ought to make, he will be involved in trouble, a prey to incertitude, a victim to credulity.

Man is a being who brings with him nothing into the world save an aptitude to feeling in a manner more or less lively according to his individual organization: he has no innate knowledge of any of the causes that act upon him: by degrees his faculty of feeling discovers to him their various qualities; he learns to judge of them; time familiarizes him with their properties; he attaches ideas to them, according to the manner in which they have affected him; these ideas are correct or otherwise, in a ratio to the soundness of his organic structure: his judgment is faulty or not, as these organs are either well or ill-constituted; in proportion as they are competent to afford him sure and reiterated experience.

The first moments of man are marked by his wants; that is to say, the first impulse he receives is to conserve his existence; this he would not be able to maintain without the concurrence of many analogous causes: these wants in a sensible being, manifest themselves by a general languor, a sinking, a confusion in his machine, which gives him the consciousness of a painful sensation: this derangement subsists, is even augmented, until the cause suitable to remove it re-establishes the harmony so necessary to the existence of the human frame. Want, therefore, is the first evil man experiences; nevertheless it is requisite to the maintenance of his existence.

Was it not for this derangement of his body, which obliges him to furnish its remedy, he would not be warned of the necessity of preserving the existence he has received. Without wants man would be an insensible machine, similar to a vegetable; like that he would be incapable of preserving himself; he would not be competent to using the means required to conserve his being. To his wants are to be ascribed his passions; his desires; the exercise of his corporeal functions; the play of his intellectual faculties: they are his wants that oblige him to think; that determine his will, that induce him to act; it is to satisfy them or rather to put an end to the painful sensations excited by their presence, that according to his capacity, to the natural sensibility of his soul, to the energies which are peculiar to himself, he gives play to his faculties, exerts the activity of his bodily strength, or displays the extensive powers of his mind. His wants being perpetual, he is obliged to labour without relaxation, to procure objects competent to satisfy them. In a word, it is owing to his multiplied wants that man's energy is kept in a state of continual activity: as soon as he ceases to have wants, he falls into inaction—becomes listless—declines into apathy—sinks into a languor that is incommodious to his feelings or prejudicial to his existence: this lethargic state of weariness lasts until new wants, by giving him fresh activity, rouse his dormant faculties—throw off his stupor—re-animate his vigour, and destroy the sluggishness to which he had become a prey.

From hence it will be obvious that evil is necessary to man; without it he would neither be in a condition to know that which injures him; to avoid its presence; or to seek his own welfare: without this stimulus, he would differ in nothing from insensible, unorganized beings: if those evanescent evils which he calls *wants*, did not oblige him to call forth his faculties, to set his energies in motion, to cull experience, to compare objects, to discriminate them, to separate those which have the capabilities to injure him, from those which possess the means to benefit him, he would be insensible to happiness—inadequate to enjoyment. In short, *without evil man would be ignorant of good*; he would be continually exposed to perish like the leaf on a tree. He would resemble an infant, who, destitute of experience, runs the risque of meeting his destruction at every step he takes, unguarded by his nurse. What the nurse is to the child, experience is to the adult; when either are wanting, these children of different lustres generally go astray: frequently encounter disaster. Without evil he would be unable to judge of any thing; he would have no preference; his will would be without volition, he would be destitute of passions; desire would find no place in his heart; he would not revolt at the most disgusting objects; he would not strive to put them away; he would neither have stimuli to love, nor motives to fear any thing; he would be an insensible automaton; he would no longer be a man.

If no evil had existed in this world, man would never have dreamt of those numerous divinities, to whom he has rendered such various modes of worship. If nature had permitted him easily to satisfy all his regenerating wants, if she had given him none but agreeable sensations, his days would have uninterruptedly rolled on in one perpetual uniformity; he would never have discovered his own nakedness; he would never have had motives to search after the unknown causes of things—to meditate in pain. Therefore man, always contented, would only have occupied himself with satisfying his wants; with enjoying the present, with feeling the influence of objects, that would unceasingly warn him of his existence in a mode that he must necessarily approve; nothing would alarm his heart; every thing would be analogous to his existence: he would neither know fear, experience distrust, nor have inquietude for the future: these feelings can only be the consequence of some troublesome sensation, which must have anteriorly affected him, or which by disturbing the harmony of his machine, has interrupted the course of his happiness; which has shewn him he is naked.

Independent of those wants which in man renew themselves every instant; which he frequently finds it impossible to satisfy; every individual experiences a multiplicity of evils—he

suffers from the inclemency of the seasons—he pines in penury—he is infected with plague—he is scourged by war—he is the victim of famine—he is afflicted with disease—he is the sport of a thousand accidents, &c. This is the reason why all men are fearful; why the whole human race are diffident. The knowledge he has of pain alarms him upon all unknown causes, that is to say, upon all those of which he has not yet experienced the effect; this experience made with precipitation, or if it be preferred, by instinct, places him on his guard against all those objects from the operation of which he is ignorant what consequences may result to himself.

His inquietude is in proportion; his fears keep pace with the extent of the disorder which these objects produce in him; they are measured by their rarity, that is to say, by the inexperience he has of them; by the natural sensibility of the soul; and by the ardour of his imagination. The more ignorant man is, the less experience he has, the more he is susceptible of fear; solitude, the obscurity of a forest, silence, and the darkness of night, desolate ruins, the roaring of the wind, sudden, confused noises, are objects of terror to all who are unaccustomed to these things. The uninformed man is a child whom every thing astonishes; who trembles at every thing he encounters: his alarms disappear, his fears diminish, his mind becomes calm, in proportion as experience familiarizes him, more or less, with natural effects; his fears cease entirely, as soon as he understands, or believes he understands, the causes that act; or when he knows how to avoid their effects. But if he cannot penetrate the causes which disturb him, if he cannot discover the agents by whom he suffers, if he cannot find to what account to place the confusion he experiences, his inquietude augments; his fears redouble; his imagination leads him astray; it exaggerates his evil; paints in a disorderly manner these unknown objects of his terror; magnifies their powers; then making an analogy between them and those terrific objects, with whom he is already acquainted, he suggests to himself the means he usually takes to mitigate their anger; to conciliate their kindness; he employs similar measures to soften the anger, to disarm the power, to avert the effects of the concealed cause which gives birth to his inquietudes, which fills him with anxiety, which alarms his fears. It is thus his weakness, aided by ignorance, renders him superstitious.

There are very few men, even in our own day, who have sufficiently studied nature, who are fully apprised of physical causes, or with the effects they must necessarily produce. This ignorance, without doubt, was much greater in the more remote ages of the world, when the human mind, yet in its infancy, had not collected that experience, taken that expansion, made those strides towards improvement, which distinguishes the present from the past. Savages dispersed, erratic, thinly scattered up and down, knew the course of nature either very imperfectly or not at all; society alone perfects human knowledge: it requires not only multiplied but combined efforts to unravel the secrets of nature. This granted, all natural causes were mysteries to our wandering ancestors; the entire of nature was an enigma to them; all its phenomena was marvellous, every event inspired terror to beings who were destitute of experience; almost every thing, they saw must have appeared to them strange, unusual, contrary to their idea of the order of things.

It cannot then furnish matter for surprise, if we behold men in the present day trembling at the sight of those objects which have formerly filled their fathers with dismay. *Eclipse, comets, meteors*, were, in ancient days, subjects of alarm to all the people of the earth: these effects, so natural in the eyes of the sound philosopher, who has by degrees fathomed their true causes, have yet the right, possess the power, to alarm the most numerous, to excite the fears of the least instructed part of modern nations. The people of the present day, as well as their ignorant ancestors, find something marvellous, believe there is a supernatural agency in all those objects to which their eyes are unaccustomed; they consider all those unknown causes as wonderful, that act with a force of which their mind has no idea it is possible the known agents are capable.

The ignorant see wonders *prodigies, miracles*, in all those striking effects of which they are unable to render themselves a satisfactory account; all the causes which produce them they think *supernatural*; this, however, really implies nothing more than that they are not familiar to them, or that they have not hitherto witnessed natural agents, whose energy was equal to the production of effects so rare, so astonishing, as those with which their sight has been appalled.

Besides the ordinary phenomena to which nations were witnesses without being competent to unravel the causes, they have in times very remote from ours, experienced calamities, whether general or local, which filled them with the most cruel inquietude; which plunged them into an abyss of consternation. The traditions of all people, the annals of all nations, recal, even at this day, melancholy events, physical disasters, dreadful catastrophes, which had the effect of spreading universal terror among our forefathers, But when history should be silent on these stupendous revolutions, would not our own reflection on what passes under our eyes be sufficient to convince us, that all parts of our globe have been, and following the course of things, will necessarily be again violently agitated, overturned, changed, overflowed, in a state of conflagration? Vast continents have been inundated, seas breaking their limits have usurped the dominion of the earth; at length retiring, these waters have left striking, proofs of their presence, by the marine vestiges of shells, skeletons of sea fish, &c. which the attentive observer meets with at every step, in the bowels of those fertile countries we now inhabit—subterraneous fires have opened to themselves the most frightful volcanoes, whose craters frequently issue destruction on every side. In short, the elements unloosed, have at various times, disputed among themselves the empire of our globe; this exhibits evidence of the fact, by those vast heaps of wreck, those stupendous ruins spread over its surface. What, then, must have been the fears of mankind, who in those countries believed he beheld the entire of nature armed against his peace, menacing with destruction his very abode? What must have been the inquietude of a people taken thus unprovided, who fancied they saw nature cruelly labouring to their annihilation? Who beheld a world ready to be dashed into atoms; who witnessed the earth suddenly rent asunder; whose yawning chasm was the grave of large cities, whole provinces, entire nations? What ideas must mortals, thus overwhelmed with terror, form to themselves of the irresistible cause that could produce such extended effects? Without doubt they did not attribute these wide spreading calamities to nature; neither did they conceive they were mere physical causes; they could not suspect she was the author, the accomplice of the confusion she herself experienced; they did not see that these tremendous revolutions, these overpowering disorders, were the necessary result of her immutable laws; that they contributed to the general order by which she subsists; that, in point of fact, there was nothing more surprising in the inundation of large portions of the earth, in the swallowing up an entire nation, in a volcanic conflagration spreading destruction over whole provinces, than there is in a stone falling to the earth, or the death of a fly; that each equally has its spring in the necessity of things.

It was under these astounding circumstances, that nations, bathed in the most bitter tears, perplexed with the most frightful visions, electrified with terror, not believing there existed on this mundane ball, causes sufficiently powerful to operate the gigantic phenomena that filled their minds with dismay, carried their streaming eyes towards heaven, where their tremulous fears led them to suppose these unknown agents, whose unprovoked enmity destroyed, their earthly felicity, could alone reside.

It was in the lap of ignorance, in the season of alarm, in the bosom of calamity, that mankind ever formed his first notions of the *Divinity*. From hence it is obvious that his ideas on this subject are to be suspected, that his notions are in a great measure false, that they are always afflicting. Indeed, upon whatever part of our sphere we cast our eyes, whether it be upon the frozen climates of the north, upon the parching regions of the south, or under the more

temperate zones, we every where behold the people when assailed by misfortunes, have either made to themselves national gods, or else have adopted those which have been given them by their conquerors; before these beings, either of their own creation or adoption, they have tremblingly prostrated themselves in the hour of calamity, soliciting relief; have ignorantly attributed to blocks of stone, or to men like themselves, those natural effects which were above their comprehension; the inhabitants of many nations, not contented with the national gods, made each to himself one or more gods, which he supposed presided exclusively over his own household, from whom he supposed he derived his own peculiar happiness, to whom he attributed all his domestic misfortunes. The idea of these powerful agents, these supposed distributors of good and evil, was always associated with that of terror; their name was never pronounced without recalling to man's mind either his own particular calamities or those of his fathers. In many places man trembles at this day, because his progenitors have trembled for thousands of years past. The thought of his gods always awakened in man the most afflicting ideas. If he recurred to the source of his actual fears, to the commencement of those melancholy impressions that stamp themselves in his mind when their name is announced, he would find it in the conflagrations, in the revolutions, in those extended disasters, that have at various times destroyed large portions of the human race; that overwhelmed with dismay those miserable beings who escaped the destruction of the earth; these in transmitting to posterity, the tradition of such afflicting events, have also transmitted to him their fears; have delivered down to their successors, those gloomy ideas which their bewildered imaginations, coupled with their barbarous ignorance of natural causes, had formed to them of the anger of their irritated gods, to which their alarm falsely attributed these sweeping disasters.

If the gods of nations had their birth in the bosom of alarm, it was again in that of despair that each individual formed the unknown power that he made exclusively for himself. Ignorant of physical causes, unpractised in their mode of action, unaccustomed to their effects, whenever he experienced any serious misfortune, whenever he was afflicted with any grievous sensation, he was at a loss how to account for it; he therefore attributed it to his household gods, to whom he made an immediate supplication for assistance, or rather for forbearance of further affliction: this disposition in man has been finely portrayed by Aesop in his fable of "the Waggoner and Hercules." The motion which in despite of himself was excited in his machine, his diseases, his troubles, his passions, his inquietude, the painful alterations his frame underwent, without his being able to fathom the true causes; at length death, of which the aspect in so formidable to a being strongly attached to existence, were effects he looked upon either as supernatural, or else he conceived they were repugnant to his actual nature; he attributed them to some mighty cause, which maugre all his efforts, disposed of him at each, moment. Thus palsied with alarm, benumbed with terror, he pensively meditated upon his sorrows; agitated with fear, he sought for means to avert the calamities that threatened him with destruction; his imagination, thus rendered desperate by his endurance of evils which he found inevitable, formed to him those phantoms which he called gods; before whom he trembled from a consciousness of his own weakness; thus disposed, he endeavoured by prostration, by sacrifices, by prayers, to disarm the anger of these imaginary beings to which his trepidation had given birth; whom he ignorantly imagined to be the cause of his misery, whom his fancy painted to him as endowed with the power of alleviating his sufferings: it was thus in the extremity of his grief, in the exacerbation of his mind, weighed down with misfortune, that unhappy man fashioned those chimeras which filled him with the most gloomy ideas, which he transmitted to his posterity, as the surest means of avoiding the evils to which he had been himself subjected.

Man never judges of those objects of which he is ignorant, but through the medium of those which come within his knowledge: thus man, taking himself for the model, ascribed will,

intelligence, design, projects, passions; in a word, qualities analogous to his own, to all those unknown causes of which he experienced the action. As soon as a visible or supposed cause affects him in an agreeable manner, or in a mode favourable to his existence, he concludes it to be good, to be well intentioned towards him: on the contrary, he judges all those to be bad in their nature, evilly disposed, to have the intention of injuring him, which cause him any painful sensations. He attributes views, plans, a system of conduct like his own, to every thing which to his limited ideas appears of itself to produce connected effects; to act with regularity; to constantly operate in the same manner; that uniformly produces the same sensations in his own person. According to these notions, which he always borrows from himself, from his own peculiar mode of action, he either loves or fears those objects which have affected him; he in consequence approaches them with confidence or timidity; seeks after them or flies from them in proportion as the feelings they have excited are either pleasant or painful. Having travelled thus far, he presently addresses them; he invokes their aid; prays to them for succour; conjures them to cease his afflictions; to forbear tormenting him; as he finds himself sensible to presents, pleased with submission, he tries to win them to his interests by humiliation, by sacrifices; he exercises towards them the hospitality he himself loves; he gives them an asylum; he builds them a dwelling; he furnishes them with costly raiment; he makes their altars smoke with delicious food; he proffers to their acceptance the earliest flowers of spring; the finest fruits of autumn; the rich grain of summer; in short he sets before them all those things which he thinks will please them the most, because he himself places the highest value on them. These dispositions enable us to account for the formation of tutelary gods, of lares, of larvae, which every man makes to himself in savage and unpolished nations. Thus we perceive that weak superstitious mortals, ignorant of truth, devoid of experience, regard as the arbiters of their fate, as the dispensers of good and evil, animals, stones, unformed inanimate substances, which the effort of their heated imaginations transform into gods, whom they invest with intelligence, whom they clothe with desires, to whom they give volition.

Another disposition which serves to deceive the savage man, which will equally deceive those whom reason shall not enlighten on these subjects, is his attachment to omens; or the fortuitous concurrence of certain effects, with causes which have not produced them; the co-existence of these effects with certain causes, which have not the slightest connection with them, has frequently led astray very intelligent beings; nations who considered themselves very enlightened; who have either been disinclined or unable to disentangle the one from the other: thus the savage attributes bounty or the will to render him service, to any object whether animate or inanimate, such as a stone of a certain form, a rock, a mountain, a tree, a serpent, an owl, &c. if every time he encounters these objects in a certain position, it should so happen that he is more than ordinarily successful in hunting, that he should take an unusual quantity of fish, that he should be victorious in war, or that he should compass any enterprize whatever that he may at that moment undertake: the same savage will be quite as gratuitous in attaching malice, wickedness, the determination to injure him, to either the same object in a different position, or any others in a given posture, which way have met his eyes on those days when he shall have suffered some grievous accident, have been very unsuccessful in his undertakings, unfortunate in the chace, disappointed in his draught of fish: incapable of reasoning he connects these effects with causes, that reflection would convince him have nothing in common with each other; that are entirely due to physical causes, to necessary circumstances, over which neither himself nor his omens have the least controul: nevertheless he finds it much easier to attribute them to these imaginary causes; he therefore *deifies* them; looks upon them as either his guardian angels, or else as his most inveterate enemies. Having invested them with supernatural powers, he becomes anxious to explain to himself their mode of action; his self-love prevents his seeking

elsewhere for the model: thus he assigns them all those motives that actuate himself; he endows them with passions; he gives them design—intelligence—will—imagines they can either injure him or benefit him, as he may render them propitious or otherwise to his views: he ends with worshipping them; with paying them divine honours; he appoints them priests; or at least always consults them before he undertakes any object of moment: such is their influence, that if they put on the evil position, he will lay aside the most important undertaking. The savage in this is never more than an infant, that is angry with the object that displeases him; just like the dog who gnaws the stone by which he has been wounded, without recurring to the hand by which it was thrown.

Such is the foundation of man's faith, in either happy or unhappy omens: devoid of experience, unaccustomed to reason with precision, fearing to call in the evidence of truth, he looks upon them either as gods themselves, or else as warnings given him by his other gods, to whom he attributes the faculties of sagacity and foresight, of which he is himself miserably deficient. Ignorance, when involved in disaster, when immersed in trouble, believes a stone, a reptile, a bird, much better instructed than himself. The slender observation of the ignorant only serves to render him more superstitious; he sees certain birds announce by their flight, by their cries, certain changes in the weather, such as cold, heat, rain, storms; he beholds at certain periods, vapours arise from the bottom of some particular caverns? there needs nothing further to impress upon him the belief, that these beings possess the knowledge of future events; enjoy the gifts of prophecy: he looks upon them as supernatural agents, employed by his gods: it is thus he becomes the dupe to his own credulity.

If by degrees the truth flashing occasionally on his mind, experience and reflection arrive at undeceiving him, with respect to the power, the intelligence, the virtues actually residing in these objects; he at least supposes them put in activity by some secret, some hidden cause; that they are the instruments, employed by some invisible agent, who is either friendly or inimical to his welfare. To this concealed agent, therefore, he addresses himself; pays him his vows; employs his assistance; deprecates his wrath; seeks to propitiate him to his interests; is willing to soften his anger; for this purpose he employs the same means, of which he avails himself, either to appease or gain over the beings of his own species.

Societies in their origin, seeing themselves frequently afflicted by nature, supposed either the elements, or the concealed powers who regulated them, possessed a will, views, wants, desires, similar to their own. From hence, the sacrifices imagined to nourish them; the libations poured out to them; the steams, the incense to gratify their olfactory nerves. Their superstition led them to believe these elements or their irritated movers were to be appeased like irritated man, by prayers, by humiliation, by presents. Their imagination was ransacked to discover the presents that would be most acceptable in their eyes; to ascertain the oblations that would be most agreeable, the sacrifices that would most surely propitiate their kindness: as these did not make known their inclinations, man differed with his fellow on those most suitable; each followed his own disposition; or rather each offered what was most estimable in his own eyes; hence arose differences never to be reconciled the bitterest animosities; the most unconquerable aversions; the most, destructive jealousies! Thus some brought the fruits of the earth, others offered sheaves of corn: some strewed flowers over their fanes; some decorated them with the most costly jewels; some served them with meats; others sacrificed lambs, heifers, bulls; at length such was their delirium, such the wildness of their imaginations, that they stained their altars with human gore, made oblations of young children immolated virgins, to appease the anger of these supposed deities.

The old men, as having the most experience, were usually charged with the conduct of these peace-offerings, from whence, the name PRIEST; [Greek letters], *presbos*, in the Greek meaning

an old man. These accompanied them with ceremonies, instituted rites, used precautions by consulting omens; adopted formalities, retraced to their fellow citizens the notions transmitted to them by their forefathers; collected the observations made by their ancestors; repeated the fables they had received; added commentaries of their own; subjoined supplications to the idols at whose shrine they were sacrificing. It is thus the sacerdotal order was established; thus that public worship was established; by degrees each community formed a body of tenets to be observed by the citizens; these were transmitted from race to race; held sacred out of reverence for their fathers; at length it was deemed sacrilege to doubt these pandects in any one particular; even the errors, that had crept into them with time, were beheld with reverential awe; he that ventured to reason upon them, was looked upon as an enemy to the commonwealth; as one whose impiety drew down upon them the vengeance of these adored beings, to which alone imagination had given birth; not contented with adopting the rituals, with following the ceremonies invented by themselves, one community waged war against another, to oblige it to receive their particular creeds; which the old men who regulated them, declared would infallibly win them the favor of their tutelary deities: thus very often to conciliate their favor, the victorious party immolated on the altars of their gods, the bodies of their unhappy captives; frequently they carried their savage barbarity the length of exterminating whole nations, who happened to worship gods different from their own: thus it frequently happened, that the friends of the serpent, when victorious, covered his altars with the mangled carcasses of the worshippers of the stone, whom the fortune of war had placed in their hands: such were the unformed, the precarious elements of which rude nations every where availed themselves to compose their superstitions: they were always a system of conduct invented by imagination: conceived in ignorance, organized in misfortune, to render the unknown powers, to whom they believed nature was submitted, either favorable to their views, or to, induce them to cease those afflictions, which natural causes, for the wisest purposes, were continually heaping upon them; thus some irascible, at the same time placable being, was always chosen for the basis of the adopted superstition; it was upon these puerile tenets, upon these absurd notions, that the old men or the priests rested their doctrines; founded their rights; established their authority: it was to render these fanciful beings friendly to the race of man, that they erected, temples, raised altars, loaded them with wealth; in short, it was from such rude foundations, that arose the magnificent structure of superstition; under which man trembled for thousands of years: which governed the condition of society, which determined the actions of the people, gave the tone to the character, deluged the earth with blood, for such a long series of ages. But although these superstitions were originally invented by savages, they still have the power of regulating the fate of many civilized nations, who are not less tenacious of their chimeras, than their rude progenitors. These systems, so ruinous in their principles, have been variously modified by the human mind, of which it is the essence, to labour incessantly on unknown objects; it always, commences by attaching to these, a very first-rate importance, which it afterwards never dares coolly to examine.

Such was the course of man's imagination, in the successive ideas which he either formed to himself, or which he received from his fathers, upon the divinity. The first theology of man was grounded on fear, modelled by ignorance: either afflicted or benefitted by the elements, he adored these elements themselves; by a parity of reasoning, if reasoning it can be called, he extended his reverence to every material, coarse object; he afterwards rendered his homage to the agents he supposed presiding over these elements; to powerful genii; to inferior genii; to heroes; to men endowed with either great or striking qualities. Time, aided by reflection, with here and there a slight corruscation of truth, induced him in some places to relinquish his original ideas; he believed he simplified the thing by lessening the number of his gods, but

he achieved nothing by this towards attaining to the truth; in recurring from cause to cause man finished by losing sight of every thing; in this obscurity, in this dark abyss, his mind still laboured, he formed new chimeras, he made new gods, or rather he formed a very complex machinery; still, as before, whenever he could not account for any phenomenon that struck his sight, he was unwilling to ascribe it to physical causes; and the name of his Divinity, whatever that might happen to be, was always brought in to supply his own ignorance of natural causes.

If a faithful account was rendered of man's ideas upon the Divinity, he would be obliged to acknowledge, that for the most part the word *Gods* has been used to express the concealed, remote, unknown causes of the effects he witnessed; that he applies this term when the spring of natural, the source of known causes ceases to be visible: as soon as he loses the thread of these causes, or as soon as his mind can no longer follow the chain, he solves the difficulty, terminates his research, by ascribing it to his gods; thus giving a vague definition to an unknown cause, at which either his idleness, or his limited knowledge, obliges him to stop. When, therefore, he ascribes to his gods the production of some phenomenon, the novelty or the extent of which strikes him with wonder, but of which his ignorance precludes him from unravelling the true cause, or which he believes the natural powers with which he is acquainted are inadequate to bring forth; does he, in fact, do any thing more than substitute for the darkness of his own mind, a sound to which he has been accustomed to listen with reverential awe? Ignorance may be said to be the inheritance of the generality of men; these attribute to their gods not only those uncommon effects that burst upon their senses with an astounding force, but also the most simple events, the causes of which are the most easy to be known to whoever shall be willing to meditate upon them. In short, man has always respected those unknown causes, those surprising effects which his ignorance prevented him from fathoming.

But does this afford us one single, correct idea of the *Divinity*? Can it be possible we are acting rationally, thus eternally to make him the agent of our stupidity, of our sloth, of our want of information on natural causes? Do we, in fact, pay any kind of adoration to this being, by thus bringing him forth on every trifling occasion, to solve the difficulties ignorance throws in our way? Of whatever nature this great cause of causes may be, it is evident to the slightest reflection that he has been sedulous to conceal himself from our view; that he has rendered it impossible for us to have the least acquaintance with him, except through the medium of nature, which he has unquestionably rendered competent to every thing: this is the rich banquet spread before man; he is invited to partake, with a welcome he has no right to dispute; to enjoy therefore is to obey; to be happy is to render that worship which must make him most acceptable; *to be happy himself is to make others happy; to make others happy is to be virtuous; to be virtuous he must revere truth: to know what truth is, he must examine with caution, scrutinize with severity, every opinion he adopts*: this granted, is it at all consistent with the majesty of the Divinity, is it not insulting to such a being to clothe him with our wayward passions; to ascribe to him designs similar to our narrow view of things; to give him our filthy desires; to suppose he can be guided by our finite conceptions; to bring him on a level with frail humanity, by investing him with our qualities, however much we may exaggerate them; to indulge an opinion that he can either act or think as we do; to imagine he can in any manner resemble such a feeble play-thing, as is the greatest, the most distinguished man? No! it is to degrade him in the eye of reason; to violate every regard for truth; to set moral decency at defiance; to fall back into the depth of cimmerian darkness. Let man therefore sit down cheerfully to the feast; let him contentedly partake of what he finds; but let him not worry the Divinity with his useless prayers, with his shallow-sighted requests, to solicit at his hands that which, if granted, would in all probability be the most injurious for himself; these supplications are, in fact, at once to say, that with our limited experience, with our slender knowledge, we better understand what is suitable to our

condition, what is convenient to our welfare, than the mighty *Cause of all causes* who has left us in the hands of nature: it is to be presumptuous in the highest degree of presumption; it is impiously to endeavour to lift up a veil which it is evidently forbidden man to touch; that even his most strenuous efforts attempt in vain.

It remains, then, to inquire, if man can reasonably flatter himself with obtaining a perfect knowledge of the power of nature; of the properties of the beings she contains; of the effects which may result from their various combinations? Do we know why the magnet attracts iron? Are we better acquainted with the cause of polar attraction? Are we in a condition to explain the phenomena of light, electricity, elasticity? Do we understand the mechanism by which that modification of our brain, which we call volition, puts our arm or our legs into motion? Can we render to ourselves an account of the manner in which our eyes behold objects, in which our ears receive sounds, in which our mind conceives ideas? All we know upon these subjects is, that they are so. If then we are incapable of accounting for the most ordinary phenomena, which nature daily exhibits to us, by what chain of reasoning do we refuse to her the power of producing other effects equally incomprehensible to us? Shall we be more instructed, when every time we behold an effect of which we are not in a capacity to develop the cause, we may idly say, this effect is produced by the power, by the will of God? Undoubtedly it is the great *Cause of causes* must have produced every thing; but is it not lessening the true dignity of the Divinity, to introduce him as interfering in every operation of nature; nay, in every action of so insignificant a creature as man? As a mere agent executing his own eternal, immutable laws; when experience, when reflection, when the evidence of all we contemplate, warrants the idea, that this ineffable being has rendered nature competent to every effect, by giving her those irrevocable laws, that eternal, unchangeable system, according to which all the beings she contains must eternally act? Is it not more worthy the exalted mind of the GREAT PARENT OF PARENTS, *ens entium*, more consistent with truth, to suppose that his wisdom in giving these immutable, these eternal laws to the macrocosm, foresaw every thing that could possibly be requisite for the happiness of the beings contained in it; that therefore he left it to the invariable operation of a system, which never can produce any effect that is not the best possible that circumstances however viewed will admit: that consequently the natural activity of the human mind, which is itself the result of this eternal action, was purposely given to man, that he might endeavour to fathom, that he might strive to unravel, that he might seek out the concatenation of these laws, in order to furnish remedies against the evils produced by ignorance. How many discoveries in the great science of natural philosophy has mankind progressively made, which the ignorant prejudices of our forefathers on their first announcement considered as impious, as displeasing to the Divinity, as heretical profanations, which could only be expiated by the sacrifice of the enquiring individuals; to whose labour their posterity owes such an infinity of gratitude? Even in modern days we have seen a SOCRATES destroyed, a GALLILEO condemned, whilst multitudes of other benefactors to mankind have been held in contempt by their uninformed cotemporaries, for those very researches into nature which the present generation hold in the highest veneration. *Whenever ignorant priests are permitted to guide the opinions of nations, science can make but a very slender progress*: natural discoveries will be always held inimical to the interest of bigotted superstitious men. It may, to the minds of infatuated mortals, to the shallow comprehension of prejudiced beings, appear very pious to reply on every occasion our gods do this, our gods do that; but to the contemplative philosopher, to the man of reason, to the real adorers of the great *Cause of causes*, it will never be convincing, that a sound, a mere word, can attach the reason of things; can have more than a fixed sense; can suffice to explain problems. The word GOD is for the most part used to denote the impenetrable cause of those effects which astonish mankind; which man is not competent to explain. But is

not this wilful idleness? Is it not inconsistent with our nature? Is it not being truly impious, to sit down with those fine faculties we have received, and give the answer of a child to every thing we do not understand; or rather which our own sloth, or our own want of industry has prevented us from knowing? Ought we not rather to redouble our efforts to penetrate the cause of those phenomena which strike our mind? Is not this, in fact, the duty we owe to the great, the universal Parent? When we have given this answer, what have we said? nothing but what every one knows. Could the great *Cause of causes* make the whole, without also making its part? But does it of necessity follow that he executes every trifling operation, when he has so noble an agent as his own nature, whose laws he has rendered unchangeable, whose scale of operations can never deviate from the eternal routine he has marked out for her and all the beings she embraces? Whose secrets, if sought out, contain the true balsam of life—the sovereign remedy for all the diseases of man.

When we shall be ingenuous with ourselves, we shall be obliged to agree that it was uniformly the ignorance in which our ancestors were involved, their want of knowledge of natural causes, their unenlightened ideas on the powers of nature, which gave birth to the gods they worshipped; that it is, again, the impossibility which the greater part of mankind find to withdraw, themselves out of this ignorance, the difficulty they consequently find to form to themselves simple ideas of the formation of things, the labour that is required to discover the true sources of those events, which they either admire or fear, that makes them believe these ideas are necessary to enable them to render an account of those phenomena, to which their own sluggishness renders them incompetent to recur. Here, without doubt, is the reason they treat all those as irrational who do not see the necessity of admitting an unknown agent, or some secret energy, which for want of being acquainted with Nature, they have placed out of herself.

The phenomena of nature necessarily breed various sentiments in man: some he thinks favorable to him, some prejudicial, while the whole is only what it can be. Some excite his love, his admiration, his gratitude; others fill him with trouble, cause aversion, drive him to despair. According to the various sensations he experiences, he either loves or fears the causes to which he attributes the effects, which produce in him these different passions: these sentiments are commensurate with the effects he experiences; his admiration is enhanced, his fears are augmented, in the same ratio as the phenomena which strikes his senses are more or less extensive, more or less irresistible or interesting to him. Man necessarily makes himself the centre of nature; indeed he can only judge of things, as he is himself affected by them; he can only love that which he thinks favorable to his being; he hates, he fears every thing which causes him to suffer: in short, as we have seen in the former volume, he calls confusion every thing that deranges the economy of his machine; he believes all is in order, as soon as he experiences nothing but what is suitable to his peculiar mode of existence. By a necessary consequence of these ideas, man firmly believes that the entire of nature was made for him alone; that it was only himself which she had in view in all her works; or rather that the powerful cause to which this nature was subordinate, had only for object man and his convenience, in all the stupendous effects which are produced in the universe.

If there existed on this earth other thinking beings besides man, they would fall exactly into similar prejudices with himself; it is a sentiment founded upon that predilection which each individual necessarily has for himself; a predilection that will subsist until reason, aided by experience, in pointing out the truth, shall have rectified his errors.

Thus, whenever man is contented, whenever every thing is in order with respect to himself, he either admires or loves the causes to which he believes he is indebted for his welfare; when he becomes discontented with his mode of existence, he either fears or hates the cause which he supposes has produced these afflicting effects. But his welfare confounds itself with his

existence; it ceases to make itself felt when it has become habitual, when it has been of long continuance; he then thinks it is inherrent to his essence; he concludes from it that he is formed to be always happy; he finds it natural that every thing should concur to the maintenance of his being. It is by no means the same when he experiences a mode of existence that is displeasing to himself: the man who suffers is quite astonished at the change which has taken place in his machine; he judges it to be contrary to the entire of nature, because it is incommodious to his own particular nature; he, imagines those events by which he is wounded, to be contrary to the order of things; he believes that nature is deranged every time she does not procure for him that mode of feeling which is suitable to his ideas: he concludes from these suppositions that nature, or rather that the agent who moves her; is irritated against him.

It is thus that man, almost insensible to good, feels evil in a very lively manner; the first he believes natural, the other he thinks opposed to nature. He is either ignorant, or forgets, that he constitutes part of a whole, formed by the assemblage of substances, of which some are analogous, others heterogeneous; that the various beings of which nature is composed, are endowed with a variety of properties, by virtue of which they act diversely on the bodies who find themselves within the sphere of their action; that some have an aptitude to attraction, whilst it is of the essence of others to repel; that even those bodies that attract at one distance, repel at another; that the peculiar attractions and repulsions of the particles of bodies perpetually oppose, invariably counteract the general ones of the masses of matter: he does not perceive that these beings, as destitute of goodness, as devoid of malice, act only according to their respective essences; follow the laws their properties impose upon them; without being in capacity to act otherwise than they do. It is, therefore, for want of being acquainted with these things, that he looks upon the great Author of nature, the great *Cause of causes*, as the immediate cause of those evils to which he is submitted; that he judges erroneously when he imagines that the Divinity is exasperated against him.

The fact is, man believes that his welfare is a debt due to him from nature; that when he suffers evil she does him an injustice; fully persuaded that this nature was made solely for himself, he cannot conceive she would make him, who is her lord paramount, suffer, if she was not moved thereto by a power who is inimical to his happiness; who has reasons with which he is unacquainted for afflicting, who has motives which he wishes to discover, for punishing him. From hence it will be obvious, that evil, much more than good, is the true motive of those researches which man has made concerning the Divinity—of those ideas which he has formed to himself—of the conduct he has held towards him. The admiration of the works of nature, or the acknowledgement of its goodness, seem never alone to have determined the human species to recur painfully by thought to the source of these things; familiarized at once with all those effects which are favourable to his existence, he does not by any means give himself the same trouble to seek the causes, that he does to discover those which disquiet him, or by which he is afflicted. Thus, in reflecting upon the Divinity, it was generally upon the cause of his evils that man meditated; his meditations were fruitless, because the evil he experiences, as well as the good he partakes, are equally necessary effects of natural causes, to which his mind ought rather to have bent its force, than to have invented fictitious causes of which he never could form to himself any but false ideas; seeing that he always borrowed them, from his own peculiar manner of existing, acting, and feeling. Obstinate refusing to see any thing, but himself, he never became acquainted with that universal nature of which he constitutes such a very feeble part.

The slightest reflection, however, would have been sufficient to undeceive him on these erroneous ideas. Everything tends to prove that good and evil are modes of existence that depend upon causes by which a man is moved; that a sensible being is obliged to experience

them. In a nature composed of a multitude of beings infinitely varied, the shock occasioned by the collision of discordant matter must necessarily disturb the order, derange the mode of existence of those beings who have no analogy with them: these act in every thing they do after certain laws, which are in themselves immutable; the good or evil, therefore, which man experiences, are necessary consequences of the qualities inherent to the beings, within whose sphere of action he is found. Our birth, which we call a benefit, is an effect as necessary as our death, which we contemplate as an injustice of fate: it is of the nature of all analogous beings to unite themselves to form a whole: it is of the nature of all compound beings to be destroyed, or to dissolve themselves; some maintain their union for a longer period than others; some disperse very quickly, as the ephemeron; some endure for ages, as the planets; every being in dissolving itself gives birth to new beings; these are destroyed in their turn; to execute the eternal, the immutable laws of a nature that only exists by the continual changes that all its parts undergo. Thus nature cannot be accused of malice, since every thing that takes place in it is necessary—is produced by an invariable system, to which every other being, as well as herself, is eternally subjected. The same igneous matter that in man is the principle of life, frequently becomes the principle of his destruction, either by the conflagration of a city, the explosion of a volcano, or his mad passion for war. The aqueous fluid that circulates through his machine, so essentially necessary to his actual existence, frequently becomes too abundant, and terminates him by suffocation; is the cause of those inundations which sometimes swallow up both the earth and its inhabitants. The air, without which he is not able to respire, is the cause of those hurricanes, of those tempests, which frequently render useless the labour of mortals. These elements are obliged to burst their bonds, when they are combined in a certain manner; their necessary but fatal consequences are those ravages, those contagions, those famines, those diseases, those various scourges, against which man, with streaming eyes and violent emotions, vainly implores the aid of those powers who are deaf to his cries: his prayers are never granted; but the same necessity which afflicted him, the same immutable laws which overwhelmed him with trouble, replaces things in the order he finds suitable to his species: a relative order of things which was, is, and always will be the only standard of his judgment.

Man, however, made no such simple reflections: he either did not or would not perceive that every thing in nature acted by invariable laws; he continued steadfast in contemplating the good of which he was partaker, as a favor; in considering the evil he experienced, as a sign of anger in this nature, which he supposed to be animated by the same passions as himself or at least that it was governed by secret agents, who acted after his own manner, who obliged it to execute their will, that was sometimes favourable, sometimes inimical to the human species. It was to these supposed agents, with whom in the sunshine of his prosperity he was but little occupied, that in the bosom of his calamity he addressed his prayers; he thanked them, however, for their favours, fearing lest their ingratitude might farther provoke their fury: thus when assailed by disaster, when afflicted with disease, he invoked them with fervor: he required them to change in his favor the mode of acting which was the very essence of beings; he was willing that to make the slightest evil he experienced cease, that the eternal chain of things might be broken; and the unerring, undeviating course of nature might be arrested.

It was upon such ridiculous pretensions, that were founded those supplications, those fervent prayers, which mortals, almost always discontented with their fate, never in accord in their respective desires, addressed to their gods. They were unceasingly upon their knees before the altars, were ever prostrate before the power of the beings, whom they judged had the right of commanding nature; who they supposed to have sufficient energy to divert her course; who they considered to possess the means to make her subservient to their particular views; thus each hoped by presents, by humiliation, to induce them to oblige this nature, to satisfy

the discordant desires of their race. The sick man, expiring in his bed, asks that the humours accumulated in his body should in an instant lose those properties which renders them injurious to his existence; that by an act of their puissance, his gods should renew or recreate the springs of a machine worn out by infirmities. The cultivator of a low swampy country, makes complaint of the abundance of rain with which his fields are inundated; whilst the inhabitant of the hill, raises his thanks for the favors he receives, solicits a continuance of that which causes the despair of his neighbour. In this, each is willing to have a god for himself, and asks according to his momentary caprices, to his fluctuating wants, that the invariable essence of things, should be continually changed in his favour.

From this it must be obvious, that man every moment asks a *miracle* to be wrought in his support. It is not, therefore, at all surprising that he displayed such ready credulity, that he adopted with such facility the relation of the marvellous deeds which were universally announced to him as the acts of the power, or the effects of the benevolence, of the various gods which presided over the nations of the earth: these wonderful tales, which were offered to his acceptance, as the most indubitable proofs of the empire of these gods over nature, which man always found deaf to his entreaties, were readily accredited by him; in the expectation, that if he could gain them over to his interest, this nature, which he found so sullen, so little disposed to lend herself to his views, would then be controuled in his own favor.

By a necessary consequence of these ideas, nature was despoiled of all power; she was contemplated only as a passive instrument, who acted at the will, under the influence of the numerous, all-powerful agents to whom the various superstitions had rendered her subordinate. It was thus for want of contemplating nature under her true point of view, that man has mistaken her entirely, that he believed her incapable of producing any thing by herself; that he ascribed the honor of all those productions, whether advantageous or disadvantageous to the human species, to fictitious powers, whom he always clothed with his own peculiar dispositions, only he aggrandized their force. In short, it was upon the ruins of nature, that man erected the imaginary colossus of superstition, that he reared the *altars of a Jupiter; the temples of an Apollo*.

If the ignorance of nature gave birth to such a variety of gods, the knowledge of this nature is calculated to destroy them. As soon as man becomes enlightened, his powers augment, his resources increase in a ratio with his knowledge; the sciences, the protecting arts, industrious application, furnish him assistance; experience encourages his progress, truth procures for him the means of resisting the efforts of many causes, which cease to alarm him as soon as he obtains a correct knowledge of them. In a word, his terrors dissipate in proportion as his mind becomes enlightened, because his trepidation is ever commensurate with his ignorance, and furnishes this great lesson, that *man, instructed by truth, ceases to be superstitious*.

Paul Henri d'Holbach. *The System of Nature*. Volume. 2, Chapter. 1. Trans. Samuel Wilkinson. London: B.D. Cousins, 1839.

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