

Solonian Reprints

No. 1

Introductory Remarks

by William E. Channing (1841)

The following tracts, having passed through various editions at home and abroad, are now collected to meet the wishes of those who may incline to possess them in a durable form. In common with all writings which have obtained a good degree of notice, they have been criticised freely; but as they have been published not to dictate opinions, but to excite thought and inquiry, they have not failed of their end, even when they have provoked doubt or reply. They have, I think, the merit of being earnest expressions of the writer's mind, and of giving the results of quiet long-continued thought.

Some topics will be found to recur often, perhaps the reader may think too often; but it is in this way that a writer manifests his individuality, and he can in no other do justice to his own mind. Men are distinguished from one another, not merely by difference of thoughts, but often more by the different degrees of relief or prominence which they give to the same thoughts. In nature, what an immense dissimilarity do we observe in organized bodies, which consist of the same parts or elements, but in which these are found in great diversity of proportions! So, to learn what a man is, it is not enough to dissect his mind, and see separately the thoughts and feelings which successively possess him. The question is, what thoughts and feelings predominate, stand out most distinctly, and

give a hue and impulse to the common actions of his mind? What are his great ideas? These form the man, and by truth and dignity he is very much to be judged.

The following writings will be found to be distinguished by nothing more than by the high estimate which they express of human nature. A respect for the human soul breathes through them. The time may come for unfolding my views more fully on this and many connected topics. As yet, I have given but fragments, and, on this account, I have been sometimes misapprehended. The truth is, that a man, who looks through the present disguises and humbling circumstances of human nature, and speaks with earnestness of what it was made for and what it may become, is commonly set down by men of the world as a romancer, and, what is far worse, by the religious as a minister to human pride, perhaps as exalting man against God. A few remarks on this point seem, therefore, a proper introduction to these volumes.

It is not, however, my purpose in this place to enter far into the consideration of the greatness of human nature, and of its signs and expressions in the inward and outward experience of men. It will be sufficient here to observe, that the greatness of the soul is especially seen in the intellectual energy which discerns absolute, universal truth, in the idea of

God, in freedom of will and moral power, in disinterestedness and self-sacrifice, in the boundlessness of love, in aspirations after perfection, in desires and affections, which time and space cannot confine, and the world cannot fill. The soul, viewed in these lights, should fill us with awe. It is an immortal germ, which may be said to contain now within itself what endless ages are to unfold. It is truly an image of the infinity of God, and no words can do justice to its grandeur. There is, however, another and very different aspect of our nature. When we look merely at what it now is, at its present development, at what falls under present consciousness, we see in it much of weakness and limitation, and still more, we see it narrowed and degraded by error and sin. This is the aspect under which it appears to most men, and so strong is the common feeling of human infirmity, that a writer, holding higher views, must state them with caution, if he would be listened to without prejudice. My language, I trust, will be sufficiently measured, as my object at present is not to set forth the greatness of human nature, but to remove difficulties in relation to it, in the minds of religious people.

From the direction which theology has taken, it has been thought that to ascribe any thing to man was to detract so much from God. The disposition has been, to establish striking contrasts between man and God, and not to see and rejoice in the likeness between them. It has been thought that to darken the creation was the way to bring out more clearly the splendor of the Creator. The human being has been subjected to a stern criticism. It has been forgotten that he is as yet an infant, new to existence, unconscious of his powers; and he has been expected to see clearly, walk firmly, and act perfectly. Especially in estimating his transgressions, the chief regard has been had, not to his finite nature and present stage of development, but to the infinity of the Being against whom he had sinned, so that God's greatness, instead of being made a ground of hope, has been used to plunge man into

despair.

I have here touched on a great spring of error in religion, and of error among the most devout. I refer to the tendency of fervent minds to fix their thoughts exclusively or unduly on God's infinity. It is said, in devotional writings, that exalted and absorbing views of God enter into the very essence of piety; that our grand labor should be, to turn the mind from the creature to the Creator, that the creature cannot sink too low in our estimation, or God fill too high a sphere. God, we are told, must not be limited; nor are his rights to be restrained by any rights in his creatures. These are made to minister to their Maker's glory, not to glorify themselves. They wholly depend on him, and have no power which they can call their own. His sovereignty, awful and omnipotent, is not to be kept in check, or turned from its purposes, by any claims of his subjects. Man's place is the dust. The entire prostration of his faculties is the true homage he is to offer God. He is not to exalt his reason or his sense of right against the decrees of the Almighty. He has but one lesson to learn, that he is nothing, that God is All in All. Such is the common language of theology.

These views are exceedingly natural. That the steady, earnest contemplation of the Infinite One should so dazzle the mind as to obscure or annihilate all things else, ought not to surprise us. By looking at the sun, we lose the power of seeing other objects. It was, I conceive, one design of God in hiding himself so far from us, in throwing around himself the veil of his works, to prevent this very evil. He intended that our faculties should be left at liberty to act on other things besides himself, that the will should not be crushed by his overpowering greatness, that we should be free agents, that we should recognize rights in ourselves and in others as well as in the Creator, and thus be introduced into a wider and ever-enlarging sphere of action and duty. Still the idea of the Infinite is of vast power,

and the mind, in surrendering itself to it, is in danger of becoming unjust to itself and other beings, of losing that sentiment of self-respect which should be inseparable from a moral nature, of degrading the intellect by the forced belief of contradictions which God is supposed to sanction, and of losing that distinct consciousness of moral freedom, of power over itself, without which the interest of life and the sense of duty are gone.

Let it not be imagined from these remarks, that I would turn the mind from God's Infinity. This the grand truth; but it must not stand alone in the mind. The finite is something real as well as the infinite. We must reconcile the two in our theology. It is as dangerous to exclude the former as the latter. God surpasses all human thought; yet human thought, mysterious, unbounded, "wandering through eternity," is not to be contemned. God's sovereignty is limitless; still man has rights. God's power is irresistible; still man is free. On God we entirely depend; yet we can and do act from ourselves, and determine our own characters. These antagonist ideas, if so they may be called, are equally true, and neither can be spared. It will not do for an impassioned or an abject piety to wink one class of them out of sight. In a healthy mind they live together; and the worst error in religion has arisen from throwing a part of them into obscurity.

In most religious systems, the tendency has been to seize exclusively on the idea of the Infinite, and to sacrifice to this the finite, the created, the human. This I have said is very natural. To the eye of sense, man is such a mote in the creation, his imperfections and sins are so prominent in his history, the changes of his life are so sudden, so awful, he vanishes into such darkness, the mystery of the tomb is so fearful, all his outward possessions are so fleeting, the earth which he treads on so insecure, and all surrounding nature subject to such fearful revolutions, that the reflective and sensitive mind is prone to see nothingness

inscribed on the human being and on all things that are made, and to rise to God as the only reality. Another more influential feeling contributes to the same end. The mind of man in its present infancy and blindness, is apt to grow servile through fear, and seeks to propitiate the Divine Being by flattery and self-deprecation. Thus deep are the springs of religious error. To admit all the elements of truth into our system, at once to adore the infinity of God and to give due importance to our own free moral nature, is no very easy work. But it must be done. Man's free activity is as important to religion as God's infinity. In the kingdom of Heaven, the moral power of the subject is as essential as the omnipotence of the sovereign. The rights of both have the same sacredness. To rob man of his dignity is as truly to subvert religion as to strip God of his perfection. We must believe in man's agency as truly as in the Divine in his freedom as truly as in his dependence, in his individual being as truly as in the great doctrine of his living in God. Just as far as the desire of exalting the Divinity obscures these conceptions, our religion is sublimated into mysticism or degraded into servility.

In the Oriental world, the human mind has tended strongly to fix on the idea of the Infinite, the Vast, the Incomprehensible. In its speculations it has started from God. Swallowed up in his greatness, it has annihilated the creature. Perfection has been thought to lie in self-oblivion, in losing one's self in the Divinity, in establishing exclusive communion with God. The mystic worshipper fled from society to wildernesses, where not even nature's beauty might divert the soul from the Unseen. Living on roots, sleeping on the rocky floor of his cave, he hoped to absorb himself in the One and the Infinite. The more the consciousness of the individual was lost, and the more the will and the intellect became passive or yielded to the universal soul, the more perfect seemed the piety.

From such views naturally sprung

Pantheism. No being was at last recognized but God. He was pronounced the only reality. The universe seemed a succession of shows, shadows, evanescent manifestations of the One Ineffable Essence. The human spirit was but an emanation, soon to be reabsorbed in its source. God, it was said, bloomed in the flower, breathed in the wind, flowed in the stream, and thought in the human soul. All our powers were but movements of one infinite force. Under the deceptive spectacle of multiplied individuals intent on various ends, there was but one agent. Life, with its endless changes, was but the heaving of one and the same eternal ocean.

This mode of thought naturally gave birth or strength to that submission to despotic power which has characterized the Eastern world. The sovereign, in whom the whole power of the state was centred, became an emblem of the One Infinite Power, and was worshipped as its representative. An unresisting quietism naturally grew out of the contemplation of God as the all-absorbing and irresistible energy. Man, as bubble, arising out of the ocean of the universal soul, and fated soon to vanish in it again, had plainly no destiny to accomplish which could fill him with hope or rouse him to effort. In the East the individual was counted nothing. In Greece and Rome he was counted much, and he did much. In the Greek and the Roman the consciousness of power was indeed too little chastened by religious reverence. Their gods were men. Their philosophy, though in a measure borrowed from or tintured with the Eastern, still spoke of man as his own master as having an independent happiness in the energy of his own will. As far as they thus severed themselves from God, they did themselves great harm; but in their recognition, however imperfect, of the grandeur of the soul, lay the secret of their vast influence on human affairs.

In all ages of the church, the tendency of the religious mind to the exclusive thought

of God, to the denial or forgetfulness of all other existence and power, has come forth in various forms. The Catholic church, notwithstanding its boasted unity, has teemed with mystics, who have sought to lose themselves in God. It would seem as if the human mind, cut off by this church from free, healthy inquiry, had sought liberty in this vague contemplation of the Infinite. In the class just referred to were found many noble spirits, especially Fénélon, whose quietism, with all its amiableness, we must look on as a disease.

In Protestantism, the same tendency to exalt God and annihilate the creature has manifested itself, though in less pronounced forms. We see it in Quakerism, and Calvinism the former striving to reduce the soul to silence, to suspend its action, that in its stillness God alone may be heard; and the latter making God the only power in the universe, and annihilating the free will, that one will alone may be done in heaven and on earth.

Calvinism will complain of being spoken of as an approach to Pantheism. It will say that it recognizes distinct minds from the Divine. But what avails this, if it robs these minds of self-determining force, of original activity; if it makes them passive recipients of the Universal Force; if it sees in human action only the necessary issues of foreign impulse. The doctrine that God is the only Substance, which is Pantheism, differs little from the doctrine that God is the only active power of the universe. For what is substance without power? It is a striking fact that the philosophy which teaches that matter is an inert substance, and that God is the force which pervades it, has led men to question whether any such thing as matter exists; whether the posers of attraction and repulsion, which are regarded as the indwelling Deity, be not its whole essence. Take away force, and substance is a shadow, and might as well vanish from the universe. Without free power in man, he is nothing. The

divine agent within him is every thing. Man acts only in show. He is a phenomenal existence, under which the One Infinite Power is manifested; and is this much better than Pantheism?

One of the greatest of all errors is the attempt to exalt God, by making him the sole cause, the sole agent in the universe, by denying to the creature freedom of will and moral power, by making man a mere recipient and transmitter of a foreign impulse. This, if followed out consistently, destroys all moral connection between God and his creatures. In aiming to strengthen the physical, it ruptures the moral bond which holds them together. To extinguish the free will is to strike the conscience with death, for both have but one and the same life. It destroys responsibility. It puts out the light of the universe; it makes the universe a machine. It freezes the fountain of our moral feelings, of all generous affection and lofty aspirations. Pantheism, if it leave a man a free agent, is a comparatively harmless speculation; as we see in the case of Milton. The denial of moral freedom, could it really be believed, would prove the most fatal of errors. If Edwards's work on the Will could really answer its end; if it could thoroughly persuade men that they were bound by an irresistible necessity, that their actions were fixed links in the chain of destiny, that there was but one agent, God, in the universe; it would be one of the most pernicious books ever issued from our press. Happily it is a demonstration which no man believes, which the whole consciousness contradicts.

It is a fact worthy of serious thought and full of solemn instruction, that many of the worst errors have grown out of the religious tendencies of the mind. So necessary is it to keep watch over our whole nature, to subject the highest sentiments to the calm, conscientious reason. Men starting from the idea of God, have been so dazzled by it as to forget or misinterpret the universe. They have come to see in him the only force in creation,

and in other beings only signs, shadows, echoes of this. Absolute dependence is the only relation to God which they have left to human beings. Our infinitely nobler relations, those which spring from the power of free obedience to a moral law, their theory dissolves. The moral nature, of which freedom is the foundation and essence which confers rights and imposes duties, which is the ground of praise and blame, which lies at the foundation of self-respect, of friendship between man and man, of spiritual connection between man and his Maker, which is the spring of holy enthusiasm and heavenly aspiration, which gives to life its interest, to creation its glory;—this is annihilated by the mistaken piety, which, to exalt God to make him All In All, immolates to him the powers of the universe.

This tendency, as we have seen, gave birth in former ages to asceticism, drove some of the noblest men into cloisters or caverns, infected them with the fatal notion that there was an hostility between their relations to God and their relations to his creatures, and of course persuaded them to make a sacrifice of the latter. To this we owe systems of theology degrading human nature, denying its power and grandeur, breaking it into subjection to the priest through whom alone God is supposed to approach the abject multitude, and placing human virtue in exaggerated humiliations. The idea of God, the grandest of all, and which ought above all to elevate the soul, has too often depressed it and led good minds very far astray,—a consideration singularly fitted to teach us tolerant views of error, and to enjoin caution and sobriety in religious speculation.

I hope that I shall not be thought wanting in a just tolerance in the strictures now offered on those systems of theology and philosophy which make God the only power in the universe and rob man of his dignity. Among the authors of these may be found some of the greatest and best men. To this class belonged Hartley, whose work on Man

carries indeed the taint of materialism and necessity, but still deserves to be reckoned among the richest contributions ever made to the science of mind, whilst it breathes the profoundest piety. Our own Edwards was as eminent for religious as for intellectual power. The consistency of great error with great virtue is one of the lessons of universal history. But error is not made harmless by such associations. The false theories of which I have spoken, though not thoroughly believed, have wrought much evil. They have done much, I think, to perpetuate those abject views of human nature which keep it where it is, which check men's aspirations, and reconcile them to their present poor modes of thought and action as the fixed unalterable laws of their being.

Many religious people fall into the error, which I have wished to expose, through the belief that they thus glorify the Creator. "The glory of God," they say, "is our chief end;" and this is accomplished as they suppose by taking all power from man and transferring all to his Maker. We have here an example of the injury done by imperfect apprehension and a vague, misty use of Scripture language. The "glory of God" is undoubtedly to be our end; but what does this consist in? It means the shining forth of his perfection in his creation, especially in his spiritual offspring; and it is best promoted by awakening in these their highest faculties by bringing out in ourselves and others the image of God in which all are made. An enlightened, disinterested human being, morally strong, and exerting a wide influence by the power of virtue, is the clearest reflection of the divine splendor on earth; and we glorify God in proportion as we form ourselves and others after this model. The glory of the Maker lies in his work. We do not honor him by breaking down the human soul, by connecting it with him only by a tie of slavish dependence. By making him the author of a mechanical universe, we ascribe to him a low kind of agency. It is his glory that he creates beings like himself, free beings, not

slaves; that he forms them to obedience, not by physical agency, but by moral influences; that he confers on them the reality, not the show of power; and opens to their faith and devout strivings a futurity of progress and glory without end. It is not by darkening and dishonoring the creature, that we honor the Creator. Those men glorify God most, who look with keen eye and loving heart on his works, who catch in all some glimpses of beauty and power, who have a spiritual sense for good in its dimmest manifestations, and who can so interpret the world, that it becomes a bright witness to the Divinity.

To such remarks as these it is commonly objected, that we thus obscure if we do not deny, the doctrine of entire dependence on God,—a doctrine which is believed to be eminently the foundation of religion. But not so. On the contrary, the greater the creature, the more extensive is his dependence; the more he has to give thanks for, the more he owes to the free gift of his Creator. No matter what grandeur or freedom we ascribe to our powers, if we maintain, as we ought, that they are bestowed, inspired, sustained by God; that he is their life; that to him we owe all the occasions and spheres of their action and all the helps and incitements by which they are perfected. On account of their grandeur and freedom they are not less his gifts; and in as far as they are divine, their natural tendency is not towards idolatrous self-reliance, but towards the grateful, joyful recognition of their admirable source. The doctrine of dependence is in no degree impaired by the highest views of the human soul.

Let me further observe, that the doctrine of entire dependence is not, as is often taught, the fundamental doctrine of religion, so that to secure this all other ideas must be renounced. And this needs to be taught, because nothing has been more common with theologians than to magnify our dependence at the expense of every thing elevated in our nature. Man has been stripped of freedom, and

spoken of as utterly impotent lest he should trench on God's sole, supreme power. To eradicate this error, it should be understood that our dependence is not our chief relation to God, and that it is not the ground of religion, if by religion we understand the sentiment of faith, reverence, and love towards the Divinity. That piety may exist, it is not enough to know that God alone and constantly sustains all beings. This is not a foundation for moral feelings towards him. The great question on which religion rests is, *What kind* of a universe does he create and sustain? Were a being of vast power to give birth to a system of unmeasured, unmitigated evil, dependence on him would be by any thing but a ground of reverence. We should hate it, and long to flee from it into non-existence. The great question I repeat it, is, What is the nature, the end, the purpose of the creation which God upholds? On this, and on the relations growing out of this, religion wholly rests. True, we depend on the Creator; and so does the animal; so does the clod; and were this the only relation, we should be no more bound to worship than they. We sustain a grander relation, that of rational, moral, free beings to a Spiritual Father. We are not mere material substances, subjected to an irresistible physical law, or mere animals subjected to resistless instincts; but are souls, on which a moral law is written, in which a divine oracle is heard. Take away the moral relation of the created spirit to the universal spirit, and that of entire dependence would remain as it is now, but no ground and no capacity of religion would remain; and the splendor of the universe would fade away.

We must start in religion from our own souls. In these is the fountain of all divine truth. An outward revelation is only possible and intelligible on the ground of conceptions and principles previously furnished by the soul. Here is our primitive teacher and light. Let us not disparage it. There are, indeed, philosophical schools of the present day, which tell us that we are to start in all our speculations from the Absolute, the Infinite.

But we rise to these conceptions from the contemplation of our own nature; and even if it were not so, of what avail would be the notion of an Absolute, Infinite existence, an Uncaused Unity, if stripped of all those intellectual and moral attributes which we learn only from our own souls? What but a vague shadow, a sounding name, is the metaphysical Deity, the substance without modes, the being without properties, the naked unity, which performs such a part in some of our philosophical systems? The only God whom our thoughts can rest on, and our hearts can cling to, and our consciences can recognize, is the God whose image dwells in our own souls. The grand ideas of Power, Reason, Wisdom, Love, Rectitude, Holiness, Blessedness, that is, of all God's attributes, come from within, from the action of our own spiritual nature. Many indeed think that they learn God from marks of design and skill in the outward world; but our ideas of design and skill, of a determining cause, of an end or purpose, are derived from consciousness, from our own souls. Thus the soul is the spring of our knowledge of God.

These remarks might easily be extended, but these will suffice to show, that in insisting on the claims of our nature to reverence, I have not given myself to a subject of barren speculation. It has intimate connections with religion; and deep injury to religion has been the consequence of its neglect. I have also felt and continually insisted, that a new reverence for man was essential to the cause of social reform. As long as men regard one another as they now do, that is as little better than the brutes, they will continue to treat one another brutally. Each will strive, by craft or skill, to make others his tools. There can be no spirit of brotherhood, no true peace, any farther than men come to understand their affinity with and relation to God and the infinite purpose for which he gave them life. As yet these ideas are treated as a kind of spiritual romance; and the teacher who really expects men to see in themselves and one another the children of God, is smiled at as

a visionary. The reception of this plainest truth of Christianity would revolutionize society, and create relations among men not dreamed of at the present day. A union would spring up, compared with which our present friendships would seem estrangements. Men would know the import of the word Brother, as yet nothing but a word to multitudes. None of us can conceive the change of manners, the new courtesy and sweetness, the mutual kindness, deference, and sympathy, the life and energy of efforts for social melioration, which are to spring up, in proportion as man shall penetrate beneath the body to the spirit, and shall learn what the lowest human being is. Then insults, wrongs, and oppressions, now hardly thought of, will give a deeper shock than we receive from crimes, which the laws punish with death. Then man will be sacred in man's sight; and to injure him will be regarded as open hostility towards God. It has been under a deep feeling of the intimate connection of better and juster views of human nature with all social and religious progress, that I have insisted on it so much in the following tracts, and I hope that the reader will not think that I have given it disproportionate importance.

I proceed to another sentiment, which is expressed so habitually in these writings as to constitute one of their characteristics, and which is intimately connected with the preceding topic. It is reverence for liberty, for human rights,—a sentiment which has grown with my growth, which is striking deeper root in my age, which seems to me a chief element of true love for mankind, and which alone fits a man for intercourse with his fellow-creatures. I have lost no occasion for expressing my deep attachment to liberty in all its forms, civil, political, religious, to liberty of thought, speech, and the press, and of giving utterance to my abhorrence of all the forms of oppression. This love of freedom I have not borrowed from Greece or Rome. It is not the classical enthusiasm of youth, which, by some singular good fortune, has escaped the blighting influences of intercourse with the

world. Greece and Rome are names of little weight to a Christian. They are warnings rather than inspirers and guides. My reverence for human liberty and rights has grown up in a different school, under milder and holier discipline. Christianity has taught me to respect my race, and to reprobate its oppressors. It is because I have learned to regard man under the light of this religion, that I cannot bear to see him treated as a brute, insulted, wronged, enslaved, made to wear a yoke, to tremble before his brother, to serve him as a tool, to hold property and life at his will, to surrender intellect and conscience to the priest or to seal his lips or belie his thoughts through dread of the civil power. It is because I have learned the essential equality of men before the common Father, that I cannot endure to see one man establishing his arbitrary will over another by fraud, or force, or wealth, or rank, or superstitious claims. It is because the human being has moral powers, because he carries a law in his own breast, and was made to govern himself, that I cannot endure to see him taken out of his own hands and fashioned into a tool by another's avarice or pride. It is because I see in him a great nature, the divine image, and vast capacities, that I demand for him means of self-development, spheres for free action; that I call society not to fetter, but to aid in his growth. Without intending to disparage the outward, temporal advantages of liberty, I have habitually regarded it in a higher light,—as the birthright of the soul, as the element in which men are to put themselves forth, to become conscious of what they are, and to fulfil the end of their being.

Christianity has joined with all history in inspiring me with a peculiar dread and abhorrence of the passion for power, for dominion over men. There is nothing in the view of our divine teacher so hostile to his divine spirit, as the lust of domination. This we are accustomed to regard as eminently the sin of the arch-fiend. “By this sin fell the angels.” It is the most Satanic of all human

passions, and it has inflicted more terrible evils on the human family than all others. It has made the names of king and priest the most appalling in history. There is no crime which has not been perpetrated for the strange pleasure of treading men under foot, of fastening chains on the body or mind. The strongest ties of nature have been rent asunder, her holiest feelings smothered parents, children, brothers murdered, to secure dominion over man. The people have now been robbed of the necessaries of life, and now driven to the field of slaughter like flocks of sheep, to make one man the master of millions. Through this passion, government, ordained by God to defend the weak against the strong, to exalt right above might, has up to this time been the great wrongdoer. Its crimes throw those of private men into the shade. Its murders reduce to insignificance those of the bandits, pirates, highwaymen, assassins, against whom it undertake to protect society. How harmless at this moment are all the criminals of Europe, compared with the Russian power in Poland. This passion for power, which in a thousand forms, with a thousand weapons, is warring against human liberty, and which Christianity condemns as its worst foe, I have never ceased to reprobate with whatever strength of utterance God has given me. Power trampling on right, whether in the person of king or priest, or in the shape of democracies, majorities, and republican slaveholders, is the saddest sight to him who honors human nature and desires its enlargement and happiness.

So fearful is the principle of which I have spoken, that I have thought it right to recommend restrictions on power, and a simplicity in government, beyond what most approve. Power, I apprehend should not be suffered to run into great masses. No more of it should be confided to rulers than is absolutely necessary to repress crime and preserve public order. A purer age may warrant larger trusts; but the less of government now the better, if society be kept

in peace. There should exist, if possible, no office to madden ambition. There should be no public prize tempting enough to convulse a nation. One of the tremendous evils of the world is the monstrous accumulation of power in a few hands. Half a dozen men may, at this moment, light the fires of war through the world, may convulse all civilized nations, sweep earth and sea with armed hosts, spread desolation through the fields and bankruptcy through cities, and make themselves felt by some form of suffering through every household in Christendom. Has not one politician recently caused a large part of Europe to bristle with bayonets? And ought this tremendous power to be lodged in the hands of any human being? Is any man pure enough to be trusted with it? Ought such a prize as this to be held out to ambition? Can we wonder at the shameless profligacy, intrigue, and the base sacrifices of public interests, by which it is sought, and, when gained, held fast? Undoubtedly great social changes are required to heal this evil, to diminish this accumulation of power. National spirit, which is virtual hostility to all countries but our own, must yield to a growing humanity, to a new knowledge of the spirit of Christ. Another important step is, a better comprehension by communities that government is at best a rude machinery which can accomplish but very limited good, and which, when strained to accomplish what individuals should do for themselves, is sure to be perverted by selfishness to narrow purposes, or to defeat through ignorance its own ends. Man is too ignorant to govern much, to form vast plans for states and empires. Human policy has almost always been in conflict with the great laws of social well-being; and the less we rely on it the better. The less of power, given to man over man, the better. I speak, of course, of physical, political force. There is a power which cannot be accumulated to excess,—I mean moral power, that of truth and virtue, the royalty of wisdom and love, of magnanimity and true religion. This is the guardian of all right. It makes those whom it acts on free. It is mightiest when most gentle.

In the progress of society this is more and more to supersede the coarse workings of government. Force is to fall before it.

It must not be inferred from these remarks, that I am an enemy to all restraint. Restraint in some form or other is an essential law of our nature, a necessary discipline, running through life, and not be escaped by any art or violence. Where can we go, and not meet it? The powers of nature are, all of them, limits to human power. A never-ceasing force of gravity chains us to the earth. Mountains, rocks, precipices, and seas forbid our advances. If we come to society, restraints multiply on us. Our neighbor's rights limit our own. His property is forbidden ground. Usage restricts our free action, fixes our manners, and the language we must speak, and the modes of pursuing our ends. Business is a restraint, setting us wearisome tasks, and driving us through the same mechanical routine day after day. Duty is a restraint, imposing curbs on passion, enjoining one course and forbidding another, with stern voice, with uncompromising authority. Study is a restraint, compelling us, if we would learn any thing, to concentrate the forces of thought, and to bridle the caprices of fancy. All law, divine or human, is, as the name imports, restraint. No one feels more than I do the need of this element of human life. He who would fly from it must live in perpetual conflict with nature, society, and himself.

But all this does not prove that liberty, free action, is not an infinite good, and that we should seek and guard it with sleepless jealousy. For if we look at the various restraints of which I have spoken, we shall see that liberty is the end and purpose of all. Nature's powers around us hem us in, only to rouse a free power within us. It acts that we should react. Burdens press on us, that the soul's elastic force should come forth. Bounds are set, that we should clear them. The weight, which gravitation fastens to our limbs, incites us to borrow speed from winds and steam, and

we fly where we seemed doomed to creep. The sea, which first stopped us, becomes the path to a new hemisphere. The sharp necessities of life, cold, hunger, pain, which chain man to toil, wake up his faculties, and fit him for wider action. Duty restrains the passions, only that the nobler faculties and affections may have freer play, may ascend to God, and embrace all his works. Parents impose restraint, that the child may learn to go alone, may outgrow authority. Government is ordained, that the rights and freedom of each and all may be inviolate. In study thought is confined, that it may penetrate the depths of truth, may seize on the great laws of nature, and take a bolder range. Thus freedom, ever-expanding action, is the end of all just restraint. Restraint, without this end, is a slavish yoke. How often has it broken the young spirit, tamed the heart and the intellect, and made social life a standing pool. We were made for free action. This alone is life, and enters into all that is good and great. Virtue is free choice of the right; love, the free embrace of the heart; grace, the free motion of the limbs; genius, the free bold flight of thought; eloquence, its free and fervent utterance. Let me add, that social order is better preserved by liberty than by restraint. The latter, unless most wisely and justly employed, frets, exasperates, and provokes secret resistance; and still more, it is rendered needful very much by that unhappy constitution of society which denies to multitudes the opportunities of free activity. A community, which should open a great variety of spheres to its members, so that all might find free scope for their powers, would need little array of force for restraint. Liberty would prove the best peace-officer. The social order of New England, without a soldier and almost without a police, bears loud witness to this truth. These views may suffice to explain the frequent recurrence of this topic in the following tracts.

I will advert to one topic more, and do it briefly, that I may not extend these remarks beyond reasonable bounds. I have written

once and again on war,—a hackneyed subject, as it is called, yet, one would think, too terrible ever to become a commonplace. Is this insanity never to cease? At this moment, whilst I write, two of the freest and most enlightened nations, having one origin, bound together above all others by mutual dependence, by the interweaving of interests, are thought by some to be on the brink of war. False notions of national honor, as false and unholy as those of the duellist, do most towards fanning this fire. Great nations, like great boys, place their honor in resisting insult and in fighting well. One would think the time had gone by in which nations needed to rush to arms to prove that they were not cowards. If there is one truth, which history has taught, it is, that communities in all stages of society, from the most barbarous to the most civilized, have sufficient courage. No people can charge upon its conscience that it has not shed blood enough in proof of its valor. Almost any man, under the usual stimulants of the camp, can stand fire. The poor wretch, enlisted from a dram-shop and turned into the ranks, soon fights like a “hero.” Must France, and England, and America, after so many hard-fought fields, go to war to disprove the charge of wanting spirit? Is it not time that the point of honor should undergo some change, that some glimpses at least of the true glory of a nation should be caught by rulers and people? “It is the honor of a man to pass over a transgression,” and so it is of states. To be wronged is no disgrace. To bear wrong generously, till every means of conciliation is exhausted; to recoil with manly dread from the slaughter of our fellow-creatures; to put confidence in the justice which other nations will do to our motives; to have that consciousness of courage which will make us scorn the reproach of cowardice; to feel that there is something grander than the virtue of savages; to desire peace for the world as well as ourselves, and to shrink from kindling a flame which may involve the world; these are the principles and feelings which do honor to a people. Has not the time come when a nation professing these may cast itself on the candor

of mankind? Must fresh blood flow for ever, to keep clean the escutcheon of a nation's glory? For one, I look on war with a horror which no words can express. I have long wanted patience to read of battles. Were the world of my mind, no man would fight for glory; for the name of a commander, who has no other claim to respect, seldom passes my lips, and the want of sympathy drives him from my mind. The thought of man, God's immortal child, butchered by his brother; the thought of sea and land stained with human blood by human hands, of women and children buried under the ruins of besieged cities, of the resources of empires and the mighty powers of nature all turned by man's malignity into engines of torture and destruction; this thought gives to earth the semblance of hell. I shudder as among demons. I cannot now, as I once did, talk lightly, thoughtlessly of fighting with this or that nation. That nation is no longer a vague mass. It spreads out before me into individuals, in a thousand interesting forms and relations. It consists of husbands and wives, parents and children, who love one another as I love my own home. It consists of affectionate women and sweet children. It consists of Christians, united with me to the common Saviour, and in whose spirit I reverence the likeness of his divine virtue. It consists of a vast multitude of laborers at the plough and in the workshop, whose toils I sympathize with, whose burden I should rejoice to lighten, and for whose elevation I have pleaded. It consists of men of science, taste, genius, whose writings have beguiled my solitary hours, and given life to my intellect and best affections. Here is the nation which I am called to fight with, into whose families I must send mourning, whose fall or humiliation I must seek through blood. I cannot do it, without a clear commission from God. I love this nation. Its men and women are my brothers and sisters. I could not, without unutterable pain, thrust a sword into their hearts. If, indeed, my country were invaded by hostile armies, threatening without disguise its rights, liberties, and dearest interests, I should strive to repel them, just as I should repel a

criminal who should enter my house to slay what I hold most dear, and what is intrusted to my care. But I cannot confound with such a case the common instances of war. In general, war is the work of ambitious men, whose principles have gained no strength from the experience of public life, whose policy is colored if not swayed by personal views or party interests, who do not seek peace with a single heart, who, to secure doubtful rights, perplex the foreign relations of the state, spread jealousies at home and abroad, enlist themselves too far for retreat and are then forced to leave to the arbitration of the sword what an impartial umpire could easily have arranged. The question of peace and war is too often settled for a country by men in whom a Christian, a lover of his race, can put little or no trust; and, at the bidding of such men, is he to steep his hands in human blood? But this insanity is passing away. This savageness cannot endure, however hardened to it men are by long use. The hope of waking up some from their lethargy has induced me to recur to this topic so often in my writings.

I might name other topics, which occupy a large space in the following tracts, but enough has been said here. I will only add, that I submit these volumes to the public with a deep feeling of their imperfections. Indeed, on such subjects as God, and Christ, and duty, and immortality, and perfection, how faint must all human utterance be! In another life, we shall look back on our present words as we do on the lispings of our childhood. Still these lispings conduct the child to higher speech. Still, amidst our weakness, we may learn something, and make progress, and quicken one another by free communication. We indeed know and teach comparatively little; but the known is not the less true or precious, because there is an infinite unknown. Nor ought our ignorance to discourage us, as if we were left to hopeless scepticism. There are great truths, which every honest heart may be assured of. There *is* such a thing as a serene,

immovable conviction. Faith is a deep want of the soul. We have faculties for the spiritual as truly as for the outward world. God, the foundation of all existence, may become to the mind the most real of all beings. We can and do see in virtue an everlasting beauty. The distinctions of right and wrong, the obligations of goodness and justice, the divinity of conscience, the moral connection of the present and future life, the greatness of the character of Christ, the ultimate triumphs of truth and love, are to multitudes not probable deductions, but intuitions accompanied with the consciousness of certainty. They shine with the clear, constant brightness of the lights of heaven. The believer feels himself resting on an everlasting foundation. It is to this power of moral or spiritual perception that the following writings are chiefly addressed. I have had testimony that they have not been wholly ineffectual in leading some minds to a more living and unfaltering persuasion of great moral truths. Without this, I should be little desirous to send them out in this new form. I trust that they will meet some wants. Books which are to pass away, may yet render much service by their fitness to the intellectual struggles and moral aspirations of the times in which they are written. If in this or in any way I can serve the cause of truth, humanity, and religion, I shall regard my labors as having earned the best recompense which God bestows on his creatures.

W. E. C.
BOSTON, *April 18th*, 1841

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