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0521479185 - A Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality

Ralph Cudworth

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## A Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality

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judge of the reality of relative ideas, which though they were mere notions of the mind or modes of conceiving, yet it follows not that they have no reality. They are not disagreeable to the reality of things, and so not false. The beauty, the strength, and ability of natural and corporeal things depend upon these relations and proportions. Instances proposed to illustrate this matter. All the ideas of things artificial have something in them that never came from sense. This true of plants and animals. No essential difference betwixt natural compounded and artificial things. Sense has no idea of the cogitative being joined to rational animals, nor of the universe as it is one corporeal frame, much less of the ideas or modes of thinking beings. CHAPTER III That even simple corporeal things, passively perceived by sense, are known or understood only by the active power of the mind. That sensation is not knowledge of these things, much less any secondary result from sense. Besides *aesthemata* and *phantasmata*, there must be *noemata* or intelligible ideas coming from the mind itself. This confirmed and illustrated by several instances and similitudes. That there is an intelligible idea of a triangle inwardly exerted from the mind, distinct from the phantasm or sensible idea; both [of] which may be in the mind together. Some sensible ideas not impressed on the soul by things without. That sense is a kind of speech of outward nature conversing with the mind. Two kinds of perceptive powers in the soul. Knowledge does not begin but end in individuals. A double error of vulgar philosophers. Immediate objects of all geometrical science are the intelligible and universal ideas of a triangle, &c. exerted from the mind, and comprehended in it. CHAPTER IV That individual material things cannot be the immediate objects of intellection and knowledge, besides which there must be some other kind of beings or entities, as the immediate objects of them, such things as do not flow, but remain immutably the same. The immutable entities, what they are, from whence, and where they exist. That there is an eternal mind, from which all created understandings are constantly furnished with ideas. Conclusion, that wisdom, knowledge, and understanding, are eternal and self-subsistent things, superior to matter, and all sensible things. CHAPTER V That the intelligible notions of things, though existing only in the mind, are not figments of the mind, but have an immutable nature. The criterion of truth. The opinion that nothing can be demonstrated to be true absolutely, but only hypothetically, refuted. Whatever is clearly intelli-

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gible, is absolutely true. Though men are often deceived, and think they clearly comprehend what they do not; it follows not that they can never be certain that they clearly comprehend any thing. The conclusion with Origen, that science and knowledge is the only firm thing in the world. CHAPTER VI In what sense the essences of things are eternal and immutable. Every thing is what it is, to science or knowledge whether absolutely or relatively, unchangeable by any mind. So that if moral good and evil, just and unjust, in things so denominated, as the actions or souls of men, they must have some certain natures unalterable by any will or opinion. That the soul is not a mere *rasa tabula*. That it is in order of nature before the body and matter, does not result out of it, but commands, governs, and rules it. The whole corporeal world a heap of dust and atoms. There can be no such thing as morality unless there be a God. The commendation of the atomical philosophy successfully revived by Cartesius. Epicurus taxed for his sottishness.

# Book I

## Chapter I

1. As the vulgar generally look no higher for the original of moral good and evil, just and unjust, than the codes and pandects, the tables and laws of their country and religion, so there have not wanted pretended philosophers in all ages who have asserted nothing to be good and evil, just and unjust, naturally and immutably (*φύσει καὶ ἀκινήτως*); but that all these things were positive, arbitrary, and factitious only (*θετικὰ, νομιμὰ ψηφισματώδη*). Such Plato mentions in his tenth book *De legibus* [*Laws*], who maintained,

That nothing at all was naturally just but men changing their opinions concerning them perpetually, sometimes made one thing just, sometimes another; but whatsoever is decreed and constituted that for the time is valid, being made so by arts and laws, but not by any nature of its own.<sup>1</sup>

And again his *Theaetetus*:

As to things just and unjust, holy and unholy, not only the Protagoreans (of whom we shall treat afterward), but many other philosophers also confidently affirm, that none of these things have in nature any essence of their own, but whatsoever is decreed by the authority of the city, that

<sup>1</sup> *Tà [δὲ] δίκαια οὐδ' εἶναι τὸ παράπαν φύσει, ἀλλ' ἀμφισβητοῦντας διατελεῖν ἀλλήλοις καὶ μετατιθεμένους ἀεὶ τὰντα ἃ δ' ἂν μετὰθῶνται καὶ ὅταν, τότε κύρια ἕκαστα εἶναι γιγνόμενα τέχνη καὶ τοῖς νόμοις, ἀλλ' οὐ δὴ τινὶ φύσει* (Plato, *Laws* 890A). The Loeb translation gives, 'as to things just they do not exist at all by nature, but men are constantly in dispute about them and continually altering them, and whatever alteration they make at any time is at that time authoritative; though it owes its exercise to art and the laws, and not in any way to nature' Plato, *Laws*, trans. R.G. Bury (London and New York, 1926).

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is truly such whether it is so decreed, and for so long time, viz. just or unjust, holy or unholy.<sup>2</sup>

And Aristotle more than once takes notice of this opinion in his *Ethics*:

Things honest and just, which politics are conversant about have so great a variety and uncertainty in them, that they seem to be only by law, and not by nature.<sup>3</sup>

And afterwards, Book 5, ch. 7, after he had divided that which is politically just (τὸ δίκαιον πολιτικόν) into natural (φυσικόν), '[that] which has everywhere the same force' (τὸ πανταχοῦ τὴν αὐτὴν ἔχον δύναμιν), and legal (νομικόν), 'which before there be a law made, is indifferent, but when once the law is made, is determined to be just or unjust':<sup>4</sup> which legal just and unjust (as he afterwards expresses it) are 'like to wine and wheat measures, as pints and bushels',<sup>5</sup> which are not everywhere of an equal bigness, being commonly lesser with those that sell and greater with those that buy: then he adds, 'some there are that think that there is no other just or unjust, but what is made by law and men, because that which is natural is immutable, and hath everywhere the same force, as fire burns alike here and in Persia; but they see that *jura* and *justa*, rights and just things are everywhere different'.<sup>6</sup>

2. The philosophers particularly noted for this opinion in Plato are Protagoras in his *Theaetetus*, Polus and Callicles in his *Gorgias*, Thrasymachus, and Glaucon in his *Politics*.<sup>7</sup> But Diogenes Laertius tells us some others, as of Archelaus, Socrates' master, that held 'that just

<sup>2</sup> 'Ἐν τοῖς δίκαιοις καὶ ἀδίκτοις, καὶ ὁσίοις καὶ ἀνοσίοις, ἐθέλουσιν ἰσχυρίζεσθαι ὥς οὐκ ἐστὶ φύσει αὐτῶν οὐδὲν οὐσίαν ἑαυτοῦ ἔχον, ἀλλὰ τὸ κοινῇ δόξαν τοῦτο γίνεται ἀληθὲς τότε ὅταν δόξη καὶ ὅσον ἂν δοκῇ χρόνον· καὶ ὅσοι δὲ μὴ παντάπασιν τὸν Πρωταγόρου λόγον λέγουσιν ὡς πᾶς τὴν σοφίαν ἄγουσι (Plato, *Theaetetus* 172b).

<sup>3</sup> Τὰ δὲ καλὰ καὶ τὰ δίκαια περὶ ὧν ἡ Πολιτικὴ σκοπεῖται, τοσαύτην ἔχει διαφορὰν καὶ πλάνην ὥστε δοκεῖν νόμον μόνον εἶναι, φύσει δὲ μὴ (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1094b14–17).

<sup>4</sup> ὁ ἐξ ἀρχῆς οὐδὲν διαφέρει οὕτως ἢ ἄλλως· ὅταν δὲ θῶνται διαφέρει (ibid. 1134b18–21). *EIM* (1731) refers to ch. 10.

<sup>5</sup> ὁμοία[... ] τοῖς μέτροις[... ] οἰνηροῖς καὶ σιτηροῖς (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1135a1). The translation of the passages suggests the Greek original is a continuous passage, which it is not, in fact. *EIM* (1848) terminates the translation at 'bushels', but it should be as given here.

<sup>6</sup> Δοκεῖ δὲ ἐνίοις πάντα εἶναι τοιαῦτα, ὅτι τὸ μὲν φύσει ἀκίνητον καὶ πανταχοῦ τὴν αὐτὴν ἔχει δύναμιν, ὥσπερ τὸ πῦρ καὶ ἐνθάδε καὶ ἐν Πέρσῃ καίει. Τὰ δὲ δίκαια κινούμενα ὁρῶσιν (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1134b24–8. Loeb translation by H. Rackham (London, 1934): 'Some people think that all the rules of justice are merely conventional, because whereas a law of nature is immortal and has the same validity everywhere, as fire burns the same here and in Persia, rules of justice are seen to vary.')

<sup>7</sup> Protagoras, Polus, Callicles, Thrasymachus, Glaucon are, respectively, the interlocutors of Socrates in the dialogues named.



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and dishonest are not so by nature but by law';<sup>8</sup> and (as I conceive) Democritus,<sup>9</sup> for after he had set down his opinion concerning happiness, or the chief end, he adds this as part of the Democritical philosophy, *ποιητὰ νομιμὰ εἶναι*, which I understand thus, that things accounted just or unjust are all factitious or artificial things, not natural; nothing being real or natural but atoms and vacuum, as the following words are, *φύσει δὲ ἄτομα καὶ κενόν*.<sup>10</sup> The same is noted by Diogenes<sup>11</sup> also concerning Aristippus, Plato's contemporary, that he asserted 'that nothing was good or evil otherwise than by law or custom'.<sup>12</sup> And Plutarch in the *Life of Alexander*, tells us of Anaxarchus, that was Aristotle's equal, that when Alexander, repenting, sadly lamented the death of Clitus, whom he had rashly slain, he read this lecture in philosophy to him to comfort him, 'that whatsoever is done by the supreme power is *ipso facto* just'.<sup>13</sup> And Pyrrho, the Eliensis philosopher, and father of the Sceptics, that was Anaxarchus' scholar, seems to have been dogmatical in nothing else but this 'that there is nothing good or shameful, just or unjust, and so likewise as to all things, that there is nothing so in truth, but that men do all things according to law and custom'.<sup>14</sup>

3. After these succeeded Epicurus,<sup>15</sup> the reviver of the Democritical

<sup>8</sup> *Τὸ δίκαιον εἶναι καὶ τὸ αἰσχρὸν οὐ φύσει ἀλλὰ νόμῳ* (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* II.16. Loeb translation by R.D. Hicks (London and Cambridge, Mass., 1934): 'that what is just and what is base depends not upon nature but upon convention'. Archelaus (fl. fifth century BC), was a pupil of Anaxagoras and is said to have taught Socrates.

<sup>9</sup> Democritus of Abdera (b. 460–457 BC) was a pupil of Leucippus and of Anaxagoras, and a proponent of an atomic theory of matter.

<sup>10</sup> Diogenes Laertius IX.45. Cudworth's two Greek quotations render Diogenes, *ποιότητος δὲ νόμῳ εἶναι, φύσει δ' ἄτομα καὶ κενόν*. Loeb translation: 'The qualities of all things exist merely by convention; in nature there is nothing but atoms and void space.'

<sup>11</sup> Diogenes Laertius X.45.

<sup>12</sup> *μηδὲν [τε] εἶναι φύσει δίκαιον ἢ καλὸν ἢ αἰσχρὸν ἀλλὰ νόμῳ καὶ ἔθει* (Diogenes Laertius II. 93). Aristippus of Cyrene, proponent of Epicureanism and founder of Cyrenaic school which taught that the immediate end of action is pleasure.

<sup>13</sup> *πᾶν τὸ πραχθὲν ὑπὸ τοῦ κρατοῦντος, δίκαιον εἶναι* (Plutarch, 'Alexander', in Plutarch, *Lives*, trans. B. Perrin (London and New York, 1919), vol. 7, 52.4. Original reads *θεμιτὸν ἢ καὶ δίκαιον* for *δίκαιον εἶναι*. Anaxarchus of Abdera (fl. fourth century BC), was a follower of Democritus and teacher of Pyrrho.

<sup>14</sup> *οὔτε καλὸν οὔτε αἰσχρὸν, [οὔτε δίκαιον] οὔτε ἄδικον, καὶ ὁμοίως ἐπὶ πάντων μηδὲν εἶναι τῇ ἀληθείᾳ, νόμῳ δὲ καὶ ἔθει πάντα τοὺς ἀνθρώπους πράττειν* (Diogenes Laertius, IX.61). Loeb translation: '[He denied] that anything was honourable or dishonourable, just or unjust. And so universally, he held that there is nothing really existent, but custom and convention govern human action.' Pyrrho (c. 365/360–c.275/270 BC) was the father of Greek scepticism.

<sup>15</sup> Epicurus (c. 341–270 BC) was a proponent of Democritean atomism, whose philosophy, known in the Renaissance via Diogenes Laertius, was promoted by Justus Lipsius (1547–1606) and

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philosophy, the frame of whose principles must needs lead him to deny justice and injustice to be natural things. And therefore he determines that they arise wholly from mutual pacts and covenants of men made for their own convenience and utility, and laws resulting from thence.

Those living creatures that could not make mutual covenants together not to hurt, nor to be hurt by one another, could not for this cause have any such thing as just or unjust amongst them. And there is the same reason for those nations that either will not, or cannot make such mutual compacts not to hurt one another. For there is no such thing as justice by itself, but only in the mutual congresses of men, wheresoever they have entered together into covenant not to hurt one another.<sup>16</sup>

The late compiler of the Epicurean system expresses this philosopher's meaning after this manner:

There are some that think that those things that are just [*justa*], are just according to their proper unvaried nature, and that the laws do not make them just, but only prescribe according to that nature which they have. But the thing is not so.<sup>17</sup>

After Epicurus, Carneades, the author of the New Academy as Lactantius testifieth, was also a zealous assertor of the same doctrine.<sup>18</sup>

4. And since in this latter age the physiological hypotheses of Democritus and Epicurus have been revived, and successfully applied to the solving of some of the phenomena of the visible world, there have not wanted those that have endeavoured to vent also those other paradoxes of the same philosophers, viz. 'That there is no incorporeal

Pierre Gassendi (1592–1655). Epicurus' denial of providence and his assertion that the world came about by chance rendered his philosophy suspect to Christians.

<sup>16</sup> 'Ὅσα τῶν ζῴων μὴ ἡδύνατο συνθήκας ποιῆσθαι τὰς ὑπὲρ τοῦ μὴ βλάπτειν, ἀλλὰ μὴδὲ βλάπτεσθαι, πρὸς ταῦτα οὐθέν ἐστι οὐδὲ δίκαιον οὐδὲ ἄδικον. ὥσαυτως δὲ καὶ τῶν ἐθνῶν ὅσα μὴ ἡδύνατο ἢ ἐβούλετο τὰς συνθήκας ποιῆσθαι τὰς ὑπὲρ τοῦ μὴ βλάπτειν μὴδὲ βλάπτεσθαι· οὐκ ἦν τι κατ' ἑαυτὸ δικαιοσύνη, ἀλλὰ ἐν ταῖς μετὰ ἀλλήλων συντροφαῖς, κατ' ὀνηλίκους δὴ ποτε ἀεὶ τόπους συνθήκη τις ὑπὲρ τοῦ μὴ βλάπτειν ἢ βλάπτεσθαι (Diogenes Laertius, x. 150, who here quotes from Epicurus *Κύρια Δόξαι*, of 'Sovran Maxims', sects. 32 and 33).

<sup>17</sup> 'Ac sunt quidam, qui existimant ea, quae justa sunt, esse secundum propriam invariataque naturam justa, et leges non ista justa facere sed duntaxat praescribere juxta eam quam habent naturam verum res non ita se habet' (Gassendi, *Philosophiae Epicuri syntagma continens canonicam, physicam et ethicam* (London, 1668), p. 267). Pierre Gassendi promoted a Christianized version of Epicurus' philosophy as an alternative to Aristotelianism.

<sup>18</sup> Lactantius, *Divinae institutiones* v.14. Carneades (214/213–129/128 BC) was a sceptical philosopher and founder, as Cudworth notes, of the New Academy. Lactantius (c. AD 240–320), was a Christian apologist.