

# JOHN STUART MILL, *The Spirit of the Age* (1831)

**LORD MELBOURNE.**

TO THE EDITOR OF THE EXAMINER.

Sir.—Your issue of 10th will, I am sure, induce you to correct the error into which you have fallen involuntarily. I am persuaded, in the Examiner of the 14th December last. In the witness you then made an error of the Members of the present Cabinet, you have grievously misapprehended the character of Lord Melbourne, the Home Secretary of State. You acknowledged, it is true, his high capacity; but you described his habits as being what they are not. If you will make inquiry, you will find that he is not merely a man of great ability, but likewise an assiduous and active man of business. At an former period he has been so great a promoter of business in the Home Department as has served since the present Ministry took office, and never was the work done with greater promptitude and dispatch. That this is the case you can easily satisfy yourself.

Had the misrepresentation of which I complain appeared in any Liberal vehicle of character, it would not have deserved notice; but, in a Journal which exercises so much political influence over the intelligent part of the community, the effect may have been injurious to the reputation of a Statesman, who ought not to have been so unjustly characterized.

X. [We gladly give insertion to this communication; and here to add, that persons whose information and judgment are equally to be relied on as of the first authority, bear testimony to the ability and diligence with which Lord Melbourne discharges the duties of his office, and rank him as one of the most efficient Members of the Government.]

**THE WHY, AND BECAUSE.**

Why has Lord Brougham and Pease withdrawn his Local Courts Bill, at a time when, and when only, he has full power to carry it? Because Lord Brougham and Pease is made a Peer, a Cabinet Minister, and Lord Chancellor, and has got all he wants.

Why does Daniel Wrayle Harvey (being a man of some, and an advocate of the rights of the people,) speak against the Bill? Because Daniel Wrayle Harvey is made a Justice to Lord Brougham and Pease's Committee of Charities, which is worth about £2000 a year.

Why has Mr. Hunt been elected for Proton, never having succeeded that of any place else before? Because the electors in Paris and Belgium have opened the eyes of the people, and the reign of the Aristocrats is over.

Why does the "Man of Goodness" support different Ministries of successive different principles? Because the sagacious Whigs know that the real principles of all corrupt Ministries are to support his order, and that their avowed principles are all nonsense!

(Imitated from the French.)  
\* They say "exaltation an impudent detraction,  
The honest Whigs alone uphold the state,"  
† That as a rope upholds a scaffold,  
Till he dies, strangled by his own demerit."

**THE SPIRIT OF THE AGE.**

No. 1.

The "spirit of the age" is in some measure a novel expression. I do not believe that it is to be met with in any work extending fifty years in antiquity. The idea of comparing man's own age with former ages, or with our notion of those which are yet to come, had occurred to philosophers; but it never before was itself the dominant idea of any age.

It is an idea essentially belonging to an age of change. Before men begin to think much and long on the peculiarities of their own times, they must have begun to think that those times are, or are destined to be, distinguished in a very remarkable manner from the times which preceded them. Mankind are then divided, into those who are still what they were, and those who have changed; into the spirit of the present age, and the men of the past. To the latter, the spirit of the age is a subject of exaltation; to the former, of terror; to both, of envy and anxious interest. The wisdom of antiquity, and the march of intellect, are looked from a distance; and the phrase originally an expression of respect and homage, such as "the wisdom of our fathers," is turned into the sarcastic jibe of "honest and foolish."

The present times possess this character. A change has taken place in the human mind; a change which, being effected by insensible gradations, and without noise, had already proceeded far before it was generally perceived. When the fact disclosed itself, had been going on in the minds of others, or even in their own, until that those were indeed new men, who looked upon being governed in a new way.

But mankind are now conscious of their new position. The conviction is already not far from being universal, that the times are pregnant with change; and that the nineteenth century will be which history has preserved the remembrance, in the human mind, and in the whole constitution of human society. Even the religious worship changes near at hand. It is felt that new and hitherto unknown bonds will now no longer unite, and be separated by new barriers; for the moderns. These men who carry their eyes to the back of their heads, and can see no other portion of the destined track of humanity than

that which it has already travelled, imagine that because the old ties are severed mankind henceforth are not to be connected by any ties at all; and hence their exultation, and their awful warnings. For proof of this assertion, I may refer to the gloomy look ever written by a cheerful man—Scott's "Colloquies on the Progress and Prospects of Society;" a very curious and not uninteresting exhibition of one of the points of view from which the spirit of the age may be contemplated. They who prefer the ravings of a party politician to the sermons of a recluse, may consult a late article in Blackwood's Magazine, under the same title which I have preferred to this paper. For the reverse of the picture, we have only to look into any popular newspaper or review.

And all this indeterminate eulogy and abuse, these undistinguishing hopes and fears, it seems to be a very fit subject for philosophical inquiry, what the spirit of the age really is; and how or wherein it differs from the spirit of any other age. The subject is deeply important; for, whatever we may think or affect to think of the present age, we cannot get out of it; we must suffer with its sufferings, and enjoy with its enjoyments; we must share in its lot, and, in no other useful or at ease, we must even partake its character. No man whose good qualities were mainly those of another age, ever had much influence on his own. And since every age continues to itself the germ of all future ages as surely as the acorn contains the future forest, a knowledge of our own age is the fountain of prophecy—the only key to the history of posterity. It is only in the present that we can know the future; it is only through the present that it is in our power to influence that which is to come.

Yet, because our own age is familiar to us, we are prejudiced, if I may judge from appearances, to know it by nature. A statesman, for example, if he be required of him to have studied any thing at all (which, however, is more than I would venture to affirm) is supposed to have studied history—which is at best the spirit of ages long past, and more often the mere innumerate masses without the spirit; but is it ever asked (or to whom does the question ever occur?) whether he understood his own age? Yet that alone is history, and the most important part of history, and the only part which a man may know and understand, with absolute certainty, by using the proper means. He may learn in a man's walk through London more of the history of England during the nineteenth century, than all the professed English historians in existence will tell him concerning the other eighteen; for, the obvious and unnumbered facts, which every one sees and can see it anticipated at, seldom occurs to any one to place upon record; and posterity, if it bears the rule, learns it, generally, from the notes bestowed by contemporaries on some accidental exception. Yet any politician and philosopher perpetually exhort to judge of the present by the past, when the present alone affords a faithful standard for judging, other than the whole states of the past, and far more accessible.

But it is unadvisable to dwell longer on this topic, lest we should be deemed obstinately to exaggerate that, which we desire that the reader should think more qualified to supply. It were better, without further preamble, to enter upon the subject, and be tried by one idea themselves, rather than by the word of them.

The test of the leading peculiarities of the present age is, that it is an age of transition. Mankind have outgrown old institutions and old doctrines, and have not yet acquired new ones. When we say outgrown, we intend to signify nothing. A man may not be either better or happier, wiser and freer, than he was at six years of age; but the man's mind which fixed him there, will not fit him now.

The prominent trait just indicated in the character of the present age, was obvious a few years ago only to the more discerning; it was veiled, and shall be veiled on a fitting occasion, of the state in which the old order of things has become antiquated in the state of society and of the human mind. But when almost every nation on the continent of Europe has achieved, or is in the course of rapidly achieving, a change in its form of government; when our own country, as all former times the most attached in Europe to its old institutions, proclaims almost with one voice that they are vicious both in the end and in the details, and that they shall be reformed, and purified, and made fit for civilized uses, we may assume that a part of the effects of the cause just now pointed out, speak sufficiently loudly for themselves. To him who can reflect, even there are but indications which tell of a more real and radical change. Not only, in the conviction some sensation, it is not by remaining in the old ways that they can be set right. Society demands, and anticipates, not merely a new set of laws, but a machine constructed in another manner. Mankind will not change either their opinions or their prejudices as they have done hitherto. The ancient constitutional form was formerly specific which would call forth or slay the spirit of the English people at pleasure: what has become of the charters? Who can hope to sway the minds of the public by the old maxims of law, or commerce, or foreign the notions and watch-words of Whig and Tory? And what Whig would command two followers in the warfare of politics by the old form has become, or what manufacturer has men? Do the people the old, or adopt their sentiments? Or the feelings of our ancestors may almost be said that we can only such as are the natural and necessary growth of a state of human society, however constituted; and I only adopt the energetic expression of a member of the House

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Mill's long essay was originally published in *The Examiner* in seven parts between January and May, 1831 and signed as "A.B."

### *Editor's Introduction*

To make this edition useful to scholars and to make it more readable, I have done the following:

1. inserted and highlighted the page numbers of the original edition
  2. not split a word if it has been hyphenated across a new line or page (this will assist in making word searches)
  3. added unique paragraph IDs (which are used in the "citation tool" which is part of the "enhanced HTML" version of this text)
  4. retained the spaces which separate sections of the text
  5. created a "blocktext" for large quotations
  6. moved the Table of Contents to the beginning of the text
  7. placed the footnotes at the end of the book
  8. reformatted margin notes to float within the paragraph
  9. inserted Greek and Hebrew words as images
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## The Spirit of the Age. No. 1 (*The Examiner*, 9 Jan., 1831)↩

[20]

THE "SPIRIT OF THE AGE" is in some measure a novel expression. I do not believe that it is to be met with in any work exceeding fifty years in antiquity. The idea of comparing one's own age with former ages, or with our notion of those which are yet to come, had occurred to philosophers; but it never before was itself the dominant idea of any age.

It is an idea essentially belonging to an age of change. Before men begin to think much and long on the peculiarities of their own times, they must have begun to think that those times are, or are destined to be, distinguished in a very remarkable manner from the times which preceded them. Mankind are then divided, into those who are still what they were, and those who have changed: into the men of the present age, and the men of the past. To the former, the spirit of the age is a subject of exultation; to the latter, of terror; to both, of eager and anxious interest. The wisdom of ancestors, and the march of intellect, are bandied from mouth to mouth; each phrase originally an expression of respect and homage, each ultimately usurped by the partisans of the opposite catch-word, and in the bitterness of their spirit, turned into the sarcastic jibe of hatred and insult.

The present times possess this character. A change has taken place in the human mind; a change which, being effected by insensible gradations, and without noise, had already proceeded far before it was generally perceived. When the fact disclosed itself, thousands awoke as from a dream. They knew not what processes had been going on in the minds of others, or even in their own, until the change began to invade outward objects; and it became clear that those were indeed new men, who insisted upon being governed in a new way.

But mankind are now conscious of their new position. The conviction is already not far from being universal, that the times are pregnant with change; and that the nineteenth century will be known to posterity as the era of one of the greatest revolutions of which history has preserved the remembrance, in the human mind, and in the whole constitution of human society. Even the religious world teems with new interpretations of the Prophecies, foreboding mighty changes near at hand. It is felt that men are henceforth to be held together by new ties, and separated by new barriers; for the ancient bonds will now no longer unite, nor the ancient boundaries confine. Those men who carry their eyes in the back of their heads and can see no other portion of the destined track of humanity than that which it has already travelled, imagine that because the old ties are severed mankind henceforth are not to be connected by any ties at all; and hence their affliction, and their awful warnings. For proof of this assertion, I may refer to the gloomiest book ever written by a cheerful man—Southey's *Colloquies on the Progress and Prospects of Society*; a very curious and not uninteresting exhibition of one of the points of view from which the spirit of the age may be contemplated. They who prefer the ravings of a party politician to the musings of a recluse, may consult a late article in *Blackwood's Magazine*, under the same title which I have prefixed to this paper. For the reverse of the picture, we have only to look into any popular newspaper or review.

Amidst all this indiscriminate eulogy and abuse, these undistinguishing hopes and fears, it seems to be a very fit subject for philosophical inquiry, what the spirit of the age really is; and how or wherein it differs from the spirit of any other age. The subject is deeply important: for, whatever we may think or affect to think of the present age, we cannot get out of it; we must suffer with its sufferings, and enjoy with its enjoyments; we must share in its lot, and, to be either useful or at ease, we must even partake its character. No man whose good qualities were mainly those of another age, ever had much influence on his own. And since every age contains in itself the germ of all future ages as surely as the acorn contains

the future forest, a knowledge of our own age is the fountain of prophecy—the only key to the history of posterity. It is only in the present that we can know the future; it is only through the present that it is in our power to influence that which is to come.

Yet, because our own age is *familiar* to us, we are presumed, if I may judge from appearances, to know it by nature. A statesman, for example, if it be required of him to have studied any thing at all (which, however, is more than I would venture to affirm) is supposed to have studied history—which is at best the spirit of ages long past, and more often the mere inanimate carcass without the spirit: but is it ever asked (or to whom does the question ever occur?) whether he understands his own age? Yet that also is history, and the most important part of history, and the only part which a man may know and understand, with absolute certainty, by using the proper means. He may learn in a morning's walk through London more of the history of England during the nineteenth century, than all the professed English histories in existence will tell him concerning the other eighteen: for, the obvious and universal facts, which every one sees and no one is astonished at, it seldom occurs to any one to place upon record; and posterity, if it learn the rule, learns it, generally, from the notice bestowed by contemporaries on some accidental exception. Yet are politicians and philosophers perpetually exhorted to judge of the present by the past, when the present alone affords a fund of materials for judging, richer than the whole stores of the past, and far more accessible.

But it is unadvisable to dwell longer on this topic, lest we should be deemed studiously to exaggerate that want, which we desire that the reader should think ourselves qualified to supply. It were better, without further preamble, to enter upon the subject, and be tried by our ideas themselves, rather than by the need of them.

The first of the leading peculiarities of the present age is, that it is an age of transition. Mankind have outgrown old institutions and old doctrines, and have not yet acquired new ones. When we say outgrown, we intend to prejudice nothing. A man may not be either better or happier at six-and-twenty, than he was at six years of age: but the same jacket which fitted him then, will not fit him now.

The prominent trait just indicated in the character of the present age, was obvious a few years ago only to the more discerning: at present it forces itself upon the most inobservant. Much might be said, and shall be said on a fitting occasion, of the mode in which the old order of things has become unsuited to the state of society and of the human mind. But when almost every nation on the continent of Europe has achieved, or is in the course of rapidly achieving, a change in its form of government; when our own country, at all former times the most attached in Europe to its old institutions, proclaims almost with one voice that they are vicious both in the outline and in the details, and that they *shall* be renovated, and purified, and made fit for civilized man, we may assume that a part of the effects of the cause just now pointed out, speak sufficiently loudly for themselves. To him who can reflect, even these are but indications which tell of a more vital and radical change. Not only, in the conviction of almost all men, things as they are, are wrong—but, according to that same conviction, it is not by remaining in the old ways that they can be set right. Society demands, and anticipates, not merely a new machine, but a machine constructed in another manner. Mankind will not be led by their old maxims, nor by their old guides; and they will not choose either their opinions or their guides as they have done heretofore. The ancient constitutional texts were formerly spells which would call forth or allay the spirit of the English people at pleasure: what has become of the charm? Who can hope to sway the minds of the public by the old maxims of law, or commerce, or foreign policy, or ecclesiastical policy? Whose feelings are now roused by the mottoes and watch-words of Whig and Tory? And what Whig or Tory could command ten followers in the warfare of politics by the weight of his own personal authority? Nay, what landlord could call forth his tenants, or what manufacturer his men? Do

the poor respect the rich, or adopt their sentiments? Do the young respect the old, or adopt their sentiments? Of the feelings of our ancestors it may almost be said that we retain only such as are the natural and necessary growth of a state of human society, however constituted; and I only adopt the energetic expression of a member of the House [21] of Commons, less than two years ago, in saying of the young men, even of that rank in society, that they are ready to advertise for opinions.

Since the facts are so manifest, there is the more chance that a few reflections on their causes, and on their probable consequences, will receive whatever portion of the reader's attention they may happen to deserve.

With respect, then, to the discredit into which old institutions and old doctrines have fallen, I may premise, that this discredit is, in my opinion, perfectly deserved. Having said this, I may perhaps hope, that no perverse interpretation will be put upon the remainder of my observations, in case some of them should not be quite so conformable to the sentiments of the day as my commencement might give reason to expect. The best guide is not he who, when people are in the right path, merely praises it, but he who shows them the pitfalls and the precipices by which it is endangered; and of which, as long as they were in the wrong road, it was not so necessary that they should be warned.

There is one very easy, and very pleasant way of accounting for this general departure from the modes of thinking of our ancestors: so easy, indeed, and so pleasant, especially to the hearer, as to be very convenient to such writers for hire or for applause, as address themselves not to the men of the age that is gone by, but to the men of the age which has commenced. This explanation is that which ascribes the altered state of opinion and feeling to the growth of the human understanding. According to this doctrine, we reject the sophisms and prejudices which misled the uncultivated minds of our ancestors, because we have learnt too much, and have become too wise, to be imposed upon by such sophisms and such prejudices. It is our knowledge and our sagacity which keep us free from these gross errors. We have now risen to the capacity of perceiving our true interests; and it is no longer in the power of impostors and charlatans to deceive us.

I am unable to adopt this theory. Though a firm believer in the improvement of the age, I do not believe that its improvement has been of this kind. The grand achievement of the present age is the *diffusion of superficial* knowledge; and that surely is no trifle, to have been accomplished by a single generation. The persons who are in possession of knowledge adequate to the formation of sound opinions by their own lights, form also a constantly increasing number, but hitherto at all times a small one. It would be carrying the notion of the march of intellect too far, to suppose that an average man of the present day is superior to the greatest men of the beginning of the eighteenth century; yet they *held* many opinions which we are fast renouncing. The intellect of the age, therefore, is not the cause which we are in search of. I do not perceive that, in the mental training which has been received by the immense majority of the reading and thinking part of my countrymen, or in the kind of knowledge and other intellectual aliment which has been supplied to them, there is any thing likely to render them much less accessible to the influence of imposture and charlatanerie than there ever was. The Dr. Eadys still dupe the lower classes, the St. John Longs the higher: and it would not be difficult to produce the political and literary antitypes of both. Neither do I see, in such observations as I am able to make upon my contemporaries, evidence that they have any principle within them which renders them much less liable now than at any former period to be misled by sophisms and prejudices. All I see is, that the opinions which have been transmitted to them from their ancestors, are not the kind of sophisms and prejudices which are fitted to possess any considerable ascendancy in their altered frame of mind. And I am rather inclined to account for this fact in a manner not reflecting such extraordinarily great honour upon the times we live in, as would result from the theory by which all is

ascribed to the superior expansion of our understandings.

The intellectual tendencies of the age, considered both on the favourable and on the unfavourable side, it will be necessary, in the prosecution of the present design, to review and analyse in some detail. For the present it may be enough to remark, that it is seldom safe to ground a positive estimate of a character upon mere negatives: and that the faults or the prejudices, which a person, or an age, or a nation *has not*, go but a very little way with a wise man towards forming a high opinion of them. A person may be without a single prejudice, and yet utterly unfit for every purpose in nature. To have erroneous convictions is one evil; but to have no strong or deep-rooted convictions at all, is an enormous one. Before I compliment either a man or a generation upon having got rid of their prejudices, I require to know what they have substituted in lieu of them.

Now, it is self-evident that no fixed opinions have yet generally established themselves in the place of those which we have abandoned; that no new doctrines, philosophical or social, as yet command, or appear likely soon to command, an assent at all comparable in unanimity to that which the ancient doctrines could boast of while they continued in vogue. So long as this intellectual anarchy shall endure, we may be warranted in believing that we are in a fair way to become wiser than our forefathers; but it would be premature to affirm that we are already wiser. We have not yet advanced beyond the unsettled state, in which the mind is, when it has recently found itself out in a grievous error, and has not yet satisfied itself of the truth. The men of the present day rather incline to an opinion than embrace it; few, except the very penetrating, or the very presumptuous, have full confidence in their own convictions. This is not a state of health, but, at the best, of convalescence. It is a necessary stage in the progress of civilization, but it is attended with numerous evils; as one part of a road may be rougher or more dangerous than another, although every step brings the traveller nearer to his desired end.

Not increase of wisdom, but a cause of the reality of which we are better assured, may serve to account for the decay of prejudices; and this is, increase of discussion. Men may not reason, better, concerning the great questions in which human nature is interested, but they reason more. Large subjects are discussed more, and longer, and by more minds. Discussion has penetrated deeper into society; and if no greater numbers than before have attained the higher degrees of intelligence, fewer grovel in that state of abject stupidity, which can only co-exist with utter apathy and sluggishness.

The progress which we have made, is precisely that sort of progress which increase of discussion suffices to produce, whether it be attended with increase of wisdom or no. To discuss, and to question established opinions, are merely two phrases for the same thing. When all opinions are questioned, it is in time found out what are those which will not bear a close examination. Ancient doctrines are then put upon their proofs; and those which were originally errors, or have become so by change of circumstances, are thrown aside. Discussion does this. It is by discussion, also, that true opinions are discovered and diffused. But this is not so certain a consequence of it as the weakening of error. To be rationally assured that a given doctrine is *true*, it is often necessary to examine and weigh an immense variety of facts. One single well-established fact, clearly irreconcilable with a doctrine, is sufficient to prove that it is *false*. Nay, opinions often upset themselves by their own incoherence; and the impossibility of their being well-founded may admit of being brought home to a mind not possessed of so much as one positive truth. All the inconsistencies of an opinion with itself, with obvious facts, or even with other prejudices, discussion evolves and makes manifest: and indeed this mode of refutation, requiring less study and less real knowledge than any other, is better suited to the inclination of most disputants. But the moment, and the mood of mind, in which men break loose from an error, is not, except in natures very happily constituted, the most favourable to those mental processes which are



necessary to the investigation of truth. What led them wrong at first, was generally nothing else but the incapacity of seeing more than one thing at a time; and that incapacity is apt to stick to them when they have turned their eyes in an altered direction. They usually resolve that the new light which has broken in upon them shall be the sole light; and they wilfully and passionately blow out the ancient lamp, which, though it did not show them what they now see, served very well to enlighten the objects in its immediate neighbourhood. Whether men adhere to old opinions or adopt new ones, they have in general an invincible propensity to split the truth, and take half, or less than half of it; and a habit of erecting their quills and bristling up like a porcupine against any one who brings them the other half, as if he were attempting to deprive them of the portion which they have.

I am far from denying, that, besides getting rid of error, we are also continually enlarging the stock of positive truth. In physical science and art, this is too manifest to be called in question; and in the moral and social sciences, I believe it to be as undeniably true. The wisest men in every age generally surpass in wisdom the wisest of any preceding age, because the wisest men possess and profit by the constantly increasing accumulation of the ideas of all ages: but the multitude (by which I mean the majority of all ranks) have the ideas of their own age, and no others: and if the multitude of one age are nearer to the truth than the multitude of another, it is only in so far as they are guided and influenced by the authority of the wisest among them.

This is connected with certain points which, as it appears to me, have not been sufficiently adverted to by many of those who hold, in common with me, the doctrine of the indefinite progressiveness of the human mind; but which must be understood, in order correctly to appreciate the character of the present age, as an age of moral and political transition. These, therefore, I shall attempt to enforce and illustrate in the next paper.

A.B.

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## **The Spirit of the Age. No. 2 (*The Examiner*, 23 Jan., 1831)** ↩

[50]

I HAVE SAID that the present age is an age of transition: I shall now attempt to point out one of the most important consequences of this fact. In all other conditions of mankind, the uninstructed have faith in the instructed. In an age of transition, the divisions among the instructed nullify their authority, and the uninstructed lose their faith in them. The multitude are without a guide; and society is exposed to all the errors and dangers which are to be expected when persons who have never studied any branch of knowledge comprehensively and as a whole attempt to judge for themselves upon particular parts of it.

That this is the condition we are really in, I may spare myself the trouble of attempting to prove: it has become so habitual, that the only difficulty to be anticipated is in persuading any one that this is not our natural state, and that it is consistent with any good wishes towards the human species, to pray that we may come safely out of it. The longer any one observes and meditates, the more clearly he will see, that even wise men are apt to mistake the almanack of the year for a treatise on chronology; and as in an age of transition the source of all improvement is the exercise of private judgment, no wonder that mankind should attach themselves to that, as to the ultimate refuge, the last and only resource of humanity. In like manner, if a caravan of travellers had long been journeying in an unknown country under a blind guide, with what earnestness would the wiser among them exhort the remainder to use

their own eyes, and with what disfavour would any one be listened to who should insist upon the difficulty of finding their way, and the necessity of procuring a guide after all. He would be told with warmth, that they had hitherto missed their way solely from the fatal weakness of [51] allowing themselves to be guided, and that they never should reach their journey's end until each man dared to think and see for himself. And it would perhaps be added (with a smile of contempt), that if he were sincere in doubting the capacity of his fellow-travellers to see their way, he might prove his sincerity by presenting each person with a pair of spectacles, by means whereof their powers of vision might be strengthened, and all indistinctness removed.

The men of the past, are those who continue to insist upon our still adhering to the blind guide. The men of the present, are those who bid each man look about for himself, with or without the promise of spectacles to assist him.

While these two contending parties are measuring their sophistries against one another, the man who is capable of other ideas than those of his age, has an example in the present state of physical science, and in the manner in which men shape their thoughts and their actions within its sphere, of what is to be hoped for and laboured for in all other departments of human knowledge; and what, beyond all possibility of doubt, will one day be attained.

We never hear of the right of private judgment in physical science; yet it exists; for what is there to prevent any one from denying every proposition in natural philosophy, if he be so minded? The physical sciences however have been brought to so advanced a stage of improvement by a series of great men, and the methods by which they are cultivated so entirely preclude the possibility of material error when due pains are taken to arrive at the truth, that all persons who have studied those subjects have come to a nearly unanimous agreement upon them. Some minor differences doubtless exist; there are points on which the opinion of the scientific world is not finally made up. But these are mostly questions rather of curiosity than of use, and it is seldom attempted to thrust them into undue importance, nor to remove them, by way of appeal from the tribunal of the specially instructed to that of the public at large. The compact mass of authority thus created overawes the minds of the uninformed: and if here and there a wrong-headed individual, like Sir Richard Phillips, impugns Newton's discoveries, and revives the long-forgotten sophisms of the Cartesians, he is not regarded. Yet the fallacies which at one time enthralled the subtlest understandings, might find, we suspect, in the present day, some intellects scarcely strong enough to resist them: but no one dares to stand up against the scientific world, until he too has qualified himself to be named as a man of science: and no one does this without being forced, by irresistible evidence, to adopt the received opinion. The physical sciences, therefore, (speaking of them generally) are continually *growing*, but never *changing*: in every age they receive indeed mighty improvements, but for them the age of transition is past.

It is almost unnecessary to remark in how very different a condition from this, are the sciences which are conversant with the moral nature and social condition of man. In those sciences, this imposing unanimity among all who have studied the subject does not exist; and every dabbler, consequently, thinks his opinion as good as another's. Any man who has eyes and ears shall be judge whether, in point of fact, a person who has never studied politics, for instance, or political economy systematically, regards himself as any-way precluded thereby from promulgating with the most unbounded assurance the crudest opinions, and taxing men who have made those sciences the occupation of a laborious life, with the most contemptible ignorance and imbecility. It is rather the person who *has* studied the subject systematically that is regarded as disqualified. He is a *theorist*: and the word which expresses the highest and noblest effort of human intelligence is turned into a bye-word of derision. People pride themselves upon taking a "plain, matter-of-fact" view of a subject. I once heard of a book entitled "Plain Politics for Plain People." I well remember the remark of an able man on that

occasion: "What would be thought of a work with such a title as this, Plain Mathematics for Plain People?" The parallel is most accurate. The nature of the evidence on which these two sciences rest, is different, but both are systems of connected truth: there are very few of the practical questions of either, which can be discussed with profit unless the parties are agreed on a great number of preliminary questions: and accordingly, most of the political discussions which one hears and reads are not unlike what one would expect if the binomial theorem were propounded for argument in a debating society none of whose members had completely made up their minds upon the Rule of Three. Men enter upon a subject with minds in no degree fitted, by previous acquirements, to understand and appreciate the true arguments: yet they lay the blame on the arguments, not on themselves: truth, they think, is under a peremptory obligation of being intelligible to them, whether they take the right means of understanding it or no. Every mode of judging, except from first appearances, is scouted as false refinement. If there were a party among philosophers who still held to the opinion that the sun moves round the earth, can any one doubt on which side of the question the vulgar would be? What terms could express their contempt for those who maintained the contrary! Men form their opinions according to natural shrewdness, without any of the advantages of study. Here and there a hard-headed man, who sees farther into a mill-stone than his neighbours, and takes it into his head that thinking on a subject is one way of understanding it, excogitates an entire science, and publishes his volume; in utter unconsciousness of the fact, that a tithe of his discoveries were known a century ago, and the remainder (supposing them not too absurd to have occurred to anybody before) have been refuted in any year which you can mention, from that time to the present.

This is the state we are in; and the question is, how we are to get out of it. As I am unable to take the view of this matter which will probably occur to most persons as being the most simple and natural, I shall state in the first instance what this is, and my reasons for dissenting from it.

A large portion of the talking and writing common in the present day, respecting the instruction of the people, and the diffusion of knowledge, appears to me to conceal, under loose and vague generalities, notions at bottom altogether fallacious and visionary.

I go, perhaps, still further than most of those to whose language I so strongly object, in the expectations which I entertain of vast improvements in the social condition of man, from the growth of intelligence among the body of the people; and I yield to no one in the degree of intelligence of which I believe them to be capable. But I do not believe that, along with this intelligence, they will ever have sufficient opportunities of study and experience, to become themselves familiarly conversant with all the inquiries which lead to the truths by which it is good that they should regulate their conduct, and to receive into their own minds the whole of the evidence from which those truths have been collected, and which is necessary for their establishment. If I thought all this indispensable, I should despair of human nature. As long as the day consists but of twenty-four hours, and the age of man extends but to threescore and ten, so long (unless we expect improvements in the arts of production sufficient to restore the golden age) the great majority of mankind will need the far greater part of their time and exertions for procuring their daily bread. Some few remarkable individuals will attain great eminence under every conceivable disadvantage; but for men in general, the principal field for the exercise and display of their intellectual faculties is, and ever will be, no other than their own particular calling or occupation. This does not place any limit to their possible intelligence; since the mode of learning, and the mode of practising, that occupation itself, might be made one of the most valuable of all exercises of intelligence: especially when, in all the occupations in which man is a mere machine, his agency is so rapidly becoming superseded by real machinery. But what sets no limit to the *powers* of the mass of mankind, nevertheless limits greatly their possible

*acquirements*. Those persons whom the circumstances of society, and their own position in it, permit to dedicate themselves to the investigation and study of physical, moral, and social truths, as their peculiar calling, can alone be expected to make the evidences of such truths a subject of profound meditation, and to make themselves thorough masters of the philosophical grounds of those opinions of which it is desirable that all should be firmly *persuaded*, but which they alone can entirely and philosophically *know*. The remainder of mankind must, and, except in periods of transition like the present, always do, take the far greater part of their opinions on all extensive subjects upon the authority of those who have studied them.

It does not follow that all men are not to inquire and investigate. The only complaint is, that most of them are precluded by the nature of things from ever inquiring and investigating enough. It is right that they should acquaint themselves with the evidence of the truths which are presented to them, to the utmost extent of each man's intellect, leisure, and inclination. Though a man may never be able to understand Laplace, that is no reason he should not read Euclid. But it by no means follows that Euclid is a blunderer, or an arrant knave, because a man who begins at the forty-seventh proposition cannot understand it: and even he who begins at the beginning, and is stopped by the *pons asinorum*, is very much in the wrong if he swears he will navigate his vessel himself, and not trust to the nonsensical calculations of mathematical land-lubbers. Let him learn what he can, and as well as he can—still however bearing in mind, that there are others who probably know much with which he not only is unacquainted, but of the evidence of which, in the existing state of his knowledge, it is impossible that he should be a competent judge.

It is no answer to what has just been observed, to say that the grounds of the most important moral and political truths are simple and obvious, intelligible to persons of the most limited faculties, with moderate study and attention; that all mankind, therefore, may master the evidences, and none need take the doctrines upon trust. The matter of fact upon which this objection proceeds, is happily true. The proofs of the moral and social truths of greatest importance to mankind, are few, brief, and easily intelligible; and happy will be the day on which these shall begin to be circulated among the people, instead of second-rate treatises on the Polarization of Light, and on the Rigidity of Cordage. But, in the first place, it is not every one—and there is no one at a very early period of life—who has had sufficient experience of mankind in general, and has sufficiently reflected upon what passes in his own mind, to be able to appreciate the force of the reasons when laid before him. There is, however, a great number of important truths, especially in Political Economy, to which, from the particular nature of the evidence on which they rest, this difficulty does not apply. The proofs of these truths may be brought down to the level of even the uninformed multitude, with the most complete success. But, when all is done, there still remains something which they must always and inevitably take upon trust: and this is, that the arguments really *are* as conclusive as they appear; that there exist no considerations relevant to the subject which have been kept back from them; that every objection which can suggest itself has been duly examined by competent judges, and found immaterial. It is easy to say that the truth of certain propositions is obvious to *common sense*. It may be so: but how am I assured that the conclusions of common sense are confirmed by accurate knowledge? Judging by common sense is merely another phrase for judging by first appearances; and every one who has mixed among mankind with any capacity for observing them, knows [52] that the men who place implicit faith in their own common sense are, without any exception, the most wrong-headed and impracticable persons with whom he has ever had to deal. The maxim of pursuing truth without being biassed by authority, does not state the question fairly; there is no person who does not prefer truth to authority—for authority is only appealed to as a voucher for truth. The real question, to be determined by each man's own judgment, is, whether most confidence is due in the particular case, to his own understanding, or to the opinion of his

authority? It is therefore obvious, that there are some persons in whom disregard of authority is a virtue, and others in whom it is both an absurdity and a vice. The presumptuous man needs authority to restrain him from error: the modest man needs it to strengthen him in the right. What truths, for example, can be more obvious, or can rest upon considerations more simple and familiar, than the first principles of morality? Yet we know that extremely ingenious things may be said in opposition to the plainest of them—things which the most highly-instructed men, though never for a single moment misled by them, have had no small difficulty in satisfactorily answering. Is it to be imagined that if these sophisms had been referred to the verdict of the half-instructed—and we cannot expect the majority of every class to be any thing more—the solution of the fallacy would always have been found and understood? notwithstanding which, the fallacy would not, it is most probable, have made the slightest impression upon them:—and why? Because the judgment of the multitude would have told them, that their own judgment was not a decision in the last resort; because the conviction of their understandings going along with the moral truth, was sanctioned by the authority of the best-informed; and the objection, though insoluble by their own understandings, was not supported but contradicted by the same imposing authority. But if you once persuade an ignorant or a half-instructed person, that he ought to assert his liberty of thought, discard all authority, and—I do not say *use* his own judgment, for that he never can do too much—but *trust* solely to his own judgment, and receive or reject opinions according to his own views of the evidence;—if, in short, you teach to all the lesson of *indifferency*, so earnestly, and with such admirable effect, inculcated by Locke upon *students*, for whom alone that great man wrote, the merest trifle will suffice to unsettle and perplex their minds. There is not a truth in the whole range of human affairs, however obvious and simple, the evidence of which an ingenious and artful sophist may not succeed in rendering doubtful to minds not very highly cultivated, if those minds insist upon judging of all things exclusively by their own lights. The presumptuous man will dogmatize, and rush headlong into opinions, always shallow, and as often wrong as right; the man who sets only the just value upon his own moderate powers, will scarcely ever feel more than a half-conviction. You may prevail on them to repudiate the authority of the best-instructed, but each will full surely be a mere slave to the authority of the person next to him, who has greatest facilities for continually forcing upon his attention considerations favourable to the conclusion he himself wishes to be drawn.

It is, therefore, one of the necessary conditions of humanity, that the majority must either have wrong opinions, or no fixed opinions, or must place the degree of reliance warranted by reason, in the authority of those who have made moral and social philosophy their peculiar study. It is right that every man should attempt to understand his interest and his duty. It is right that he should follow his reason as far as his reason will carry him, and cultivate the faculty as highly as possible. But reason itself will teach most men that they must, in the last resort, fall back upon the authority of still more cultivated minds, as the ultimate sanction of the convictions of their reason itself.

But where is the authority which commands this confidence, or deserves it? Nowhere: and here we see the peculiar character, and at the same time the peculiar inconvenience, of a period of moral and social transition. At all other periods there exists a large body of received doctrine, covering nearly the whole field of the moral relations of man, and which no one thinks of questioning, backed as it is by the authority of all, or nearly all, persons, supposed to possess knowledge enough to qualify them for giving an opinion on the subject. This state of things does not now exist in the civilized world—except, indeed, to a certain limited extent in the United States of America. The progress of inquiry has brought to light the insufficiency of the ancient doctrines; but those who have made the investigation of social truths their occupation, have not yet sanctioned any new body of doctrine with their unanimous, or nearly unanimous, consent. The true opinion is recommended to the public by

no greater weight of authority than hundreds of false opinions; and, even at this day, to find any thing like a united body of grave and commanding authority, we must revert to the doctrines from which the progressiveness of the human mind, or, as it is more popularly called, the improvement of the age, has set us free.

In the mean time, as the old doctrines have gone out, and the new ones have not yet come in, every one must judge for himself as he best may. Learn, and think for yourself, is reasonable advice for the day: but let not the business of the day be so done as to prejudice the work of the morrow. “Les supériorités morales,” to use the words of Fiévée, “finiront par s’entendre;” the first men of the age will one day join hands and be agreed: and then there is no power on earth or in hell itself, capable of withstanding them.

But ere this can happen there must be a change in the whole framework of society, as at present constituted. Worldly power must pass from the hands of the stationary part of mankind into those of the progressive part. There must be a moral and social revolution, which shall, indeed, take away no men’s lives or property, but which shall leave to no man one fraction of unearned distinction or unearned importance.

That man cannot achieve his destiny but through such a transformation, and that it will and *shall* be effected, is the conclusion of every man who can *feel the wants of his own age*, without hankering after past ages. Those who may read these papers, and in particular the next succeeding one, will find there an attempt, how far successful others must judge, to set forth the grounds of this belief.

For mankind to change their institutions while their minds are unsettled, without fixed principles, and unable to trust either themselves or other people, is, indeed, a fearful thing. But a bad way is often the best, to get out of a bad position. Let us place our trust for the future, not in the wisdom of mankind, but in something far surer—the force of circumstances—which makes men see that, when it is near at hand, which they could not foresee when it was at a distance, and which so often and so unexpectedly makes the right course, in a moment of emergency, at once the easiest and the most obvious.

A.B.

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### The Spirit of the Age. No. 3 (*The Examiner*, 6 Feb., 1831)↩

[82]

THE AFFAIRS OF MANKIND, or of any of those smaller political societies which we call nations, are always either in one or the other of two states, one of them in its nature durable, the other essentially transitory. The former of these we may term the *natural* state, the latter the *transitional*.

Society may be said to be in its *natural* state, when worldly power, and moral influence, are habitually and undisputedly exercised by the fittest persons whom the existing state of society affords. Or, to be more explicit; when on the one hand, the temporal, or, as the French would say, the *material* interests of the community, are managed by those of its members who possess the greatest capacity for such management; and on the other hand, those whose opinions the people follow, whose feelings they imbibe, and who practically and by common consent, perform, no matter under what original title, the office of thinking for the people, are persons better qualified than any others whom the civilization of the age and country affords, to think and judge rightly and usefully.

In these circumstances the people, although they may at times be unhappy and consequently discontented, habitually acquiesce in the laws and institutions which they live under, and seek for relief through those institutions and not in defiance of them. Individual ambition struggles to ascend by no other paths than those which the law recognizes and allows. The ruling powers have no immediate interest in counteracting the progress of civilization; society is either stationary, or moves onward solely in those directions in which its progress brings it into no collision with the established order of things.

Society may be said to be in its *transitional* state, when it contains other persons fitter for worldly power and moral influence than those who have hitherto enjoyed them: when worldly power, and the greatest existing capacity for worldly affairs, are no longer united but severed; and when the authority which sets the opinions and forms the feelings of those who are not accustomed to think for themselves, does not exist at all, or, existing, resides anywhere but in the most cultivated intellects, and the most exalted characters, of the age.

When this is the posture of affairs, society has either entered or is on the point of entering into a state in which there are no established doctrines; in which the world of opinions is a mere chaos, and in which, as to worldly affairs, whosoever is dissatisfied with any thing or for any reason, flies at once to an alteration in the conditions of worldly power, as a means for obtaining something which would remove what he deems the cause of his dissatisfaction. And this continues until a moral and social revolution (or it may be, a series of such) has replaced worldly power and moral influence in the hands of the most competent: when society is once more in its natural state, and resumes its onward progress, at the point where it was stopped before by the social system which it has shivered.

It is the object of the present paper, and of that by which it will be immediately followed, to demonstrate, that the changes in the visible structure of society which are manifestly approaching, and which so many anticipate with dread, and so many with hope of a nature far different from that which I feel, are the means by which we are to be carried through our present transitional state, and the human mind is to resume its quiet and regular onward course; a course as undisturbed by convulsions or anarchy, either in the political or in the moral world, as in the best times heretofore, but far more favoured than any former period in respect to the means of rapid advancement, and less impeded by the effect of counteracting forces.

[83]

To begin with the conditions of worldly power.

There are two states of society, differing in other respects, but agreeing in this, that worldly power is habitually exercised by the fittest men. One is, when the holders of power are purposely selected for their fitness. The other is, when the circumstances of society are such, that the possession of power of itself calls forth the qualifications for its exercise, in a greater degree than they can be acquired by any other persons in that state of society.

The former state was exemplified in the best constituted republics of antiquity, and is now realized in the United States of America: the latter prevailed throughout most of the nations of Europe in the middle ages.

In the best of the ancient republics all offices, political or military, which were supposed to require peculiar abilities, were conferred upon those who, in the opinion of the best judges, the educated gentlemen of the country (for such the free citizens of Athens, and, in its best times, of Rome, essentially were) possessed the greatest personal qualifications for administering the affairs of the state, and would administer them according to the best ideas of their age. With how much wisdom the choice was usually made, is evidenced in the case

of Athens, by the extraordinary series of great men by whom the affairs of that little commonwealth were successively managed, and who made it the source of light and civilization to the world, and the most inspiring and elevating example which history has yet produced, of how much human nature is capable. In the case of Rome, the same fact is as certainly demonstrated, by the steady unintermitted progress of that community from the smallest beginnings to the highest prosperity and power.

In the United States, where those who are called to power, are so by the general voice of the whole people, experience equally testifies to the admirable good sense with which the highest offices have been bestowed. At every election of a President, without exception, the people's choice has fallen on the person whom, as all impartial observers must admit, every circumstance that the people knew, pointed out as the fittest; nor is it possible to name one person preeminently qualified for the office, who has not, if he was a candidate, obtained it. In the only two cases in which subsequent experience did not confirm the people's judgment, they corrected the error on the very first lawful opportunity.

But supposing that, in communities constituted like the United States, the holders of power were not really, as in fact they are, the most qualified persons; they are at least those whom the people imagine to be so. The people, consequently, are satisfied with their institutions, and with their rulers; and feel no disposition to lay the blame of their private ills upon the existing order of society, nor to seek the improvement of their circumstances by any means which are repugnant to that order.

In addition to these instances, where the management of the affairs of the community is in the fittest hands because those hands are deliberately selected and put in charge of it, there is another class of cases, in which power is not assigned to him who is already the fittest, but has a strong tendency to render that person the fittest to whom it is assigned. The extreme case of this state of society is that of a Highland clan: and all other small societies of barbarous people are in the main similar. The chief of a clan is despotic, so far as custom and opinion and habit can render him so. He is not selected for any qualities of his, for his office is in all cases hereditary. But he is bred to it, and practised in it from his youth upwards; while every other member of the community is bred to, and practised in, something else, and has no opportunity of training himself to that. The position, moreover, of the society itself, does not admit of the chief's being utterly destitute of the necessary qualifications for leading the clan in battle, and guiding them in council. It is the condition of his existence and theirs, that he should be capable of maintaining himself in circumstances of considerable difficulty. As men generally contrive to acquire the faculties which they cannot possibly do without, the head of a clan is scarcely ever absolutely unfit for governing: the clansmen are fit for executing, and sometimes for advising, but seldom for commanding. The leader, therefore, is still the fittest, or at the least as fit as any one else: and the essential character of a natural state of society is realised, for the people have confidence in those who manage their affairs.

Between these two states of society, that in which capacity raises men to power, and that in which power calls forth their capacity, there is this important difference, that the former state does not contain in itself the seeds of its own dissolution. A society which is directed by its most capable members, wheresoever they are to be found, may doubtless come to an end, as is shown by many instances, but at least its dissolution is never the direct consequence of its own organization, since every new intellectual power which grows up, takes its natural place in the existing social order, and is not obliged to break it in pieces in order to make itself way. But when the possession of power is guaranteed to particular persons independently of their capacity, those persons may be the fittest to-day and the most incapable to-morrow: and these social arrangements are exposed to certain destruction, from every cause which raises up in the society itself, fitter persons for power than those who possess it. For although mankind, in all ages except those of transition, are ever ready to obey



and love those whom they recognize as better able to govern them, than they are to govern themselves, it is not in human nature to yield a willing obedience to men whom you think no wiser than yourself, especially when you are told by those whom you do think wiser, that they would govern you in a different manner. Unless therefore this state of society be so constituted as to prevent altogether the progress of civilization, that progress always ultimately overthrows it—the tendency of civilization being on the one hand, to render some of those who are excluded from power, fitter and fitter for it, and on the other hand (in a way hereafter to be explained) to render the monopolizers of power, actually less fit for it than they were originally.

Now, the proposition which I am about to prove is, that the above is a correct account of the process which has been going on for a considerable length of time in modern Europe:— that the qualification for power has been, and is, anything rather than fitness for it, either real or presumed: that nevertheless the holders of power, for a long time, possessed, from the necessary circumstances of society, greater fitness for it than was possessed by any other persons at that time; which fitness they have for some time been losing, while others through the advancement of civilization have been gaining it, until power, and fitness for power, have altogether ceased to correspond: and that this is one great cause, so far as political circumstances are concerned, of the general dissatisfaction with the present order of society, and the unsettled state of political opinion.

From the earliest periods of the nations of modern Europe, all worldly power has belonged to one particular class, the wealthy class. For many centuries the only wealth was land, and the only wealthy were the territorial aristocracy. At a later period, landed wealth ceased to be so greatly engrossed by a few noble families, and manufacturing and commercial wealth grew by little and little into large masses. Worldly power, under which expression I include all direct influence over the worldly affairs of the community, became proportionably diffused. It then belonged to two classes, but to them exclusively, the landed gentry, and the monied class; and in their hands it still remains.

For many ages these were felt by all to be the proper depositories of power, because they possessed, on the average, such qualifications for it as no other members of the community, in the then state of civilization, could rationally hope to acquire. It cannot, for example, be imagined that the villeins or serfs, or even the smaller freeholders, in those ages in which nothing was to be learnt from books, but all from practice and experience, could be so fit for commanding the nation in battle, or deliberating on its affairs in council, as those who had been taught to look to these as their appointed functions and occupations, who had been trained to fitness for them in every way which was suggested by the conceptions of those times, and who from constant practice, possessed at least the same kind of superiority in their business, which an experienced workman possesses over one who has never handled a tool.

It is not pretended that the barons were in themselves very fit for power, or that they did not use it very ill; they did so, as history testifies, to a frightful extent: not that I agree in one-half of all that is said in their disparagement by many who, if contemporary with them, would most probably have admired them, having no standard of approbation but the ideas of their own age. But those may be in themselves very unfit, than whom, nevertheless, an uncivilized age affords none fitter: and power, which is not accountable to those interested in its being properly employed, is likely to be abused, even though it be held by the most capable persons, not in a rude age only, but in the most highly civilized one. This is one of those principles which being true in all states and in all situations in which man has been found, or in which we can rationally expect to find him, must be allowed the paramount importance which is due to it, whatever be the state of society that we are considering. This may not always have been duly adverted to by the historical school of politicians (by whom, be it understood, I mean the really profound and philosophic inquirers into history in France and

Germany, not the Plausibles, who in our own land of shallowness and charlatanerie, babble about induction without having ever considered what it is, relying on that rhetoric which is defined by Plato as the art of appearing profoundly versed in a subject to those who know nothing at all about it). I say, those who have endeavoured to erect an inductive philosophy of history, may be charged with having taken insufficient account of the qualities in which mankind in all ages and nations are alike, their attention being unduly engrossed by the differences; but there is an error on the other side, to which those are peculiarly liable, who build their philosophy of politics upon what they term the universal principles of human nature. Such persons often form their judgments, in particular cases, as if, because there are universal principles of human nature, they imagined that all are such which they find to be true universally of the people of their own age and country. They should consider that if there are some tendencies of human nature, and some of the circumstances by which man is surrounded, which are the same in all ages and countries, these never form the whole of the tendencies, or of the circumstances, which exist in any particular age or country: each possesses, along with those invariable tendencies, others which are changeable, and peculiarly its own; and in no age, as civilization advances, are the prevailing tendencies exactly the same as in the preceding age, nor do those tendencies act under precisely the same combination of external circumstances.

We must not therefore (as some may be apt to do,) blame the people of the middle ages for not having sought securities against the irresponsible power of their rulers; persuading ourselves that in those or in any times, popular institutions might exist, if the many had sense to perceive their utility, and spirit to demand them. To find fault with our ancestors for not having annual parliaments, universal suffrage, and vote by ballot, would be like quarrelling with the Greeks and Romans for not using steam navigation, when we know it is so safe and expeditious; which would be, in short, simply finding fault with the third century before Christ for not being [84] the eighteenth century after. It was necessary that many other things should be thought and done, before, according to the laws of human affairs, it was possible that steam navigation should be thought of. Human nature must proceed step by step, in politics as well as in physics. The people of the middle ages knew very well, whether they were oppressed or not; and the opinion of the many, added to the fear of vengeance from some injured individual, acted in a certain, though doubtless by no means a sufficient, extent, as a restraint upon oppression. For any more effectual restraint than this, society was not yet ripe. To have thrown off their masters, and taken others, would have been to buy a still worse government at the price of a convulsion: to contrive, establish, and work the machine of a responsible government, was an impossibility in the then state of the human mind. Though the idea had been conceived, it could not have been realized. Several antecedent stages in civilization had previously to be passed through. An insurrection of the peasants against their feudal lords, could, in the nature of things, have only been, what it actually was, a Jacquerie: for any more rational effort there was needed a power of self-restraint for the purpose of union, and a confidence in each other, which they are not to be blamed for not having, since it could only be the slow result of a habit of acting in concert for other purposes, which, in an extensive country, can only co-exist with a high state of civilization. So soon as any portion of the people did acquire this habit of acting together, they did seek better political securities, and obtained them: witness the rise of the free cities, and corporations, all over Europe. The people therefore of the middle ages had as good a government as the circumstances of the middle ages admitted; their affairs were less badly managed, in that bad age, by their masters, than they could have managed them for themselves. The army of Godefroi de Bouillon in the first crusade, was not quite so efficient an instrument of warfare as that of the Duke of Wellington, in 1815: but it was considerably more so than that of Peter the Hermit, which preceded it.

From these remarks it will be seen how greatly I differ, at once from those, who seeing the institutions of our ancestors to be bad for us, imagine that they were bad for those for whom they were made, and from those who ridiculously invoke the wisdom of our ancestors as authority for institutions which in substance are now totally different, howsoever they may be the same in form. The institutions of our ancestors served passably well for our ancestors, and that from no wisdom of theirs; but from a cause to which, I am afraid, nearly all the good institutions which have ever existed, owed their origin, namely the force of circumstances: but the possessors of power in the present day are not the natural successors of the possessors of power in that day. They may show a valid title to inherit the property, perhaps, of the ancient Barons; but political power descends, as will be found in the long run, by a different law.

*(The conclusion of this Paper in our next.)*

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### **The Spirit of the Age. No. 3 (concluded) (*The Examiner*, 13 Mar., 1831)** ↩

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*[It was by mistake that we announced, several weeks since, that this series would conclude with the present paper. It will extend to several numbers more, though the pressure of more urgent matters will not enable us to continue it from week to week.]*

IT IS NOT NECESSARY for me to point out that until a comparatively recent period, none but the wealthy, and even, I might say, the hereditarily wealthy, had it in their power to acquire the intelligence, the knowledge, and the habits, which are necessary to qualify a man, in any tolerable degree, for managing the affairs of his country. It is not necessary for me to show that this is no longer the case, nor what are the circumstances which have changed it: the improvement in the arts of life, giving ease and comfort to great numbers not possessed of the degree of wealth which confers political power: the increase of reading: the diffusion of elementary education: the increase of the town-population, which brings masses of men together, and accustoms them to examine and discuss important subjects with one another; and various other causes, which are known to every body. All this, however, is nothing more than the acquisition by other people in an inferior degree, of a few of the advantages which have always been within the reach of the higher classes, in a much greater degree: and if the higher classes had profited as they might have done by these advantages, and had kept their station in the vanguard of the march of improvement, they would not only at this moment have been sure to retain in their hands all the powers of government, subject perhaps to severer conditions of responsibility, but might possibly even have continued for a considerable time longer to retain them on the same footing as at present. For ample experience has proved that mankind (who, however prone they may be, in periods of transition, to even groundless suspicion and distrust, are as strongly addicted at all other times to the opposite extreme of blind and boundless confidence), will bear even great excesses of abused power, from those whom they recognize as fitter to hold the reins of government than themselves.

But the higher classes, instead of advancing, have retrograded in all the higher qualities of mind. In the humanizing effects of civilization they have indeed partaken, and, to some extent, in the diffusion of superficial knowledge, and are so far superior to their predecessors: but those predecessors were braced and nerved by the invigorating atmosphere of a barbarous age, and had all the virtues of a strong will and an energetic active mind, which their descendants are destitute of. For these qualities were not the fruits of an enlightened

education skilfully pointed to that end, but of the peculiar position of the holders of power; and that position is no longer the same.

All is not absolutely unfounded in the notion we imbibe at school, from the modern writers on the decline of the ancient commonwealths, that luxury deadens and enervates the mind. It is true that these writers (whose opinion, truly, was the result of no process of thought in their own imitative souls, but a faint impression left by a ray of the stoic philosophy of Greece and Rome themselves, refracted or bent out of its direction by the muddy medium through which it had passed) were wrong in laying it down as a principle that pleasure enervates; as if pleasure, only to be earned by labour and won by heroic deeds, ever did or ever [163] could enervate the mind of any one. What really enervates, is the secure and unquestioned possession, without any exertion, of all those things, to gain which, mankind in general are wont to exert themselves. This secure and lazy possession, the higher classes have now for some generations enjoyed; their predecessors in the same station and privileges did not enjoy it.

Who, for example, that looks over the catalogue of the Kings who have reigned in Europe for the last two centuries, would not conclude, from that and the nature of the case combined, that the station of a hereditary king was the very most unfavourable to be found in this sublunary world, for the acquisition of any talents for governing? Is not the incapacity of the monarch allowed for, as an inevitable inconvenience, even by the most strenuous supporters of monarchy; represented at best as an evil susceptible of palliation, and preventing other evils far more fatal? From the beginning of the eighteenth century it has passed into a philosophic truism, that kings are generally unfit to govern, and likely even to delegate their power not to statesmen, but to favourites, unless forced to choose those Ministers whom the public voice recommends to them. Yet this maxim is far from being borne out by history. A decided majority of all the kings of England previous to the Revolution, will be found to have been men who, in every endowment belonging to their age, might be compared to the best men in it. The same may be said of the Emperors of Germany, and even of the Kings of France, of Spain, the Dukes of Burgundy, and so on. Would you know why? Think of Edward II and Richard II. In that turbulent age, no rank or station rendered the situation of a man without considerable personal endowments, a secure one. If the king possessed eminent talents, he might be nearly absolute: if he was a slave to ease and dissipation, not only his importance was absolutely null, but his throne and his life itself were constantly in danger. The Barons stood no less in need of mental energy and ability. Power, though not earned by capacity, might be greatly increased by it, and could not be retained or enjoyed without it. The possessor of power was not in the situation of one who is rewarded without exertion, but of one who feels a great prize within his grasp, and is stimulated to every effort necessary to make it securely his own.

But the virtues which insecurity calls forth, ceased with insecurity itself. In a civilized age, though it may be difficult to *get*, it is very easy to *keep*: if a man does not earn what he gets before he gets it, he has little motive to earn it thereafter. The greater the power a man has upon these terms, the less he is likely to deserve it. Accordingly, as Mr. Hallam has remarked, Great Britain has had since William III no monarch of more than ordinary personal endowments; nor will she ever more, unless the chapter of accidents should open at a page inscribed with very singular characters. We may add, that the House of Peers has produced, since the same epoch, hardly any remarkable men; though some such have, from time to time, been aggregated to the order. As soon as these facts became manifest, it was easy to see a termination to hereditary monarchy and hereditary aristocracy: for we never shall again return to the age of violence and insecurity, when men were forced, whatever might be their taste for incapacity, to become men of talents in spite of themselves: and mankind will not always consent to allow a fat elderly gentleman to fill the first place, without insisting upon

his doing something to deserve it. I do not undertake to say in what particular year hereditary distinctions will be abolished, nor do I say that I would vote for their abolition, if it were proposed now, in the existing state of society and opinion: but to the philosopher, who contemplates the past and future fortunes of mankind as one series, and who counts a generation or two for no more in marking the changes of the moral, than an age or two in those of the physical world, the ultimate fate of such distinctions is already decided.

There was an intermediate stage in the history of our own island, in which it was yet a question whether the Crown should share in the government of the country as the master of the aristocracy, or only as the first and most powerful of its members. Though the progress of civilization had given to the gentry of England, personal security independently of honourable exertion, it had not yet given them undisputed power. They were nothing, except through the Parliament, and the Parliament as yet, was nothing, except through their energy and talents. The great names by which the seventeenth century of English history has been immortalized, belonged almost without an exception to the same class which now possesses the governing power. What a contrast! Think, good heavens! that Sir John Elliot, and John Hampden, and Sir John Colepepper, and Sir Thomas Wentworth, were *country gentlemen*—and think who are the parliamentary leaders of that class in our own day: a Knatchbull, a Bankes, a Gooch, a Lethbridge! Think even of the most respectable names among the English landholders of our time, such as Lord Wharncliffe, or Mr. Coke. The remainder of the great politicians of that age, the Bacons, the Cecils, the Walsinghams, the Seldens, the Iretons, the Pyms, the Cokes, were mostly lawyers. But what lawyers, and how strikingly distinguished, as well by their origin as by the range of their faculties and acquirements, from our successful Barristers, our Sugdens and Copleys! They were almost to a man, the younger or even the elder sons of the first families among the English gentry: who studied the law as being what it then in some degree was, a liberal profession, a pursuit fit for a gentleman, and not for a mere drudge; exercising at least the higher faculties, by the comprehension of principles, (though frequently absurd ones), not the mere memory, by the heaping together of unconnected details: and who studied it chiefly that it might serve them in fulfilling the exalted mission, to which they were called by an ambition justly to be called noble, since it required of them great sacrifices, and could be gratified only by the accomplishment of what was then nearest to their country's weal.

Applied to these men, the expression, natural leaders of the people, has some meaning: and then and then only it was that our institutions worked well, for they made this country the nurse of more that is exalted in sentiment, and expansive and profound in thought, than has been produced by all other countries in the modern world taken together, until a recent period. The whole of their effect is now the direct contrary—to degrade our morals, and to narrow and blunt our understandings: nor shall we ever be what we might be, nor even what we once were, until our institutions are adapted to the present state of civilization, and made compatible with the future progress of the human mind. But this will, I trust, more clearly appear, when, in the next paper, the historical survey which I have here taken of the conditions of worldly power, shall also have been taken of the conditions of moral influence.

A.B.

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**The Spirit of the Age. No. IV (*The Examiner*, 3 Apr., 1831) [↪](#)**

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IT HAS BEEN STATED, in the preceding paper, that the conditions which confer worldly power are still, amidst all changes of circumstances, the same as in the middle ages—namely, the possession of wealth, or the being employed and trusted by the wealthy. In the middle ages, this form of government might have been approved, even by a philosopher, if a philosopher had been possible in those ages: not, surely, for its intrinsic excellence; not because mankind enjoyed, or could have enjoyed, the blessings of good government under it: but there are states of society in which we must not seek for a good government, but for the least bad one. It is part of the inevitable lot of mankind, that when they themselves are in a backward state of civilization, they are unsusceptible of being well governed.

But, now, mankind are capable of being better governed than the wealthy classes have ever heretofore governed them: while those classes, instead of having improved, have actually retrograded in capacity for government. The abuses of their power have not diminished, though now showing themselves no otherwise than in forms compatible with the mildness of modern manners, and being of that kind which provokes contempt, mingled with resentment, rather than terror and hatred, as of yore.

Such of the above propositions as required illustration appearing to have sufficiently received it in the foregoing paper, I proceed to take a similar survey of the changes which mankind have undergone in respect to the conditions on which moral influence, or power over the minds of mankind, is dependent.

There are three distinguishable sources of moral influence:—eminent wisdom and virtue, real or supposed; the power of addressing mankind in the name of religion; and, finally, worldly power.

It is not necessary to illustrate the manner in which superiority of wisdom and virtue, or in which religion, pre-engages men's minds with the opinions and feelings in favour of which those authorities declare themselves. It is equally superfluous to insist upon the influence exercised over the minds of men by worldly power. The tendency of the human mind to the worship of power, is well understood. It is matter of common complaint, that even the Supreme Being is adored by an immense majority as the Almighty, not as the All-good; as he who can destroy, not as he who has blessed. It is a familiar fact, that the vulgar, in all parts of the world, have in general little or no rule of conduct or of opinion, but to do as their betters do, and to think as their betters think: and this very word *betters*, is a speaking proof of the fact which we allege—meaning, as it does, not their *wisers*, or their *honesters*, but their *richers*, and those placed in authority over them.

All persons, from the most ignorant to the most instructed, from the most stupid to the most intelligent, have their minds more or less under the dominion of one or other, or all, of the influences which have just been mentioned. All bow down, with a submission more or less implicit, to the authority of superior minds, or of the interpreters of the divine will, or of their superiors in rank and station.

When an opinion is sanctioned by all these authorities, or by any one of them, the others not opposing, it becomes the received opinion. At all periods of history in which there has existed a general agreement among these three authorities, there have existed *received doctrines*: a phrase the sense of which is now almost forgotten. The most marked character of such periods is a firm confidence in inherited opinions. Men cleave with a strong and fervent faith to the doctrine which they have imbibed from their infancy: though in conduct they be tempted to swerve from it, the belief remains in their hearts, fixed and immoveable, and has an irresistible hold upon the consciences of all good men. When, on the contrary, the three authorities are divided among themselves, or against each other, a violent conflict rages among opposing doctrines, until one or other prevails, or until mankind settle down into a

state of general uncertainty and scepticism. At present, we are in a mixed state; some fight fiercely under their several banners, and these chiefly the least instructed; while the others (those few excepted who have strength to stand by themselves) are blown about by every breath, having no steady opinion—or at least no deep-rooted conviction that their opinion is true.

Society, therefore, has its natural state, and its transitional state, with respect to moral influence as well as to worldly power. Let us bestow a few words upon the natural state, and upon the nature of those varieties of the social order in which it has hitherto been realized.

It is in states of society in which the holders of power are chosen by the people (or by the most highly civilized portion of the people) for their supposed fitness, that we should most expect to find the three authorities acting together, and giving their sanction to the same doctrines. As men are raised to worldly power for their supposed wisdom and virtue, two of the three sources of moral influence are united in the same individuals. And although the rulers of such societies, being the creatures of the people's choice, have not, *quâ* rulers, that ascendancy over the minds of the people, which power obtained and held independently of their will, commonly possesses; nevertheless, the station to which they are elevated gives them greater opportunities of rendering their wisdom and their virtue visible, while it also fixed the outward stamp of general recognition upon that merit, which would otherwise operate upon each mind only in proportion to its confidence in its own power of discriminating the most worthy.

Accordingly, in the best-constituted commonwealths of the ancient world, this unity of moral influence did to a very great degree exist. And in the great popular government of our own times, it exists with respect to the general doctrines of the constitution, and many maxims of national policy, and the list of received doctrines is [211] increasing as rapidly as the differences of opinion among the persons possessing moral influence will allow.

I say, only the *best-constituted* commonwealths of antiquity—and chiefly Athens, Sparta, and Rome—because, in the others, the form of the government, and the circumstances of society itself, being in a perpetual flux, the elements of moral influence never remained long enough in the same hands, to allow time for constitutional doctrines, or received maxims of policy, to grow up. But, in the three commonwealths which I have named, such constitutional doctrines, and such received maxims of policy, did exist, and the community was intensely attached to them.

The great authority for political doctrines in all these governments was the wisdom of ancestors: their old laws, their old maxims, the opinions of their ancient statesmen. This may sound strange to those who have imbibed the silly persuasion, that fickleness and love of innovation are the characteristics of popular governments. It is, however, matter of authentic history. It is not seen in reading Mitford, who always believed his prejudices above his eyes—but it is seen in reading Demosthenes, who shows in every page that he regards the authority of ancestors, not merely as an argument, but as one of the strongest of arguments; and steps out of his way to eulogise the wisdom of the ancient laws and lawgivers, with a frequency which proves it to have been the most popular of topics, and one on which his unequalled tact and sagacity taught him mainly to rely. All the other Athenian orators, down to the speeches in Thucydides; Cicero, and all that we know of the Roman orators; Plato, and almost all the monuments which remain to us of the ideas of Athens, Sparta, and Rome, teem with evidence of the same fact. In all this there is nothing but what the known constitution of human nature would have enabled us to surmise: it is precisely what marks these commonwealths to have been in a natural state of society. When a government, whether it be a popular one or not, works well for the people among whom it exists, and satisfies their highest conceptions of a good social order, there is naturally a strong, and generally a very

just, reverence for the memory of its founders. This would not have been thought strange three-quarters of a century ago. Robertson, the historian, speaks with the utmost simplicity, of “that attachment to ancient forms, and aversion to innovation, which are the unfailing characteristics of popular assemblies.” Europe had not then entered into the state of transition of which the first overt manifestation was the breaking out of the French revolution. Since that epoch, those near-sighted people who can see nothing beyond their own age, have mistaken that desire of novelty, and disregard of the authority of ancestors, which characterise an age of transition, for the properties of a popular government: just as if the same symptoms did not constantly attend every change, no matter of what nature, in the spirit of the age; as if we might not be quite sure that there was as much scoffing at the wisdom of ancestors in the Court of Augustus, as in the National Convention of France.

The authority of ancestors, so deeply revered at Athens and Rome, was the authority of the wisest and best men for many successive generations. If, instead of upholding and applauding the ancient maxims, the ablest and most experienced contemporaries had affirmed them to be the rude conceptions of barbarians, the many would have lost their faith in them, and would have been as we are now. Nor had authority more than its just weight: it did not supersede reason, but guided it: for every relic which remains to us, of what was addressed to the Athenian Demos, for example, by their orators and politicians, is full of strong sense, cogent argument, and the most manly and forcible appeals to the reason of the people. The speeches of the great orators, and those in Thucydides, are monuments of long-sighted policy, and keen and sagacious observation of life and human nature, which will be prized as long as the world shall endure, or as wisdom shall be understood and appreciated in it.

It is well known that respect and deference for old age formed a conspicuous feature both in the public and private morality of the ancient commonwealths: and there is no surer mark of a natural state of society in respect to moral influence. So deeply, however, have the notions and feelings of an age of transition taken root among us, that if there are some who wonder that this reverence should no longer exist, there are probably many more who wonder that it should ever have existed, and view it as a sort of superstition, or as one of the numerous oddities of those peculiar people, the ancients: if, indeed, they believe it at all; for it may be almost a misapplication of terms to say that a man believes a fact, although he may never dream of doubting it; as religious writers know well, when they treat of what they call practical infidelity. We can hardly be said to believe that, which we do not conceive with any distinctness or vivacity. What we read of Greece and Rome is so remote from what we have ever seen; we are helped by so few familiar analogies to penetrate our minds with its spirit, and make ourselves, as it were, at home in it, that some strength of imagination is requisite to conceive it with the intensity and life which is essential to any thing deserving the name of belief. We do not believe ancient history, we only fancy we believe it—our belief deserves no higher name than simple acquiescence—it scarcely amounts to more than that conventional assent, which we give to the mythology of the same nations.

Unquestionably, if the mental state of the old men of the present day were their natural state, there would be little reason for paying much deference to their modes of thinking. But narrowness of mind, and obstinate prejudice, are not the necessary, or the natural concomitants of old age. Old men have generally both their opinions and their feelings more deeply rooted than the young; but is it an evil to have strong convictions, and steady unfluctuating feelings? It is on the contrary, essential to all dignity or solidity of character, and to all fitness for guiding or governing mankind. It constitutes prejudice, only when society is at one of those turns or vicissitudes in its history, at which it becomes necessary that it should change its opinions and its feelings. There is but little wisdom in any one head, whatever quantity there may be in the society collectively, when the young are wiser than the old. We should not forget that, in the natural state of things, the old would, as a matter of



course, be further advanced than the young, simply because they have been longer on the road. If this be not the case at present, it is because we have come to a bend in the road, and they not knowing it, continued to advance in the same line, got to the wrong side of the hedge, and allowed even the hindmost to pass them by. If the old know less than the young, it is because it is hard to unlearn; but society, fortunately, has not so frequent need to unlearn, as to learn.

All old men might have, and some old men really have, knowledge which it is altogether impossible that a young man, however great his capacity, should possess a very large measure of, namely, that which is derived from personal experience. There are some states of civilization in which this is every thing—rude states, it is true. In these, accordingly, the authority of age is almost unlimited. Nowhere is it so great as among the North American Indians: for there, the knowledge and judgment of every man must be nearly in proportion to the length of his individual experience, as the cunning of a fox may be not inaccurately measured by his years. Among the Greeks and Romans, though, in comparison, highly civilized nations, wisdom, notwithstanding, was less the fruit of speculative study, than of intercourse with the world, practice in business, and the long habit of deliberating on public affairs. It was there a recognised maxim, that old men were fittest to devise, and young men to execute.

In an age of literature, there is no longer, of necessity, the same wide interval between the knowledge of the old, and that which is attainable by the young. The experience of all former ages, recorded in books, is open to the young man as to the old; and this, doubtless, comprises much more than the individual experience of any one man; but it does not comprise all. There are things which books cannot teach. A young man *cannot*, unless his history has been a most extraordinary one, possess either that knowledge of life, which is necessary in the most difficult and important practical business, or that knowledge of the more recondite parts of human nature, which is equally necessary for the foundation of sound ethical and even political principles, but which is almost the exclusive privilege of him who, like Ulysses, has been πολῦτλας. which he, whose mind has not passed through numerous states, both moral and intellectual, cannot find out by himself—though he may undoubtedly take upon trust from other minds, such faint, uncertain, and shadowy conceptions, as we have of a plant or an animal about which we have merely read. It is true that our old men, educated as they were, have little enough of all these advantages; but young men *cannot* have them. If they are not in the old men, they are nowhere.

That the habits of old men are fixed, their principles riveted, and that they swerve not easily from them, instead of a defect, should naturally be the highest recommendation. It would be so, if the habits which they acquired in their youth, were still suitable to the state of the human mind in their old age. When it is otherwise, indeed, the greater flexibility of the young, their greater accessibility to new ideas and new feelings, all which would otherwise be termed unsteadiness, renders them the sole hope of society. But this is nothing to be proud of, or to rejoice at; it is one of the great causes which combine to render this state of transition a most dangerous passage to society. The indispensable requisites for wise thinking and wise conduct in great affairs, are severed from each other: they are apart, and are not all found in the same men; nay, they are found in two sets of men, who are, for the most part, warring with each other. The young must prevail, though it were only by outliving their antagonists; but the most important of the qualifications for making a good use of success, are still to be acquired by them during the struggle. In turbulent times, knowledge of life and business are rapidly obtained; but a comprehensive knowledge of human nature is scarcely to be acquired, but by calm reflexion and observation, in times of political tranquillity; for when minds are excited, and one man is ranged against another, there are few who do not contract an invincible repugnance, not only to the errors of their opponents, but to the truths to which

those errors are allied. Through this state, however, we must struggle; and happy will be the day when it will once more be true, that with length of years cometh wisdom, and when the necessary privations and annoyances of declining life shall again, as heretofore, be compensated by the honour and the gratitude due to increased powers of usefulness, fittingly employed.

A.B.

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### The Spirit of the Age. No. V (*The Examiner*, 15 May, 1831)↩

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IN COMMENCING THIS SERIES OF PAPERS, I intended, and attempted, that the divisions of my discourse should correspond with those of my subject, and that each number should comprehend within its own limits all which was necessary to the expansion and illustration of one single idea. The nature of the publication, which, as being read by more persons capable of understanding the drift of such speculations (and by fewer, in proportion, who are unfit for them) than any other single work, I considered myself fortunate in being enabled to adopt as a vehicle for my ideas, compels me to limit the length of each article more than is compatible with my original plan. I can no longer always hope that every paper should be complete within itself; and the present number, had it appeared in its proper place, would have formed the continuation of the last.

In endeavouring to give an intelligible notion of what I have termed the *natural* state of society, in respect of moral influence—namely, that state in which the opinions and feelings of the people are, with their voluntary acquiescence, formed *for* them, by the most cultivated minds which the intelligence and morality of the times call into existence; and in drawing attention to the striking differences between this *natural* state and our present *transitional* condition, in which there are no persons to whom the mass of the uninstructed habitually defer, and in whom they trust for finding the right, and for pointing it out; I have hitherto illustrated the former state only by the example of those commonwealths, in which the most qualified men are studiously picked out because of their qualifications, and invested with that worldly power, which, if it were in any other hands, would divide or eclipse their moral influence: but which, placed in theirs, and acting partly as a *certificate* of authority, and partly as a *cause*, tends naturally to render their power over the minds of their fellow-citizens paramount and irresistible.

But it is not solely in such societies that there is found a united body of moral authority, sufficient to extort acquiescence from the uninquiring, or uninformed majority. It is found, likewise, in all societies where religion possesses a sufficient ascendancy, to subdue the minds of the possessors of worldly power, and where the spirit of the prevailing religion is such as excludes the possibility of material conflict of opinion among its teachers.

These conditions exist among two great stationary communities—the Hindoos and the Turks; and are doubtless the chief cause which keeps those communities stationary. The same union of circumstances has been hitherto found only in one *progressive* society—but that, the greatest which had ever existed: Christendom in the middle ages.

For many centuries, undivided moral influence over the nations of Europe, the unquestioned privilege of forming the opinions and feelings of the Christian world, was enjoyed, and most efficiently exercised by the Catholic clergy. Their word inspired in the rest

of mankind the most fervent faith. It not only absolutely excluded doubt, but caused the doubter to be regarded with sentiments of profound abhorrence, which moralists had never succeeded in inspiring for the most revolting of crimes. It is certainly possible to feel perfectly sure of an opinion, without believing that whosoever doubts it will be damned, and should be burnt: and this last is by no means one of those peculiarities of a natural state of society which I am at all anxious to see restored. But the deep earnest feeling of firm and unwavering conviction, which it pre-supposes, we may, without being unreasonable, lament that it was impossible, and could not *but* be impossible, in the intellectual anarchy of a general revolution in opinion, to transfer unimpaired to the truth.

The priesthood did not claim a right to dictate to mankind, either in belief or practice, beyond the province of religion and morals, but the political interests of mankind came not the less within their pale because they seldom assumed the authority to regulate those concerns by specific precepts. They gave the sanction of their irresistible authority to one comprehensive rule, that which enjoined unlimited obedience to the temporal sovereign: an obligation from which they absolved the conscience of the believer, only when the sovereign disputed their authority within their peculiar province: and in that case they were invariably triumphant, like all those to whom it is given to call forth the moral sentiments of mankind in all their energy, against the inducements of mere physical hopes and fears.

The Catholic clergy, at the time when they possessed this undisputed authority in matters of conscience and belief, were, in point of fact, the fittest persons who *could* have possessed it—the then state of society, in respect of moral influence, answers to the description of a *natural* state.

When we consider for how long a period the Catholic clergy were the only members of the European community who could even read; that they were the sole depositaries of all the treasures of thought, and reservoirs of intellectual delight, handed down to us from the ancients; that the sanctity of their persons permitted to them alone, among nations of semi-barbarians, the tranquil pursuit of peaceful occupations and studies; that, howsoever defective the morality which they taught, they had at least a mission for curbing the unruly passions of mankind, and teaching them to set a value upon a distant end, paramount to immediate temptations, and to prize gratifications consisting of mental feelings above bodily sensation; that (situate in the position of rivals to the temporal sovereign, drafted chiefly from the inferior classes of society, from men who otherwise would have been serfs, and the most lowly among them all having the road open before him even to the papal chair,) they had the strongest motives to avail themselves of the means afforded by Christianity, for inculcating the natural equality of mankind, and the superiority of love and sacrifice above mere courage and bodily prowess, for menacing the great with the only terrors to which they were accessible, and speaking to their consciences in the name of the only superior whom they acknowledged, in behalf of the low;—Reflecting on these things, I cannot persuade myself to doubt that the ascendancy of the Catholic clergy was to be desired, for that day, even by the philosopher; and that it has been a potent cause, if even it was not an indispensable condition, of the present civilization of Europe. Nor is this an apology for the vices of the Catholic religion: those vices were great and flagrant, and there was no natural connection between them and the more civilizing and humanizing features in which all that there was of good in it resided. We may regret that the influence of the priesthood was not superseded by a better influence: but where in those days did any such influence exist?

I conclude, therefore, that, during a part of the middle ages, not only worldly power, as already shown, but moral influence also, was undisputedly exercised by the most competent persons; and that the conditions of a natural state of society were then fully realized.

But the age of transition arrived. A time came when that which had overmatched and borne down the strongest obstacles to improvement, became itself incompatible with improvement. Mankind outgrew their religion, and that, too, at a period when they had not yet outgrown their government, because the texture of the latter was more yielding, and could be stretched. We all know how lamentably effectual an instrument the influence of the Catholic priesthood then became, for restraining that expansion of the human intellect, which could not any longer consist with their ascendancy, or with the belief of the doctrines which they taught.

The more advanced communities of Europe succeeded, after a terrific struggle, in effecting their total or partial emancipation: in some, the Reformation achieved a victory—in others, a toleration; while, by a fate unhappily too common, the flame which had been kindled where the pile awaited the spark, spread into countries where the materials were not yet sufficiently prepared; and instead of burning down the hateful edifice, it consumed all that existed capable of nourishing itself, and was extinguished. The germs of civilization to come were scorched up and destroyed; the hierarchy reigned stronger than ever, amidst the intellectual solitude which it had made: and the countries which were thus denuded of the means of further advancement, fell back into barbarism irretrievable except by foreign conquest. Such is the inevitable end, when, unhappily, changes to which the spirit of the age is favourable, can be successfully resisted. Civilization becomes the terror of the ruling powers, and that they may retain their seat, it must be their deliberate endeavour to barbarize mankind. There has been, since that day, one such attempt, and only one, which has had a momentary success: it was that of a man in whom all the evil influences of his age were concentrated with an intensity and energy truly terrific, less tempered by any of its good influences than could appear possible in the times in which he lived—I need scarcely say that I refer to Napoleon. May his abortive effort to uncivilize human nature, to uncultivate the mind of man, and turn it into a desolate waste, be the last!

It remains to trace the history of moral influence in the nations of Europe, subsequently to the Reformation.

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### **The Spirit of the Age. No. V. (concluded) (*The Examiner*, 29 May, 1831)↩**

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IN THE COUNTRIES which remained Catholic, but where the Catholic hierarchy did not retain sufficient moral ascendancy to succeed in stopping the progress of civilization, the church was compelled, by the decline of its separate influence, to link itself more and more closely with the temporal sovereignty. And thus did it retard its own downfall, until the spirit of the age became too strong for the two united, and both fell together to the ground.

I have said that the three sources of moral influence are, supposed [340] wisdom and virtue, the sacerdotal office, and the possession of worldly power. But in Protestant countries, the authority of the ministers of religion, considered as an independent source of moral influence, must be blotted out from the catalogue. None of the churches which were the successors of the Catholic church in the nations in which the Reformation prevailed, succeeded, as churches, to any portion of the moral influence of their predecessor. The reason is, that no Protestant church ever claimed a special mission from the Deity to itself; or ever numbered among the obligations of religion, that of receiving its doctrines from teachers accredited by that particular church. The Catholics received the priest from God, and their

religion from the priest. But in the Protestant sects, you resorted to the teacher, because you had already decided, or because it had been decided for you, that you would adopt his religion. In the popular religions you chose your own creed, and having so done, you naturally had recourse to its ministers;—in the state religions, your creed was chosen for you by your worldly superiors, and you were instigated by conscience, or, it may be, urged by motives of a more worldly nature, to resort for religious instruction to the minister of their appointment.

Every head of a family, even of the lowest rank, in Scotland, is a theologian; he discusses points of doctrine with his neighbours, and expounds the scripture to his family. He defers, indeed, though with no slavish deference, to the opinion of his minister; but in what capacity? only as a man whom his understanding owns as being at least more versed in the particular subject—as being probably a wiser, and possibly, a better man than himself. This is not the influence of an interpreter of religion, as such; it is that of a purer heart, and a more cultivated intelligence. It is not the ascendancy of a priest: it is the combined authority of a professor of religion, and an esteemed private friend.

What I have said of the Scottish church, may be said of all Protestant churches, except state churches (which the Scottish church, notwithstanding its national endowment, is not). It may be said of all dissenters from our own establishment; except, indeed, those who inherit their religion, and adhere to it (not an uncommon case) as they would to any other family connexion. To the followers of the Church of England, a similar observation is wholly inapplicable: those excepted, who would abide by that communion for its doctrine, were it a dissenting sect. The people in general have not, nor ever had, any reason or motive for adhering to the established religion, except that it was the religion of their political superiors: and in the same ratio as their attachment to those superiors has declined, so has their adherence to the established church. From the time when the Church of England became firmly seated in its temporalities; from the period when its title to the fee-simple of our consciences acquired the sanctity of prescription, and when it was enabled to dispense with any support but what it derived from the stable foundations of the social fabric of which it formed a part; it sunk from its independent rank, into an integral part, or a kind of appendage, of the aristocracy. It merged into the higher classes: and what moral influence it possessed, was merely a portion of the general moral influence of temporal superiors.

From the termination, therefore, of that period of intellectual excitement and hardy speculation which succeeded the crisis of the Reformation, and which was prolonged in our own country to the end of the seventeenth century;—that moral influence, that power over the minds of mankind, which had been for so many ages the unquestioned heritage of the Catholic clergy, passed into the hands of the wealthy classes, and became united with worldly power. The ascendancy of the aristocracy was not so dictatorial and enthralling as that of the Catholic priesthood; because it was backed in a far inferior degree by the terrors of religion: and because unity of doctrine was not maintained, by the same powerful means, among the dominant class itself. Nevertheless, the higher classes set the fashion, as in dress, so in opinion. The opinions generally received among them, were the prevalent ones throughout the rest of the nation. A bookish man here and there might have his individual theories, but they made no converts. All who had no opinions of their own, assumed those of their superiors. Few men wrote and published doctrines which the higher classes did not approve; or if published, their books were successfully cried down, or at best, were little read or attended to. Such questions, and such only, as divided the aristocracy, were (modestly) debated by the people: whose various denominations or divisions were each headed by an aristocratic *côterie*. Even the Dissenters made amends for their preference of a vulgar religion, by evincing a full measure of pliability and acquiescence in all that concerned politics and social life; though the banner they in general followed, was that of a section of

the aristocracy less wedded than the other section to the monopoly of the sect which possessed advowsons and archbishoprics.

The wealthy classes, then, from the revolution downwards, possessed all that existed both of moral authority and worldly power. Under their influence grew up the received doctrines of the British constitution; the opinions, respecting the proper limits of the powers of government, and the proper mode of constituting and administering it, which were long characteristic of Englishmen. Along with these arose a vast variety of current opinions respecting morality, education, and the structure of society. And feelings in unison with those opinions, spread far, and took a deep root in the English mind.

At no time, during this period, could the predominant class be said, with truth, to comprise among its members all the persons qualified to govern men's minds, or to direct their temporal interests, whom the state of society afforded. As a whole, however, that class contained, for a long time, a larger share of civilization and mental culture, than all other classes taken together. The difficulties, to men of merit and energy, of lifting themselves into that class, were not insuperable; and the leading and active spirits among the governing body, had capacity to comprehend intellectual superiority, and to value it. The conditions, therefore, of a natural state of society were for some time, upon the whole, tolerably well fulfilled.

But they have now ceased to be fulfilled. The government of the wealthy classes was, after all, the government of an irresponsible few; it therefore swarmed with abuses. Though the people, by the growth of their intelligence, became more and more sensible of whatever was vicious in their government, they might possibly have borne with it, had they themselves remained as they were formerly, unfit, and conscious of their unfitness, for the business of government. But the comparative freedom of the practical administration of our Constitution—the extensive latitude of action which it allowed to the energies of individuals—enabled the people to train themselves in every habit necessary for self-government; for the rational management of their own affairs. I believe it would be impossible to mention any portion whatever of the business of government (except some parts of the defence of the country against external enemies), of which the exact counterpart is not, in some instance or other, performed by a committee chosen by the people themselves: performed with less means, and under incomparably greater difficulties, but performed unexceptionably, and to the general satisfaction of the persons interested. It is notorious that much of the most important part of what in most other countries composes the business of government, is here performed wholly by voluntary associations: and other portions are done by the government in so clumsy and slovenly a manner, that it is found necessary to have recourse to voluntary associations as a subsidiary resource.

When the people were thus trained to self-government, and had learned by experience that they were fit for it, they could not continue to suppose that none but persons of rank and fortune were entitled to have a voice in the government, or were competent to criticise its proceedings. The superior capacity of the higher ranks for the exercise of worldly power is now a broken spell.

It *was* in the power of those classes, possessed as they were of leisure and boundless opportunities of mental culture, to have kept themselves on the level of the most advanced intellects of the age; not to have been overtopped by the growth around them of a mass of intelligence, superior, on the average, to their own. They might also have preserved the confidence of the people in the integrity of their purposes, by abating each abuse, in proportion as the public conscience rose against it. They might thus have retained, in right of their virtue and intellect, that moral ascendancy which an intelligent people never long continues to yield to mere power. But they have flung away their advantages.

I have already adverted to the decline of the higher classes in active talent, as they became enervated by lazy enjoyment. In the same ratio in which they have advanced in humanity and refinement, they have fallen off in energy of intellect and strength of will. Many of them were formerly versed in business: and into the hands of such, the remainder committed the management of the nation's affairs. Now, the men of hereditary wealth are mostly inexperienced in business, and unfit for it. Many of them formerly knew life and the world: but their knowledge of life is now little more than the knowledge of two or three hundred families, with whom they are accustomed to associate; and it may be safely asserted, that not even a fellow of a college is more ignorant of the world, or more grossly mistakes the signs of the times, than an English nobleman. Their very opinions,—which, before they had passed into aphorisms, were the result of choice, and something like an act of the intelligence,—are now merely hereditary. Their minds were once active—they are now passive: they once generated impressions—they now merely take them. What are now their political maxims? Traditional texts, relating, directly or indirectly, to the privileges of their order, and to the exclusive fitness of men of their own sort for governing. What is their public virtue? Attachment to these texts, and to the prosperity and grandeur of England, on condition that she shall never swerve from them; idolatry of certain abstractions, called church, constitution, agriculture, trade, and others: by dint of which they have gradually contrived, in a manner, to exclude from their minds the very idea of their living and breathing fellow-citizens, as the subjects of moral obligation in their capacity of rulers. They love their country as Bonaparte loved his army—for whose glory he felt the most ardent zeal, at a time when all the men who composed it, one with another, were killed off every two or three years. They do not love England as one loves human beings, but as a man loves his house or his acres.

Being such persons as has now been described, and being at last completely found out by the more intelligent, they no longer retain sufficient moral influence to give, as heretofore, vogue and currency to their opinions. But they retain—and the possessors of worldly power must always retain—enough of that influence, to prevent any opinions, which they do not acknowledge, from passing into received doctrines. They must, therefore, be divested of the monopoly of worldly power, ere the most virtuous and best-instructed of the nation will acquire that ascendancy over the opinions and feelings of the rest, by which alone England can emerge from this crisis of transition, and enter once again into a natural state of society.

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A few months before the first of these papers was written, it would have seemed a paradox to assert that the present aera is one of moral and social transition. The same proposition now seems almost the tritest of truisms. The revolution which had already taken place in the human mind, is rapidly shaping external things to its own form and proportions.

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That we are in a state of transition, is a point which needs no further illustration. That the passage we are in the midst of, will conduct us to a healthier state, has perhaps been rendered probable in the preceding papers, to some few who might otherwise have questioned it.

But it greatly imports us to obtain a far deeper insight into the futurity which awaits us, and into the means by which the blessings of that futurity may be best improved, and its dangers avoided.

How shall we attain this insight? By a careful survey of the properties which are characteristic of the English national mind, in the present age—for on these the future fate of our country must depend.

But “fit audience,” even “though few,” cannot be found for such discussions, at a moment when the interests of the day and of the hour naturally and properly engross every mind. The sequel of these papers must therefore be postponed until the interval of repose, after the present bustle and tumult. I shall resume my subject as early as possible after the passing of the Reform Bill.

A.B.