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First Principles

William Batchelder Greene

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1843

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power of causation, so far as to be able to vary the position of that portion of the “infinite diversity and combination of properties ” which formed its body; and, by that means, to act on the “exterior combination of properties” and to modify them to a certain extent.

God thought the “combination of properties” to have the power to act upon the body of the being, and by that means, to hold a certain relation to the being itself.

The being possessed of will, wisdom, sensibility, is the soul of man. The infinite variety of properties is the world of matter. The body is that portion of the world of matter upon which the soul immediately acts. All these exist in the thought of God.

Thus do I explain the Universe as the settled opinion of Almighty God; and thus do I explain the relation which exists between the mind and what is without.

W. B. G.

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the Beautiful, the love of the Just, and the love of the Harmonious, dwell in the sensibility; but the idea of Beauty, the idea of Justice, and the idea of Harmony, dwell in the intelligence. Beauty itself; Justice itself, Peace itself, are neither in the sensibility, nor in the intelligence; they are with God. and are everlastingly the same; but we can discover, as we move on, more and more concerning them.

GOOD AND EVIL.

God is the only perfect being. If we endeavor to move on toward the perfection of our being, if we strive to follow the idea of what we ought to be, which leads to infinite love, infinite wisdom, and infinite power, we shall be on the right course. Whatever tends to assist us in our journey is good. If we fall from the idea of what we ought to be, and do not strive to perfect our natures, but move downward toward infinite hatred, infinite folly, and infinite weakness, we shall be on the wrong course. Whatever tends to press us downward is evil. The existence of infinite power, infinite wisdom, infinite love, supposes the existence of something which is not them. The existence of the Yes, supposes the existence of the No.

CREATION.

God thought a being partaking of will, wisdom, and sensibility. He thought a body, with which this being was to be connected, and which was to be the instrument by which it should manifest itself, and by which it should maintain communion with what is without. The nature of this body is explained below.

God thought an infinite variety of properties combined with each other, in an infinitely diversified manner.

The being possessed of will, wisdom, sensibility, was one thought ; the “infinite variety of properties,” was another and a different thought. God thought the being to be possessed of the

It is natural for us to love our friends more than we love any other created beings; and this is because they live, and because we have seen more of their lives than we have of the lives of any other created things. Our sensibilities are much affected when we see a fine statue, or painting, because the statue, or painting, is a representative of life; and when we perceive a statue, we recognise the living artist that made it. We admire any piece of human labor; even a plain brick wall possesses a certain interest, when compared with a loose heap of stones. If the statue be so fine that we forget the artist, it is because the statue is lifelike in itself, and the appearance of life in the statue, renders it unnecessary for us to think; of the living artist. But no man would be so much affected h! the sight of a work of art, as he would be by the sight of an equally perfect living person. If man possessed nothing but sensibility, and activity, he would be acted upon by every thing which came in contact with him; and, as each of these things would have its precise effect, his own conduct would be regulated by the exterior world, he being but a mere machine. If man possessed nothing but intelligence and activity, he would have no emotions to induce him to think, neither would he have any subject of thought, and although he would have the power of thought, he would not think, and therefore would not truly live. The action of the intelligence upon the sensibility, constitutes Life and nothing truly lives but spirit. Our life is a struggle between two natures; if either were wanting, there would be no struggle, and life would cease. Beauty, Justice, and Harmony, always accompany Life, yet they do not constitute life; but, if Life be manifested, then will Beauty, Justice, and Harmony appear, because they are attributes of that manifestation. Whenever we find either Beauty, or Justice, or Peace, we recognise that there a Living Spirit either is, or has once been. Yet Beauty, Justice, and Peace, are not that Living Spirit, they are, it I may so speak, the language by which that Spirit manifests itself. We often find Beauty, and Justice, and Harmony, in the work of a Spirit, after that Spirit has left its work, and departed from it. The love of

LOVE.

THE stream flows between its banks, according to Love. The planets sustain and restrain themselves, in their courses, by this same principle. All nature governs itself by Love.

By this I understand that each created thing, is gifted to act, as though it knew the properties, and ends to be attained which belong to each of the others; and that each one so guides itself as not to interfere with, or restrain, the workings of another; except when a clashing of properties takes place, and then, a just and equitable compromise is immediately effected.

This regard to the peculiarities, and constructions of each other, appears to be an application of the principle of justice.

The sentence, "All nature governs itself by Love," implies a power—the Power of Love. But this is not always perceived.

LOVE AND POWER.

Looking out upon nature, we find all things moving, and revolving according to some apparently everlasting and unchanging laws, of which we have, as yet, obtained no knowledge, save that of their mere existence.

Immediately we sum up all the changes of the seasons; the summer with its overpowering heat; the winter with its intense cold; the movement of the winds and the waves; the growth of the trees; the revolutions of the sun, and the moon, and the stars; and then we turn our eyes inward, and perceive in our own souls, that we decide concerning the performance of any action, according as the motive *for*, is stronger or weaker than the motive *against*; and because we have seen all this, we say:

There are in nature two classes of things: things which are governed, and things which govern. The things which are governed are matter and spirit. The things which govern, are the *laws* of

matter and the *laws* of spirit. Then we sum up all the laws which we know, and find that they may be included in the first thought of justice or love. But the view is changed; we now perceive the element of Activity, or Power.

Power (or activity) I call *will*, (not *free* will.)

As in the word Love, Power (or activity) is implied, so in the word Power, Freedom is implied. But this is not always perceived.

APPLICATION.

There is a chain of causes and effects, which proceeds from the eternity of the past and passes, link by link, through our little dominion of time, thence stretching onward, till it is lost in the dim eternity to come. The description of this chain, is the history of the universe. When we have performed an action, it is no longer ours, it belongs to nature. As soon as an action goes forth, it gives birth to another action, which last gives birth to still another, and so on through all eternity. The little bustle and noise, which we have made, appears small, beside the motion of the rest of the universe; but that little bustle and noise will have their precise effect, and this effect will continue to produce and reproduce itself forever. All that has been done before my time, has left effects, to serve me as motives. All that I do, and all that nature does in my time, will serve as motives to those who come after me. All nature has been at work from the beginning of time, until this day, to produce me, and my character. "All things are full of labor; men cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. The thing that has been, is the thing that shall be; and the thing that has been done, is the thing that shall be done; and there is no new thing under the sun." When we see these things, we think that it is well to know, and to love, nature; for, according to her laws, are all things done, which are done, in the world. We see that from good, good arises; and that from evil, evil arises. We see that this is a

and a volition; a thought involves an emotion, and a volition; a volition involves an emotion, and a thought. If I attempt to examine one manner of acting by itself, the other two immediately present themselves; if I attempt to examine the three, I immediately perceive nothing but their unity; if I attempt to examine their unity, the unit immediately disappears, and a triplicity stands in its place. I do not pretend to explain this triplicity in unity; I merely endeavor to show that it does, in fact, exist. It is said that there is a soul different from, and manifesting itself by, sensibility, intelligence, and power. I have never caught a glimpse of any such soul; I see no necessity for such a soul; and I have, therefore, no reason to believe that any such soul does really exist. It appears to me that if the sensibility, intelligence, and power, which belong to any man's soul, should be so separated as not to act and react upon each other, that the fact of their separation would amount to the annihilation of the man's soul. A true soul must fulfill the following conditions; 1. It must be able to act; 2. It must be able to perceive its own activity; 3. It must be able, while it perceives its own activity, to recognise itself. These three, are reciprocally, the conditions of each other's existence; and they include the fact of consciousness.

BEAUTY, JUSTICE, AND HARMONY.

There is in every man a love, an attraction, for that which is like himself, and a dislike, a repulsion, for that which is unlike himself.

The highest characteristic of man is Life, and he loves every being in which he perceives life, or the manifestations thereof; he dislikes every being in which he perceives a tendency downwards, from life, toward non-existence.

There are many beings incomplete, half dead, which we do not love; but we do not dislike them because they partake of life, but because of their tendency toward nonexistence. Man loves order, but he has a horror of chaos.

To facilitate study, Geometry is divided into three parts; the first part treats of length; the second treats of length and breadth; the third treats of length, breadth, and depth. The first two parts treat of that from which all true being has been abstracted; the third part treats of real, existing things.

Now, there is no soul which does not *desire, think, and act*: in other words, there is no soul without *sensibility, intelligence, and power*. When we speak of sensibility, intelligence, and power, or when we speak of either sensibility, intelligence, or power, alone by itself, or when we speak of any two of these, without the third, we speak; of things which do not really exist, because that which forms the perfection of their being has been abstracted from them. But when we speak of sensibility, intelligence, *and* power, we speak of a general formula which includes all the souls with which we come in contact every day. In order to facilitate observation, we will endeavor to examine sensibility by itself; intelligence by itself; and power by itself:

1. By sensibility, the soul either *perceives* its own *activity*; or it reacts upon itself by an emotion.

2. By intelligence, the soul either recognizes the causes of its own activity; or having recognized those causes, it proceeds to recognise their effects; or, it compares emotions, received through the sensibility, with recognitions of cause and effect.

By power (activity, volition), the soul either simply produces effects upon the material world: or, by producing such effects, it acts upon other souls, through the instrumentality of language; or, it reacts upon itself by the formation of an opinion, thereby producing a harmony between the intelligence and the sensibility.

I have endeavored, in the last three paragraphs, to describe the action of the soul by sensibility alone, by intelligence alone, and by power alone; but I have not succeeded, and I cannot in my own mind conceive of such separate action. The soul acts, and thinks, when it perceives; it perceives, and acts, when it thinks; it perceives, and thinks, when it acts. An emotion involves a thought,

law of nature. Then we say again, with King Solomon, "God shall judge the righteous and the wicked; for there is a time for every work, and for every purpose. Though a sinner do evil a hundred times, and his days be prolonged, yet surely I know that it will be well with them which fear God, but it shall not be well with the wicked; neither shall he prolong his days, which are as a shadow; because he feareth not before God."

LOVE AND POWER AND INTELLIGENCE.

Looking in upon ourselves, we find that we are not machines. We find that we are something more than mere sieves, by which, nature distinguishes stronger from weaker motives.

We find that, although we always act from a choice of motives, there is no power in any motive, by which it acts irresistibly upon the mind. The degrees of strength, by which motives act upon the mind, are given to those motives, by the mind itself: The mind itself decides by what motives it will be ruled; and often, it refuses to obey a motive coming from without, because of a principle which it has formed for its own government. The mind makes laws for itself; and changes those laws when it pleases so to do. Matter obeys the strongest force, and it obeys that force so far as it is stronger than all other opposite forces. But not so spirit. Spirit opposes extraneous forces, by forces formed by, and in itself.

The struggle between the soul, and extraneous force, constitutes Spiritual Life. In every human action there is an element of Liberty, and an element of Destiny. Liberty modifies destiny, and destiny modifies liberty.

Man is not wholly free, neither is he wholly enslaved; for were he wholly free, or wholly enslaved, he *might* continue to exist, but he would cease to be man. Man is a free spirit, bound in chains and fetters; but having power to throw off; one by one, the bands which fasten him to the earth. If any man strive to rise above his

destiny, that man is a noble man; if any man knowingly succumb to his circumstances, that man is an ignoble man.

A man is not an ignoble man, because he does ignoble things; but he does ignoble things, because he is an ignoble man. A tree may be known by its fruits.

CONCLUSION.

The fool is driven before his destiny; but the man of understanding rideth thereon.

DESTINY.

There is a chain of causes and effects, which stretches from eternity to eternity. This chain is a bridge, which connects the past with that which is to come. Proceeding from that which is behind us, we step, link by link, along this bridge, and press onward toward the shadowy future.

We know that this chain exists, because we see its links. We know that a particular cause will never fail to brine forth its own particular effect. As cause is to effect, in the material world, so, with certain modifications, is motive to voluntary action in the human mind. No link, in the immeasurable chain, could occupy any other place than the one which it does occupy; for there is no such thing as chance.

This chain stretches forth from the eternity, which precedes our birth; and these causes, under the name of motives, will always have their precise effect, upon every operation of our minds, and upon every action of our lives.

From like causes we never fail to experience like effects. Knowledge is not vague and undetermined. The human mind is a legitimate object of science.

never perceived; I know no necessity for it: and I have, therefore, no reason to believe that any such simple substance really exists.

CONCERNING OURSELVES.

A man, and the object upon which he acts, are two separate and distinct things.

A man, and the instrument by which he acts, are also two separate and distinct things.

If I cut a piece of wood, or write upon a sheet paper, the piece of wood and the sheet of paper are objects upon which I act; they are, therefore, not me.

The chisel with which I cut, and the pen with which I write, are instruments by which I act; they are, therefore, not me. My hand is also an instrument by which I act; my hand, therefore, is not me.

My whole body is a combination of instruments by which I act; my body, therefore, is not me.

If I am not the object acted upon, nor the instrument by which the action is performed, what then am I? I am, evidently, *that which acts*.

CONCERNING THE SOUL.

Although there is no material body without three dimensions, we often make abstraction of one or two of them; for example, if we speak of the size of a field, or of the height of a church, we consider a surface only, or a line. But no such thing as a geometrical line, or as a surface, tall) exists. When we speak of length, or of length and breadth, we speak of things from which the perfection of their being has been abstracted; but, when we speak of length, breadth, *and* depth, we speak of a general formula which includes all the material bodies with which we come in contact every day.

fine, the way to escape the bondage of the body, and to attain to the liberty of the sons of God?

If this Idea, this Light, should come among us, if he should come as a man like ourselves, we should know him, because he would do wonderful things, which no man ever did—because he would begin a movement which would go on, growing and growing, from generation to generation; and, when men of the most remote ages perceived this movement, they would recognise Him that commenced it. We should know him, because he would testify of himself, and the light which is in us would testify of him; for he would speak the words of truth, and these words would bring out the dim and defaced image of the truth which is in us, until it should reflect the blaze of the eternal glory.

He that believeth hath the witness in himself. The witness within and the witness without. At the mouths of two or three witnesses shall every word stand fast.

CONCERNING MATTER.

What are material objects? Material objects are the causes of impressions. We do not perceive material objects; we only perceive the impressions which they make upon us. Their different properties, smell, taste, weight, color, extension, &c., only appear to us as their different manners of acting, or of making impressions. We know material objects by their properties only. We know them, therefore, only as active beings, as *forces*. All the being of nature, minerals, vegetables, &c., are nothing to us, but forces, or combinations of forces. These forces are not like the soul, intelligent and free, but they are all gifted with activity. Even those which have no property but simple resistance are active, for resistance is action.

It is said that there is a simple substance, differing from, and lying behind, all these properties. This simple substance I have

If we have given, the *precise character*, and motives, of a man, we can predict his conduct, under certain circumstances, as certainly as we can predict an eclipse of the sun, or the return of a comet.

The old farmer knows more that the young beginner, because he has had more experience. The old diplomatist knows more than the young politician, because he has seen more men.

If I plant corn, I am as certain that I can sell it in the market, as I am that it will come up in my fields. If I am the owner of a manufactory, I am as certain that I can obtain men to labor in my mill, as I am that my machinery will work. Men do not always see this destiny; but if adversity lays her iron hand upon them, and they perceive that all avenues are closed, by which they would vent their activity, they acknowledge this conjunction of causes and effects, which then asserts its power. How often is it, that we would act, but cannot, because circumstances oppose us; and circumstances mark out our destiny.

FREEDOM.

“Nor would I have you mistake, in the point of your own liberty. These is a liberty of corrupt nature, which is effected both by men and beasts, to do what they list; and this liberty is inconsistent with authority, impatient of all restraint; by this liberty *sumus omnes deteriores*; ‘t is the grand enemy of truth and peace, and all the ordinances of God are bent against it. But there is a civil, a moral, a federal liberty, which is the proper end and object of authority; it is a liberty for that only which is just and good; for this liberty you are to stand with the hazard of your very lives and whatsoever crosses it, is not authority, but a distemper thereof This liberty is maintained in a way of subjection to authority; and the authority set over you will, in all administrations for your good, be quietly submitted unto by all, but such as have a disposition to shake off the

yoke, and lose their true liberty, by their murmuring at the honor and power of authority.”

Always man sees, above himself, an image of what he ought to be. This image is not himself, but is what he ought to be. This image comprises, in itself, *goodness, power, and wisdom*. As a man strives to realize this idea of what he ought to be, he rises higher and higher; but, as he rises higher and higher, this image removes from him and also rises higher and higher, until it becomes *infinite goodness, infinite power, and infinite wisdom*. When this idea has become thus perfected, and man perceives it, he knows that the idea is the idea of God. Man says, it is not me, it is not mine; but I see it, and it is the everlasting God.

Freedom is not the power to do wrong; it is the power to do right, the power to exercise all the capacities of one’s nature. There is but one being that is absolutely free; that being is God. Man is the victim of circumstances; he is never free in himself, but he can become free by partaking of the absolute liberty, by partaking of “the liberty of the sons of God.”

There is no self-determining power of the will. Always the will obeys the emotions of the sensibility, as modified by the dictates of the intelligence. In other words, the precise conduct of a man may be known, if we have given, the *precise character* of the man, and the motives which are to act upon that *character*. Man is not accountable for the motive, neither is he accountable for the action; but he is accountable for the character. Man always has the idea before him of what he ought to be, and, if he contemplate and love that idea, he will ascend toward it; and if he ascend toward it, he will partake of the everlasting liberty. But, if he scorns that idea, and prefers the fleeting circumstances of time, he will fall from liberty and become a bond slave of the Devil.

A man is not a murderer, because he commits murder: but he commits murder, because he is a murderer. We condemn the man, because he commits the deed; for, to us, a tree is known by its fruits only. There is One that judgeth the *heart*.

Freedom, therefore, dwells in the intelligence; because it is by the intelligence that we know God, when we perceive his manifestations. It is by the intelligence that we look inward, and discover our own limitations and weaknesses; and the knowledge of our own limitations and weaknesses is the first step toward a remodeling; of our characters, according to the everlasting idea. When adverse circumstances surround us, and threaten to overwhelm us, do we overcome them, and assert our superiority, our liberty, by an effort of the will? No. We look at these circumstances, and study them, and then because we have obtained *knowledge*, we turn aside these adverse circumstances, one after the other, and at last we ride over that which at first threatened to overwhelm us.

LIBERTY AND DESTINY.

Were we mere spirits, and not spirits subjected to the circumstances of the body, then *might* this idea, of what we ought to be, be sufficient to maintain our liberty.

But we are not such spirits; we are bound down by material bodies, surrounded by temptations, the victims of circumstances; and this divine idea is hardly seen by those who are obliged to toil, daily and nightly, to secure those things which are necessary to the body.

It is possible, if this idea were all that could lead us to liberty, that among whole generations of men, there *might* not be a single one, who should assert his freedom, and become the master of his destiny. For the image wanes dim, because of the world which is seen, and the things therein.

Would it not be a glorious mercy of God, if this idea, which is not man, but which comes down to man, to show him the path of liberty, the path which leads to God, should become man, and dwell among us, and die among us, to show us how to assert the superiority of our souls over that which is material—to show us, in