A DISCOURSE concerning the Unchangeable Obliga-
tions of NATURAL RELIGION, and the Truth
and Certainty of the CHRISTIAN REVELATION

[The Boyle Lectures, 1704 (following upon A Demon-
stration of the Being and Attributes of God, the Boyle
Lectures, 1704). First printed, 1706. Reprinted here
from the seventh edition, corrected, 1728, with modi-
ﬁed spelling, reduction of initial capital letters and
italics, and omission of nearly all footnotes. The foot-
notes are mostly quotations from classical authors,
Hobbes, and Cumberland]

A Discourse of Natural Religion

SAMUEL CLARKE

Having in a former discourse endeavoured to lay ﬁrmly the ﬁrst foundations of religion, in the certainty of the existence and of the attributes of God, . . .

It remains now, in order to complete my design of proving and establishing the truth and excellency of the whole superstructure of our most holy religion; that I proceed upon this foundation of the certainty of the Being and Attributes of God, to demonstrate in the next place the unalterable Obligations of Natural Religion, and the certainty of Divine Revelation; in opposition to the vain arguings of certain vicious and profane men, who, merely upon account of their incredulity, would be thought to be strict adherers to reason, and sincere and diligent inquirers into truth; when indeed on the contrary there is but too much cause to fear, that they are not at all sincerely and really desirous to be satisﬁed in the true state of things, but only seek, under the pretence and cover of infidelity, to excuse their vices and debaucheries; which they are so strongly enslaved to, that they cannot prevail with themselves upon any account to forsake them: and yet a rational submitting to such truths, as just evidence and unanswerable reason would induce them to believe, must necessarily make them uneasy under those vices, and self-condemned in the practice of them. It remains therefore (I say) in order to ﬁnish the design I proposed to myself, of establishing the truth and excellency of our holy religion, in opposition to all such vain pretenders to reason as these; that I proceed at this time, by a continuation of the same method of arguing, by which I before demonstrated the being and attributes of God, to prove distinctly the following propositions.

* * * * *
I. The same necessary and eternal different relations, that different things bear one to another; and the same consequent fitness or unfitness of the application of different things or different relations one to another; with regard to which, the will of God always and necessarily does determine itself, to choose to act to justice, equity, goodness and truth, in order to the welfare of the whole universe; might likewise constantly to determine the wills of all subordinate rational beings, to govern all their actions by the same rules, for the good of the public, in their respective stations. That is; these eternal and necessary differences of things make it fit and reasonable for creatures so to act; they cause it to be their duty, or lay an obligation upon them, so to do; even separate from the consideration of these rules being the positive will or command of God; and also antecedent to any respect or regard, expectation or apprehension, of any particular private and personal advantage or disadvantage, reward or punishment, either present or future; annexed either by natural consequence, or by positive appointment, to the practising or neglecting of those rules.

The several parts of this proposition, may be proved distinctly, in the following manner.

1. That there are differences of things; and different relations, respects or proportions, of some things towards others; is as evident and undeniable, as that one magnitude or number, is greater, equal to, or smaller than another. That from these different relations of different things, there necessarily arises an agreement or disagreement of some things with others, or a fitness or unfitness of the application of different things or different relations one to another; is likewise as plain, as that there is any such thing as proportion or disproportion in geometry and arithmetic, or uniformity or diversity in comparing together the respective figures of bodies. Further, that there is a fitness or suitableness of certain circumstances to certain persons, and an unsuitableness of others; founded in the nature of things and the qualifications of persons, antecedent to all positive appointment whatsoever; also that from the different relations of different persons one to another, there necessarily arises a fitness or unfitness of certain manners of behaviour of some persons towards others; is as manifest as that certain properties which flow from the essences of different mathematical figures, have different congruities or incongruities between themselves; or that, in mechanics, certain weights or powers have very different forces, and different effects one upon another, according to their different distances, or different positions and situations in respect of each other. For instance: that God is infinitely superior to men; is as clear, as that infinity is larger than a point, or eternity longer than a moment. And it is as certainly fit, that men should honour and worship, obey and imitate God, rather than on the contrary in all their actions endeavour to dishonour and disobey him; as it is certainly true, that they have an entire dependence on him, and he on the contrary can in no respect receive any advantage from them; and not only so, but also that his will is as certainly and unalterably just and equitable in giving his commands, as his power is irresistible in requiring submission to it. Again; it is a thing absolutely and necessarily fitter in itself, that the supreme author and creator of the universe, should govern, order, and direct all things to certain constant and regular ends; than that every thing should be permitted to go on at adventures, and produce uncertain effects merely by chance and in the utmost confusion, without any determinate view or design at all. It is a thing manifestly fitter in itself, that the all-powerful governor of the world, should do always what is best in the whole, and what tends most to the universal good of the whole creation; than that he should make the whole continually miserable; or that, to satisfy the unreasonable desires of any particular depraved natures, he should at any time suffer the order of the whole to be altered and perverted. Lastly, it is a thing evidently and infinitely more fit, that any one particular innocent and good being, should by the supreme ruler and disposer of all things, be placed and preserved in an easy and happy estate; than that, without any fault or demerit of its own, it should be made extremely, remedilessly, and endlessly miserable. In like manner; in men's dealing and conversing one with another; it is undeniably more fit, and absolutely and necessarily fitter in itself, that the all-powerful governor of the world, should do always what is best in the whole, and what tends most to the universal good of the whole creation; than that he should make the whole continually miserable; or that, to satisfy the unreasonable desires of any particular depraved natures, he should at any time suffer the order of the whole to be altered and perverted. Lastly, it is a thing evidently and infinitely more fit, that any one particular innocent and good being, should by the supreme ruler and disposer of all things, be placed and preserved in an easy and happy estate; than that, without any fault or demerit of its own, it should be made extremely, remedilessly, and endlessly miserable. In like manner; in men's dealing and conversing one with another; it is undeniably more fit, and absolutely and necessarily fitter in itself, that all men should endeavour to promote the universal good and welfare of all; than that all men should be continually contriving the ruin and destruction of all. It is evidently more fit, even before all positive bargains and compacts, that men should deal one with another according to the known rules of justice and equity; than that every man for his own present advantage, should without scruple disappoint the most reasonable and equitable expectations of his neighbours, and cheat and defraud, or spoil by violence, all others
without restraint. Lastly, it is without dispute more fit and reason-
hable in itself, that I should preserve the life of an innocent man, that
any reason or provocation at all.

These things are so notoriously plain and self-evident, that nothing
but the extreme stupidity of mind, corruption of manners, or
perverseness of spirit, can possibly make any man entertain the least
doubt concerning them. For a man endowed with reason, to deny
the truth of these things; is the very same thing, as if a man that has the
use of his sight, should at the same time that he beholds the sun, deny
that there is any such thing as light in the world; or as if a man that
understands geometry or arithmetic, should deny the most obvious
and known proportions of lines or numbers, and perversely contend
that the whole is not equal to all its parts, or that a square is not double
to a triangle of equal base and height. Any man of ordinary capacity,
and unbiased judgement, plainness and simplicity; who had never
read, and had never been told, that there were men and philosophers,
who had in earnest asserted and attempted to prove, that there is no
natural and unalterable difference between good and evil; would at
the first hearing be as hardly persuaded to believe, that it could ever
really enter into the heart of any intelligent man, to deny all natural
difference between right and wrong; as he would be to believe, that
evry there could be any geometer who would seriously and in good
earnest lay it down as a first principle, that a crooked line is as
straight as a right one. So that indeed it might justly seem altogether
a needless undertaking, to attempt to prove and establish the eternal
difference of good and evil; had there not appeared certain men, as
Mr Hobbes and some few others, who have presumed, contrary to
the plainest and most obvious reason of mankind, to assert, and not
without some subtlety endeavoured to prove, that there is no such
real difference originally, necessarily, and absolutely in the nature of
things; but that all obligation of duty to God, arises merely from his
absolute irresistible power; and all duty towards men, merely from
positive compact; and have founded their whole scheme of politics
upon that opinion. Wherein as they have contradicted the judge-
ment of all the wisest and soberest part of mankind, so they have not

[1 See Hobbes, §§ 89, 101.]
thing as good and evil in the nature of things, antecedent to all laws; then neither can any one law be better than another; nor any one thing whatever, be more justly established, and enforced by laws, than the contrary; nor can any reason be given, why any laws should ever be made at all: but all laws equally, will be either arbitrary and tyrannical, or frivolous and needless; because the contrary might with equal reason have been established, if, before the making of the laws, all things had been alike indifferent in their own nature. There is no possible way to avoid this absurdity, but by saying, that out of things in their own nature absolutely indifferent, those are chosen by wise governors to be made obligatory by law, the practice of which they judge will tend to the public benefit of the community. But this is an express contradiction in the very terms. For if the practice of certain things tends to the public benefit of the world, and the contrary would tend to the public disadvantage, then those things are not in their own nature indifferent, but were good and reasonable to be practiced before any law was made, and can only for that very reason be wisely enforced by the authority of laws. Only here it is to be observed, that by the public benefit must not be understood the interest of any one particular nation, to the plain injury or prejudice of the rest of mankind, any more than the interest of one city or family, in opposition to their neighbours of the same country: but those things only are truly good in their own nature, which either tend to the universal benefit and welfare of all men, or at least are not destructive of it. The true state therefore of this case, is plainly this. Some things are in their own nature good and reasonable and fit to be done; such as keeping faith, and performing equitable compacts, and the like; and these receive not their obligatory power, from any law or authority: but are only declared, confirmed and enforced by penalties, upon such as would not perhaps be governed by right reason only. Other things are in their own nature absolutely evil; such as breaking faith, refusing to perform equitable compacts, cruelly destroying those who have neither directly nor indirectly given any occasion for any such treatment, and the like; and these cannot by any law or authority whatsoever, be made fit and reasonable, or excusable to be practiced. Lastly, other things are in their own nature indifferent; that is, (not absolutely and strictly so; as such trivial actions, which have no way any tendency at all either to the public welfare or damage; for concerning such things, it would be childish

and trifling to suppose any laws to be made at all; but they are) such things, whose tendency to the public benefit or disadvantage, is either so small or so remote, or so obscure and involved, that the generality of people are not able of themselves to discern on which side they ought to act: and these things are made obligatory by the authority of laws; though perhaps every one cannot distinctly perceive the reason and fitness of their being enjoined: of which sort are many particular penal laws, in several countries and nations. But to proceed.

The principal thing that can, with any colour of reason, seem to countenance the opinion of those who deny the natural and eternal difference of good and evil; (for Mr Hobbes's false reasonings I shall hereafter consider by themselves;) is the difficulty there may sometimes be, to define exactly the bounds of right and wrong; the variety of opinions, that have been obtained even among understanding and learned men concerning certain questions of just and unjust, especially in political matters: and the many contrary laws that have been made in divers ages and in different countries, concerning these matters. But as, in painting, two very different colours, by diluting each other very slowly and gradually, may from the highest intenseness in either extreme, terminate in the midst insensibly, and so run one into the other, that it shall not be possible even for a skilful eye to determine exactly where the one ends, and the other begins; and yet the colours may really differ as much as can be, not in degree only but entirely in kind, as red and blue, or white and black: so, though it may perhaps be very difficult in some nice and perplexed cases (which yet are very far from occurring frequently,) to define exactly the bounds of right and wrong; just and unjust; and there may be some latitude in the judgement of different men, and the laws of divers nations; yet right and wrong are nevertheless themselves totally and essentially different; even altogether as much, as white and black, light and darkness. The Spartan law perhaps, which permitted their youth to steal; may, as absurd as it was, proceed.
commanded or allowed, that every man might rob by violence, and murder whomsoever he met with; or that no faith should be kept with any man, nor any equitable compacts performed; no man, with any tolerable use of his reason, whatever diversity of judgement might be among them in other matters, would have thought that commanded or allowed, that every man might rob by violence, and murder whomsoever he met with; or that no faith should be kept not in men's power to make falsehood be truth, though they may right and wrong, cannot but be confessed to be plainly and un-alter the property of their goods as they please. Now if in flagrant cases, the natural and essential difference between good and evil, right and wrong, cannot but be confessed to be plainly and un-denially evident; the difference between them must be also essential and unalterable in all even the smallest and nicest and most intricate cases, though it be not so easy to be discerned and accurately distinguiished. For if from the difficulty of determining exactly the bounds of right and wrong in many perplexed cases, it could truly be concluded that just and unjust were not essentially different by nature, but only by positive constitution and custom; it would follow equally, that they were not really, essentially, and unalterably different, even in the most flagrant cases that can be supposed. Which is an assertion so very absurd, that Mr Hobbes himself could hardly vent it without blushing, and discovering plainly, by his shifting expressions, his secret self-condemnation. There are therefore certain necessary and eternal differences of things; and certain consequent fitnesses or unfitnesses of the application of different things or different relations one to another; not depending on any positive constitutions, but founded unchangeably in the nature and reason of things, and unavoidably arising from the differences of the things themselves. Which is the first branch of the general proposition I proposed to prove.

230 2. Now what these eternal and unalterable relations, respects, or proportions of things, with their consequent agreements or disagreements, fitnesses or unfitnesses, absolutely and necessarily are in themselves; that also they appear to be, to the understandings of all intelligent beings; except the only, who understand things to be what they are not, that is, whose understandings are either very imperfect, or very much depraved. And by this understanding or knowledge of the natural and necessary relations, fitnesses, and proportions of things, the wills likewise of all intelligent beings are constantly directed, and must needs be determined to act accordingly; excepting those only, who will things to be what they are not and cannot be; that is, whose wills are corrupted by particular interest or affection, or swayed by some unreasonable and prevailing passion. Wherefore since the natural attributes of God, his infinite knowledge, wisdom and power, set him infinitely above all possibility of being deceived by any error, or of being influenced by any wrong affection; it is manifest his divine will cannot but always and necessarily determine itself to choose to do what in the whole is absolutely best and fittest to be done; that is, to act constantly according to the eternal rules of infinite goodness, justice and truth. As I have endeavoured to show distinctly in my former discourse, in deducing severally the moral attributes of God.
diminution of his power to make this reason of things the unalterable rule and law of his own actions in the government of the world, and does nothing by mere will and arbitrariness; it is impossible (I say,) if it was not for inexcusable corruption and depravation, but the same eternal reason of things must much more have weight in the government of the world, and the right of the case; as it is natural and (absolutely speaking) necessary, that the will should be determined in every action by the reason of the thing, and the right of the case; as it is natural and (absolutely speaking) necessary, that the understanding should submit to a demonstrated truth. And it is as absurd and blame-worthy, to mistake negligently plain right and wrong, that is, to understand the proportions of things in morality to be what they are not; or wilfully to act contrary to known justice and equity, that is, to will things to be what they are not and cannot be; as it would be absurd and ridiculous for a man in arithmetical matters, ignorantly to believe that twice two is not equal to four; or wilfully and obstinately to contend, against his own clear knowledge, that the whole is not equal to all its parts. The only difference is, that assent to a plain speculative truth, is not in a man’s power to withhold; but to act according to the plain right and reason of things, this he may, by the natural liberty of his will, forbear. But the one he ought to do; and it is as much his plain right and indispensable duty; as the other he cannot but do, and it is the necessity of his nature to do it. He that wilfully refuses to honour and obey God, from whom he received his being, and to whom he continuously owes his preservation; is really guilty of an equal absurdity and inconsistency in practice; as he that in speculation denies the effect to owe any thing to its cause, or the whole to be bigger than its part. He that refuses to deal with all men equitably, and with every man as he desires they should deal with him: is guilty of the very same unreasonableness and contradiction in one case; as he that in another case should affirm one number or quantity to be equal to another, and yet that at the same time not to be equal to the first. Lastly, he that acknowledges himself obliged to the practice of certain duties both towards God and towards men, and yet takes no care either to preserve his own being, or at least not to preserve himself in such a state and temper of mind and body, as may best enable him to perform those duties; is altogether as inexcusable and ridiculous, as he that in any other matter should affirm one thing at the same time that he denies another, without which the former could not possibly be true; or undertake one thing, at the same time that he obstinately omits another, without which the former is by no means practicable. Wherefore all rational creatures, whose wills are not constantly and regularly determined, and their actions governed, by right reason and the necessary differences of good and evil, according to the eternal and invariable rules of justice, equity, goodness and truth; but suffer themselves to be swayed by unaccountable arbitrary humours, and rash passions, by lusts, vanity and pride; by private interest, or present sensual pleasures: these, setting up their own unreasonable self-will in opposition to the nature and reason of things, endeavour (as much as in them lies) to make things be what they are not, and cannot be. Which is the highest presumption and greatest insolence, as well as the greatest absurdity, imaginable. It is acting contrary to that understanding, reason and judgement, which God has implanted in their natures on purpose to enable them to discern the difference between good and evil. It is attempting to destroy that order, by which the universe subsists. It is offering the highest affront imaginable to the creator of all things, who made things to be what they are, and governs every thing himself according to the laws of their several natures. In a word; all wilful wickedness and perversion of right, is the very same insolence and absurdity in moral matters; as it would be in natural things, for a man to pretend to alter the certain proportions of numbers, to take away the demonstrable relations and properties of mathematical figures; to make light darkness, and darkness light; or to call sweet bitter, and bitter sweet.

Further: as it appears thus from the abstract and absolute reason and nature of things, that all rational creatures ought, that is, are obliged to take care that their wills and actions be constantly determined and governed by the eternal rule of right and equity; so the certainty and universality of that obligation is plainly confirmed, and the force of it particularly discovered and applied to every man, by this; that in like manner as no one, who is instructed in mathematics, can forbear giving his assent to every geometrical demonstration, of which he understands the terms, either by his own study, or by having had them explained to him by others; so no man, who either has patience and opportunities to examine and consider things himself, or has the means of being taught and instructed in any
tolerable manner by others, concerning the necessary relations and dependencies of things, can avoid giving his assent to the fitness and reasonableness of his governing all his actions by the law or rule before mentioned, even though his practice, through the prevalence of brutish lusts, be most absurdly contradictory to that assent. That is to say; by the reason of his mind, he cannot but be compelled to own and acknowledge, that there is really such an obligation indispensably incumbent upon him; even at the same time that in the actions of his life he is endeavouring to throw it off and despise it. For the judgement and conscience of a man's own mind, concerning the reasonableness and fitness of the thing, that his actions should be conformed to such or such a rule or law; is the truest and formallest obligation; even more properly and strictly so, than any opinion whatsoever of the authority of the giver of a law, or any regard he may have to its sanction by rewards and punishments. For whoever acts contrary to this sense and conscience of his own mind, is necessarily self-condemned; and the greatest and strongest of all obligations is that, which a man cannot break through without condemning himself. The dread of superior power and authority, and the sanction of rewards and punishments; however indeed absolutely necessary to the government of frail and fallible creatures, and truly the most effectual means of keeping them in their duty; is yet really in itself, only a secondary and additional obligation, or enforcement of the first. The original obligation of all, (the ambiguous use of which word as a term of art, has caused some perplexity and confusion in this matter,) is the eternal reason of things; that reason, which God himself, who has no superior to direct him, and to whose happiness nothing can be added nor anything diminished from it, yet constantly obliges himself to govern the world by: and the more excellent and perfect any creatures are, the more cheerfully and steadily are their wills always determined by this supreme obligation, in conformity to the nature, and in imitation of the most perfect will of God. So far therefore as men are conscious of what is right and wrong, so far they are under an obligation to act accordingly, and consequently that eternal rule of right, which I have been hitherto deriving, it is evident ought as indispensably to govern men's actions, as it cannot but necessarily determine their assent.

Now that the case is truly thus; that the eternal differences of good and evil, the unalterable rule of right and equity, do necessarily and unavoidably determine the judgement, and force the assent of all men that use any consideration; is undeniable manifest from the universal experience of mankind. For no man willingly and deliberately transgresses this rule, in any great and considerable instance; but he acts contrary to the judgement and reason of his own mind, and secretly reproaches himself for so doing. And no man observes and obeys it steadily, especially in cases of difficulty and temptation, when it interferes with any present interest, pleasure or passion; but his own mind commends and applauds him for his resolution, in executing what his conscience could not forbear giving its assent to, as just and right. And this is what St Paul means, when he says, (Rom. ii. 14. 15.) that when the Gentiles which have not the law, do after the figure of the things contained in the law, these having not the law, are a law unto themselves; which show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing, or else excusing one another.

It was a very wise observation of Plato, which he received from Socrates; that if you take a young man, impartial and unprejudiced, one that never had any learning, nor any experience in the world; and examine him about the natural relations and proportions of things, [or the moral differences of good and evil:] you may, only by asking him questions, without teaching him any thing at all directly, cause him to express in his answers just and adequate notions of geometrical truths, [and true and exact determinations concerning matters of right and wrong.] From whence he thought it was to be concluded, that all knowledge and learning is nothing but memory, or only a recollecting upon every new occasion, what had been before known in a state of pre-existence. And some others both ancient and moderns, have concluded that the ideas of all first and simple truths, either natural or moral, are innate and originally impressed or stamped upon the mind. In their inference from the observation, the authors of both these opinions seem to be mistaken. But thus much it proves unavoidably; that the differences, relations, and proportions of things both natural and moral, in which all unprejudiced minds that naturally agree, are certain, unalterable, and real in the things themselves; and do not at all depend on the variable opinions, fancies, or imaginations of men prejudiced by education, laws, customs, or evil practices: and also that the mind of man naturally and unavoidably
204  SAMUEL CLARKE

gives its assent, as to natural and geometrical truth, so also to the
moral differences of things, and to the finesse and reasonableness
of the obligation of the everlasting law of righteousness, whenever
fairly and plainly proposed.

236  Some men indeed, who, by means of a very evil and vicious
education, or through a long habit of wickedness and debauchery,
have extremely corrupted the principles of their nature, and have
long accustomed themselves to bear down their own reason, by the
force of prejudice, lust and passion; that they may not be forced to
confess themselves self-condemned, will confidently and absolutely
contend that they do not have any indispensable obligations, as we would endeavour
to persuade them; and that they are not sensible they ought to be
conquered by any other rule, than their own will and pleasure. But
industriously they endeavour to conceal and
even these men, the most abandoned of all mankind; however
condemnation; yet they cannot avoid making a discovery of it some-
times when they are not aware of it. For example: there is no man
vile and desperate, who commits at any time a murder and robbery,
with the most

205  A DISCOURSE OF NATURAL RELIGION

men pass upon each other’s actions, than from what we can discern
concerning their consciousness of their own. For men may dissemble
and conceal from the world, the judgement of their own conscience;
nay, by a strange partiality, they may even impose upon and deceive
themselves; (for who is there, that does not sometimes allow himself,
nay, and even justify himself in that, wherein he condemns another?)
But men’s judgements concerning the actions of others, especially
where they have no relation to themselves, or repugnance to their
interest, are commonly impartial; and from this we may judge, what
sense men naturally have of the unalterable difference of right and
wrong. Now the observation which every one cannot but make in
this matter, is this; that virtue and true goodness, righteousness and
equity, are things so truly noble and excellent, so lovely and vener-
able in themselves, and do so necessarily approve themselves to the
reason and consciences of men; that even those very persons, who, by
the prevailing power of some interest or lust, are themselves drawn
drawn aside out of the paths of virtue, can yet hardly ever forbear to
give it its true character and commendation in others. And this observa-
tion holds true, not only in the generality of vicious men, but very
frequently even in the worst sort of them, viz. those who persecute
others for being better than themselves. . . . At least, there is hardly
any wicked man, but when his own case is represented to him under
the person of another, will freely enough pass sentence against he
wickedness he himself is guilty of; and, with sufficient severity,
exclaim against all iniquity. This shows abundantly, that all variation
from the eternal rule of right, is absolutely and in the nature of the
thing itself to be abhorred and detested; and that the unprejudiced
mind of man, as naturally disapproves injustice in moral matters, as
in natural things it cannot but dissent from falsehood, or dislike
incongruities. Even in reading the histories of past and far distant
ages, where it is plain we can have no concern for the events of
things, nor prejudices concerning the characters of persons; who is
there, that does not praise and admire, nay highly esteem and in his
imagination love (as it were) the equity, justice, truth and fidelity of
some persons; and with the greatest indignation and hatred, detest
the barbarity, injustice, and treachery of others? Nay further; when
the prejudices of corrupt minds lie all on the side of injustice; as when
we have obtained some very great profit or advantage through
another man’s treachery or breach of faith; yet who is there, that