

The background of the entire image is a photograph of a mosque. A large, light-colored dome with a finial is the central focus on the left. To the right, a tall, slender minaret with a smaller dome at its top is visible. The sky is a clear, pale blue. The overall tone is calm and architectural.

***JOHN
FOSTER***

***AN ESSAY
ON THE EVILS
OF POPULAR
IGNORANCE***

John Foster

An Essay on the Evils of Popular Ignorance

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Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info



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ESSAY ON POPULAR IGNORANCE.

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"My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge."

Hosea.

SECTION I.

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It may excite in us some sense of wonder, and perhaps of self-reproach, to reflect with what a stillness and indifference of the mind we can hear and repeat sentences asserting facts which are awful calamities. And this indifference is more than the accidental and transient state, which might prevail at seasons of peculiar heaviness or languor. The self-inspector will often be compelled to acknowledge it as a symptom and exemplification of the *habit* of his mind, that ideas of extensive misery and destruction, though expressed in the plainest, strongest language, seem to come with but a faint glimmer on his apprehension, and die away without awakening one emotion of that sensibility which so many comparatively trifling causes can bring into exercise.

Will the hearers of the sentence just now repeated from the sacred book, give a moment's attention to the effect it has on them? We might suppose them accosted with the question, Would you find it difficult to say what idea, or whether anything distinct enough to deserve the name of an idea, has been impressed by the sound of words bearing so melancholy a significance? And would you have to confess, that they excite no interest which would not instantly give place to that of the smallest of your own concerns, occurring to your thoughts; or would not leave free the tendency to wander loose among casual fancies; or would not yield to feelings of the ludicrous, at the sight of any whimsical incident? It would not probably be unfair to suspect such

faintness of apprehension, and such unfixedness and indifference of thought, in the majority of any large number of persons, though drawn together ostensibly to attend to matters of gravest concern. And perhaps many of the most serious of them would acknowledge it requires great and repeated efforts, to bring themselves to such a contemplative realization of an important subject, that it shall lay hold on the affections, though it should press on them, as in the present instance, with facts and reflections of a nature the most strongly appealing to a mournful sensibility.

That the "people are destroyed," is perceived to have the sound of a lamentable declaration. But its import loses all force of significance in falling on a state of feeling which, if resolvable into distinct sentiments, would be expressed to some such effect as this:—that the people's destruction, in whatever sense of the word, is, doubtless, a deplorable thing, but quite a customary and ordinary matter, the prevailing fact, indeed, in the general state of this world; that, in truth, it would seem as if they were made but to be destroyed, for that they have constantly been, in all imaginable ways, the subjects of destruction; that, subjected in common with all living corporeal beings to the doom of death, and to a fearful diversity of causes tending to inflict it, they have also appeared, through their long sad history, consigned to a spiritual and moral destruction, if that term be applicable to a condition the reverse of wisdom, goodness, and happiness; that, in short, such a sentence as that cited from the prophet, is too merely an expression of what has been always and over the whole world self-evident, to excite any particular attention or emotion.

Thus the destruction, in every sense of the word, of human creatures, is so constantly obvious, as mingled and spread

throughout the whole system, that the mind has been insensibly wrought to that protective obtuseness which (like the thickness of the natural clothing of animals in rigorous climates) we acquire in defence of our own ease, against the aggrivance of things which inevitably continue in our presence. An instinctive policy to avoid feeling with respect to this prevailing destruction, has so effectually taught us how to maintain the exemption, by all the requisite sleights of overlooking, diverting, forgetting, and admitting deceptive maxims of palliation, that the art or habit is become almost mechanical. When fully matured, it appears like a wonderful adventitious faculty—a power of evading the sight, of *not seeing*, what is obviously and glaringly presented to view on all sides. There is, indeed, a dim general recognition that such things are; the hearing of a bold denial of their existence, would give an instant sense of absurdity, which would provoke a pointed attention to them, the more perfectly to verify their reality; and the perception how real and dreadful they are, might continue distinct as long as we were in the spirit of contradicting and exploding that absurd denial; but, in the ordinary state of feeling, the mind preserves an easy dulness of apprehension toward the melancholy vision, and sees it as if it saw it not.

This fortified insensibility may, indeed, be sometimes broken in upon with violence, by the sudden occurrence of some particular instance of human destruction, in either import of the word, some example of peculiar aggravation, or happening under extraordinary and striking circumstances, or very near us in place or interest. An emotion is excited of pity, or terror, or horror; so strong, that if the person so affected has been habitually thoughtless, and has no wish to be otherwise, he fears he shall never recover his state of careless ease; or, if of a more serious disposition, thinks it impossible he can ever cease to feel an awful and salutary effect. This more serious person perhaps also thinks it must

be inevitable that henceforward his feelings will be more alive to the miseries of mankind. But how obstinate is an inveterate habitual state of the mind against any single impressions made in contravention to it! Both the thoughtless and the more reflective man may probably find, that a comparatively short lapse of time suffices, to relieve them from anything more than slight momentary reminiscences of what had struck them with such painful force, and to restore, in regard to the general view of the acknowledged misery of the human race, nearly the accustomed tranquillity. The course of feeling resembles a listless stream of water, which, after being dashed into commotion, by a massive substance flung into it, or by its precipitation at a rapid, relapses, in the progress of a few fathoms and a few moments, into its former sluggishness of current.

But is it well that this should be the state of feeling, in the immediate presence of the spectacle exhibiting the people under a process of being destroyed? There must be a great and criminal perversion from what our nature ought to be, in a tranquillity to which it makes no material difference whether they be destroyed or saved; a tranquillity which would hardly, perhaps, have been awaked to an effort of intercession at the portentous sign of destruction revealed to the sight of Ornan; or which might at the deluge have permitted the privileged patriarch to sink in a soft slumber, at the moment when the ark was felt to be moving from its ground. If the original rectitude of that nature had been retained by any individual, he would be confounded to conceive how creatures having their lot cast in one place, so near together, so much alike, and under such a complication of connections and dependences, can yet really be so insulated, as that some of them may behold, with immovable composure, innumerable companies of the rest

in such a condition, that it had been better for them not to have existed.

To such a condition a vast multitude have been consigned by "the lack of knowledge." And we have to appeal concerning them to whatever there is of benevolence and conscience, in those who deem themselves happy instances of exemption from this deplorable consignment; and are conscious that their state of inestimable privilege is the result, under the blessing of heaven, of the reception of information, of truth, into their minds.

If it were suggested to the well instructed in our companies to take an account of the benefit they have received through the medium of knowledge, they would say they do not know where to begin the long enumeration, or how to bring into one estimate so ample a diversity of good. It might be something like trying to specify, in brief terms, what a highly improved portion of the ground, in a tract rude and sterile if left to itself, has received from cultivation; an attempt which would carry back the imagination through a progression of states and appearances, in which the now fertile spots, and picture-like scenes, and commodious passes, and pleasant habitations, may or must have existed in the advance from the original rudeness. The estimate of what has ultimately been effected, rises at each stage in this retrospect of the progress, in which so many valuable changes and additions still require to be followed by something more, to complete the scheme of improvement. In thus tracing backward the condition of a now fair and productive place of human dwelling and subsistence, it may easily be recollected, what a vast number of the earth's inhabitants there are whose places of dwelling are in all those states of worse cultivation and commodiousness, and what multitudes leading a miserable and precarious life amidst the inhospitableness of the waste, howling

wilderness. Each presented circumstance of fertility or shelter, salubrity or beauty, may be named as what is wanting to a much greater number of the occupants of the world, than those to whom the "lines are fallen in such pleasant places."

When, in like manner, a person richly possessed of the benefits imparted by means of knowledge, finds, in attempting to recount them, that they rise so fast on his view, in their variety, combinations, and gradations from less to greater, as to overpower his computing faculty, he may be reminded that this account of his wealth is, in truth, that of many other men's poverty. And if, while these benefits are coming so numerous in his sight, like an irregular crowd of loaded fruit-trees, one partially seen behind the offered luxury of another, and others still descried, through intervals, in the distance, he can imagine them all devastated and swept away from him, leaving him in a scene of mental desolation—and if he shall then consider that nearly such is the state of the great multitude—he will surely feel that a deep compassion is due to so depressed a condition of existence. And how strongly is its infelicity shown by the very circumstance, that a being who is himself but very imperfectly enlightened, and who is exposed to sorrow and doomed to death, is nevertheless in a state to be able to look down upon the victims of the "lack of knowledge" with profound commiseration. The degree of pity is the measure of a conscious superiority.

We may say to persons so favored—If knowledge has been made the cause that you are, beyond all comparison, better qualified to make the short sojourn on this earth to the greatest advantage, think what a fatal thing that must be which condemns so many, whose lot is contemporary and in vicinity with yours to pass through the most precious possibilities of good unprofited, and at last to look back on

life as a lost adventure. If through knowledge you have been introduced into a new and superior world of ideas and realities, and your intellectual being has there been brought into exercise among the highest interests, and into communication with the noblest objects, think of that condition of the soul to which this better economy has no existence. If knowledge rendered efficacious has become, in your minds, the light and joy of the Christian faith and hope, look at the state of those, whose minds have never been cultivated to an ability to entertain the principles of religious truth, even as mere intellectual notions. You would not for the wealth of an empire consent to descend, were it possible, from the comparative elevation to which you have been raised by means of knowledge, into melancholy region of spirits abandoned to ignorance.

But in this situation have the mass of the people been, from the time of the prophet whose words we have cited, down to this hour.

The prophets had their exalted privilege of dwelling amidst the illuminations of heaven effectually countervailed, as to any elation of feeling it might have imparted, by the grief of beholding the daily spectacle of the grossest manifestations and mischiefs of ignorance among the people, for the very purpose of whose exemption from that ignorance it was that they bore the sacred office. One of the most striking of the characteristics by which their writings so forcibly seize the imagination is, a strange continual fluctuation and strife of lustre and gloom, produced by the intermingling and contrast of the emanations from the Spirit of infinite wisdom, with those proceeding from the dark, debased souls of the people. We are tempted to pronounce that nation not only the most perverse, but the most unintelligent and stupid of all human tribes. The revealed law of God in the midst of them; the prophets and other

organs of oracular communication; religious ordinances and emblems; facts, made and expressly intended to embody truths, in long and various series; the whole system of their superhuman government, constituted as a school—all these were ineffectual to create so much just thought in their minds, as to save them from the vainest and the vilest delusions and superstitions.

But, indeed, this very circumstance, that knowledge shone on them from Him who knows all things, may in part account for an intellectual perverseness that appears so peculiar and marvellous. The nature of man is in such a moral condition, that anything is the less acceptable for coming directly from God; it being quite consistent, that the state of mind which is declared to be "enmity against him," should have a dislike to his coming so near, as to impart his communications by his immediate act, bearing on them the fresh and sacred impression of his hand. The supplies for man's temporal being are conveyed to him through an extended medium, through a long process of nature and art, which seems to place the great First Cause at a commodious distance; and those gifts are, on that account, more welcome, on the whole, than if they were sent as the manna to the Israelites. The manna itself might not have been so soon loathed, had it been produced in what we call the regular course of nature. And with respect to the intellectual communications which were given to constitute the light of knowledge in their souls, there can, on the same principle, be no doubt that the people would more willingly have opened their minds to receive them and exercise the thinking faculties on them, if they could have appeared as something originating in human wisdom, or at least as something which, though primarily from a divine origin, had been long surrendered by the Revealer, to maintain itself in the world by the authority of reason only, like the doctrines worked out from mere human speculation. But truth that

was declared to them, and inculcated on them, through a continual immediate manifestation of the Sovereign Intelligence, had a glow of Divinity (if we may so express it) that was unspeakably offensive to their minds, which therefore receded with instinctive recoil, They were averse to look toward that which they could not see without seeing God; and thus they were hardened in ignorance, through a reaction of human depravity against the too luminous approach of the Divine presence to give them wisdom.

But in whatever degree the case might be thus, as to the cause, the fact is evident, that the Jewish people were not more remarkable for their pre-eminence in privilege, than for their grossness of mental vision under a dispensation specially and miraculously constituted and administered to enlighten them. The sacred history of which they are the subject, exhibits every mode in which the intelligent faculties may evade or frustrate the truth presented to them; every way in which the decided preference for darkness may avail to defy what might have been presumed to be irresistible irradiations; every perversity of will which renders men as accountable and criminal for being ignorant as for acting against knowledge; and every form of practical mischief in which the natural tendency of ignorance, especially wilful ignorance, is shown. A great part of what the devout teachers of that people had to address to them, wherever they appeared among them, was in reproach of their ignorance, and in order, if possible, to dispel it. And were we to indulge our fancy in picturing the forms and circumstances in which it was encountered by those teachers, we might be sure of not erring much by figuring situations very similar to what might occur in much later and nearer states of society. If we should imagine one of these good and wise instructors going into a promiscuous company of the people, and asking them, with a view at once to see into their minds and inform them, say, ten plain

questions, relative to matters somewhat above the ordinary secular concerns of life, but essential for them to understand, it would be a quite probable supposition that he did not obtain from the whole company rational answers to more than three, or two, or even one, of those questions; notwithstanding that every one of them might be designedly so framed, as to admit of an easy reply from the most prominent of the dictates of the "law and the prophets," and from the right application of the memorable facts in the national history of the Jews. In his earlier experiments he might be supposed very reluctant to admit the fact, that so many of his countrymen, in one spot, could have been so faithfully maintaining the ascendancy of darkness in their spirits, while surrounded by divine manifestations of truth. He might be willing to suspect he had not been happy in the form of words in which his queries had been conveyed. But it may be believed that all his changes and adaptations of expression, to elicit from the contents of his auditors' understandings something fairly answering to his questions, might but complete the proof that the thing sought was not there. And while he might be looking from one to another, with regret not unmingled with indignation at an ignorance at once so unhappy and so criminal, they probably might little care, excepting some slight feeling of mortified pride, that they were thus proved to be nearly pagans in knowledge within the immediate hearing of the oracles of God.

Or we may represent to ourselves this benevolent promoter of improvement endeavoring to instruct such a company, not in the way of interrogation, but in the ordinary manner of discourse, and *assuming* that they actually had in their minds those principles, those points of knowledge, which would, on the former supposition of a course of questions, have qualified them to make the proper replies. It may indeed be too much to imagine a discerning man to

entertain such a presumption; but supposing he did, and proceeded upon it, you can well conceive what reception the reasonings, advices, or reproofs, would find among the hearers, according to their respective temperaments. Some would be content with knowing nothing at all about the matter, which they would perhaps say, might be, for aught they knew, something very wise; and, according to their greater or less degree of patience and sense of decorum, would wait in quiet and perhaps sleepy dulness for the end of the irksome lecture, or escape from it by a stolen retreat, or a bold-faced exit. To others it would all seem ridiculous absurdity, and they would readily laugh if any one would begin. A few, possessed of some natural shrewdness, would set themselves to catch at something for exception, with unadroit aim, but with good will for cavil. While perhaps one or two, of better disposition, imperfectly descrying at moments something true and important in what was said, and convinced of the friendly intention of the speaker, might feel a transient regret for what they would with honest shame call the stupidity of their own minds, accompanied with some resentment against those to whose neglect it was greatly attributable. The instructor also, as the signs grew evident to him of the frustration of his efforts upon the invincible grossness of the subjects before him, would become animated with indignation at the incompetence or wicked neglect in the system and office of public instruction, of which the intellectual condition of such a company of persons might be taken as a proof and consequence. And in fact there is no class more conspicuous in reprobation, in the solemn invectives of the prophets, than those whose special and neglected duty it was to instruct the Jewish people.

Now if such were the state of their intelligence, how would this friend of truth and the people find, how would he have *expected* to find, their piety, their morals, and their

happiness affected by such destitution of knowledge? Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? We are supposing them to be in ignorance of four parts out of five, or perhaps of nine parts out of ten, of what the Supreme Wisdom was maintaining an extraordinary dispensation to declare to them. Why to declare, but because each particular in this divine promulgation was pointed to some circumstance, some propensity, some temptation, in their nature and condition, and was exactly fitted to be there applied as a rectifier and guard? The revelations and signs from heaven were the sum of what the Perfect Intelligence judged indispensable to be sent forth from him to his subjects, as seen by him liable to be wrong; and could there be one dictate or fact superfluous in such a communication? If not, consider the case of minds in which one, and a second, and the far greater number, of the points of information thus demonstrated to be necessary, had no place to shine or exist; of which minds, therefore, the estimates, passions, volitions, principles of action with the actions also, were in so many instances abandoned to take their chance for good or evil. But *had* they any chance for good in such an abandonment? What principle in their nature was to determine them to good, with an impulse that rendered needless the rational discrimination of it by the light of truth? It were an exceedingly probable thing truly, that some happy instinct, or some guiding star of good fortune, should have beguiled into an unknowing choice of what is right, that very nature which knowledge itself, including a recognition of the will of God, is so often insufficient to constrain to such a choice.

But further; the absence of knowledge is sure to be something more and worse than simple ignorance. Even were that absence but a mere negation, a vacancy of truth, (the terms truth and knowledge may be used for our present purpose as nearly synonymous, for what is not truth

is not knowledge,) it would be by its effect as a *deficiency*, incalculably injurious. But it could not remain a mere deficiency: the vacancy of truth would commonly be found replenished with positive error. Not indeed replenished, (we are speaking of uncultivated persons,) with a comprehensive and arranged set of false notions; for there would not be thinking enough to form opinions in any sufficient number to be distinctly and specifically the opposites to the many truths that were absent; but a few false notions, such as could hardly fail to take the place of absent truth in the ignorant mind, however crude they might be, and however deficient for constituting a full system of error, would be sure to dilate themselves so as to have an operation at all the points where truth was wanting. It is frightful to see what a space in an ignorant mind one false notion can occupy, working nearly the same effect in many distinct particulars, as if there had been so many distinct wrong principles, each producing specifically its own bad effect. So that in that mind a few false notions, and those the ones most likely to establish themselves there, shall be virtually equivalent to a whole scheme of errors standing formally in place of so many truths of which they are the reverse. And thus the dark void of ignorance, instead of remaining a mere negation, becomes filled with agents of perversion and destruction; as sometimes the gloomy apartments of a deserted mansion have become a den of robbers and murderers.

Such a friend of the people, then, as we were supposing to expend his life and zeal on the object of rescuing them from their ignorance, would see in that ignorance not only the privation of all direction and impulsion to good, but a great positive force of determination toward evil.

But it may be alleged, that he would not find them *wholly* destitute of right information. True; but he would find that

the small portion of knowledge which an ignorant people did really possess, could be of little avail. It is not only that, from the narrowness of its scope, knowledge so scanty as to afford no principles directly adapted for application to a vast number of matters of judgment and conduct, would of course be of small use, though it *were* efficient as far as it reached—of small use though it *did* produce that very limited quantity of good which ought to be its proper share, in a due proportion to the larger amount of good to be produced by a larger knowledge. This is not the whole of the misfortune; it would not produce that proportionate share. For the fewer are the points to which there is knowledge that can be applied, the less availing is its application even to those few points. It shall be the kind of knowledge apposite to them, and yet be nearly useless; from the obvious cause, that a few just notions existing disconnected and confused among the mass of vain and false ones, which will, like noxious weeds, infest minds left in ignorance, are not *permitted* by those bad associates to do their duty. Weak by being few, insulated, unsupported, and dwelling among vicious neighbors, they not only cannot perform their own due service, but are liable to be seduced to that of the evil principles whose company they are condemned to keep. The *conjunction* of truths is of the utmost importance for preserving the genuine tendency, and securing the appropriate efficacy, of each. It is an unhappy "lack of knowledge" when there is not enough to preserve, to what there is of it, the honest beneficial quality of knowledge. How many of the follies, excesses, and crimes, in the course of the world, have taken their pretended warrant from some fragment of truth, dissevered from the connection of truths indispensable to its right operation, and in that detached state easily perverted into coalescence with the most pernicious principles, which concealed and gave effect to their malignity under the falsified authority of a truth.

There were many and melancholy exemplifications of all we have said of ignorance, in the conduct of that ancient people at present in our view. Doubtless a sad proportion of the iniquities which, by their necessary tendency and by the divine vindictive appointment, brought plagues and destruction upon them, were committed in violation of what they knew. But also it was in no small part from blindness to the manifestation of truth and duty incessantly confronting them, that they were betrayed into crimes and consequent miseries. This is evident equally from the language in which their prophets reproached their intellectual stupidity, and from the surprise which they sometimes seem to have felt on finding themselves involved in retributive suffering, for what they could not conceive to be serious delinquencies. It appeared as if they had never so much as dreamed of such a-consequence; and their monitors had to represent to them, that it had been through their thoughtlessness of divine dictates and warnings, if they did not *know* that such proceedings must provoke such an infliction.

How one portion of knowledge admitted, with the exclusion of other truths equally indispensable to be known, may not only be unavailing, but may in effect lend force to destructive error, is dreadfully illustrated in the final catastrophe of that favored guilty nation. They were in possession of the one important point of knowledge, that a Messiah was to come. They held this assurance not slightly, but with strong conviction, and as a matter of the utmost interest. But then, that this knowledge might have its appropriate and happy effect, it was of essential necessity for them to know also the character of this Messiah, and the real nature of his great design. But this they closed up their understandings in a fatal contentment not to know. Literally the whole people, with a diminutive exception, had failed, or rather refused, to admit, as to that part of the subject, the inspired declarations.

Now comes the consequence of knowing only one thing of several that require to be inseparable in knowledge. They formed to themselves a false idea of the Messiah, according to their own worldly imaginations; and they extended the full assurance which they justly entertained of his coming, to this false notion of what he was to be and to accomplish when he should come. From this it was natural and inevitable that when the true Messiah should come they would not recognize him, and that their hostility would be excited against a person who, while demanding to be acknowledged in that capacity, appeared without the characteristics pictured in their vain imagination, and with directly opposite ones. And thus they were placed in an incomparably worse situation for receiving him with honor when he did appear, than if they had had no knowledge that a Messiah was to come. For on that supposition they might have regarded him as a most striking phenomenon, with curiosity and admiration, with awe of his miraculous powers, and as little prejudice as it is possible in any case for depravity and ignorance to feel toward sanctity and wisdom. But this delusive pre-occupation of their minds formed a direct grand cause for their rejecting Jesus Christ. And how fearful was the final consequence of *this* "lack of knowledge!" How truly, in all senses, the people were destroyed! The violent extermination at length of multitudes of them from the earth, was but as the omen and commencement of a deeper perdition. And the terrible memorial is a perpetual admonition what a curse it is *not to know*. For He, by the rejection of whom these despisers devoted themselves to perish, while he looked on their great city, and wept at the doom which he beheld impending, said, *If* them hadst *known*, even thou in this thy day.—

So much for that selected people:—we may cast a glance over the rest of the ancient world, as exemplifying the pernicious effect of the want of knowledge.

The ignorance which pervaded the heathen nations, was fully equal to the utmost result that could have been calculated from all the causes contributing to thicken the mental darkness. The traditional glimmering of that knowledge which had been originally received by divine communication, had long since become nearly extinct, having gone out in the act, as it were, of lighting up certain fantastic inventions of doctrine, by ignition of an element exhaled from the corruptions of the human soul. In other words, the primary truths, imparted by the Creator to the early inhabitants of the earth, gradually losing their clearness and purity, had passed, by a transition through some delusive analogies, into the vanities of fancy and notion which sprang from the inventive depravity of man; which inventions carried somewhat of an authority stolen from the grand truths they had superseded. And thus, if we except so much instruction as we may conceive that the extraordinary and sometimes dreadful interpositions of the Governor of the world might convey, unaccompanied with declarations in language, (and it was in but an extremely limited degree that these had actually the effect of illumination,) the human tribes were surrendered to their own understanding for all that they were to know and think. Melancholy predicament! The understanding, the intellect, the reason, which had not sufficed for preserving the true light from heaven, was to be competent to give light in its absence. Under the disadvantage of this loss—after the setting of the sun—it was to exercise itself on an unlimited diversity of important things, inquiring, comparing, and deciding. All those things, if examined far, extended into mystery. All genuine thinking was a hard repellent labor. Casual impressions had a mighty force of perversion. The senses were not a medium through which the intellect could receive ideas foreign to material existence. The appetites and passions would infallibly occupy and actuate the whole man. When by these his imagination was put in activity, its

gleams and meteors would be anything rather than lights of truth. His interest, according to his gross apprehension of it, would in numberless instances require, and therefore would gain, false judgments for justification of the wrong manner of pursuing that interest. And all this while, there was no grand standard and test to which the notions of things could be brought. If there were some spirits of larger and purer thought, that went out in the honest search of truth, they must have felt an oppression of utter hopelessness in looking round on a world of doubtful things, on no one of which they could obtain the dictate of a supreme intelligence. There was no sovereign demonstrator in communication with the earth, to tell benighted man what to think in any of a thousand questions which arose to confound him. There were, instead, impostors, magicians, vain theorists, prompted by ambition and superior native ability to abuse the credulity of their fellow-mortals, which they did with such success as to become their oracles, their dictators, or even their gods. The multitude most naturally surrendered themselves to all such delusions. If it may be conceived to have been possible that their feeble and degraded reason, in the absence of divine light and of sound human discipline, might by earnest exertion have attained in some small degree to judge better that exertion was precluded by indolence, by the immediate wants and unavoidable employments of life, by sensuality, by love of amusement, by subjection, even of the mind, to superiors and national institutions, and by the tendency of human individuals to fall, if we may so express it, in dead conformity and addition to the lump.

The result of all these causes, the sum of all these effects, was, that unnumbered millions of beings, whose value was in their intelligent and moral nature, were, as to that nature, in a condition analogous to what their physical existence would have been under a total and permanent eclipse of the

sun. It was perpetual night in their souls, with all the phenomena incident to night, except the sublimity. While the material economy, constituting the order of things which belonged to their temporal existence, was in conspicuous manifestation around them, pressing with its realities on their senses; while nature presented to them its open and distinctly-featured aspect; while there was a true light shed on them every morning from the sun; while they had constant experimental evidence of the nature of the scene; and thus they had a clear knowledge of one portion of the things connected with their existence—that portion which they were soon to leave, and look back upon as a dream when one awaketh;—all this while there was subsisting, present with them, unapprehended except in faint and delusive glimpses, another order of things involving their greatest interest, with no luminary to make that apparent to them, after the race had willingly forgotten the original instructions from their Creator.

The dreadful consequences of this "lack of knowledge," as appearing in the religion and morals of the nations, and through these affecting their welfare, equalled and even surpassed all that might by theory have been presaged from the cause.

This ignorance could not annihilate the *principle* of religion in the spirit of man; but in taking away the awful repression of the idea of one exclusive sovereign Divinity, it left that spirit to fabricate its religion in its own manner. And as the creating of gods might be the most appropriate way of celebrating the deliverance from the most imposing idea of one Supreme Being, depraved and insane invention took this direction with ardor. [Footnote: Those who have read Goethe's Memoirs of Himself, may recollect the part where that late idolized "patriarch" of German literature tells of the lively interest he had at one time felt in shaping out of his

imagination and philosophy a theology, beginning with the fabrication of a god (or gods,) and amplified into a system of principles, existences, and relations.] The mind threw a fictitious divinity into its own phantasms, and into the objects in the visible world. It is amazing to observe how, when one solemn principle was taken away, the promiscuous numberless crowd of almost all shapes of fancy and of matter became, as it were, instinct with ambition, and mounted into gods. They were alternately the toys and the tyrants of their miserable creator. They appalled him often, and often he could make sport with them. For overawing him by their supposed power, they made him a compensation by descending to a fellowship with his follies and vices. But indeed this was a condition of their creation; they *must* own their mortal progenitor by sharing his depravity, even amidst the lordly domination assigned to them over him and the universe. We may safely affirm, that the mighty artificer of deifications, the corrupt soul of man, never once, in its almost infinite diversification of device in their production, struck out a form of absolute goodness. No, if there were ten thousand deities, there should not be one that should be authorized by perfect rectitude in itself to punish *him*; not one by which it should be possible for him to be rebuked without having a right to recriminate.

Such a pernicious creation of active delusions it was that took the place of religion in the absence of knowledge. And to this intellectual obscuration, and this legion of pestilent fallacies, swarming like the locusts from the smoke of the bottomless pit in the vision of St. John, the fatal effect on morals and happiness corresponded. Indeed the mischief done there, perhaps even exceeded the proportion of the ignorance and the false theology; conformably to the rule, that anything wrong in the mind will be the *most* wrong where it comes the nearest to its ultimate practical effect—

except when in this operation outward it is met and checked by some foreign counteraction.

The people of those nations (and the same description is applicable to modern heathens) did not know the essential nature of perfect goodness, or virtue. How should they know it? A depraved mind would not find in itself any native conception to give the bright form of it. There were no living examples of it. The men who held the pre-eminence in the community were generally, in the most important points, its reverse. It was for the *Divine* nature to have presented, in a manifestation of itself, the archetype of perfect rectitude, whence might have been derived the modified exemplar for human virtue. And so *would* the idea of perfect moral excellence have come to dwell and shine in the understanding, if it had been the True Divinity that men beheld in their contemplations of a superior existence. But when the gods of their heaven were little better than their own evil qualities, exalted to the sky to be thence reflected back upon them invested with Olympian charms and splendors, their ideas of deity would evidently combine with the causes which made it impossible for them to conceive a perfect model for human excellence. See the mighty labor of human depravity to confirm its dominion! It would translate itself to heaven, and usurp divinity, in order to come down thence with a sanction for man to be wicked—in order, by a falsification of the qualities of the Supreme Nature, to preclude his forming the true idea of what would be perfect rectitude in his own.

A system which could thus associate all the modes of turpitude with the most lofty and illustrious forms of existence, would go far toward vitiating essentially the entire theory of moral good and evil. And it would in a great measure defraud of their practical efficacy any just principles that might, after all, maintain their place in the

convictions of the understanding, and assert at times their claim with a voice which not even all this ruination could silence.

But, how small was the number of pure moral principles, (if indeed any,) that among the people of the heathen nations *did* maintain themselves in the convictions of the understanding. The privation of divine light gave full freedom, if there was any disposition to take such license, for every perverse speculation which could operate toward abolishing those principles in the natural reason of the species. What disposition there would be to take it may be imagined, when the abolishing of those principles was evidently to be also the destruction of all intrinsic authority in the practical rules founded on them, which destruction would confer an exemption infinitely desirable. The freedom for such thinking would infallibly be taken, in its utmost extent; and in fact the speculation was stimulated by so mighty a force of the depraved passions, that it went beyond the primary intention: it not only annulled the right principles and rules, but, not stopping at such negation, presumed to set forth opposite ones, so that the name and repute of virtues was given to iniquities without number. It is deplorable to consider how large a proportion of all the vices and crimes of which mankind were ever guilty, have actually constituted, in some or other of their tribes and ages, a part of the approved moral and religious system. It is questionable whether we could select from the worst forms of turpitude any one which has not been at least admitted among the authorized customs, if not even appointed among the institutes of the religion, of some portion of the human race. And depravities thus become licensed or sacred would have a fatal facility of communicating somewhat of their quality to all the other parts of the moral system. For this sanction both would reinforce their own power of infection, and would so beguile away all

repugnance and counteraction, that the rest of the customs and institutes would readily admit the contamination, and become assimilated in evil; as the Mohamedans have no care to avoid contact with their neighbors who are ill of the plague, since the plague has the warrant of heaven.

Wherever, therefore, in the imperfect notices afforded us of ancient nations, we find any one virulent iniquity holding an authorized place in custom or religion, we may confidently make a very large inference, though record were silent, as to the corresponding quality that would pervade the remainder of the moral system of those nations. Indeed the inference is equally justified whether we regard such a sanction and establishment of a flagrant iniquity as a cause, or as an effect. Suppose this sanction of some one enormity to *precede* the general and equal corruption of morals—how powerfully would it tend to bear them all down to a conformity in depravation. Suppose it to be (the more natural order) the result and completion of that corruption—how vicious must have been the previous state which could go easily and consistently to such a consummation.

Everything that, under the advantage given by this destitution of knowledge, operated to the destruction of the true morality, both in theory and practice, must have had a fatal augmentation of its power in that part especially of this ignorance which respected hereafter. The doctrine of a future existence and retribution did not, in any rational and salutary form, interfere in the adjustment of the economy of life. The shadowy notion of a future state which hovered about the minds of the pagans, a vague apparition which alternately came and vanished, was at once too fantastic and too little of a serious belief to be of any avail to preserve the rectitude, or to maintain the authority, of the distinction between right and wrong. It was not denned enough, or noble enough, or convincing enough, or of judicial application enough, either to assist the efficacy of