

Book 3, Chapter 01

Systems of Political Writers

1793

People :

Author : William Godwin

Text :

BOOK III Principles of Government

CHAPTER I

Systems of Political Writers

*The question stated. - First hypothesis: government founded in superior
□strength. - Second hypothesis: government jure divino. - Third hypothesis: the social contract. - The first hypothesis examined. - The □second. - Criterion of divine right: 1, patriarchal descent - 2, □justice* HAVING in the preceding book attempted a general delineation of the principles of rational society, it is proper that we, in the next place, proceed to the topic of government.

It has hitherto been the persuasion of communities of men in all ages and countries that there are occasions, in which it becomes necessary, to supersede private judgment for the sake of public good, and to control the acts of the

individual, by an act to be performed in the name of the whole.

Previously to our deciding upon this question, it will be of advantage to inquire into the nature of government, and the manner in which this control may be exercised with the smallest degree of violence and usurpation in regard to the individual. This point, being determined, will assist us finally to ascertain both the quantity of evil which government in its best form involves, and the urgency of the case which has been supposed to demand its interference.

There can be little ground to question the necessity, and consequently the justice, of force to be, in some cases, interposed between individual and individual. Violence is so prompt a mode of deciding differences of opinion and contentions of passion that there will infallibly be some persons who will resort to this mode. How is their violence to be repressed, or prevented from being accompanied occasionally with the most tragical effects? Violence must necessarily be preceded by an opinion of the mind dictating that violence; and, as he who first has resort to force instead of argument, is unquestionably erroneous, the best and most desirable mode of correcting him is by convincing him of his error. But the urgency of the case when, for example, a dagger is pointed to my own breast or that of another, may be such as not to afford time for expostulation. Hence the propriety and duty of defense.

Is not defense equally necessary, on the part of a community, against a foreign enemy, or the contumacy of its own members? This is perhaps the most forcible view in which the argument in favor of the institution of government has yet been placed. But, waiving this question for the present, the inquiry now proposed is, if action on the part of the community should in any instance be found requisite, in what manner is it proper or just that the force, acting in behalf of the community, should be organized?

There are three hypotheses that have been principally maintained upon this subject. First, the system of force, according to which it is affirmed "that, inasmuch as it is necessary that the great mass of mankind should be held under the subjection of compulsory restraint, there can be no other criterion of that restraint than the power of the individuals who lay claim to its exercise, the foundation of which power exists, in the unequal degrees in which corporal strength, and intellectual sagacity, are distributed among mankind."

There is a second class of reasoners, who deduce the origin of all government from divine right, and affirm "that, as men derived their existence from an infinite creator at first, so are they still subject to his providential care, and of consequence owe allegiance to their civil governors, as to a power which he has thought fit to set over them."

The third system is that which has been most usually maintained by the friends of equality and justice; the system according to which the individuals of any society are supposed to have entered into a contract with their governors or with each other, and which founds the authority of government in the consent of the governed.

The first two of these hypotheses may easily be dismissed. That of force appears to proceed upon the total negation of abstract and immutable justice, affirming every government to be right that is possessed of power sufficient to enforce its decrees. It puts a violent termination upon all political science; and is calculated for nothing further than to persuade men to sit down quietly under their present disadvantages, whatever they may be, and not exert themselves to discover a remedy for the evils they suffer. The second hypothesis is of an equivocal nature. It either coincides with the first, and affirms all existing power to be alike of divine derivation; or it must remain totally useless, till a criterion can be found to distinguish those governments which are approved by God from those which cannot lay claim to that sanction. The criterion of patriarchal descent will be of no avail till the true claimant and rightful heir can be discovered. If we make utility and justice the test of God's approbation, this hypothesis will be liable to little objection; but then on the other hand little will be gained by it, since those who have not introduced divine right into the argument will yet readily grant that a government which can be shown to be agreeable to utility and justice is a rightful government.

The third hypothesis demands a more careful examination. If any error have insinuated itself into the support of truth, it becomes of particular consequence to detect it. Nothing can be of more importance than to separate prejudice and mistake on the one hand from reason and demonstration on the other. Wherever they have been confounded, the cause of truth must necessarily be the sufferer. The cause, so far from being injured by a dissolution of the unnatural alliance, may be expected to derive from that dissolution a superior degree of prosperity and

luster.

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