

SUGGESTIONS

FOR

THOUGHT

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Florence Nightingale

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THE ANNOTATED EDITION

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Summary

Suppose a man intensely desirous to be assured that human existence is in accordance with moral right.

He finds this desire to be, not an individual caprice, but a want indicated by the laws of his constitution to be appropriate to his nature.

Yet a study of the actual history of human existence, a recognition of the suffering, the moral wrong which it exhibits, show it to be in the past and the present utterly at variance with this desire, since the history of human existence is what it is in accordance with law, and it was not, therefore, in human possibility that such history should have been other than it has been.

Here, then, consequently on the universality of law, so long as man contemplates its temporary and immediate results unexplained, he is face to face with a difficulty. To this we are endeavouring to offer a solution.

The solution we find in the *character and tendency of Law*, – which are such as to induce us to refer its existence to *will* and *power* in a righteous nature, – and hence to infer human existence to be in connexion with a future, by which connexion the desire for moral right is satisfied. The mode of operation of law, from which this character and tendency are deduced, is, that thereby are supplied means and inducement through which the imperfect moral nature will ultimately perfectionize itself and its kind.(2)¹

We propose to elucidate these propositions by a consideration of the subjects “law”² and “moral right,”³ as connected with the conditions of human existence.

1 Pagenumber in the printed, unpublished version of 1860. (*Suggestions for Thought*. London, George E. Eyre & William Spottiswoode. 1860.)

2 See Chapter 1.

3 See Chapter 2.

1

Law

Meaning attached to the word "Law."

"Law is, etymologically, that which is *laid down*, and is used in the most appropriate sense, to signify some general injunction, command, or regulation, addressed to certain persons who are called upon to conform to it.

"It is in this sense, that we speak of 'The law of Moses,' 'The law of the Lord,' &c.

"It is also used in a transferred sense to denote the statement of some *general fact*, the several individual instances of which exhibit a conformity to that statement, *analogous* to the conduct of persons in respect to a law which they obey. It is in this sense that we speak of 'the laws of nature,' when we say that 'a seed in vegetating directs the radicle downwards, and the plumule upwards, in compliance with a law of nature,' we only mean that such is universally the fact; and so in other cases. It is evident, therefore, that in this sense the conformity of individual cases to the general rule is that which *constitutes* a law of nature. If water should henceforth never become solid at any temperature, then the freezing of water would no longer be a law of nature; whereas, in the other sense, a law is not less a law from the conformity or (3) non-conformity of individuals to it. If an act of our legislature were to be disobeyed and utterly disregarded by every one, it would not on that account be the less a law."⁴

4 **FN:** Whateley's Logic. [1] [2] [3]

[1] All footnotes of Miss Nightingale herself are preceded with **FN**.

[2] See Richard Whately (1787-1863): "*Law is, etymologically, that which is laid down, and is used in the most appropriate sense, to signify some general injunction, command, or regulation, addressed to certain persons who are called upon to conform to it. It is in this sense, that we speak of The law of Moses, The law of the Lord, &c.*

It is also used in a transferred sense to denote the statement of some general fact, the several individual instances of which exhibit a conformity to that statement, analogous to the conduct of persons in respect to a law which they obey. It is in this sense that we speak of the laws of nature, when we say that a seed in vegetating directs the radicle downwards, and the plumule upwards, in compliance with a law of nature, we only mean that such is universally the fact; and so in other cases. It is evident, therefore, that in this sense the conformity of individual cases to the general rule is that which constitutes a law of nature. If water should henceforth never become

The word “law” when it is used to express some regulation of man, includes the idea of will or intention that, *when this is, that shall be*. “The expression *Law of Nature*, is generally used by scientific men, with a sort of tacit reference to the original sense of the word *law*, viz.: – the expression of the will of a Superior; the Superior in this instance being the Ruler of the Universe.”⁵ There are thinkers, however, who do not admit that evidence is within our reach, for referring to any *will* the uniformities observable in nature, which are designated laws of nature. By such thinkers the expression (laws of nature) is only used to express uniformities which experience shows may be expected with as much certainty as if there were evidence that these result from will, existing with power competent to realize such will. By such thinkers the word “law,” in the phrase “laws of nature,” is not used correctly, unless in a figurative sense; nature being figuratively represented as an entity ordaining laws.

The groundwork of our argument is that observation and experience afford evidence that law is manifested in the beginning, the constitution, the history, and the tendency of all modes of being that have a beginning.

The manifestation of law in certain instances is now admitted, but difference of opinion exists as (4) to its universality and invariability. By many the phenomena of volition are not admitted to manifest the operation – by many deviations from law are considered to be effected by miraculous interposition.

That there exist observed uniformities in many modes of existence is acknowledged by all thinking minds. This, being interpreted, signifies that there are certain definite modes of existence which are invariably attended by certain other definite modes of existence – that the former never exist without the latter, the latter never exist without the former. Such observed uniformities are called *laws*; and there are

solid at any temperature, then the freezing of water would no longer be a law of nature; whereas, in the other sense, a law is not less a law from the conformity or non-conformity of individuals to it. If an act of our legislature were to be disobeyed and utterly disregarded by every one, it would not on that account be the less a law.” (R. Whately. *Elements of Logic*. 2e edition. London, 1827, p. 288)

[3] All phrases cited or paraphrased by Miss Nightingale are printed in italics.

5 **FN:** Mill’s Logic. [1]

[1] See John Stuart Mill (1806-1873): “*The expression Law of Nature, is generally used by scientific men, with a sort of tacit reference to the original sense of the word law, viz.: – the expression of the will of a Superior; the Superior in this instance being the Ruler of the Universe.*” (J.S. Mill. *A system of Logic Ratiocinative and Inductive, Being a Connected View of the Principles of Evidence and the Methods of Scientific Investigation*. London, 1843, 7:316-17)

thinking minds – now numerous enough to constitute a class⁶ – who say that to notice such observed uniformities is all that man is capable of – that he has no sufficient evidence for tracing that they arise from a *will*.

By *will*, as recognized by our own consciousness, we mean wish, purpose, existing with the conviction of being able to effect the wish and purpose in question. Now, suppose that the more we learn concerning the modes of existence which are and have been, and concerning the future modes of existence – towards which are tending what is and has been – the more we find reason to believe that, *if* there existed a will, perfect in righteousness, in goodness, in love, in wisdom, and omnipotent to fulfil itself, the will of such a Being would be –

- (1) The invariable accompaniment of certain modes of existence, determined by Him, by certain other modes of existence, determined by Him.(5)
- (2) That one mode of existence should be beings adapted to find their satisfaction in will the same as the Perfect Will.
- (3) That beings of this mode are capable of recognizing what modes of existence involve, or are certain to be accompanied by, what other modes of existence; and that they thus possess the power of bringing into existence, through the exercise of the powers of their nature, that which is satisfactory to their nature *and* to the nature of the Perfect.

Suppose, further, that we arrive at the conviction that such a scheme alone would be harmonious with a Perfect Will, and that, the more we learn the essential nature of every different mode of being which exists, the more evidence we find that such a scheme actually exists, – will it not, in such a case, be justifiable to trace these, undoubtedly to be observed, uniformities to the existence of a *will*? The recognition of truth is much impeded by vagueness in the words with which we seek to convey what we conceive to be true. The question, whether the uniformities observed may be traced to will, or whether all we can say about them is to affirm their existence, is confused by the designation *laws*, applied to these uniformities. The word *law* is used also to designate some rule laid down by human will; and it is doubtful whether those who use the word *law*, with no conscious reference to will, have not an *unconscious* reference. It would seem best that law should be used to signify, *will, that a definite mode of being should invariably be simultaneous with certain* (6) *definite (and invariably the same) circumstances*, without any fresh exertion of will to occasion this uniformity. If a Supreme Will is understood as the spring of what are called the laws of nature, the word *law* appears perfectly appropriate. But, if observed uniformities are spoken of – not attributed to any will – the use of the

6 Positivist philosophers like Auguste Comte (1798-1857).

word *law* is objectionable. It is always dangerous to clearness to use a word *sometimes* according to its etymology, connected with which there are likely to be old and strong associations, and *sometimes* in a quite opposite sense.

By a law of God, we mean that it is a volition of God – that there is, and shall be, a constant relation of succession or co-existence with regard to certain modes of being; such as that, coexistent with certain other modes of existence, it shall always be that particles press equally in all directions – thus constituting one mode of being which we denominate a fluid.⁷ Our experience is, that such laws are invariable, never broken. “Thou shalt do no murder”⁸ is sometimes called a law of God written in the heart of man, or pronounced by God through Moses. But this cannot be said to be “laid down” – to be a volition of God. It is broken many times in every year in the nineteenth century in England and Wales. To call it a volition of God would be to say that God’s will is *not* always done.

A law may be kept in various modes or manners. The law of gravitation is kept whether a man falls down a precipice or stands upon the earth. But one mode of keeping God’s law is salutary, another pernicious to man’s temporary well-being. (We say *temporary*, for the whole of the laws of God (7) is such that temporary evil only is possible. The *whole* of the laws of God is such that they are self-rectifying, with regard to their effect upon man’s well-being.)

Can “Thou shalt do no murder” be denominated a law of God? We must carefully distinguish what are the modes of existence which are law – *i.e.*, which are, because it is the will of God that such a mode of existence shall be. It is one of the laws of motion that action and reaction are equal to one another, and in contrary directions.⁹ The invariable co-existence here is movement communicated by force, and action and reaction equal and in contrary directions.

Will it be said that, if *all* be thus law, man is really directed by God – not by himself – as much as if, each time he lifts his hand, it were by Divine will?

7 Pascal's law is a principle given by Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) that states that a pressure change at any point in a confined incompressible fluid is transmitted throughout the fluid such that the same change occurs everywhere. (Wikipedia)

8 Ex. 20:13: ¹³ *Thou shalt not kill.*

9 Newton’s (1642-1727) laws of motion are three physical laws that, together, laid the foundation for classical mechanics. They describe the relationship between a body and the forces acting upon it, and its motion in response to those forces. More precisely, the first law defines the force qualitatively, the second law offers a quantitative measure of the force, and the third asserts that a single isolated force doesn't exist. The third law can be summarised as follows: When one body exerts a force on a second body, the second body simultaneously exerts a force equal in magnitude and opposite in direction on the first body. (Wikipedia)