

OF SUPERSTITION OR INDISCREET DEVOTION.

1. Our great ignorance of the Divine Beings most naturally runs in two streams; whereof the one in harsh and coarse tempers, as in dry and stubborn soils, produces atheism, and the other in the more tender and flexible, as in moist and yielding grounds, produces superstition. Indeed, every wrong judgment, in matters of this nature especially, is a great unhappiness to us; but it is here attended with a passion, or disorder of the mind, of a worse consequence than itself. For every such passion is, as it were, an error inflamed. And as a dislocation is the more painful when it is attended with a bruise, so are the perversions of our understandings, when attended with passion. Is a man of opinion that atoms and a void were the first origins of things? It is indeed a mistaken conceit, but makes no ulcer, no shooting, no searching pain. But is a man of opinion that wealth is his last good? This error contains in it a canker; it preys upon a man's spirits, it transports him, it suffers him not to sleep, it makes him horn-mad, it carries him over headlong precipices, strangles him, and makes him unable to speak his mind. Are there some again, that take virtue and vice for substantial bodies? This may be sottish conceit indeed, but yet it bespeaks neither lamentations nor groans. But such opinions and conceits as these, —

Poor virtue! thou wast but a name, and mere jest,
And I, choust fool, did practise thee in earnest,

and for thee have I quitted injustice, the way to wealth, and excess, the parent of all true pleasure, — these are the thoughts that call at once for our pity and indignation ; for they will engender swarms of diseases, like fly-blows and vermin, in our minds.

2. To return then to our subject, atheism, which is a false persuasion that there are no blessed and incorruptible beings, tends yet, by its disbelief of a Divinity, to bring men to a sort of unconcernedness and indifferency of temper ; for the design of those that deny a God is to ease themselves of his fear. But superstition appears by its appellation to be a distempered opinion and conceit, productive of such mean and abject apprehensions as debase and break a man's spirit, while he thinks there are divine powers indeed, but withal sour and vindictive ones. So that the atheist is not at all, and the superstitious is perversely, affected with the thoughts of God ; ignorance depriving the one of the sense of his goodness, and superadding to the other a persuasion of his cruelty. Atheism then is but false reasoning single, but superstition is a disorder of the mind produced by this false reasoning.

3. Every distemper of our minds is truly base and ignoble ; yet some passions are accompanied with a sort of levity, that makes men appear gay, prompt, and erect ; but none, we may say, are wholly destitute of force for action. But the common charge upon all sorts of passions is, that they excite and urge the reason, forcing it by their violent stings. Fear alone, being equally destitute of reason and audacity, renders our whole irrational part stupid, distracted, and un-serviceable. Therefore it is called *δειμα* because it *binds*, and *τάραχος* because it *distracts* the mind.* But of all fears, none so dozes and confounds as that of superstition. He fears not the sea that never goes to sea ; nor a battle, that

* Plutarch derives *δειμα* from *δέω*, to *bind*, and *τάραχος* from *ταράσσω*, to *distract* or *confuse*. (G.)

follows not the camp; nor robbers, that stirs not abroad; nor malicious informers, that is a poor man; nor emulation, that leads a private life; nor earthquakes, that dwells in Gaul; nor thunderbolts, that dwells in Ethiopia: but he that dreads divine powers dreads every thing, the land, the sea, the air, the sky, the dark, the light, a sound, a silence, a dream. Even slaves forget their masters in their sleep; sleep lightens the irons of the fettered; their angry sores, mortified gangrenes, and pinching pains allow them some intermission at night.

Dear sleep, sweet easer of my irksome grief,
Pleasant thou art! how welcome thy relief! *

Superstition will not permit a man to say this. That alone will give no truce at night, nor suffer the poor soul so much as to breathe or look up, or respite her sour and dismal thoughts of God a moment; but raises in the sleep of the superstitious, as in the place of the damned, certain prodigious forms and ghastly spectres, and perpetually tortures the unhappy soul, chasing her out of sleep into dreams, lashed and tormented by her own self, as by some other, and charged by herself with dire and portentous injunctions. Neither have they, when awake, enough sense to slight and smile at all this, or to be pleased with the thought that nothing of all that terrified them was real; but they still fear an empty shadow, that could never mean them any ill, and cheat themselves afresh at noonday, and keep a bustle, and are at expense upon the next fortune-teller or vagrant that shall but tell them: —

If in a dream hobgoblin thou hast seen,
Or felt'st the rambling guards o' th' Fairy Queen,

send for some old witch who can purify thee, go dip thyself in the sea, and then sit down upon the bare ground the rest of the day.

O that our Greeks should found such barbarous rites,†

* Eurip. Orestes, 211.

† Eurip. Troad. 759.

as tumbling in mire, rolling themselves in dunghills, keeping of Sabbaths, monstrous prostrations, long and obstinate sittings in a place, and vile and abject adorations, and all for vain superstition! They that were careful to preserve good singing used to direct the practisers of that science to sing with their mouths in their true and proper postures. Should not we then admonish those that would address themselves to the heavenly powers to do that also with a true and natural mouth, lest, while we are so solicitous that the tongue of a sacrifice be pure and right, we distort and abuse our own with silly and canting language, and thereby expose the dignity of our divine and ancient piety to contempt and raillery? It was not unpleasantly said somewhere by the comedian to those that adorned their beds with the needless ornaments of silver and gold: Since the Gods have given us nothing gratis except sleep, why will you make that so costly? It might as well be said to the superstitious bigot: Since the Gods have bestowed sleep on us, to the intent we may take some rest and forget our sorrows, why will you needs make it a continual irksome tormentor, when you know your poor soul hath ne'er another sleep to betake herself to? Heraclitus saith: They who are awake have a world in common amongst them; but they that are asleep are retired each to his own private world. But the frightful visionary hath ne'er a world at all, either in common with others or in private to himself; for neither can he use his reason when awake, nor be free from his fears when asleep; but he hath his reason always asleep, and his fears always awake; nor hath he either an hiding-place or refuge.

4. Polycrates was formidable at Samos, and so was Periander at Corinth; but no man ever feared either of them that had made his escape to an equal and free government. But he that dreads the divine government, as a sort of inexorable and implacable tyranny, whither

can he remove? Whither can he fly? What land, what sea can he find where God is not? Wretched and miserable man! in what corner of the world canst thou so hide thyself, as to think thou hast now escaped him? Slaves are allowed by the laws, when they despair of obtaining their freedom, to demand a second sale, in hopes of kinder masters. But superstition allows of no change of Gods; nor could he indeed find a God he would not fear, that dreads his own and his ancestors' guardians, that quivers at his preservers and benign patrons, and that trembles and shakes at those of whom we ask wealth, plenty, concord, peace, and direction to the best words and actions. Slaves again account it their misfortune to become such, and can say, —

Both man and wife in direful slavery,
And with ill masters too! Fate's worst decree!

But how much less tolerable, think you, is their condition, that can never possibly run away, escape, or desert? A slave may fly to an altar, and many temples afford sanctuary to thieves; and they that are pursued by an enemy think themselves safe if they can catch hold on a statue or a shrine. But the superstitious fears, quivers, and dreads most of all there, where others when fearfullest take greatest courage. Never hale a superstitious man from the altar. It is his place of torment; he is there chastised. In one word, death itself, the end of life, puts no period to this vain and foolish dread; but it transcends those limits, and extends its fears beyond the grave, adding to it the imagination of immortal ills; and after respite from past sorrows, it fancies it shall next enter upon never-ending ones. I know not what gates of hell open themselves from beneath, rivers of fire together with Stygian torrents present themselves to view; a gloomy darkness appears full of ghastly spectres and horrid shapes, with dreadful aspects and doleful groans, together with judges and tor-

mentors, pits and caverns, full of millions of miseries and woes. Thus does wretched superstition bring inevitably upon itself by its fancies even those calamities which it has once escaped.

5. Atheism is attended with none of this. True indeed, the ignorance is very lamentable and sad. For to be blind or to see amiss in matters of this consequence cannot but be a fatal unhappiness to the mind, it being then deprived of the fairest and brightest of its many eyes, the knowledge of God. Yet this opinion (as hath been said) is not necessarily accompanied with any disordering, ulcerous, frightful, or slavish passion. Plato thinks the Gods never gave men music, the science of melody and harmony, for mere delectation or to tickle the ear, but in order that the confusion and disorder in the periods and harmonies of the soul, which often for want of the Muses and of grace break forth into extravagance through intemperance and license, might be sweetly recalled, and artfully wound up to their former consent and agreement.

No animal accurst by Jove
Music's sweet charms can ever love,*

saith Pindar. For all such will rave and grow outrageous straight. Of this we have an instance in tigers, which (as they say), if they hear but a tabor beat near them, will rage immediately and run stark mad, and in fine tear themselves in pieces. They certainly suffer the less inconvenience of the two, who either through defect of hearing or utter deafness are wholly insensible of music, and therefore unmoved by it. It was a great misfortune indeed to Tiresias, that he wanted sight to see his friends and children; but a far greater to Athamas and Agave, to see them in the shape of lions and bucks. And it had been happier for Hercules, when he was distracted, if he could have neither seen nor known his children, than to

* Pindar, Pyth. I. 25.

have used like the worst of enemies those he so tenderly loved.

6. Well then, is not this the very case of the atheist, compared with the superstitious? The former sees not the Gods at all, the latter believes that he really sees them; the former wholly overlooks them, but the latter mistakes their benignity for terror, their paternal affection for tyranny, their providence for cruelty, and their frank simplicity for savageness and brutality.

Again, the workman in copper, stone, and wax can persuade such that the Gods are in human shape; for so they make them, so they draw them, and so they worship them. But they will not hear either philosophers or statesmen that describe the majesty of the Divinity as accompanied by goodness, magnanimity, benignity, and beneficence. The one therefore hath neither a sense nor belief of that divine good he might participate of; and the other dreads and fears it. In a word, atheism is an absolute insensibility to God (or *want of passion*), which does not recognize goodness; while superstition is a blind heap of passions, which imagine the good to be evil. They are afraid of their Gods, and yet run to them; they fawn upon them, and reproach them; they invoke them, and accuse them. It is the common destiny of humanity not to enjoy uninterrupted felicity.

Nor pains, nor age, nor labor they e'er bore,
Nor visited rough Acheron's hoarse shore,

saith Pindar of the Gods; but human passions and affairs are liable to a strange multiplicity of uncertain accidents and contingencies.

7. Consider well the atheist, and observe his behavior first in things not under the disposal of his will. If he be otherwise a man of good temper, he is silent under his present circumstances, and is providing himself with either remedies or palliatives for his misfortunes. But if he be a

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