**Whewell on Political Economy and Christian Theology:**

**An Important but Neglected Sermon**



William Whewell. Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, London.

This previously unpublished text has been transcribed by Simon Ravenscroft, supported by an UK Association of Christian Economists Small Research Grant awarded to Paul Oslington in 2017. The 28 page manuscript of the sermon is part of the Whewell Papers in the Wren Library at Trinity College Cambridge, almost undecipherable in places, which may be part of the reason the sermon has so far escaped detailed analysis. Paul Oslington and Simon Ravenscroft are grateful to the Librarian Jonathan Smith for his assistance with accessing the papers and permission to publish the text. Small portions of the text were previously published in Isaac Todhunter *William Whewell, D.D. Master of Trinity College Cambridge: An Account of His Writings with Selections from His Literary and Scientific Correspondence,*  2 volumes. London, Macmillan, 1876 available **here** **<Insert link to** [**https://archive.org/details/williamwhewelld04whewgoog**](https://archive.org/details/williamwhewelld04whewgoog)**>.** The brief introduction by Paul Oslington draws on a paper “Natural Theology, Theodicy and Political Economy in 19th century Britain: William Whewell’s Struggle” forthcoming in *History of Political Economy*, a prepublication draft of which is available **here < Insert link to pdf >.**

**Introduction by Paul Oslington**

William Whewell (1794-1866) exerted a huge influence over 19th century British intellectual life, including political economy through his position at Trinity College Cambridge, his networks, his writings, as well as his role in the work of his political economist friend Richard Jones[[1]](#footnote-2).

Through the 1820s Whewell had become increasingly interested in political economy[[2]](#footnote-3), and in 1827 delivered a series of sermons on the relationship between science and Christian theology at St Mary’s Church at the University of Cambridge. According to Todhunter these sermons “attracted great attention” at the time, but were never published[[3]](#footnote-4).

While preparing the sermons Whewell wrote to his friend Hugh Rose, explaining his view that the sciences must harmonize with religion: “What I do hold is that inductive science is a good thing, and, as all truth is consistent with itself, I hold that if inductive science be true it must harmonize with all the great truths of religion; nor do I see how anyone can persuade one's self to believe that all this tempting system of discoverable truths is placed within our reach, as it were on purpose, while it is at the same time tainted with the poison of irreligion.”[[4]](#footnote-5) This assurance of the harmony between science and religion was characteristic of British scientific natural theology, and similar statements can be found in the writings of contemporaries TR Malthus, Richard Whately and others.

Whewell wrote to Jones that his topic in the sermons would be “benevolent design in the moral frame of society”. He was behind in writing the sermons but “with time enough I should not fear the greater part of the work - all the argument about the activity and omnipresence of the Deity, but when I come to the indications of benevolent design in the moral frame of society I have not such an habitual familiarity with the view of the subject in its details as merits with the confidence and vehemence which would be becoming. I have no doubt I should get on better if I had you at my elbow”. What is interesting here is the emphasis Whewell puts on benevolent design in society – the particular subject matter of the science of political economy - in a series of sermons that was to cover the relationship between the sciences and theology.” [[5]](#footnote-6)

When Whewell came to preach the sermons in February 1827 only the first four of the five he prepared were delivered. As he wrote to Jones “'I have got through them without getting quite up to the moral part of my subject...No population and in short nothing but one or two analogies from the natural world to illustrate the probability of our being very fairly ignorant of the non-general laws of the moral world”. Whewell described the sermons as “an attempt to make science fall in with a contemplative devotion which I don't think was difficult though people seem from the notion they had of scientific men to have thought it must be impossible” [[6]](#footnote-7).

What is the significance of this text for discussions of the relationship between economics and theology, including discussions that have been going on at the Association of Christian Economists[[7]](#footnote-8)?

Whewell’s text comes from a different era, one where Christian theology was the authoritative discourse and many political economists saw reconciling the new discipline with Christian theology as essential to its legitimacy in the University, and with the wider public. Robert Malthus had famously tried to reconcile his *Essay on the Principle of Population* with Christian theology, with decidedly mixed success, even perhaps in his own eyes[[8]](#footnote-9). Few political economists are concerned with such reconciliation today, and attempts would perhaps have the opposite effect on one’s reputation in the University, in the mainstream economics profession, and with the general public.

However the theological issues of scarcity and theodicy which absorb Whewell remain central to theological engagement with economics, which has taken over from theology as the master discourse in contemporary culture.

At a personal level economists who are Christians continue to struggle with tensions between

their professional work and their faith, and Whewell’s text is a record of one man’s struggle, which had important implications for his subsequent intellectual development.

For those with no interest in the reconciliation of political economy with Christian theology, the text adds to our understanding of Whewell’s intellectual development, and prefiguring many themes which recur in his later writings on the history and philosophy of science, and political economy.

I am pleased that this text is now accessible to scholars as a result of the transcription efforts of Simon Ravenscroft and the support of the UK Association of Christian Economists, and hope that it stimulates further reflection on the issues at stake.

**Transcription by Simon Ravenscroft**

**William Whewell Fifth sermon in series delivered at Great St Mary’s Church, Cambridge 1827 (this sermon was never delivered)**

**Manuscript R6.17.17. Wren Library, Trinity College, Cambridge.**

*James 3:13. Who is a wise man? Let him shew out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom*.[[9]](#footnote-10)

If it is true, as has been pointed out, that by many of the most active and profound discoverers and thinkers of these our days, in many of the most admired, and, in a mere human sense, sagacious and sublime speculations, the existence and power, the indications and operations of God have been left out of sight, or even shut out from men’s view, and brought in some measure into doubt and discountenance – if this be so, as it is difficult altogether to deny it to be; – it is no less true that other attributes of the Divine Lord of all, his goodness, his justice, his mercy, his holiness, have been also, by another class of speculators, so far at least as the tendency is concerned of their views of the cause of events in this world, forgotten or slighted. I speak now more especially of those who have reasoned concerning the moral nature and prospects of man and of societies of men; their attachments, their impulses, their passions, their bonds of union, the laws of their guidance, of their progress, and decay. And if we look steadily at the doctrines put forth by those who have in disputing concerning these momentous subjects, won, in these modern times, the largest share of applause, and become the founders and the idols of sects and schools, do we not find reason to declare of them that they do not lead us, through their teaching, up to an admiration of the beneficent wisdom and ever-good producing contrivance of the great creator. I do not say of them that they doubt, that they deny, that they attack the moral attributes of God. God forbid! – Even in these days of confident and undiscriminating boldness of speculative reasoning, there are hardly found among the most abandoned and degraded of the bondsmen of error, tongues and pens vile and hardened enough for such an accursed and unhallowed work. But I speak of the impressions **[p.2]** produced and left upon men’s minds when the doctrines of these teachers pass over them. I speak of the manner in which their views and opinions of the laws which influence human events join themselves with our views – the believers’ views – of a God of mercy and justice presiding in the world which he has made and ordering all things for good. And looking in this aspect at much of that which is now currentas the best established and most accreditedof our philosophy on these points, or at least which aspires to and claims such favour and assent, may we not ask if the feelings to which it gives birth do tend to confirm our trust, to heighten our admiration of the goodness and holiness of almighty God – whether the representation which it gives to the humble believer, of the courseof this world does easily and naturally combine and mingle itself with that love which he bears to God because he first loved us. Whether there is not rather something of seeming discrepance, some struggle and conflict, between the spirit of prayer and praise, of trust and thankfulness to the wisdom that ordereth all things well, and the seeming evil and wrong, the imperfections and weaknesses which the systems of men force upon our consideration as existing and resulting, as causes and consequences in the destines of mankind.

That this want of harmony is perceived between the views of the Reasoner and the Believer; that this pang is sometimes felt in the inward thoughts of those who lean too much on the broken spear of human philosophy, we may read in the indications given by the wavering expressionsand inconsistent thoughts of many of our Christian brethren when they look at this; and may be easily shewn in particular instances. That this discord, this struggle, arises from the too **[p.3]** narrow view which their philosophy has taken of the moral structure of this world and of man, is the belief which we pray to God that we may be able to impress upon all your minds. And this conviction we trust shall arise, that where their teaching so draws men down to earth and oppresses them with a deadness and inertness to all heavenly thoughts, then it is laden and bound down by a chain of error. That if men in their highest speculations cannot raise themselves to an all wise and all good being it is because their wings are laden, their flight is crippled, their strength is broken, by some inward infirmity, some disease of falsehood and mistake. That if their philosophy leads not to religion it is known it is erroneous even as philosophy. That it is because their sight is imperfect that they discover not the door which leads out of all the difficulties and darkness and doubts of their systems into the full light regions of religious truth. Blind insects beating their wings against the walls of their self-chosen prison and unable to see the opening by which they might emerge into the wider and fairer air of heaven.

To sift and examine all the erroneous doctrines by which men may have been shaken and disquieted in their contemplations of the goodness and holiness of God were too vast task for one man, and were not for this place or for this occasion. In strange and various forms have the restless subtlety and unmeasurable caprice of men clothed such errors – Extending to all the varieties of human affairs producing thoughts some fantastic and frivolous, some bitter and scoffing, some polluted and unholy, how could the preacher find language to mark such things meet and suited to his lips? Upon such points disputations and details, so far as they are allowable[,] that is so far as truth may be benefitted of them, are for other **[p.4]** places. To point, with a brief and general indication at some of the forms of error, its causes, and the grounds of its refutation is here all that is permissible, all that is required. To other times, to other hands must be left the labour and the honour, the precious and blessed labour, the high and enduring honour of combating in particulars those errors from which foolish and unhappy men have drawn or may draw inferences which darken the face of moral nature and divine truth. There can be no worthier object of intellectual ambition, no higher subject for the minds of the best and wisest, than thus to show that what is truein general of the goodness of God is true in particulars, that the motives and passionsof men[,] the frame and course of his society, bear marks of benevolent contrivance as strong as the evidence that theeye was made to enjoy the pleasures of sight and the ear of sound. This work is not now to be dwelt on, but I would intreat those who are setting out on their career of reasoning to believe that this conviction will fix and grow in their minds in proportion as they are wise and good**,** that it is at the same time the produceand the reward of a pure and well-ordered mind.

When we point out to men the marks and instances of a designing mind and of a will replete with purpose, in the constitution and construction of the bodilyframe of this world and its creatures; the contrivances which are to be found, presented as they are in the palpable form of matter, and resembling in many respectsmachines of our own fabrication, strikethe sense and the reason with aforce ofcompelling assentwhich even to a wandering attention is hardly to be resisted.

And one reason at least why we seem to see and understand these mechanisms plainlyand unerringly is that we know certainly and completely the laws of nature by the combination and operation of which the effects are in those cases brought about. We seem to comprehend the design which brought together and fashioned to their **[p.5]** proper shapes and fixed in their suitableplaces the liquid crystals of the eye, because we have exactly ascertained and can use to our own purposes the law which determines what flexureand change the waves of light shall undergo when they are made to take their course through like substances to those liquids when we hold such substances in our own hands and make them part of our own machines. Butwhen we come to contemplate such marks of God’s design and of benevolent purpose as in truth may be found in the constitution of man and in those tendencies and habits by which he is drawn and united into societies, we have no longer this kind of analogy and this element of certainty to assist us. Not only have we to fix our attention upon the unbodied and fleeting remembrances of passions and habits felt in ourselves or observed in others; hard to conceive distinctly in particular instances, harder still to generalize and embrace as a whole. Not only have we this difficulty, but also this other that we manifestly do not know the laws the combination of which is our main scope and object of contemplation, with any portion of the certainty or completeness which shed such a light on our reasoningsfrom the material world. God knoweth the human heart; and to him doubtless, the moral laws of our being, whatever they are, are present and immediate objects of perception as clearly *[sic]* as the laws of matter. But surely nothing but the wildest self confidence of the spirit of system-making, can venture to assume that to us these things are known with that axiomatic certainty and universal applicabilitywhich entitles us to lean upon them the whole weight of questions and considerations in which the interestsof life and immortality[,] of time and eternity are involved. At present at least the soul and the will of man is of too **[p.6]** complicated a structure, contains too many feelings and motives, for us to select from among them a few and neglecting all beside to call these principles, secure and confident that they are all that is requisite to comprehend in our reasonings, and that we have in them the germs and undeveloped embryosof all truth respecting man. This few or none will assume. Is it not indeed clear that there is no one rule with respect to man’s will which we know or can know with the certainty of a physical law of nature. In the calmest moments of self-examination we see a far different spectacle. An undistinguishable throng of hopes and fears, of passions and purposes, of recollections and anticipations, of habits and affections. A few leading maxims, subject even to error and exception; a few marks of order and regularity, seen clearly only by the wise and patient, make up our knowledge of man. How then, when we would scan the purpose with which the proportions and tendencies of this being, man, unknown to us as Imight almost call him, have been used and managed by the being who knows every movement of his structure – how shall we speak confidently or hastily – how shall we say from such one principlehe must so and so act and such and such effects must necessarily follow. Surely our reasonings must speak a different language and follow a different train. Humility and consciousnessof our own darkness and weakness as to this matter must hang upon us at every step. Not as has before been saidthat we are to despair of light and of truth. But that light and truth are to be worked for only as the reward of patient and humble and sincere thought, and that the moment, in questions where elements such as we speak of are concerned, we fix ourselves to any one principle or axiom, and neglecting modifying considerations, pursue out its consequences by mere subtlety and continuity of the reasoning intellect, from that moment we shall undoubtedly be led [to] error and falsehood by an inevitable and irretrievable career. **[p.7]** That if we are to arrive at truths of any considerable extent and general swayit must be by looking at the tangled and multitudinous texture of questions relating to man, tillthe perseveringandquick eye is able to perceive what are so far as we can trace them, the roots of natural and habitual feeling from which they spring, where each filament joins the rest and how so far as we can trace it, it twines and unites with them.

With such a caution and in such a spirit we may venture to turn our thoughts to some of the doctrines which seem most likely, among thosewhich in our days ride rampantly over the surface of men’s mind, to interfere with and discolour the spirit of pleasedand grateful recognition of God’s goodness. And let me pray you to notice that this very caution will of itself point out in most such instances, where the mistake and omission is to be found. For the opinions which may firstly have this characterare in almost all cases obtained by following out with exact connexion the logical consequences of some one or two assumed principles, and we may well believe that much of their credit and favour has arisen from the admiration of this acuteness and consistency which the intellect of men gladly hallows. Pleased to have its own clear view filled, its own bountiful and rapid powers of deduction employed – while the moral judgement, which can but work with an ever-recurring reference to individual cases, to conscious feelings, to limited rules, with time and labour, slowly and unostentatiously, for itself and not for others, is willingly neglected and unattended to by them who seek in their studies their own and the world’s applause.

**[p.8]** Let it be allowed us then, not in the idle and irreverent desire to fix your attention in this place on human theories and opinions, but in the trust that by looking for the truth in these things the glory of God and the discipline of our own thoughts may be best forwarded, to turn our thoughts for a moment to some of the doctrines which with respect to the moral government of the course of this world, have been spread among men, exhibiting all the show of sciences and systems in the form in which they have been displayed, and received with the applause and acceptance which belongs to demonstrated discoveries. Of some of these which as they are generally understood and received, seem little in harmony with our natural admiration and love of a good and merciful God, guiding all his works by laws that tend to the happiness and perfection of his creatures let us ask whether they can bear a rigid scrutiny, even of that reason which they consider as their all powerful patron – and whether the authors of them would not have done well, even in the pursuit of their own object, the strictness of speculative truth and philosophical generalization, to have gone on with a trust in their hearts that their enquiries if carried far and high enough, would lead them to a feeling that God’s government is good and wise as far as it is given to us to see it; and whether having stopped short of this point their systems are not therefore lame and imperfect, broken and disjointed even to the eye of the rational man. **[p.9]** It has, for instance, been maintained, and this doctrine has produced and does still produce a powerful impression and manifest tendency in the speculations of those who even now reason concerning the laws which regulate the prosperity and riches of human societies, that the fiat of his will by which the Creator ordained the increase and multiplication of men, impelled them in a career leading by a course not to be stopped or deflected, to want and degradation, to vice and misery. It has been passed from pen to pen and from lip to lip as a great discovery, that the tendency of mankind to replenish the earth ever pushes them on till the sharp discipline of pain, the iron hand of want and its deadly concomitant crime, drive them back or at least forbid their further progress. That wherever the large bounty of nature opens some new supply, pours out some new store of nutriment, this fierce and indomitable property of human societies springs forth instantly upon the offered food and devours it with wolfish rapidity, leaving the spot that seemed thus enriched as bare and hungry as it had been. That thus the more depressed of the orders of mankind, those portions of society that win their bread by the labour of their hands and eat it in the sweat of their brows are destined to eternal and irredeemable degradation – fated to increase in numbers as the fruits of the earth allow of their increase, and as it were condemned to become more numerous lest they should become more happy. That this, or something like this, is the representation often given of the necessary course of states and nations by those who most loudly call our attention to their success in speculation most will recognize and know. That the proclamation of such a doctrine, represented as a demonstrated truth and the fruitful source of many truths besides, shook **[p.10]** and startled the minds of pious and benevolent men, and seemed like an oppressive and disquieting thought forced in among their belief and trust in God's goodness, like a funereal and menacing light thrown upon the fair face of nature, many who bear in mind the youth and first appearance of these doctrines and their operation on the minds of men, will still recollect. And even if such opinions should have lost something of their first strange and fierce splendour. If their sway is now more narrow and partial, it may still be useful to hold up to view the falsity and failure of this attempt among others to find laws of harshness and uncompensated tendencies to the bad in the constitution of nature. If doctrines should at first be put forth by men themselves wise and good, so expressed in the vehemence of generalisation that they bore to some understandings such an interpretation as this; if these doctrines should be seized upon by men of unbalanced minds and principles; unregulated by any trust in God, by any practical feelings of goodness, by any care of consequences; should be carried to all the extravagance to which the love of system, the pride of intellect, and the polluted perverseness of the heart can lead, it might be worth our notice to see where the first aberrations were which led to this train of fallacies, to listen to the warnings of those who having been the earliest to promulgate all that was true in such opinions had afterwards been the most earnest and eloquent in exposing the errors and exaggeration which had resulted from rushing headlong on with the abstract generality of a principle without regarding the limitations and exceptions with which in human affairs truth is ever clothed and surrounded.

**[p.11]** Now if we listen to these, and if we listen to experience and observation, we shall be told in a thousand voices, that this general law which carries the increase of man’s numbers as rapidly on as the earth under their hands, supplies them with means of life – that this law is not, as has been sometimes represented, a sovereign and predominant rule forcing away all obstacles and restrictions, a huge and irresistible machine which rolls on crashing over all other springs and rules of human action, but that it is, on the contrary, but one law and impulse among many. That beside this cause a thousand others, and taken together a far more powerful band, shape the fortunes and determine the actions of men. That the numbers of men do not thus spread as it were like a torrent over the land, but that a thousand banks and dykes, and floodgates oppose and limit their progress which yet are not vice nor misery, in any reasonable application of such terms. That prudence and duty, fear and hope, a thousand interests and relations, a thousand habits and feelings, operate even in the poor man’s bosom, to prevent his rushing blindly on to want, and wickedness. That these fears softened by the trust and prospect of the future, this struggle in which he is supported and strengthened by duty and religion, are so far from degrading his nature and shedding an unbroken gloom over his existence that they ennoble and exalt his being, and call out energies of reflexion and self-guidance, of affection and kindness, without which his character would be selfish and soulless. That these regulating principles and feelings, ever varying in their form and modification, are in their existence and influence as universal as man’s nature and no less powerful than that impulse which it is their office to oppose and balance. **[p.12]** That therefore of the persons who maintain, so to speak, the omnipotence of that tendency, the error is one of a palpably unphilosophical and unscientific character. It consists in taking in general, in regarding in its most universal extent one part only of the subject, one bias only of our nature, while the rest are not so generalised; are not followed to coordinate extent but are left out of consideration and are looked upon as forming exceptions few and trifling, and sufficiently regarded if they are introduced in this and that case as corrections of our previous corrections. This is it would seem a manifest and undeniable error and the source of the strangefalsity and exaggeration which in this subject has been admitted into our political science. But this is not all. If we do consider in the most general point of view these self-regulating principles, these feelings which produce providence and considerateness and respect for themselves and regard for others in the more numerous and laborious ranks of society, we shall see that they depend immediately and closely on all that influences the moral and religious character of the massof the community. That all legislationswhich give them security**[[10]](#footnote-11)** and hope,**[[11]](#footnote-12)** all institutions which improvetheir moral character and impressions in their earlier years; above all everything which diffuses and strengthens religious rules of duty and principles of action and associations and hopes among them, ministers to the strength of the principle of good and will if strong enough divest of all destructive power the tendency which has beenso viewed with terror that if we can make them individually conscientious and kind we need not fear theirbeing collectively thronged and destitute**.** It is not requisite to do, or **[p.13]** to wish upon general principles anything but that which on the most limited view is our plain duty in each particular case. Where good social institutions and good religious principles have generated a good character in the poorer classes all is safe from the general impulses of multiplication. If hope and security, if generosity and uprightness, if a trust in God and a disposition to ask his aid predominate in a community, its happiness will not be overwhelmed by any too powerful principle of increasing numbers. In societies as with individuals our happiness and peace are given on condition of subjecting our actions to the rules of duty and our feelings to a benignant virtue. This is the provision which God makes for the advancement and improvement of nations as of men. He does not drive us to good and to enjoyment by any irresistible rule – how then could enjoyment be any but the lowest and most selfish or good more than a name[[12]](#footnote-13)[?]. But he places good and enjoyment, all that is high and ennobling and tender and devoted in our reach, the object of our aspiration, the reward of our energy. All that is done to improve the character, the views, the morals of the poorer classes, to increase their sympathy with each other, with the other orders, to add to their love and their means of comfort, their feeling of respectability, their views of their duties and destinies, all this is done to deliver them from the thraldom of passion and improvidence, and makes any accession to their means of life an addition to their real happiness, the reward of past and encouragement of future exertions, binding to them as it were all the improvement which they have gained, and appending on instruments of their future and farther education.**[p.14]** But this is not all. We may carry our thoughts farther. The approach of light which dissipates these idle terrors of the night and strips from these forms of human passion the appalling shape and supernatural power which the darkness had thrown around them, by the same light we may proceed yet onwards. – Society is preserved and advanced by a thousand impulses of considerateness and kindness and religion, from being the mere passive victim of the impulse to vice and misery. If passion be universal, self-regulation in some form and degree at least is universal also. Now let us endeavour to consider in some**[[13]](#footnote-14)** general points of view these feelings of caution against present and future evil, of regard for the welfare of others, of obedience to rules and habits of duty, which form some part at least of the being and life of all men – and not the less so because men do not always consciously refer to and embody them or because to a spectator the task of unravelling and tracing them is difficult and laborious. We may not be able to give with the evidence of demonstration any system of propositions with regard to these tendencies of our nature to a salutary self-government; but this I think almost all will allow of them that they are encouraged and enabled by all that improves the social, the moral, the religious character of the community. All institutions, and forms, and ordinances which secure to them the fruits of their industry and the means of making their industry fruitful. All that draws close the bonds of kindness and mutualregard by which different classes and ranks are tied together. All that increases the strength and holiness and purity of the characterof private and domestic life. All that mixes with the daily current of their thoughts, higher feelings of duty and eternity. All that convinces them they are thought of and cared for by the great and the wise – that the legislator, and the magistrate and the minister of religion labour and meditate to diminish thesorrows, [**p.15]** to secure the advantages which wait on their condition as they wait on all. All in short that puts in motion their hopes, their feelings of responsibility, their sense of right and good, all ministers to the strength of the persevering principle and weakens and palsies the destructive power of human passions. The consideration of the effect which these produce on human society leads to no other practicallessonfor the philosopher than what the plainest Christian could teach him. A well-ordered state, a people trusting in God, – such need not to fear that their crowds will increase too fast, thatthey will outgrow the foundations of their prosperity. As it were by anatural law the violation of God’s commands, the forgetfulness of his care and superintendence, the pollution of the ties by which he has bound societies together lead to the carelessness of the future[,]the selfishness, the licentiousness, the violence, by which alone increasing numbers becomean evil. It is only if the children of menforget his law and walk not in his judgments, that he visits their transgressions with a rod of iron and their iniquity with stripes. And in proportion as they approach to a conformity with his will; as they have more and more of these higher and betterelements in their minds and characters,as their governors and lawgivers have been raised by an enlightened wisdom and religion above all that is hasty or rash and selfish and harsh – as the poor have beenby the fear of God rescued from all violence, and cupidity and evil speaking and supining – the rich from selfishness, luxuryand oppressions – they will approach too this state of security where as it were the visible blessing of God overshadows them and protectsthem from the terrors of **[p.16]** a dissolute darkness and as it were the pestilence of improvidence.

Thus then societies as well as individuals are the authors of their own happiness or misery – the good they do or neglect to do, their vices and follies, their trust in God or their forgetfulness of him are all heavy with consequences and drag in the fortunesof the future by a chain as indissoluble as the actions of this man or that. A country is responsiblefor its own social prosperity and happiness. The actions of all influence the fortunes of all. The future depends upon the present, and the careerof kingdoms insofar as the balance is concerned between their increase of numbers and prosperity, is regulated by the religion and wisdom and purity of their chiefs and governors, of their priests and sages, but not of these only but still more and mostprincipally by the morality and purity and good disposition and kindness and considerateness of the great massof the people.**[[14]](#footnote-15)**

When the prophets so often utter denunciations against different lands under the characterof a single person and declare the wrath of God against them for their sins theyutteran oraclewhichevery day fulfils in every land.**[[15]](#footnote-16)** And when God declares that though there of themost righteous of men, though Noah, Daniel and Job were in the land they should not deliver ithe declares that which he to this day executes.“When the land sinnethagainst me by trespassing grievously,then will I stretch out mine hand upon it and will break the staff of the bread thereof, and will send famine upon it, and will cut off man and beast from it”.**[[16]](#footnote-17)**

**[p.17]** Being arrived then at this point what is there that need at all alarm or stagger us, what is there of gloom or despair, what is there of encouragement to low and selfish principles in the viewthat we now obtain of the principles by which the progress of human society is influenced. That societies are responsible for their conduct? That the good and illwhich nations sufferdepends on the good and ill they do? That the character and wisdom of nations and legislators have their consequences in their fortunes? Is this terrible or discouraging? Can we conceive it or would we have it otherwise? Would we have wisdom produce no happiness or vice draw down no punishment when applied to the actions of masses and bodies of men? – Would we have God guide us to good and to enjoyment by an irresistible rule and necessity? If this be so could enjoyment be aught but the lowest and most selfish or good more than a name? – And if we would aspire for, can we conceive such a state?If each man receives of good or ill earnedby his own actions, if his reward depends upon howhis talenthas been occupied, can the common stock of society be independent of such causes? – Surely it is not needful farther to dwell upon the vain and inconsistent wishes, the unreflectingignorance and absence of all consciousness of the feelingswhich are concerned in such a question which must have been the endowment of them whose hopes and thoughts and consolations were disturbed and struck with giddiness when the tendencies of human societies were unfolded to them. Their shortsightedness would be hardly accountable [**p.18]** did we not know how prone in these latter times men have been to reason on human nature as if society could exist or could be conceived without a sense of duty and mutual regard. As if the consideration of these elements, and of all the habits of action and thought which bear on them were not an indispensable and everlasting condition of every enquiry with respect to our nature which should ever lead to truth. With this light, with this consolation, we see in all this ostentatious exhibition of these doctrines of human tendencies to misery, nothing but this that man and consequently societies of men have passions which they must bridle, indulgencies which are denied, rules of duty which require self-denial. That they are connected with the future by the relation of providence and hope and responsibility and have their souls and minds and hearts not given in vain but that they may think and feel and resolve.

But not only does this view remove all fear and terror except that of folly and wickedness, but it seems farther to be full of joy and consolation. Who is there, of them who have pleasure in the exertions of their powers and faculties that wishes that men should not be responsible for their actions. Who of them that have any hope and trust, would desire that his country should have its future altogether independent of what is done by her children –– of the wisdom of her legislators and sages, of the holiness of her priests,of the virtue of her daughters, of the integrity and generosity and firm resolve of her sons. For whom of these that labour for the good of the land is it not the spring and principle of their actions that all that their minds can produce of wise and good shall be stamped in ineffaceable characters upon the destinies of their country, that it shall become an element in the great and eternal succession of events. All they can do to make them more secure from misfortune and worry, all labours by which they can render them more good, more pure, more compassionate, more thoughtful, more religious, all **[p.19]** this is not of a momentary and evanescent existence, a sigh breathed in the air; – it is as it were eternal – it has a beginning but no end – it joins the great army of beneficial causes and events which is forever marching on, and of which no man knows where the conquest will terminate. And even to the lowest it is a thought of joy that the fruit of his actions of goodness and prudence is not confined to himself or to the present time, that the humble and good man is a benefactor of his country, and to all time.[[17]](#footnote-18)

Hence it appears then that the conflict which takes place in the world between good and evil, is but the multiplication and generalization of that which occurs in the personof each man. If we would understand that wider problemwe must consider their individual cases. The tendency to evil and to misery is the whole amount; the sum as it were of all the impulses by whicheach one of the sons of Adam is driven in that course. The power of resisting this the better and holier impulseswhich balance and outweigh it are also to be found in **[p.20]** each man’s bosom and if we reeds will so speculateand make our all embracing theories, and hold in our hands the diverging threads of a universal truth we must take in a general view these better principles also. This the strident rules of our philosophy require and ordain. It is not wrongmerely[,] butwhat some perhaps wouldmost avoid[,]it is against reason, to consider these antagonist powers and to view one more widely than the other.[[18]](#footnote-19)

If he use all that is given him; and all feelings of generosity and kindness and love; if he add to this an habitual and sincere reference to a sense of duty; if, this being insufficient, he fly to God, call in his help; and use and look for the means of prayer and mediation and support which he has appointed, let him say if he has not strength to prevail against the powers of darkness. If that side will not prevail which proves that God is just and good and calls for our admiration and thankfulness to him. But here we must have no \_\_\_\_\_[[19]](#footnote-20) fight;no man who while he seems to struggle wishesto yield, no traitorouschampion – it is not by using his reason merely, by reenacting theories[,]by repeating formularies that we can prove ourselves conquerors. It must be an action of the heart, the resolution, the will – we must run to God as the weak man to the strong in danger, as the child to the parent in distress – we must be as earnest in wishing to resist temptation as the bad man is to yield to it, and then we shall find that God has with the temptation provided a way of escape – that in ordinary cases by ordinary means, in more critical situations by extraordinary efforts and earnestness if by the divine assistance given in such cases we can overcome the evil. No good man ever felt disposed to think that he had yielded to temptation otherwise than by his own fault – suchmen do not throw off the blame**,** \_\_\_\_\_[[20]](#footnote-21) the temptation is in the weakness of their nature. **[p.21]** And if we would know which of these powers does essentially predominate, which is armed with greaterstrength and more conquering energies, let each man look within himself and see how the matter stands in his ownproperperson, and what aspect the persevering and destroying tendencies lean in the inward chambers of his own bosom. What is true for each man is true for all, is that universal truth which is the object of our sciencesand the purpose of our present thoughts. If each man have supports and consolations which, well used, would enable him to play manfully his part in fighting against the armies of sin and misery, of passionand improvidence, in that warfare of which human life consists; and if in this war victory is certain whileeach soldier bears himself with fidelity and zeal, shrinking from no difficulty while hope remains and spurning all seductions to disloyalty and fear then have we allthat we can look for or feel as needful. All then that each needs to enquire is if he has enough to encourage his hopes, to animate his exertions, to reward his success. And howstands the case in this matter?Are we deserted? Are we abandoned? Have we not the support and guidance which our postmakes necessary? In all questions where our actions lead to consequences have we not the means afforded us of doing right, of resisting the seductions of evil. Let each man say whether. **[p.22]** And if men, all men, may sometimes fall, yet is it clear that with them for not using the means rests the fault and the wrong, and that it would be utterly erroneous and perverse to deny that means of resistance were not offered. Go to any good man, that is to any man who does sincerely use the strength which is given him to follow the rules of duty, and ask him if in any case he have deviated from its line whose was the error and the act. Whether an irresistible force wrested his foot from the straight path, whether his limbs were palsied by any power without him. Do such men when they turn their sorrowful countenances upon their own errors throw off the blame upon the overwhelming force of the seduction to which they yielded or make God responsible for withholding his strength and his consolation from them. To such men such language as this would sound like folly and madness, like wickedness and blasphemy. It is not from the faithful and zealous champion that you hear such language. It is from another class that you hear of dangers not to be confronted and difficulties not to be overcome. It is from them who turn from the press of the battle, who give up the fight and yield without a blow in fighting against our spiritual enemies, who wish not to be conquerors but cast away their shields courting ignominy and wishing for captivity. It is from these that this cry comes that we are conquered and hopeless, that the powers of evil are too strong for us, that the battle is lost and the boots of the adversary [are] powering on to trample us underfoot, they it is that spread this cry of terror and dismay in our camps. But surely we are not so to be misled and terrified; we are not thus to be startled from our firmness and trust: from our hope and consciousness of God’s goodness.[[21]](#footnote-22) **[p.23]** We feel and we know that we are not, that societies are not driven to worry and wretchedness by an irresistible torrent of causes, but that men have power and means to fight a better fight to earn a better fortune. That men have the power not only of here throwing off the load of wretchedness and evil with a success proportional to their sincere and upright use of their faculties; but that besides this mortal victory which of itself bears superintendent witness of the justice and goodness of God, there is prepared for the conquerors a more exceeding weight of glory hereafter. How then shall we be dismayed by that evil and wrong which man himself preaches by the rejection of those rules and the neglect of those assistances which God gives, or what is then in it which should shake or bend our trust in him. What shall separate us as the apostle asks (Rom 8:35) from the love of God, from the relief of his mercy. Shall tribulation or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword[,] shall the temporal evils which are contained in that constitution of the world of which our vices and errors are also part. Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. Let us then rest in that sublime persuasion of the apostle. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life no principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come nor height nor depth nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God, that good which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Here then we see of what nature the conflict is which is maintained between the happiness and the misery, the vice and the virtue of societies. The field of combat is the soul of each man and the champions are the tendencies of good [and] **[p.24]** evil, the powers of light and darkness, the strength from above, the temptations from without and within, of which he is conscious. Except a man have turned his thoughts to this conflict, except he have wrestled hard and earnestly in this struggle, except he havesought assistance and strength from all the better powers of his nature and from God, how can he know and measure the causes which urge on states and societies to weal or to woe. If he merely looks abroad, if he reckons merelywhat bad men do without feeling what good men can do; what sources of hopeful and vigorous action, of consoling and triumphant reflexion they have,he has no means of understanding the solution of his difficulty. He asks his question while he is blind to the character, while he is deaf to the voice in which the answer is returned. How can he understand the state of trial and resistanceto temptation and reliance on divine assistance and hope of the future which assure all the believer’s difficulties – they are words whose meaning must be learnt by consciousness. **[p.25]** Is it thought strange that we should require for the illumination and assistance of the reason some operation of the affections, some consciousness of feelings which are not under its control? Surely this is not too much. We require only that man should approach such questions in a frame of mind which allows all the impressions that bear upon them to make themselves felt and heard. It is not by reasoning from definitions and axioms in such matters that truth is to be attained[.] She is not to be bound down in such technicalities but her presence is to be attained by opening our minds to her influences from every part.**[[22]](#footnote-23)**

**[p.26]** These then are the thoughts, the train of hopeful and I may say triumphant reflexions which are suggested by turning to one of those doctrines which men had fashioned out of their sciences so as to be at variance with or at least not in harmony with the love of God to us and from us to God. And has it notbeen seen that it is weak and unphilosophical as science, while it is cold or gloomy in its bearing to religion. Has it not been seen that short and imperfect as our views are, high as the laws of the moral universe are arched over our head and beyond our vision, yet if we do follow such light as we have in humility and hope, we are led to contemplations cheering, consoling, animating. Mixing the satisfaction of our reason with the encouragement of our virtue and the strengthening of our faith. Now I fear not to assert that with respect to all conclusions which war against God’s goodness; which represent the world as by a necessary chain of causes tending to misery and wrong the case is the same. If they were examined with a scrutinizing eye, merely as theories, leaving religion out of the question it would even be found that some mutilated generalization, some narrow view, some false step had been admitted which made it necessary to alter the whole for the sake of reason even if piety were silent… All views which represent the interest of one class of society as necessarily and perpetually opposed to that of others, which tell us that the fruits of the earth are in the progress of society so divided that those to whom the earth belongs receive still more and more at the expense of others, that those who **[p.27]** labour the earth must earn by a toil more and more hard and unmitigated a pittance more and more scanty and bitter, all views which tell us that men are to be wrought upon only by base and selfish desires and that our institutions must suppose them to be restrained from crimes only by force or by the fear of force, all such doctrines might be shown to be based in strange and childish perversions of the mind and pedantic and useless narrowing of principles, suppositions which render them ever too ignorant of the sphere of God’s world and ends. But we struggle in vain for time and opportunity to make all this appear. Nor would it be suitable. If we have \_\_\_\_\_\_\_[[23]](#footnote-24) so far this place is henceforth for other things.

It is to be observed that I am not here attempting to account for all the evil and misery in the world; but only to show that one of the systems which represents it as the source of laws of human existence is logically false. It would [be] presumptuous ever to answer systematically and without reference to our ignorance the general argument.**[[24]](#footnote-25)**

1. Biography covered by Richard Yeo "Whewell, William" in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* 2004, or Laura Snyder "William Whewell" in *Stanford Encylopedia of Philosophy* 2012 at [**https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/whewell/**](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/whewell/) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Whewell’s interest in political economy is more fully discussed in Paul Oslington “Natural Theology, Theodicy and Political Economy in 19th century Britain: William Whewell’s Struggle” *History of Political Economy* 2018. The larger context of debates about political economy and Christian theology in 19th century Britain is discussed in Paul Oslington *Political Economy as Natural Theology: Smith Malthus and Their Followers* London, Routledge 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Isaac Todhunter *William Whewell, D.D. Master of Trinity College Cambridge: An Account of His Writings with Selections from His Literary and Scientific Correspondence*  2 volumes, London, Macmillan 1876 I p323. The sermon on political economy is discussed by John Hedley Brooke *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives* Cambridge, CUP 1991 p151; Richard Yeo *Defining Science: William Whewell, Natural Knowledge and Public Debate in Early Victorian Britain* Cambridge, CUP 1993 p194; James P. Henderson *Early Mathematical Economics: William Whewell and the British Case* Lanham, Md., Rowman & Littlefield. 1996 p94; Laura Snyder *Reforming Philosophy: A Victorian Debate on Science and Society* Chicago, University of Chicago Press 2006 p24 although the discussion is mostly limited to the passages quoted by Todhunter [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Whewell to Hugh Rose 12 December 1826 R.2.99/27. Published in Todhunter II p78. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Whewell to Jones, 10 December 1826 Add.Ms.c.51/32. Published in Todhunter (1876) II p79. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Whewell to Jones 26 February 1827 Add.Ms.c.51/34 published in Todhunter (1876) II p82-83. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. For instance the surveys of Andy Hartropp “Christianity and Economics: An Annotated Bibliography.” *Association of Christian Economists UK Journal* December Special Issue 1997, or Paul Oslington ed. *Oxford Handbook of Christianity and Economics.* Oxford, Oxford University Press 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. T. R Malthus *An Essay on the Principle of Population* 1798. Edited by A. Flew. Harmondsworth, Penguin 1970. Commentary on Malthus attempt at reconciliation includes J. M. Pullen “Malthus' Theological Ideas and Their Influence on His Principles of Population.” *History of Political Economy* 13/1 1981 p39-54 and A. M. C. Waterman *Revolution, Economics and Religion: Christian Political Economy 1798-1833* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1991. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. This text was written in side margin by Whewell: *Job 36:2. Suffer me a little, and I will shew thee that I have yet to speak on God's behalf. I will fetch my knowledge from afar, and will ascribe righteousness to my Maker* [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Something like “of propriety” or “of property” is inserted in between lines; unclear where it is meant to be added. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Unintelligible text added in between lines here. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. This word is unintelligible [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. There were here some unfinished amendments to the text: the original sentence began: “Now if we do consider in the most general points of view”, but this was not fully corrected, so the ‘to’ added above is missing, and there is an unnecessary ‘the’ before ‘some’, which we have removed. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Here there are references to Isaiah 47:1, and Ezekiel 16:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Here there is a reference to Ezekiel 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. From Ezekiel 14:13. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. *The following paragraph is intelligible but has been crossed out:*That it would be inconsistent with Divine goodness that men and communities of men should not have their welfare dependent on their good conduct and good government is surely plain. But it may sometimes happen that men turning their thoughts only to human miseries without holding with sufficient steadfastness to their trust in God’s government; and moreover not recollecting sufficiently the narrow limits of our ignorance of the general system of the moral world, may have had sad and despairing thoughts forced upon them as if God had forgotten to save men from the enemies, vice and sorrow that march with so wide a front over the earth. Now it might be sufficient to reply that we see indeed that misery and wrong have a connexion with vice and folly, but that we see this imperfectly and that what amount of one belongs to the other we have no means of judging. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. Here there are some crossed out sections and an indecipherable marginal note [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. An unintelligible word here. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. An unintelligible word here. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. There is here a line crossed out, which is a quotation from the book of Romans (quoted and expanded in the following passage). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. There follows here an unfinished sentence concluding the page half-way down:“And if fear or courage or affection and…” [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. An unintelligible word here. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. Unclear whether this line is finished or not. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)