

Part III.

How the step from polity to no polity was made distinct, history does not record—on this point Sir Henry Maine has drawn a most interesting conclusion from his peculiar studies:

"It would be," he tells us, "a very simple explanation of the origin of society if we could base a general conclusion on the hint furnished us by the Scriptural example already adverted to, and could suppose that communities began to exist wherever a family held together instead of separating at the death of its patriarchal chieftain. In most of the Greek states and in Rome there long remained the vestiges of an ascending series of groups out of which the state was at first constituted. The family, house, and tribe of the Romans may be taken as a type of them, and they are so described to us that we can scarcely help conceiving them as a system of concentric circles which have gradually expanded from the same point. The elementary group is the family, connected by common subjection to the highest male ascendant. The aggregation of families forms the *gens*, or house. The aggregation of houses makes the tribe. The aggregation of tribes constitutes the commonwealth. Are we at liberty to follow these indications, and to lay down that the commonwealth is a collection of persons united by common descent from the progenitor of an original family? Of this we may at least be certain, that all ancient societies regarded themselves as having proceeded from one original stock, and even labored under an incapacity for comprehending any reason except this for their holding together in political union. The history of political ideas begins, in fact, with the assumption that kinship in blood is the sole possible ground of community in political functions; nor is there any of those subversions of feeling, which we term emphatically revolutions, so startling and so complete as the change which is accomplished when some other principle—such as that, for instance, of local contiguity—establishes itself for the first time as the basis of common political action."

If this theory were true, the origin of politics would not seem a great change, or, in early days, be really a great change. The primacy of the elder brother, in tribes casually cohesive, would be slight; it would be the beginning of much, but it

would be nothing in itself; it would be—to take an illustration from the opposite end of the political series—it would be like the headship of a weak parliamentary leader over adherents who may divide from him in a moment; it was the germ of sovereignty,—it was hardly yet sovereignty itself.

I do not myself believe that the suggestion of Sir Henry Maine—for he does not, it will be seen, offer it as a confident theory—is an adequate account of the true origin of politics. I shall in a subsequent essay show that there are, as it seems to me, abundant evidences of a time still older than that which he speaks of. But the theory of Sir Henry Maine serves my present purpose well. It describes, and truly describes, a kind of life antecedent to our present politics, and the conclusion I have drawn from it will be strengthened, not weakened, when we come to examine and deal with an age yet older, and a social bond far more rudimentary.

But when once politics were begun, there is no difficulty in explaining why they lasted. Whatever may be said against the principle of "natural selection" in other departments, there is no doubt of its predominance in early human history. The strongest killed out the weakest, as they could. And I need not pause to prove that any form of polity is more efficient than none; that an aggregate of families owning even a slippery allegiance to a single head would be sure to have the better of a set of families acknowledging no obedience to anyone, but scattering loose about the world and fighting where they stood. Homer's Cyclops would be powerless against the feeblest band; so far from its being singular that we find no other record of that state of man, so unstable and sure to perish was it that we should rather wonder at even a single vestige lasting down to the age when for picturesqueness it became valuable in poetry.

But, though the origin of polity is dubious, we are upon the *terra firma* of actual records when we speak of the preservation of politics. Perhaps every young Englishman who comes now-a-days to Aristotle or Plato is struck with their conservatism: fresh from the liberal doctrines of the present age, he wonders at finding in those recognized teachers so much contrary teaching. They both—unlike as they are—hold with Xenophon—so unlike both—that man is the "hardest of all

animals to govern." Of Plato it might indeed be plausibly said that the adherents of an intuitive philosophy, being "the Tories of speculation," have commonly been prone to conservatism in government; but Aristotle, the founder of the experience philosophy, ought, according to that doctrine, to have been a liberal, if anyone ever was a liberal. In fact, both of these men lived when men had not "had time to forget" the difficulties of government. We have forgotten them altogether. We reckon, as the basis of our culture, upon an amount of order, of tacit obedience, of prescriptive governability, which these philosophers hoped to get as a principal result of their culture. We take without thought as a *datum* what they hunted as a *quæsitum*.

In early times the quantity of government is much more important than its quality. What you want is a comprehensive rule binding men together, making them do much the same things, telling them what to expect of each other—fashioning them alike, and keeping them so. What this rule is does not matter so much. A good rule is better than a bad one, but any rule is better than none; while, for reasons which a jurist will appreciate, none can be very good. But to gain that rule, what may be called the impressive elements of a polity are incomparably more important than its useful elements. How to get the obedience of men is the hard problem; what you do with that obedience is less critical.

To gain that obedience, the primary condition is the identity—not the union, but the sameness—of what we now call Church and State. Dr. Arnold, fresh from the study of Greek thought and Roman history, used to preach that this identity was the great cure for the misguided modern world. But he spoke to ears filled with other sounds and minds filled with other thoughts, and they hardly knew his meaning, much less heeded it. But though the teaching was wrong for the modern age to which it was applied, it was excellent for the old world from which it was learnt. What is there requisite is a single government—call it Church or State, as you like—regulating the whole of human life. No division of power is then endurable without danger—probably without destruction; the priest must not teach one thing and the King another; King must be priest, and prophet King: the two must say the same,

because they are the same. The idea of difference between spiritual penalties and legal penalties must never be awakened. Indeed, early Greek thought or early Roman thought would never have comprehended it. There was a kind of rough public opinion and there were rough, very rough, hands which acted on it. We now talk of political penalties and ecclesiastical prohibition, and the social censure, but they were all one then. Nothing is very like those old communities now, but perhaps a "trades union" is as near as most things; to work cheap is thought to be a "wicked" thing, and so some Broadhead puts it down.

The object of such organizations is to create what may be called a cake of custom. All the actions of life are to be submitted to a single rule for a single object; that gradually created the "hereditary drill" which science teaches to be essential, and which the early instinct of men saw to be essential, too. That this *régime* forbids free thought is not an evil; or rather, though an evil, it is the necessary basis for the greatest good; it is necessary for making the mould of civilization, and hardening the soft fibre of early man.

The first recorded history of the Aryan race shows everywhere a King, a council, and, as the necessity of early conflicts required, the King in much prominence and with much power. That there could be in such ages anything like an Oriental despotism, or a Cæsarean despotism, was impossible; the outside extra-political army which maintains them could not exist when the tribe was the nation, and when all the men in the tribe were warriors. Hence, in the time of Homer, in the first times of Rome, in the first times of ancient Germany, the King is the most visible part of the polity, because for momentary welfare he is the most useful. The close oligarchy, the patriciate, which alone could know the fixed law, alone could apply the fixed law, which was recognized as the authorized custodian of the fixed law, had then sole command over the primary social want. It alone knew the code of drill; it alone was obeyed; it alone could drill. Mr. Grote has admirably described the rise of the primitive oligarchies upon the face of the first monarchy, but perhaps because he so much loves historic Athens he has not sympathized with pre-historic

Athens. He has not shown us the need of a fixed life when all else was unfixed life.

It would be schoolboyish to explain at length how well the two great republics, the two winning republics of the ancient world, embody these conclusions. Rome and Sparta were drilling aristocracies, and succeeded because they were such. Athens was indeed of another and higher order; at least to us instructed moderns who know her and have been taught by her. But to the "Philistines" of those days Athens was of a lower order. She was beaten; she lost the great visible game which is all that short-sighted contemporaries know. She was the great "free failure" of the ancient world. She began, she announced, the good things that were to come; but she was too weak to display and enjoy them; she was trodden down by those of coarser make and better trained frame.

How much these principles are confirmed by Jewish history is obvious. There was doubtless much else in Jewish history—whole elements with which I am not here concerned. But so much is plain. The Jews were in the beginning the most unstable of nations; they were submitted to their law, and they came out the most stable of nations. Their polity was indeed defective in unity. After they asked for a King the spiritual and the secular powers (as we should speak) were never at peace, and never agreed. And the ten tribes who lapsed from their law melted away into the neighboring nations. Jeroboam has been called the "first liberal;" and, religion apart, there is a meaning in the phrase. He began to break up the binding polity which was what men wanted in that age, though eager and inventive minds always dislike it. But the Jews who adhered to their law became the Jews of the day, a nation of a firm set if ever there was one.

It is connected with this fixity that jurists tell us that the title "contract" is hardly to be discovered in the oldest law. In modern days, in civilized days, men's choice determines nearly all they do. But in early times that choice determined scarcely anything. The guiding rule was the law of status. Everybody was born to a place in the community: in that place he had to stay: in that place he found certain duties which he had to fulfil, and which were all he needed to think of. The

net of custom caught men in distinct spots, and kept each where he stood.

What are called in European politics the principles of 1789 are therefore inconsistent with the early world; they are fitted only to the new world in which society has gone through its early task; when the inherited organization is already confirmed and fixed; when the soft minds and strong passions of youthful nations are fixed and guided by hard transmitted instincts. Till then not equality before the law is necessary but inequality, for what is most wanted is an elevated *élite* who know the law: not a good government seeking the happiness of its subjects, but a dignified and overawing government getting its subjects to obey: not a good law, but a comprehensive law binding all life to one routine. Later are the ages of freedom; first are the ages of servitude. In 1789, when the great men of the Constituent Assembly looked on the long past, they hardly saw anything in it which could be praised or admired or imitated: all seemed a blunder—a complex error to be got rid of as soon as might be. But that error had made themselves. On their very physical organization the hereditary mark of old times was fixed; their brains were hardened and their nerves were steadied by the transmitted results of tedious usages. The ages of monotony had their use, for they trained men for ages when they need not be monotonous.

Part IV

But even yet we have not realized the full benefit of those early polities and those early laws. They not only "bound up" men in groups, not only impressed on men a certain set of common usages, but often, at least in an indirect way, suggested, if I may use the expression, national character.

We cannot yet explain—I am sure, at least, I cannot attempt to explain—all the singular phenomena of national character: how completely and perfectly they seem to be at first framed; how slowly, how gradually they can alone be altered, if they can be altered at all. But there is one analogous fact which may help us to see, at least dimly, how such phenomena are caused. There is a character of ages, as well as of nations; and as we have full histories of many such periods, we can

examine exactly when and how the mental peculiarity of each began, and also exactly when and how that mental peculiarity passed away. We have an idea of Queen Anne's time, for example, or of Queen Elizabeth's time, or George II's time; or again of the age of Louis XIV, or Louis XV, or the French Revolution; an idea more or less accurate in proportion as we study, but probably even in the minds who know these ages best and most minutely, more special, more simple, more unique than the truth was. We throw aside too much, in making up our images of eras, that which is common to all eras. The English character was much the same in many great respects in Chaucer's time as it was in Elizabeth's time or Anne's time, or as it is now. But some qualities were added to this common element in one era and some in another; some qualities seemed to overshadow and eclipse it in one era, and others in another. We overlook and half forget the constant while we see and watch the variable. But—for that is the present point—why is there this variable? Everyone must, I think, have been puzzled about it. Suddenly, in a quiet time—say, in Queen Anne's time—arises a special literature, a marked variety of human expression, pervading what is then written and peculiar to it: surely this is singular.

The true explanation is, I think, something like this. One considerable writer gets a sort of start because what he writes is somewhat more—only a little more very often, as I believe—congenial to the minds around him than any other sort. This writer is very often not the one whom posterity remembers—not the one who carries the style of the age farthest towards its ideal type, and gives it its charm and its perfection. It was not Addison who began the essay-writing of Queen Anne's time, but Steele; it was the vigorous forward man who struck out the rough notion, though it was the wise and meditative man who improved upon it and elaborated it, and whom posterity reads. Some strong writer, or group of writers, thus seize on the public mind, and a curious process soon assimilates other writers in appearance to them. To some extent, no doubt, this assimilation is effected by a process most intelligible, and not at all curious—the process of conscious imitation; A sees that B's style of writing answers, and he imitates it. But definitely aimed mimicry like this is always rare; original men

who like their own thoughts do not willingly clothe them in words they feel they borrow. No man, indeed, can think to much purpose when he is studying to write a style not his own. After all, very few men are at all equal to the steady labor, the stupid and mistaken labor mostly, of making a style. Most men catch the words that are in the air, and the rhythm which comes to them they do not know from whence; an unconscious imitation determines their words, and makes them say what of themselves they would never have thought of saying. Everyone who has written in more than one newspaper knows how invariably his style catches the tone of each paper while he is writing for it, and changes to the tone of another when in turn he begins to write for that. He probably would rather write the traditional style to which the readers of the journal are used, but he does not set himself to copy it; he would have to force himself in order not to write it if that was what he wanted. Exactly in this way, just as a writer for a journal without a distinctly framed purpose gives the readers of the journal the sort of words and the sort of thoughts they are used to—so, on a larger scale, the writers of an age, without thinking of it, give to the readers of the age the sort of words and the sort of thoughts—the special literature, in fact—which those readers like and prize. And not only does the writer, without thinking, choose the sort of style and meaning which are most in vogue, but the writer is himself chosen. A writer does not begin to write in the traditional rhythm of an age unless he feels, or fancies he feels, a sort of aptitude for writing it, any more than a writer tries to write in a journal in which the style is uncongenial or impossible to him. Indeed, if he mistakes he is soon weeded out; the editor rejects, the age will not read his compositions. How painfully this traditional style cramps great writers whom it happens not to suit is curiously seen in Wordsworth, who was bold enough to break through it, and, at the risk of contemporary neglect, to frame a style of his own. But he did so knowingly, and he did so with an effort. "It is supposed," he says, "that by the act of writing in verse an author makes a formal engagement that he will gratify certain known habits of association; that he not only then apprises the reader that certain classes of ideas and expressions will be found in his book, but that others will be carefully eschewed.

The exponent or symbol held forth by metrical language must, in different ages of literature, have excited very different expectations; for example, in the age of Catullus, Terence, or Lucretius, and that of Statius or Claudian; and in our own country, in the age of Shakespeare and Beaumont and Fletcher, and that of Donne and Cowley, or Pope." And then, in a kind of vexed way, Wordsworth goes on to explain that he himself can't and won't do what is expected from him, but that he will write his own words, and only his own words. A strict, I was going to say a Puritan, genius will act thus, but most men of genius are susceptible and versatile, and fall into the style of their age. One very unapt at the assimilating process, but on that account the more curious about it, says:—

"How we
Track a livelong day, great heaven, and watch our shadows!
What our shadows seem, forsooth, we will ourselves be.
Do I look like that? You think me that: then I *am* that."

What writers are expected to write, they write; or else they do not write at all; but, like the writer of these lines, stop discouraged, live disheartened, and die leaving fragments which their friends treasure, but which a rushing world never heeds. The nonconformist writers are neglected, the conformist writers are encouraged, until perhaps on a sudden the fashion shifts. And as with the writers, so in a less degree with readers. Many men—most men—get to like or think they like that which is ever before them, and which those around them like, and which received opinion says they ought to like; or if their minds are too marked and oddly made to get into the mould, they give up reading altogether, or read old books and foreign books, formed under another code and appealing to a different taste. The principle of "elimination," the "use and disuse" of organs which naturalists speak of, works here. What is used strengthens; what is disused weakens: "to those who have, more is given;" and so a sort of style settles upon an age, and imprinting itself more than anything else in men's memories becomes all that is thought of about it.

I believe that what we call national character arose in very much the same way. At first a sort of "chance predominance" made a model, and then invincible attraction, the

necessity which rules all but the strongest men to imitate what is before their eyes, and to be what they are expected to be, moulded men by that model. This is, I think, the very process by which new national characters are being made in our own time. In America and in Australia a new modification of what we call Anglo-Saxonism is growing. A sort of type of character arose from the difficulties of colonial life—the difficulty of struggling with the wilderness; and this type has given its shape to the mass of characters because the mass of characters have unconsciously imitated it. Many of the American characteristics are plainly useful in such a life, and consequent on such a life. The eager restlessness, the highly strung nervous organization, are useful in continual struggle, and also are promoted by it. These traits seem to be arising in Australia, too, and wherever else the English race is placed in like circumstances. But even in these useful particulars the innate tendency of the human mind to become like what is around it, has effected much; a sluggish Englishman will often catch the eager American look in a few years; an Irishman or even a German will catch it, too, even in all English particulars. And as to a hundred minor points—in so many that go to mark the typical Yankee—usefulness has had no share either in their origin or their propagation. The accident of some predominant person possessing them set the fashion, and it has been imitated to this day. Anybody who inquires will find even in England, and even in these days of assimilation, parish peculiarities which arose, no doubt, from some old accident, and have been heedfully preserved by customary copying. A national character is but the successful parish character; just as the national speech is but the successful parish dialect, the dialect, that is, of the district which came to be more—in many cases but a little more—influential than other districts, and so set its yoke on books and on society.

I could enlarge much on this, for I believe this unconscious imitation to be the principal force in the making of national characters; but I have already said more about it than I need. Everybody who weighs even half these arguments will admit that it is a great force in the matter, a principal agency to be acknowledged and watched; and for my present purpose I want no more. I have only to show the efficacy of the tight early

polity (so to speak) and the strict early law on the creation of corporate characters. These settled the predominant type, set up a sort of model, made a sort of idol; this was worshipped, copied, and observed, from all manner of mingled feelings, but most of all because it was the "thing to do," the then accepted form of human action. When once the predominant type was determined, the copying propensity of man did the rest. The tradition ascribing Spartan legislation to Lycurgus was literally untrue, but its spirit was quite true. In the origin of states strong and eager individuals got hold of small knots of men, and made for them a fashion which they were attached to and kept.

It is only after duly apprehending the silent manner in which national characters thus form themselves, that we can rightly appreciate the dislike which old Governments had to trade. There must have been something peculiar about it, for the best philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, shared it. They regarded commerce as the source of corruption as naturally as a modern economist considers it the spring of industry, and all the old Governments acted in this respect upon the philosophers' maxims. "Well," said Dr. Arnold, speaking ironically and in the spirit of modern times—"Well, indeed, might the policy of the old priest-nobles of Egypt and India endeavor to divert their people from becoming familiar with the sea, and represent the occupation of a seaman as incompatible with the purity of the highest castes. The sea deserved to be hated by the old aristocracies, inasmuch as it has been the mightiest instrument in the civilization of mankind." But the old oligarchies had their own work, as we now know. They were imposing a fashioning yoke; they were making the human nature which after times employ. They were at their labors; we have entered into these labors. And to the unconscious imitation which was their principal tool, no impediment was so formidable as foreign intercourse. Men imitate what is before their eyes, if it is before their eyes alone, but they do not imitate it if it is only one among many present things—one competitor among others, all of which are equal and some of which seem better. "Whoever speaks two languages is a rascal," says the saying, and it rightly represents the feeling of primitive communities when the sudden impact of new thoughts and

new examples breaks down the compact despotism of the single consecrated code, and leaves pliant and impressible man—such as he then is—to follow his unpleasant will without distinct guidance by hereditary morality and hereditary religion. The old oligarchies wanted to keep their type perfect, and for that end they were right not to allow foreigners to touch it.

"Distinctions of race," says Arnold himself elsewhere in a remarkable essay—for it was his last on Greek history, his farewell words on a long favorite subject—"were not of that odious and fantastic character which they have been in modern times; they implied real differences of the most important kind, religious and moral." And after exemplifying this at length he goes on, "It is not then to be wondered at that Thucydides, when speaking of a city founded jointly by Ionians and Dorians, should have thought it right to add 'that the prevailing institutions of the two were Ionian,' for according as they were derived from one or the other the prevailing type would be different. And therefore the mixture of persons of different race in the same commonwealth, unless one race had a complete ascendancy, tended to confuse all the relations of human life, and all men's notions of right and wrong; or by compelling men to tolerate in so near a relation as that of fellow-citizens' differences upon the main points of human life, led to a general carelessness and scepticism, and encouraged the notion that right and wrong had no real existence, but were mere creatures of human opinion." But if this be so, the oligarchies were right. Commerce brings this mingling of ideas, this breaking down of old creeds, and brings it inevitably. It is now-a-days its greatest good that it does so; the change is what we call "enlargement of mind." But in early times Providence "set apart the nations;" and it is not till the frame of their morals is set by long ages of transmitted discipline, that such enlargement can be borne. The ages of isolation had their use, for they trained men for ages when they were not to be isolated.