

MORAL AGENCY;

OR,

NATURAL ABILITY

CONSISTENT WITH

MORAL INABILITY:

BEING

REMARKS

ON

“AN ESSAY ON THE INABILITY OF SINNERS,

BY A PRESBYTERIAN.”

~~~~~

**BY A CHRISTIAN.**

~~~~~

PHILADELPHIA:

PUBLISHED BY THOMAS AND WILLIAM BRADFORD.

NO. 8, SOUTH FRONT-STREET.

Anderson & Meehan, Printers.

1819.

MORAL AGENCY,

&c.

THE “ESSAY ON THE INABILITY OF SINNERS, BY A PRESBYTERIAN,” first addressed the public in the “Evangelical Guardian and Review,” at New York. Common fame, nevertheless, affirms it to have been a native of Philadelphia. The *second* edition having been conspicuously advertised within the walls of the General Assembly, challenged, at the same time, attention and principles.

If to have been born of, baptized by, educated among, and to have communed sacramentally with presbyterians, for many years, may entitle to the name, the writer of these remarks has *as good a right* to be denominated a presbyterian, as the reverend author of the essay. He thought also, that the Confession of that church was a confession of his faith; but the essay assails his orthodoxy, as well as that of many venerable fathers of that church, now removed to heaven, or yet within the extent of its dissociating influence.

The piety of the reverend author, it is not intended to call in question. His zeal, whether discreet or not, sufficiently appears by his essay. How far charity for his brethren has been sustained, is problematical; but this must be submitted to his own conscience. His knowledge of his subject must be fairly tried. If it shall appear, that the natural, we will not say the designed, tendency of the essay, is rather to promote dis-

cord among Christians, than to cast any light upon the important subject of which it treats, there will be only another proof, that pious men can be *dogmatical*, and even *ensorious*, when their own ideas are evidently confused about the same thing, the belief of which they categorically demand of others.

The writer of the essay has substituted the appellative term "*Presbyterian*," and withholden his name. By such signature, he virtually denies the character to those who differ from him. The writer of these remarks hesitates upon the name *Christian*, because unworthy of it; and though he thinks the essay unchristian, so far is he from excluding the essayist from a just claim to be a follower of Christ, that he fondly hopes to meet him in His presence; and has no doubt, that the reverend author will then better discern the truth of that distinction, which his essay aims to confound.

Many presbyterians discern in it, with *sorrow*, a representation by far too comforting to the impenitent, and an apology for sinning, not to be found in the writings of the oldest and best divines. The wicked have been, in every age, when charged with guilt, disposed to adopt the principles advocated in the essay, and to plead, that they have *no ability* to comply with the commands of God; thus exonerating themselves, by virtually impeaching his justice. To favour their cause is to harden and injure them, at the expense of truth.

The essay commences with the admission of a "distinction, made by some valuable divines, between natural and moral inability," and afterwards professes, that the writer has "no design to contest the propriety of making a distinction between natural and moral ability. There is a sufficient foundation for it."* It is indeed too

common to have escaped observation, and too obvious to be capable of denial. Yet, as these remarks are designed for the uninstructed, and the essay almost every where *aims* to confound this same distinction, it must be explained and exemplified.

Man is conscious that he is a *thinking* being. The power by which the living soul thinks, we denominate *mind*; but this power or ability is of different kinds. That faculty, by the operations of which we perceive, compare, determine, or reason, is denominated *understanding*; that by which we choose, or refuse, we term *will*; that by which we recollect our ideas, is the *memory*. Among these powers the *will* predominates; exerting a dominion over the others, by employing them, or not, at pleasure. Our excellent Confession of Faith,* speaking of this, says—"God hath endued the *will* of man with that *natural liberty*, that it is neither forced, nor, by any absolute necessity of nature, determined to good or evil." Without this *natural liberty*, which the Creator preserves, by making it a means of accomplishing his own purposes, man would be a mere *machine*, and by no means a subject of praise or blame. This power, which employs the other faculties of the mind, all of which are, if inclined, as well calculated for the service of God as of sin, belongs to human nature; it is therefore natural, and, concurring with the power of distinguishing good and evil, constitutes man, whether he be depraved or holy, a *moral agent*. *Natural ability*, therefore, every man has who is accountable, and must be admitted to have, if we expect to convince him of his guilt.

Fact concurs with the scriptures to prove, that man, in his fallen state, not only distinguishes between moral

good and evil, but is prevailingly disposed to prefer, or choose, the latter. This corrupt inclination does not destroy his natural liberty of will, for he does choose; but when it predominates, the man is rendered, in the language of scripture, the *servant of sin*; yet still he is a *willing* servant, and not exculpated by such slavery. His *natural ability* is a talent, fully sufficient to render him accountable, and destitute of apology; whilst his aversion to holiness is so inveterate, that he chooses only evil, until his heart, or disposition, is, in some indescribable manner, changed by the Spirit of God. This is a deplorable inability. Though natural to fallen men, it is not essential to human nature. It is denominated *moral*, because it tarnishes their *manners* with the quality or character of vice. The man who is thus destitute of moral ability, or dead in sin, is supposed to be a *living* man, and to have all the powers of body, and faculties of mind, necessary to constitute him a man, and accountable for his thoughts, words, and actions. His *deadness in sin* is chiefly, if not only, meant of that indisposition to holiness, which, resembling the insensibility of a lifeless corpse, renders the party, as to every mental faculty, dormant to the evidence of spiritual truth, and the motives to moral good.

The existence at the same time both of this *natural ability* and *moral inability*, the scriptures plainly imply, when the unregenerate are called upon to turn, repent, and believe, or are blamed for their sins; whilst the same word of truth shows them to be impotent, dead in sin, and saved and changed by grace. As the essayist exhibits much *confusion of ideas* on this important subject, to exemplify this representation, will conduce much to illustrate and fix the distinction, and perhaps to render his sermons hereafter the more intelligible.

Suppose, therefore, it were affirmed, that the writer of this essay *could not* have put his name to it; no one would learn from these words, that he had not had the *natural ability*, or power to have written, and prefixed his name; on the contrary, every person would understand by such terms, that he had had *an aversion* to the avowal of his authorship. This *inability*, being mere disinclination, and referrible to the moral conduct of the pious author, is termed a *moral inability*, a phrase which, though not universally, is nevertheless generally identified with immorality. It is denominated *moral*, therefore, not because it contained any virtuous *ingenuousness* in it, or any holy boldness in vindicating the cause of God; but merely because the aversion to the avowal, must be referred to the disposition, will, and affections, which are the sources of the morality of conduct. Suppose it still further asserted, that the reverend author of the essay, has so fully disseminated his own sentiments on this important subject, and his own views of the orthodoxy of his brethren of the ministry who differ from him in sentiments, that he *will never be able* to counteract the impressions he has made, of himself, upon the minds of many of the best instructed both of the clergy and laity. *This inability* has no dependence upon his will or desires; it is not moral: but let him possess even the strongest inclination, either at death or at any other time of seriousness, or better information, to undo what he has done, he has no *natural ability*, either of mind or body, to effectuate such a wish. He is indeed naturally as able to repent of the evil he has done to the characters of his two brethren of Newark, as he is of any other evil, of which, as a Christian, he does repent; but as long as his views continue the same that they were when he wrote the essay,

he has no *moral ability*, that is, no disposition of mind, *to be sorrowful* for what he has done, or perhaps so much as *to believe*, that he has wounded them in the most sensible point, by an arrow sent from the bow of an archer who lies concealed behind the hedge. This *moral inability* to see and repent of the evil, does, nevertheless, by no means palliate the breach of gospel simplicity, or lessen his offence. His *natural powers* of investigating the truth, and of examining his own motives and conduct, and of pursuing a different course, render him responsible; and in that eventful day, when every man's thoughts and actions shall be examined, he will, at the farthest, discern what he might now with clearness know, that man's guilt lies in the neglect, or misapplication of those *natural talents* or advantages, with which he has been intrusted.

The antiquity of this distinction has been often shown, and its importance happily illustrated. The pious and learned Dr. Watts observes, “Man has not lost his *natural powers* to obey this law; he is bound then, as far as natural powers will reach. I own his faculties are greatly corrupted by vicious inclinations, or sinful propensities, which has been happily called by our divines a *moral inability* to fulfil the law, rather than a natural impossibility of it.”* If the inability which prevents faith, be a mere defect of understanding to discern the truth, or of evidence to make it clear, the party is to be pitied, not blamed: but if an aversion to holiness determines the will to direct the understanding to other objects, the party is culpable. That such an aversion to holiness is the cause of unbelief, is proved by the circumstance, that works or fruits are required as the proofs of faith. Faith might exist without works, except so

* Watts' Works, vol. i. p. 580.

far as it is itself a compliance with duty, or works without faith, if they did not each require the same disposition of mind. But if any one possess so much regard to holiness, as to be induced to perform works from proper motives, the same disposition will lead him duly to appreciate the evidences of sacred writ; and, in like manner, if he be so well disposed to the truths revealed in the word of God, as to weigh and receive them, he has so much regard to moral excellency, as to endeavour to maintain spotless integrity, and a conscientious deportment.

This disposition is that which was lost by human defection; it is the same which the law requires; which no unrenewed man has; which every saint possesses; and it is that which duty requires every man to maintain, but which is the peculiar work of the Spirit of God, even that life which is the opposite of spiritual death. If the mind be brought, in any manner, to a conviction of sin, or to any species of illumination, yet if this wrong disposition be not changed, the man has no credible evidence of the pardon of his guilt. To induce men to believe that there is any other supernatural influence or aid necessary, than that which is to remedy *moral* inability, or help them “to will and to do” what they are already bound unto, and have natural talents for, is to furnish them with an excuse. It is most unjust, on the other hand, to allege, that “to assert that men have sufficient natural ability to obey the law, and perform the duties required, provided they have a heart to do so,” is to flatter their pride, and to encourage delay; because the moral inability, though blameable, is so inveterate, in every unrenewed man, that it amounts to a self-created or voluntary necessity of sinning, from which no one is ever saved without

special grace : and the danger is imminent, for the Spirit of God will not always strive with man. But the objection is an iniquitous doing of evil that good may come ; the truth should always be spoken, and the event left with God.

When the reverend author of the essay declares to the impenitent, from the sacred desk, that they are dead in sin, does he mean that their understandings are *shallow*, their memories *bad*, and natural talents, because impaired by apostacy, *incompetent*? Or does he aim to convince them that their hearts are alienated, and that they have, comparatively, no more *disposition* to receive spiritual things, than dead bodies to receive impressions from external objects? Does he intend an apology for them, or an accusation? To allege their defects of natural ability, is to do the former ; to press their moral inability, is to effect the latter. Ought he not to aim to be understood? Can he preach the gospel without the distinction? Does he explain *death in sin*, so as to apologize for it? Or does he teach, that when man is said to be *dead in sin*, it must be understood of his subjection to the dominion of iniquity, and that it implies, by analogy to the insensibility of animal mortified members, a total inaction of all the faculties of the soul to moral good? That this incapacity springs merely from the indisposition of the heart or will?

In the General Assembly's Narrative for the present year, (1819.) the destruction of the finally impenitent is charged "*wholly* upon their own unwillingness to accept of the merciful *provision* made in the gospel." The governing faculty, the *will*, being dead, or indisposed to good, renders the whole man dead, it misapplies or prejudices the intellectual powers, closes the eyes and ears, and shuts up every avenue by which truth might reach the man.

The essayist thinks he has “carefully stated and illustrated this distinction,” when he has said that “nothing more is meant by it, than that man possesses the faculties of a rational and moral being, which render him accountable for his conduct; and that, although all these faculties are so corrupted, and perverted by the fall, that he has become unable to fulfil the will of God, yet he is inexcusable for every breach of the Divine precepts, to which his depravity leads him.” page 3.

What must every Christian think, when a reverend minister of the gospel gravely affirms that to be a statement and illustration of a distinction, which is palpably neither the one, nor the other. The distinction is, indeed, not in opposition to such truths; it supposes man has such faculties, that he is accountable, that his faculties are corrupted, and that he is unable to fulfil the will of God, and also that he is without excuse; but the mere enumeration of these truths is not a statement and illustration of the *distinction* between natural and moral inability. It on the contrary obscures the distinction. Does the reverend essayist mean by the word *unable*, in the sentence quoted, a moral or a natural inability? If he intends the former, then he agrees with the brethren whom he has arraigned; but if he means a natural, that is, a physical inability, then he charges *Eternal Justice* with requiring the improvement of a talent not given. As well might he blame the *idiot* or *infant* for unbelief, and require, of each, faith as a term of justification.

Some confusion has also arisen in the representations in the essay, from an unusual acceptation of certain terms. Thus it is affirmed that man, “when originally created, was endowed by his Creator with *natural ability* to do *natural actions*, and with *moral ability* to do

moral or holy actions ; but when his heart became polluted with sin, he lost the latter, though he retained the former power." Here it is admitted that man possesses natural, but has lost moral ability ; but the natural ability, which is conceded, is limited to mean that only which is competent to the performance of natural actions. These being contrasted with "moral or holy actions," must mean such as are free from praise or blame. If this be the intention, by natural ability the author means, not the powers of perceiving, comparing, reasoning, judging, choosing, or otherwise acting, for all these may be exercised in moral action ; but something else, which the reader is unable distinctly to perceive. If, nevertheless, he intends by natural ability, the powers last mentioned, he then says the truth ; they have not been wholly lost by the fall of man. But "his heart being polluted by sin," he ever misapplies ~~them~~, and commits sin even under the appearance of good. That this last is the meaning of the essayist, seems also probable, because, in another place, he says, "The union of two powers, natural and moral, is necessary to qualify a man for yielding obedience to the Divine law : it follows, therefore, that if one (the moral for instance) of the requisite powers be destroyed, man is no longer qualified to yield obedience. His ability is gone, the ability which was the result of the union of the two powers." p. 13, 14. Here he admits, not only the distinction between natural and moral ability, but the necessity of their concurrence to virtuous action ; yet he strangely confounds them again, in the words "his ability is gone." This he does to countervail the assertion of one of his brethren, that "sinners have full ability to repent and believe." The essayist well knew, that the brother whom he opposed, meant by "full

ability to repent and believe," natural, not moral ability. What could, therefore, have induced his deliberate choice of ambiguity, by passing from the divided sense of the term *ability*, to that which is compounded, it is difficult to perceive, and unpleasant even to conjecture. Does the reverend author of the essay, when charging home upon the consciences of sinners the guilt of impenitency and unbelief, take care to furnish his hearers with the apology of a defect of natural ability? Or does he say, with the preacher whose orthodoxy he defames, that "they possess understanding, will and affections, and are capable of loving and hating? That there is no difficulty in the way of their loving and submitting to God, but what they are to blame for; there is no *natural* inability; nothing hinders but what is a moral evil, an implacable opposition, too deep and powerful to be overcome, but by the Spirit of God?"*

Whatever may have been intended, the essay does furnish the sinner a defence against his conscience, when it shows, in this connexion, that the law requires all the heart, soul, and might, and neither sinner nor saint, not Paul himself, could perform it.† Does the reverend author mean to say, that the laws of God require more than the holy exercise of all the natural powers of man? Or does he wish, by blending the idea of moral inability, that is, the carnal enmity of the sinner with his natural, that is his physical defect, to furnish him with a defence for his sin? The piety of the essayist forbids the supposition; yet the obvious effect of his argument is to show, that the believer may be pitied, not blamed.

The essay carries its appeal to the standards of our church, to the scriptures, and to experience. The Christian, provided he can find an issue in which he

* Park-street Lectures.

† Essay, p. 4.

can join, will submissively follow this reverend teacher through his proofs, not forgetting that the question presbyterian or no presbyterian is involved in the event. Truth will develop itself, if the terms can be preserved clear and definite.

The professed object of the inquiry was to “find how explicitly such ability, in any of our fallen race, is denied.”* Are there intended by the words *such ability*, natural, that is, physical powers, or moral? The ability which had been predicated of sinners by all the authors mentioned in the essay, competent to justify their condemnation for actual guilt, was known to this writer to be of the natural and not of the *moral* kind. The essay has denied “full ability” to man, but seems to include under the term ability, both natural and moral. If moral ability be meant by the words *such ability*, the essay denies what no one affirms. But although there is no issue tendered, or none that can be controverted, yet the essay must be followed, not for the purpose of chasing a shadow, but to discover whether the writer can make out, either from our standards, the scriptures, or experience, that man is condemned for any other *inability* than that which is *moral*; we say, *can make out*, for its real object is to confound, if not disprove, that distinction which it both admits and combats.

The eighty-second answer of the shorter Catechism, explained by the larger, is resorted to by the essayist as his first proof from our standards. “No mere man is *able*, either of *himself*, or by *any grace* received in this life, perfectly to keep the commandments of God,” &c. The *ability* which is here denied, is evidently of the *moral* kind, because the aid of the *inability* is supposed to be *grace*, which adds no *new* faculties. The

* Essay, p. 4.

passage taken from the Confession of Faith, chap. xvi. is a representation of the same thing. “This ability to do good works, is not at all of themselves, but wholly from the Spirit of God.” Here the ability spoken of is that which the saint has, and the sinner has not, and is derived from the Spirit of God; it is therefore merely the effect of regenerating grace, which changes the *heart*, removes the *prejudices*, and thus enlightens the *understanding*; the law itself ought to convince such minds of their inability to render an acceptable righteousness, and thus lead them to Christ. In all these instances, the inability consists, not in the *natural*, that is physical defects, either of mind or body; if it were such, it would excuse; but it consists in the party’s *aversion to holiness*. This is also clear from another passage cited in the essay, page 15, from the Confession of Faith. “A natural man, being altogether averse from that which is good, and dead in sin, is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereto.” Here the words “*dead in sin*,” express a higher degree of that “*aversion to good*,” which had been predicated of man in his natural and unrenewed state, and suppose the party to have no more disposition to things spiritual and holy, than a dead carcass possesses towards objects of sense. The inability or want of strength here mentioned, is affirmed of the natural man; and his inability, or that circumstance in which it consists, is pointed out expressly by the intercalary member, “being, altogether averse from that which is good, and dead in sin.” Language can scarcely be found more clearly to show, that the only culpable *inability*, or *want of strength* in the sinner, lies in his *aversion to that which is good*.

The reverend essayist’s proofs from the standards

are thus found to extend no farther than to fastening man's actual guilt upon his moral inability, which they show to consist in the aversion of his heart to good. Those standards may be presumed to accord with themselves, and the sentiments of those who made them. The prolocutor of the General Assembly who made the Confession, well understood and explained this distinction. It is not probable, that those who framed our standards, would have made them speak the opposite of their own views of sound doctrine. Although it is exceedingly unpleasant to discern in the essay the imputation of erroneous doctrines, and unhappy consequences equally deprecated both by him who imputes, and by those against whom they are charged, yet it is some consolation that they all agree that man is guilty, dependent, and morally impotent, and that humility, repentance, and faith, are his obvious duties.

The essayist proceeds to examine, whether the scriptures ascribe to sinners "an ability to yield spiritual obedience." He supposes this opinion calculated to "nourish a self-sufficient spirit." The writer of the essay must have very limited information, if he does not know, that those whom he arraigns hold that the unrenewed have *no moral ability to yield spiritual obedience*; but such ignorance of his brethren ought not to be imputed to the author of the essay: he undoubtedly, therefore, intends by such language to pass censure on those who hold and teach that the unrenewed have the *natural*, that is the mental *powers* of understanding, memory, will and affections. But must the truth be denied because the possession of such natural powers may, and often does, "nourish a self-sufficient spirit?" If the essayist could succeed to convince us that we can neither understand, nor choose, nor exercise any natural

powers, he would not only place us beyond the reach of blame, but could find no arguments which would ever make us sensible of guilt.

His scriptural proofs must now be examined, that we may know whether they declare man to be destitute of all natural ability, and also blame him for the defect.

The first proof adduced is from our Lord himself, "No man CAN come to me, except the Father draw him." Here the difficulty lies in the sense of the word CAN. The terms express that the inability is removed, when the Father draws him. This drawing is by the influence of the Spirit; and the consequent power of coming to Christ is not of walking, but of believing on, which includes desiring Christ. If this drawing be regeneration, and if this regeneration produces no new faculties, but life and activity, or moral ability, instead of indisposition to holiness; then the inability expressed in the passage is also of a moral kind, and may be presumed to be the same which the Saviour meant when, on another occasion, he said, "Ye will not come to me, that ye might have life." When the sufficiency of the saints is affirmed to be from God, and they are declared to be, in themselves, without strength; when they can do nothing without Christ, their ability is to be derived from Divine grace, which supposes their inability to be of a moral kind. Even after they are measurably renewed, the remainder of moral corruption is the culpable cause which prevents the accomplishment of their better designs: they "*cannot* do the things they would." That moral ability, or desire of holiness, which is the work of grace, is still lamentably imperfect even in the best.

Whether the essayist has proved any thing favourable to his hypothesis from the work of grace in regene-

ration, in the several passages he has adduced, will be sufficiently understood by explaining one of them, as they accord in the same truth. “*You hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins.*”* The words inserted in this passage by the translators, are supplied variously; but the same representation is given expressly, four verses after. The words are spoken of living men, who are supposed to have been *dead in sin*, while possessed not only of animal life, but of every power of body and faculty of mind necessary to moral agents. If they had not possessed natural ability, or those faculties necessary to perform the will of God, they could not have been actual sinners, for they could have been guilty of no breach of duty. Their *death*, therefore, was not a physical incapacity, but of a moral kind, a death in sin, or a total aversion to real holiness. Spiritual or holy things made no more impression upon them, than external objects do upon those who are subjected to temporal death. The native indisposition of the heart to moral good, produced a general torpor or apathy to holiness in every faculty of the soul; neither did their eyes see, nor their ears hear it. And as a dead carcass cannot animate itself; so a soul dead in sin, being subjected to a moral, or voluntary, though native inability, notwithstanding its possession of understanding, will, memory, and affections, or natural ability, as fit for duty as sin, never chooses holiness on its own account, until the Spirit of God supernaturally, and in a way unknown to us, *quickens*, or gives it life and activity towards, and a disposition prevailing, though defectively, aiming at moral purity, that is, real holiness.

As the writer of the essay admitted the distinction “between natural and moral inability” in the first in-

* Essay, p. 6

stance,* and then, although he well knew that the sole charge of defect of orthodoxy rested upon the affirming that sinners possess *natural* ability to do what is required, he blended them together under the one name, and proceeded to prove that the unregenerate have not *ability* to keep the law ; so, with the *same* logical consistency and fairness of representation, he admits, that a man “retains essentially the same faculty of understanding which he had previously to his regeneration ; retains essentially the same faculty of will ; (and) essentially the same system of affections ;” nevertheless, from the figurative language by which the scriptures describe the renovating influences of the Spirit upon the soul, he argues that it is “impossible,” that “no new faculty, no new power is given, which” the party “did not possess before.” Thus the essayist concedes and afterwards retracts, and is himself that which he combats. What was wanting ? That disposition which man lost by the fall ; which the law requires in man ; which no natural man has ; but which is, in various imperfect degrees, in every saint ; and which was promised to be given, “a new heart,” even “a right spirit.” This heart every man ought to have, and thus the effect of grace is coincident with the duty of man. The efficient cause is the Spirit, who renders man *willing* ; the manner of operation is supernatural ; the subject is passive, man ; and the effect is holy activity to good, moral ability, or spiritual life. The favour is purely gratuitous, and because already man’s duty, not necessary to vindicate the justice of God. But it would be far otherwise, if *new faculties* were given in regeneration, which the party had not previously possessed. Such an inability would indemnify the transgressor. But that the unre-

unrenewed are defective of the natural ability necessary to the performance of the duties required of them, the reverend author of the essay has not proved, nor can he do it. That such inability exists, it is believed he never learned among *presbyterians*, and consequently can scarcely be justified for maintaining it under the name of a *presbyterian*. No doubt the pious author of the essay preaches as he has written. Suppose, then, one of his hearers should remain after a sermon on the subject treated of in the essay, and should say to him, Sir, I am the unrenewed person you describe; I have never received such new faculties, or powers, but I desire, I long, I pray, I wait for them; I can do no more, and if they are not bestowed, I cannot blame myself: What could this preacher advise his hearer to do more than he has done? Would he advise him to persevere in the use of precisely the same means, and endeavour to solace him with proofs from scripture history, THAT THE PRAYERS OF THE UNREGENERATE HAVE BEEN HEARD, and therefore his may? Would he do what he has no authority from his Master to do, require duties, which are not holy, and demand less than God has charged him to require, the heart?

But, upon the principles of any of the brethren arraigned in the essay, the Lord's dealings with such a hearer, could be easily vindicated. Such would ask the hearer, do you desire, long, pray, and wait for spiritual blessings, *that you may be holy*? Is it the love of holiness, and of a holy God, that leads you to such earnest longing and worship? If it be, you have mistaken your case; this is the very thing you are seeking; it is the Spirit who gives you such desires and prayers. But, on the other hand, if you desire and pray for such spiritual blessings, merely for the supposed consequent advan-

tages, that you may inherit present good and eternal happiness, the Lord substantially grants you what you desire, when he withholds from you that change of soul to holiness which you hate. Your inability is *moral*; you are averse to God and holiness; your condemnation is just, and that if grace should never be bestowed. Grace is purely gratuitous, and not necessary to the vindication of that justice which consigns the impenitent and unbelieving to misery.

Upon the head of the testimony of experience, the essayist says, “the sinner is awakened, he sets about the work of reformation in his own strength, vainly supposing he has sufficient for its accomplishment. Does the experiment justify his lofty notions of his own ability?—if he possess ample power to repent, believe, and do the whole will of God, where is the consistency in praying for grace to enable him to perform his duty? Every petition of this kind, surely contradicts the position controverted.”

This is that species of sophism which consists in arguing from that which is true in particular circumstances, to prove the same thing true absolutely.* An author arraigned by the essay, speaking of “*natural ability in distinction from moral*,” had asserted that “sinners have full power to repent and believe:” the writer of the essay, knowing that the author whom he attacks, acknowledges the moral inability of every impenitent, and his perishing need of the grace of God to enable him to repent and believe, nevertheless asserts that “the position which that author had laid down, merely with respect to natural ability,” and which was therefore in a particular sense, is contradicted by a general prayer for grace to help. His argument is, that

* A dicto secundum quid, ad dictum simpliciter

“because man has not moral, he has no ability of any kind.”

If the sinner has no natural ability, that is, no understanding, will, and affections, and no other advantages for discerning the truth, or directing his conduct, it will be difficult to know how he can be “awakened;” for, in order to this, there must be a discernment of personal guilt; and yet without a talent its improvement cannot be required, there can be no such guilt, and consequently no conviction, or awakening. When the mind of man is awakened to discern his guilt, he does generally “set about the work of reformation in his own strength.” But what strength is it upon which he thus falsely depends? If he exercises his understanding to discern the truth, his will to choose holiness, and his affections on their proper objects, he does well. Every real convert lays these natural faculties under contribution. His disappointment arises, not so much from a defect in his natural powers, which are as well suited to the service of God as of sin; his chief mistake lies in depending upon his supposed moral abilities, the nature and strength of his own purposes, resolutions, and performances. But when he finds his purposes change, his resolutions fail, and his performances all tainted with sin, and that while his natural powers are sufficiently strong to bring him into condemnation, he has no moral ability, or strength of inclination to God and holiness to direct his efforts towards proper objects; he is then disposed to sink into the dust, acknowledge his guilt and impotency, and cast himself upon the mercy of God in Christ.

Upon this view of ordinary christian experience, let candour decide whether the inability felt by the penitent be not of the moral kind, and whether some natural

powers be not necessary to justify condemnation for the abuse of them, and to produce a conviction of such sin

Without an understanding to perceive the truth, faith is not a duty ; and without a will physically able to apply the understanding to such investigation, there is no crime in unbelief: and if there be no such natural ability of knowing a man's condition, repentance is not his duty. The duties of repentance and faith do, therefore, suppose natural powers ; and so far are such powers from superseding the use of prayer, it can neither be a duty, nor exist without them. And it is a lamentable reflection that the author of the essay, whilst he denied the propriety of prayer upon the principles he opposes, must have seen, that "prayer for grace to *enable* (a man) to perform his duty," has for its most important object, the aids of the Spirit to supply an ability of the *moral* rather than of the natural kind.

If there have been any writers or preachers in the presbyterian church, who, in criminating the wicked, and in combating their false pleas of total inability to do what God requires, have gone so far as to assert that they possess the moral ability or holy disposition to obey, the writer of these remarks has never witnessed such folly and self-contradiction. To condemn and praise, to pronounce vicious and virtuous at the same time, the same persons, and in the same respects, must be so rare an occurrence, that it could scarcely have merited a corrective essay. If the writer had fixed his charge on such, and pointed us to the book and page, his readers would have been relieved. He is well acquainted with the writings of the four worthy ministers who have been mentioned : they all held, and the two survivors hold and preach successfully, this distinction of moral and natural ability, which is essential

to the gospel. But if ever they, or either of them, exculpated the sinner, by an admission that he was the subject of either natural inability or moral ability, this fact remains yet to be made known ; nor is it believed that the reverend author can show it.

The essay confesses that those ministers whom it arraigns, “allow the understanding to be blind, the will rebellious, and the affections perverse ; and moreover maintain, that till sinners be born again, regenerated in a supernatural manner, created anew by Almighty power, they never will repent, never will believe, never will obey, (and that) these faculties must undergo a supernatural change, before sinners can obtain that *moral* ability, which is absolutely necessary to *enable* them to do their duty.” It nevertheless charges them with holding and teaching the very reverse of these doctrines, “that man is able to regenerate himself.”* But all its imputations weigh nothing, or rather they are turned to commendations, if the worthy persons against whom they are brought, charge upon the guilty the want of moral ability, or of a right disposition, and the abuse of the natural powers or talents which God has given them, and for which he will bring them to account.

The propriety of the expression *ability of sinners*, is denied in the following terms : “If the possession of these faculties constitute the *ability of sinners*, then they must be in such an unimpaired state, as really to enable them to fulfil the requirements of the law, without the aid of any other power, or the mode of speaking adopted by some divines cannot be justified ; because an ability that is not sufficient to perform any work, certainly cannot be denominated, with any propriety of speech, *full ability, ample power.*”

The ability here spoken of is not moral; it consists not in the disposition or inclination of the mind, but in "the possession of faculties," and other advantages, or means necessary to obedience to "the requirements of the law." The argument is founded upon the supposition, that the faculties of the mind are in a state so much impaired, as to prevent the obedience required. This defect in the faculties, or obstruction to their exercise, is not of the moral kind; for the question upon which the argument is intended to bear, relates solely to a natural ability; and the introduction of a supposition of a moral defect in the faculties, would be a total deviation from the subject of discussion, and render his conclusion useless. The argument is consequently founded upon the assumption, that the Judge of all the earth, who judges righteous judgment, requires more than he has given natural powers to accomplish, and that, when he shall pass his final judgment, he will condemn for the non-performance of actions, which the party had no faculties or natural powers, enabling him to accomplish. If this be not to charge him, who possesses unerring rectitude, with injustice, it will be difficult to say what might amount to such a charge. When the day shall arrive which has been appointed to discover the righteousness of God's dealings with man, imagine one of the accursed to allege in his defence, that he had not been possessed of full ability to do the things which had been demanded, and for which he is now to be condemned; what must be the answer in vindication of the justice of the Eternal? Certainly truth dictates this posing return. No more has been required than an obedience to the extent of thy natural ability. 'This thou hast not rendered, because thou hast been in heart opposed to the holiness of the Divine laws and government. This aver-

sion of mind, or moral inability, constitutes the essence of thy guilt, and when thou wast left to thyself, thou hadst thy desire, and hast no right to complain. Thus the proceedings of the last day will abundantly answer and put down this argument of the essayist, and vindicate the “use” of “language” which he “censures” as “grossly improper.”

If this argument will be found unreasonable and unjust in the mouth of a damned spirit in the last day, such also must be its true character now, though in the hand of the reverend author of the essay.

When the ministers of the sanctuary, whose high office it is to vindicate the ways of God to man, stand between him and the people, and pronounce God’s ways to be equal, the pious hearers magnify their office, and account those who hear it, blessed of the Lord. But the reverend writer of the essay seems to delight to overwhelm the minds of his hearers with impenetrable darkness, and envelop the Divine conduct in mystery inexplicable. He tells us that man “is commanded to convert himself, to make himself a new heart, to rise from the dead, and to become a new creature ; all this is his duty, because his Maker requires it from him ; but the work far transcends his ability, and can be accomplished only by the mighty power of God.” Here is scriptural language expressive of most important truths, but presented under an aspect little calculated to vindicate the Divine conduct, and in words which may tender difficulties insuperable to the minds of some, and drive them either to infidelity or despair.

If, by ability in the passage cited, he meant that which is *natural*, (and it is left purposely uncertain, for one object of this pamphlet must have been to confound the kinds, by removing the difference which exists between

them,) then it represents Him whose justice is eternal, *as reaping where he has not sown, and gathering where he has not strewed* ; and it is an afflicting recollection, that the scope of the essay requires such an interpretation of its terms. If this writer had told us, that our inability was merely moral, that it consisted in so inveterate an alienation, and so determined an indisposition of our minds to good, that no motive to the contrary could countervail our obduracy ; he would have shown us, that God required, not what is absolutely impossible, but that which is his due ; and that his justice is clear, because nothing but our aversion to holiness prevents our converting or being turned by the powerful motives he has presented to our minds ; nothing but this hinders our making to ourselves new hearts, or changing our desires from sensual to spiritual things ; rising from the dead, or being alive to holiness ; and becoming new creatures, or so changed from former desires and pursuits, as to justify the idea of a renovation of our natures. And if he had chosen to upbraid us with our guilty opposition, and to have accounted it, not only unreasonable, but so inveterate, that nothing except the mighty power of that God whom we hate and resist could remove it, or accomplish that in us, which he justly demands of us, even though he should bestow no help ; we must have pronounced the Lord to be just even in our own condemnation. In this way he might have honoured his Master, and, by his blessing, presented a motive, which might have led us from reflection to sorrow, humility, faith and salvation.

The essayist asks ; “ Is it logical to infer from the want of one power the possession of another ; or does it follow, because the sinner’s inability is blamable, he must have unblamable power ? ” In answer, the Chris-

lian can say, that he is acquainted, neither with any rule of logic, nor principle of reason, which would exclude the inference, the propriety of which has been proposed as doubtful by the learned and reverend writer of the essay. On the contrary, it appears, at least to him, very clear, that a man's moral inability, that is, his indisposition to obey the law, is blamable, precisely in proportion to the extent of his natural ability, or power to comply with the Divine precept, and consequently it does follow, that if he be blamable, or morally defective, he must have some natural power. If it be the neglect, or abuse, and not the mere possession of this, which subjects any one to blame, it must be reasonable to infer, that if any man be blamable, because destitute of *moral ability*, or a holy disposition, he must have some natural power, at least, to enable him to distinguish evil from good.

Mr. Fuller had observed ; "The law of God itself requires no creature to love him or obey him, beyond his strength, or with more than all the powers he possesses." In another place he had said, "It is sometimes suggested, that to ascribe natural ability to sinners to perform things spiritually good, is to nourish their self-sufficiency ; and to represent their inability as only moral, is to suppose, that it is *not insuperable*, but may be overcome by efforts of their own." The essay asks, "Are not these passages contradictory ?" and observes, "The first asserts that sinners have strength sufficient to love and obey God ; but the second asserts that their inability to do things spiritually good, or to love and obey God, is *insuperable*, and not to be overcome by efforts of their own. Strength sufficient, and insuperable inability !" There is far less difficulty in reconciling these different sentences of Mr. Fuller, than in reconciling

the observations of the essayist with correct ideas of that candour, which is inseparable from the character of a pious minister of the gospel. When we see that this writer had before his eyes the words *natural ability*, and that *inability which is only moral*; and knew that the word *strength* referred to *natural ability*, or the powers which the sinner possessed as a man, and the terms *insuperable inability* to his *moral inability*, or his corrupt heart, things wholly different; his charge of contradiction in Mr. Fuller, produces real sorrow in the Christian, and renders him unwilling to make this matter clearer.

Such is the strength of man's aversion to good, which, since the fall, is natural to him, that he never rightly chooses it, but by the aid of Divine grace; and though the impossibility is not absolute, but depends upon the opposition of his heart, yet he is said to be unable to do it. "No man can come unto me, except the Father draw him." In the same sense Mr. Fuller had spoken of "a righteousness adequate to the demands of the law, as *naturally impossible*" to the unrenewed man. Whereupon the author of the essay observes, "it was naturally impossible for him to fulfil the demands of the law, and yet he had *natural ability* to obey the law, or fulfil all its demands!!" This impossibility is occasioned by that moral corruption which the essayist himself has pronounced to be *natural*; the *natural ability* he has likewise admitted to be a distinct thing; why, then, did he exhibit them in contrast, with the terms "*and yet*," and two notes of admiration? This is pointing with the finger a wrong direction to the inquiring traveller, without venturing to speak in terms, what the conscience must have forbidden. Mr. Fuller was in this also correct, and the Christian fears he was seen to be so.

The progress of the essay discovers the mind of the writer gradually approaching, in his conviction of the truth, to the sentiments he desires to oppose. By penetrating farther into the subject, his understanding became nearly reconciled to the distinction; which at length he wrote, as we suppose, in the beginning of the essay. "Man, even in his fallen state," he observes, "certainly possesses *natural ability* to do many actions; and the assertion of his *inability to do holy*, by no means requires the denial of power to perform natural actions. He has power to eat and drink, to think and speak, to read and hear the word of God, to meditate and pray; in a word, he has the faculties of a living and rational creature—we apprehend it to be incorrect to say he has natural ability to obey the whole will of God." Thus the essayist has explained his terms *natural actions*, to mean all human actions which are not holy, and for such he admits that man has *natural ability*, but not for holy actions, to these he is unable. He agrees with those, whom he has brought before the public for censure, that Divine grace is essential to holy actions; and he also consents, that man possesses natural ability, whereby he can read, meditate, and pray, provided there is no holiness in these actions. But they are not orthodox, because they hold, that for the performance of all actions which they accomplish, whether good or evil, men have and exercise natural power; whilst his orthodoxy consists in excluding natural power altogether from holy actions. He certainly cannot imagine that the same ministers of the gospel, who believe and inculcate that sinners have no moral ability or disposition to holiness, except from the Spirit of God, do, when they speak of the extent of *natural ability* in the unregenerate, mean, that *natural ability* shall answer the pur-

poses of Divine grace, and supply the defects of moral ability.

The essayist, nevertheless, ought to know, that there is neither virtue, nor vice, in an action as such, these belong to the mind ; and that mere *natural* ability is neither morally good nor evil, but constitutes an important talent, capable of being applied to the glory of God. When it is so applied, he will admit the action is denominated a virtuous action ; and that the virtue lies neither in the natural ability, nor in the exercise of it, but in that quality of the purpose of the mind, in respect of which it is conformed to the Divine will. Now if the moral excellency only of such purpose must be referred to the grace of God, why should any be pronounced unsound, for holding that all the residue of such actions, wherein they resemble what the essayist denominates natural actions, should be referred to natural ability. When Christ said, “ Ye will not come unto me, that ye might have life,” he supposed his hearers could perceive, compare, judge, determine, choose, assent to evidence, . . . if disposed, consent to good ; and yet, because he blamed them for unbelief, their condition and powers were no better than those in his view when he said, “ No man can come unto me, except the Father draw him.”

The essayist would do well to attend more closely to those actions which he denominates *natural actions*. They are not like the action of the lungs or arteries ; they are the effects of choice, and all of them actions of moral agents, who are accountable for every thought, word, and deed ; they are, consequently, by no means to be regarded with indifference. If not holy, they are sinful ; that is, the party possesses *natural ability* to perform them, his defect of a right disposition, or of

moral ability, brings him into guilt, and will involve him in condemnation. Thus a person who is destitute of moral ability, may possess *full and ample natural ability* to perform his duty, and will, for that *very reason*, be brought into condemnation, seeing nothing but a want of heart, that is, a right disposition, or of moral ability, prevented his compliance.

The essayist asserts, that the question at issue is, “not whether man possesses natural faculties, but how a creature possessing these faculties in a state so corrupted and disordered by sin, as to be rendered unable to obey the Divine law, can be justly required to yield an obedience beyond his ability.” If this writer had inserted the word *morally* before the word *unable*, and the word *moral* before *ability*, the doubt would have been removed; for every reader would have yielded, that obedience to the Divine law is then justly required. But whilst confessing that man possesses *natural faculties*, he keeps the difficulty alive by concealing, under the words *unable*, and *beyond his ability*, the supposition of the want of *natural ability*. He has conceded to the enemies of God and religion, what he has no right to yield, and what no sound presbyterian can admit, that “had man been originally created in his present state, the law by which he is governed would indeed have been disproportional to his powers.” Every infidel can immediately discern, in this concession, that *the law of God* is admitted to be at present disproportional to human powers; and if *natural ability*, and this is part of the concession, be wanting, the essayist will never be able to vindicate Divine justice in the condemnation of the impenitent.

How different from those of the essayist are the views of man's guilt, in the most approved writers! Calvin

observes, that "it is of great importance to examine with attention what ability is retained by man in his present state." "Reason," he observes, "by which a man distinguishes between good and evil, by which he understands and judges, being a *natural talent*, it could not be totally destroyed." "To condemn" the understanding "to perpetual blindness, so as to leave it no intelligence in any thing, is repugnant, not only to the Divine word, but also to the experience of common sense." "It is such a universal blessing, that every one for himself ought to acknowledge it, as the peculiar favour of God." "Since the sinner, though he endeavours to evade the knowledge of good and evil imprinted on his mind, is frequently brought back to it, and so is not permitted to shut his eyes, but compelled, whether he will or not, sometimes to open them; there is no truth in the assertion that he sins only through ignorance." After having admitted it to be true, that man possesses free will in this sense, that "he does evil voluntarily, and not by constraint," he approves of the words of Augustine: "Let no man dare so to deny the freedom of the will, as to desire to excuse sin." The standards of our church agree with these representations, and both accord with the word of God, that man has sufficient natural powers to obey, but that he is morally corrupt, his disposition is evil, and thus sin has possession of the powers of his soul.

When we speak of a moral or holy action, the action, whether of body or mind, is one thing, and he who performs it possesses natural ability; the morality or holiness is quite another; and to the production of the quality of the action, for we refer that disposition of the mind to the action, which is only proper to the agent, moral ability, a heart conformed to the Divine

will, or spiritual strength, is necessary. Thus to effect a volition or action, natural ability is necessary; that the volition or action should be holy, also moral ability. Where the former exists, the party possesses the talent, and has also all that justice requires to render him accountable. This truth is that which these remarks are intended to vindicate; this truth should be seen and felt by every human creature; this truth, it is the duty of every minister of the gospel of Christ to press upon the consciences of men. This is that truth for vindicating which the pious Dr. Smalley, and the Rev. Mr. Fuller, both now gone to rest, and the two pastors of the presbyterian churches in Newark, in Jersey, and others not named, but to be known by their sermons, have been held up before the eyes of the world by the writer of the essay, as departing from sound principles: yet this truth will, in the last day, be shown as the firm foundation, upon which the judgment of God shall rest.

The essay, upon the whole, is a laboured effort to confound, we hope conscientiously, a distinction, with which the mind of the writer was perplexed, but which he durst not deny. Its importance to the preaching of the gospel with convincing effect, is well known in every congregation where it is clearly set forth, and many humble followers of Christ have it interwoven with their experience; and it is also undeniable, that this distinction appears in many of the oldest presbyterian books. Nevertheless, without asserting it to be either contrary to scripture or reason, this essay strangely maintains a conflict with it, under the unfounded supposition that it militates against the doctrine of the necessity of renewing and sanctifying grace; and is calculated to exalt the powers of the creature, to the disparagement of the glory of God.

If this writer, who assumes the signature of presbyterian, and arraigns the orthodoxy of some of the most able divines of that church, both ancient and modern, had more carefully studied the subject for himself, and suffered his brethren in the ministry, many of whom have *more natural abilities* than he possesses, and, it may be, as much *moral ability*, by the grace of God, as he has, to teach their respective congregations according to their best knowledge, leaving them answerable to God, and liable to their own presbyteries for any errors in doctrine or practice, into which they might fall, he would have avoided an abuse of his natural powers. The time is short, the servants will soon be called to give in their accounts of the improvement of their natural advantages; not one of whom will then be able to deny that he has had a *talent*, or *natural ability*, to have served his Master; and those who have been indisposed, or destitute of *moral ability* to improve their talents, will be eternally deprived of all aids of grace to enable them to do any thing for his glory, and be associated with those unhappy principalities and powers, who are and will be subjected to all the miseries consequent upon moral inability for ever. But if, in this life, our moral inability, flowing from a defect of that crown of original rectitude which has fallen from the head of man, be counteracted by the supernatural and undeserved grace of God; and we, being changed in the dispositions of our hearts, exercise in this world, our natural powers of mind, in repenting of our sins, believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, and loving God and holiness; we shall receive the approbation of *well done, good and faithful servants*, you have been faithful in the exercise of small natural abilities, you shall possess greater, enter ye into higher joys. There our understandings will

be enlarged to discern more of the Divine excellencies ; and beholding, we shall become still more and more assimilated to them in our moral powers. As man is finite in every capacity, and God is infinite, both the natural and the moral ability of the glorified saint, and consequently his happiness, will become thus progressively augmented in the endless annals of eternity.

That the reverend author of the essay may rise to those glories, and that the unworthy writer of these remarks may not be excluded, but find some humble place at the footstool of his compassionate Redeemer, is his ardent prayer, and heart-cheering expectation, during the night of his earthly pilgrimage.