



THE POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

OF

WILLIAM GODWIN

BY

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AN ABSTRACT

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This thesis is divided into four chapters. In the first chapter there is a brief presentation of Godwin's life and the times in which he wrote. His major works are mentioned, and emphasis is placed on the main events and circumstances of his life; such as his marriage to Mary Wollstonecraft, his role as the ~~father-in-law~~ of Shelley, and his life-long financial difficulties.

The second chapter presents, in detail, Godwin's political philosophy as expressed in his major work, An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and Its Influence on General Virtue and Happiness, published in 1793. Section A is devoted to his basic principles; which include the theory of perfectibility and the proposition of "universal benevolence," the value of sincerity, the doctrine of necessity, and other principles. Section B sets forth Godwin's belief that men's actions are governed by reason alone, and that moral improvement can result only from the effects of persuasion and free discussion. This section also describes various types of interference that Godwin believes are detrimental to free discussion and therefore to progress. Section C presents Godwin's objections to the use of coercion in any form, but especially in the form of punishment, and to the law as an agent of coercion. Section D includes Godwin's unfavorable opinions on the history and basis of all government; his description of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy; and his recommendations for the dissolution

of government. Section E sets forth what Godwin considers the "genuine system" of property; which is, that each man should receive according to his need.

The third chapter mentions the revisions in Godwin's political thought as expressed in his later work. These revisions reflect his higher regard for emotion and the domestic affections, his recognition of physical inequality and the consequent repercussions on his theory of perfectibility, and his discussion of the "delusive sense of liberty" and how it effects the doctrine of necessity. This chapter also mentions the books in which Godwin's revisions are most clearly shown.

Chapter four contains a criticism of Godwin's political philosophy, which states; one, that although man is capable of improvement, serious reservations must be made as to the process as set forth by Godwin; two, that Godwin overlooks the role played by emotion in men's actions; and three, that some government is needed for security against violence and for the regulation of complex affairs that arise in an advanced civilization. This chapter also presents a more sympathetic view of Godwin's life than the one that generally prevails, and points out the significance of some of his ideas.

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INTRODUCTION

For a brief period in English history, William Godwin's literary star shone brightly, only to shatter with sudden swiftness and descend into oblivion. He is little remembered today. For those to whom his name does bring some glint of recognition, he is usually remembered only as the father-in-law of Shelley.

When Godwin published Political Justice, in 1793, he became a celebrity almost overnight. William Hazlitt said, "Tom Paine was considered for the time as a Tom Fool to him, Paley an old woman, Edmund Burke a flashy sophist. Truth, moral truth, it was supposed, had here taken up its abode, and these were the oracles of thought."¹

Political Justice was written during that brief period in the 1790's, when the French Revolution had stimulated a reform movement in England. The Godwinian theory rode the crest of this wave, and set forth many known and also many original and sometimes rather startling propositions. Starting from a utilitarian position, that the greatest happiness of the greatest number should be the goal of society, it proposed that men were capable of infinite perfectibility,

¹William Hazlitt, "William Godwin" The Spirit of the Age, in his Works, J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., London, v. II, p. 17.

and that the proper way to realize this was through the use of reason and private judgement. Godwin never deviated from the strictest logic in arriving at the ultimate effects dictated by his basic premises. "His belief in the greatest happiness of the greatest number and in the mathematically equal a priori worthiness of each individual led him to a number of unorthodox conclusions, most of which gave credit to his will to consistency and his courage than to his realism and common sense."² Perhaps the most famous conclusion is the illustration involving seventeenth-century archbishop Fenelon and his chambermaid trapped in a burning building. If only one could be saved, then it must be Fenelon, as he is the most valuable to society; and this conclusion would not be altered even if the chambermaid were the rescuer's mother.

J. B. Bury calls Political Justice the "most important speculative work of the time."³ "He (Godwin) was the oracle of the young generation of many schools; and men as different as Wordsworth, Malthus, Shelley, Crabb Robinson, Chalmers the Scotch theologian, and Place, the London Radical tailor, were altered for better or worse by reading William Godwin."⁴ What, then, caused the rapid decline of

²Christian Bay, Freedom of Expression, unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Oslo, 1956, p. 2.32.

³J. B. Bury, The Idea of Progress, Macmillan Co., New York, 1932, p. 224.

⁴Philip A. Brown, The French Revolution in English History, Allen & Unwin Ltd., London, 1923, p. 44.

Godwin's reputation? In 1876, an anonymous author wrote in the Nation, "The sentiment changes, and the man who has given it expression thereupon loses his power."⁵ Godwin was caught in the downdraft of the reaction to the French Revolution. The return to conservatism caused him to lose favor almost as quickly as he had gained it. Since that time Godwin's name has evoked little notice, and in 1926 Martin Armstrong wrote, "He is of interest to us today not because of his works, but because of his curiously contradictory character, and because he is an incident in the lives of a number of brilliant persons."⁶

Lately however, there has been a revival of interest in Godwin, both in his life and in his theories. In this study, although I have felt it necessary to give a background sketch of Godwin's life and the times in which he wrote, I have tried primarily to analyze his political philosophy as developed in Political Justice and in his later work. I believe that Godwin's ideas are very much worth such an analysis, especially today. In 1951 Angus Wilson put it this way, "His principal work, Political Justice, so influential in its own day, has been once more re-estimated and found, despite its quaint air of

⁵"William Godwin," in the Nation, 1876, p. 278.

⁶Martin Armstrong, "Godwin," in Bookman, April, 1926, v. 70, p. 14.

pedantry applied to life, to be a valuable statement of the fundamental liberties which humanity must always protect against the drive for increased power that inevitably lies beneath the claims of rulers of whatever political shade."⁷ This study is a continuation of that re-estimation.

⁷Angus Wilson, "The Novels of William Godwin," in World Review, June, 1951, p. 40.

CHAPTER I

LIFE AND TIMES

A. Early Life

William Godwin was born at Wisbech in 1756. His father and grandfather were both dissenting ministers, and Godwin was brought up in an extremely religious environment. He was a pious child with a great deal of intellectual curiosity, and decided early in life to enter the ministry. He completed his studies in 1778 and spent the next five years serving several dissenting congregations.

When Godwin first became a minister, he was a strict Calvinist. He was, in fact, a believer in the Sandemanian dogma, which damned nine out of ten Calvinists, as the Calvinists had damned nine out of ten of mankind. After reading Rousseau, Helvetius, and d'Holbach, however, his faith was considerably shaken. Finally, in 1783, Godwin left the ministry and went to London to earn his living as a writer.

He had originally planned to open a small school at Epsom, for which he had written an interesting pamphlet setting forth his ideas on education, and also several propositions that figured prominently in his later political theories. When this plan failed for want of pupils, Godwin turned entirely to literary work. He had previously

published, at his own expense, a biography of William Pitt, and he now produced a Life of Chatham, some novels, and several articles for Whig periodicals. He also gained valuable experience by writing the "British and Foreign History" section in the New Annual Register from 1784 until 1791.⁸

In 1789, events occurred in France which were beginning to stir the world. As one author puts it, "We have reached a stretch in the stream of time which is broken by the cataract of the French Revolution."⁹ The spirit of liberty was in the air. Old things seemed to be passing away, as

⁸This corrects an error made by C. K. Paul on page 101 of his book, William Godwin, His Friends and Contemporaries, as pointed out by Jack W. Marken in his article, "William Godwin's Writing for the New Annual Register," printed in Modern Language Notes, November, 1953, vol. 60, p. 477-9. Paul states that Godwin began writing for the New Annual Register in 1785, and this error has been repeated by other biographers; but Paul also states that Godwin wrote the section entitled, "The History of Knowledge, Learning and Taste in Great Britain," which would deny Godwin the valuable political experience he obtained from writing the "British and Foreign History" section. This is well worth noting, as it was due to this experience that Godwin obtained much background work for his major production, An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its Influence on General Virtue and Happiness, published in 1793. For those interested, Marken has published in another article a complete list of Godwin's early works, not all of which are mentioned by Paul. This article is entitled, "The Canon and Chronology of William Godwin's Early Works," and is found in Modern Language Notes, March, 1954, vol. 69, p. 176-80.

⁹Herbert J. C. Grierson and J. C. Smith, A Critical History of English Poetry, Chatto and Windus, London, 1947, p. 286.

the pathway to a glorious future beckoned. It was this spirit which inspired Godwin to desire to make some great contribution to the welfare of mankind. In 1791 he began writing Political Justice, finishing it in 1793. The work met with instant success, despite its rather high price of three guineas. Working men combined their resources to purchase it, and it became their bible. Young men, such as Wordsworth and Southey, were inspired by it. William Hazlitt said, "No work in our time gave such a blow to the philosophical mind of the country as the celebrated Enquiry concerning Political Justice."¹⁰ Godwin rode the crest of the times; he was the outstanding spokesman for the disciples of the new freedom.

There had been many pamphlets written to refute Edmund Burke's conservative stand in his Reflections on the Revolution in France, but Godwin's work was of a larger scope. It was written mainly for the purpose of correcting the work of Montesquieu, but also to redefine and make clear for all time the basic principles of man, society, and government. One of the most influential men who helped Godwin in the clarification of these principles was Thomas Helcroft; and yet he was only one of "the four oral instructors" that Godwin felt indebted to for the improve-

¹⁰Op. cit.

ment of his mind, the others being George Dryson, Joseph Fawcet, and Coleridge.¹¹ Godwin was a man who valued friendship highly, and his conversations with such men as Charles Lamb, Wordsworth, and Coleridge, among others, did a great deal to stimulate his thinking.

B. Years of Transition

At one of these gatherings with his friends, Godwin made the acquaintance of Mary Wollstonecraft. This occurred during November, in 1791, by which time she had already written her reply to Burke, Vindication of the Rights of Man. She is more famous, however, for her later work, Vindication of the Rights of Women, which became the forerunner of the feminist movement.

Godwin was not impressed with Mary Wollstonecraft at the time, but changed his mind after he renewed his acquaintance with her in 1796. During this time she had been living with Gilbert Imlay in France. Imlay, an American, proved unfaithful, and she left him to return to London with her daughter, which she had borne Imlay out of wedlock. She found happiness with Godwin, and although they both felt that marriage was an unnecessary institution, they married in March, 1797, out of consideration for the

¹¹C. K. Paul, William Godwin, His Friends and Contemporaries, Henry S. King & Co., London, 1876, v. I, p. 17.

approaching birth of their child. His wife's love did much to cause Godwin to appreciate the importance of affection and emotion, which he had discounted in Political Justice. Their happiness was short-lived however, as Mary Godwin died in September of the same year.

"With the death of Mary Wollstonecraft in 1797, ended all that was happy and stimulating in Godwin's career."¹² According to George Woodcock, Godwin's most important work had been completed by the end of 1798, and the rest of his life is interesting from a purely biographical viewpoint alone.¹³ Also it was around this time that the reaction to the French Revolution had begun in England, which was the main cause of the decline in Godwin's popularity.

In 1794 he had followed up his success with a novel, Things as they are: Or, the Adventures of Caleb Williams, and a political pamphlet, Cursory Strictures on the Charge delivered by Lord Chief Justice Eyre to the Grand Jury, October 2, 1794. In Caleb Williams, Godwin's best known novel, he attempted to translate his political and social beliefs into story form, and the success of the book increased his reputation as a man of literary talent. The Cursory Strictures was written in defense of several of

¹²H. N. Brailsford, Shelley, Godwin, and their Circle, Henry Holt and Co., New York, p. 154.

¹³George Woodcock, William Godwin; A Biographical Study, The Porcupine Press, London, 1946, p. 146.

Godwin's friends, who were active in London reform societies, and who were accused of treason. Godwin's pamphlet was instrumental in their acquittal, and he was thought by many to have made a substantial contribution to the prevention of unwarranted governmental prosecution in England.

Two other works which Godwin completed around 1798 were The Enquirer: Reflections on Education, Manners, and Literature, and the Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft. The first was a series of essays mainly important for illustrating Godwin's views on education. The latter was a moving tribute to the memory of his wife, in which he softened the emphasis he had made in Political Justice on reason alone as a guide for living, and revised his opinion of the domestic affections.

The Memoirs, however, was written with great frankness and sincerity, and the results of this caused many people to regard Godwin with loathing. David Fleisher states that "the English public was incensed against the man who, in a last excess of immorality, had brazenly offered to the world the eulogy of an abandoned woman, the mistress first of Imlay and then of Godwin."¹⁴ This was only part of the public reaction against Godwin at this time, a reaction caused primarily by the change in public opinion concerning

¹⁴David Fleisher, William Godwin; A Study in Liberalism, Allen & Unwin Ltd., London, 1951, p. 40.

the French Revolution. Disgust at the internal policies of the Revolution, and alarm over possible French aggression in Europe caused the English people to rise up against the proponents of liberalism. Godwin, the foremost spokesman for the New Philosophy, was assailed on all sides.

His only reply was published in 1801, Thoughts occasioned by the Perusal of Dr. Parr's Spital Sermon. David Fleisher calls it, "an able and just defence, remarkable for dignity, eloquence, and restraint."¹⁵ In it Godwin defended the basic principles that inspired Political Justice and protested against the spirit of the charges made against him.

During this same year, Godwin married a widow with two children, Mrs. Mary Jane Clairmont. Including Fanny, the child Mary Wollstonecraft had borne Imlay, and Mary, their own child, Godwin now was responsible for the support of four children. Mrs. Clairmont was quite different from Mary Wollstonecraft; she was bad tempered and envious, and Godwin's old friends began to see him less frequently. In 1803 a fifth child, a son, was added to the family. During this period Godwin wrote three plays, a novel, and a life of Chaucer, which were not successful enough to enable him to handle his increased family responsibilities. So in 1805 he and his wife went into the business of publish-

¹⁵Ibid., p. 42.

ing children's books. They took premises first in Hanway Street in London, and two years later moved to 41 Skinner Street, where The Juvenile Library struggled along until Godwin was declared bankrupt in 1824.

These were mostly years of financial crisis, and in desperation Godwin borrowed heavily from his friends; especially from Shelley, whom he had met in 1812. It is here that Godwin's character is shown at its worst, and many writers remembered him only for the incessant demands for money he made on his friends. His publishing business never really prospered, in spite of the fact that he published Charles and Mary Lamb's Tales from Shakespeare. The Juvenile Library was under his wife's name, and Godwin's literary reputation reached rock bottom. Hazlitt called him "to all ordinary intents and purposes dead and buried."¹⁶

C. Later Years

In 1811 Shelley wrote Godwin in order to form his acquaintance. He states in this letter that he had "enrolled Godwin's name on the list of the honorable dead," and that he had learned with "inconceivable emotion" that Godwin was still alive.¹⁷ Shelley became a fervent disciple of

¹⁶Op. cit.

¹⁷C. K. Paul, William Godwin, His Friends and Contemporaries, Op. cit., v. 2, p. 202.

Godwin's ideas, and acted accordingly by eloping with Godwin's daughter Mary in 1814, when his marriage with Harriet Westbrook began to disintegrate. Although Political Justice had condemned marriage, Godwin had changed his mind on this subject, and heartily disapproved of Shelley's action. However, to his discredit, Godwin continued to borrow heavily from Shelley. This caused friction between the two from time to time, although Shelley never ceased to believe in Godwin's genius and in his philosophy.

After the collapse of the Juvenile Library, Godwin moved to a modest home on Gower Place, where he continued with his literary efforts. From 1824 until 1828 he occupied himself with writing a History of the Commonwealth. The work was well received at the time, although it has since become superceded by authors with new material. Godwin was growing old now, and perhaps felt that a revival of his liberal views was not worth more vilification. Also he was writing this book in order to make money, and therefore found it necessary to write faster and more superficially. At any rate, the book was a conventional history, paying more attention to battles and statutes than to social conditions.

Still Godwin did not receive enough income to provide for his old age, and he continued to write. These works included a novel, and a collection of essays called Thoughts on Man: His Nature, Productions and Discoveries. This

latter book was the only one that approached the level of his early work in style and content, and in it Godwin indicates that he remained true to his basic principles to the last.

In April, 1833, Godwin was offered the post of Yeoman Usher of the Exchequer by the new ministry that was established under the Reform Bill. The office was a sinecure, providing Godwin with a small house and income. This saved him from ending his days in miserable poverty, and yet his tasks were not enough to keep him from his pen. He finished another novel, among other works, and was writing a group of religious essays when he died in 1836.

This, very briefly, presents a picture of Godwin's life. However, the purpose of this study is primarily to examine Godwin's political philosophy, so let us now turn to these ideas, mainly as set forth in his masterpiece, Political Justice.

CHAPTER II
POLITICAL JUSTICE

Godwin's philosophical ideas are not all original, nor does he pretend that this is the case. He himself states that his belief "that monarchy was a species of government unavoidably corrupt" was owed to the reading of Swift and the Latin historians.¹⁸ He also owed a debt to Hume and Hartley, as well as to Rousseau, Helvetius, and d'Holbach. Sir Leslie Stephen said, "The Political Justice is an attempt to frame into a systematic whole the principles gathered from these various sources, and may be regarded as an exposition of the extremest form of revolutionary dogma. Though Godwin's idiosyncrasy is perceptible in some of the conclusions, the book is instructive as showing, with a clearness paralleled in no other English writing, the true nature of those principles which excited

¹⁸ William Godwin, An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, and its Influence on General Virtue and Happiness, (First Edition) as edited and abridged by Raymond A. Preston, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1926, v. 1, p. xl of the Preface. All future references will be to this edition unless otherwise indicated. Godwin published two other editions in 1796 and 1798, but in neither one are his principles stated with such force and clarity as in the original. Mr. Preston's abridgement omits principally the metaphysical, and not the political speculation, which Godwin himself indicated the reader might pass over as unessential.

the horror of Burke and the Conservatives."¹⁹

Sir Leslie is right in calling Godwin's theory revolutionary, but it must be remembered that Godwin did not advocate the use of force; he favored a gradual revolution obtained through the use of persuasion for the attainment of his objectives. Perhaps the primary claim of Political Justice to being revolutionary and original, lies in the extreme conclusions at which it arrived by following through on ideas and principles already proposed by less courageous writers.

A. Basic Principles

1. Perfectibility

To express an important assumption which underlies all his thought on government, Godwin used the following quotation from the first page of Thomas Paine's Common Sense. "Society and government are different in themselves and have different origins. Society is produced by our wants, and government by our wickedness. Society is in every state a blessing; government even in its best state but a necessary evil."²⁰

Godwin, however, carried this principle to its logical

¹⁹Sir Leslie Stephen, History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century, Peter Smith, New York, 1949, p. 266.

²⁰Political Justice, v. 1, p. 39.

conclusion, something which Paine did not do; Godwin wanted to do away with government entirely. He felt that any external constraint whatsoever was an unwarranted infringement on the individual personality. For a short time, perhaps, it may be suffered as a necessity; but Godwin believed that human society should eventually reach a point where there would be no need of government at all.

In order to effectively work toward the goal of the greatest happiness for the greatest number, Godwin believed that reason and private judgement must be exercised freely. "To a rational being there can be but one rule of conduct, justice, and one mode of ascertaining that rule, the exercise of his understanding."²¹ Godwin believed in the Socratic principle that knowledge is virtue, and that vice is only an error in judgement; and he also believed that for men to gain knowledge they must exercise their faculties independently.

Government interferes with the independent intellectual and moral improvement of men, according to Godwin, and he cites two examples of this tendency. First, he says, government may furnish me an additional motive to do good, but by furnishing a personal reward for my action the nature of it is changed. No longer do I do it because of its

²¹Ibid., p. 72.

intrinsic excellence, but because of personal advantage. Secondly, government may inform me as to what actions are right and which are wrong. But for me to believe a statement without having all the reasoning and the evidence present in my mind, is not really to know it at all. I am merely accepting a statement on grounds of authority, and this, says Godwin, makes "dwarfs" of men.

By using reason and private judgement to discover virtue and truth, man is on the way to moral improvement. This is the Godwinian theory of perfectibility; that men are capable of indefinite perfection (never, however, reaching perfection, because then they would not be capable of further improvement). To illustrate this, Godwin traces the development of man and then asks, "Is it possible for us to contemplate what he has already done without being impressed with a strong presentiment of the improvements he has yet to accomplish? There is no science that is not capable of additions; there is no art that may not be carried to a still higher perfection. If this be true of all other sciences, why not of morals? If this be true of all other arts, why not of social institution?"²²

The theory of perfectibility depended on Godwin's theory of human nature. He believed that "the moral characters

²²Ibid., p. 27.

of men are the result of their perceptions."²³ Men are shaped by their environment; improve their environment through education, literature, and the practice of political justice, and men will improve.

The nature of government, however, is such that it tends to block such progress. Godwin doubts "whether error could ever be formidable or long lived if government did not lend it support."²⁴ "It is farther evident that though the duty of every man to exercise his private judgement be unalterable, yet so far as relates to practice, wherever government subsists, the exercise of private judgement is substantially intrenched upon...That government therefore is the best which in no one instance interferes with the exercise of private judgement without absolute necessity."²⁵

2. "Universal Benevolence"

For Godwin, political justice was the fulfillment of moral duty. To be consistent with utilitarian ethics then, our moral duty is to do that action which is most conducive to the general good. "If justice have any meaning, it is just that I should contribute everything in my power to

²³Ibid., p. 11.

²⁴Ibid., p. 14.

²⁵Ibid., p. 126.

the benefit of the whole."²⁶

It is here that Godwin reaches some of his most extreme conclusions, which have demonstrated to many people, says D. H. Munro, "the absurdities to which philosophers are driven through trying to be logical."²⁷ A good example of this is the case of archbishop Fenelon and his chambermaid.²⁸ What difference should it make if the chambermaid happens to be my mother, says Godwin? "What magic is there in the pronoun 'my' to overturn the decisions of everlasting truth? My wife or my mother may be a fool or a prostitute, malicious, lying or dishonest. If they be, of what consequence is it that they are mine?"²⁹

Although this proposition seems cold and cruel, we must remember that Godwin was facing a difficult situation. As Munro says, "No really satisfactory solution of the fire problem is possible, because the situation is inherently evil."³⁰ It is a problem involving a choice between our own happiness and that of society; and if we cannot have both, we must choose society.

This is the Godwinian theory of "Universal Benevolence."

²⁶Ibid., p. 40

²⁷D. H. Munro, Godwin's Moral Philosophy, Oxford University Press, London, 1953, p. 10.

²⁸See above, p. 2.

²⁹Political Justice, v. 1, p. 42.

³⁰Op. cit., p. 12.

We must treat all human beings as equally worthy of our good intentions, regardless of their relationship to us. Godwin also believes that the intention is the most important element in any action. He says, "If the disposition by which a man is governed have a systematical tendency to the benefit of his species, he cannot fail to obtain our esteem, however mistaken he may be in his conduct."³¹ Nevertheless, Godwin does not excuse erroneous conduct, and therefore, for him, virtue consists in a constant search for knowledge on the subject of right and wrong.

This brings us back to the conclusion that virtue is knowledge, and vice only error. If you add that this knowledge can best be obtained through the exercise of individual initiative and private judgement, and that by this process man is capable of perpetual improvement, you have, as H. N. Brailsford says, the "premise (in which) lies already the whole of philosophic anarchism...For if truth is omnipotent, why trust to laws?"³² Godwin is often credited with being the first anarchist. William A. Dunning states, "The Frenchman Proudhon, in 1840, was apparently the first to assume formally the name of anarchist. The substance of the doctrine that justified the name however,

³¹Political Justice, v. 1, p. 52.

³²Op. cit., p. 104-5.

had been pretty fully set forth half a century before by the Englishman William Godwin, in his Political Justice."³³

It is not quite true that Godwin was an anarchist; he cautions us that "anarchy as it is usually understood and a well-conceived form of society without government are exceedingly different from each other...Anarchy in its own nature is an evil of short duration."³⁴ Godwin believed that the immediate dissolution of government would cause a brief period of anarchy which would terminate when "justice, reflection, and enquiry" had had time to establish public restraint and control.

3. Sincerity and Necessity

Since Godwin regarded truth with such high esteem, it was only natural that he should place great importance on the value of sincerity. If, therefore, I have knowledge of truth, virtue, or anything else that may be of benefit to my neighbor, it is my duty to communicate it to him. If an action deserves praise, I am obliged to give it; neither can I withhold criticism or blame when it is due. "How extensive an effect would be produced," says Godwin, "if every man were sure of meeting in his neighbour the

³³ William A. Dunning, A History of Political Theories from Rousseau to Spencer, Macmillan Co., New York, 1926, p. 362.

³⁴ Political Justice, v. 2, p. 184-5.

ingenuous censor, who would tell to himself and publish to the world his virtues, his good deeds, his meannesses and his follies?"³⁵

Godwin believed that knavery would be stopped before it had barely begun if sincere public opinion were brought to bear upon the offender, and that it was mere cowardice that allowed countless errors to continue to exist in the world. He states, "If every man today would tell all the truth he knows, three years hence there would be scarcely a falsehood of any magnitude remaining in the civilized world."³⁶ He also believes that this sincerity would not degenerate into sadistic brutality, because the only motive I would have to tell my neighbor an unpleasant truth would be for his own benefit.

Godwin again reaches some extreme conclusions in his emphasis on the value of always telling the truth. He discusses an incident concerning a hunted man being discovered by his pursuers; not recognizing him, they ask for information concerning their prey's whereabouts. Godwin admits that this is an extreme case, but still feels that it would be more important to admit the truth in a case like this, than to "violate the majesty of truth," even if

³⁵Ibid., v. 1, p. 153.

³⁶Ibid., p. 155.

the victim were innocent of any wrongdoing. Godwin continues, "would he not have done an honour to himself, and afforded an example to the world that would have fully compensated the calamity of his untimely death?"³⁷ This is indeed asking a great deal of the average hunted man.

Godwin's theory taken as a whole would imply the doctrine of necessity, even if he had not mentioned it. If, given the proper environment, man is certain to improve, it follows that "if we form a just and complete view of all the circumstances in which a living or intelligent being is placed, we shall find that he could not in any moment of his existence have acted otherwise than he has acted."³⁸

This determinism goes a long way toward explaining Godwin's theory of punishment. For if a man could not have

³⁷Ibid., p. 158.

³⁸Ibid., p. 161. In this area, Godwin drew heavily on the philosophy of David Hume. In an article on the subject, Frank B. Evans III points out that, "not only is the doctrine of necessity unoriginal with Godwin, but Shelley himself drew as much from Godwin's source. This source is sections IV to VIII of David Hume's Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding." Evans continues, "Both Godwin and Hume proceed along the following path of argument: Everyone acknowledges that matter is actuated by a necessary force; the basis of this belief is the observed uniformity of events in nature, and the consequent inferences made by the mind about causes and effect." Frank B. Evans III, "Shelley, Godwin, Hume and the Doctrine of Necessity," in Studies in Philology, October, 1940, vol. 37, p. 632-3.

done otherwise than what he has done, how can we blame him, or even punish him? We should instead try to change his environment to allow the development of truth. Godwin makes his point clear with this statement, "As long as we admit of an essential difference between virtue and vice, no doubt all erroneous conduct, whether of ourselves or others, will be regarded with disapprobation. But it will in both cases be considered, under the system of necessity, as a link in the great chain of events which could not have been otherwise than it is. We shall therefore no more be disposed to repent of our own faults than of the faults of others."³⁹

Godwin's discussion of free will is not complete enough to really establish his position. George McLean Harper writes, "The many pleas in favor of free will which have suggested themselves to philosophers, as well as to humbler thinkers, he (Godwin) almost wholly fails to take into account."⁴⁰ Perhaps Godwin anticipated this, for he states at the beginning of his discussion on necessity that the reason he did not discuss it sooner was to make clear to the believers in free will that his basic principles did not need the doctrine of necessity to make them valid,

³⁹Ibid., p. 185.

⁴⁰George McLean Harper, "Rousseau, Godwin, and Wordsworth," in the Atlantic Monthly, May, 1912, vol. 109, p. 646.

but only that it leads "to a bold and comprehensive view of man in society, which cannot possibly be entertained by him who has embraced the opposite opinion."⁴¹

4. Other Principles

Another one of Godwin's basic principles is that all men are equal, if not physically, then certainly morally. By physical equality, Godwin meant equality of the mind and body. While admitting that there is some basis for believing men not to be equal in this respect, he would remind us that this inequality is much greater now than it was originally, and also states that, "There is no such disparity among the human race as to enable one man to hold several other men in subjection, except so far as they are willing to be subject."⁴²

Moral equality is easier to maintain, says Godwin, inasmuch as all of us "are partakers of a common nature, and the same causes that contribute to the benefit of one contribute to the benefit of another...We are all of us endowed with reason, able to compare, to judge and to infer. The improvement therefore which is to be desired for the one is to be desired for the other."⁴³ Godwin emphasizes

⁴¹Political Justice, v. 1, p. 160.

⁴²Ibid., p. 57.

⁴³Ibid., p. 58.

that prejudice and "arbitrary distinction" must not interfere with the freedom for everyone to exercise and develop his talents to the best possible advantage, and this idea is certainly in keeping with modern democratic thought.

More unorthodox, however, is Godwin's position on human rights. He believes that men have no rights of a discretionary nature, involving the power of choice, that would enable them to do or not to do something without becoming liable to censure. I have no right to the free use of my money if there is a duty that compels me to give it to someone more in need than myself.

"It is impossible for intellectual beings to be brought into coalition and intercourse without a certain mode of conduct, adapted to their nature and connection, immediately becoming a duty incumbent on the parties concerned...there can neither be opposite rights, nor rights and duties hostile to each other."⁴⁴ Godwin here correlates rights with duties, and says that my only right consists in that another should act in accordance with his duty where I am concerned; or, putting it the other way, if it is my duty to act in a certain manner towards another, then that other person has a right to demand this from me. Godwin would say that this man has a claim upon me, but not a right, at least not a

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 60-1.

right in the discretionary sense of the word. If I have any rights at all, any discretionary power, it is small indeed, because "it must be proved that my choice on one side or the other can in no possible way contribute to the benefit or injury of myself or of any other person in the world."⁴⁵

This rigid adherence to duty and justice enables Godwin to reach an unusual conclusion concerning promises. If I must always do the thing which is best and most preferable for the common good, then any promises I may have made to do the contrary while lacking sufficient knowledge cannot be binding. "If every shilling of our property, every hour of our time and every faculty of our mind have already received their destination from the principles of immutable justice, promises have no department upon which for them to decide."⁴⁶

Godwin does not believe that this should interfere with the affairs of the world because a promise should be "understood merely as declaratory of intention and not as precluding farther information."⁴⁷ At any rate, if my neighbor were fair and honest, he should not expect me to live up to a promise if I was bound by duty and justice

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 62.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 98.

⁴⁷Ibid.

to act otherwise.

Before concluding this section, I think it might be well to restate two of Godwin's principles which I have already mentioned. These principles generally come to mind in connection with Godwin's name; one of them is his conception of human nature, and the other is his desire for a gradual revolution, achieved without the use of force or violence.

Godwin believed that men were born into the world with no "innate principles," and thus were entirely molded by their environment. He also believed that men were basically good, and were not under the taint of original sin; because if men were not basically good, then the improvement of their surroundings would not necessarily improve their actions, and environment would not then be the controlling factor in men's lives. In such a case, men would not be perfectible after all.

But since Godwin believes that improving the environment will guarantee the improvement of mankind, he also believes that there is then no justification for a violent revolution to be waged in order to bring about a more desirable state of society. He says, "The true instruments for changing the opinions of men are argument and persuasion ...When we descend into the listed field, we of course desert the vantage ground of truth and commit the decision to uncertainty and caprice. The phalanx of reason is in-

vulnerable; it advances with deliberate and determined pace; and nothing is able to resist it. But when we lay down our arguments and take up our swords, the case is altered. Amidst the barbarous pomp of war and the clamorous din of civil brawls, who can tell whether the event shall be prosperous or miserable?"⁴⁸ It was just this emphasis on non-violence that helped save Godwin from later prosecution by the British government.

B. Public Opinion

1. Freedom from Interference

Since Godwin believed that men were capable of infinite improvement and that this could only be obtained through the use of reason and private judgement, then public opinion would necessarily have a large part to play in his philosophy. It is the proper use of public opinion that will do away with the need for political institutions by acting as a check on individual behavior, and it is through the influencing of opinion that men will reach true understanding. As stated by H. N. Brailsford, "He (Godwin) was concerned to insist that men's voluntary actions originate in opinion, that he might secure a fulcrum for the leverage of argument and persuasion."⁴⁹ If men are living in error

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 133.

⁴⁹Op. cit., p. 103.

because of the lack of proper knowledge, this error can be corrected by persuasion. Thus it is opinion that should rule, and not governmental force.

One of the reasons why government should not interfere with opinion is that society is made up of many individuals, and its acts cannot be considered as that of a single entity, but as a combination of the acts of now one person and then another. Men who attempt to act in the name of society as a whole will find themselves hampered by the conflicting interests of the individuals composing that society. "They are fettered by the prejudices, the humours, the weakness and the vice of those with whom they act; and after a thousand sacrifices to these contemptible interests their project comes out at last distorted in every joint, abortive and monstrous."⁵⁰

Since the acts of society are but the total of the acts of each individual, they will lack wisdom as well as efficiency. Godwin asks, "Has society then any particular advantage in its corporate capacity for illuminating the understanding?...If so why have not societies of men written treatises of morality, of the philosophy of nature, or the philosophy of mind? Why have all the great steps of human improvement been the work of individuals?"⁵¹

⁵⁰Political Justice, vol. 2, p. 76.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 77.

Godwin also believes that intervention by society in its corporate form for the propagation of truth and virtue is not only unnecessary but harmful. "Truth and virtue are competent to fight their own battles."⁵² Since men always act in the manner they feel most conducive to their best interests, no superintendence is necessary; in fact it may be harmful by causing obsolete tendencies to persist, because even though corporate interference "be inadequate to change, it is powerful to prolong."⁵³

Not only must government not interfere with opinion in a positive way, says Godwin, but it must not interfere in a negative way; that is, it must not suppress erroneous opinion. The argument in favor of this kind of supervision is that since the opinions of men are varied, some will be eccentric and perversions of truth; therefore it is the duty of government to "prevent their ascendancy." But, replies Godwin, "Ignorance is not necessary to render men virtuous."⁵⁴ If we continue to speculate, we shall correct our errors and proceed to the truth, but if all opinions that clash with someone's preconceived notion of what is true and what is false are suppressed, all science and knowledge surely

⁵²Ibid., p. 81.

⁵³Ibid., p. 85.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 100.

will cease.

Neither is it true that differences of opinion will threaten the peace of society. According to Godwin, it is only when the government supports one or the other that militant opposition arises. Let authority remain neutral, and these many sided sects and creeds will live side by side in sufficient harmony.

2. Direct Interference

Godwin uses religious establishments as an example of direct interference with opinion. He states that "the system of religious conformity is a system of blind submission."⁵⁵ Clergymen must subscribe to "precise and dogmatical assertion upon almost every subject of moral and metaphysical enquiry."⁵⁶ If they believe all these assertions, they must have small powers of independent thought; if they do not, what a fraud is then perpetuated upon their unsuspecting countrymen. "They (the congregations) are bid to look for instruction and morality to a denomination of men formal, embarrassed and hypocritical, in whom the main spring of intellect is unbent and incapable of action."⁵⁷ Such interference with public opinion, the factor upon which the improvement of mankind depends, is, according to Godwin,

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 92.

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 95

one of the most prominent forms of evidence showing the evil effects of political and politically supported institutions.

If William Godwin were alive today, he would very likely be a member of the group that oppose the signing of loyalty oaths. He believed that requiring men to swear to their fidelity was unnecessary and ineffectual; and his argument, as set forth in his chapter "Of Tests", is so concise and to the point as to warrant reproducing it in full.

"Duty and common sense," says Godwin, "oblige us to watch the man we suspect, even though he should swear he is innocent. Would not the same precautions which we are still obliged to employ to secure us against his duplicity have sufficiently answered our purpose without putting him to his purgation? Are there no methods by which we can find out whether a man be the proper subject in whom to repose an important trust without putting the question to himself? Will not he who is so dangerous an enemy that we cannot suffer him at large discover his enmity by his conduct without reducing us to the painful necessity of tempting him to an act of prevarication? If he be so subtle a hypocrite that all our vigilance cannot detect him, will he scruple to add to his other crimes the crime of perjury?"⁵⁸

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 108.

Not only is an oath ineffective in uncovering men with evil intentions, but Godwin believes that it is an insult to a man of good will with an unblemished record. Godwin considers that the practice of administering oaths in a court of law informs the witness that his word is not sufficient for him to be believed. To a virtuous man it is treatment with contempt, and to the ignorant it encourages the notion that "veracity in the affairs of common life (is) a thing unworthy to be regarded."⁵⁹ Surely then, concludes Godwin, the use of tests and oaths is extremely harmful in the promotion of virtue.

In continuing his assault upon interference, Godwin goes so far as to advocate the abolishment of libel laws. In the first place, says Godwin, the libeller would receive his proper punishment from public opinion, and in the second place, the absence of libel laws would encourage men to be sincere. If I feel that a man is vicious, it is my duty to so represent him, even though I could not prove it to the satisfaction of a court of law. If I am wrong, the truth will be discovered, if I am right, justice has been served. The main thing, Godwin feels, is that truth will overcome error if given an equal hearing, but that "the law of libels usurps the office of directing me in my daily

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 114.

duties, and by perpetually menacing me with the scourge of punishment undertakes to render me habitually a coward, continually governed by the basest and most unprincipled motives."⁶⁰

3. Indirect Interference

Godwin mentions three other methods by which government interferes with opinion more indirectly; by the use of constitutions, national education, and pensions and salaries for public office.

By establishing a constitution, a group of men impose their views on justice on all future generations. Godwin uses the French constitution of 1789 as an example, in which the makers stated that no change could be made for ten years, and after that only if very rigorous procedures were followed. For Godwin this is pure folly. "It is to say to a nation, 'Are you convinced that something is right, perhaps immediately necessary to be done? It shall be done ten years hence.'"⁶¹ The people, says Godwin, should be allowed to make their own decisions, and not be forced to rely on the judgement of past generations.

Godwin objects to national education because he feels

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 124.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 130

that this will give to our schools a tendency to have an aversion to change, and says that "public education has always expended its energies in the support of prejudice; it teaches its pupils not the fortitude that shall bring every proposition to the test of examination, but the art of vindicating such tenets as may chance to be previously established."⁶² He is also afraid that national education would be a tool for the government to use in strengthening its own hand. Perhaps Godwin's fear that national education would keep the schools a hundred years behind the times has not been borne out, but his premonitions of the alliance between the government and education, as pointed out by George Woodcock, have been amply illustrated in our times when education has become a formidable weapon for the use of a dictator in the indoctrination of the people.⁶³

Another method mentioned by Godwin that the government uses to influence opinion is to provide salaries and pensions for public office. Godwin feels that public service is thwarted when rewarded with a salary or a pension, and that the office will be desired for the sake of the reward and not for the chance of contributing to the general good. Let the office holder be supported by private individuals,

⁶²Ibid., p. 140.

⁶³Op. cit., p. 80.

if his personal resources are insufficient. "I ought to receive your superfluity as my due while I am employed in affairs more important than that of earning a subsistence, but at the same time to receive it with a total indifference to personal advantage, taking only precisely what is necessary for the supply of my wants."⁶⁴ Only under such a system, believes Godwin, can we have public servants who will be zealous in the discharge of their duties for the welfare of society.

C. Coercion and Punishment

1. The Use of Force

Godwin's theory of necessity dictated his views on punishment. If a man cannot help what he does, then what blame can be assigned to him? "The assassin cannot help the murder he commits any more than the dagger."⁶⁵ Godwin believes, therefore, that there can be no point in punishing a man on the grounds of retribution, because he could not help what he did. The only basis left for punishment is on the grounds of utility, for the protection of any acts he may commit against society in the future.

But punishment cannot correct a man's tendency to

⁶⁴Political Justice, v. 2, p. 146.

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 155.

commit crime, according to Godwin's basic principles. Vice is error, and can only be corrected through the use of reason. "Let us reflect for a moment upon the species of argument, if argument it is to be called, that coercion employs. It avers to its victim that he must necessarily be in the wrong because I am more vigorous and cunning than he. Will vigor and cunning be always on the side of truth?"⁶⁶ "(Coercion) cannot begin with convincing; it is no argument. It begins with producing the sensation of pain and the sentiment of distaste. It begins with violently alienating the mind from the truth with which we wish it to be impressed."⁶⁷

If, then, punishment is unjust treatment for what a man has done in the past, and it is ineffective for preventing him from committing crimes in the future, is there any other basis on which we can justify punishment? Godwin mentions coercion for the purpose of deterring others by setting an example, but he does not go into this possibility very thoroughly. He seems to feel that coercion is unjust no matter what its purpose, and that force is intrinsically evil and never serves a good purpose.

There are some instances, however, in which Godwin

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 163

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 165

does sanction the use of coercion, though very reluctantly. Two such instances in which Godwin feels the use of force may occasionally be justified are the defense of country and defense of self. "I ought to take up arms against the despot by whom my country is invaded, because my capacity does not enable me by arguments to prevail on him to desist, and because my countrymen will not preserve their intellectual independence in the midst of oppression. For the same reason I ought to take up arms against the domestic spoiler, because I am unable either to persuade him to desist, or the community to adopt a just political institution, by means of which security might be maintained consistently with the abolition of coercion."⁶⁸ It must be remembered however, that Godwin favored loyalty to one's fellow man rather than to patriotism as such. "'The vindication of national honour' is a very insufficient reason for hostilities."⁶⁹ He also states that self defense should be used only when absolutely unavoidable, "where time can by no means be gained, and the consequences instantly to ensue are unquestionably fatal."⁷⁰

2. Law

In the same way that he would like to abolish coercion

⁶⁸Ibid., p. 184.

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 46.

⁷⁰Ibid., v. 1, p. 128.

and punishment, Godwin would like to abolish law. In the first place, says Godwin, law attempts to classify cases and rules, whereas in reality, "every case is a rule to itself. No action of any man was ever the same as any other action, had ever the same degree of utility or injury."⁷¹ Therefore it is necessary that new laws be made to attempt to classify new cases. This leads, according to Godwin, to a multitude of "tedious, minute, and circumlocutory" rules and statutes.

The result of all this infinitude of law, continues Godwin, is uncertainty. This destroys the very aim of the law, which is to put an end to uncertainty. It is impossible for any lawyer, much less a layman, to predict what the law will decide in any given situation. "It is a labyrinth without end; it is a mass of contradictions that cannot be extricated."⁷² While this may be true in some areas of the common law, Godwin did not consider that this is not true necessarily in most areas of statutory law. Godwin would reply, however, that regardless of this fact, the law places an institutional restraint on the people which inhibits the independent use of their own private judgement, and thus hinders the advancement of virtue.

⁷¹Ibid., v. 2, p. 207-8

⁷²Ibid., p. 209.

Not only is the law itself a pernicious institution, but Godwin also believes that those who practice it cannot escape contamination. "A lawyer can scarcely fail to be a dishonest man. He that is habitually goaded by the incentives of vice will not fail to be vicious. He that is perpetually conversant in quibbles, false colours and sophistry cannot equally cultivate the generous emotions of the soul and the nice discernment of rectitude."⁷³

Even considering it possible that there can be such a thing as an honest lawyer, adds Godwin, in reality he would do more harm than a dishonest one by covering up and softening the genuine effect of an erroneous institution.

The theory that men are creatures of passion and therefore law is necessary to provide a suitable monitor does not convince Godwin. Our imperfections, he states, can be removed only by the introduction of knowledge. As long as we look for guidance to anything but the independent operation of our own mind, we cannot gain in understanding. The only solution is to throw off the shackles of the law, and tell men "that they have passions, are occasionally hasty, intemperate and injurious, but they must be trusted with themselves...The effect of this disposition of things will soon be visible; mind will rise to the level of its

⁷³Ibid., p. 210-1

situation; juries and umpires will be penetrated with the magnitude of the trust reposed in them."⁷⁴

To the uncertainty of the law, says Godwin, is added the uncertainty of punishment, resulting from the present practice of the law in granting pardons. Although Godwin disapproved of punishment as a means of reforming character, he admits that there are occasions when the good of society will demand the confinement of a criminal. "What then is clemency? It can be nothing but the pitiable egotism of him who imagines he can do something better than justice. Is it right that I should suffer constraint for a certain offense? The rectitude of my suffering must be founded in its tendency to promote the general welfare. He therefore that pardons me, iniquitously prefers the imaginary interest of an individual and utterly neglects what he owes to the whole."⁷⁵ This point is particularly interesting in that it shows that Godwin was not in every respect a soft hearted liberal who would do away with all restraint and unpleasantness.

D. Political Institutions

1. History

We have examined some of Godwin's basic principles

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 214.

⁷⁵Ibid., p. 218.

first because it is on these principles that he bases his political, economic, and social system. As pointed out by C. H. Driver, "A man's political theory when he sets out to construct a system is to a large extent determined by his basic conceptions (be they held consciously or unconsciously) concerning the nature of man and the nature of the general world process...In the case of Godwin we are dealing with a man who consciously and deliberately deduced the whole of his political ideas from these assumptions, and who makes that fact clear beyond a doubt in almost every one of his eighty chapters. He reiterates his position to an almost wearisome degree and recurs to his first principles with every specific problem."⁷⁶

Godwin considers government to be the most important influence in man's environment. He goes into great detail in outlining the unfortunate effects of political institutions upon the history of the human race. He states that, "War has hitherto been considered as the inseparable ally of political institution."⁷⁷ The great masses of men have been forced into subjection and poverty, and vast numbers now live in a state of great deprivation and want. Godwin believes that this can be remedied only through increased

⁷⁶C. H. Driver, "William Godwin" in The Social and Political Ideas of Some Representative Thinkers of The Revolutionary Era, F. J. C. Hearnshaw (ed), Barnes and Noble Inc., New York, 1950, p. 153-4.

⁷⁷Political Justice, v. 1, p. 6.

freedom for the individual to exercise his faculties in contributing to the common good. He denies Montesquieu's proposition that it is difficult to establish a free government in warm climates, and states that climate is not a hindrance to the proper use of freedom.

Having established the importance of the subject of government, Godwin proceeds to analyze previous hypotheses which have been used to establish a foundation for political government. The system of force and the system of divine right he dismisses quickly. The use of force, he says, "appears to proceed upon the total negation of abstract and immutable justice, affirming every government to be right that is possessed of power sufficient to enforce its decrees...The second hypothesis...either coincides with the first...or it must remain totally useless till a criterion can be found to distinguish those governments which are approved by God from those which cannot lay claim to that sanction."⁷⁸

He spends more time on the third system, the social contract, but he dismisses it as well by asking a series of questions. Am I bound by a system of government contracted for by my ancestors? Or must the contract be renewed, and if so, when? How is my consent to be determined? How long

⁷⁸Ibid., p. 90.

am I bound by my consent; is it to be for my whole life regardless of any increase in my wisdom? To what do I give my consent, "the laws of England in fifty volumes folio?" Not finding satisfactory answers to these questions, Godwin rests in the belief that the foundations of government must be based on the common and present consent or deliberation of the people.

2. Monarchy

After discussing the basis of political authority, Godwin spends a great deal of time in analyzing the three traditional forms of government; monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. He appears, however, to be more concerned with moral desirability than with operational efficiency. F. E. L. Priestley comments, "His preoccupation is not with the political or economic efficiency of each form, but with its moral tendencies; he is, as might be expected, seeking the form which encourages virtue, not pleasure or luxury."⁷⁹

Godwin believes that a king is not in a proper position to govern. From childhood he is surrounded by those whose only duty is to know his whim, to flatter him and sing his praises. He has no opportunity to see things for himself, and therefore he must take the word of his ministers who

⁷⁹In his edition of Political Justice, University of Toronto Press, 1946, v. 3, p. 38.

are invariably concerned only with the advancement of their own ambitions. Even if a monarch be a wise and virtuous man, he still will not be able to attend properly to all the affairs that require his attention, and he cannot entirely escape from being served by ministers who are corrupt and hypocritical.

One of the most unfortunate aspects of a monarchy, says Godwin, is the effect it has on its subjects. In the first place, a king's power, as all institutional power, is based on falsehood. He has no intrinsic superiority over his subjects, and he pretends to supervise affairs of which he cannot possibly be completely informed. To cover up this imposture, the king is equipped in ornamental splendor and his inflated titles fill our ears. Everything is done in the royal name of the king; he is "Our Sovereign Lord the King." Can a man, asks Godwin, "be persuaded that the imposition is salutary? He willingly assumes the right of introducing similar falsehoods into his private affairs. He becomes convinced that veneration for truth is to be classes among our errors and prejudices, and that so far from being, as it pretends to be, in all cases salutary, it would lead, if ingeniously practised, to the destruction of mankind."⁸⁰

⁸⁰Political Justice, v. 1, p. 228.

Not only does monarchy lead its subjects away from truth, it breaks their spirit, their self esteem, and their energy. "What conscious dignity and virtue can there be among a people who, if deprived of the imaginary guidance of one vulgar mortal, are taught to believe that their faculties are benumbed and all their joints unstrung?...He that cannot speak to the proudest despot with a consciousness that he is a man speaking to a man, and a determination to yield him no superiority to which his inherent qualifications do not entitle him, is wholly incapable of sublime virtue."⁸¹

Godwin describes three variations of monarchy; elective monarchy, limited monarchy, and a president with regal powers. They are all found wanting. An elective monarchy is impractical; every election would not present a man with the necessary virtue and genius to rule; but even so, his election would be rendered precarious by the lack of wisdom among the electorate. A limited monarchy has a king whose main duty is to be idle. He may not express his opinion, appoint officers, or hear any advisors other than his own. The more he is deprived of his proper duties, the more unreasonable will he become. There would be no one to whom responsibility could be assigned. "The measures are mixed

⁸¹Ibid., p. 230.

and confounded as to their source beyond the power of human ingenuity to unravel."⁸²

The third alternative, a president with regal powers, has the same disadvantages under another name. No one man is able or has the right to exercise the power that is delegated to him under such a system. "A king is the well-known and standing appellation for an office which...has been the bane and the grave of human virtue. Why endeavor to purify and exorcise what is entitled only to execration?"⁸³

3. Aristocracy and Democracy

Both monarchy and aristocracy depend upon ignorance for their continued existence. Aristocracy is opposed to what Godwin believes is the true nature of things, in that it "implies neither less nor more than a scheme for rendering more permanent and visible by the interference of political institution the inequality of mankind."⁸⁴ The principle supporting this scheme, according to Godwin, is that of hereditary distinction. Political Justice devotes a chapter to refuting this principle, and asks, "What are the sensations that the lord (or the noble) experiences in his mother's womb by which his mind is made

⁸²Ibid., p. 245.

⁸³Ibid., p. 253

⁸⁴Ibid., v. 2, p. 14.

different from that of the peasant? Is there any variation in the finer reticulated substance of the brain by which the lord (or noble) is adapted to receive clearer and stronger impressions than the husbandman or the smith?"⁸⁵

Godwin believes that the only proper basis for distinction is that of personal merit; and that whenever this principle is ignored, then that "unfortunate wretch who with unremitted labour finds himself incapable adequately to feed and clothe his family has a sense of injustice rankling at his heart,"⁸⁶ and jealousy and hatred are spread among the people.

It appears then, that monarchy and aristocracy inflict great evils on mankind, and must therefore be shunned if justice is to prevail. Only one type of government remains to be discussed, that of democracy. If democracy is as bad as monarchy and aristocracy, the future would look dim indeed, but Godwin does not believe that this is the case. He states, "Supposing that we should even be obliged to take democracy with all the disadvantages that were ever annexed to it, and that no remedy could be discovered for any of its defects, it would be still greatly preferable to the exclusive system of the other forms."⁸⁷

⁸⁵Ibid., p. 3-4.

⁸⁶Ibid., p. 10.

⁸⁷Ibid., p. 24.

Godwin proposes some of these disadvantages which he feels are factors hindering a democracy. He says that the wise are outnumbered by the ignorant, and therefore the welfare of the whole is endangered. The crafty politician has more opportunity to deceive the unsuspecting multitude. A democracy is inconsistent and unstable; it wavers with each wind of changing opinion, and outstanding men of public service are soon accused of seeking after power.

In answering these arguments, Godwin points out that, "In the estimate that is usually made of democracy one of the most flagrant sources of error lies in our taking mankind such as monarchy and aristocracy have made them and from thence judging how fit they are to legislate for themselves."⁸⁸ Democracy does not undermine the virtue of its subjects as do other types of government, according to Godwin. "Democracy restores to man a consciousness of his value, teaches him by the removal of authority and oppression to listen only to the dictates of reason, gives him confidence to treat all other men as his fellow beings, and induces him to regard them no longer as enemies against whom to be upon his guard, but as brethren whom it becomes him to assist."⁸⁹

⁸⁸Ibid., p. 25

⁸⁹Ibid., p. 26

It is clear, then, that although Godwin grants that a democracy has certain failings, he believes that it offers the greatest opportunity for the advancement of virtue, in particular the virtue of equality. He does not, however, entirely approve of existing forms of democratic government, and goes to great lengths to suggest various improvements.

4. Defects of Democracy

The system of "checks and balances" rediscovered by Montesquieu and incorporated into the American constitution, is condemned by Godwin as dividing a nation against itself. The proposed reason for such a system is that by dividing governmental power among several bodies, "rash" proceedings will be eliminated, and the clash of various interests will result in moderate and agreeable compromise. It was just such compromises that Godwin opposed, as he believed that any conclusion not reached by reason and sound evidence, no matter how radical, is an injury and not a benefit. If a check is necessary, it should be found, according to Godwin, through the use of a cautious and deliberate proceeding prescribed by the representative assembly itself.

Godwin also gives a critical examination to the principle of representation. By the act of choosing a representative, a man delegates his judgement to another, something that Godwin believed could never be accurately and

truly done. Also, claims Godwin, the fact that a majority of representatives vote a certain way does not mean that they have grasped eternal truth.

In this second criticism Godwin brings up one of the persistent problems of a democracy, the problem of the tyranny of the majority. He believes that truth must prevail, but this truth "cannot be made more true by the number of its votaries."⁹⁰

Godwin would like to correct this difficulty by doing away with legislation. "Legislation," he says, "as it has been usually understood, is not an affair of human competence. Reason is the only legislator, and her decrees are irrevocable and uniform."⁹¹ This implies that governmental responsibilities rest in executive power, and so Godwin believes. "Administration...is a principle of perpetual application. So long as men shall see reason to act in a corporate capacity, they will always have occasions of temporary emergency for which to provide. In proportion as they advance in social improvement, executive power will, comparatively speaking, become everything, and legislative nothing."⁹²

Still, until man reaches a more advanced state

⁹⁰Ibid., v. 1, p. 105.

⁹¹Ibid., p. 107

⁹²Ibid., v. 2, p. 53.

of social improvement, some organization is necessary. Godwin proposes what he feels might be a possible plan for future organization; however his principal aim is to guarantee the importance of the individual as opposed to society in a corporate form; and since this is his only real concern, we should not, as F. E. L. Priestley points out, attach too much emphasis on his sample scheme.⁹³

Godwin would divide the country up into small parishes in which a jury would supervise the administration of justice. A national assembly would be elected only on special occasions to consider special emergencies. Even this very informal structure will become unnecessary, states Godwin, as men gradually improve in wisdom and virtue.

Godwin now has followed his thought to its logical end of enlightened anarchism, and concludes with enthusiastic optimism, "With what delight must every well-informed friend of mankind look forward to the auspicious period, the dissolution of political government, of that brute engine which has been the only perennial cause of the vices of mankind, and which, as has abundantly appeared in the progress of the present work, has mischiefs of various sorts incorporated with its substance, and no otherwise to be removed than by its utter annihilation."⁹⁴

⁹³Op. cit., p. 44.

⁹⁴Political Justice, v. 2, p. 71.

E. Property

1. The "Genuine System"

Godwin devotes a complete section of Political Justice to the subject of property, "containing," notes H. S. Salt, "an epitome of his social doctrines."⁹⁵ Godwin himself states, "The subject of property is the keystone that completes the fabric of political justice. According as our ideas respecting it are crude or correct, they will enlighten us as to the consequences of a simple form of society without government, and remove the prejudices that attach us to complexity."⁹⁶

In discussing the problem of property, Godwin is concerned more with ethics and morals than with economic problems as such. He does not enter into problems of interest to a scientific economist, but considers some of the basic principles which are implied by these problems. It is necessary to keep this in mind when analyzing his theory, because as pointed out by F. E. L. Priestley, "To submit Godwin to judgement as an economist is manifestly unfair. His approach is not the scientific approach of the economic investigator; it is the ethical approach of the moral philosopher."⁹⁷

Godwin's "genuine system" of property is governed by

⁹⁵Godwin's Political Justice, H. S. Salt (ed), Allen & Unwin Ltd., London, 1949, p. 10.

⁹⁶Political Justice, v. 2, p. 223.

⁹⁷Op. cit., p. 63.

the same principle that runs throughout his work, the principle of justice. Applying this principle to property, Godwin asks the following question, and supplies his own answer. "To whom does any article of property, suppose a loaf of bread, justly belong? To him who most wants it, or to whom the possession of it will be most beneficial."⁹⁸ Godwin felt that it was unjust for any man to have more than he needed, while there was any other man in existence who was in want. Luxury was of no use to the wealthy man, and any expense beyond his needs is ostentation. "The nobleman who should for the first time let his imagination loose to conceive the style in which he would live if he had nobody to observe and no eye to please but his own, would no doubt be surprised to find that vanity had been the first mover in all his actions."⁹⁹

This inequality of wealth leads to evils greater than any he has mentioned, says Godwin. First of all it creates a sense of dependence among the poor. "Observe the pauper fawning with abject vileness upon his rich benefactor, and speechless with sensations of gratitude for having received that which he ought to have claimed with an erect mien and with a consciousness that his claim was irresistible."¹⁰⁰ Secondly, the established system of property displays a

⁹⁸Political Justice, v. 2, p. 224.

⁹⁹Ibid., p. 227.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., p. 232.

perpetual spectacle of injustice. The importance placed on wealth leads men to look upon it as the most desirable of all objects, and rich men are made the subject of "general esteem and deference." Godwin believes that all riches "are to be considered as the salary of a sinecure office, where the labourer and the manufacturer perform the duties, and the principal spends the income in luxury and idleness."¹⁰¹

Godwin anticipates the argument that since men differ in ability and industry, they should receive different rewards. But, answers Godwin, what if by working hard you gain a hundred times more wealth than you need. What good will this be to you? "He that looks at his property with the eye of truth will find that every shilling of it has received its destination from the dictates of justice."¹⁰²

Godwin describes the great benefits that would come with the equal distribution of wealth. "Every man would have a frugal yet wholesome diet; every man would go forth to that moderate exercise of his corporal functions that would give hilarity to his spirits; none would be made torpid with fatigue, but all would have leisure to cultivate the kindly and philanthropical affections of the soul and

¹⁰¹Ibid., p. 236.

¹⁰²Ibid., p. 230.

to let loose his faculties in search of intellectual improvement."¹⁰³ Not only would there be intellectual improvement, but moral improvement as well. There would be no occasion for crime, because each man would possess in abundance what he desired. The vices of oppression, envy, and selfishness would cease to exist, and the history of war would be at an end.

George Saintsbury writes that in Political Justice, "there are germs of the worst results of Bolshevism itself."¹⁰⁴ A reply to this accusation is made by G. D. H. Cole, who feels that Godwin was not a Socialist in the wide sense of the word, he merely anticipated doctrines that contributed to the making of Socialist movement. He didn't want to make property collective, he wanted to do away with the very conception of it.¹⁰⁵ And according to F. E. L. Priestley, equality does not mean collectivism. "Godwin's system might be described as a voluntary communism of use; production remains private."¹⁰⁶

2. Objections

After outlining his system of property, Godwin gives

¹⁰³Ibid., p. 237-8

¹⁰⁴George Saintsbury, Collected Essays and Papers, J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., London, 1923, p. 370.

¹⁰⁵G. D. H. Cole, Socialist Thought; The Forerunners, 1789-1850, St. Martin's Press Inc., New York, 1953, p. 26-7.

¹⁰⁶Op. cit., p. 72.

his answers to various objections that might be raised. One of these objections is that it is luxury that has made civilization possible; and it is the "elegant voluptuary" that employs thousands to produce goods for his enjoyment, and provokes nations to engage in commerce for the same reason. Godwin answers this by repeating his arguments showing the ill effects of luxury and inequality of wealth; he believes that these evils overbalance any good that luxury can accomplish. "If mind be to be preferred to mere animal existence, if it ought to be the wish of every reasonable enquirer not merely that man but that happiness should be propagated, then is the voluptuary the bane of the human species."¹⁰⁷

Another objection is that Godwin's system would put an end to industry. If no man can keep more than what is of use to him, he will not exert himself and will become slothful. Godwin refutes this by reminding us that by the time his system would have come about, men would have made tremendous intellectual strides and would occupy themselves eagerly in refined pursuits of various kinds. Besides, the amount of labour required by that time would only amount to a half hour a day per person, and all necessary wants would be supplied. Who would shrink from this small amount

¹⁰⁷Political Justice, v. 2, p. 246.

of work, asks Godwin? He refutes the argument that his system could not be made permanent in the same way. Man would have advanced to such a point that he would not slide back to the old system under any circumstances.

Neither should his system be incompatible with independence, says Godwin. He defines two types of independence, natural and moral; natural independence being the use of private judgement, and moral independence being the lack of giving or receiving aid and assistance from one's neighbors.

Moral independence is undesirable anyway, says Godwin. "What could be more beneficial than for each man to derive every possible assistance for correcting and moulding his conduct from the perspicacity of his neighbour?"¹⁰⁸ But an equal system of property should not interfere with personal independence and the use of private judgement; there is no need for common meals and common storage houses. In fact, Godwin is opposed to cooperation in all forms, going to unusual extremes in his conclusions. For example, he believes that we will not have music concerts or theatrical performances in the future, because it "seems to include an absurd and vicious cooperation."¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸Ibid., p. 265.

¹⁰⁹Ibid., p. 269.

Some of these conclusions have drawn much abuse upon Godwin's head; for example the following statement made by George Saintsbury. "When a man decides, as Godwin does, that exactly half an hour's work per diem on the part of everybody will satisfy all the reasonable wants of the human race, he is beyond argument; you can only laugh at him or shut him up."¹¹⁰ Such criticism places itself beyond argument, and makes any examination of Godwin's ideas difficult. It might be wiser to remember a remark made by H. S. Salt, "It is easy to ridicule and caricature such speculations by applying, or rather misapplying, the criticism of today to views which have reference solely to a future period; but it is well, nevertheless, that our thoughts should be sometimes directed toward this final and ultimate goal of human aspirations."¹¹¹

¹¹⁰Op. cit., p. 372.

¹¹¹Op. cit., p. 11.

CHAPTER III

LATER THOUGHT

A. The Domestic Affections

Godwin revised many of his ideas after the publication of Political Justice, and some of those revisions form important enough appendages to his thought to be discussed in some detail. In the later editions of Political Justice, published in 1796 and 1798, he toned down the vigorous expression of much of his philosophy, and the work lost a great deal of its force. According to F. E. L. Priestley, however, the third edition is superior in that the crudities of the earlier work have been corrected, and the reasoning has been reduced to greater accuracy.¹¹² At any rate, neither of the later editions greatly modified the idea and spirit behind the original, although a few minor changes were made.

In the third edition, Godwin placed slightly more

¹¹²Op. cit., p. 82. The full title of Priestley's edition is An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and Its Influence on General Virtue and Morals, by William Godwin; a Photographic Facsimile of the Third Edition. In these three volumes Priestley has used the third edition of Godwin's work, but has reprinted all of the variations in the first and second editions, making it a handy reference for the comparison of all three editions.

emphasis on the importance of feeling and emotion. This was due primarily to his marriage with Mary Wollstonecraft in 1797, and his revision of thought on this subject is even more marked in his later writings. In his Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft, he discards his cold logical writing style, and pens a tender narrative about the life of the woman who gave him one of the happiest periods of his life. He appears to have completely changed his mind about the value of the domestic affections by this time, and in describing Mary Wollstonecraft he says, "She felt herself formed for domestic affection, and all those tender charities, which men of sensibility have constantly treated as the dearest band of human society."¹¹³

In a diary note written in 1798, Godwin says, "The benefits we can confer upon the world are few, at the same time that they are in their nature, either petty in their moment, or questionable in their results. The benefits we can confer upon those with whom we are closely connected are of great magnitude, or continual occurrence."¹¹⁴ Apparently Godwin now felt that charity begins in the home, and that by demonstrating benevolence and kindness there, a man will be made more prompt in the service of the general

¹¹³Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft by William Godwin, Richard R. Smith Inc., New York, 1930, p. 65.

¹¹⁴C. K. Paul, Op. cit., v. 1, p. 294.

public.

In 1799 Godwin published a novel, St. Leon, which gave high praise to the domestic affections. Godwin even found it necessary to write a brief preface explaining the change in his attitude. He said that for four years he had been anxious to change some of his opinions of this subject as expressed in Political Justice, and that he now believed that the domestic affections were natural to man, and were not incompatible with justice and virtue.

In his Thoughts occasioned by the Perusal of Dr. Parr's Spital Sermon, published in 1801, he took a somewhat different view of the question involving Fenelon and his chambermaid. He had already reached the opinion that the domestic affections were of undoubted importance in furthering the general happiness of mankind. It becomes a question then, of which choice will most be for the benefit of society as a whole. If I were to rescue Fenelon I would be contributing most directly to the general good, but by ignoring the fact that the chambermaid is my mother, I will be ignoring a motive which, says Godwin, is normally essential to the welfare and happiness of humanity.

In this same work, however, Godwin points out that the value of these domestic and private affections exists only to the extent that they are conducive to the public good. It appears then, that this change in his attitude did not involve any change in his basic conception of virtue. He

still believes that the proper goal of society should be the greatest happiness of the greatest number, and that the domestic affections are to be considered valuable only inasmuch as they contribute to this goal. In other words, I must not love my mother to the extent that it will interfere with my contributions to the general welfare.

In Godwin's book of religious Essays, which he was working on at the time of his death, there is further evidence to show that his brief happiness with Mary Wollstonecraft had convinced him of the necessity for the domestic affections. In essay number VIII, "On the Character of Jesus," Godwin quotes some biblical sayings of Christ. These sayings state that a man must come to Jesus hating his father and mother, wife and children; also that a man must not be slow in following Jesus because he must bury his father, but that he should "let the dead bury their dead."

Godwin here says, "It must be confessed that in all these exaggerations there is a noble and a gallant spirit, which leads us in some degree to admire the speaker (Jesus). But when we consider him as endeavoring to lay down an everlasting code of morals, what he says under these heads is worthy of distinct and unhesitating censure."¹¹⁵

When Godwin expressed his views on the domestic affections

¹¹⁵ Essays by the late William Godwin, Henry S. King & Co., London, 1873, p. 155.

in Political Justice, he was writing and thinking from an ivory tower. He did not write from practical experience, but from the reflections of solitary meditation. It is only natural to suspect that under such circumstances he might tend to overemphasize the part that reason plays in the lives of men, and to neglect the importance of familial love and emotion in general as motives for action.

Although his marriage did not change his basic utilitarian principles, it softened his rigid intellectualism considerably; and in the second edition of his Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft he writes, "A sound morality requires that nothing human should be regarded by us with indifference; but it is impossible that we should not feel the strongest interest in those persons, whom we know most intimately, and whose welfare and sympathies are united to our own. True wisdom will recommend to us individual attachments; for with them our minds are more thoroughly maintained in activity and life than they can be under the privation of them...True virtue will sanction this recommendation, since it is the object of virtue to produce happiness, and since the man who lives in the midst of domestic relations, will have many opportunities of conferring pleasure, minute in the detail, yet not trivial in the amount, without interfering with the purposes of general

benevolence."¹¹⁶

B. Reason and Feeling

Godwin also revised his opinion concerning the influence of feeling and emotion on the actions of men. He came to feel that emotion played a greater part in determining the motives of men's actions than he had realized. Even before the publication of the Memoirs, he had stated in The Enquirer in 1797, "There is no motive more powerful in its operations upon the human mind, than that which originates in sympathy."¹¹⁷

In his later novels, Godwin injects emotion and feeling in large quantities. In fact, it is difficult at times to believe that the author of the cold, logical Political Justice, and the author of the later emotionally portrayed novels, are one and the same. Angus Wilson states, perhaps rather extremely, "There is a frightening chasm, a nightmare association between the gloomy tortured lives of Godwin's heroes and the sweet reasonableness, the universal good sense of Political Justice."¹¹⁸

Godwin's apparent inconsistency in this respect

¹¹⁶Op. cit., p. 127.

¹¹⁷William Godwin, The Enquirer; Reflections on Education, Manners, and Literature, Simpkin & Marshall, London, 1823, p. 50.

¹¹⁸Op. cit., p. 40. For another article illustrating Godwin's later use of sentiment in his novels, see B. Sprague Allen, "William Godwin as a Sentimentalist," PMLA, March, 1918, vol. 1, p. 1-29.

is somewhat difficult to understand. One reason is, of course, Godwin's revised attitude toward feeling; he had changed his mind and wanted to show that he had. The form of the novel as a means of communication probably had something to do with it. Since novels are built around characters and situations, it is easier, in fact almost necessary, to bring emotion and feeling into the picture. Another possible explanation might be that Godwin was writing these novels to make money; and since emotional and romantic novels have more commercial appeal than philosophical treatises, Godwin might have wanted to inject more emotion into his work than he otherwise would.

Another illustration of Godwin's recognition of the importance of emotion can be taken from his book, Thoughts on Man, finished in 1831. "We are prepared by the power that made us for feelings and emotions; and unless these come to diversify and elevate our existence, we should waste our days in melancholy, and scarcely (be) able to sustain ourselves."¹¹⁹

What impact does this development have on the Godwinian theory? The basic element of that theory is perfectibility. Vice is really an error in understanding; correct a man's thinking, and you will correct his vice. But if a man

¹¹⁹William Godwin, Thoughts on Man, His Nature, Productions and Discoveries, Effingham Wilson, Royal Exchange, London, 1831, p. 234.

can be motivated by his feelings, then something more than reason would be necessary to lead the way to virtuous conduct. This indicates a conflict with Godwin's theory that knowledge is virtue and that in order to improve men's moral actions you need only to improve their understanding.

To discover Godwin's solution, we must turn to the "Summary of Principles" that he prefixed to the third edition of Political Justice. In the "Summary" is stated the new principle that the voluntary actions of men are directed by their feelings, and that reason has "no tendency to excite us to action." But it goes on to say that although our actions do not originate in reason, they are governed and regulated by reason. In other words, although feeling is what motivates our acts, reason selects the right and proper conduct "according to the worth it ascribes to various excitements." Therefore reason is still the key to perfectibility, and it is to reason we must appeal for the further improvement of man's character.

We can gather from this, then, that Godwin did not change his fundamental position concerning the relative merits of reason and feeling at all. As David Fleisher notes, "What he (Godwin) did in effect was not to alter the fundamental relationship of feeling and reason, but simply to emphasize the part which feeling played in that relationship."¹²

¹²⁰Op. cit., p. 117-8.

How far does Godwin's revision go toward solving the problem? He apparently believes that by emphasizing feeling he is placing it in a more equal relationship with reason. But in reality nothing is changed. Feeling and emotion are still subordinate to reason, and although feeling motivates our actions, Godwin still believes that reason is the headmaster who selects the actions we will take.

Godwin had to maintain his fundamental position here, because if feeling could prompt us to act regardless of the dictates of reason, moral conduct could not be improved by the use of persuasion and free discussion. This problem is a basic one that goes to the root of the Godwinian theory. John Middleton Murry makes an attempt to explain it in this fashion, "Godwin's 'reason' is the concept of a recluse, which in reality contains under one conventional label a whole host of instincts and emotions. He has done what most men do who entertain a like purpose--namely, rationalized his own 'values.' Godwin's 'universal benevolence' is not a deduction, but an assumption; he is trying to find a reason for the emotion which he felt, and the ideal of which he dreamed."¹²¹

C. Perfectibility

Godwin also modified his views on intellectual per-

¹²¹ John Middleton Murry, Countries of the Mind, Oxford University Press, London, 1931, p. 183.

fectibility. His original belief was that men were born with negligible variation in intellect and ability. They were all equally malleable, and it was due to the differences in environment and stimulation to learn that one man would outstrip another. However, in the same diary note in which he corrected his views on emotion and the domestic affections Godwin said, "I am...desirous of retracting the opinions I have given favourable to Helvetius' doctrine of the equality of intellectual beings as they are born into the world, and of subscribing to the received opinion, that, though education is a most powerful instrument, yet there exist differences of the highest importance between human beings from the period of their birth."¹²²

This view is supported by Godwin in Thoughts on Man. "But as in the infinite variety of human beings no two faces are so alike that they cannot be distinguished... there are internal varieties in the senses, the organs, and the internal structure of the human species..."¹²³ Elsewhere in the same work Godwin comments on the different talents that students bring to their instructors at school. He concludes that each man cannot develop equally as well in any field, but can reach his highest perfection in the

¹²²Op. cit., v. 1, p. 265.

¹²³Op. cit., p. 30-1.

field for which he is most suited.

It is not, however, upon physical equality and perfectibility that the bulk of Godwin's theory rests. His philosophy is primarily concerned with morality. What impact, then, does the variation Godwin makes in his theory of physical perfectibility have on his theory of moral perfectibility?

As stated earlier, Godwin originally considered the fact of moral equality more certain than that of physical equality. It is perhaps for this reason that he does not seem to revise his theory of moral perfectibility to any great extent, even in spite of his concessions in the area of physical inequality. It is true that in his religious Essays he states that "some men seem born to love, and others to hate,"¹²⁴ but he does not seem to believe that this is prevalent to such an extent that it cannot be overcome by the power of education.

D. Necessity

The last revision of Godwin's thought to be discussed here has to do with his doctrine of necessity. In Thoughts on Man, Godwin introduces what he considers an answer to the principal difficulties the believer in necessity en-

¹²⁴Op. cit., p. 64.

counters. He admits that "...every man, the necessarian as well as his opponent, acts on the assumption of human liberty, and can never for a moment, when he enters into the scenes of real life, divest himself of this persuasion."¹²⁵ How can this be explained? It would seem that this would be a powerful argument for the proponents of free will. However, Godwin remains persuaded that every action has a cause, perhaps not known, but a cause nevertheless, that will not permit us to do otherwise than what we do.

He surmounts the difficulty by calling this assumption the "delusive sense of liberty." In reality we are governed by necessity, says Godwin, but we cannot escape the feeling that our actions are free. "...we have demonstration, all the powers of reasoning faculty, on one side, and the feeling of our minds, an inward persuasion of which with all our efforts we can never divest ourselves, on the other."¹²⁶

This situation is not an unfortunate one, continues Godwin. It is this "delusion" that gives us our conscience, and a sense of right and wrong. Its absence would have a most harmful effect; it is this feeling that our will is free that gives us enthusiasm, a determination for moral exertion, and fills us with a vigorous energy for right

¹²⁵Op. cit., p. 228.

¹²⁶Ibid., p. 230.

action. Here Godwin reverses his belief set forth in Political Justice, that a man cannot be blamed for his misdeeds. However, it is difficult to determine whether the blame Godwin would assign is based on truth or delusion. As pointed out by David Fleisher, "...it is surprising that a philosopher who equated truth with virtue and error with vice should yet in this instance have spoken with enthusiasm of virtues which are engendered by a universal delusion."¹²⁷

Of what value, then, is the knowledge of the truth of necessity, if all men act on the assumption that their actions are free? It will still have uses, according to Godwin, and he points out some of them. "It will moderate our excesses, and point out to us that middle path of judgement which the soundest philosophy inculcates...and... we shall view with pity, even with sympathy, the men whose frailties we behold, or by whom crimes are perpetrated, satisfied that they are parts of one great machine, and, like ourselves, are driven forward by impulses over which they have no real control."¹²⁸

It appears that Godwin's later revisions did not change his basic theory to any great extent. The basic principles

¹²⁷Op. cit., p. 126.

¹²⁸William Godwin, Thoughts on Man, op. cit., p. 241-2.

and scope of Political Justice remain untouched. It can accurately be said then, that Godwin's contribution to political philosophy was based almost entirely on one book. In fact, without Political Justice, Godwin's work might very well have passed almost entirely unnoticed in the history of literature.

CHAPTER IV

CRITICISM

A. Godwin's Life

With the advantage of hindsight and the knowledge we have gained since Godwin's time, it is easy to dismiss many of his ideas as ridiculous or unrealistic. But the men who wrote during the time of the French Revolution lived under conditions that might plausibly have led some of them to believe that a new world of perpetual progress was in the making, and that they were laying the foundation stones for a new concept of political and social development. As pointed out by Christian Bay, "Not only must we forgive them if we find that they entertain what we would consider odd value preferences, as well as unrealistic conceptions of human nature and other empirical phenomena; but we must also remember that the complexities of their own times must have placed their heavy impact on political thinkers in all countries."¹²⁹

William Godwin's life and personality have been considered by many to be the most interesting thing about him. Many conflicting positions have been taken in this respect,

¹²⁹Op. cit., p. 227.

and it might be well at this point to try to establish as fair a picture as we can with regard to Godwin as a man, keeping in mind the circumstances of his life and the times in which he lived.

J. R. Sutherland writes, "Godwin is at once a shrewd observer and a crank."¹³⁰ A more extreme view is taken by A. Edward Newton, who believes that Godwin "was a cold, hard, self-centered man who did good to none and harm to many. As a husband, father, friend, he was a complete failure."¹³¹

On the other hand, John Middleton Murray writes that Godwin was "one of the most human figures of his time. The quality that is diffused through his whole work is rare and human and tender."¹³² J. B. Bury says, "Rousseau and Godwin are the two great champions in the eighteenth century of the toiling and suffering masses."¹³³

There are, I think, several reasons that help explain such differing opinions. One of these reasons might be the political atmosphere during the reaction to the French Revolution. When the revolution had reached the height

¹³⁰ J. R. Sutherland, "Peace in the Age of Wars and Revolution," Bookman, December, 1931, vol. 81, p. 156.

¹³¹ A. Edward Newton, "A Ridiculous Philosopher," Atlantic Monthly, September, 1917, vol. 120, p. 390.

¹³² John Middleton Murray, "William Godwin," Heroes of Thought, Julian Messner Inc., New York, 1938, p. 257.

¹³³ Op. cit., p. 225.

of its popularity, no man was held in higher esteem than William Godwin. The decline of his reputation and the many aspersions cast against him were the result, I believe, of the changing political feeling more than reaction against Godwin himself or his work. Many of Godwin's closest friends later became staunch conservatives and felt obliged to sternly criticize Godwin and his theories. That such personal criticism was largely unmerited is supported by the pangs of conscience felt by Coleridge when he wrote in the margin of his copy of Godwin's reply to Dr. Parr's sermon, "Though I did it in the zenith of his reputation, yet I feel remorse ever to have only spoken unkindly of such a man."¹³⁴

Another reason for the abuse heaped upon Godwin is that many felt that his own actions were not directed by his philosophy. The fact that he did not live up to his principles is pointed out by those who note as examples his marriage with Mary Wollstonecraft and his acceptance of a sinecure position from the government near the end of his life. In The Encyclopedia Americana Arthur H. Nason writes that both Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft "held that a legal marriage was undesirable; but, lacking the courage of their convictions, they were married 29 March 1797."¹³⁵

¹³⁴Quoted by David Fleisher, Op. cit., p. 42.

¹³⁵Arthur H. Nason, "William Godwin," The Encyclopedia Americana, 1955, v. 12, p. 750.

However, for a long period previous to the marriage, they had lived as man and wife, thereby being consistent with their principles. But Godwin had always felt that a man could bring himself and those around him a great deal of grief by single-handedly opposing the beliefs held by a majority of society, even if society were wrong. It was for this reason that he and Mary Wollstonecraft married; it was a matter of sacrificing a principle for the sake of their unborn child. I don't believe they can be criticized to any great extent for wanting to protect their child from the misery involved in denying convention. Their marriage then, I believe, was more a matter of placing one principle above another, rather than a lack of moral courage. Later on, of course, Godwin changed his mind concerning the institution of marriage; and I think it is recognized that men have the right to, and occasionally do, change their minds.

The conditions of Godwin's life explain a great deal of his inconsistency. He accepted a salaried office from the government when he had but a few years to live. Who can begrudge an old man from choosing to live out his life in reasonable comfort instead of racking poverty? Godwin felt that compensation from a governmental position was wrong, true enough, but his theory called for charity to spring directly from the hearts of the individuals composing the public. If the public was not ready for this teaching,

I think Godwin can be justified in accepting this means of obtaining a livelihood.

The conditions of his life explain another reason for much criticism that has been directed against Godwin; that he sponged incessantly off his friends. Yet it cannot be denied that Godwin worked hard during his lifetime; his literary production was enormous, and even old age did not keep him from sustained effort. However, the ill repute of his name and the lowered quality of his work prevented him from being able to make an adequate livelihood. What is a man to do when he has a wife and five children to support? Godwin's own philosophy said that if a man was in need he should request necessary assistance from those who are able to afford it "with an erect mien and with a consciousness that his claim was irresistible."¹³⁶ Neither should it be forgotten that Godwin was as generous with others to the extent of his means as he felt others should be with him.

Shelley was the friend that Godwin made most of his demands on. But few look upon the other side of this coin and realize that Shelley owed most of the ideas on which he based his poetry to Godwin. Considering Godwin's circumstances, the fact that Shelley was a member of the family,

¹³⁶See above, p. 56.

and the fact that Shelley got most of his ideas from Godwin, is it unreasonable for Godwin to expect some assistance when he was so sorely in need of it? John Middleton Murry writes, "At a modest estimate three quarters of (Shelley's work) is Godwin in poetry...(Godwin) gave Shelley his ideas and expected Shelley to give him his money. Was it really so monstrous?"¹³⁷

It is unfortunate that Godwin's personal life was such as to cause so great a distraction from his ideas. I think it is time to view with some sympathy the difficulties under which he worked, and give closer attention to the theories that so startled his own world, and offer a considerable basis for speculation today.

B. Three Basic Ideas

Before we plunge into an analysis of Godwin's political philosophy, it might be convenient to set forth what might be considered the three basic ideas of his thought.

(1) Man is capable of infinite perfectibility. Knowledge is received through perception, and at the time of their birth individuals are equally capable of improvement through the shaping of their environment; this follows from the law of necessity which holds that each action is governed by a previously determined cause. If this environment encourages

¹³⁷Op. cit., p. 181-2.

the use of reason and private judgement with perfect sincerity in communication, truth will be promoted; and since knowledge is virtue and vice only error, mankind will gradually approach a state of moral perfection in which the greatest happiness of the greatest number will be advanced through the practice of universal benevolence, where justice will dictate that each man supply, equally and without discrimination, the needs of his neighbor.

(2) "The voluntary actions of men originate in their opinions." In order that man may progress on this road to moral perfection, his opinions must be influenced; for what men do depends on what they think. Persuasion and free discussion should not be interfered with or hampered, then, by such things as religious dogma, libel laws, loyalty oaths, previous constitutions, national education, and salaried political office. Neither should erroneous opinion be suppressed, because it is only through the unhampered exchange of opinion that truth can be discovered and men's actions improved.

(3) Government interferes with the discovery of truth and the free exchange of opinion and should therefore be abolished. All systems of government are based on falsehood and must support error for the continuance of their own existence, and by the use of coercion and the support of inequality of wealth and property they interfere with the free exchange of opinion and the welfare of the people.

Although democracy is preferable to monarchy and aristocracy, as now practised it too contains serious errors as illustrated by the theories of checks and balances and representation; for the benefit of society, therefore, the power of all existing forms of government should be gradually reduced and finally dissolved.

C. Perfectibility

It would be sad indeed if we could not say that man was capable of improvement. The important questions are, of course; how is this to be achieved, to what extent is it possible, and how fast can it be expected?

Although men are indeed subject to change for the better, I believe that Godwin overlooks the enormous complexity involved. He assumes that the free exercise of reason and private judgement will always bring men to the truth; ignoring the extreme difficulty of arriving at the truth by any process, and then knowing when it has been found. Even if this can be accomplished, there is no guarantee that men will want to act in accordance with the truth they have found. There are many desires and irrational processes that interfere with behavior even when the truth is known, and such perceptions upon which we base our judgement of truth tend to be affected by these same desires and irrational processes.¹³⁸ Godwin also

¹³⁸The same point is raised by Christian Bay, op. cit., p. 2.44.

ignores the difficulty involved in applying abstract truth to the practical affairs of everyday life.

In spite of these difficulties though, it is possible to go along with the basic idea of perfectibility. But there are other considerations in Godwin's conception of this process that need to be examined. His theory that men are equally capable of moral improvement through environment is one of them. Godwin himself revised his opinion on this matter in his later work. He states that he has come to believe that there are considerable differences possible in children at birth, and that this will result in different talents and aptitudes in later life; but he still believes that the susceptibility for moral improvement is largely unaffected by these intellectual differences. But if men vary intellectually at birth, and their actions are governed by opinions derived from their intellect, then it seems to me that men are not equally capable of moral improvement. The more intelligent will be better able to understand their environment and absorb instruction, and thus be in a better position to select proper moral actions than their less intelligent neighbors.

There appears to be some conflict in Godwin's belief in necessity and his conception of the utility of praise and blame. Although he believes that men's actions are governed by necessity and thus they are not responsible for their deeds, yet he insists that the merit of a deed

depends upon the motive of the doer.¹³⁹ G. D. H. Cole explains this conflict by stating that for Godwin knowing and doing the good are identical.¹⁴⁰ In this case, if a man does wrong he cannot be blamed, because he lacked the proper knowledge; if he had had the proper knowledge, he would not have done the deed. If a man knows the good, according to Godwin, he will automatically be motivated to achieve it; but if a man does good accidentally, he cannot be praised, because he lacked the proper motive. The proper motive necessitates the proper act, but the motive must be the proper one to acquire merit, and presto! the dilemma is solved; the belief in the utility of praise and blame is reconciled with the belief in determinism.

It is not quite this simple, however, for what merit can a motive acquire if it is determined by a previous cause and in turn determines the act? Godwin would say that the merit is involved merely because the motive is there and the act is not accidental. This connection between motive and act may be desirable, but the doer can claim little merit, since whether or not the motive is there was determined in the first place.

Godwin dismisses free will too lightly, and avoids

¹³⁹See above, p. 21.

¹⁴⁰Op. cit., p. 25.

discussing a topic that has been a highly controversial issue throughout the history of philosophy. It was essential for Godwin to assume determinism to avoid the possibility of wilful action interfering with the moral progress of man achieved by the attainment of greater knowledge. Since free will might prove ruinous to his theory, Godwin rather arbitrarily denies it; and although there is much that could be said on both sides of this issue, Godwin believes he has firmly established his position after one short chapter.

By what criteria does Godwin measure the state of man's moral development? Where does the road lead? Godwin believes that improvement is indicated by man's tendency to promote the greatest happiness of the greatest number. This is the basis of philosophic radicalism, and the soundness of this principle as the proper goal for society can be earnestly debated. Strictly interpreted, it delegates any values that do not promote the general welfare to a secondary position.

Godwin does just this, and sometimes follows his logic to such extreme lengths that his conclusions become completely unacceptable. Leslie Stephen says, "He (Godwin) dealt in what is called inexorable logic! That is to say, that whenever he ran his head against a lamp-post, he calmly asserted that it did not exist."¹⁴¹ Unfortunately

¹⁴¹Leslie Stephen, "Studies of a Biographer", The Knickerbocker Press, London, 1907, p. 121.

there is more truth than humor in this statement, as illustrated by Godwin's case of Fenelon and his chambermaid. To reach the conclusion that he must save Fenelon, in spite of the fact that the chambermaid is his mother, Godwin completely overlooks the values of personal love and gratitude. In fact Godwin condemns gratitude as a sin if it results in an act not otherwise dictated by the general welfare.

It is true that Godwin later had doubts about his choice of saving Fenelon, but his other conclusions still show the difficulty of making utility the sole basis of justice and moral duty; for example, his belief that promises are not binding if the public welfare later demands a different action. Such a proposition would undermine day to day transactions and would result in a chaos of uncertainty.

Such extreme conclusions prompted H. N. Brailsford to say that "...his (Godwin's) honesty provided the perfect refutation of his premises. The reasoning was sound but the conclusions were impossible. Clearly then, the premises were at fault. Political Justice is the reductio ad absurdum of individualism."¹⁴² I think it might be better to say that Godwin's reasoning was sound as far as it went; if he

¹⁴²H. N. Brailsford, "William Godwin," in Great Democrats, A. Barratt Brown (ed), Ivor Nicholson & Watson, London, 1934, p. 332.

had included more factors in the consideration of his basic premises, I think his conclusions might not have been so extreme.

One other criticism of the perfectibility theory that should be made here is a basic one that must be mentioned in any discussion of perpetual improvement or progress. It was originally stated by Thomas Robert Malthus in 1798 as a reply to Godwin. "Population," says Malthus, "when unchecked, increases in a geometrical ratio. Subsistence increases only in an arithmetical ratio."¹⁴³ If this be true, then society is faced with an almost insurmountable obstacle to future improvement. Godwin originally answered Malthus in his reply to Dr. Parr's sermon in 1801, and stated that by the time population became a threat to existence, men would have acquired the capacity for moral restraint sufficient to reduce the danger. In his book Of Population, written in 1820, Godwin attacked the Malthusian ratios which he had previously accepted, and now concludes that population could never outstrip the power of improvement made possible by the human intellect.

The population argument remains a vital one, however, to all theories of progress, especially in our own time

¹⁴³ Thomas Robert Malthus, First Essay on Population, reprinted by Macmillan & Co, Ltd., London, 1926, p. 14.

as the problem looms before us with ever increasing urgency. We have come to accept Malthus' supposition, and are now turning our attention more to the solution to the problem of overpopulation. Much controversy has arisen over various solutions that have been proposed, especially around the issue of birth control; and it begins to look as though this problem might turn out to be the most crucial obstacle to the theory of perfectibility and progress.

D. Opinion

Godwin's belief that the voluntary actions of men originate in their opinions is open to serious question. In fact I believe that it is the most fundamental objection that can be made to his whole theory. Godwin recognized the importance of doubts that could be cast in this area, and attempted to revise his statement in his later work. He said in the third edition of Political Justice that action originates in feeling and not in opinion, but he nevertheless retained his belief in the superiority of opinion by stating that reason selects the most desirable action suggested to our minds by feeling and emotion.

If action can be motivated by feeling without regard to reason, then the improvement of the understanding will not necessarily result in virtuous action; and it is commonly accepted by modern psychology that feeling does have a part, and a very large part, in determining our actions. It is

really impossible, however, to separate the causes of any action and say that this or that cause was the primary factor. Irving Sarnoff, Daniel Katz, and Charles McClintock have written an article which illustrates the complexity of attitudes and motivation. "A major difficulty in the field of attitude research," say the authors, "has been the oversimplification of problems in terms of a narrow theory of motivation."¹⁴⁴ They suggest that there are three basic types of motivational patterns, which interplay in determining individual human behavior; sometimes one pattern predominates at the expense of the other patterns. These are the three patterns: the rational or making-sense-of-one's world pattern, the reward and punishment or social acceptance pattern, and the ego defense or anxiety-reducing pattern.

In all these three, reason and emotion can be interwoven in countless variations. It is consequently misleading to state, as Godwin does, that reason will always be the deciding factor in all our actions; clearly it is not, nor is it necessarily desirable for it to be. Much good can result from actions springing from an appropriate emotion.

Persuasion can be successful in improving people's emotional responses as well as their understanding, as pointed out by Sarnoff, Katz, and McClintock. "The great bulk

¹⁴⁴ Irving Sarnoff, Daniel Katz, and Charles McClintock, "Attitude-Change Procedures and Motivating Patterns," in Public Opinion and Propaganda, Daniel Katz et. al. (eds.), Dryden Press, New York, 1954, p. 305.

of the efforts to change attitudes in the world of affairs is through persuasion and argumentation, in which an appeal is made to existing value structures."¹⁴⁵ Godwin would very likely reply that if a person's emotional responses have been improved, it is because he has increased in understanding. I think that the best explanation of Godwin's position is given by John Middleton Murry, when he says that Godwin has "rationalized his own 'values'" and uses reason as a label to include a "whole host of instincts and emotions."¹⁴⁶

If man is capable of action based on emotion and passion, then the elimination of all interference would not be a wise step to take. Established constitutions, wisely constructed to allow room for improvement, counterbalance emotional demands for changes not based on sound judgement. Our experience in this country tends to add emphasis to this point. The difficulty of amending our constitution allows time to cool hot heads; and the result is, generally speaking, that when changes are made, they have a better chance to be based on reflection and long consideration.

This reasoning also supports the existence of libel laws. Men would then learn to pause in the heat of anger

¹⁴⁵Ibid., p. 309.

¹⁴⁶See above, p. 70.

and consider the results of hasty statements. Religious restrictions have the same effect; by establishing certain beliefs and convictions based on sound reflection and past experience, they impose checks on the passions of the faithful. Of course it is possible for religious convictions to become unreasonable, but the point remains that such restraints on matters of faith and morals are not necessarily harmful.

The matter of taking oaths has been a bone of contention for many people. The Bible enjoins us "not to swear at all," on the theory that our word must be taken for what it is. The opponents of this theory state that if a man is innocent of any wrong, he should not object to taking an oath. If a man objects, he casts a reasonable doubt upon his reliability; and if he lies he may be made to suffer a conviction of perjury, whereas otherwise no penalty may be possible. For purposes of convenience in administering justice, such reasons as the latter indicate that the taking of oaths may be made to serve a useful purpose.

Godwin's position on national education has certainly not been substantiated by the experience we have had of it up to the present time in our own country. It is true that in the hands of an all-powerful dictator it may become a potent weapon, but under such conditions any institution could be used to strengthen the government's position. As we know it, national, or socialized education has been a



powerful factor in the progress of culture and civilization, and is concrete evidence of Godwin's error in this respect.

Godwin's objection to salaried governmental offices is open to a very practical criticism, and one which was realized in his own life. His belief that individuals should support public officials who are in need does well to point out the value of the services such officials render, but the hard fact remains that individuals do not do this. Of course they do it indirectly through taxes, but Godwin opposed this as an unequal burden upon the poor; however, the graduated income tax of today has removed this inequality.

A stronger criticism to Godwin's proposal is that people do not seek public office for monetary reward instead of public service. Salaries are low enough so that public service is one of the primary incentives that can be advanced to interested parties, thus realizing Godwin's desire. In the light of this situation, it would be better to have some monetary reward attached to public office than to take the extreme position of having none at all.

E. Government

If one accepts Godwin's theory of necessity, it would be difficult to find fault with his general view of punishment. It would be useless to punish a man for retributive purposes if he could not help what he did. But Godwin himself opens the door on this subject by admitting

in his later work that in fact people do act in all their dealings as if they were capable of choice. He calls this the "delusive sense of liberty," and states that from this feeling comes our conscience and concepts of right and wrong. By admitting this, it is possible to punish a criminal for failing to heed this sense of liberty, delusive though it may be.

Even if we do not consider the question of necessity, it is possible to punish by confinement for the sake of the future security of society, because we have now established that some actions are governed by feeling and not opinion. If this is true, enlightening the criminal's understanding will not necessarily result in his rehabilitation. In fact it is in the case of the criminal that passion is most likely to subordinate reason, and confinement may be necessary to cool these passions or to keep them under control.

It is this type of security against the violent acts of men that Godwin does not take into proper consideration. This is also evident in his view on law. Law is unnecessary, he says, because men should be ruled by opinion. It is because they are not so ruled that law is necessary. If the law is sometimes confusing and uncertain, think of the confusion that would reign without its protective mantle. Countless instances of administrative matters that do not even involve passion but are only questions of convenience

would be unresolved, not even considering the fear of probable violence that would result from the absence of law enforcement agencies.

This same argument would also require the existence of some form of government. If there is need for a restraining power, there must be some agency that can supply it. Not only is government necessary for the existence of courts of law, it is essential for control and regulation of countless other situations that develop in the kind of complex society that result from the progress of civilization. Civic administration, economic regulation, and foreign relations are only examples of the many areas needing some type of governmental action.

As long as some such agency is required, an established government has certain advantages over other types of institutions, because it at least is under some form of control by the electorate. There are many kinds of agencies which are not, such as business monopolies, unions, and pressure groups of all kinds. Godwin fails to consider, as Christian Bay observes, that "the abolition of state power, if it would have any effects that can be predicted with certainty, would result in the immediate substitution of other, and probably even more obnoxious power hierarchies."¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁷Op. cit., p. 2.45.

Since it seems necessary, then, that some form of government be formed,, I believe we can go along with Godwin's belief that democracy is the best available system, as it seems to offer the most freedom for the individual while still providing the required control and restraint. Although Godwin objects to the theory of representation, I believe it presents the most desirable method of allowing the individual to take a part in government. It would be wildly impractical to expect any sense or order from a council of all the citizens formed to decide upon laws and matters of state, even if such a thing were possible. It is true that a representative cannot act exactly as each and every one of his electors would, and many times the operations of practical politics interfere with the voice of the people; nevertheless, constituents have enough influence over their representatives to allow their wishes to be expressed in many matters of public interest.

Godwin objects to the system of checks and balances because it results in too much compromise, and because it splits a country against itself. He believes that compromise thwarts the discovery of truth, and that truth can only be discovered by the use of uncompromising reason. It might again be pointed out here that truth is a complex thing indeed, and it is no easy matter to discover it or recognize it when found. The only authority for such recognition is the opinion of men, and men differ in their

opinions. Who is to say what is true? At least a compromise is a method by which the clash of conflicting opinions can be reconciled to a workable program. The truth of this is illustrated by the compromises which made possible the making of our own constitution.

Godwin's theory of property involves an area too vast for detailed discussion here; however, a few comments may be appropriate. Godwin believed that government supports the inequality of wealth and that legislation favors the rich. This is not necessarily true, as seen by the operation of government today. The income and the inheritance tax are only examples of governmental action tending to redistribute wealth, and indicate that the very reverse of Godwin's proposition may be true; that government may function in such a manner as to help the poor and bring about to a great extent Godwin's desire for economic equality.

Godwin's assumption that man's progress toward moral perfection will cause him to supply the needs of his neighbor may be true to some extent, but tends to oversimplify human nature. Passion and emotion are strong ingredients in man's desire to keep what he has earned. Perhaps a more realistic system would take advantage of these tendencies by providing suitable conditions for the poor to raise their economic standards through equality of opportunity.

F. Conclusion

Let us now see what conclusions we can make in view of our criticism of the three basic ideas of Godwin's political philosophy.

(1) Man is capable of infinite perfectibility. The statement that man is capable of improvement cannot be denied, but serious reservations must be made as to the process as set forth by Godwin. Most of his assumptions can be questioned, particularly when he states that men are molded entirely by their environment and that they are equally capable of moral improvement. He overlooks the complexity of knowing and applying abstract truth and assumes too lightly the doctrine of necessity. Finally, his assumption of utility and universal benevolence as criteria for measuring morality is highly debatable.

(2) "The voluntary actions of men originate in their opinions." This is only partly true, as many times the actions of men are governed entirely by their emotions. This being the case, outside interference is not always undesirable; and constitutions, religious dogma, and libel laws can be made to serve a good purpose. Godwin's conclusions regarding the taking of oaths, national education, and salaried governmental offices is open to criticism on grounds of practicality and the conflicting evidence of past experience.

(3) Government interferes with the discovery of truth and the free exchange of opinion and should therefore be

abolished. This conclusion must be rejected entirely. The passions of men require some security against violence; government is able to provide this check, and to do much good in other areas as well. The absence of state power would only bring some other less desirable organization into control. Godwin's conclusions regarding representation in a democracy and the system of checks and balances may also be criticized, and his belief that government always supports inequality of wealth is erroneous.

From this summary it appears that most of Godwin's political views are open to strong criticism. Has history been right then, in consigning Political Justice to the realm of forgotten literature? In spite of the many weaknesses in his theory, I believe that Godwin pointed out many wrongs and potential dangers to his age that have significance and meaning to men of any era. As John Bowle states, "Whatever the psychological misconceptions on which his remedies are based, and however fatuous his belief in the rationality of mankind, who can deny the vast iniquities which he so briskly pointed out?"¹⁴⁸

Not only did he point out injustices in areas that needed attention, but he contributed a great deal to the

¹⁴⁸ John Bowle, Politics and Opinion in the 19th Century, Oxford University Press, New York, 1954, p. 140.

concepts of freedom and progress which were being formed at that time, and to which we living now owe a considerable debt for the political and economic advantages we take for granted today.

B. Sprague Allen notes that "...the conception of society, not as inflexible or static, but as capable of growth and infinite change, was one of the most valuable contributions of philosophical radicalism to that of the 18th century."¹⁴⁹ We should not forget those who are prominent in the struggle for a better world, merely because we are able to look back and point out their mistakes.

In this study I have tried to emphasize certain political ideas of Godwin that have not previously received a great deal of attention; and I have hoped, in this process, to show that he was a political thinker of some weight. I believe that a re-examination of Godwin's work would be especially significant today, when the problem of freedom has become an issue of vital importance and a subject of extreme controversy. Despite various weaknesses in his thinking, Godwin's Political Justice remains a sincere and vocal reminder of man's aspiration for freedom and his inherent capacity for improvement.

¹⁴⁹B. Sprague Allen, "Minor Disciples of Radicalism in the Revolutionary Era," in Modern Philology, February, 1924, vol. 21, p. 277.

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